Columns
Religious Life



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The doctor asked me what I remembered.

"I remember everything," I said, "except how it began or when it started."

I was working on my computer when one of the nurses came into my room to return a comforter she had washed and dried for me. She placed it on my bed and quickly left the room, which was unlike her. She always had a friendly greeting and a word or two.

Minutes later, one of the charge nurses was in my room, kneeling in front of me and holding both my hands. She was running through the protocols they always show on TV for a possible stroke.

"Squeeze my hands, Peg," she said. "Harder. Now even harder. Raise your hands over your head. Look at me and smile. Look left. Look right. Look up. Look down."

She then reached for her walkie-talkie and called the other charge nurse.

"Peg is having a stroke," she said. "Call an ambulance NOW and then come down here."

They put me in the ambulance — driver in front, assistant in back. The assistant had the blood pressure cuff on and kept checking the results.

"I have to tell you," he said, "the intervention by this nursing staff was fast and effective. I think they saved your life."

And then we were off to the hospital. When the ambulance pulled into the emergency room bay, my brother Tom was just outside the door waiting for me.

"You'll be OK," he said.

My sister-in-law and niece Maggie were already inside waiting for me, too. The whole time I was in the hospital, family and sisters from the Villa were with me. I was never alone, but I was still terrified.

"Please, God," I prayed. "Not my brain. Heart, kidney — anything but the brain. Please, please, God, not my brain. I need to think, to keep writing. I need my brain."

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Within minutes of being admitted, a young man named Pablo came into my room to transport me to my first test. He was short, but I could see muscles rippling through his arms and shoulders.

"Can you stand to get onto my cart, Miss Margaret, or do you need my help?"

"I can do it, Pablo, but I am so cold."

"I'll take care of that," he said, and he brought me not one but two heated blankets. "I'll take the short way there and the long way back to your room, but I'll make sure you're warm."

As he wheeled the cot back to my room, I said, "Pablo, you are truly the salt of the earth."

"Thank you, Miss Margaret. I cannot wait to call my grandma when I get home to tell her that. It will make her so happy."

Memo to Mr. and Ms. Hospital CEO: Pay attention to Pablo and all the transporters. My experience with them proves you need look no further to find the hospital's ambassadors to the public. I hope you praise and recognize them. Put them on your brochures and billboards. Pablo was only the first.

Soon after, a tall, imposing woman came into my room — floated in, really — carrying a little medical caddy she set down by my bed. I could see five little empty tubes and a needle she would use to draw my blood. Before I could grit my teeth and prepare for the needle, it was already done — so smoothly, I didn't feel it.

"Melissa," I said, "if there were an annual award for phlebotomy expert of the year, I would vote for you."

As she floated out of my room, she said to the nurse, "Did you hear that? She would vote for me. My momma will be so proud when I tell her."

Yes, Pablo and Melissa are your true ambassadors, your face to the world. And I, for one, think you should tell them.

All the staff I encountered were on top of their game. The nurses were great, and three doctors came to my room before every test to explain what would happen — CT scan, heart echo, MRI, sonograms — and later to explain the results.

Several years ago, Charles Schulz took this country by storm, claiming that happiness is a warm puppy. I've always loved puppies. But as I continuously beseeched God to spare my brain, I realized that happiness is really a warm blanket in a cold hospital, delivered with care by hospital employees who understand what their patients need and are happy to provide it with a smile — and yes, with a warm blanket.

And glory be to God, I think my brain is still intact.