

**Section 1: Description of Event:**

I visited with Carmen A., a hospice patient, 15 hours before she died. This is first situation in which I had visited with the patient several times while she was awake, communicative (although severe alzheimers), and interacting; and then did vigil with her before she died. I had met the daughter and husband, and so also had the experience of connecting and offering some spiritual care with family.

When I arrived, the daughter and husband looked exhausted, and glad to see me. I asked how they were doing, and we exchanged some simple words I don't remember exactly the content. The husband said he was going back to sleep on the couch, and the daughter took me in to the bedroom where Carmen was, sleeping. I asked how she, the daughter, was holding up, and she said, "Ok, you know, as good as one can expect. I'm just so tired, though, I don't understand why." She gestured to the bed, "I slept here last night." I made eye contact with her and said, "Of course you are tired. How could you not be?" There was a pause of just being in the reality of this moment. Then I asked, "How can I be of help?" I offered to sit with Carmen if the daughter wanted to take a break, or I could also sit with her and talk or whatever. She said she wanted to go get dressed and take a shower, and then go to Safeway. We agreed on a time she'd be back since she knew I needed to pick up my daughter an hour later.

I sat with Carmen for the next hour. First, I pulled over a chair to be close, and quietly told her I was here, reminded her who I was, even though she was unconscious, non-responding. Then I put my hand on her arm and squeezed her, softly rubbing her arm with my thumb. I felt the deep desire to connect, to make contact, even to get some response, but mostly to do everything I could do let her know she wasn't alone and that she was cared about. I took some breaths, then offered some metta to her, which came easily and without effort from my heart. Then I sang some songs to her, especially while a lawn mower made a lot of noise outside the room. I wanted to fill her ears with beautiful sounds, not loud noise (although I also told her I wasn't a great singer and I didn't know what kind of music she liked, but that I was going to do my best!). After awhile, I noticed things inside me slow down some more, and I stopped even the little bit of "doing" that I was doing. I sat by her side. It was a concentration meditation in which her breathing and her body were the focus of my attention. Whenever I caught my mind wandering to other mundane thoughts, or my head nodding off, I just brought my attention back to her breathing, her body.

After about an hour I heard the husband come in and say that Debra was back now. It was my cue to go. He fussed with her bedcovers and asked if I had gotten any reactions from his wife. He had a tone of despair and hopefulness. I told him no. He said that she had been this way now for a couple days. He looked so powerless and scared. I told him that she probably could still hear him, that supposedly hearing is the last thing to go, and so he could still talk to her. He looked surprised and a little eager. Something to do, maybe? Something to hold onto in these

last few hours? I wasn't sure that what I said was accurate, but I had heard it somewhere, and it felt like it was a comforting thing to offer him, so I think it was OK to say that. Then he hugged me, which was a surprise to me, since he had been a little distant from me during our visits, and I had suspected that he actually hadn't wanted me to visit. I went out and spoke briefly with Debra, hugged her, offered to come back tomorrow if it would be OK/helpful, and then said good-bye.

The hospice volunteer coordinator texted me the next day that she had died early that morning.

The afternoon after she died I was feeling some sadness and also a lot of restlessness. So that afternoon I pushed myself to sit down and write the family a condolence note, sharing with them my heartfelt sorrow and some of the things I remembered and enjoyed about Carmen. It's the kind of thing I tend to put off and never get to, even though I think to myself what a nice thing to do. I put the note in the mail, and went back to work. Then as I was in a cafe shifting my attention from one meeting to the next, trying to clear my mind to be present for the next group of East Side parent leaders that I was going to be training, the phone rang from an unknown 408 number. I don't usually answer unknown numbers, especially at work. But for some reason, I answered. It was the daughter, Debra. "I found your number in my phone, and wanted to give you a call. Mom died this morning, and I wanted to tell you how grateful we are for the support you gave to her and to us. You put a smile back on her face, and even though you weren't here for that many weeks, I know you and she had a connection. We are so very grateful for your kindness and support."

We talked for about 5 minutes, and I felt a clear line of heart connection. Sadness, loss, beauty, gratitude. And then, after some shared appreciations, I said something about wanting to know when the funeral would be if possible, and we both became a little awkward talking about logistics. It was clear that that was it, there wasn't more to say, we were still strangers, really. And yet, she had reached out, I had reached out, we had connected in this deep moment of pain for her. I had been of service. And I was more open-hearted, and inspired as a result.

#### Thoughts, Feelings, Expectations and Assumptions prior to event:

My state of mind/being before I got the request to go do this visit was of someone riding a wave of energy and exertion. This week in particular was a culmination of intensive work commitments, and I had warned my family that I was on a work marathon.

