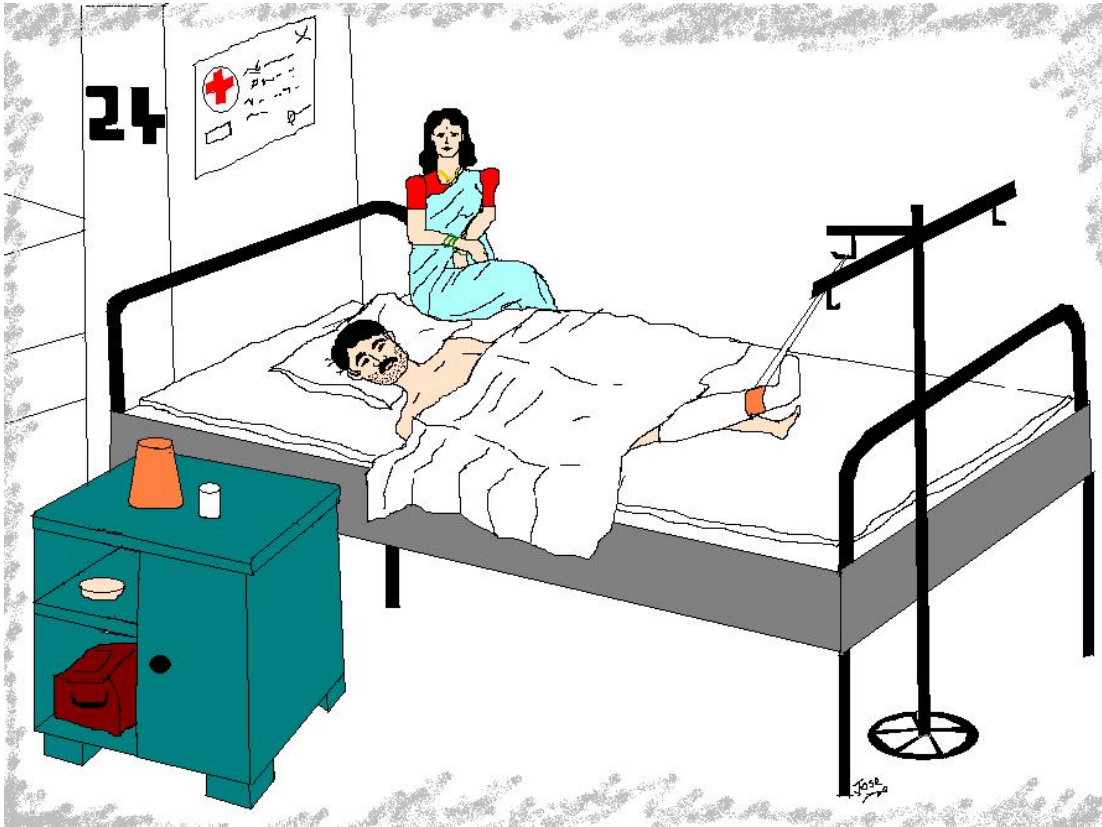


Repentance

A story by Jose Varghese



The smell of medicines spread in the air was already making me sick. In spite of the Herculean efforts put up by the staff of the medical college hospital, the wards still held the pungent smell of medicines. I was there in the orthopedic ward to see Hamesh, who is a friend of my wife Lakshmy. Hamesh was Lakshmy's classmate. He had an accident last week. Though not severe, he had some minor fractures and had to be admitted in the hospital. Hamesh's wife was there when me and Lakshmy went to visit him. Though it was not the visitor's time, we could manage to get in with the help of a staff in the hospital whom I knew very well.

"So Hamesh, How are you? Don't you feel like riding the bike again with this bandage on? I asked

Hamesh Just smiled and said..

"No Dr.Menon.. I had enough. By God's grace I had a narrow escape"

His looks told that he is feeling bad about the incident. Drunken night driving had taken him to this situation. He could escape because of the prayers of many others who love and care for him..

"Who is taking care of the kids Hamesh? Asked Lakshmy

Kids are with my parents. Anyway this is vacation time. Otherwise it would have been difficult for Lakshmy to manage the kids and me at the same time ” Answered Hamesh in a tired voice.

