

## **The Personal is the Pastoral**

By Betty Morningstar

The frantic phone call came at 10:00 p.m. in the middle of a busy week. "Carol wants me to go back to the ER," Patty sobbed. Carol was Patty's on-again, off-again girlfriend. Patty was my best friend and confidante. "I've been there twice this week," Patty said, "and they keep sending me home. What should I do?"

"Oh, Patty, I'm so sorry about this." Over the years, our relationship had become a classic example of "friends as family." On top of that, Patty's professional role as a nurse-midwife had brought an invaluable resource to my life. She had walked me through pregnancy and breastfeeding. We had nursed our babies together on her front porch in their first months. Our kids had grown up together, attending birthday parties, a Bar Mitzvah, and our respective commitment ceremonies. Patty's vegan Thanksgivings were a highlight of the year.

Patty's voice shook. "I'm supposed to start the new treatment Monday, but I'm afraid they'll delay it." She'd rebounded from several setbacks in her cancer treatment in the past couple of years, so we had come to expect the same this time.

"I'm coming out this weekend," I told her.

"Really? Oh, thank you."

Patty took a breath. "But it's far. Are you sure?" She had moved from the East coast to California a year earlier. Frequent flyer miles had made visiting easier than we'd thought.

"I'm sure. I'm going to start packing right now." I was matter of fact, hoping that might calm her. Carol called right after I hung up with Patty. In a rushed tone, Carol said, "It's bad. You should come as soon as you can. Her eyes are hollow. She won't eat." Carol slowed down. "She thinks she'll be okay to start the trial, but I'm doubtful. Please come soon. It's so hard," she wept.

"Hang in there, Carol. I'm coming on Sunday."

She sighed from the other side of the country.

I arrived three days later, committed to fulfilling the promise I'd made: to accompany Patty through the last leg of her journey. When she'd made the request, I'd felt a rush of love and nausea. Although I had sat with dying family members—holding their hands and uttering soothing words—those people had lived full lives. Patty was in her fifties, and she appeared to have outrun cancer that was first diagnosed fifteen years earlier. As a chaplain, I had also counseled people with end-of-life fears and decisions. I'd seen adult children take care of dying parents, even when the parents had given little to them during childhood. Holding on to hope against hope, these children would usually get nothing back in the end, except the satisfaction of knowing they had done what functioning families do.

Not that my relationship with Patty had been without conflict, but we had long since settled into a loving and generous relationship. I was where I wanted to be.

When I entered Patty's hospital room, I was greeted by large, darkened eye sockets that took up too much room on her pallid face. Even during three years of chemo, she'd retained her soft roundish countenance. The change happened in discreet phases. When my wife and I had seen her three weeks prior, Patty looked like a different person. Her silvery hair had glistened in the sun, and her face had been sculpted and elegant. Her tailored outfit had made her look

handsome, in the way some women athletes do. In the thirty years I had known Patty, she had been very overweight and had worn clothes that had complimented her earthy, nurturing persona. That was what had attracted me to her initially. I'd been needy, and she'd always been a caregiver. Now the roles were reversed.

Over the past few months, Patty and I had intended to talk about her end-of-life concerns and needs, but when I'd brought up the topic, she hadn't been ready. During our last visit, she'd only conveyed one thing: "I need you to make sure my ex (her kids' other parent) comes nowhere near me, including at the funeral."

"I'll make sure." I paused for a long moment, then said, "We'll get through this." I took a deep breath. "We've been through so much together." We both began to cry.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

In her hospital bed, Patty smiled, even with those haunting eyes. I hugged her gently, unsure if she was in physical pain. Carol was sitting close to her on the bed. I was a bit surprised because last I'd heard, Patty had been pushing her away. Carol and I hugged, and she whispered, "Thank God, you're here." I felt the same about her.

"Hi, Patty. I made it." I couldn't conceal the weight of gravity in my voice. "What's been going on?"

She was to stay in the hospital until the doctor decided about starting a new treatment, a last-ditch effort, with a medicine still in trials for a kind of breast cancer that she didn't have. My heart was crying, but I held it together. "How're you feeling?"

“Not great. I know I’d feel better in my own bed.” In a pleading voice, Patty said to Carol, “You could take care of me at home.” Both Carol and Patty were nurse practitioners. Carol grasped the medical reality, but as the patient, Patty believed she could make a comeback.

It was quiet until Carol said to me, “You should go register at the hotel. Grab something to eat, too. It could be a long night.” I kissed them both and walked out into the dry air of the Southern California evening. I could see why Patty had wanted to move to this climate. After registering at the Best Western, I sat down in my room for a few minutes at the glass-topped desk decorated with strangers’ fingerprints. With one hand holding an egg salad sandwich, I flipped through some notes I’d jotted down on the plane, hoping to have time to ask all the not-so-simple questions that Atul Gawande recommends in his book, *Being Mortal*, which had just been published.

Both for Patty’s sake and for the sake of my professional role, I had been scouring books about how to help someone die. Gawande's questions are intended to help patients have a sense of choice when they have little to no control over anything in their lives. But now that time was running out; I would have to select one or two from the following: What is your understanding of the situation? What are your fears and... hopes? What trade-offs are you willing to make? What course of action best serves this understanding?

