

Indian Journal of Palliative Care

December 2007 | Vol 13 | Issue 2

CONTENTS

Original Article

- Broadening our perspective on spirituality and coping among women with breast cancer and their families: Implications for practice
Margaret A. Schneider..... 25

Review Articles

- Palliative care and spirituality
Aru Narayanasamy..... 32
- Care of the spirit that transcends religious, ideological and philosophical boundaries
Meg Hegarty..... 42
- Spiritual issues at end of life
Santosh K. Chaturvedi..... 48
- Spiritual perspectives and practices at the end-of-life: A review of the major world religions and application to palliative care
S. Bauer-Wu, R. Barrett, K. Yeager..... 53
- End-of-life care in the Indian context: The need for cultural sensitivity
R. Shubha..... 59

Practice

- Spiritual care in a multi-religious setting revisited
Rev. John Lunn..... 65

Narratives

- Facing death: Awakening a passion for life
Deborah Grassman..... 68

Author Index, 2007 72

Title Index, 2007 73

Indian Journal of Palliative Care is indexed/listed with Allied and Complementary Medicine Database, Health and Wellness Research Center, Health Reference Center Academic, InfoTrac One File, Expanded Academic ASAP, and ProQuest Databases. Issues are published biannually in the last week of June and December. All the rights are reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, no part of the publication can be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the Editor. The Journal and/or its publisher cannot be held responsible for errors or for any consequences arising from the use of the information contained in this journal. The appearance of advertising or product information in the various sections in the journal does not constitute an endorsement or approval by the journal and/or its publisher of the quality or value of the said product or of claims made for it by its manufacturer.

The copies of the journal to members of the association are sent by ordinary post. The editorial board, association or publisher will not be responsible for non-receipt of copies. If any of the members wish to receive the copies by registered post or courier, kindly contact the journal's / publisher's office. If a copy returns due to incomplete, incorrect or changed address of a member on two consecutive occasions, the names of such members will be deleted from the mailing list of the journal. Providing complete, correct and up-to-date address is the responsibility of the members. Copies are sent to subscribers and members directly from the publisher's address; it is illegal to acquire copies from any other source. If a copy is received for personal use as a member of the association/society, one cannot resale or give-away the copy for commercial or library use.

Facing death: Awakening a passion for life

Deborah Grassman

Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Bay Pines, FL, USA

Correspondence to: Deborah Grassman ARNP

Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Bay Pines, FL, USA. E-mail: deborah.grassman@med.va.gov

Many of us delude ourselves into thinking we are immune from death; combat veterans, however, suffer no such illusions. They have faced death before in war; they live their lives realising death is always at their sides. Some return from war bitter; others return enlightened - although it usually did not come easily. If they are able to successfully integrate the war experience into their lives, they are often able to achieve peace by seeking reconciliation in their relationships, expressing love and demonstrating gratitude. Death adds richness to their lives, helping them live beyond their egotistical or material selves. Paradoxically, death helps them tap into unconscious energy, awakening a passion for life. They have lived their lives better because of their war experience. The cruelty of war taught them how to love and forgive others and themselves. It was a lesson they lived daily. Because they faced death before and lived their lives differently, they live their deaths differently - but it requires hard work like this next veteran demonstrates.

Milton Howarth was frail and wilted, a blanket drawn tightly around his shoulders as he sat staring out the window. I was answering a hospice consult from his physician to see if he was appropriate for care on our hospice unit. My mission was to gain a sense of this 82-year-old man's story and what had been important to him, his current struggles as he reckoned with deteriorating health and his hopes for his coming death.

"Everything is wonderful because I have a room with a beautiful view," he said when I asked about how he was doing.

I was not sure how to respond. So often "everything is wonderful" is used stoically - to avoid reckoning with a grim personal world. In those situations, the last thing I want to do is reinforce the denial. I did not know this man yet or what his 'wonderful' meant. But there was quiet vitality in him that made me trust his sincerity; I had no sense of stoic false bravado.

I noticed a notebook of stunning watercolour paintings by his bedside; some were recent sketches of the view from his window in the hospital.

"Did you do these?" I asked, impressed.

"Oh, yes," he responded with enthusiasm.

"How did you come to develop such an appreciation for nature and beauty?" I asked as I leafed through his notebook of sketches.

"Oh," he chuckled, "It's easy. That's an artist's job." He began to talk about his local fame as an artist commissioned by the city, as well as the paintings he did during his travels to India. He saw my interest in the latter and pulled out a portfolio of watercolours.

I told him of my own travel to India, the hospice I had visited there and how I, too, had stayed in the homes of locals. "Your paintings bring me back," I told him. "I found India to be a fascinating land of incongruities," I told him.

We were both delighted to discover a fellow pilgrim who had experienced the enigmas of India. We

reminisced about our similar adventures in a land so different from our own. I talked about how the trip had been a turning point in my life; it had forced me to let go of my fear of the unknown and open up to uncertainty and ambiguity.

As much as I wished to continue our talk about India, I needed to return to the task at hand.

“From the outside, you sound like everything’s going well. I’m wondering how things are going on the inside?”

“Ah, on the inside?...is bliss.” He said it with strength, joy and clarity, drawing me into rapt attention.

“But everything’s falling apart,” I protested. “You’re getting frail. Each day is becoming a struggle. You might be nearing the end of your life.”

“I have bliss because God is with me no matter what. It doesn’t matter what is happening with my body. It doesn’t matter what is happening out there. In here,” pointing to his head and then his heart, “is bliss. It doesn’t change.”

“Is that because of your religion?” I asked.

“My religions,” he corrected me smiling. “I believe in all religions. They lead to the same place - to a place of bliss. I’ve learned to practice them all,” he said with serenity and security.

