

I've been thinking...



Saint Bernards
September 2008

I've been thinking about churches, hospitals, Crocs[®], and dogs.

I spent the first half of my career as a minister. One Sunday a visitor complained that the people were unfriendly. Turns out the *unfriendly* people he was sitting next to were also visitors.

During a recent consulting engagement that included in-depth tours of five Midwest hospitals, a number of people assumed I worked for the hospitals. It must have been the clipboard. It's a bit like wearing a red shirt when you shop at Target[®]. One patient even asked me if I were a doctor. I resisted the temptation to say no, but that I did stay at a Holiday Inn Express[®] last night.

Shortly after I made the transition into health-care consulting, a friend introduced me at a gathering: "Mark used to get paid to be good. Now he's good for nothing."

One of the hospitals we toured had attendants posted at curbside, in the main lobby, and at key corridors, greeting and assisting patients and their families. Most were paid to be good, but my favorite was a volunteer at one facility's information desk. Bernard welcomed each person with the warmth of a tail-wagging puppy. Then there was the inhospitable charge nurse in a psych unit who barked us as well as her staff. Hmm. It dawns on me, "hospitality" appears on the heels of "hospital" in dictionaries.

During my pastoral days, I figured that if I preached to myself behind the pulpit, what I said might be useful to someone in a pew. I'm no longer preaching sermons on Sundays, but you know from my columns, in the words of [Dr. Robert Wachter](#), that I have "a preacher's passion for bar coding."

Yeah, sometimes I get too preachy. Nevertheless, I am thrilled to be a voice in the wilderness appealing for hospitals to implement state-of-the-art bar-code-point-of-care (BPOC) systems and to undertake the process reengineering and training required to use them properly. Without apology, I seek to persuade hospitals to protect nurses from committing errors and patients and loved ones from experiencing tragic outcomes.

Meeting Bernard was an epiphany. He helped me realize that if I really care so much about these people, then I should practice what I preach when I

visit hospitals by not passing up opportunities for affirming nurses in ICUs, saying hello to patients in hallways, and listening to families in waiting areas.

As with the visitors in my church, some of these people form their opinions about their hospital's care-quotient by how I treat or fail to treat them.

The basketball legend Bill Russell explained the difference between major and minor surgery: "When it happens to you, it's minor. When it happens to me, it's major."

It was as if Bernard has walked a few miles in the Crocs of the staff and in the slippers of the patients. As a result, he treats each the way he would want others to treat him if he were reeling on the heels of a long shift or going under for high-risk surgery. All who meet this saint know he views their needs as important as his.

A few days later, I saw a bumper sticker on a big white pickup that summed it all up: "Wag more. Bark less."

What do you think?



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