

**Palliative Care: It's more than you think, and it gives more than you think.**

Offering palliative care is like accompanying my friend to a train station, where she is leaving on a journey alone, or to an airport where the time comes for her to move into the secured area, and I can no longer see her. I know that she must continue alone. My role is complete. Her journey has both ended and begun. I already miss her. That's it for me. I have done my best. And my time with her has ended. What was it like? A privilege and a responsibility. Not always easy, sometimes rough and bumpy, confusing, and often draining, but always satisfying. Worthwhile.

It started with uncertainty. Would I get along with this person assigned to me? Would she accept me? So different in personality and life experience. An unlikely pairing. And yet ... we were drawn to each other, and so the caring began.

As I got to know her, we each shared our life experiences. Because I was not family and not officially a friend, she could share herself more freely with me than with others. Her thoughts, hopes, fears, wishes. Some regrets. Her happy times and her sad ones. As time passed, she also shared her confusion, anger and rebellion at the perceived injustice of dying, to her mind, earlier than she should. But who determines the timing of death? Each of us is in God's hands, and His timing is perfect. He makes no mistakes, although we often do not understand. This could be a source of comfort, if she accepted it. I hoped she would.

So my care for her continued. I learned the importance of many things: patience, kindness, and especially compassion. I learned how to show love, the kind of love that seeks the well-being of another, a love which compels me to stay longer if she needs me. A love which does not get upset when pain makes her angry. A love which is honest and truthful, but expressed with empathy. A hard balance, and a delicate one. This love calls her out when she takes too much medication and too little nourishing food. But my role is not to judge, just to care and support. She could ask for advice, and feel free to choose to accept or reject it. We could be honest with one another, respecting our differences, needing and enjoying the interactions. A life lesson about gentleness as being strength controlled by love, about perseverance, and about sincerity and truth.

I learned the importance of time, and that it is deceptive: it can pass so slowly when one is alone and in pain. Looking back, one sees that it has flashed past, carrying with it what little remains of one's life - and looking ahead, one sees life's last fragments, the remnant of time that remains. I learned how important it is to not only savour life's special moments, but to actively look for special moments and create them. A drive by the river, to soak up winter sunshine, and hear the birds, or to

watch the rowers with their youth and strength – a moment created, a memory of peace and serenity. And who knew that crutches could be ski poles? That the concrete wheelchair ramp could be a ski slope? Who knew that a wheelchair could be a racing car? I remember the fierce and crushing grip on my hand during a concert when she was thrilled by the music. The memory of her delight and excitement is a lasting joy to me. Pain forgotten for a sliver of time. A life lesson: time is precious and very fleeting. Check and evaluate priorities, make time meaningful and joyful. Value time as the gift it is. The gift is this day, for yesterday has passed, and tomorrow may never come.

There is always an increased clarity about the importance of relationships, of cherishing the people in our lives that we care about, of repairing broken relationships. I saw bitterness in her about family and friends who had grieved her or abandoned her, and I saw the pain that lack of forgiveness can bring. Here was a warning for me to love others as they are, not expecting more than they are capable of offering, a reminder that forgiveness is a powerful and liberating tool. Did I convey that with understanding and compassion for her grief? I hope so. I cared enough to try. A life lesson for my own relationships. Less self-focus, and more concern for others and their distress. Value our family, friends, neighbours and all we meet, with thankfulness, gratitude and respect, and allow them to enrich our lives.

I learned how hard it is to not judge, but to step back. It is always easy to compare, to see clearly what some-one else 'should' do, or think. I have not walked her path in life. I can only enter in a tiny part into her sufferings. If I was in her shoes, how would I be thinking, feeling, speaking and acting? A life lesson for all of us: the lesson of empathy and humility.

My time as a palliative carer? It is more than you think, and it gives more than you think. It brings into focus the important things in life, for both; all the essentials are crystallized and the drudgery of the everyday falls away, for both. I hope I enriched her life, and that the time we shared was precious, comforting, and helpful, as she approached the departure gate of death. Sharing life and death is a privilege.