

HOSPICE AND HUMOR: A CONFLICT?

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The philosophy of Hospice recognizes dying as a part of the normal process of living and maximizes the quality of life that remains. Hospice represents compassionate caring, and love for patients and families and allows them to develop a mental and spiritual preparation for death.

Palliative care, an important part of hospice services, does not hasten or prolong life or provide a cure for disease, but rather to relieve pain and provide comfort. It's often difficult for patient and family to adopt a different mind-set and make the transition to hospice care. They are no longer involved with aggressive medical intervention to provide a cure or prolong life. When there is acceptance that death is imminent, family and friends can engage themselves to maximize the quality of life of their loved one.

While illness takes a toll on the person's physical condition, spirit and passion for life and sense of humor often remain intact. Hospice recognizes humor is compatible with its philosophy and its website (www.thehospicewebsite.com/features/humor.html), provides links to other sites that encourage people to share humorous experiences they've had with patients. In a Google search, a multitude of references suggests humor to be an effective part of palliative care. More home care providers, hospice staff, and volunteers use humor to provide comfort and encouragement to patients and their families.

In spite of the increased acceptance of humor in hospice programs, some still feel its use is inappropriate for those with serious illness. To relate, once when asked to speak at a hospice fundraiser, I suggested the title, "Hospice and Humor." However, the sponsors expressed reluctance for the topic and gave the impression humor was not suitable for these people. Often there is the assumption that sadness, associated with ill health, entails a denial of humor. To the contrary, Allen Klein, in his book, The Courage to Laugh, suggests humor is a natural part of life regardless of health. Further, it has dignity and deserves respect. It promotes normalcy to those with illness and encourages communication with others. Often the zeal for life never leaves in spite of terminal illness.

In his book Humor of Christ, Elton Trueblood reports that elements in contrast, such as sadness and humor, are often complementary. While crying is associated with sadness, it can also result from humor. How often have you heard or experienced laughter that results in tears?

Erma Bombeck, in her book, I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise, reports initial apprehensiveness about the use of humor with young cancer

patients. That is until one of the kids she met said, “Would you be happier if we cried all the time?” She soon realized that these gutsy children had an eternal optimism, laughter, and love of life waiting to be developed. A 16-year old boy related how people felt uncomfortable around him. They felt sorry for him and kept the conversation serious. When confronted about his outlook on life, he stated, “Without a sense of humor, I would never have made it this far.” From Bombeck, “Laughter rises out of tragedy when you need it the most and rewards you for your courage.”

Recently, I read Art Buchwald’s book, Too Soon to Say Goodbye. Buchwald suffered from multiple health problems that included renal failure. He rejected the thought to have dialysis and decided to spend his final days in a hospice home. The well-known humorist wrote his final book while a hospice patient. The book reflects Buchwald’s love for life and “undying” sense of humor. This includes a dream about his flight to heaven only to have it cancelled and he ponders stand-by status. Even with terminal illness, Buchwald continues his journey in life with all the passion and fervor he can muster. He states, "I can't be concerned about dying because I'm too dammed busy living!"

In the movie, “Bucket List,” Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, who have terminal illnesses, meet in the hospital as roommates. Nicholson is a billionaire and Freeman has modest means. They develop a bond and friendship made possible by mutual qualities – enjoyment of life and sense of humor. Rather than sit back and wait to die, Nicholson persuades Freeman to share a bigger-than-life experience and do all the things they ever wanted to do. For the next few months, they spare no expense to fulfill their dreams as they do outrageous things and, in the process, have the time of their lives.

In his bestselling book The Last Lecture, Dr. Randy Pausch, a computer science professor, who specialized in virtual reality at Carnegie Melton University, talks openly about his terminal illness. He has pancreatic cancer with a prognosis of 6-months to live, but still has fun. He accepts his fate and while not able to change the cards dealt him, focuses on how to play the hand. For him, anger is not in the cards. When asked in an interview with Diane Sawyer of Prime Time, how he felt, he smiled and said, “I am alive, so I feel great.”

As he began his final lecture, “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams,” Pausch describes the cancer that would soon take his life. Then, with a smile, drops to the floor and does a series of push-ups in rapid succession. In a flash, he changes the audience’s mood from one of somber to delight. He talks about one of the earliest childhood dreams to be the coolest guy in an amusement park. That person is the one who struts around the grounds as he carries a large stuffed animal. Through the years, Pausch wins a sizeable number of the toy critters from games on the midway. Before his final lecture, he places many of the prizes on the stage for all to see and offers them to any takers. What a neat way for a brilliant man to share a simple dream. In contrast to Nicholson and Freeman, Pausch's "bucket list" consisted of little moments around the house with his wife and children.

Reportedly, the positive aspects of humor can have a therapeutic effect on those with illness. Humor has a positive impact on life. It builds togetherness and reduces stress. In her book A Burden Shared, Jane Kirkpatrick, with poetic prose and compassionate caring, offers encouragement and support for those with burdens. Insightfully she says, "I want to give you words of joy, spoken to make your spirit laugh and see the brightness of a future filled with those who care." From Mark Twain, "Humor is mankind's greatest blessing." Noted author, humorist, Andy Rooney suggests that a sense of humor is "one of the most universally admired qualities a person can have." Sam Erwin, in his book, Humor of a Country Lawyer, reflects: "Humor is one of God's marvelous gifts. Humor gives us smiles, laughter, and gaiety. Humor reveals the roses and hides the thorns. Humor makes our heavy burdens light and smoothes the rough spots in our pathways. Humor endows us with the capacity to clarify the obscure, to simplify the complex, to deflate the pompous, to chastise the arrogant, to point a moral, and to adorn a tale."

Thus, there is strong evidence to suggest that the judicious use of humor is compatible with the hospice philosophy. For those volunteers who feel comfortable to use humor, it represents another dimension of patient contact that creates positive feelings and promotes good will.