



Pearls December 2003



All of us, the various professional players in palliative care try diligently to relieve pain and to manage the symptoms that our patients present. We are filled with compassion as we see what our patients and their families deal with every day; and we realize that we are privileged to be invited into the every day lives of these persons.

Recently, a few of us were gathered together in an examination room with one particular patient whose wound was being assessed. "What was this person's pain like? Was the wound sensitive to the air? Did it hurt when it was being dressed? How much was the wound draining? What products was the community nurse using in the home? How could this person's wound be better managed? We all know those very important questions that are used in a wound assessment. And this patient, while writing responses to this multi-disciplinary team, kept a sense of humour during the interview. He was able to joke and laugh at some things he shared with us.

All of us there were in our own minds, wondering what it must have been like for this gentleman with this open wound. All of us were thinking at least one of the following thoughts: how terrible it would be to not be able to go to work...not have much of a social life...losing one's independence and having to move home with parents again....Making our assumptions about another's life, values, priorities...a very human reaction to another's suffering.

And then, a final question was asked before the physical examination. "What is the hardest part of all this for you?" And there was a profound silence as the patient thought, looking beyond the present room. And, then, on his pad of paper he wrote: "My passing will break my mother's heart." Simple words! Holy words! Unexpected words! Spiritual words! And there was a pregnant silence in the room...as we who are caregivers tried to take in the profundity of this patient's words from the heart. That examination room had become holy ground!

That was one of those holy moments that will not be forgotten by that palliative care team. The physical wound was such a tiny part of that person's concern. His mother was far more important. It was her care, her pain that was foremost in his mind and heart. It was going to be his death that broke his mother's heart. What does one say to such a deep groaning of the soul? A soul open to communicate his deepest pain.

Unexpected? Yes! But a moment in time when that patient was far more than a wound to be treated with compassionate medical expertise, but a soul to be wholly appreciated. A person who was inviting us on a holy journey with him through this life and into the next. Were we up to the invitation? Could we not only look after his wound care, but help him look after his mother during his life and in his death? How could we enable him to leave a legacy for his beloved mother? Maybe he already has by his living!

At this season, we think of the holidays, of our families and friends. We also think of those with whom we are privileged to know as clients/patients and their families. We often think we know so much about how others feel, think and are; but let us not make assumptions even with the best of intention. True compassion means inviting others to tell their stories. It means listening with our minds and hearts to their understandings of life and of death. Through our ability to ask the appropriate questions, at the right time, and to listen, we learn what is truly important. Listen to the words, listen to the silence, listen to the body.

May you have some sacred time and space during this holiday season.

Submitted by Joyce McManus BA, BSW, M.Div, RSW
by invitation of the Palliative Medicine Program