

He Knows He's About To Die

Visiting a friend in a hospice

When a friend is approaching the final days or weeks of life—whether at home, in a hospital or a hospice facility—it's often awkward for a visitor to know what to say. How do we know what would really comfort someone who is dying? What would support the family who may be keeping a 'round-the-clock vigil? We're not family—should we even visit? One couple's story offers a window not just into the world of hospice care but also into how we can be ourselves with someone who is very near death.

After fighting Langdon's cancer for several years, the time came when he and his wife, Annabelle, decided that he should enter a hospice care facility. Langdon was a large man who required a strong team to bathe him and change his bedding. Langdon and Annabelle's studio apartment in Manhattan was too small to accommodate a private nurse or hospice care.

The decision to go to a hospice was gut wrenching, as the two knew this was foreshadowing the end and that they would not share their loving bed together again. However, hospice care brings great comfort. It means that the patient will have the round-the-clock attention of professionals, many of whom are extraordinarily compassionate and are trained in the best ways to minimize pain. The hospice staff also attend to

psychological and spiritual needs as well as provide the primary caregiver some time at home for reflection, tears, and gathering strength for the impending loss.

Annabelle set about creating as homey an environment as possible in Langdon's hospice room. He had been ravaged by the disease, become pathetically gaunt, and seemed to age overnight. That's why she made sure the room was sprinkled with photographs of him in his prime—photos with his family and a dashing photo of him in his British Commando uniform. His wife felt that the pictures reminded the nursing staff of what a strong, virile gentleman he once was, and this helped to generate and enhance respect and fondness towards him.

Annabelle also composed a list of suggestions to help visitors to help them feel less awkward during their visits. Here is how it read:

Langdon knows he is dying. I know this might be awkward for some of you, so in my gratitude for your being here, this is a list that might help you. Please accept it in the spirit it is intended—as a way to comfort and to bring sweet peace to Langdon.

- *Try to get beyond the shock of his appearance. I know it is sad and grim, but it is our wonderful Langdon inside this cancer-ravaged body.*
- *Langdon is a gentleman with great dignity. If for some reason his blankets are askew in an immodest way, straighten them up for him, please.*
- *Langdon is a very tactile person. Feel free to hold his hand or stroke his arm. It is a wonderful way to connect.*

- *Talk to him about something besides his sickness--politics, the latest news, an anecdote from your friendship, some juicy gossip. And a good joke is always welcomed.*
- *Tell him what he means to you. Do not fear tears—they are natural— and words of friendship and love are the best ingredients in a farewell.*
- *Ask him if there are any phone calls you can make for him.*
- *There are times when Langdon won't seem totally lucid because of the pain medication, but he is very much aware of your presence and loves to just feel your being with him. Often this is when handholding is a good gesture.*
- *If you sense that he needs more pain medication or if he tells you he needs it, please contact his nurse immediately.*
- *I will be here part of every day, but if you notice something that doesn't sit right with you regarding his comfort or care please call me to report it. This will be very helpful. Leave any messages on our tape.*
- *Please sign our visitors' poster and write a message if you find Langdon asleep.*

Friends, thank you for coming to be with Langdon, have a good visit.

Love, Annabelle

“What else do you think people need to know that could help support the family of someone who is dying in a hospice facility?” I asked.

I always felt guilty for the times I could not be there sitting with him day and night. And yet there were times when I wanted to escape and take a walk, be back in our home, or go out and have a quiet meal away from the hospice environment. I also needed to have a good restorative cry and wanted to share things with my children about Langdon's condition.

What took some of the burden of guilt from me was having a friend call and ask if he or she could fill in for me at the hospice, even give me a full day off. These offers were like manna from heaven, as I knew Langdon would understand my taking a break and would enjoy a new face to share a long visit with him. I made sure it was someone whom Langdon enjoyed. I should add that there were some people, well-meaning, whom he didn't want to visit him, and I would have to politely fend them off by saying, "Not a good day, I'm afraid, but thank you for the show of caring."

Something else friends might want to know is that telephone calls from people inquiring about the dying person's condition are not always welcome. Annabelle explained that she was exhausted, depressed, and frightened—lost in her own misery. "I just didn't have the energy to recite the mantra of my husband's grim deterioration to people who were perhaps phoning out of a sense of obligation. Often I fielded calls by letting the machine answer them. Later, I would respond to the meaningful ones. It's not easy to maintain perfect manners when your heart is breaking. Don't beat yourself up about this."

We were about to end our conversation when Annabelle looked out into the winter sky and said, “The most loving act you can do for one you love who is about to die is to listen to his thoughts. Be generous in sharing him with others who love him as much as you do. Arrange a private visit with a minister. Help him facilitate final amends that he expresses a desire to make. Listen to his fears and try to soothe him. Tell him how much you are going to miss him. Cry together. But most of all, share, if you can, an understanding that we all die and it is part of the continuum of life in which all suffering ends and love is eternal.”