

Remembering Barthan Nyeswa

-A Personal Recollection of the Final Moments of a Dear Friend

By: Norris Tweah

The phone call that woke me at 01:46 a.m. on Saturday, October 10, 2020, was supposed to be a typical return call to the one I dialled more than an hour earlier, at 12:22 a.m., which rang unanswered.

Sleep had not fully arrested my body, now at full stop in the aftermath of a long Friday, which began with a short shift at the office that ended at 2 p.m., but extended past midnight into early Saturday morning without my eyes closing a wink.

With some time to spare after work that Friday afternoon, I stopped to sympathize with a young brother who had recently lost his mother, thus further prolonging my day late into the evening.

My plan was to catch up later that evening with two close friends, Barthan Nysewa and Teakon J. Williams, both long-time members of our brotherly fraternity called Royal Social Club. The rendezvous would take place at a popular restaurant called D'Calabash, located less than a mile from where I was making my condolence visit.

The plan changed slightly when I received a phone call from my brother, Samuel D. Tweah Jr., informing me that he was stopping by my house. I ended my condolence visit, which had already lasted four hours, and I headed home to be in time for his visit.

Nonetheless, I didn't think my brother's visit would obviously disrupt the plan to meet up with my friends.

Specifically, that evening, I wanted to atone for two past outing delinquencies. The first being a failure to honor a scheduled rendezvous I had with Barthan on Friday, September 25, at D'Calasbash. When I failed to show up, Barthan was unhappy and did not mince his words the next morning when we met for our regular exercise.

The following Friday, on Oct. 2, I planned to meet up with Teakon at the same venue. Again, I was no-show! Unlike Barthan, Teakon could care less and simply said the evening went great.

And so as the Friday evening of October 9 rapidly progressed, however, the specter of a third time delinquency loomed. Samuel's visit had mercilessly encroached upon whatever remnant of a time I had left to fulfil the plan, inducing a feeling of guilt. However, because I did expressly promise my two friends, like the two previous occasions, the feeling of guilt was halted in its tracks even before it simmered inside.

I knew exactly what the response would have been if had promised, and it was certainly going to come from Barthan—who had this proverbial trademark criticism of me that went like this: “Comrade Tweah, you do not multitask.”

But “multitask,” as was used by Barthan in this context, carried a different meaning other than the plain dictionary meaning of the word; only members of our fraternity understood when Barthan lashed out that I don't "multitask."

Nevertheless, Friday night being what customarily Friday night is, and instead of agonizing like a child who had been grounded at home from a sleepover, I slowly pivoted into a sort of “Thank God is Friday” frame of mind of my own.

To get started with my own fallback Friday night plan, I ordered two special plates of grilled fish and plantains from D’Calabash, the main course of culinary preference when big brother comes to visit, and popped open a bottle of wine. But my options were limited because I had not planned to spend the evening home.

As soon as I noticed the clock passed midnight, I dialled Teakon at 12:22 a.m., hoping to explain the circumstances which prevented my attendance and to solicit from him what I had missed out on. But Teakon’s phone rang endlessly until it went silent, and I dozed off to sleep on my couch.

So, when I picked up Teakon’s call at 01:46 a.m., obviously, I thought he was simply returning my call, believing they had just ended the night that I failed to attend.

Quite the contrary!

Teakon surprised me when he told me that I needed to call a doctor, saying that Barthan had fallen and was lying on the pavement in the back of his yard. He explained further that they had tried to revive him by sprinkling cold water, pinching his feet — applying the sort of desperate on-site first aid response to someone who had passed out. All, he said, to no avail. He narrated that both of them, as well a few familiar friends, had spent the evening at D’Calabash, but returned to the residence thereafter. He insisted that I call a doctor.

The brief explanation that our friend was lying unresponsive in the back of his yard shifted my brain from sleep mode into emergency mode. Our conversation lasted 55 seconds; however, in those few seconds I inched to the realization that Barthan was faced with some kind of a great peril that warranted my immediate presence.

I dashed out the door—grabbing my single car key, phone and charger; my glasses slapped on my face, and shoved two worn out US\$20 dollar bills in my front pocket.

Outside, I exhaled the loudest scream possible at Swen, my security guard, to open the gate, briskly relaying to him the news that Barthan was in an emergency situation. A sudden surprise and sadness flashed across Swen's countenance. The gate has never been swung open so fast. My security guard knew Barthan well--especially from opening and closing the gate to his Prado Toyota SUV on many of his routine visits to me.

Barthan’s residence is less than a five-minute drive from mine. Our bond of brotherhood and friendship was even more solidified by our residential proximity—located on the outskirts of the small Monrovia suburb called 72nd-SKD Boulevard, Paynesville, Montserrado County.

As I raced to Barthan’s house, pumping the gas so fast in a desperate attempt to do the distance in half the time, the road was dark, eerie and deserted. But I was never going to allow the road's shallow and treacherous clustered pot-holes and annoying speed breakers on the stretch midway between Barthan and me to subtract any mileage of my acceleration.

