

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF HOSPICE & PALLIATIVE MEDICINE®

VOLUME 23 NUMBER 4

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2006

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Angels and Atheists

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American Journal of Hospice
& Palliative Medicine
Volume 23 Number 4
August/September 2006 338-339
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10.1177/1049909106290750
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A professed atheist, Tillie said religion was a "crutch" that kept people from exerting their individuality. Though she had a Jewish background, Tillie had no need for a God. She was a spirited person who had been a pioneering, military woman in an era when women were discouraged from exerting personal power. So it was not surprising that Tillie was unconventional in her spiritual beliefs and nonconforming with religious practices. At the end of her 86 years, Tillie prepared herself to die on the inpatient VA Hospice Unit. She set about this in the way that she had approached other things: matter-of-factly, with few words, and a sureness that conveyed acceptance.

Tillie was a bit surprised one day when told that the nice young man who had visited the day before was Chaplain Dan. Dan's stated mission is to "love people into the kingdom." He defines himself as a person whose job is to form relationships with others. When he visits patients, he is *with* people: he's not there to fulfill a role, perform a task, say a prayer, and wish someone a good day. He is there to experience the person as the unique human being that he or she is. By doing that, the patient has a deeper sense of self. Dan also describes himself as a person with very conservative religious beliefs and a very liberal application. He identified himself as a chaplain when he visited Tillie. He always does. But Dan respects people, and so he assesses the meaning that God has for each person. Then, he responds to people in whatever way is meaningful to them. So, it is not surprising that the impression of Dan that remained with Tillie was that he was a "very nice young man."

Dan and Tillie formed a spiritual relationship that was not within a "religious" context. He cooked Tillie breakfast each Wednesday morning. He took her to the cemetery to see the plot where she would soon be buried. He chatted with her and listened to her concerns about dying. He spoke with her nieces

and heard about their fears that Tillie would die an atheist. Sometimes, he and Tillie spoke about religion. She was surprised when Dan told her that he did not consider himself "religious" either, that the God that he understood is more concerned about relationship than with religion—relationships between individuals and God and relationships between people.

Dan was told that if all chaplains throughout Tillie's lifetime had touched Tillie the way he had, she might not be an atheist. Dan smiled, replying, "I think she just responded to my love for her." All religions agree that God is love. Even atheists believe in love. Sometimes belief in God is just a matter of semantics.

Dr Hull was Tillie's physician. He was also her chef on Wednesday mornings for the community breakfast. Dr Hull explains how he provided spiritual care for Tillie:

I understood Tillie, and I respected her. I let her *know* that I understood and respected her. I respected her atheism. It was another way that Tillie displayed the value she placed on individuality. I knew that her views were not casual but rather opinions that she had carefully considered. I was interested in her perspective. She challenged my own spiritual beliefs. By denying her own spirituality, she invited me to further define my own. It's easy to preach to the choir, but here was a woman that wasn't in the choir. And, yet, I was to minister to her with the same care that I ministered to people who shared my belief system. Tillie was a reminder to me of the value of diversity . . . that Love comes in many different forms. Who is to say that God wasn't speaking through her? Who is to say that maybe that was even her motive . . . that challenging, rather than reinforcing peoples' beliefs brought people closer to their spirituality? There was a lot of Good in Tillie. How can there be Goodness without God? So, God was with her and in her. The fact that she said she was an atheist didn't matter. She could communicate her Goodness in other ways.

Marlene was another caregiver. She is a nurse of compassion, understanding, and respect. Her spirituality is experienced by others not so much by *what* she says but how she says it and not so much by *what* she does but how she does it.

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Marlene understood that the essence of Tillie's personhood was doing things "her way." She understood that Tillie took pride in "being true to herself." Tillie did not want any medication. She did not want any oxygen. She did not want to talk much. So Marlene ministered to Tillie in those ways that were meaningful and respectful of those considerations. It meant extra pillows and positioning rather than morphine. It meant not pushing or probing. It meant sitting with Tillie and letting a quiet peacefulness engulf them rather than filling empty spaces with chatter. It meant quiet moments of shared understanding that brought a smile to Tillie's face because she felt understood.

In all of these moments, the word *God* was never spoken. Marlene's tenderness toward Tillie did not

need a religious context or a "godly" label. God asked Marlene to love and accept His child named Tillie and trust that He would take care of the rest.

The team also helped Tillie gain a deeper sense of her value and meaning by celebrating her life story with a tribute that recounted the importance of her life. When the ceremony was over and the last strain of Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way" faded, Tillie's nieces gathered around her to make one more appeal to reconsider her stance about God. "Well, Aunt Tillie, if you won't believe in God, would you at least concede that there could be angels?"

Very deliberately, Tillie looked at each member of the Hospice team. Slowly she replied, "Well, I guess I'll have to. I'm looking at a room full of them!"