

Victoria Sweet's *God's Hotel: A Doctor, A Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine*

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Suppose I got to talking to someone on public transit, and when I mentioned that I worked in medical humanities, my companion said: “Can you recommend a book, just one book that will tell me what it’s really like to practice medicine? I want to learn about the history of the profession, but I also want to understand how any doctor’s work takes place in a system of health care—I want to hear about the administrative bureaucracy and the municipal politics. I also want the story of a hospital: what holds these places together; what do they facilitate and what do they obstruct? And I believe care should have a spiritual basis, so the book has to have this side, too. I want a book that’s filled with great stories but also pays attention to facts. It has to be sad and funny and completely engaging to read. And of course it has to help me become healthier myself. So, what’s that book?” Then I’d look calmly at this person and say, “No problem. Read *God’s Hotel*. You’ve just described it exactly.”

Time will tell if *God’s Hotel* is recognized as a classic, but I expect so. No other medical memoir combines such scope, such depth of insight, such expressive style, such literary companionship. Sweet begins the story in medical school when she realizes that the cadaver they are about to dissect was a patient she had attended. She watches him sawed open; each organ taken out, weighed, set aside. Finally, “Mr. Baker was done. Finished. That was it. Nothing more inside” (2). But Sweet knows there was something else, and medicine once had a name for that vital force, actually a couple of names: “*Spiritus* was the breath, the regular, rhythmic breathing of the live body that is so shockingly absent from the dead” and “there was *anima* . . . the invisible force that *animates* the body” (2–3, original emphases). As Sweet wonders how medicine lost interest in *spiritus* and *anima*, she happens to find a book—“not a great book”—about the twelfth-century German mystic, musical composer, nun and practicing physician, Hildegard of Bingen. Fascinated with Hildegard, Sweet decides to supplement her medical training with a doctorate in the history of medicine. That, in turn, requires finding a hospital offering a part-time position.

The hospital she finds is Laguna Honda in San Francisco. This very particular institution is the last remaining almshouse in the U.S., municipally funded but retaining a strong Catholic influence personified by several nurse-nuns who are among the many characters whom Sweet animates. Sweet’s own background is Catholic, but her beliefs seem less doctrinal than, in Hildegard’s sense, horticultural. Hildegard’s central doctrine is *veriditas*, literally *greening*.

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Hildegard's idea of *veriditas* meant "the power of plants to put forth leaves, flowers, and fruits; and she also used it for the analogous power of human beings to grow, to give birth, and to heal" (86). Laguna Honda, at least during Sweet's early years there, is a singularly good place to practice medicine based on *veriditas*. The patients are indigent and have nowhere else to go. Their diseases are chronic; any treatments they are receiving are slow. At Laguna Honda, Sweet can practice "Slow Medicine" (125) in which a central therapeutic agent is the passage of time.

The practice of Slow Medicine begins with Sweet asking herself, with regard to a patient who defies all imaginable treatment options, "What would Hildegard do?" The answer is clear. "I had to start with a vision of Terry whole, complete, and healthy, in a future when all that was missing from her complete health was a pair of glasses. And walk my way back from that. ... I walked all the way back from the perfect future to the imperfect now, and then I organized my strategy forward" (95).

Sweet realizes that her job, as "gardener-physician," is to realize that her patient has a "natural ability to heal." Her own *veriditas* will heal her, if it is not obstructed. Thus, Sweet seeks "not to make a brilliant diagnosis or give any magical medications but to remove obstructions to Terry's own *veriditas*" (95). Terry has massive, scary, life-threatening bedsores: "Any pressure on Terry's body, from wrinkled bedclothes to hard mattresses, was also in [the way of *veriditas*] and had to be removed. Anything that interfered with the circulation of her blood—nicotine, for example—was in the way of *veriditas*. Dirt, unkemptness, stale clothes. Unnecessary medications. Fear, depression, hopelessness. All were in the way" (95). In writing about medicine, the word *holistic* is often held up as an ideal. Sweet offers the most practical, literal guide to what holistic practice actually can and should be.

After removing obstructions, what-would-Hildegard-do practice turns to fortifying: "That is, with good nutrition—tasty food, vitamins, liquids—deep sleep, fresh air, and sunlight. After that? Peace. Rest. Safety" (96). The final element is time: "As much time as Terry needed" (96). The time needed turns out to be about two and a half years. "But we were in no hurry, and neither was she" (97).

A place where medicine can be practiced this way deserves to be called God's Hotel, the name of the early French hospitals, *Hôtel-Dieu* (7). In such a place, a patient like Terry can be "tucked away at our hotel, out of sight of the administrators and out of the mind of budgeters, so the tincture of time could do its work" (98). Except that Laguna Honda does not remain that place. *God's Hotel* is an epic story, tragic in its own way, of how local politicians, federal bureaucracies, public relations firms, efficiency experts (working on a contingency fee by which they receive a percentage of any budget reductions they recommend), and the administrators they appoint (some of whom then fall under the spell of Laguna Honda) effect a change. At the end of the book, the patients and staff move into a new building, adjacent to the old one, most of which is slated for demolition. Sweet retains her usual optimism—*veriditas* will find its own way—but we feel a palpable sense of loss, not only for the hospital but also for ourselves and the times in which we live.

The story of political encroachment that forces a shift from "the practice of medicine" to "the delivery of health care" (253) is told with ironic wit and affection. That story is juxtaposed with Sweet's walking the medieval pilgrimage route from southern France to Compostela. She makes the journey in segments over 3 years. I finished the book convinced that the only way a physician could remain sane would be to quit medicine at regular intervals and go on a pilgrimage. I might even go myself. In the meanwhile, I will ask myself, at the start of each day, to imagine my own fullest health at the end of the day. Then I will walk backwards, anticipating what might happen to me that could obstruct that health. And then I will work on removing that obstruction with deepest gratitude to Dr. Sweet.