REFLECTIONS

If I Was Going to Die The Voices of Five Dying Patients

A Note from the Authors

Do we truly listen to our patients' words?

We conducted long conversations with 23 dying patients at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. All were mentally clear but predicted to live an average of 6 months. We published our methods and a qualitative analysis of our work.¹ However, we found it difficult to express how profoundly these conversations affected us. We found layers of meaning embedded in their words. Poetry offers a way for us to capture this truth and poignancy. The poems that follow are offered with greatest respect from transcripts recorded with patients' permissions:

i. If I Was Going to Die

If I was going to die,
And I just had a couple of weeks,
Or months,
Or whatever,
I would just have to,
You know,
Prepare.
You know,
Because we all going,
You know,
All my loved ones,
You know,
I just don't want mine to be suffering.

ii. You Are Not Alone Anymore

If I thought I was dying,
I guess spending time with my sisters.
As a matter of fact,
It wasn't till I came in here
I had seen them.
They came up for Labor Day Weekend,
The first time the three of us had been together in ten years.
Just spending time with family,
I mean everything else pretty much that I've wanted to do, I've done,
And a lot of stuff I shouldn't have done,
I've done.
I've done a lot of traveling,
A lot of, like I said, whatever I wanted to do.
Somebody told me the only thing to hold you back is you
And I believe them.
It was wonderful.
They are my sisters.
We went different ways.
For a long time I've been alone.

Actually, it was great.
It is nice to know you are not alone anymore.

iii. I Only Pray

When I get into trouble or something,
Or get sick or something:
Then you go:
Oh, Lord:
Help me.
That's me now,
I try to pray,
Pray before going to sleep at night,
And help me make it through the day,
And I try to remember to pray
For waking me up and seeing another day.
But you know, mostly people like me,
I don't think about praying until you get in some kind of trouble.

iv. Well, I Jump In and I Jump Out

I lived some, you know,
I'm going to call it for what it is.
I let the Devil pull me away.
For the position I'm in now, I say it to myself,
And I go on thinking,
And the next thing you know I go out and drink a beer.
One thing leads to another.
I try to put it in my head,
I just don't care anymore.
You know I'm dying anyway you know.

v. Just Keep Praying

Just keep praying,
Because we definitely have to pray for each other,
Just not for me,
There is a lot of people,
There is a lot of people with HIV,
A lot of people just don't have bone marrow,
You don't know
How important your body is
Until you start having these problems.
Pray for the babies
That's not even here yet,
Pray for the ones that's not trying walking
Trying to seek help
Not just food but help.
Peace,
Happiness,
Not just for them but for other people.
Peace
There's got to be peace in the world,
Somewhere,

Where is it, we just keep praying.
That's not including preachers sitting up on the pulpit
Say,
Oh, Preacher
That don't mean you are a preacher.
Everybody has to pray for each other,
And then the peace will eventually join together,
Might take six months,
Might take six years,
But all of us need to join together,
All the generations.

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REFERENCES

1. **Torke AM, Garas NS, Sexson W, Branch WT Jr.** Medical care at the end of life: views of African American patients in an urban hospital. *J Palliat Med.* 2005;8:593-602.