

In Search of a Secular Hospice

Donald Shields

When I entered the dimly-lit hospice room, a woman's voice reached out to me. "I hope that you have not come to proselytize your religion."

I was in my fourth year of volunteering in a hospice. My wife had died under hospice care in 2003. A year and a half later I decided to contribute my time to helping others in the same way that I had been helped and comforted by this worthy organization. I sensed personal satisfaction in the work that I was doing meeting needs of hospice patients and their families. Now, I had entered the patient's room to see if I could be helpful in any way. A cup of coffee, perhaps? A pot of tea?

The woman's voice challenging the purpose of my visit took me aback. My immediate reply was that I did not have a religion, and therefore I had nothing to proselytize.

"I ask you this question because I had to send away the last volunteer," the woman continued. "She asked to sit with me and my husband in order to guide us along a path that would ensure that my husband would enter

heaven. Earlier in the day, another volunteer had questioned us both on our religious beliefs. We were gracious in allowing him to converse with us, but after he left, we resolved to not let that happen again. Hence my dismissal of the last volunteer who started down the same, unacceptable road."

I now saw that the woman was sitting in a chair drawn up next to her husband who was unconscious in the hospice bed. "You see," she said, "my husband and I are atheists. Our beliefs are private to ourselves, and we object to people coming in uninvited, to interfere."

The distress in the woman's voice prompted me to ask myself once again: What is the role of religion and religious beliefs in a hospice setting? I had been troubled searching for the answer to my question from the very first day of my involvement in hospice.

On that, my first day, I started my weeks-long training to be a hospice volunteer. This initial training session ended with the program director asking us to stand. When we all were standing, she

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led us in Christian prayer. This came as a complete surprise to me, a non-praying, non-believer in religious ritual. I had been led to understand that hospice was a secular organization.

Concerned about being asked to join in prayer, I went to see the director of training the following day to inquire whether the hospice followed religious practices or was it indeed secu-

lar. The answer was that hospice received half its financial support from the provincial government. It therefore had to be secular and non-denominational. Pursuing the topic of the appropriateness of prayer further with the training course director, she came to agree with me that prayers did not really have a place in the training program given this constraint. Prayers at further training sessions stopped.

Other questionable hospice practices came to my attention after I had started working in the hospice unit itself. Early in my volunteering, I was asked to check and make sure that if a patient died, a stained-glass angel was hung beside the door of the room in which the patient lay. The angels were about four inches tall, the sort of multi-colour, stained-glass object that became my father's hobby to replicate and sell in retirement. This responsibility, to ensure that an angel was hung on a doorframe, caused me to wonder if the choice of an angel was a symbol of purely Christian faith. "Would an angel be acceptable to the broad spectrum of beliefs held by hospice patients and their families?" I asked myself. This led me to ask friends and acquaintances who were other than Christian what they thought of the practice. In particular, I asked if there were a role in their religious or other practices for angels. According to Jewish tradition, I was told, angels exist, but they are spiritual beings who do not have any physical characteristics. Angels do exist as well in Muslim belief. They are not ob-

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jects to be worshiped or prayed to, as they do not deliver prayers to God. Angels exist in other religions such as Buddhism and Mormonism. In the end, the use of angels to mark a death did not seem to me to be problematic except for those who are agnostic or atheists. Later, on its own, the hospice directors decided to allow symbols other than angels to be hung

by the door on a case by case basis. A reasonable accommodation I thought.

More disconcerting to me, and more difficult to resolve, was another hospice practice. This was the practice of a small group of volunteers gathering in a patient's room after the patient had died and the body had been removed. I was asked to join one of these gatherings. Intrigued, I agreed.

Once we assembled in the darkened room, one of the volunteers handed each of us a printed page of words. Our small group then began to chant its way through the text in the handout while the leader rang a gong from time to time to emphasize a break in the text.

During the reading we were instructed to make a quarter-turn periodically. This meant that eventually we faced all four principal directions – East, South, West and North. The attributes of each direction, such as East, were read out before we turned, in unison, to face the next direction. This practice of honouring the spiritual forces of our planet can be said to be based on Aboriginal North American ritual. The ceremony is known as the "prayer to the four directions." The four directions cover the races of man, the seasons, and the stages of life from childhood to old age. East is the gift of the warm sun; South, the gift of life; West, the gift of water; and North, the gift of the wind. A prayer is offered to each direction by the original peoples of North American at community gatherings.¹

It took me a moment to realize that the program we were following in this darkened hospice room was almost identical to the ritual we volunteer candidates were introduced to during a training session. The leader in this case was one of the spiritual advisers in hospice. Then, I had stood with the rest of the trainees. The spiritual adviser started to chant to the East, calling on the sun, the spirits of our world, to life, and to the Great Spirit. His words, involving spirits and prayer, struck me as a manifestation of religious belief, or at least something spiritual. Coming to realize this, I decided to sit down, away from the others, unwilling to participate further. The rest of our group continued on under the adviser's lead to also face south, west and north. They paused while facing each direction, giving the hospice adviser time to state the contribution that each cardinal direction made to mankind.

Now I found myself taking part in the same spiritual ritual in the hospice room. While I continued to say the words along with the others, it occurred to me that what we were undertaking was a cleansing-of-the-room exercise, cleansing the hospice room of the spiritual presence left by the most recent occupant who had just died. I wondered: What would the families of the dead patient think if they knew that the room in which their loved one had only recently died was being ritually cleansed of his or her presence? Rather than continuing to participate, I quietly left the room, leaving the others to continue.

I told a number of friends about what had transpired in that room. All shook their heads in disbelief. They saw the activity as a New Age ritual which had no place in a secular, government-supported organization. I agree with them.

A year or so after the ritual in the room, I had the opportunity to raise my concern about what had taken place with hospice administrators and other hospice volunteers in an open forum. I reported the

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surprise and the negative responses of my friends. It happened that two of the hospice administrators were attending an open forum for the first time. They informed us that they had not been made aware that this was an ongoing activity in the hospice unit. One volunteer spoke about how she had participated once in the ceremony,

and then had decided to never participate again. She had felt uncomfortable the whole while, uncomfortable in the same way that I had.

To my surprise, the majority of volunteers who were present spoke up to say that they saw these ceremonies to be acceptable. Many had taken a role in the ritual themselves. They felt that there had to be a ceremonial way to recognize the passing of someone in hospice care. Closure was required they said, closure in the sense that someone's life had ended in the room, and in the sense that the role of volunteers in caring for the patient had equally come to an end on death. They also said that the words and the striking of the bong prepared the room spiritually for the next patient. The practice continues.

I am no longer a hospice volunteer.

Donald Shields is a retired academic with an interest in secularism and free will. My work? Consulting engineer and Professor and Dean of Civil Engineering. Now, in retirement, I participate in volunteering activities and as a leader and member of five discussion groups. My interests range from secular philosophy to consciousness.

Endnotes

1 See, for example, *The Legacy Of Mui'n'iskw - Smudging Ceremony*. This ceremony acknowledges the seven sacred directions. The first four directions are the four main directions of the compass: East, South, West and North. When a Native American prays to the four directions, it is a prayer to the spirits of the world, to life and the Great Spirit that encompasses the four directions and everything that is.