



“Those who have the strength and the love to sit with a dying patient in the silence that goes beyond words will know that this moment is neither frightening nor painful, but a peaceful cessation of the functioning of the body.”

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

SPIFFY

Although I had planned to write about something completely different, I can't seem to put the words together in any coherent form. I am being pushed to relate something that happened decades ago. I have the feeling that in order for me to proceed with my original desired writing direction; I will have to put this down on paper first.

My very first nursing position after graduation was in a hemodialysis unit. I originally worked the evening shift because I was "low man on the totem pole" and they needed a registered nurse to legally be in charge. (For me it meant major responsibility right out of the gate.)

One day upon entering the unit, I greeted our part-time home dialysis training nurse giving "the tour" to a potential candidate and his mother. Introductions were made all around. This young man, the patient, was dressed like he just came from a college interview and I said so adding, "My, don't you look spiffy!" He assured me, with a proud smile, that he was already attending college. The dye was cast as far as I was concerned, from that day forward I called him Spiffy. Until today his proper name eludes my memory. Spiffy he was and Spiffy he would always be.

In the weeks that followed while he and his mother were being trained and afterwards while they were waiting for the equipment to be delivered to their home, I made it a point to always stop into the training room to visit. Spiffy was an intelligent man, always with a sly smile and a wicked sense of humor.

During his time being dialyzed at home I would see Spiffy occasionally whenever his home shipments were delayed and he needed to borrow supplies, when he wanted to fill us in on his college progress, when his mother took a short vacation respite, or he decided just to stop in and say hello. We were all thrilled, patients and staff alike, when he told us of his forthcoming kidney transplant! Spiffy's new kidney started working immediately and the anti-rejection meds were doing their job. After a few months of positive lab results, everyone started to relax and breathe a bit easier. But before the year was up the lab work started showing initial signs of rejection. Medications were adjusted, but to no avail. The handwriting was on the chart, Spiffy's new kidney was going to fail. Disheartened, he returned to his old routine of home dialysis. Unfortunately this didn't last too long as more and more medical complications started to set in. Eventually Spiffy needed hospitalization.

While he was being hospitalized, we handled his treatments in our unit. Since he was an "add on" to our schedule Spiffy had his dialysis in the evenings or after hours. Being his nurse during most of these times we quickly dispensed with small talk and got into some very serious discussions.

Being a nurse taking care of patients with a fatal disease, the newly published book, **On Death and Dying** by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was pretty much required reading for me. Being a patient with kidney failure Spiffy had already treaded his way through all the, now famous, 5 Stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Now with the failure of his transplanted kidney, together with his complications he had to revisit depression and acceptance. Because of his condition which barred him from the astronomical chance of finding a second matching kidney, Spiffy had to truly face his situation with literally no hope. We both knew he had to find a different direction through this heartbreaking time.

Through our discussions during those after hours, when all the other patients had gone home, with all that one-on-one time available, he saw his new direction. Spiffy had to work his way backwards to be able to move forward again. Life is not always a straight line. We talked about what he had accomplished, what he enjoyed, who and what he loved and cared about, what in his life he was thankful for, what in his life he regretted, and what he was now cursing at, his death.

These conversations he continued with his family and friends when they visited him in his hospital room. Some of the reactions from the people closest to him he admitted

were odd. We discussed how people react to someone talking so openly about their future death. (This was the early 1970's, and Kubler-Ross' book was only out a couple of years and was mostly read by medical professionals in those first years of publication. Cancer was still being referred to as the "C-word" by the population at large and speaking of someone having a fatal disease or dying was done in whispers.)

Once Spiffy accomplished a "life review" and tackled saying what he wanted to say to the people in his life, our conversation shifted to the big questions. He was moving forward. What was the meaning of our existence? What was waiting for us all once we died? Do we really make a difference? Here we were, both in our twenties, having some pretty deep philosophical and esoteric discussions. We didn't arrive at anything concrete but I think all our talks helped in a way. It prepared him for his death. He was more accepting of where he now was in his life.

One evening, towards the end of a shift, being quietly rolled into the unit on a stretcher, Spiffy was brought in for what would be his final dialysis treatment. The staff knew his condition before his arrival. We didn't have to say a word to the other patients, they knew. Spiffy was now experiencing hypersensitivity of his senses. We set him up in an alcove where we could shield him from piercing light and buffer the sound attacking his ears. I spoke to him in low whispers and gently connected him to the dialysis machine, in spite of this he grimaced in pain. As the remaining patients finished their treatments each one came to the alcove archway. I put my finger to my lips, silently telling them not to speak. Separately, they each stood and in silence said their goodbyes, acknowledging the death that is part of life that comes to us all, turned, and left.

With all the other patients gone, I stayed with Spiffy while he dialyzed. I gently held his hand and lightly stroked the inside of his forearm, which seemed to make his body more relaxed. We stayed in the quiet, not saying a word, no need. The time for conversations had already ended. When his treatment was over and I had returned all the circulating blood back to his body, I softly asked him if he wanted to remain in the now quiet unit longer. He agreed to stay until his mother arrived back at the hospital, then he would go back to his room with her. Before the transporters took Spiffy back to his room, I asked him if he would be fine. He nodded slightly and mouthed thank you. That was the last time I saw Spiffy. He died later that night.

With Gratitude.

Kai

