

DIGNITY IN DEATH

- Dr. Gururaj Karajagi

It was probably June or July 1971. I was in Calcutta for about a week. When we landed in Calcutta we were told by the vice-chancellor that it would be risky for all of us to stay at one place in the University campus as the fear of getting attacked by the Naxalites was very high. We were asked to stay in the residences of different faculty members. I was somehow not very happy at the prospect of being a 'guest' for an unwilling host.

I wondered whether I could use this opportunity of meeting Mother Theresa and if possible to serve as a volunteer in Nirmal Hriday. I reached Nirmal Hriday in the morning. Mother was not there. I waited for sometime and Mother returned after about an hour. I introduced myself and asked her whether I could stay there and work as a volunteer. Since I had told her that I was a student of Chemistry, she asked me to go and work in the pharmacy. She did not ask me anything else. She treated me as if she knew me for ages. I was the fourth one in the room allotted to me.

An incident happened at about 1.30. in the afternoon. The volunteers of Nirmal Hriday brought an old lady on a stretcher. The lady was about 90 years old and was not fully conscious. She had high fevers and was constantly uttering something in her semiconscious state. Mother and other sisters took her in and gave her a bath and medicines. Mother sat besides her pressing her legs and patting her shoulders in a very soothing way. She was also telling something to the old lady, who was certainly looking better. Since, I could not follow Bengali, I asked some one as to what is the old lady saying and what is that the mother was telling her. What I heard was pathetic.

This lady lost her husband when her son was only three years old. She struggled hard to bring up this son. She worked tirelessly in a number of homes as a maid servant. She gave him a decent education. He got a job and was married. Till then the lady's life was joyful. I do not know whether the lady had differences with her son or daughter in law and it is also not clear whether the lady was sent out of the house or she herself walked out of it. But this much was clear that she was not staying with her son. She continued to work in other's houses as long as her health permitted. When she could not work, she started begging. For the last three days she was suffering from high fever. She had fallen unconscious totally exhausted by fever and hunger. Now the volunteers had brought her here. A message was sent to her son so that he can meet and take her home. But he refused to come. The old lady was cursing her son and holding him responsible for her present situation. Mother in her own inimitable style was telling her not to speak ill of her son, "mother is a God for the children. If God curses, will it not become true? Mother should always wish well for the children." She continued pressing her legs.

Måy be because of the medicine or due to the affectionate attention she received, the lady showed distinct improvement in her health. In the evening she regained consciousness. She was cheerful and was now speaking good about her son. She was nostalgically recollecting those lovely incidents when her son was a small child and played pranks with her. "Yes" she said, "Mother was right. I should not curse my son. Actually he is a very good boy. He is under wrong advice. I am sure, one day he would come and take me home." She smiled. And then she rested. We all thought that she would recover completely.

After midnight, the lady developed complications and her blood pressure started falling. Doctors were called in. In spite of best efforts, the lady died at 2.30 in the morning. Again a message was sent to her son. He declined and told the volunteers that he had nothing to do with her. Probably he was upset that his mother died in a missionaries place and brought bad name to the family. At that time, Mother suddenly turned to me and asked, "Are you a Hindu Brahmin?" I said, "Yes". "Would you do the rituals for this lady?" she asked. I was shell shocked. I come from an orthodox family where going to the crematorium when your parents are alive is unthinkable and performing rituals there is beyond imagination. I thought for a second. I remembered that I had promised the Mother to be a volunteer. Volunteers have no options. After a few seconds hesitation, I said 'yes'. Early morning I went and performed all the rituals that a son should perform for his mother. May be this lady was my mother in any of my previous births.

Later I asked Mother, "you did so much for this lady but she did not survive. Don't you think that all your efforts are wasted?" Her grayish green eyes met mine. Let me tell you that I have not seen a more wrinkled face than hers and a more beautiful face than hers. She smiled. "No son, nothing is wasted. I knew that her health was delicate. I wanted her to have dignity in death." I was stunned. I had never heard anything like this. I had only heard about dignity in life. What is this dignity in death? I asked her. Her answer made me dumb. Even after so many years, when I think of her answer, I get thrilled. She said, "Son" and kept her little finger on my chest, which I still feel. "Son, this little heart of yours beating continuously is the temple of God. It should always be clean. Normally it gets filled up with dirt such as anger, jealousy, hatred, selfishness. When we die and go up to see God, His temple must be clean. Otherwise you cannot see his lovely face. Did you see that the heart of the lady was filled with anger, helplessness, and frustration? What happened to her in the evening? She had cleaned her heart from all those negative feelings and was cheerful and positive. Her temple of God was clean and would certainly be able to go and see God in the eyes. That I call as the dignity in death. If one has the purity of heart in the last minute of his life, he can see God. That is dignity in death"

I have thought about it several times in my life. I have seen many people who have shown remarkable dignity in life. Some really had dignity, some managed

to show dignity, some wore masks and some manipulated dignity. This may be easy. But to have dignity in death truly demands purity because at that time there is no pretence, no one to please and nothing to gain. I had learnt a message from the Mother that dignity in death is more important than the dignity in life.
