

Healing Through Waiting

Category: Waiting

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Waiting.

Over more than half a century of delivering primary care, I was privileged to be present at moments of profound sorrow and unspeakable grief. Often, these moments came when communicating about a fatal prognosis during a house call after a death had occurred there—whether unexpected or expected, sudden or after a chronic illness.

Since the local police were aware that I was available to come to a home after a death had occurred, I experienced many such events. On these house calls, I learned to use waiting as a therapeutic tool. I learned to be extremely alert and aware in order to use that waiting time to absorb the narrative—the story of both the patient and their loved ones—and to become a witness in a spiritual sense.

Once, while covering for another physician, I arrived at a home where the mother and father of two adult children had just been informed that both of them had been killed by a drunk driver. The clergy were there; the mother worked at their church.

The mother was inconsolable and agitated, and everyone wanted me to give her “a shot.” As I entered the bedroom with my medical bag, I waited. I waited through her heart-piercing sobs until she acknowledged my presence. I then spoke hesitatingly, gently, hoping that my presence as physician could be a somewhat healing nostrum.

I did not give her “a shot.” I felt that healing required that she begin her restorative journey. That despite her grief-stricken and heartsick soul, a healing balm produced through the alchemy of the mystery of eternal hope and faith would ensue. I felt that I, as stranger, was there not as a specific doctor but as a physician quod physician. I was mindful of how often, in stories and dramas, a physician is called after a death.

Plainly, waiting has negative connotations, too. But in some circumstances, waiting out clock time gives us an opportunity to call up that other critical time, biblical time, time to delve into and help uncover someone else’s capacity for healing.

Indeed, waiting can be a tool in our black bag of compassion.

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