

Healing: The Spiritual Work in Palliative Care

Rev. Karen Estle

THE PALLIATIVE CARE TEAM was consulted to see Mrs. Brown in January 2012. Mrs. Brown was 75 years old, had been married for 60 years, and had a very bad heart. She was essentially bedridden, as she did not have the strength to move about the room. Mrs. Brown and her family understood that her condition was life threatening. I soon learned that her heart was broken both physically and emotionally.

The couple spoke openly about having four children. Sadly, three of their children died when they were young adults. The family spoke of the dead children often as they cried quietly while heavy tears ran down their cheeks. Their grief and sadness would seem to fill the room as they remembered. Mr. Brown cried more often than anyone else in the family. As he cried he would say, "It depends so much on who you hang out with." Their one surviving daughter was always nearby and tried to comfort her family as she cried. Just the mere thought of Mrs. Brown's approaching death brought layers of grief from years ago pouring back into the present. The family could not imagine facing death again.

Mr. Brown and I had a private talk as he worried about the two grandchildren they were raising. They are both good students. He said, "I have been raising kids since I was eighteen." He explained he is raising a grandson who is 18 and a senior in high school. The grandfather and 17-year-old granddaughter are often involved in verbal confrontations. He wants to protect her, but historically she leaves their home after they have words. He worries that when his wife dies, his relationship with his granddaughter will be more challenging to manage. Some days he feels like he cannot go on without his wife. "How can my family survive another death?" Providing spiritual support did not erase the grief and fear for the family.

I visited Mrs. Brown daily, finding various family members with her. We would talk and then I would pray. I began to ask Mrs. Brown at every visit, "What is the good Lord saying today?" She always had a quick reply like, "Don't worry I am right here." Her replies were always positive until Friday the 15th when she replied, "It's not good." I asked, "What do you mean?" She said, "It won't be long." I clarified she was referring to dying. She answered with a nod. Her family was crying as they gathered closer to her bed. The daughter sat beside the bed and took her mother's hand, and the granddaughter sat down on the foot of the bed. Her cousin

was standing by the bedside table and leaned over the table toward the bed.

I gently probed with questions, and she began to talk about several family members who had died coming to visit her. Her son came and told her, "Do not worry. Everything will be OK. It is a beautiful place." As she quoted her son saying, "I have been watching over you guys," her granddaughter leaned very close and asked, "What else did my daddy say?" She had been very young when her daddy died and this encounter spoke to her deeply. Her tears flowed easily and heavily as she listened to catch every word. Mrs. Brown replied, "He looked a little older than I remember him, but he looked so good. I could touch him once again." To receive a message from across the veil was a sacred event. Messages of love were delivered. Mrs. Brown said, "My cousin's husband came to visit me more than the others. He just died last year." Her cousin was smiling and crying simultaneously, as she was comforted by his visit as well. He told Mrs. Brown, "I will come back and show you the way." The words from deceased relatives provided layers of comfort, seemingly holding the family as we continued. He said, "It is a wonderful place. You don't have to worry about anything. It is beautiful."

Mrs. Brown's family quietly listened as we continued talking. I remained curious and as she spoke the healing and smiles spread around the room. Mrs. Brown explained that she had been having visitors for awhile but she had been afraid to speak of it, as she feared people would think she was crazy. I said, "Well I do not think you are crazy." Her family began to chime in and tell her how wonderful it is to hear these stories. The granddaughter was now in bed with her grandmother. Their grief was lifted by the sacredness of the encounter. It was as if the family received a healing in preparation for Mrs. Brown's death. We prayed as we always did at the end of our visit.

Later in the day I returned to check on Mrs. Brown and her family. The mood was lifted. I asked if there were more visits. Mrs. Brown replied, "I am going to keep the rest of my visits here," as she touched her heart. She asked me, "Is that OK?" I replied, "Sure, we as women do that, don't we? That is what makes us mysterious and interesting." Everyone laughed and agreed.

Before I could see her again, Mrs. Brown died early Sunday. I made a follow-up bereavement call on Wednesday. The

daughter said they were all doing fine. I did not hear tears in her voice as we spoke. Her viewing was scheduled for later that day and the funeral the following day. The daughter said, "It is people like you and Dr. G who make the world a better place." The family's faith seemed to hold them in an arena of peace and hope, enabling them to move forward with their lives.

Address correspondence to:

Rev. Karen Estle
Wishard Health Services
Palliative Care
1001 W. 10th Street, No. 5132
Indianapolis, IN 46202

E-mail: karen.estle@wishard.edu