

The Power of Presence

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IT WAS 9:00 PM and my daughter Heather was resting peacefully in her hospital bed. I was perched on the edge of the “parent bed” by the window. I had become a sentry of sorts, ever watchful, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice on her behalf. Her cancer had failed to yield to the aggressive chemo, radiation, and stem cell rescue attempts. She was in the process of dying.

Quietly, the door to our room opened and Dr. Greenfield, one of the staff oncologists came in and took a seat in the chair beside her bed—my other perch. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. He began to stroke her forehead and speak to her very softly. Although I could not hear every word, it was a sacred conversation between the two of them, I heard enough to know that he was telling her that he would be away for a while and asking her if she would still be here when he got back. She asked him how many days he would be gone and I saw her look into space for a moment then she turned to him and said, “Yes, I will still be here.”

I have replayed that scene many times in my mind since Heather's death. The sheer realness of it brings me to tears—tears of gratitude. Dr. Greenfield gave my daughter a gift that night, the gift of his presence. He came into her world and shared his vulnerability with her. Each stroke of her forehead said, “I love you,” “Will you be here when I get back,” and “You are important to me, I know you are leaving and I need to say goodbye.” These things brought great comfort to Heather. Although the word, “goodbye” was never spoken, it was exchanged.

Months earlier in another hospital stay Heather was very quiet and seemed in emotional distress. My attempts to talk with her were met with, “Mother, I need space!” I felt that I was the one she needed space from. I asked her who, if anyone, she would talk to and she said she would talk to Annie, our child life worker. I asked that Annie be paged to come see Heather when she could. Sometime later Annie arrived outside the door. She looked in through the door window, waiting for permission from Heather to enter. Heather waived her in. Annie stopped just inside the door and looked at Heather, assessing the situation. Instead of walking toward the bed, Annie got down on all fours and slowly crawled to the bed, never taking her eyes off my daughter. When she got to the side of the bed she rested her chin on it without saying a word. Heather broke into an ear-to-ear smile and I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Annie had found her! I left them together and went to the parent room so they could talk.

Sometimes in the hospital Heather's nurse would take a look at me, a sobbing, anguished mess and say, “Would a hug help?” Sometimes she would come into the room to find Heather unconscious and me crying in a heap on the parent bed. She would sit beside me, take my hand, and cry with me—not a word spoken. This made me feel understood. My favorite people at Heather's funeral were those who looked at me with tears in their eyes and said, “I don't know what to say to you, but I wanted to be here.” Perfect! I would think because I had no idea what to say to them. Some things are unspeakable and it is best to admit that.

When I found a part-time job a year after Heather died, it required me to call on people in hospital settings. This was obviously difficult and brought up a myriad of painful memories. As I drove down the highway in tears between calls I would call my sister-in-law who would say, “Are you OK to drive? Do you need to pull over? Do you need me to come get you?” Sometimes we would sing the chorus of a song together that she taught me: “Start from the very beginning, it's a very good place to start . . .” One time I was so deep in despair that after listening to me she simply said, “I love you!” three powerful words that got me through that day.

When I think of the power of presence, I realize that it is not given the honor it deserves. People think they have to do more. They think they have to somehow fix it or make it better or they have not offered anything of value. I respectfully submit that the power of another human being's presence when you are suffering is everything. You do not have to say or do something profound; you cannot fix or solve the situation. To try to do so is arrogant and is playing a false game that is isolating and hurtful. As my friend Dr. Alan Wolfelt, expert on grief says, the power of presence is about “companioning” the suffering. Entering into their painful world and walking along side them. What to bring? YOU in all your wonderful, unpredictable messy humanness—just as you are. Suffering is messy and unpredictable as well, so you will get along fine! In the months following Heather's death my pastor said to me, “I can't do the work for you. You are in a valley of boulders and in order to step forward you must break the boulders up with your sledgehammer. Breaking up those boulders and moving forward is your work alone. However, I can bring you lemonade or walk alongside you and tell you jokes!” He was describing the art of companioning. I could picture myself, sweaty, forlorn, exhausted but

smiling as I saw him climbing down the valley with that lemonade!

To companion the suffering is an act of courage. The sufferer has to be in their painful situation, the companion chooses to be. It is a breathtaking and profound act of love to enter into someone else's darkness to give your vulnerability to them and to receive theirs, never knowing exactly what it is going to look like or feel like. It is holy ground and you and the sufferer are pilgrims on a journey together. You can be a witness and a validation, you can be a beacon of hope, you may just be the reason the sufferer is able to bear their burden for one more day.

Perhaps my 6-year-old nephew, operating on pure instinct, did it best. Several months after Heather's death I was over at my brother's house and I was in pretty bad

shape. It must have shown on my face. After taking a look at me, my nephew ran to his room returning with his boom box. He got on his knees in front of me, inserted a CD and the beginning notes of "You'll Be In My Heart" by Phil Collins came forth. He squared his shoulders, looked me in the eye, took a breath and sang the whole song to me. I met his gaze and sang along with tears of love and gratitude streaming down my face.

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