

Traveling Companion: Let me tell you about mine

Fr. Michael Tracey

The man, his wife and two children needed to get to Hot Coffee, Mississippi on Ash Wednesday. A St. Vincent DePaul member provided the necessary funds for the trip. Out of curiosity, he asked the man, what denomination he belonged to. The man said, "Protestant" The St. Vincent DePaul member pressed, "What particular branch?" The man from Hot Coffee simply replied, "Catholic." The remark brought a chuckle as well as an insight to many who shared it.

Yes, people say the darndest things for a variety of motives. In many cases, the motive is to placate an audience with something that will stroke their egos.

Recently, a friend had a breast biopsy. As she went through her own soul searching thoughts and fears, many people came to her rescue with their own similar stories. In many cases, the stories generated more fear than hope; more panic than reassurance; more pessimism than realism. It was as if they were preparing her for the worse, knowing that if it did happen, she would know that her friends had told her so and supposedly prepared her for it.

I often wonder why we seem to have a propensity for the worse scenarios. Is it a defense mechanism that will prepare us for the inevitable bad news that may follow? Are we more tuned in to bad news than good news? Do we prepare ourselves for the worse, knowing that if it happens, we can say to ourselves, "see, I knew it would happen." Why are we so comfortable with gossip, knowing that it can lead to various degrees of character assassination?

I am curious about one phenomenon in particular about hospitals and hospital visitors. The scenario plays out something like this. You are in hospital, recovering from surgery, whether minor or major. You feel tired. You hurt. You want to sleep but the hospital personnel keep waking you up at all hours of day and night to see if you are okay, to take your vital signs, to see if you are sleeping. You want rest but it bypasses you.

Then you have to contend with visitors. You are in no mood to entertain visitors. You want to be left alone but still the visitors come and they enjoy their overstay. They ask you about your surgery and seem fascinated by every detail. Then they begin to lecture you on their surgery. Usually, they begin with, "when I had my surgery..." and continue at a nauseating pace. They pride themselves in reliving in graphic detail every aspect of their surgery, complete with belches and bowel movements. They may even volunteer to show you their scar. As you listen, you feel yourself getting sicker and sicker but your visitor is so engrossed in their own surgery story, that they don't notice your frustration. It is as if they have a captive audience and want to make sure that someone, who happens to be you, hears every detail.

Why do people do such things? Do they do it because they need an audience who have no choice but to listen? Do they use you as a guinea pig to vent their own "can you top this" surgery story? Do they do it to enlighten you, to let you know that things could be worse, according to their interpretation of worse? After all, they have had the "worst" surgery and you should not feel too bad about your "minor" surgery?

Finally, when they have bored you into crucifixion, they decide to leave. They are happy that they have cheered you up; made your day, and helped you feel better and helped you realize that you are really blessed and lucky not to have the kind of surgery others, namely the visitor, had.

So, the next time you find yourself in hospital, recovering from surgery and I come to visit you; be assured that I don't have any personal surgery stories to share with you. I will gladly share a blessing with you and maybe one of the pink ladies will share with us a cup of hot coffee.