

*Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute*

*December 20013*

## **The Healing Power of Relational and Collaborative Practices**



Dr. Bob Cottor

I am always impressed when "theory in practice" just pops up during everyday living. It has happened again. A close family friend sent us a copy of a letter she had just received from her granddaughter, Jennifer, a medical student on the east coast of the US. Amazingly, Jennifer had written this letter to a young man who had died in her hospital while she was taking care of him. Our friend was very proud of her granddaughter's unusual letter and knew my wife and I would enjoy reading it. We certainly did! And Jennifer revealed herself to be a relational, collaborative and constructionist professional-in-training.

I would like to share that letter:

*Dear Jayden,*

*I'll never forget the night we met. Did we really meet if technically you were dead? The night you died was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. May I say that without diminishing the tragedy of your death? I do not exactly know how or why you died. But I am grateful that, at their moment of loss, your parents chose to make you an organ donor.*

*As you were wheeled into the operating room, the first thing I noticed was your long, straight, black hair plastered to your forehead. It reminded me of the children I met in Thailand who had been rescued from human trafficking. That experience had been intensely personal for me. Decades earlier, my grandmother was a Nazi slave. Learning that there are more slaves in the world today than at any other point in history, drew me to work with those children. They suffered incomprehensible abuse. But, somehow, seeing you on the operating table shook me to my core.*

*Jayden, did you know that the medical student who had taken care of you in the hospital stood by your side in the operating room until the organ procurement was done? Did you know that the surgeons had a moment of silence in your honor during the obligatory "timeout"? I admired that reverence for you very much.*

*But the moments that followed were not about you. They were about the three recipients waiting in hospitals in three different states for your life-saving gifts. I have always felt queasy in anatomy lab, but your body was beautiful, pristine. Yet, for all the respect you were shown, it was unnerving to see you opened up in that way -- a way that made clear you would not be put back together again. The surgeons worked frantically to separate your organs from the surrounding tissue. The first to leave your body was your heart. It was a race against the clock to get your heart into its new home. It went by ambulance and then airplane, kept in nothing more sophisticated than a Coleman cooler. It was surreal.*

*Your heart was motionless for the four hour journey back to Atlanta. There, another young boy whose own heart had failed waited on an operating table with his bad heart ready to come out. Your heart was handed to the waiting surgeon who put it in its new home. My own heart skipped a beat as I watched you come to life again. But the best moment of the night was walking into the waiting room at 3:30 AM to tell an anxious family that their son had a new, strong heart. This is why I chose medicine. To be part of a transformational moment in a family's life.*

*Jayden, I often think of you and the night we met. I worry that someday I might forget your name. So I say it out loud to myself to remember exactly how it sounds. Your life, tragically cut short, gave life to three other people and fulfilled my grandmother's adage that "pain should not be wasted." Thank you, Jayden, with all my heart.*

*Jennifer*

It is so exciting for me to read that Jennifer's reason for choosing medicine was to participate in a "transformational moment in a family's life." She obviously knows how to do that. My strong bias is that the social/relational/affirmative dimension of medicine and healthcare has been tragically neglected by the contemporary technology-focused diagnosis and treatment system that dominates healthcare. Jennifer's letter strongly raises my hope that medicine can again become relationship and meaning-focused and employ the healing power of relational and collaborative practices.