Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2024), 33: 4, 596–597
doi:10.1017/S0963180124000276

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

DEPARTMENTS AND COLUMNS: SYMPTOMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Gray Rainbows

Robert Burton

Independent Scholar, CA, USA
Email: raburton@pacbell.net

"You fooled me. I never dreamt," George said to the pasty gray face in the mirror. As a child, he had worked out complicated schemes of how the world must be constructed. This led to that, and that led to this. When this and that no longer fit together, he began to squint, and limit his view to the essential. At any moment, the sky might break open and rain body parts and end times. He never imagined that it would be colors that would give way.

"It's not your eyes," the eye doc said.

"Not your brain," the neurologist said.

"Probably stress," said the primary care doc at the VA hospital, handing him a psych clinic referral. "After all, you've seen a lot."

In the park, the once brightly painted red and blue benches were the color of concrete; so were a young mother and child playing in the gray sandbox. George peeled off a strip of gray bark from a large eucalyptus tree and held it to his nose. He smelled nothing, as though fragrance required color. He sat on a bench.

A tall man approached, sweeping a long stick in front of him. "Excuse me," he said, taking a seat at the far end. "Is there anyone here?"

"Just me," George said, watching gray children laugh and carry on.

From his backpack, the man pulled out a chunk of bread and broke it into small pieces. Gray birds swooped down, finished off the bread, and begged for more. He brought out a large stone-gray apple and with a small pen knife cut it into sections. "Want some," he said, offering a slice to George.

The apple tasted like wood. The blind man smacked his lips as he ate. When finished, he said, "Sorry to bother you, but could you tell me what it's like today? Is it as gorgeous as yesterday?"

"Where would you like me to begin?" George realized that he had no recollection of how colors looked or felt. Even his memories had grayed.

"Start with the clouds. Tell me how they catch the sun's light, how they kiss each other as they pass across the heavens."

For a moment, George wondered if the man was legit. He recalled men who inexplicably could not speak and one soldier who had gone blind during an air raid. He made a threatening gesture; the man continued to gaze in the direction of the sky, awaiting news.

George said nothing.

"The trees, the trees, don't forget the trees. Are the leaves budding yet? Have the cherry blossoms come? And the lilacs? Come on, don't be so stingy. Tell me what you see."

"What were they like yesterday?"

"'Tall, majestic, tickling the sky', the woman from yesterday said. Yes, yesterday the clouds were mighty and majestic."

"Well, they are no different today."

"You sure don't like to share much, do you stranger?"

"You have a way with words. I could never talk like that. So, what else did she tell you?"

"She said that the first blades of spring grass were popping up and hummingbirds and butterflies filled the air."

"Sounds right." Two children ran by, dragging pieces of gray paper across the sky. "Why don't we talk about other things?"

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180124000276 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Okay. Let's talk about my wife." The man pulled out his wallet and pointed to a laminated photo of a shadowy woman. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

"She's very lovely," George said.

"Look at those eyes, blue as the deepest sea."

"You're a lucky man."

"Who could blame her? With eyes like that, you wouldn't expect her to stay with a blind man, would you?"

"Tell me about the trees again," George said.

"They are tall and majestic and…. I've forgotten."

"Mighty," George said.

"Gorgeous."

"Yes, they're wonderful, sticking up towards the sky like that," George said.

"Reaching, not sticking."

"What about the sky? Do you remember what she said about the sky?"

"Pale blue, the color of a baby blanket."

"You're sure?"

"I'd stake my life on it."

The man tilted his head back to take in the sun. So did George. Behind closed lids, little gold sparks peeked out from the darkness. George seized the opportunity. Red, blue, green, turquoise, alabaster, indigo, pink, mauve, he said to himself. Come one, come all, come out from wherever you are. Initially, his mind's words were as gray as his surroundings. With slowly gathering speed, colors flickered at the edges of vision. When he opened his eyes to sneak a peek at the world, grayness returned, though there may have been the faintest suggestion of gold hiding behind one particularly fleecy cloud.

"What do you see?" the blind man asked.

"I see billowy white clouds backlit in hammered gold." He stared and hoped. He'd once read where faith required effort. "Hey, you catch on quickly." The man stood and gathered up his backpack. "See you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here."

"I can't thank you enough," the blind man said. "I love the idea of hammered gold clouds."

After the man left, George again took a brief peek at the sky before closing his eyes and trying to imagine what the blind man saw.

Cite this article: Burton R (2024). Gray Rainbows. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 33: 596–597, doi:10.1017/S0963180124000276

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180124000276 Published online by Cambridge University Press