

End of Life Care: A Personal Perspective

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For me, End of Life Care has a very special meaning. It represents the greatest learning experience of my life and of my long nursing career of 48 years. It involves my mother and me, and the six years plus during which I cared for her in my home. It also involves close friends.

Mum had always been a gentle person. Her feelings were seldom shown until she was nearing the end of her life. Never to be forgotten were three life episodes Mum shared, in reluctance at first, but later with great clarity.

Mum had been looking forward to having three elderly friends come for a formal tea. The day they were to join us Mum was not feeling well but insisted the event not be cancelled. She joined them for tea then asked to be taken to her room. When I checked on her, Mum asked to see each friend separately, saying she wanted to receive the benediction. It was clear that I was not to be present. The benediction was a way of engaging each in Mum's special mission, that of asking good friends to take care of me when she was gone.

I will never forget Mum's other two highly moving experiences. She awoke from her afternoon sleep with a radiant smile and a look of extreme peacefulness. It was so unusual, so obviously calming, so spiritual, as I learned later on that day. We sat together in silence at first, her experience was only for herself. When I asked if what had happened was positive, a quiet "yes" was uttered. She said she was at peace, that I was not to worry. When I asked if she could share what had happened she said "no". I respected her wish and told her if she ever wanted to relate what had happened it might help me in my old age or in my work with others. That evening she was ready.

An angel had come and had taken her home to her early farm days, then to where my sister and brother-in-law live, miles and miles apart. Friends, family and the minister she had chosen for her funeral were all there. It was for her a magnificent reunion. She told me not to be afraid, that she was at peace, without any fear. I was reminded of the biblical words, "The peace that passeth all understanding". To my knowledge the angel appeared only one more time, this time in everyday clothes. No further details were shared, if they occurred. They remained private.

What do these experiences mean to a daughter, a family and health professionals? For me they represent a very privileged and trusted relationship. They also represent rich and insightful learnings not experienced in 48 years of patient care.

Clergy told me it is rare to witness such insights. They are shared only in relationships of trust. I regret that my family was not part of those moments and have tried to convey them as best I can, for they add a rare dimension to end of life care. I am left wondering how staff in long term care can learn from my experience and find ways to be of help to elderly residents. It is easy to focus on tasks. However, preparation for the end of life comes from being open to learning from those whose life paths are ending.

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