So, when I got the news Carmen was suddenly actively dying and the family wanted me to visit, I could have just said no way, and in the past I may have felt pressured and stressed by one more request/demand on my time. Instead, I felt like I had flexibility and capacity. I knew I wanted to be there. I was both hopeful and nervous going into this visit. I also was a little scared that it would be harder than other visits -- because I knew her more as a person, and because her family would be there, which meant it might be more emotional. I also had the basic expectation that this was important for me to do, would be good for me and for Carmen and her family, that it was right that I visit. I had just the previous day been at a hospice "circle

of care” training that emphasized things like tone, touch and body language as important ways to communicate care and presence. I was resolved to try this out and not to worry about what I would say. I felt calm walking in, and ready to be present.

## **Section 2: Reflections on the Experience (relating to chaplaincy)**

What actions, words, terms, language stood out to you? What you were drawn to, what did you pull away from, what were you neutral about?

- I was drawn to the husband’s plaintive words about not getting any response from her anymore, and then surprise and lightness on hearing maybe she could hear him still. It made my heart cry out for him, to hear his sense of powerlessness and loss, and his deep desire to do something, anything, to still connect with her.
- I was drawn to the sacredness of the moment. It felt both very heavy in intensity, and light in there being nothing to do.
- I had a negative feeling about the noises in her room -- the lawnmower outside and the oxygen tank inside. I didn’t want these to be the only noises she heard, so it motivated me to speak to her and to sing to her, to try to offer something more pleasant.
- I was highly attracted to the gratitude and appreciation I received. It made me feel really good to get the call from the daughter, and to be told I had made a difference. Would I have felt as connected and moved by the whole experience if I hadn’t been getting such positive reinforcement from them? Honestly, probably not. Getting the messages that I, and what I was doing, was valued was a powerful motivator for me to reach out more, open my heart more.

Which of your assumptions were proved/disproved?

- My assumption that this was the right thing to do, that I could be of value, and would also benefit from the experience was proven true.
- I didn’t worry about what I would say, just trusted my instincts and the intention to show care. I think I was more consciously making eye contact, listening, and then initiating or receiving touch (eg., the hugs) that I otherwise would have been before the training.
- I now realize that I held some assumption that while what I was doing was valuable, it was miniscule in the broad scheme of things, given the magnitude of what they were going through. So, I was really surprised to get the call from the daughter. I assumed she had a million other people to call and things to put her attention on besides me -- and it never occurred to me she would reach out to connect with me, some random volunteer who had only been there a few times. So, some underlying assumption of my non-importance. That was disproved in her calling me. Maybe that’s why it was so powerful for me to get that call.

How is this helpful to me in this course? What were you grateful you: knew about, could do, could be present with to be of service?

1. Learning about energy, and potential greater capacity to engage with people than I have assumed. There is so much going on in my life right now, so many people I am feeling connected to and new relationships to track, to hold in my mind/heart: chaplaincy colleagues, my fellow volunteers and the men in the prison, hospice staff and patients, work colleagues, parents I am training on the East Side San Jose through work, parents and staff at my daughter's school I am volunteering with, my own family. I feel an expanding in me, and also a default to the assumption I will be overwhelmed or exhausted by it all. I have been putting mindfulness toward what am I actually feeling, vs. this default. Bringing some curiosity to consider whether the stretching is good. I have noticed a wider range of feelings -- including nourishment, energy, and growth, not always a feeling of being drained.
2. Being with death. One of my goals in taking this course was to prepare myself in some way for the eventual death of my own parents. I won't know until it happens, but I have some sense that it is helpful to me going through the experience with other people, and learning how to be present and open-hearted in the face of death and familial loss/pain.
3. Seeing where my capacity is growing and also where there are gaps. I can see a growing capacity and comfort in me to be open-hearted and present in these kinds of circumstances. I am trusting my instincts and intuition and not over-thinking things. Natural curiosity and compassion is beginning to flow/grow. All that feels good, and I am deeply grateful. I am also able to see that there are areas of spiritual care that I am not yet comfortable taking the initiative to do -- particularly public prayer or ritual. I reflect back on this encounter and can see that an experienced chaplain might have taken the opportunity with the husband and daughter and offered to lead a prayer, or do some kind of more active ritual/engagement to invite the family members in to do something with their loved one. Create and hold space for them to express their feelings to her, for example. I didn't consciously see the opportunity in the moment, only after. I certainly didn't have the confidence to initiate something. I feel grateful to be able to see progress and development, and also see what areas don't come as easily or readily to me right now.

### **Section 3: Dharma Talk**

Since it is in the prison work that I am called on to give Dharma talks occasionally, I want to use this space to prepare something that I could potentially use in real life. Here goes.

I want to talk tonight about the practice of loving-kindness and compassion, two of the Brahmaviharas that Phil talked about last time we were here together. Metta and Karuna, in Pali. I have heard some of you say, and certainly it has been my experience, that having compassion for myself, or offering metta to myself is harder than offering it to others. For some reason, allowing ourselves to be the recipients of good will, of kindness, of compassion is very difficult. And yet, the Buddha says that:

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe deserve your love and affection.”

