



Hush Little Baby, Don't Say a Word, Momma's Going to Buy You a Mocking Bird

*As told by
Kathleen Masters*

As a nurse trained to use music in healing, for some time I have been working in the emergency room with tapes produced for infants and children called “Baby Goes to Sleep.” They have been especially useful for calming newborns. These wonderful recordings have nursery rhymes that we all grew up with, coupled with music and the sound of the mother’s heartbeat as the baby hears it in the uterus.

One afternoon, an 86-year-old Alzheimer patient, Myrtle, was brought in after falling at her nursing home. Her face was injured, including lacerations and possibly a broken nose. To make matters more difficult, Myrtle was very agitated, mostly nonverbal, and only making sounds and screaming. She was incapable of carrying on any kind of conversation.

I have a special fondness for these patients, and the other nurses were busy, so I took her. When I looked into her eyes, I could see the fear that was there and felt absolutely compelled to stay with her and see if I could, in some small way, change that for her.

Our first task was to get extensive x-rays to be sure that there were no neck injuries. There hadn’t been any witnesses to her fall, and she couldn’t give us a description of what happened. I knew we were going to have quite a challenge keeping her still for the pictures as well as cleaning up and repairing the lacerations.

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From the very beginning, I tried to establish a relationship with Myrtle, keeping eye contact as much as I could. Even though we tried to explain to her what was going to happen, she was extremely frightened and didn't seem to understand. So, with an ER tech to help me out, we proceeded to the x-ray department with Myrtle on a stretcher and me walking beside her with my eyes in constant contact with hers. I realized that this was going to take some time, so I grabbed my tape player on the way out of the ER and had music going all the way down the hall.

When we entered the x-ray suite, I looked up to find that the two techs assigned that day were the most difficult, terse, and efficiency-minded people in the whole department. If anything was out of place or anybody moved, they were quick to demand the proper response: "sit still," "look this way," "I can't get that." They took one look at Myrtle and I could see in their eyes that they were thinking, "Oh God, how are we ever going to get these films?" As we moved her to the x-ray table, I kept looking at her and talking to her. I even put the music right up next to her ear.

She recognized one of the songs. "Hush little baby, don't say a word, momma's going to buy you a mocking bird" and started to hum along with it as she looked at me. I said, "You know that song, don't you, Myrtle?" She smiled. "Did your momma sing it to you?" She smiled again. Instantly, everything in the room changed.

The x-ray techs started singing along, becoming kinder and softer with the way they gently handled her. We were there for 45 minutes with everyone singing. As we were leaving, the ER tech looked at me and said, "What just happened in there?" Whatever it was, it was dramatic for all of us.

Back in the ER, I continued to play the music. Myrtle startled me when she looked at me and said, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Myrtle," I said. When we went in to try to clean her wounds, she continued to cooperate. Some were skeptical, saying that it was the local anesthetic that numbed her. But I knew better.

Unfortunately, when we had to suture the lacerations, she did need to be restrained. That was hard for me. I wanted the music to be magic, to totally take care of things so she could lie still. But as we did the medical things we had to do to get her through the next piece, I kept the music going, and I didn't stop talking to her. I wanted the connection to last. As they finished the suturing, I leaned over to her ear, and said, "Goodbye."

My staff and I have reflected long and hard on what happened that day with Myrtle. The word "presence" comes to me again and again. Sacred presence is what it is about. I have learned to remind myself that it doesn't take any more time to enter a patient's room from my heart. I try to live from this heart center. It only takes about half a second to remember this and then connect with people's spirit. Even a five-minute encounter can be transformed into such a gift by meeting people where they are and recognizing the sacred place in them.

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