How can a Clinician Face Death Mindfully?

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One Sunday night, well past midnight, while my body was motionless and my mind roamed, Naomi summoned me. I felt the urgency of her plea in the cruc of my being. I sensed that Naomi was slipping into a quandary. Where was she? Her cries were loon-like. I moved in and out as they met the shore. The smell of pines permeated the nocturnal air. My heart beat startled me into wakefulness. The time had come.

The next morning I called the oncology department. The nurse on duty informed me that Naomi was in Room W6.25 of the hospital palliative care wing. I slipped into an indigo dress, cancelled my morning appointments and wandered into my garden. Memories of Naomi flooded my mind. The garden offered spring blossoms. I gently gathered white tulips and wrapped them so they would not wilt. Sorrow replaced the anguish I felt upon wakening from the dream.

Other deaths, tucked away in the recesses of my mind emerged as I drove to the hospital. They were: the twinkle in my father's eyes as he recognized me just before he lapsed into a coma; my mother-in-law's parished lips hours before she took her last breath; and a 96 year old woman's bitter battle to grasp life, despite her advanced age.

I met Naomi's husband for the first and last time when I entered Room W6.25. He was short with thinning hair, dressed in dark slacks and a wrinkled gray shirt. His face looked strained; dark circles rimmed his eyes. I let go of what I had heard about him during our sessions. I sensed that his suffering was all that mattered now. He thanked me for coming as he edged toward the door. Before leaving us alone he said, "Naomi spoke highly of you; you meant a great deal to her." He used the past tense.

Bouquet in hand, I approached the woman, once my patient, who was in Room W6.25. He was short with thinning hair, dressed in dark slacks and a wrinkled gray shirt. His face looked strained; dark circles rimmed his eyes. I let go of what I had heard about him during our sessions. I sensed that his suffering was all that mattered now. He thanked me for coming as he edged toward the door. Before leaving us alone he said, "Naomi spoke highly of you; you meant a great deal to her." He used the past tense.

When I entered the hospital room I was conscious of the full range of my feelings and memories about our previous sessions. I sensed that her dark anger and fear of death had faded into the past. She and I accepted her fate. My intention was to offer her my presence one last time. Awareness of breath helped me stay in the present moment. We both allowed silence to prevail until a voice transmitted a message of healing even when curing is no longer possible. Marr writes, "...when I enter a patient's room I like to drop it all [charted information, test results] and go in without an agenda [3]. I like to use myself as an 'instrument' of care...And I need to calibrate myself to receive the information." In other words, arrive with an open, curious mind, a "beginner's mind" given how unique each person and exchange is.

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References