

Facing Death with One Who Is Dying Chaplain Jim Burns

As a kid I witnessed my mother saying “good-bye” to my sister as she and her family would get in the car to leave. My sister was married to a career military man and they lived in many far-away places in those days. My mother always had a hard time saying “good-bye” to Blanch. Every time we visit my wife’s family, there are tears when we have to say “good-bye.”

Learning to say “good-bye” to a loved one whom you see only once every two or three years is hard for all of us. Watching loved ones drive away and seeing a parent’s reaction can be a terrifying experience for tiny tots. Watching a loved one walk toward death’s door is much worse than all those “good-byes.” When a loved one is dying, we feel helpless, frightened and inconsolable. There is just simply no easy way to say “good-bye” when someone close to you is dying. Sometimes this process goes on for weeks or months. You know what lies ahead but you can never be fully prepared. I am intelligent enough to know that these words won’t make it any easier to say “good-bye” when one dies, but I hope these words will help you to be a little better prepared when you face death of a firefighter or family in this most difficult storm in life.

As a chaplain, we often do a lot of “good-byes” with our firefighter families, with crisis victims, and with our own families and friends. To be honest chaplains, we’d rather play games about serious illness, injury and facing death. We have a natural tendency to try to shield the dying from the reality of their condition. However, they usually *know* what is going on. We shy away from discussing the approaching death which often leaves the dying isolated by our shying away to discuss death’s imminence. It is a difficult task of the chaplain, but it is one of the most important jobs we can provide to our constituents.

The dying person needs help in breaking through that isolation. Often the person who is dying has to take the first step, but we must be open to speak with the dying person. In many cases, we are quick to divert the conversation to something that *we* are more comfortable with. We want to talk about his healing, how he’s going to be back to work in a few days and the like. The dying person needs to talk about dying. He or she needs to talk to someone about how sick he or she really is. And as uncomfortable as it is for us, we need to give them the opportunity to share what they’re feeling. Please *allow* feelings into the conversation - your feelings and the dying person’s feelings. Don’t be afraid to talk to them about your fears, about how uncomfortable you are with the course of the illness. Talk to them about your worries about the future. Talk about the grief experience and grieve together. And accept as normal whatever anger either one of you feels about all this, talk about the unfairness of it all.

Your openness will serve not only your own needs, but also the needs of the dying person. Anything you feel - sorrow, anxiety, anger, fear, sadness - the dying person most certainly feels *much* more. They need someone who will allow them to express these feelings, without judging them, without trying to divert the conversation to more pleasant

things. They need to vent their feelings. They deserve to vent their feelings. And, the chaplain probably wants you to guide them through those difficult feelings. Remember, however great the loss you are feeling, they are facing a far greater loss than you are.

Carol Lueberig tells about how a dying friend of hers taught her a valuable lesson about this. Carol says, “Kay and I had spent an hour or more reminiscing about the many good times we’d had with our circle of friends. Suddenly Kay grew serious. ‘You know,’ she said, ‘I’m not afraid of dying. It’s just that you know what you have here and it’s hard to leave.’ Carol further adds, “And I realized that even as I struggled to say “good-bye” to Kay, she was saying “good-bye” to everyone and everything she cared about.”¹ Wow! We often think of death selfishly [not intentionally, of course, but we tend to see a dying person’s death as taking something from us], when they are the ones who are losing *everything* they’ve ever known or loved.

We oftentimes try to protect ourselves from pain by shunning the dying. The more obviously an illness becomes, the fewer visitors show up at the door. Even the closest of friends tend to distance themselves from the dying. Most people don’t know what to say or do, so they stay away. Backing off in this way may seem to make the last good-bye easier [for us], but it really doesn’t. It only postpones the pain. Death is painful. It always has been; it always will be. To back away from a friend or loved one who is dying doesn’t make anything easier, it only adds a lot of regrets to the pain you already feel.

The end of life is too precious to waste. The scriptures teach that there is a time to be born and a time to die [Ecclesiastes 3:1-2]. Dying is part of living. It is as much a part of life as being born.