Suddenly my cell phone rang. It was Nisha, a Ph. D student working under my guidance in the University. She is going to have her viva voce next week. She is bit nervous these days and hence I get many calls a day from her.

Excuse me Lakshmy...you please carry on. I will be back in a minute.

As the signal reception was very poor, I had to walk towards the corridor in the ward, from where I could talk without any signal problem. It was nearly at the end of the orthopedic ward.

Around twenty minutes I must have been on phone. My ears got burnt by the heat from the cell phone. I realized the need for having a hands free set, which Lakshmy always insists me to use. I put the cell phone back into my pocket and walked back towards Hamesh's bed. On my both sides, there were patients lying with various levels of orthopedic problems. Some had steel rods put into their legs and hands and some other had either hands or legs covered in plaster. Just by seeing that I could feel how much pain they would be bearing. I thanked god for keeping me in good shape and letting me live peacefully everyday. Suddenly I noticed a patient lying on bed number 24. His face was looking very familiar to me. A young woman was sitting beside him on the bed...probably his wife? When she moved slightly to take out some thing, I saw his face clearly.

“I know this man. How can I forget him?” I said to myself.

As a reflex action, my right hand moved up to touch my left cheek. I could still feel the roughness of Alphie's hands on my cheeks. I could identify the man on bed number 24 as Alfred D'Souza, alias Alphie. I stared at his face from distance. An unpleasant feeling spread in my heart. My human instincts asked me to ignore him and go away. But my instincts as teacher, stopped my legs and forced me to think again before walking away from him.

In a second I went fifteen years back in time. I recalled the past I buried deep inside my mind. Those were the times when I was young and dynamic. I had just completed my fifth year of service as a lecturer of Geology in Kerala University. Teaching was my passion and I grabbed a job which helped me to fulfill that passion. The head of the department had given me the freedom to introduce new academic concepts and new ways of teaching in the department. That itself was a great achievement and recognition for me. I always felt that the Joy I get by teaching students is something which words cannot describe.

Since I was passionate about my subject and about the job I am doing, my work always reflected that to its full extent. I had full attendance from the students in almost all classes. With the help of some senior staffs, I had also set up a career counseling cell, to give proper guidance to our students in choosing a career in geology and related disciplines. That was a successful venture and was praised by everyone in the college.

Everything about the college was good..the ambience, the rich history and the cultural prominence ..except. the murky Politics. I felt that the student wings of the political parties, existed in the college, were breeding grounds of power politicians. The manifestos they put forward were good and ideal, but never followed by anyone in the party. The party front in the college was lead by college drop outs and ex-students with

criminal backgrounds. For any small reason they would call for strikes and that would disrupt the normal college life. The worst thing was about forcing innocent students to take part in strikes and processions. The college management used to keep mum on all these issues. Perhaps the more experience they got, the more wiser they became. Mightier ones ruled without resistance from anyone. With fresh blood going through my veins, I was not ready to accept these things, at least in my department. Perhaps that was the biggest mistake I did. Maybe I failed to understand the psychology of students. I wished that my views, philosophies and attitude towards life would be accepted and appreciated by every student in my class. How foolish I am; But.. I should proudly say that most of my students accepted it, except Alphie.

He was a rebel from the beginning. He was the only student with less than 50% attendance in my class. Rather than attending the classes he would be seen always inside the BBC corner. (Bad Boys Club). It was severely irritating for me to see one of my students ruining himself. I had given him many warnings about his poor attendance and the action I would have to take against him by the year end. Many a times I also tried to advise him on his attitude towards life and other people around him. Every time I could sense a sarcastic look on his face. All my advises went to deaf ears. He preferred to continue with his chosen way of life.