“I’m wondering how you came to live this wisdom,” I said intrigued. “I know it wasn’t just by reading books or living in India or practicing all religions or being an artist. It had to be born from something beyond that - struggles transcended no doubt. What did you do in the military? You haven’t mentioned that part of your life yet.” If he was being stoical, this is where it would come out.

He became still, pensive. “Well, yes. That would be it...” He said no more.

“That would be what? I don’t understand,” I asked after a few moments.

“I was a POW you know,” he said, turning to look me fully in the eyes. “I was tortured in a German prisoner-of-war camp.”

There was no self-pity in his voice. I could see he was at peace with his memories so I did not press for details. “War brings out the worst in people,” Milton said. “But it also brings out the best.” He then told me how he was watching a documentary on TV about an American POW who had been imprisoned next to a cell with Russian prisoners. The walls between them did not extend completely to the ceiling. The Russian prisoners overheard how the American prisoners were starving to death. “Do you know what the Russian prisoners did?” Milton asked me.

I shook my head.

“They threw pieces of bread over the wall to the Americans. When I heard that on the TV, I started sobbing. I couldn’t stop.” He paused to see if I grasped the significance of what he was saying. He clarified: “They were starving too. Not only that. Do you know what would have happened to them if they would have been caught?”

“I would guess they would have been shot,” I conjectured.

Milton nodded. We sat quietly together while I marvelled at what he had seen and experienced. Then I asked him how he was able to reckon with his experiences in the POW camp. “If those things had happened to me, I’d be bitter,” I added.

“I was at first,” he said. “After I was released, I wanted nothing to do with Germany or with Germans. I cringed just to hear a German word; it brought back memories of guards spitting out German words as they tortured us. I had moved on in my life. I was an art professor at the University of Southern California. I didn’t need to remember.”

But events in his life forced him to remember. The phone rang one day and he heard a woman with a German accent. It was Friendlinde Wagner, Richard Wagner’s granddaughter. She wanted him to be their



Figure 1: Photograph of a young Milton Howarth

set designer for one of their operas in Germany. At first, he turned her down. "I wasn't willing to face a land that had tortured me," he said. But he could not get the offer out of his mind. "It was a dream come true that I wouldn't have because my resentment kept me trapped. I decided that Germany was not going to control me any longer. I called Friedlinde back and told her I'd come."

In Germany, he was conflicted. The work was exciting but being there triggered his memories. He pushed the memories aside and focused on his work. But he could not push aside the language. "I resisted as much as I could, but there was no escaping it. I needed to direct the workers in what I wanted them to do." He found himself wondering if these same workers were among the Germans who had tortured him years earlier.

He learned the language so well that he was asked to become a German interpreter. "It was the last straw. I told them absolutely not. But he finally gave in and found that interpreting German gave him the courage to face his demons. "It brought me face to face with my own inner war. It forced me to face my fear. When you're an interpreter, you have to be like a bridge - a bridge of understanding. You have to adopt the perceptions of those who speak the language." The lesson he learned took my breath away. "It forced me to understand people

I didn't want to understand. It forced me to love people I had only known to fear. And in doing that I became free. It was my real release date from the German POW camp. If I hadn't done that, I'd still be imprisoned."

I was speechless; "Wow" was all I could say. (Wow is my acronym for **w**ithout **w**ords.) In my wordless beholdenment, I realised that beyond the heroism of living as a POW was the heroism required to make the post-POW journey - a heroism often not recognised or acknowledged. Finally, I spoke. "So the journey you made to become a German interpreter was your salvation."

He nodded. "It was how you redeemed your suffering," I continued.

"Oh yes," he said with an almost child-like enthusiasm.

"It was how you met your Crescent Moon Bear," I cryptically added. Normally I would never speak of myths with patients, but here was a patient who *lived* mythical truths; I couldn't resist. "It's a myth about the journey after trauma...the journey to gather scattered pieces of broken self...the journey to meet the Great Compassionate Self paradoxically housed in the gruff, fearful self. The Great Compassionate Self houses the energy to bring all the pieces of self back together so they can co-exist peaceably."

He laughed with recognition immediately. "You got it. That's it exactly... you know and understand the wisdom myths contain."

"Not as much as I need to," I acknowledged. "It's taken me a long time to value and appreciate their hidden treasures. That's a story in itself."

"I don't suppose you know who Joseph Campbell is?" he said.

I nodded. Everyone who watched PBS knew the man who was probably the greatest mythologist of our time.

“Joe was my best friend,” he said smiling. “I vacationed at his home in Hawaii,” he said as he pulled out some watercolours of Hawaiian scenes. It was hard to contain my excitement as I heard tales of their adventures together. “Joe told me he and I travel in a forest without a path.”

I looked at him quizzically.

“...We make our own trails,” he said grinning.

“Ah. I can see that...you are a trail blazer of the highest order,” I responded.

Conflict of interest: None declared

Author Help: Sending a revised article

- 1) Include the referees' remarks and point to point clarification to those remarks at the beginning in the revised article file itself. In addition, mark the changes as underlined or coloured text in the article. Please include in a single file
 - a. referees' comments
 - b. point to point clarifications on the comments
 - c. revised article with text highlighting the changes done
- 2) Include the original comments of the reviewers/editor with point to point reply at the beginning of the article in the 'Article File'. To ensure that the reviewer can assess the revised paper in timely fashion, please reply to the comments of the referees/editors in the following manner.
 - There is no data on follow-up of these patients.
Authors' Reply: The follow up of patients have been included in the results section [Page 3, para 2]
 - Authors should highlight the relation of complication to duration of diabetes.
Authors' Reply: The complications as seen in our study group has been included in the results section [Page 4, Table]