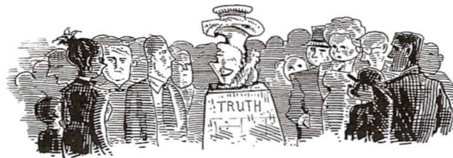

The Hospital Where I Grew Up

by Jonathan Aitken

IT IS AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE to go back to a scene of your childhood and to understand from rekindled memories where and how the first seeds of your faith were planted.

I recently had this experience, courtesy of the BBC, as a result of being the subject of one of its programs, *The House Where I Grew Up*.

It proved to be a remarkable journey down memory lane featuring a forgotten killer disease and starring a legendary Catholic nun who was the Irish equivalent of Florence Nightingale. She was Sister Mary Finbar, renowned for her nursing of child tubercular patients at Cappagh Hospital in Dublin. I spent three and a half years of my early life immobilized on a frame in the children's TB ward of this hospital—the location of the BBC's program.

To set the scene in its historical perspective of the 1940s, it has to be remembered that before the discovery of antibiotics TB was more feared than cancer is today. There was no cure apart from rest and fresh air. Small children were particularly vulnerable. I caught the infection at the age of four from an Irish nanny working at the UK embassy in Dublin. I was there because my grandfather was Britain's wartime envoy to de Valera's government. I was separated from my parents for several months of the war because my mother was looking after my father at a convalescent home in London after he had been shot down and badly burned in his RAF Spitfire.

By the time my TB was fully diagnosed, the disease had spread into both lungs and into the bones of my hips. Eminent specialists on both sides of the Irish Sea were consulted. Years later I was told that one of them warned: "This child may not live." A slightly less gloomy second opinion was: "This child may live but he will never walk." But the founder of Cappagh Hospital, an eminent surgeon, Dr. Henry MacAuley, offered the only positive diagnosis. He thought I could make a full recovery provided I spent three years strapped down to a frame—a sort of predecessor of an iron lung—breathing lots of fresh air each day throughout this long period of total immobilization.

This cure may have sounded traumatic when described on the airwaves of the BBC 60 years after the event. But despite the incredulous and sometimes psychobabblish questioning of the interviewer, I know I was right to recall that my main memories of Cappagh were happy ones. Just as today's disabled children usually adjust to their handicaps quite cheerfully, so the young TB patients of the 1940s accepted their circumstances as normal.

I regarded my years in the hospital as competitive rather than distressing. The high points of our day were the morning and afternoon "wheelouts" when the French windows of the ward were flung open and all the patients' beds were pushed outside onto a stone terrace, where we were ordered to breathe deeply. As soon as I was taken back to that terrace I remembered the scene perfectly. Taking longer and deeper breaths of Irish ozone than Paddy or Seamus or whoever was my neighbor in the line of beds was the name of the game. The nurses clapped for you if you did well and as I enjoyed their applause I strove mightily in the breathing stakes. This was just as well because the real competition was not for breath but for life.

The life-threatening dimension of my Cappagh memories also came back to me as soon as I entered the remarkably unchanged hospital ward. There were sad occasions when our beds were put into a circle and a priest would say Mass for the soul of some little boy who had gone to heaven in the night. Despite all the sales talk about the joys of heaven I was in no hurry to go there. This was largely because life with my favorite nurse was such an earthly joy.

ALL THE NURSING AT CAPPAGH was done by nuns from an order called the Religious Sisters of Charity. Their outstanding leader in the hospital was Sister Mary Finbar, who looked after me day and night. What I remember most about her was her sense of humor, her skill as a teacher, and her deep still silences of prayer.

Humor was much used by Sister Mary when giving me my early reading lessons, which were conducted in slow motion because of the defects in our magic lantern. This antediluvian electrical device was essential for my tuition because, being flat on my back with my arms pinned down, I needed everything to be projected onto a screen above my head. One of the many inconveniences of the magic lantern was that it became overheated by its light bulbs. Sister Mary was none too skillful with her hands. We got into great fits of giggles together as she tried to change the pages under the plates of the lantern, which gradually became as incandescent as burning coals. In cold print this hot activity does not look as amusing as I remember it, but it created great merriment at the time as we counted the "oh bothers" and the much more sinful "oh drat its" for which Sister Mary promised she would say penances at Friday prayers.

Sister Mary's prayers made a great impression on me. At night when I was drifting off to sleep Sister Mary would kneel by my bed. Her stillness was astonishing. Often I would wake up and find her in exactly the same position as she had been when I fell asleep. Her prayers gave me a feeling of being loved and contented that far transcended the physical discomfort of being strapped down on a frame.

The BBC producers of *The House Where I Grew Up* said it was not at all unusual for their subjects to recall many long forgotten memories as a result of going back to scenes of their childhood. But they were surprised, and I was certainly astonished by the intensity of the emotions that were reborn in me by returning to Cappagh Hospital. From physical recollections like the patterns of the tiles of the operating theater corridor to the rafters of the TB ward roof, I was transported to the world I had lived in 60 years ago. The deepest chords resonating from that world were spiritual. As I so vividly remembered Sister Mary's bedside prayers, her kind smiling face, her white habit with its centerpiece of her pectoral cross, and above all the warmth of her love, I saw something powerfully important I had never recognized before. I knew it was Sister Mary Finbar who had planted in me the first seeds of faith that have grown to become the most important force in my life today.

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Jonathan Aitken *is most recently author of* John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace *(Crossway Books). His biographies include* Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed *(Doubleday) and* Nixon: A Life, *now available in paperback (Regnery).*

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