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Healing vignettes

Letting Buddha grow justice and diversity

Deborah Grassman, ARNP

She arrived on the VA Hospice unit from the ER asking, "Where are my parents?" The nurse phoned Jane's parents. They had left Jane in the ER without saying good-bye. It was a symptom of their angry and ambivalent relationship. There had been many altercations between Jane and her parents. They had been estranged until she returned home six months earlier because she was unable to maintain her three-year battle with pancreatic cancer. Their relationship retained residue from teenage and young adult rebellion. "They never did approve of anything I did," Jane would later say.

After six months of providing care, Jane's parents were tired and angry, warning staff, "Be

careful. She'll try to pull something with you." Over the next six weeks, her parents would remain distant and cold. A veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Jane had spent 22 years in the military. She was just 46 years old with two young sons, ages 12 and 21, and was divorced from her second husband.

Military life had exposed Jane to many ideas from around the world. She had explored different philosophies and considered death and afterlife from various perspectives. The first week on the unit she remained aloof, erecting barriers and watching to see how staff responded. She began by announcing she was Buddhist. She described Buddhist practices for managing the dead, including not touching the head and going to the morgue dressed and sitting upright.

Though no reference for these practices could be found in religious/cultural handbooks, morgue personnel provided approval for her request. Though she remained silent when told her body preparation wishes would be honored, she seemed satisfied.

Crystals lined her windowsill. Jane became upset when her crystals were moved. Quickly, staff learned that the crystals' effectiveness was influenced by their direction and specific placement. Similarly, staff learned about the dreadful odor of shark cartilage. Accidentally spilled on the floor, Jane revealed how the shark cartilage had kept her cancer in check for three years. She also demonstrated remarkable ability for relaxation to control her pain, as well as meditation practices. She seemed surrounded

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with an air of tranquility. Unfamiliar with Therapeutic Touch, Jane was intrigued and excited about the treatments. The calming effect they had on her promoted her trust in the staff.

Jane's most striking feature was her dignity in the face of indignities. Frequent abdominal taps to relieve accumulated fluid were taken in stride. Subsequent leaking from the site or bagging of the fluid to contain the continuous leak did not diminish her composure.

Jane's long, black hair was a reminder of past "hippie" days. Always neat and well-groomed, Jane carefully and diligently brushed her hair each day. Though her energies were flagging and the long strokes left her exhausted, she resisted all offers for help.

It was a nurse who first gained entry to Jane's trust. When Jane initially remained distant, the nurse would remain quietly standing until Jane asked her to sit. Jane's independence reminded the nurse of her own teenage daughter. Without shifting the focus to herself, the nurse briefly told her the highlights of the most recent rebellions. Jane laughed with recognition. Jane's rebelliousness had found an understanding haven.

Her two sons, brother, and dog brought Jane comfort. Her oldest son was nearing graduation at Georgetown University, and Jane was determined to be alive when he graduated. He visited as often as he could. Jane's pride was evident whenever she was with him or spoke of him. The product of a biracial marriage, this young man had a depth of understanding of the

human condition that defied his young years.

When Jane's parents visited, they brought her dog. It eased the tension between them and shifted the focus to the much beloved pet. A little white fluff of fur, the dog seemed to know Jane was sick and would lie quietly as they napped together.

Though he had little money, Jane's brother flew from Chicago. They had remained close over the years, and their love for each other was evident. Not wanting to waste a precious minute even during the night, they slept near each other in the living room on the unit.

It was her brother who clued staff about Jane's religion. "Jane's not Buddhist," he said. "She just got tired of every hospital wanting to code a religion for her. One day, out of exasperation, she told them 'Buddhist.' She thought it would keep them off her back." Now, this was the Jane we knew! We could easily imagine the silent amusement with which she observed responses to her proclamation. It was only after the truth of her "Buddhism" was known that Jane sheepishly confided: "I never really left Jesus."

Jane's involvement with the staff and with activities gradually increased—including supervising a project on the unit.