They nearly, however, upended the vehicle astray as I steered the thing over them just like a jet enduring through a thunderstorm, oblivious of whether they were there.

Once I succeeded in making a turn in a deep curve while maintaining the same speed, Barthan's house was within sight. I literally began assaulting and banging the horn to alert Barthan's security guard that I needed to be let in and very quickly.

But this was not the night to be derelict. The gate opened swiftly even before the vehicle approached the main entrance. Security at this gate is never known to be lax. The guard on duty always follows the protocol of double-checking to ascertain who was at the gate before granting access. This protocol applies to everybody, including frequent visitors and close friends like me.

So, when the gate hurriedly opened without the security guard performing the usual protocol of double-checking, even though I knew he was expecting me, it reinforced to me the message that something serious was amiss.

As I entered the compound, I spotted a figure lying under the twilight of the shadow of Barthan's one-storey building. I sprung out of the vehicle, saw Teakon and Dr. Emmanuel Wureh, another close acquaintance, sitting on the staircase looking forward to my arrival. There was a female companion (name withheld for privacy reasons), who especially looked in a state of confused pandemonium.

A couple of feet away, from where everybody was, my worst fear was confirmed: Barthan was lying on his back on the pavement, just how Teakon had described over the phone. He was inhaling and exhaling. But there was something abnormal about his breathing; it lacked a uniformed pace and the cadence was discordant. He looked like someone snoring in a deep sleep.

I asked again what had happened; and how he got on the pavement. Teakon repeated some of what he said on the phone, and pleaded I should call a doctor. Dr. Wureh said he had seen a door upstairs leading from Barthan's room opened. This was the first time I heard of this door. The brief account from my two friends was enough.

Frantically, I searched through my contacts and dialled my doctor and friend, G. Gobi Logan. Dr. Logan and I spent a few hours together earlier that Friday at a program, so my mind instinctively went to him. I dialled his number three times: 1:53 a.m., 1:54 a.m. and 1:55 a.m. The phone rang and stopped. I searched hurriedly again, this time I dialled Dr. Bernice Dahn, my professional colleague at the University of Liberia, but got the same result.

I was furious and thought everybody should be awaked, a close friend of mine was in an emergency, forgetting to know it was now around 2 a.m. in the morning. I was definitely not having any luck with the phone, I told the group.

I moved closer to get a close-up look at Barthan. The shadow from above the building covered most of his upper body, blurring his face. I switched my phone light on, and suddenly, his face glowed from the reflection. It was when I noticed blood accumulate around his left ear. The blood seemed like it was about to penetrate through the opening on his left ear.

This freaked me out, but I told myself this could be a cut on the forehead from the fall. But whether there was blood or not, I had come prepared to rush my friend to the hospital, and nothing would stop this.

I am inclined to believe that two experiences from the past had prepared me for responding to this type of life-and-death emergency.

I recall wasting no time in driving a friend to the emergency room experiencing an asthmatic attack in the middle of the night. This was as closed as it gets. Thanks to the quick thinking of doctors and nurses at the hospital, who immediately inserted a tube connected to an oxygen tank to her nostril and administered an injection. I feared the worst.

A second experience came in February of 2013. This one an arduous journey to a hospital that was nearly 40 miles away, through heavy traffic on a road notorious for reckless motorists and amateur motorcyclists. A close friend of mine was experiencing a painful perforated ulcer burst and needed to be driven, his wife comforting by his side, to see a specialist. There were many near misses on the road. At one point during the long drive, my friend was in so much pain and probably thought this was it. He turned his forehead toward me, and begged, his face in excruciating pain and anguish, and asked that I look after his two boys.

Recently, this friend and his wife invited me over for dinner to console me, and we spoke about the experience and the harrowing distance we had to cover just to get medical help. I used the occasion to remind him of his one-sided and selfish dying declaration, especially the part asking me to look after his two boys but not after his beautiful wife. We laughed over it; however, it was not a laughing matter at that time.

Now, here was I again, thrust in the middle of yet another ominously pivotal medical emergency involving yet another very close friend. The whole thing seemed surreal and bizarre.

I did not know how long Barthan had been on the pavement, however, because I called Teakon at 12:22 a.m, I approximated the fall could have happened somewhere between 12:30 a.m. to 1:30 a.m, giving me a range of an hour to work from.

This was not good, especially not knowing exactly when the fall happened and how long my friend had been on the pavement. But I knew one thing: We were racing against time.

I recall shouting: "We have four minutes to get out of here." Immediately, everyone began moving and cooperated as I announced that we were going to the John F. Kennedy (JFK) Medical Center.

I inquired which car we would use. The hydraulic lock at the back of my Toyota Fourrunner is broken, so my car could not be used. I asked whether we could use Teakon's or Dr. Wureh's vehicle, both have mid-size vehicles and they were parked nearby. I remember asking Dr. Wureh whether his new Nissan Marono back could open.

