



It's a Privilege

My family and I learned the importance of hospice volunteers when my mother was in her final months of life. Until then, I had no idea what hospice volunteers did. Then, on one particularly intense day, the hospice nurse said to our family, "You folks have been under a lot of stress. Maybe you'd like to consider going out to have dinner or see a movie or something. Get out of the house and breathe some fresh air. Our hospice has volunteers who can sit with you mother until you get back. If there are any problems or changes in her breathing, you will be called right away. Take a break and do something for yourselves."

At the time she said this, I mostly remember feeling numb with exhaustion and sadness. Unless you have been on a "death watch" with someone you love dearly, it's difficult to describe the experience, except to say that your emotions reside on the surface, but also penetrate down to the fiber of your being.

It was a big deal for us to leave mom alone with a stranger. Who was this person who would volunteer for such a job? Such an odd thing to volunteer to do, or so it seemed at the time.

We took the advice, and, a few hours later, we arrived back from the movie to find the dishes done, the kitchen organized, and the volunteer reading silently by mom's bed. It was like one of Santa's elves had come in and made our world a little easier. One by one, each of us kids thanked her for helping. "It's a privilege" is all she said as she quietly left.

I can't tell you the name of that volunteer. I only saw her one other time, at mom's funeral a week later. At the end of the service, she came up and quietly shook my hand, saying what a privilege it had been to meet my mom. That experience was significant in forming my attitude toward hospice. Two years later, my feelings of gratitude brought me to do my own volunteering with a hospice in Los Angeles. It was clear to me that the best way to show my deep appreciation was to become a volunteer and help a family as mine had been helped.

Why are hospice volunteers important? From a social perspective, hospice volunteers often help to create a personalized "hometown" feeling of care. There is rarely anything institutional about hospice care, and one of the biggest reasons for this is the volunteer program. From a spiritual/psychological perspective, hospice volunteers are the only team members in the mix of all those involved (nurse, social

worker, chaplain, etc.) who are not there to evaluate the patient. Hospice volunteers come to the patient as a friend, with no agenda and no judgment, and that approach of friendship is deeply important to the transition process.

The unique thing about hospice volunteers is that they are usually motivated by the purest sense of love. Many want to give back to hospice something they've received. A sense of selfless service is a common attribute I've encountered with many of the volunteers I have met through trainings and conventions. I would estimate that eight out of ten volunteers I've trained in the last three years came to volunteer in hospice because it once helped them with a loved one who passed away. Something beautiful has been given to them, and they wish to give back. This desire is sometimes expressed as a feeling of spiritual obligation. "What you have been given as a gift...give as a gift," someone once said. Money cannot buy the sort of devotion that speaks from the heart and says, "It's a privilege."

Furthermore, as many hospice volunteers offer their service, the love they have for their own loved one who passed away gets stirred up when they volunteer. Memories come back, deep conversations come about that might not normally take place, and a bonding and healing often flow freely between patient and volunteer. "It's a privilege" are often the only words a volunteer can find to describe this experience.

For me, being involved in hospice has truly been a life-changing experience, and I'm more convinced now than ever that volunteers can be the secret key ingredient to a powerful and healing experience for both the family and the patient.

A friend of mine recently lost his grandmother, who raised him since birth. Six months before she died, they were having a very deep and heartfelt conversation. In that conversation, he recounted how she had sacrificed so much to raise him. He said, "How can I ever repay you for all the love you have given me?" She responded without missing a beat: "My dear, love can never be paid back...it can only be passed on."

That's what volunteers do. They pass love on knowing that it is, indeed, a privilege.

--author Dillon Woods

Dillon Woods is presently involved in supporting caregivers and hospice professionals around the country with his two books entitled: [Where Souls Meet: Caring for the Seriously Ill](#) and [Questions...for Quiet Times](#). Samples of his work can be viewed at www.livingwithquality.com