

“...first the blade, then the ear,
and then the full ear of corn.”

Waiting for the Full Ear of Corn

by Donna M. Authers

Some years ago, I attended a healing service led by the late Canon Jim Glennon. He taught that we should not be discouraged when we don't see an immediate, spontaneous healing after we pray. Quoting from Mark 4:28 he said, "... first the blade, then the ear, and then the full ear of corn." The point he made for those of us involved in prayer ministries is that we need to be patient. But then the question remains: What do we do while waiting for evidence of the healing we know is taking place?

In the July/August 2011 issue of *Sharing*, North American OSL Board Member Fr. Nigel Mumford offered one suggestion in his review of the book, "A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying." He encouraged us to take the time to learn the do's and don'ts of compassionate caregiving. Following his battle with and continued recovery from H1N1, he now values more than ever the caregivers who help meet the practical and emotional as well as the spiritual needs of hurting people and their families.

I am the author of "A Sacred Walk" and, as a caregiver for many years, I can tell you what every caregiver

knows: we receive far more than we give. When you spend consistent, quality time with people in crisis you can learn so much. In time trust is built; and when that happens they tend to share on a deeper level, revealing not only their regrets in life but also how they felt about the way others interacted with and cared for them. It was as if my care receivers wanted me to capitalize on their experience and help me learn how to face the reality of my own mortality. They also taught me how to be a more effective caregiver.

Before the book was published, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Thank God I had been tutored in how to deal with a life-threatening illness, and I know God heard every prayer offered up on my behalf. By His grace, I am well and drew even closer to Christ as He carried me through my treatment. The bonus for me was verification of what my special friends told me about their needs and wants – from family, friends, and their medical staff – while they waited for God to grant them a complete, sometimes ultimate, healing.

Since the book's publication, I have been invited to speak at churches throughout the country to help open

a dialog on important topics we tend to avoid, from developing a personal relationship with Christ to exactly how we can "carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). At these events new personal stories are often shared, affirming what I had learned while spending time with those who survived a crisis or looked death squarely in the face.

Whether you are a prayer minister or have another calling, there is little doubt that we will all become caregivers one day, perhaps reluctantly. Everybody wants to help, but not everybody knows what to do. So, if we are meant to bear one another's burdens, we need to follow Fr. Nigel's advice and learn the dos and don'ts of caregiving.

It is a privilege to be a confidante to someone traveling through one of life's valleys. And if you are invited to join a friend or a loved one approaching the end of their sacred walk through life, be prepared to respond to these typical "from-the-heart" requests:

Don't ask me how to help

Although asking how you can help might be your first instinct, instead try to anticipate ways in which you can be useful. Your loved one is embroiled in

an immense crisis, and he may not be able to identify or articulate the areas in which he needs help. It's also possible that he might feel uncomfortable asking for aid. So if you see a way in which you can help, just do it. Make a meal. Clean your loved one's bathroom. Offer to pick up groceries, or take care of children. Your foresight and initiative will be greatly appreciated.

Don't make me talk about my condition

Remember that your loved one has talked endlessly to doctors about her illness, prognosis, and treatment options. If you were not a part of those meetings, it's okay to ask about general news – but resist the impulse to go into detail. More likely than not, this will unnerve your loved one, make her feel less “normal,” and undermine the positive attitude she's striving for. When she's ready to share, she'll initiate the topic.

Listen to me

When a person in need is ready to talk, be ready to listen – even if the topic is one you'd rather avoid. Remember that listening is an active not a passive skill, so pay attention and ask clarifying and open questions to fully explore their feelings, regrets, and decisions they will have to make. You will surely be grateful for the heartfelt lessons of life and death you will learn from them.

Help alleviate my fears

If your loved one is harboring fears about the dying process or death, it's important for her to address them. Gently encourage the patient to talk about what she is afraid of or apprehensive about, and do what you can to alleviate those worries, whether that involves physical action or affirming

words.

So often the stoic mask of endurance hides real anxieties. Effective caregivers gently encourage friends and loved ones to identify their fears, even the complex fear of death. Once a fear is out in the open, the Lord will make you an instrument of peace whether that involves physical action or by giving you just the right words to say to help alleviate their fear. Remember, God did not give us a spirit of fear.