Barthan was a big guy averaging about 6ft and the position he was lying in required great care in lifting him up. It was going to be difficult to fit him in the back seat. Suddenly, I noticed Barthan's Toyota Prado SUV parked at its usual spot in the compound. Instantly, I made the decision to use it. It is spacious enough in the back. I screamed for the key.

I observed that Barthan was only wearing a boxer, and demanded that an additional article of clothing be put on him. I was never going to take my friend to JFK half-dressed.

But this was not the night for time wasting. I raced upstairs when I could not get the key fast enough. It was laying on a desk in Barthan's room. I raced back down and jumped in the vehicle and inserted the key in the ignition.

I am familiar with such a vehicle, having driven the Ford Everest version of the Toyota Prado for years. Both of them are stick shifts. But when I inserted the key in the ignition, I noticed the gas gauge was on empty. I blurted out a profanity and jumped out and asked Teakon and Dr. Wureh whether their vehicles had enough gas.

At this point, I noticed the security guard and another young man called Albert, a cousin of Barthan, arrived on the scene. This pleased me greatly, because we needed all the manpower to lift Barthan into one of the vehicles.

Unsure which vehicle to use, I proceeded back to Barthan's SUV to inspect whether or not the residue of the gas in the tank could take us to JFK. Luckily, I observed the gauge was slightly above the empty yellow alert light, deciding the gas was sufficient to make at least a one-way trip to JFK.

I slowly backed up the vehicle close enough to where Bathan was lying, opened the back of the hood and removed every item left in there. They were mostly Barthan's personal items and running shoes. The same shoes he would have worn later that morning while we jogged on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.

I yelled out to everyone including the security guard, Albert, Teakon and Dr. Wureh, and together we lifted Barthan in the vehicle, gently. I asked the female companion to race upstairs and bring additional pillows to cushion his head, and instructed Albert to ride in the back and ensure that Barthan's head was protected against any headbutt as well as to keep an eye on him. I said to Teakon and Dr. Wureh to drive behind me closely, and be at the ready just in case we ran out of gas.

The Journey to JFK

In a split second, I powered the Prado on SKD Boulevard headed toward JFK. The road was very dark and deserted, just how I left it when I drove into Barthan's compound. This is the same road I use everyday—to work, elsewhere and back home. But there is this section on the road that comes immediately after one passes Barthan's house when heading south toward Monrovia. It causes in-coming vehicles to skid perilously when speeding, so drivers often swing, momentarily, on the opposite lane to dodge this section.

That's when the second shock of the night happened! From nowhere I saw this beaming yellow light coming toward me, as if about to collide with us. I tilted the wheel a little to the right, just moving slightly away for this huge, double 40-foot container-carrying trailer moving at an unbelievable speed. This was scary. It was a near miss which hammered in the realization that getting to JFK would not be as easy as I thought.

I lowered all the window glasses to ensure natural air came in. But the main reason was because I wanted to save on gas. I could not use the air condition. In the back, I could hear

my friend breathing deeply and loudly, and I wanted to fly. So I pressed the gas hard, but as you pressed, you can only go so far, knowing that there was not much patrol.

And then suddenly this heavy downpour just started pelting the windshell. It was like the sky just burst open. The heaviest October downpour ever, it seemed. It was so fast, and because the windshell was down, it rushed in wetting everywhere in the vehicle. Albert, in the back, screamed, saying, “Chief, you’re getting wet, pull the windows up.”

But it was too late! I was already soaked. As soon as I pulled up the windows, I ran into problem number two. Within minutes, this thick, heavy moisture came from nowhere and just settled over the front windshield, reducing visibility to zero.

I could see nothing ahead, and at one point, I found myself on the opposite side of the four-lane boulevard. Albert again came to my rescue, shouting, “Chief, you’re going off the road.” I fired back, screaming: “I can’t see a damn thing.”

I managed to steer the vehicle to the side and brought it to a stop. Teakon pulled over by my side and asked what was the matter. I lowered the window and told him I could not see ahead, urging him to drive ahead and I will follow his taillight.

Albert then reminded me to put the heat on, and momentarily, the moisture evaporated and visibility was restored. The heavy October downpour then ended just as suddenly as it began. This must be the nature of October rain. I even noticed there was not a drop of it on the final stretch leading to JFK.

With the road cleared and the rain completely stopped, I pressed the gas pedal in a desperate attempt to make up for any lost time, shifting to the maximum as quickly, and passing every moving object on the road that morning.

My patient was still breathing loudly, and hearing him do so unleashed a certain adrenaline and bravery in me, as I swerved the Toyota Prado from lane to another, banging on the horn to force a yield from any incoming traffic.

Within minutes, a security guard manning the JFK emergency entrance understood the urgency and granted immediate access without hesitation. I drove through the extra layers of JFK security and health protocol, arrived at the emergency main entrance, quickly disembarked the vehicle and rushed in to draw attention to my emergency.

A Morning, Never to Forget, at JFK

(To be continued)