As a passionate teacher, I used to maintain very good relations with my students. Outside the class I was a friend to all. But unfortunately it was not the same with Alphie. He had some sort of hatred towards me. I do not know the reason. All I tried to do was to correct him and give him a proper guidance in his career. Once I asked him to bring his father to the college. I was expecting him to be a spoilt son of a rich father. But the day Alphie brought his father to the college, I realized I was wrong. His father was a poor fisherman. After talking to him for half an hour, I could understand how hard he tries to make both ends meet. That incident strengthened my desire to correct Alphie towards a good way of life. But it didn't work. Things took a nose dive when he was in the second year B.Sc and the year end exams were nearing. Since his attendance was not even 30% that year, I decided to evoke the stringent law that prohibits a student from appearing for the university exams, if he or she has less than the bare minimum attendance. My colleagues warned me and said to close my eyes on such issues. They said I am trying to stir a hornet's nest. I didn't listen to all those advices. I believed that giving favors to an irresponsible student is like insulting a sincere student who works hard to achieve his or her goals. I had my own philosophy for everything.

Next day onwards, the big brothers from the college student body and representatives of the political parties started coming to meet me in my office. Rather than requesting, they showered demands littered with abuses, to let Alphie sit for the examinations. These threats didn't deter me. I was determined to go ahead with what I decided. As per the law, a student with less than the minimum required attendance can opt to appear for the examination by paying a penalty to the university. I put forward that as an option to Alphie. But he and his friends looked at that option as a challenge towards their might and insult towards them by a mere lecturer. I was just a bureaucrat in their eyes.. someone who should be suppressed and uprooted in the beginning itself. After a week of threats and abuses over phone, there was a silence. I thought everything was over. But I was mistaken. That was calm before a storm.

The exams were just one month ahead. It was the last Friday of the month of March. I had many examination related duties to be completed both in the department and in the university head office. Since the regular classes were over, I was fully devoting my time to complete those responsibilities, most of them being administrative. The university head office was just ten minutes walk from the Department of Geology. Department was on the side of the main highway that bisected the campus. I was coming back to the department after finishing that day's job in the university office. The bus stop in the highway was very crowded. Similar crowd was there in front of the tea shop near the bus stop. Most of them were students. Even my students were there in the shop, taking a break and sipping hot tea in that summer. As I was walking towards the department, I saw a group of students walking in the opposite direction. Alphie was one among them. If I remember correctly, they were five in number. They almost occupied the width of the pavement I was walking in. I could identify the student union president and his assistants among them. I sensed their hatred towards me in their looks. As I was about to cross them, purposely one of them rubbed his body against mine.

"Can't you walk properly,? Is this road inherited to you?"

These were the starting sentences they used. It seemed to me that they were deliberately doing it and they were enjoying every bit of it. If I could dismiss that incident and go away, perhaps I could have avoided a big embarrassment. But I was full of anger at that time. The rebel in me wanting to protest against such bad mannerisms of growing citizens of India, made me explode.

"Why are you doing this? Wasn't it a deliberate attempt to embarrass me? You people should better behave in a more responsible way"

I feel from my heart that I didn't say anything wrong. But my well wishers, who are more pragmatic than me, said that I did a blunder by irritating those guys who were already half barbarians.

The leader of the group, addressed me with the dirtiest abuse I have ever heard. He pushed me with his hands forcefully. Somehow I kept my balance and escaped from falling on the road. Then I heard a shower of abuses from the whole group. Suddenly I felt something wetting my face and my cloths. One of them threw ink on my body. It spread all over my light colored shirt, my face, and my spectacles. Then I heard someone shouting

"Come on Alphie...what the hell are you waiting for"

Even before I could guess what is going to happen, Alphie's hands fell heavily on my face. He must have put all his hatred into his hand. My spectacles fell off my face. I was literarily shocked. What just happened was something I could never imagine even in my wildest dreams. I was hit on my face by my own student. What worst than this can happen to a teacher in his career. For few moments I didn't realize that I am on the road and there is a big crowd around me watching the fun. When I woke up to the pinching reality, those guys were laughing and walking away from the scene. I was there..standing in the middle of the gathered crowd...like a clown. I was embarrassed, shattered and felt like being pushed to the hell for rest of my life.

Again in a reflex action I shouted with the strength I could regain..

"Alphie...you will repent for this one day. Mark my words"

On hearing me saying that, Alphie uttered another abusive word. That was like the last nail put on my coffin.