What can we chaplains do in the final weeks and days to make a dying one’s death a more *valuable* experience [we can’t make it easier]. In the long run, memories are the only thing those who linger in this world get to keep. The dying cling to their memories. Unfinished business haunts them; they have a yearning to wrap things up and to know that their lives really mattered; that they meant to someone or something. Give the dying a hand in making good memories during the last weeks and days of life. Help them gather some things that they want to pass on to others - sentimental possessions that they want to give to certain children, grandchildren or friends. There are sentimental possessions that loved ones keep for years to pass on to the next generation. Help them do that while they can experience the pleasure of passing these things on. An elderly lady, for example, can gain great pleasure in passing along her husband’s pocket watch to the first grandson, a bit of wedding silver to the oldest granddaughter, a special brooch or bracelet to another granddaughter, etc., etc., etc. Help the dying person to experience pleasure of getting to pass on these items while he or she is still able. This is not likely to be a pleasant moment for you or for the grandchildren, but it can be one of the greatest gifts you can give to a dying person.

Sometimes we are called to the bedside of a dying one with whom we have not had the best of relationship with. For whatever reason, relationships have a way of souring. A dying person may need to offer an apology. Or you may not want to be at a dying

one's bedside because of a sour relationship. However, this is your last change to make a good memory for both of you. It's never easy to leave this world with unfinished business. Do what needs to be done, not what you feel like doing. You need to make things right and the dying person needs to make things right. Even if the person doesn't accept your advance toward them, you will be able to handle the death better if you do what's right. I have been at the bedside of a number of dying persons who have had a lot of bitterness toward me, or to the church, or to the fire department. And, honestly, I didn't want to go there, but by God's grace I did. I can tell you, how difficult it may be, it also has helped me and the dying persons more than you can ever imagine.

Seek support. There is a passage in the Old Testament that describes a scene where the Hebrews were in a battle (Exodus 17:8-13). In this passage it says that as long as Moses kept his hands raised, the battle went well for them; when he tired and let his hands down, the battle went down hill as well. So some of Moses' friends came to his side and held his arms up. That's what other chaplains are for - to hold you up when you are too weak to hold yourself up. Chaplains are there to help the dying persons and their families weather the storms of life that are too hard for them to weather alone. Other chaplains are there to help you weather your storms. Like St. Martin giving his cape to the beggar. Facing ministering to a firefighter, or friend who is facing the loss of a loved one in death is one of those storms. It is a storm that can take the wind out of your sails and leave you drained, both physically, emotionally and even spiritually.

And chaplain, remind the family that when their friends ask them to tell them what they can do to help, they are expressing genuine willingness to help. This is a great opportunity for you to give some good advice to those who are caregivers for the dying. You can say something like, "I know you don't want to impose on your friends, however, at this time, tell them what you need." "Ask first for their shoulder to lean on and their ear to listen." You will remind them that they will need that kind of support now and perhaps a long after the death. Remind them that when they grow weary, ask for practical help. "Ask a friend to do your laundry or to run errands, do grocery shopping, write out your bills for you. Your friends genuinely want to help. Many times they don't know what to say or how to support you emotionally, but they have a genuine desire to help in practical ways. Let them! Sometime not even your closest friends are able to discern your needs. Don't be afraid to ask them for help. Ask a good friend to provide a meal or to relieve you from care giving for an afternoon. You need rest from time to time. You need to get away from the care of your loved one for a little while. The Lord provided a Sabbath [a day of rest after six days of labor] for us to catch our wind and rest our bodies. Take advantage of this opportunity."

You may remind them that if they don't have friends who have the skills needed to care for their loved one, a doctor or hospital social worker might be able to direct them to an organization that can provide such services - Hospice, Cancer Care, or some such group. I would suggest the caregiver to ask their physician what to expect. No one can predict the moment of death, but the attending physician can give you a fairly good idea of what to look for and be prepared for.

Saying “good-bye” is never easy. AND, it never gets easier. A dying person will slip from your grip no matter what you do. Chaplain you can be a more valuable help than you can ever imagine. What do you do? Be there for them. Love them. Listen to them. Be honest with them. Listen to them. Love them. Be there for them.

1 Quote from Carol Luebring, Saying Good-bye to a Loved One. A CareNote from Abbey Press

Chaplain Jim Burns retired after 45years of ministry as pastor and public safety chaplain. He retired senior chaplain of the Sugar Creek Township Fire Department, and retired pastor of His Place - New Palestine, New Palestine, IN. Jim and his wife, Susan, now lives in a sleepy little town in Central Louisiana.