



Being with Death

Rob Long

There's a volunteer program at Harbor View Medical Center (HMC) that I became aware of a few years ago. It's called NODA or **No One Dies Alone**. Several of us at SIMS participate as NODA volunteers. I wanted to share a bit of my experience.

The program operates out of the Spiritual Care office at HMC and it involves a group of around 50 volunteers who sit with patients. The patients generally have only a few hours or days to live. They are individuals from our community who have no nearby family, who are estranged from their family, or whose family is only able to come to visit infrequently. Often they come from the homeless community or other vulnerable groups from HMC's mission population. In all cases, they have consented to having companionship in the final hours of their lives: either the patient or a family member has indicated that the patient would like company. We schedule ourselves via a group calendar to sit with a patient for about an hour and may visit over several days.

What's it like to sit with a patient? Every patient is different. Some are alert and conscious. Some are apparently not responsive. What I try to do is simply create a space for the patient. This means being mostly quiet and meeting them where ever they are. It's not about me. Offering my presence and attention. Holding hands. Playing music. Offering some words. Getting a popsicle, some ice water or a warm blanket. But mostly just sitting and saying nothing. It's a bit like meditating. Dying is a process and we are providing simple and direct care for the process.

Being a part of this program has touched me in a very tender way. It's a sweet thing to me and I am so grateful to be a part of this beautiful service. It's hard to put into words what this program means to me and I probably can't really. But I wanted to share some of the things I have come to really appreciate about NODA.

Remembering life. It goes without saying and sounds possibly cliché. But we're all going to die someday. Everyone around us. All our friends and family. Someday we'll be the one lying in the hospital bed. But for the most part we don't think about this. We ignore it. We forget. We push it away. We deny. We avoid that pain. But in avoiding and denying that pain we forget how wonderful our life really is. What a gift every moment really is.

When we sit with a dying patient we can't forget anymore. When we sit, we have to allow space for death. We have to let it in and look at it directly. Accept it. See it as natural. When we stop forgetting about our own death, we remember how precious is our life. Every second. Every moment. To be on this earth walking around in our bodies, what a treasure. We have so little time on this earth. I am reminded to hold death in my effort to live. How am I living now? Am I living in the light of my eventual and certain death? I so appreciate that reminder.

Connection. When I sit with a patient I am no longer my “self,” Rob Long, software engineer, father, son, husband, privileged white male, individual with my own basket of issues and hang-ups. I am simply one human person sitting quietly and intimately with another. The mask is gone. I hold their hand. I rub their shoulder. I mostly am quiet. We share something, a space. We share something that is very intimate and dear, which is simply something I cannot say. We share a moment. I often feel a sense of deep connection especially after visiting someone over several days. I am deeply humbled. This sense of connection I take with me when I leave the room. Everyone I see will be on that bed someday. We are all the patient. We are all the volunteer. All of us are frail and vulnerable and fragile beings and we all are deserving of love and compassion. I feel less separate and alone.

Fear. When I walk into a room for the first time and meet a patient lying there on the bed, I usually experience a deep sense of fear. There is the fear of what I will see. There is the fear of can I meet the moment? There is the fear that the patient will reject me. But there's nothing I can do about that fear. There's nowhere to hide from it. It's just there and all I can do is touch it with a tender heart. I think this is what much of our practice is about. Not running away. Not rejecting or pushing away. Just being with. When I sit with a patient I sit with a lot of fear and it's just there. And it's somehow OK.

Not being the center of things. When I step into a patient's room, I am giving up me being the center of everything in my life for a little while. I have a patient that needs attending to. I practice listening. What's going on with me isn't important anymore at least not in this moment. I step out of my own self for a while; I practice being of service to others and serving life without needing to be the center of attention. I find this to be a joyful experience.

We all have pain. We have the pain of things that others have done to us. We have the pain of things we have done to others. How do we step out of that pain? How do we let go and break the cycle? I think one way we can is to let go of the bitter thoughts of past and future and do the best we can with what is right in front of us. To just be here with what is and doing the best we can. When I sit with a patient who is dying, I am working with that.