That single incident made so many changes in my life. I withdrew myself into a secluded life. I kept myself aloof most of the time. Apart from teaching, I didn't involve in any of the other activities of the college. I kept a large distance with my students, knowing that I am deviating from my way of teaching. That incident took away my desire to be the most successful and inspiring teacher. Even though I didn't make an official complaint, the incident was reported to the higher authorities by some of my students who witnessed the whole incident. Alphie was the only student of the college involved in that incident. All others were outsiders. Alphie was dismissed from the college. The state police department registered a case against all those outsiders. But when the police came to me, I said I do not have any complaints. I didn't bother to enquire what happened to those guys.

Since that incident I lost the charm in continuing the job as a teacher, especially in that college. But the almighty had decided the other way. He must have acted immediately. I got a promotion transfer. I was posted as the assistant professor in a college in the outskirts of the city. Since that college was away from all the crowds, I should say that a real academic environment prevailed there. But again I lived in the shadow of what I used to be. I just did teaching, nothing else. After a year, my senior colleagues, who knew me before also, counseled me a lot to come out of that shadow, forget about the unhappy incidents and be the real teacher I used to be. I could not resist the temptation. I succumbed to that temptation. I buried those unhappy incident deep in my heart. The following years went happily. Five years after, I was posted back as the head of the department in the same college, where I was humiliated by my own student. I worked there two more years, before getting transferred to the directorate of higher education on a deputation. Currently I am working there.

"You are still here Dr.Menon? Asked the orthopedic surgeon, who is my friend. He was just passing through that corridor in the ward. I smiled at him. Then I slowly walked towards bed number 24.

On seeing me, the lady who was sitting by the side of the bed, stood up. And she murmured..

"Alphie...some one is here to see you"

With much discomfort, Alphie made an attempt to look at me. His body was covered with a cloth up to his neck, and his right leg was completely plastered and kept on a suspension support. When he looked at me, he must have had a shock of his life. I could make out the feelings rushing through his mind at that time. His face could not conceal any of that. No one talked for a while. Then I broke the silence

"Do you recognize me Alphie?"

I didn't ask anything else. But that question was enough to let him release all those feelings which flew inside him. His lips shivered and tear drops channeled through the corner of his eyes. I heard him murmuring

" Sorry Sir..I am really sorry for what I did. I am repenting for all those dirty things I had done sir..Please don't curse me"

I didn't say anything immediately. I sat near his bead .

"Don't worry Alphie...I am nobody to forgive. The almighty would forgive you. I am happy that now you repent. Everyone makes mistakes. You are not the only one. To err is human."

“ Sir I know what I had done to you. It is a terrible thing a teacher can expect in his life. I became the reason for that in your life. All I can do is to sincerely apologize to you. If I could go back in time, I would go back and do all that I could do, to avoid that embarrassment I brought to you. I am really sorry sir”.

Those words touched me. Perhaps I was waiting for those words for a long time. It had a magical touch and it brought back a big confidence in me as a teacher. But then, what Alphie said, put me into a difficult situation I had never been through.

“Sir..I want to touch your feet and ask for forgiveness. But I cannot do anymore. I don't have my hands now.” After saying that he cried like a child.

Then only I realized why his body was covered with a cloth up to his neck. After few seconds of silence, I turned to the lady who was standing near Alphie

“You must be Alphie's wife? “

“ Yes Sir”. She said with all the respects she would give to a teacher.

“Could you please tell me what happened exactly?.

When she was about to answer, Alphie said..

“Sir, I will explain everything to you. I would feel good if I can tell this to you. Perhaps God has brought you in front of me.”

He asked for water. His wife gave him a cup of cold water. After sipping it couple of times, he continued.

Sir, I was in the special task force deployed in the city last week, to face the students protesting against the government policy on reservations. The situation was out of control and I landed up in the middle of the bomb explosion that happened. My both hands are amputated from elbow. I do not know how I will cope up with this for the rest of my life. But I feel ...I deserve it Sir. God took away my hands for hitting my teacher and leading a sinful way of life. I know it is an offence which God will not forgive”

“Oh..Alphie..my dear..don't think like that..I don't believe god does things like that. You were just a pawn in the hands of those goons. You didn't do..but they made you to do it..”

