

I've been thinking...



Hotels, Hospitality, and Hugs
February 2012

I've been thinking about hotels, hospitals, and hugs.

I've stayed at hundreds of hotels across the nation and in 31 countries. My kids say I'm a hotel snob. When a Kimpton Hotel is in town, it's a no brainer, unless there's more than one. The interior design appeals to my side of the brain. The fresh, clean rooms are inviting. The beds are "just right," the linens and pillows are comfy, and when there's body wash or shampoo left, it's worth taking home. All this at sane rates.

This same, however, could be said of many hotels. A more compelling reason has made me loyal—so loyal that Kimpton tells me I'm the first person to have stayed at all 56 of their properties over the group's first three decades. Hospitality. The Kimpton team exudes genuine hospitality.

As with anyone who stays fifteen nights in one year, Kimpton has granted me Inner Circle status, which, among other things means I will always find a lovely amenity in my room. I've also been given the direct phone number to the CEO. I understood the amenities but the CEO's number?

A year and a half ago, after surgeons found glioblastoma in my brother's brain, I determined to spend as many closing days with him as possible. This meant frequent trips to Novato, just north of San Francisco, during which I stayed at Kimpton's Argonaut Hotel, not far from the city side of the Golden Gate Bridge.

On my second visit, before I said a word or handed over a credit card, the front desk people smiled and said, "Welcome back, Mr. Neuenschwander." Early on, I realized I had found a home away from Bellevue. After several months, the Argonaut manager responded to one of my impersonal online reservations with a personal e-mail.

Mr. Neuenschwander,

So glad to see your reservation. It will be good to have you back. How is your brother? We are praying for and thinking of you.

Antonio

Ugh. I had to inform him that Ed had passed away and that I was coming down to assist the family with arrangements. Antonio's quick response was heartfelt, empathetic, comforting—brotherly. Upon arrival, they put me in the best corner suite overlooking the bay facing a majestic Northern California sunset behind the most beautiful bridge on the planet. On the table was a stunning Japanese flower arrangement with a sympathy card bearing kind thoughts, wishes, and prayers—handwritten by many of the staff who had lifted my spirits over the difficult months. I choked up.

Two weeks later, I enjoyed my inaugural visit to Kimpton's new Palomar Hotel in the City of Brotherly Love. Again, I was upgraded to a beautiful suite, which had a gorgeous

crystal vase filled with rare fresh flowers. I thought it a bit extravagant for a hotel. Soon a young lady arrived at my door, pushing a linen-covered cart carrying champagne, chocolate covered strawberries, and an envelope with my name on it. While opening the door, I opened the envelope and found sympathetic condolences from the staff. Ah, that's why the flowers. I'm slow.

The young lady was tiny and shy, with hints that she may have known something of the harder side of life. When she saw the flowers, she smiled and dared to ask, "What are you celebrating?" When I told her my brother had died, she froze, looked me square in the eye with understanding, and gently asked, "Do you need a hug?" I did. She sincerely cared and gave me a hug that I feel to this day.

That's when I knew what you do with the CEO's number. After his secretary heard my name, she said,

"Of course, Mr. Depatie will take *your* call."

"Hello, Mr. Neuenschwander."

"Mike, I *have* to tell you what just happened to me in your Philadelphia hotel."

"I'm eager to hear but would first like to say how sorry we are to hear about your brother."

The CEO knew. The CEO cared. I was touched. But no more than he was by hearing about the young lady who delivered the hug. He said my call made his day and something about Kimpton's commitment to genuine hospitality.

That evening I met the Palomar hotel manager and reran the hug episode. Nick teared up and said, "This is why I do what I do." Then he told me how Sharnese had applied without experience—not even a resume. Though extremely timid, she came across as genuine and kind. "You can't teach that; we can teach all the other stuff." We both had tears.

Several months later, I was back in the Bay Area to be near my mother who had just entered hospice. Have you had experience with hospice? I'm a believer. Each person who cared for mom cared—was in it for all the right reasons. Their love for my mother as well as for her grieving husband and son was obvious.

Once again, the Argonaut was my home, and the staff was my extended family. Flowers, a sympathy card, kind words, and more hugs followed my mother's passing.

I'm intrigued that in my desk dictionary, *hospitality* immediately rubs shoulders with *hospice* to its left and *hospital* to its right—a troika worth pondering.

Resumes and skills of physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and therapists are important. Safety, quality, state-of-the-art technology, lean process, and evidence-based medicine are vital. When patients don't have to wait until hospice for caregivers to show hospitality, that's priceless. That's what I get from my hotel! And that's what I got December 13 from the time I walked into my hospital to the moment I was wheeled out after having gone under the knife to repair a rotator cuff. Nice.

There is a great line from the back of those Gideon Bibles found in hotel nightstands everywhere, which says:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” [1]

I'm not sure I fully understand what that means. But I do know that when Sharneese hugged me in Philly, the city lived up to its name, and the membrane between heaven and earth seemed exceptionally thin.

I'm guessing that since you've stuck with me to this point, we're resonating.

I commend you for genuinely caring for people where you work,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Neuenschwander'.

Mark Neuenschwander a.k.a. Noosh

[1] Hebrews 13:2

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