

November 13, 2011

Address by Diane Monti-Catania to Hospice Volunteers Annual Dinner

It is an honor and pleasure to be with you tonight.

I join you as a volunteer, serving as the chaplain for hospice for the past six months.

My experience has been a rewarding one and I want to reflect and share with you some of the lessons I have learned.

I am an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ.

I have been trained to work with families in all sorts of transitions, bringing a sense of God's presence to whatever the situation might be.

It is a little like social work with a spiritual focus.

As a minister, I am often invited into the most private and sacred moments of an individual's life.

I find that engaging with families at a time when someone is dying is perhaps the most intimate, privileged work that I do.

There are several reasons for this.

As a culture we are not well-prepared for death.

While we organize, research and celebrate the beginning of life, we approach the end of life with fear, apprehension and dismay. The best selling book, "What to Expect When You Are Expecting" has been on the New York Times Best Seller List for 534 weeks! I'm sure many of you read this book, as I did, from cover to cover as we anticipated the birth of our children.

Birth is indeed miraculous, as is death – we simply need to reframe our attitude.

When someone is dying, it often seems that an imaginary circle is drawn around them – keeping people at a distance.

Many of us have watched, with sadness, the exhausted patient trying to pretend that they are not dying to protect their loved ones from pain.

I have sat at the bedside of many people as they have ended their mortal life and I have witnessed a process that is most often peaceful and somewhat predictable.

There is however, no bestseller that tells us what to expect when we are dying.

This is where Hospice steps in.

Hospice volunteers and staff are the people in our society who are not afraid to talk about death.

We are the ones who step into the circle of grief and apprehension and say "we are here" "we are not afraid of you" "we are not afraid of dying."

Everyone dies.

That is not a particularly bold statement-there is not much to argue, but it is a sentiment that causes people discomfort.

We approach death in our society as a battle, something to be fought, to avoid, rather than a natural and inevitable part of our living.

The problem with characterizing death as a battle is that means that someone wins and someone loses.

One of the greatest gifts that we, as hospice volunteers, can give to a person at the end of their life is a reframing of the dying process.

From my vantage point, as a minister, I offer the gift of God.

Not just my God, as defined by my Protestant theology, but the existence of a divine presence, something greater than us.

When people are facing the end of their lives they, and their family members, often seek a spiritual presence.

Religion, over the centuries, has always developed in response to life's unanswered or unanswerable questions.

Forrest Church, writing about his own experience with illness and death said this:

“We are a part of, not apart from, a vast and mysterious living system. Mystics of every faith proclaim this sense of oneness. Thus the Brahman-Atman relationship of Hinduism, the sense of nirvana of the Buddhists, the concept of Jesus that “I and the Father are One.” All of these, he proclaims, are examples of mystical oneness. The great religious seers have all recognized that beyond the intellectual realm lies a numinous oneness that transcends all differences, call it the Holy, the divine Spirit, God—it doesn't matter. The mystic oneness of person to person, of mother to child and then brother to sister, is but a simple expression of the greater mystical oneness of all existence in the great chain of being.”

It is natural for us to want to explain the mysteries that affect our lives.

We are humans, created with a brain that has the ability to reason, to research, deliberate and decide on what answers make sense to us.

But sometimes, we don't have answers.

Sometimes nothing makes sense.

This is where we step in.

This is where we offer ideas of spirituality to the patient who is dying or the family who is trying to make sense out of their loss.

We don't have to share the same beliefs; we don't have to inflict our religion on someone else.

What we can do, and what we should do, is provide the space and opportunity for spiritual reflection.

We can thoughtfully and gently step inside that circle and ask someone what they believe.

Sometimes just giving someone space to articulate their thoughts guides them to a place of understanding.

They might draw upon something they didn't even know they had. A childhood prayer might provide comfort.

The words of a hymn sung years ago in a choir open a door closed by lack of use.

It is always amazing to me to watch people recite psalms and scripture passages that they memorized as children and can now recall at an advanced age.

You see, spirituality, being in touch with a divine presence can come in many different forms.

Our responsibility as volunteers is to simply facilitate the awareness of that divine presence, in whatever form it might take for our patients and their families.

The reason that we do this consciously and deliberately is because it provides people with a sense of comfort.

It is part of the holistic approach to illness that incorporates every possible way of easing someone through the difficult time at the end of their life.

Praying with someone, reading scripture, calling on God – by whatever name you use, is part of the treatment plan.

Just as the medical personnel attend to the symptoms that are causing physical discomfort, we are the tenders of the soul.

We are the ones charged with providing light on the journey, clearing the path for whatever comes next.

In 1967 when Dr. Cicely Saunders founded St. Christopher's Hospice in London she was motivated by a deep religious faith. The key concept of the early hospice was "care of patients."

The relationship to patients was one of covenant and community.

This is what we provide.

We are the community for the patient and their family during this difficult time.

We are the people who are willing to ask the hard questions, to sit patiently when all that is needed is the presence of another person, to engage in conversation on issues great and small.

We are the people who say, "We are not afraid of you because you are dying. We are here to help in whatever way will ease your pain, whether it be physical, mental or spiritual."

We are a collective gift to the dying and the bereaved.

This is what we celebrate tonight.

I want to address one other important issue – the care and nurturing of you.

The work that we have taken on is hard. It takes a toll.

I want to urge you to take care of yourselves.

I invite you to explore your spiritual self, in light of this work.

What are your thoughts on the mysteries of life and death?

How is this work changing your own perspectives on the divine?

Allow yourself time and space to feel the magnitude of what you do.

Being present for another human being can be exhausting.

Make sure that you are incorporating times of quiet reflection into your own life.

We have the tremendous benefit of living in a beautiful area where there are multiple opportunities to be outside, walking, riding – whatever you enjoy.

Make sure that you are taking advantage of the natural beauty that surrounds us.

Also, give yourself a gift of community, whether it is fellow volunteers, neighbors or perhaps one of our churches.

Make sure that someone cares about you as much as you are caring for others.

And Take time to laugh – to recognize that our serious work is made better and more effective if we are healthy in mind, body and spirit.

I thank you for the services that you provide to members of our community and I offer you God's blessing in all that you do.

I wish you peace and comfort on this journey.

I am honored to be traveling with you.