There was silence again between us. Only the sound of Alphie's weeping was heard.

“Since that incident, I didn't know anything about you. I would like to know that Alphie..” I said.

Again there was a period of silence. He must have been gathering his thoughts. Then he said..

“Sir..Since my dismissal from the college, I had spent four more years aimlessly with college politics as an outsider. Then my father fell ill all of a sudden. Barely could he work and the income in my house dwindled. That was a wake up call for me. I decided to continue studies by joining a private institution. In two years time I got my degree in economics. Then I tried to get some government jobs. I tried many small jobs in the mean time , each lasting for not more than six months. I appeared for many examinations. Even I appeared for interviews for some of them. But I couldn't get through. Finally I got selection in the state police force as a constable. I worked for more than ten years. Then I was asked to join the special task force within the state police department. I got married at that time. Now I have a five year old son. Since my joining the special task force, I had to face very tough situations..like riots, strikes and processions going out of control. The irony of the situations is that, many years back I used to throw stones at the police force from the college compound. Now I face the stones that fly out of the same campus. Then I realized that everyone would be judged by what one does and the penalty or the reward

would come within everyone's lifetime. The judgment day we all believe in, is not after death. It will come sooner or later before we die. I was judged for what I did. So I am here. Helpless and tired..with my hands no more with me..even to pray to god with folded hands for forgiveness.. But sir..if you say you have forgiven me...that would help me a lot...it would help me to come out of the mental trauma I go through”

He cried silently. Tears flew continuously through his eyes. I compared the Alphonse I used to know, with the Alphonse lying on the bed in front of me. Life is very strange. Things change in the most unexpected ways. You may be rich today..but tomorrow you can be the poorer of the poorest.

I put my hands on Alphonse's forehead.

“Alphonse.. Please take away that thought from your heart. I have forgiven you. I am sure God also would forgive you. You have already realized your mistakes. Repentance is the best way to wash away one's sins. I know it is easy to say..but please don't think that the life is ending here without hands.. bring back the spirit and courage you had while you were young. Direct it with a positive spirit. Don't let your spirits fade out. Live your life, with whatever you have. I am sure you have many beloved ones to stand by you..your wife..your son..your parents....”

I felt that my words could make a huge impact in Alphonse. At least he will not carry that bad feeling within him. He had to wait for long to request for forgiveness from the same teacher whom he hit with his hands fifteen years back.

Before moving away from his bed I said..

“After you get well, come home one day with your wife and son. I am staying in the same old ancestral home where I used to live. You had been there with your other classmates during your first year in college. Me and Lakshmy would be happy to have you as our guests.

With tearful eyes and perhaps a bit relieved heart, he nodded his head.

Putting my cell phone into my pocket I walked towards Hamesh's bed. Even while I was walking, I was actually thinking of Alphonse only. Suddenly I remembered something .

“ My God.. did I say that ?..”

Fifteen years back, during that incident I had shouted at Alphonse and told him that he would repent one day for what he did .

“Was that a curse? Did I curse my student? Did my words fall on him as a curse and took away his hands?

While I stepped out of the hospital with Lakshmy, my mind was still debating on the rights and wrongs around that incident. A guilt feeling caught me deep in my heart. Perhaps I should not have uttered such a curse on a student of mine.

I the night, when I discussed this with Lakshmy, she said to me like a philosopher..

“ See, you have forgiven him. To err is human and to forgive is divine. May be at that point of time, you were reduced to a normal human being vulnerable to all emotions. You were no more a teacher at that time. So you uttered those words out of your anger. You don't have to keep that in mind. Like your student, Alphonse said... it is the law of the universe..everyone would get the reward or penalty for whatever he or she does. So did he”

Still... I felt bad. Before retiring to bed, I looked at the Picture of Lord Krishna kept in my room and prayed

“Oh..God..Please forgive me ..unintentionally I brought a curse on my student. Please forgive me and bless him and his family for the rest of their lives”

It appeared to me that Lord Krishna was blinking his eyes at me as if granting my wishes and advising me

“As you sow, so shall you reap”

Jose Varghese
June 6th, 2007