

# The Center of Everything

Category: The Middle of the Night  
written by Jutta Braun | January 29, 2017

The call came at midnight. "He died," the voice on the other end said. No emotion.

"How are you, Alice?" I asked.

"Ok," she answered, "Will you come?"

"On my way." Clothes back on, I grabbed my nursing bag, ran out the door.

I remember my first day at the Van Roker cottage. Alice and I sat on metal and red vinyl kitchen chairs.

"He don't know he got cancer," she said, "Should I tell him?"

"Has he asked?" I countered.

She thought. "No, he tole me he don't wanna know what's wrong with him."

In nursing school, we practiced "open-ended" communication. I had tried with Homer. It just wasn't his way. He was polite, but no extra words. Never. "When he wants to know, he'll ask. Be honest with him, though. Be gentle, but honest."

They were an old-fashioned couple, Alice and Homer. They did what was expected—he worked at the factory, she raised the kids, kept the home neat. Both were stoic, especially Alice. She attended to Homer's needs matter-of-factly. She asked practical questions. "Should he be sitting up?" "Which is better for him, chicken soup or meatballs?" She took my word as gospel truth. They would bicker, but Alice did what she needed to do, and told Homer what he needed to do, and that was that.

With every visit, Homer looked weaker, his legs and abdomen became more swollen, till the skin was so stretched, the fluid leaked out. No pain, thankfully. On one visit, Alice took me to the kitchen. "He finally asked," she said. "I told him yes. You got cancer."

"And what did he say?"

"He said 'I wish you hadn't told me that!'"

Shortly after that, I got the call. At the door, I was admitted by a middle-aged man in a flannel shirt and jeans bearing a plate of cheese and crackers. In surprise, I looked around the living room. Despite the late hour, fifteen people were gathered there, sharing juice and crackers. I could hear Alice in the kitchen, smell of fresh-baked cookies wafting. I was offered refreshments and ushered to a seat, introduced to neighbors, the children and grands. I

looked around at all the faces – all serene, no tears, all quietly conversing. It felt like a Sunday-home-from-meeting gathering.

Then I spotted him. He had been more comfortable sitting up at the end.

There he was, on the couch, eyes open, looking on at the gathering. This was his place, at the center of everything.

His family and friends didn't look at all uncomfortable with him there—it was as if this situation was totally natural. In that instant I saw that he loved, and was loved. Words, or lack of them, didn't change that. I caught my breath, validated that he didn't have his, and made myself part of the group. Time enough to call the funeral home later.

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