Learning the Meaning of Care

Category: Hands
written by Alexander Gunn | April 10, 2017

I was nervous. I had never been this close to someone who was about to die. I introduced myself, but the patient was non-responsive. I told her that I was going to sit with her and that I would stay for a few hours. As I sat down, I noticed her breathing—it was irregular, and each breath sounded like she was slowly and painfully drowning. Almost trying to distract myself from her breathing, I studied her face. The structure of her face—her jaw- and cheekbones—was well defined. My eyes wandered from her head to her shoulders and along her arms, and then I saw her hands.

In that moment, I knew the right thing to do. I reached out and held her hand. Its radiating warmth surprised me. I had expected her be cold, an embodiment of her appearance. I continued to sit with her. I fidgeted a bit. I got up and fetched some lotion and smoothed it onto her hands. I sat back down and again took her hand in mine.

I turned to study her face again, and I saw something different this time: I saw the face of my grandmother. I thought about this woman's family, who could not be here, and I thought about how much love they surely had for her. With those thoughts, in that moment, I loved her as a grandchild might love her.

This experience was a memorable part of my work as a volunteer for a program called No One Dies Alone, which was created to ensure that hospitalized patients can have a volunteer sit with them during their waning hours or days of life.

Prior to this experience—whether it was teaching my favorite sport, basketball, to a team of ninth-graders or working as an EMT in the emergency room—I had found meaning in improving others' health or helping others achieve a goal. My experience with this program, however, was different. Through it, my perception of what it means to give care was completely transformed.

During this experience, I found meaning in simply approaching a patient with care and compassion. The fact that I could be a part of the team caring for this woman in her final hours gave me great pride. I knew that I was not helping to save her life, but I was able to provide *care* at a critical and difficult moment—and in that I found meaning.

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