
Healing vignettes

The third way home

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While our nation has carried out a war in Iraq and a war against terror, I have held the hands of dying soldiers who have fallen at home in their beds, surrounded by loved ones. For six months I have been serving as a director of Spiritual Care for a Hospice operated by the Visiting Nursing Association. In this time, I have worked closely with soldiers who have died in hospice care. For these men, veterans of World War II and Vietnam, their last battles may have been their toughest.

Bravery, courage, and duty are the hallmarks of military training. Soldiers are taught to be steadfast in the face of dangers and horrors most of us hardly imagine, never mind face. Soldiers don't take to the idea of surrender very well.

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It is not uncommon for military veterans to suppress the reality of death in order to survive battlefield experiences. In many cases the veterans won't discuss their experiences, even years after the incidents. Recently, I worked with a patient who didn't want to leave this earthly battlefield, who did not want to go gently into the great good night. Although years removed from military duty, he was a stubborn, brave warrior and found it hard, like many brave warriors do, to surrender.

When I first met the Vietnam veteran I'll call Jack, that's all he talked about—how hard it was to let go. He said he wanted to go out kicking and screaming because the only other alternative, as he saw it, was to just give up; so, kicking and screaming it was. He was a bear of a patient. He gave the hospice nurse a hard time. He gave his family a hard time. He wanted nothing to do with the hospice social worker,

and even though his wife was a Christian (he wasn't sure what he believed, he would later tell me), he wanted nothing whatsoever to do with the chaplain. He was so ornery that finally the nurse had to tell him, "Look, you are going to talk to either the social worker or the chaplain. That's your plan of care. You're driving your family nuts and you're driving me nuts. This is the only way we go on." He picked the chaplain.

His wife told me he even agreed to dress up for my visit. He got a sponge bath and got rid of his t-shirt and sweatpants. He put on a hunting shirt, jeans, and a fishing hat. He was quite an outdoorsman and missed that part of his life terribly, as I would come to find out.

I would also find out he was a soldier (it wasn't on the hospice intake form). At the time, our hospice didn't inquire as to veteran status upon admission; we

do now. No wonder he was being so ornery to everyone. You don't win the war against cancer (for that was his diagnosis) in hospice care; eventually you have to surrender, whether you want to or not—and soldiers don't surrender easily. If we had known he was a Vietnam vet earlier, what pain could we have saved the nurse and his family? What suffering could we have saved *him*?

Like many veterans, he didn't talk about the war; he didn't want to let the story out—but the story wanted out of him. It was affecting how he was dying, even after all these years. He refused to surrender. We had work to do, Jack and I.

All the caregivers around Jack were women. I decided to try and be a bit macho—not my regular personality.

"Why are you being so mean to everyone?" I asked him. He didn't respond. He looked like the local parson or, worse, the military chaplain, who is always an officer, had chastised him. I tried again.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of dying."

"No?"

"No WAY." It sounded like "No SIR!"

"Jesus, I would be."

"Me, too." His voice was as small as it could possibly get.

"What are you most afraid of, Jack?"

"Giving up." His voice was still small. "I'm afraid that if I give up, I'll die right away."

I let him continue.

"And I just can't stand the idea of giving up. It's such a sissy thing to do, just roll over and die."

I told him he couldn't go on like he was because he was driving his

family crazy, but he didn't have to just die. I told him hospice was about living until you die, not about giving up. I asked him if he was a football fan. He said he was. I suggested that his situation was like being on the losing team and watching the other side run out the clock, or taking a knee, with nothing you can do to stop it. He nodded. The only thing you can control, I offered, is how you accept the defeat. You can rage and take it out on those who love you the most, which is what he was doing. Another option is to just roll over and die; but maybe, just maybe, there's a third way. You don't have to fight, but you don't have to surrender. That's what living until you die is about. Some people who aren't terminally ill don't live until they die; they just go through life blindly. Jack was suddenly, shockingly alive and in the moment. He used what energy he had to sit up a bit more and began to talk about his fears surrounding death, pain, leaving his wife, and the fact that he and his wife had different religious ideas. He said he wasn't altogether sure that he wasn't going to just end up in the ground and have that be the end of it. We talked about a lot of things.

He asked if I would come back. I agreed, but on the condition that we make a plan to find that third way. Jack was a hunter and a fisherman. He knew about finding his way through the woods and making camp. He said he knew the woods where he hunted and fished like the back of his hand. Well, these woods, the woods of those with

cancer, the woods of the ones preparing to die, were my territory. Maybe I could help him find that third way; maybe I could get him back to camp. He agreed. And that's what we worked on.

I met with Jack a few times before he died, and he did find that third way home. It was rough going at first. Raging is easier, and a lot of rage toward death had built up over the years. After the rage, he wanted to hang on and give up by turns, and he found that the third way home is much more difficult than either raging against the dying light or just giving up. Living until you die is a tough path through a thick forest, but with his being an outdoorsman, I was confident, as our work progressed, that Jack would find it.

Jack finally did make it back to camp peacefully, at home and in the presence of his loved ones. By the time he died he had calmed down considerably and was a model patient for the hospice nurse and a joy to be around for his wife and children. I presided at Jack's funeral and committal at a military cemetery. The prayers at his funeral included this adaptation of the Hunter's Prayer¹:

May Jack and all who went afield and stream with him be blessed with your grace. Watch over our brother Jack, now. Welcome him safely back to camp.

Reference

1. Trinity Lutheran Church. "A Hunter's Prayer." Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Resource Center Web site. Available at http://www.synodresourcecenter.org/pg/prayer/personal/0003/hunter_prayer.html.