HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Medicine Man

Frederick Adolf Paola, MD, JD^{1,2}

¹Health Professions Division, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Myers, FL, USA; ²Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Ethics, Humanities & Palliative Care, Morsani College of Medicine at the University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA.

Some time ago I took a job as a staff physician on the medical service at a Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital. There I made the acquaintance of Hèctor Martín and Ron Oneida, two new colleagues with whom I would be sharing a large office.

At the end of my first day on the job, Hèctor and I went out for drinks at a local watering hole. Ron took a rain check.

We sat at the bar. Hèctor, who, it turned out, was Argentinian-born (explaining the poster of Diego Armando Maradona he kept above his desk), ordered Scotch-and-soda. I spied a remarkably good Oregonian Pinot Noir on the wine list and ordered that. “Ron’s a good guy, kind of quiet, keeps mostly to himself,” he explained. “And after his experience with our last *colleague* — and I use the term loosely — I can’t blame him.”

I knew that the desk I was moving into had previously belonged to one Dr. Barrett, but knew nothing about why he had left, and so I asked.

Hèctor smiled. “The strongest evidence I have yet come across for the existence of God.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Barrett wasn’t the nicest guy in the world.” He paused, weighing his words, chewing on an ice cube. “He was unpleasant. A mean-spirited, passive-aggressive person, to tell you the truth.” He looked me over, trying to decide if I could be trusted. Then, with an oh-what-the-hell gesture, admitted, “He was an asshole. Did you know his first name was Jarrett, by the way, even though he called himself Jerry? That’s right, Jarrett Barrett.” He laughed.

“Go on,” I said, intrigued.

“Ron Oneida joined the staff about a year ago. And from the start, Barrett hated him.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? Barrett was kind of a hateful guy.” He thought some more. I was learning that information

came out of him in dribs and drabs. Just when you thought he was done, he would begin again. He was an exercise in listening. “Also, Ron was younger and more recently trained than Barrett, and better liked by the house staff.” Another thoughtful pause. “To make things worse, Ron’s an American Indian. Nez Perce. Full name is something like ‘Ronyada-shayouh Oneida.’ So, I don’t know if there was an element of — how do you say it in English — xenophobia?”

“Yes, xenophobia.” I knew what he meant. Still, the irony of being in America and applying the term to a Native American did not escape me. “So what happened?” I asked.

He proceeded to tell me.

It seems that Jarrett Barrett, having taken an instant dislike to Ron Oneida, set out to make life at work as unpleasant as possible for him. Barrett apparently expended considerable energy in the endeavor. He was a master of cattiness, subtlety, ambiguity and the double entendre; the words, acts and omissions he directed Ron’s way, no matter how malicious, were such that he could, in most instances, affect an air of innocent unawareness of having given offense. It took Ron a while to figure out what was going on.

“Ron tried to ignore it, but over time that sort of thing wears on a person, you know?” Hèctor said.

I nodded.

Little by little, Jarrett Barrett’s siege took its toll on Ron Oneida, who responded by trying to minimize his exposure to Barrett. This meant spending little, if any, time at his desk, at least during normal working hours. Sensing that Ron was not the type to ask others to intervene, and knowing that he would get nowhere talking to Barrett, Hèctor brought the situation to the attention of Dr. Weller, the medical service chief; but he simply listened indifferently before dismissing the matter as a trifle not worthy of his intervention.

One will never know how matters might have played out, were it not for one G.I. Joe. It seems Ron Oneida kept a specially modified G.I. Joe doll in his office, seated on the hutch above his desk. He'd had it since he was a little boy; it had been part of a school project about his heritage that he'd worked on with his father. G.I. Joe was dressed not like an American soldier or sailor, but like a Nez Perce warrior in a long, fringed buckskin shirt, leggings, a belt, a breechcloth, gloves and moccasins. He wore a feathered bonnet on his head, underneath which he had long black hair in two braids. His face was painted as if he were preparing to do battle.

