

The Nursing Home

Life Experience

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Many years ago, I was the keynote speaker at a recognition luncheon for older adults at a local community college. At the time, I was a self-employed long-term care consultant and held several licenses including one for nursing home administration. During my introduction, the event host read from my resume and highlighted my time as an administrator in various facilities.

After my presentation, I was seated at a large table of attendees. As we waited for lunch and chit-chatted about the weather, the lady to my right turned to me and asked, with genuine dismay in her voice, "How on earth did you go to work every day in such a sad, depressing place with people dying all the time?" The table fell silent and everyone looked at me.

I wasn't shocked or offended or surprised. I had been asked that question in one form or another more times than I could remember—that happens when you work in a nursing home. My standard answer for these occasions was brief and always at the ready, but that day as I looked into the faces around the table, I knew that response was inadequate. And so began a long, intimate back-and-forth conversation in which I shared the following:

Yes, every day I went to work in a sad, depressing place with people dying. A nursing home is a place of loss. Loss of health, loss of independence and control, loss of friends, family, and routine. Loss of dignity. Loss of privacy. Loss of financial security. Loss of a sweater, locket, or book. Loss of life.

And every day I faced the impossible challenge of stopping the loss, all the while knowing that even using everything in my power the best I could hope for was to slow that loss a wee bit. Yes, I worked at the nursing home surrounded by loss—watching life being reduced bit by bit.

But it was that reduction of life that drew me back day after day. Surprised? Professional chefs use reduction to remove useless vapor, leaving only the richest, most intense flavor and body, the very essence of the food. The reduction of life in the nursing home is much the same. The losses—be they real, perceived, or merely useless vapor—revealed the deep, rich, intense essence of being human. I had the daily honor to partake of this richness.

I took in the undying love and tenderness between husband and wife sharing a waltz neither knew was possible. She, lost in dementia and restrained in a geri-chair; he dying of cancer. I wanted a restraint-free facility. He wanted to dance with his wife once more before he died. The restraints disappeared and she stood in his arms. The look on their faces as they slowly spun around and he silently mouthed "thank you" to me was a gift I cherish.

I shared the delicate elegance of a time long past with the most petite embodiment of manners and refinement. Miss M never married and was always oh-so proper. Wearing immaculate white lace gloves, she daintily served fresh strawberries and cream in the few remaining pieces of her china. Swallowed up by an armchair, her dignified presence still filled the room.

I received history lessons without compare from the people who lived it. From the people who *made* it. The stories of what they did, saw, heard, and felt were more vivid than any movie. I held their artifacts—a family Bible, a picture, a brooch—as they recounted the moment that

touchstone came into their lives. Now too, I have a shared memory with them. The thread of our history binds us tightly together.

I sat and waited. Waited and talked and waited. Talked, held hands, cried, and waited. And in the final hours with residents, I learned so much more about living than about dying. I learned about joy and disappointment, trials and tribulations, anticipation, ambition, hope, faith, and laughter. Some may find it odd, but in the waiting hours there is laughter, joy, and happiness and a desire to see that spirit live on.

So, you asked, how on earth did I go to the nursing home? How could I *not* go? I went because the losses pale in comparison to what's gained. I went because there's more happy than sad; more living than dying. But most of all, I went because in the nursing home, where life is distilled down to its barest essence in those last years, months, days, and hours, the intense fullness of the human spirit is revealed. There is no "useless vapor", only the very soul of life. While poets may look to the heavens to "touch the face of God" I needed only to walk the halls of the nursing home.

How did I go to the nursing home every day? I went happily. Hopefully. Humbly. Gratefully.