"Maybe some hospice graffiti would make it look better." "Maybe we should put some furniture in front of it." "Maybe we should paint that picture on it." Everyone had an idea about how to make the construction wall that had been erected in the middle of the unit look better. Though it was temporary, staff thought that the cold, gray sheet

rock interfered with a healing environment. No one anticipated that the wall could be of any value. No one anticipated that in the midst of this storm could emerge a beautiful rainbow.

The genesis for the "Healing Wall" began the previous year. A ceremony for new hospice staff had been created which included each person receiving a tiny footprints pin with the words: "Know that your journey is sacred and that your footprints are holy." Each staff wrote their personal perspective of what their footprints pin symbolized for their role in helping people die healed. A painting of a rainbow hovering above a winding road was hung so that patients would understand the meaning of the pin.

One evening, the hospice physician brought paint and brushes. Throughout the night, he and the staff worked to reproduce on the sheet rock wall the painting of the road and the welcoming rainbow. Jane joined in the production. When they encountered difficulty with the recreation of the rainbow, she had the solution. Back to her room she wheeled, returning with some dental floss. "Now go get a tack and use my floss to draw the arc." Later, when asked about her contributions to the mural, she responded: "I just sat in my wheelchair and supervised the doctor. He's pretty good to work with."

The next morning, Jane asked a nurse to take her to view the finished product. As she gazed into the depths of the painting, unique personal meanings revealed themselves in the recesses of Jane's soul. Years of

unshed tears erupted into sobs. It was the first and only time that Jane surrendered to the pain of her experience. No words needed to be spoken. Within the integrity of the silence and the calming that the expression of her soul's pain had brought, was the peace that Jane sought.

The mural has come to have similar effects on others. Family groups, employee bereavement groups, private patient sittings, hospice staff retreats—its metaphorical message fits anyone who gazes into its depths. "A pathway to a new beginning..."

"Hope and peace. . ." "Everything levels off over the last hill and gets beautiful. . ."

"The further along on the journey that you go, the lighter it gets" "I'm meeting my Maker, who is waiting to walk with me over the last hill, and then a new day is born. . ." "It's a highway to heaven. . ."

For Jane, her footprints would no longer walk hospice hallways. She returned to her bed and increasing weakness prevented her from rising again.

Her son phoned. "Should I come?" Taught to refrain from giving advice and knowing they had already said their good-byes, the nurse thoughtfully proceeded

to give advice. "No. Your mom knows it's exam time for you. It would upset her to know you missed your exams and had to delay graduation. It would distress her to know she was interfering with your graduation. She is so excited about it and it brings her so much peace. NOT coming might be a gift to her."

The nurse spoke to Jane about her son not coming, and Jane was relieved that his studies would not be interrupted. Then it was back to the task at hand. "Will you do my hair?" It was the first and last time that Jane surrendered her brush. Jane talked about making peace with her parents, working out things with her ex-husband to assure the care of her 12 year old, and her confidence in her 21 year old because he would be graduating soon. Her hair now done, Jane asked for a hug.

Jane died quietly the next day. She had tested staff repeatedly by making absurd requests and watching reactions, as if saying: "If I do this, are you still going to love me?" Experiencing a lifetime of feeling unloved, in the end, she felt loved and at peace with the world.

Three months passed. One day a package arrived on the unit

from Jane's brother. A note read: "I found this when I was going through my sister's belongings. I thought you should have it." Inside was a Buddha. About eight inches tall, it was a perfect addition to the cross, rosary beads, Mormon Bible, and Menorah in the hospice chapel.

The Buddha also gave the team an opportunity to explore religious diversity when a patient's wife saw it and ran from the room shrieking that she would not stay in the same room.

"We've got to remove it," a staff member said. "It's offensive to some people who are not Buddhist." However, the resultant dialogue among team members affirmed the value of Buddha in hospice's midst. The diversity it represented called each person to respect the multiple faiths each patient represents. The diversity of religion—the diversity of each patient—must be honored. Buddha AND Jane represented these values of the team. As the physician noted, "We see in Jane the things we like about ourselves. We see just treatment. We see equality. We see beneficence. We have to identify ourselves. Jane teaches us that we have to be open to learn about ourselves."