

Bringing the Family Closer

"In this life, we are to be a bit like Heaven, so that God might find a home here..."

-Meister Eckhart

An elderly Greek Orthodox gentleman was brought to the ED for possible stroke. This man was accompanied by many supportive and elderly family members, adult children and young grandchildren. When I met them in the patient's ICU room in the early hours of the morning, all family (about 15 in number) were gathered. What struck me immediately was the positioning of the family members. Each one was as close to the wall away from the patient as they could get. While they were forming a semi-circle around the patient's bed they did so at such a distance that none of the family were within six feet of the patient. I saw so many emotions on the faces of this man's loved ones; fear, sadness, confusion, shock...I could tell so much needed to be said by the family yet they did not know how to be present with this man as he lay dying.

As chaplains, we are trained not only in presence ministry but also in facilitating communication between family that works to enhance the experience around death and dying and the grief therein. I asked the family if a prayer would be helpful although I already knew the answer was "yes." As I always do, I asked what the family would like to pray for. They responded to my question. When I first entered the room, I joined the family speaking with each one being mindful of their angst and sense of helplessness and the unknown. As I was hearing their spoken prayer requests, I moved from the outer circle of family toward the patient. When I approached the patient's bed I leaned over him took his hand and introduced myself and stated that his wonderful family was surrounding him now with a great amount of love and support. I told him that we were all going to pray with him now. One by one, family began to slowly approach the bedside. By the time we prayed all family were holding this man's hands, touching his arms or gently touching his blanketed legs. After the prayer, each family member was able to say their tearful goodbyes. I was touched

by the outpouring of love this family had for this man as he lay dying. Their final moments with this man told me as much about his life as it did his impending death. He was loved and cherished and would live on in their hearts. As I watched the family comfort each other, they began to tell stories even laughing at times.

Before leaving, I stood next to the patient and offered him support by telling him what a lovely family he had, how amazing his life must have been and how he would be greatly missed. At that time, I noticed a tear falling down his cheek. His family recognized this as a gift of his love and affirmation that he was, "okay," that he would be good.

I left the room knowing that my ministry of presence goes way beyond my own skill. All that I can do is open a space for God to come in and God does come in.... every time.

P.S. I was told later that this man died a few hours later surrounded by his loving family who said that they had peace and were comforted knowing he was on his way home.

- What best practices can you share regarding how you facilitate family communication and interaction with a loved one who is dying?



Rev. Valeri Briggs has been the lead chaplain at Kaiser Permanente's Irvine Medical Center for nearly four years. While in California only a short time, her expertise spans well over a decade in places such as

Texas, Alaska and Colorado. As a board certified chaplain through the Association of Professional Chaplains and with a Master's in Pastoral Ministry, Valeri also participates in training and education on a national level as well as promoting the integration of spirituality with bioethics to provide patients, families and staff with better outcomes and better overall care in the face of more challenging and complex medical issues. Valeri is an Ordained Minister with the Christian church (Disciples of Christ) and has integrated her theology of social justice into patient care and best practices. She is a strong proponent for compassionate and competent end-of-life care through promoting patient empowerment, advocacy for promoting moral courage and the ability to have difficult conversations in an authentic way.

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