Commentary: Give people the dignity the world has taken away

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Before entering the hospital room I pulled the patient's chart from the nurses' station, so I knew I was about to enter the room of a 54-years-old male with multiple arm, shoulder, and facial fractures. I had been conditioned by my chaplain supervisor to silently repeat a phrase whenever I held the handle of a hospital room door: "When I enter this room I represent the presence of God." It was an intimidating and ill-fitting role for a 26-year-old, like wearing someone else's suit—someone with more gray hair and gravitas.

I entered and introduced myself as the chaplain. Bill was immobilized, his arm and shoulder in a cast and his face badly bruised and swollen. He gently turned his head to look at me.

"I can't talk very well," he said through clenched teeth. "They've wired my jaw shut."

"I understand you took a nasty fall yesterday. What happened?"

"I don't remember," Bill said. "I was drunk." His speech was difficult to understand, so I drew my chair closer to his head.

"You're young," he said. He suspected I was wearing someone else's suit, too.

"I'm a seminary student," I said. Bill looked away, his eyes wet. I assumed his pain meds were wearing off.

"You're here to talk about God?"

"If you'd like to," I said, "or we can talk about whatever's on your mind."

"I used to talk to people about God," Bill said. "I'm a pastor." I tried to hide my surprise.

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