
FROM THE EDITOR

Reflections on losing a friend

Four days after Mother's Day, May 15, 2003, my dear friend Marcy Dempsey passed away. Her personal reflection, "A Toolbox for Living: Cancer Reflections" can be read within the current issue of *Palliative and Supportive Care* (*P&SC*). I do wish she were still here, not so much just to see this piece come out, but to grace us longer with her gentle spirit, boundless energy, and sage wisdom.

It feels odd to begin this, my first contribution to *P&SC*, on such a personal, intimate note. But then again, this journal was launched with the intent of taking its readership to places not frequently found in other publications. With a mandate to address the psychosocial, spiritual, and existential dimensions of end-of-life care, *P&SC* will need to include content that speaks to the profoundly personal and fundamentally human aspects of end-of-life care. This will take on various conventional forms, including clinical trial reports, literature reviews, and an assortment of scholarly papers. However, probing the meaning and impact of life-altering losses and expanding the field of inquiry around end-of-life care will require an openness to various forms of expression. In that regard, personal reflections such as Marcy's have so very much to teach us.

Marcy was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago and died just shy of her 40th birthday. Throughout her illness, her vigorous commitment to being a mother, wife, friend, and life-long learner was unwavering. Like so many people living with a life-limiting condition, Marcy was looking for answers and, ultimately as it turned out, for tangible meaning. She would occasionally ask me for book recommendations and always seemed touched and

enlightened by these literary retreats; once, feeling the pressure of wanting to keep up my track record, I asked her what sort of book she was up for next. She replied, "something that will give me insights." To the very end, she was trying to figure things out and trying to make sense of what was happening to her.

While she clearly tried to prepare herself for death, at the same time, she fully immersed herself in the joy and challenges of living. Perhaps this is a variation on what Avery Weisman referred to as "middle knowledge"; the ability to anticipate death, while simultaneously planning on life. Recent studies have focused on the importance of meaning and purpose as fundamental components of quality life among patients who are terminally ill. That being the case, one of the great challenges facing palliative care practitioners is how to identify these sources of meaning, and use them to engender hope and purpose toward the end of life. Whether the language we use falls within the realm of psychological, spiritual, or existential discourse, these are compelling issues that demand our attention. "A Toolbox for Living" is one remarkable woman's personal journey through this landscape of meaning and purpose, as her life draws to a close. Marcy died surrounded by a circle of friends, who softly chanted her favorite Hebrew melodies as she passed from this world into the next. As for her fear of being forgotten, I am convinced that she helped fill each of our "toolboxes for living" with gifts that will last no less than a lifetime.

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