

On Finding a ‘White Rose’: Realistic Hope Applied To Serious-Illness, Dying and Bereavement

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Abstract

The title of this brief discussion is inspired by the poem by Christina Georgina Rossetti ‘Where shall I find a white rose blowing?’ White roses are considered to symbolise honour, respect, dignity and peace, and are particularly relevant to loss, death, grief, and hope.

The idea of hope when a person is dying is nonetheless complex, and can confuse and distress family members. While hope for curing a serious illness may not be possible, it is often helpful to review life, loves and relationships, in order to progress through the experience, and die with some sense of peace and equanimity - this is realistic hope.

The brief account that follows is disguised, yet illustrates ways in which normal communication between family members became difficult, throughout episodes of serious ill-health. The usual ways that family members communicated were no longer helpful or could be tolerated by the family as a whole.

Brief psychotherapy helped, and although confined to a single assessment consultation, all involved recognised the need for an immediate change in circumstances, in order to achieve and provide some level of emotional and relational comfort to one another, at a time of extreme crisis.

Introduction

‘Where will I find a white rose blowing...in my garden the snow was snowing.’

Edward, (a pseudonym), was sixty-eight years old and suffering from pancreatic cancer - with little possibility of recovery. I saw him in the clinic, following a period of hospitalization. He was struggling with low-mood and marked anxiety.

Edward was polite, friendly and pleasant - but stoical, showing little in the way of emotion regarding his situation. ‘It is simply how things are,’ he commented. He spoke of running a successful business and how he needed to be in control of managing it throughout. He kept his feelings private and maintained a professional distance from employees. Edward explained that this was a way he had lived much of his life and in this respect he was like his father - loving and providing for his family and others, but his feelings remain private.

Although serving him well in business affairs, this would prove problematic throughout Edward’s illness. He described how he would often isolate himself during evenings at home in his study, managing accounts and work activities - a source of great discomfort to his wife and daughter. It was an aspect of Edward’s nature that brought financial success - but emotional distance from his family and friends.

Later in our consultation, I asked if he wished his wife and daughter to join us. He agreed, and I invited them into the consulting room - both were tearful and distressed. I asked Edward’s wife and daughter to explain to him how they felt about his illness and their situation more generally. I also asked Edward to listen closely to their words, before responding.

Both spoke tearfully of their anguish - not being able to find a way to comfort him throughout this distressing time in their lives.

‘We want to help and support you but you won’t allow us to and it feels awful - we love you, we’re your family Edward!’

Each went on to explain and illustrate ways the situation was hurting them. They spoke of feeling helpless, and wished to love and comfort Edward, realizing he would die from his illness and so their time together was limited and precious.

Edward remained silent and evidently reflective for a while, before responding that he loved them both very much and explained that he knew of no other way to cope with his illness. He didn’t wish his wife and daughter to suffer - although unavoidable given the circumstances of his illness.

All became tearful. I asked if they would feel comfortable, silently, holding one another’s hand. They agreed, and strong emotions

surfaced - together they wept - embracing each other - sharing their sorrow as family.

Edward spoke again of loving his wife and daughter and wishing to protect them both from pain and concern. He vowed to allow his family to share his sorrow - an achievable hope realized.

As all were leaving, Edward paused, wordlessly, squeezing my arm - perhaps, a further indication of difficulty in voicing his feelings and emotions at this pronounced time of suffering.

Edward died the following week.

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