So, how do we let this in, how do we come to soften ourselves to receive metta, to receive karuna? The main way that I have found from my own experience is to offer it to others, and slowly, slowly come back to myself. It is the way I have seen you all practice at times, too -- returning to ourselves as the last in the series of metta practice. In a minute, I will share a way I do that in my own practice that helps to open my heart and receive it more fully. But first, let's talk about this phenomenon of offering it to others as a way to cultivate our own capacity to receive. Perhaps some of you know the Prayer of St. Francis, that says:

O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

This prayer has always been deeply moving and grounding for me, even though I wasn't brought up Christian and now am Buddhist. I think there are many similar themes in Buddhism. One theme is that there is this interconnection between ourselves and others, between giving and receiving. In fact, one of the core truths the Buddha learned and then encourages us to experience and learn through our own practice is the truth of not-self. This is a complicated teaching that I am not going to go into much tonight, but it points to an understanding we can reach through deep practice that there is not a separate “me” who stands fundamentally apart from a separate “you”.

So, in seeking to open our own hearts to offer good will to others, to feel compassion towards others in pain, we also open ourselves to allow in the care and good will of others, to break down the entrenched beliefs that we are not worthy, we are not deserving of love, of care.

Recently, I had the opportunity to be with a family as their mother/wife moved toward death. I was only there for a little while, didn't know them very well. But we had a connection, and when I learned the next day that she had died, I felt sad. I also felt grateful -- to have had the chance to connect with other human beings at such a vulnerable and painful time. My heart had loosened its protective walls a little as a result of the experience. My capacity for compassion had grown. I was surprised to get a call from the daughter the afternoon after her mother died, expressing heartfelt gratitude toward me for the time I had spent with her and her mother. It had been such a small gesture -- an hour of my time, presence; easy to offer. And yet, it turned out to be important to her. I realized that my surprise in getting that call was rooted in this belief of

not being worthy. Who was I? A stranger, someone miniscule compared to what I assumed were way more important people in her life. And yet... she called me, felt gratitude toward me. Can I allow that to sink in? Have there been small ways, small instances in your life where someone has expressed appreciation toward you, good will toward you? And what do you do? What feelings, thoughts come up inside you in these moments? This is a good place to bring mindful attention. It is a place where our deeply rooted beliefs about ourselves can emerge, and that gives us an opportunity to shine the light of awareness on them and be curious.

Another lesson I take from this recent experience is that it's ok to start where it's easy. In fact, the Buddha encourages us to find the places in our practice where there is ease. He encourages his followers to begin where it is easier because it builds the capacity of our hearts to open and flow with compassion and loving-kindness. It's like doing weights. Maybe you want to be able to bench press twice your weight, and can see others doing it, or look longingly at the huge barbells that you aspire to, but you gotta build up to it. Start smaller, and use the practice to develop strength of the heart. Then as we feel more skilled and confident, we can turn that strengthened heart toward more difficult people and situations -- including our own.

For me, I realized that the thought of being present for the death of dearly loved family members was terrifying, and just thinking about it could close up my heart in a frozen clamp. But, sitting with another family who I don't know well at all is a place I can start to learn to be present for loss, to sit with death. At the same time, I am being of service to others. There is a mutuality of benefit, a connection that shows us we are not really separate.

Here is a Zen story that I like, in which a monk asked Master Tao Wu what compassion looked like? "Tao Wu responded, 'It's like reaching around for a pillow in the middle of the night.'" Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is depicted with thousands of heads and arms, has an instinct for saving suffering beings. She does a small, simple act with ease -- to me, I hear this story and think -- wow, compassion is something that can be done in my sleep! It can be simple, without effort or prior thought, a natural response.

Ok, so let's come back to giving ourselves metta -- good-will -- or karuna, compassion, when we are in pain or struggling. Towards the end of our evening together I will lead us in our closing metta practice and we can try this together, but I'll tell you now what I have learned to do that helps me to receive metta. I think of a person in my life who has been good to me in an uncomplicated way. Someone who I know cares about me, and when I think about them I don't have any charge from a more complicated relationship. So for me it tends to be a good friend from college, or a former teacher or coach that I had. I can hold them in my mind and quite easily feel happy to think about them. My body can relax a little, and sometimes a warmth or even joy arises. It is relatively easy to offer them metta, loving-kindness. May they be happy, may they be free from suffering, may they be safe wherever they are. Then, after awhile of offering them metta, I turn it around. I imagine they are offering it back to me. I put myself in their shoes, and see myself through their eyes, and then speak as if it is them speaking to me, "Kim, my dear, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free from suffering."

So, we can try that together later and see what your experience is with it.

Thank you.