

A Gift of Words

Category: House Calls and Home Care

written by Aine Greaney | December 12, 2025

I used to tell myself that my work in health communications was about more than earning a paycheck or typing words on a page. Yes, I didn't provide clinical care, but didn't I make a small contribution, too?

I hoped so. Then, I switched specialties from behavioral health to end-of-life (hospice and palliative) care. In my new organization, I assumed that writing and educating about adult and child grief-recovery (my assigned beat), was about more than selling services or outfoxing algorithms.

I assumed wrong.

One day, my supervisor reminded me that grief recovery wasn't reimbursable. So I would expand my scope to all services. I would learn by shadowing some clinical colleagues, starting with a chaplain's house call.

In that meeting, I remember thinking that visiting the home of a terminally ill patient would be a happy reprieve from that silent, watchful administration wing. On the opposite side of that building, my clinical colleagues smiled more. They could chat and laugh.

On the appointed day, I met the chaplain in the lobby. Robert seemed excited to have someone in his red pick-up truck. As we exchanged childhood and career stories, the sound of my own voice and laughter startled me. When we exited the highway, he said, "You'll just love our 91-year-old patient John."

About a half hour later, I followed him across a sidewalk to the patient's front door.

Inside, John played host. He asked all the "how-are-you-today" questions. A retired educator, he listed that week's other visitors, including former students. John had less than three months to live. But in that sunlit room where I listened to two men chat and tease each other, time stalled and expanded into a sweet forever.

"What do you do?" John asked me.

"I write," I said, hoping he couldn't hear or see my jadedness. He eased himself out of his armchair to shuffle-walk toward a back room.

He returned with some typed pages. "I write, too," he said. "Helps me sleep. Here!"

"But these poems are for your fam—" I started.

"—No," John interrupted. "I want you to have them."

At our next supervision meeting, I conjured John's face, his kind voice as I

reported on the visit and its tick-the-box learning outcomes. My (now former) boss approved.

I said nothing about those poems that, these days, in my home office, I often re-read.

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