One October morning, Ron came to work and noticed that G.I. Joe was not in his usual place. Scanning the room, he found him. In the ceiling there was a nail, to which was attached one end of a cord. At the other end of the cord, a tiny noose had been fashioned and placed around G.I. Joe's neck. G.I. Joe hung there, his hands tied behind his back, his buckskin shirt torn almost in half to expose the word "Injun" which had been carved into his chest, possibly with a number eleven scalpel blade. His headdress had been removed and was nowhere to be found, and his long braids had been shorn off.

Hèctor paused in his telling of the story, shaking his head. "It was just a stupid doll, you know, but... it was such a hateful thing to do. And it was special to Ron — his father died pretty soon after they finished working on it together."

I nodded. He ordered another Scotch-and-soda, and I another glass of wine.

"I got to the office right after he found it. He was very emotional," he said somberly. "I thought Ron would kill Barrett when he walked in a few minutes later, acting like he'd had nothing to do with it, asking with a smirk on his face why there was a cord hanging from the ceiling; but Ron just looked at him for a second, then walked out."

"Did Ron report him?" I asked.

Hèctor shook his head. "No. There were three of us who shared the office, and cleaning people had access to the office and sometimes forgot to lock the door at night. There would have been no way to prove that Barrett had done it. And I'm not sure anything would have been done even if Ron could've proved it.

"By the end of the day, Ron had submitted a letter of resignation. I asked him why; he said that living together peacefully with some people is impossible. 'Ron,' I asked him, 'why don't you fight back?' He just pointed to a famous quote he had framed above his desk:

"Hear me my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."

Chief Joseph 1877

"Then Ron just looked at me, smiled, and said 'Forever is a long time.'"

I remembered seeing the framed quote above Ron's desk. "OK Hèctor, so how is it that I'm moving into Barrett's desk instead of Ron's?" I asked.

At this, Hèctor, who had just taken his first sip of his second Scotch-and-soda, slowly broke out into a wide grin. "Ahhh," he exclaimed, enjoying the Scotch, or a memory, or both, "enter the 'Hand of God.'" He paused. "Of course, all we know about what actually happened is the story Barrett told us, and what we can reasonably surmise from it."

According to the report of one Jarrett Barrett, as told to Veterans Affairs security officers, he was working in the office quite late one night when he detected an unusual aroma in the air. Following the smell, he found that it was coming from the service chief's office, just around the corner from the office he shared with Ron and Hèctor. The door was ajar, and the office was dark. He entered the office and, once within, noticed that it was filled with thick smoke. Really thick. "What the hell . . . ?" he muttered to himself. What was going on? Why had the smoke detectors not been triggered? And what *was* that smell? It was starting to make him lightheaded. It smelled like reefer! In the service chief's office? And where was the chief? Most likely, he began to consider how he might turn this most recent development to his own advantage.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and through the dense haze saw what appeared to be a large, fierce-looking Nez Perce warrior, standing nearly a head taller than himself, his face painted with bright colors, his black hair shorn off. Barrett saw the warrior raise his clenched fist, then felt his face explode in a blinding flash of pain before losing consciousness.

Hèctor went on. "A short time later, the smoke detectors fired and the sprinklers hit him. Security came to the scene, only to find the asshole unconscious on the wet floor, his nose broken and bloodied from an apparent fall against the chief's desk, and a strong scent of marijuana in the air. They found no trace of any Indians" — Hèctor guffawed here — "but they did find a humongous joint burning in an ashtray, which was later analyzed and found to contain dried, powdered peyote mixed with marijuana. Dr. Weller was called at home, as were the chief of staff and the hospital

director, and all arrived at the hospital at about four in the morning, none too happy to be there.”

“What happened to Jarrett Barrett?” I asked.

Hèctor looked quizzically down his aquiline nose at me. “They fired him, of course.”

“Isn’t that hard to do at the VA?” I asked.

Hèctor threw his head back and laughed. “Yes, unless they find you passed out, high on marijuana and peyote in the service chief’s office!”

I laughed along with him. It occurred to me to ask, “So, uh, what do you think really happened that night?” but something about Hèctor’s countenance gave me pause. I’d likely think for a long time before asking him that question.

Corresponding Author: Frederick Adolf Paola, MD, JD, Health Professions Division, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Myers, FL 33913, USA (e-mail: pfrederi@nsu.nova.edu).