Allow me to maintain my dignity and self control

Although you might want to do everything you can for your loved one from the minute he receives a terminal diagnosis, it's important not to hover over him or prematurely treat him as an invalid. Let him maintain a normal life by doing the things he can for as long as he can. Otherwise, he might

feel as though he has lost control of his life. Once your loved one does need aid to get from one day to the next, always be sure to consult his opinion and make sure that his wishes are being followed.

Reassure me that my life mattered

It is common for depression and doubt to set in when someone accepts that she is losing the battle to stay alive. Take every opportunity to express appreciation and admiration for her past accomplishments, and communicate what your relationship has meant to you. Make sure that your loved one knows how much you care for her, and encourage other family members and friends to do the same. Reminisce, remind her of who she is in the eyes of God (Psalm 139), and tell her she will not be forgotten.

A SACRED WALK

Walking alongside someone with a chronic or terminal illness is a sacred time, but we usually want to be told exactly how to help.

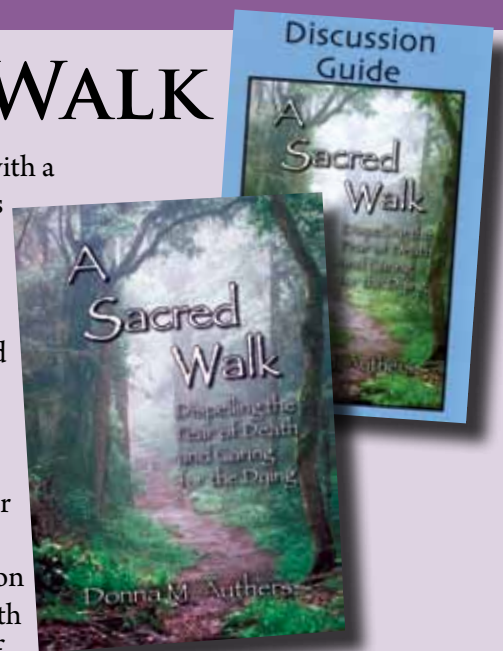
This book shows how best to meet their practical, emotional, and spiritual needs. It describes healings, both physical and emotional, that strengthens one's relationship with Jesus. It also provides a tool for evangelism as well.

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Share your faith with me

Whether your loved one is an atheist, an agnostic, or a person of faith, he may be uncertain and apprehensive about what the next step will entail – and he might not feel comfortable initiating conversations about what he believes. Keep your antennae up and listen for the subtle openings you might be given.

Skeptics and believers alike are comforted by the assurance that a divine being exists and that an afterlife awaits. I have learned over the years that healing prayer, if it does nothing else, plants seeds of hope – even in the heart of a skeptic. Those seeds are watered by the unwavering faith of those who continue to pray with thanksgiving. Caregiving is akin to working in God's garden (weeding and fertilizing the soil) while we wait patiently to see "first the blade, then the ear, and then the full ear of corn."

Create a peaceful atmosphere for me

The last thing your loved one wants is to be surrounded by reminders of death and dying. Most patients prefer to stay at home if at all possible. If your loved one has to remain in a health care facility, though, do everything you can to make her room feel like home. Keep the area around her free of clutter and harsh lights, try to hide or disguise medical supplies, and surround her with her favorite things: pictures, objects, flowers, artwork, music, and above all, people.

Give me permission to go

This is one of the last and most difficult services you can perform for your dying loved one. Even after a person's fears about the dying process have been addressed, some might still worry about leaving the people who love and care for them. Assure your

loved one that everything has been taken care of, that he will be remembered and cherished, and that it is okay to let go. Removing any emotional obstacle that may remain will help open the door to a peaceful passing.

Whatever your role in meeting the variety of needs of someone experiencing one of life's unwelcome surprises, know that caregiving is an act of service that provides inestimable and eternal value to all concerned. God bless the caregivers of this world! Whether you are a prayer warrior, a consistent listening presence, a person providing hands-on support, or all of the above, be confident in your calling with the full knowledge that neither you nor your loved one is walking alone.

Donna Authers is an OS� member with a passion for applying her natural caregiving skills to help bring hope and healing to hurting people.



After retiring from a successful business career in 1992, she has been active in Stephen Ministry and Community Bible Study. Since the publication of her book, "A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the fear of Death and Caring for the Dying and its companion Discussion Guide," she is a frequent guest speaker at churches and conferences throughout North America. Donna lives with her husband Roger in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. To contact Donna and learn more about her work, visit her website at www.asacredwalk.com

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Deacon Gail White
(207) 353-8453
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496 Lisbon Road
Lisbon, ME 04250