
"The Most Beautiful Painting"

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Citation

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Abstract

This reflects the strength of a lady confined to the bed. She wanted to paint; her joints would not let her. She was determined to. But not always one can win her handicaps. It is not always, that you can make a disobedient body, crippled by Rheumatoid Arthritis, work the way you want it to. Could she paint?

I have known her for more years than I can count. I had known her from my school days, as she had been my English language teacher. At times, I jokingly said to her "Mrs. Mathews you have given me beatings for not getting correct spellings and pronunciations, and now it is the time (though undesirably), I am giving you the prescriptions". To me, her physician, what she had was just another case of Rheumatoid Arthritis. I knew she wanted to paint; I also knew that she would not be able to. She herself was even aware of this, although she never cared to admit it. Her Rheumatoid Arthritis was so advanced that even corticosteroids could not have offered much in the way of relief. Most of her joints were immovable and she had been confined to her cot for a decade or so.

Her disease had developed over time. It was not that she did not realize that something was happening to her; she could always make out that her joints were changing. Gradually the wrists, then the elbow, then the little fingers; and surely of late it was the most of her articulations that lost their momentum. When I write Mrs. Mathew was 'limited' to her cot, I certainly mean she was limited to her cot.

The viewpoint of the medical men was that she was completely disabled. As far as she was concerned, she always wanted to do something that was creative. An active person like her is bound to be restless. She wanted to hue the canvas. She wanted to put her feelings in color. She was adamant to paint and it became a terrible job to explain her how very impossible was it for her to do so. She would not accept this fact, and Mr. Mathew had to get her a 24 x 36 canvas, set of oil colors, and painting brushes. Getting these, she seemed to be the happiest soul on earth and was as

jubilant as a little kid getting his favorite candy.

Would she be able? We wondered. We knew it was not quite possible with the state of her joints. She tried to lift the brush. She could not. She tried to do so umpteen times, but all in vain. Holding the brush requires approximating the fingers and imparting them a grip. I have used my hands to tie my shoestrings, write my schoolwork, to do my dissections during college, to stitch wounds, to palpate my patients. I did all this while never, ever realizing how important this set of fingers was.

Figure 1

Painting instruments used to create the painting.



Each day she would try to grip the painting brush but the little joints would always humble her efforts; they were rigid, perhaps sort of determined that they would not bend. For hours she would admire the canvas, which till now was all white. She would admire the colors that lay by her. On many occasions, I had seen the salted pearls trickle down her face. Autoimmune mechanisms were clearly outdoing her efforts. Vindictive circulating immunoglobulins working overtime against her joints, making sure that they are going to defeat her.

Of late she admitted that she could not manage it. This was probably her only regret. She never felt as miserable about being confined to bed as she did about not being able to paint. It was some one year after she had asked for paints and canvas. Her condition grew worse; the joints became all the more rigid. Methotrexate was added to her prescriptions and the steroids' dose doubled and then trebled. She became a guinea pig for escalating analgesics, uncertain roles of chloroquine and the precious metal gold, not doing much to help her out. She was a very compliant patient. Her silent acceptance of the unrewarding chemicals seemed to be an utter mockery of medical developments. The only thing she

was concerned with was painting. Her desire to paint grew all the more intense. She was prepared to do anything, only if she could paint. This was just one of the many desperate cases of Rheumatoid Arthritis. She would weep very often, not because of her illness, but because she had to rein her very desire

One early morning, a few weeks later, I learnt that she had managed to uncap the color tube and was able to take the paint out of it. She was a chirping bird. I can bet she must be the only person who discovered the real delight and joy of "uncapping and squeezing out a tube". As for me, I was concerned, because painting was not just putting the color in a tray. It meant a lot. It meant holding the brush, mixing the colors, and being able to put them on the canvas, in a desirable fashion. This would be an especially difficult endeavor for a person who had taken well over a year to just open the color tube. I worried that this would make her very uncomfortable and that she might start worrying about all this again.

Figure 2

The painting "God Loves You".



Months rolled by; her joints seemed to have read chapters from the medical textbooks on Rheumatoid Arthritis very carefully. They molded themselves into Swan neck and boutonnière deformities. One fine day, I received a phone call. Mrs. Mathew was on the phone. She asked me to see her that evening. A bit of a worry hovered over me. I was troubled that her conditioned might have worsened. I visited her and she welcomed me with a smile. She asked me to get her canvas from the other room. The same boring job and the same desire to paint, I fancied. To me, again another ridicule at my profession, which was structured to offer solace but very often, was unable to. I got her the canvas and it was

wrapped in a paper. She asked me to uncover it.

I did so and to my amazement I could make out some color on it. She had done it! She had defeated her limitations. She had humbled her handicap. She had emerged victorious. She had smartly belittled the rigid articulations and had mocked at the doctors, who said with her Rheumatoid Arthritis she would never paint.

I may not be the greatest of connoisseurs, but this time I sure was. It was the best painting I have ever seen. I tried to work out what the painting was. The canvas on its left corner was scribbled, no I must rightfully say, was “ painted ” with the words: “God Loves You: Trust Him”. This sure was the most beautiful painting from an unfortunate but a very strong lady.

References

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