Just as I finished wolfing down my sandwich and guzzled some Diet Coke, the phone rang. Carol’s breathless voice whispered, “Sorry to rush you, but we need you here.” It could only mean one thing. “I’m on my way.”

I panted as I race-walked toward Patty’s room. From inside, I heard screaming and sobbing and indecipherable words. I thought I’d throw up. I entered quietly and found Patty and Carol wrapped around each other on the bed. Carol motioned for me to join the embrace. All of us headed and sobbed for a good ten minutes. Patty cried out, “They told me I couldn’t get the

treatment. I'm going to die. There's not enough time. I must see my kids. I can't do this, I can't do this. I can't do this."

The doctor's words had just about killed her already.

"Oh, Patty," I half cried, half spoke. "We'll be right here with you the whole time. You won't be alone."

She nodded and mumbled something. Carol and I repeated how much we loved her and how important she was in our lives. How much we'd miss her. Gradually Patty calmed a bit, and we all edged a few inches apart. It felt good to breathe.

We spoke quietly to her about how she would be surrounded by love and how her whole life she'd nurtured and given love to so many people. We'd all be here for her now. Patty held our hands and squeezed weakly. "Patty," I said. "Do you remember that we were going to talk about how you wanted things to go at the end?" She didn't respond right away. "Can we do that now?"

Patty went back to her usual, planful ways temporarily, providing detailed guidance for us to take care of business. Carol took notes in the dark. We both showered affection on Patty, and while I did most of the talking, Carol dealt with her medical needs, offering to help the medical staff when necessary. Carol and I formed an alliance that continues to this day. I'd so wanted to give Patty the chance to express everything in her mind and heart at that time. And even with a short window, my prior reading and experience allowed me to proceed. If someone had asked me where I thought God resided, I would have said God lived in my gut because that is what ultimately led me to make this last and most profound connection to Patty. I held her close and repeated how deeply I loved and appreciated her. Then I asked, "What do you need for us to do?" It got quieter when I started speaking.

Amid tears, she said, "I want to die at home."

"We can make that happen." Clearly, she'd thought this out ahead of time, which surprised me, given her reluctance to have 'the talk.' "And I want to be able to tell my kids in person that I'm going to die."

I'd already managed to call each of them from the bathroom and had helped them arrange their flights. I had expected her to resist any financial support. "But it's too far and too expensive," she sobbed. "That's already taken care of," I told her. "They're making reservations now."

"But I can never pay you back for this and everything else you've given me." Heavy weeping ensued.

"Patty, you know how much I love you and your kids. I'm happy to be able to do this for you." She emitted a sweet, contented sound, almost like a baby falling asleep at the breast. "You are like family, and that's what families do when they can," I continued. "Please let me do this for you."

She thanked me. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Absolutely. You have given me so much all these years."

She had cooked for me and taken care of my son twice when I'd had surgery, had been my go-to person for my own medical worries, and had helped me through my pregnancy. She had orchestrated my efforts to start artificial insemination and she was the first person I called when I found out I was pregnant. I'd wished I could have her attend the birth of my son, but I

worried she'd be too helpful, that her expertise, combined with her oldest sister's bossiness, could complicate the dynamics with the staff.

I stroked Patty's hair. "We give each other what we can, and it's always from the heart," I said.

"Okay," she whispered. Carol caressed her cheek and rearranged her pillows.

"What are your worries now?" I asked.

She blurted out, "I'm afraid I've ruined my kids' lives by dying and leaving them with my ex." Her chest heaved. "They'll get nothing from her, and they'll be all alone."

Carol and I both assured Patty that her kids would be okay. "But how? Will you keep your eyes on them?"

"Of course, we will. Always," one of us said. I continued, "I love them so much. I know they'll be okay. They'll always miss you. But they are resilient because you made them that way."

"Really?" she asked. I nodded. "You've been such a good mother that they can now take good care of themselves and each other." The oldest was 25, and the twins were 20.

Patty said, "There's one more thing. Will you make sure Sam finishes college?"

"I'm on it," I said.

She replied, "I hate to ask for so much. Is it too much?"

"Not at all. I know you don't like to ask for help, but now is the time to let people take care of you. You've spent your whole life giving." I thought about all the rites of passage we had celebrated together. This last one felt sacramental. "You know how you've brought hundreds of babies into the world?" Carol corrected my estimate: it had been thousands. I thought I heard an um hm from Patty. "You have nurtured babies and moms and so many friends, and now it's your turn to be taken care of."

Patty was silent. "Please let us help you leave this world, just like you've brought so many into it."

After a brief silence, I asked Patty what else she wanted us to know. "That's it, I think," she said.

I paused for another moment. "How are you feeling now?"

"I feel calm. I'm happy."

Patty's face seemed fuller, and a subtle smile spread across her lips. She had an aura not unlike a woman who had just given birth. With the hard work finished, we could both let go.

*Work Cited: Gawande, Atul. Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End. Henry Holt and Company, 2014.*



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