

# *A Mother as Guide*

*For you are all children of the light.*

***1Thessalonians 5:5***

Many times, as a nurse I have come into a room and found a patient talking aloud. I could not see anyone beside the patient from the doorway. And also, upon entering the room, I could find no one inside but the patient. One such day when I was making rounds on patients, I found an elderly woman who was suffering with heart failure.

Patients who are in late stages of heart failure report having trouble catching their breath. Automatically, the muscles in their stomach stretch to take in air. Patients in extreme heart failure describe feeling overwhelmed by the fluid collecting in airways. And there is nothing they can do to stop it from accumulating. Like in drowning, the fluid prevents air from being exchanged. When there is no oxygen exchange in the lungs, patients become very anxious and restless. They are struggling to breathe.

At 94-years-old and after two heart attacks, Bertha was very tired just from the effort of gulping in air. I put her nasal oxygen prongs back on. I helped her move up in the bed so she could breathe easier. I gently rubbed lotion on her hands.

And then, I saw her open her eyes and heard her speak although not to me. “Mommy, mommy,” she called out. “Oh, there you are. You are so beautiful. The light is beautiful.” Afterward, Bertha closed her eyes again in sleep while her chest and abdomen moved fast and frantically pushing the oxygen in and out of her lungs. I left the room to get some morphine to calm her and relieve her body’s work of breathing.

Later that shift, her family came to the nurses’ station. “We think our mother is talking to her mother. But her mother has been dead since she was six-years old. She and her mother were

separated when she was a toddler. With the war, her mother went off to find work in the city while Bertha was brought up by aunts in the rural area where she was born.

Bertha's mother labored in a clothing factory. She sent monies home and visited when she could...not often. She was always under pressure to not break thread. Often, the girls and women suffered injuries because they were hungry, cold, and tired. They worked in dimly lit rooms. Bertha's mother ran her machine at great speed working ten-hour days and then collapsed at night in a boarding house where females slept in close quarters—a dozen to a room. She contracted Tuberculosis and died.

Our mother never talked much with us about all this. Our great-aunts told us what happened. Mother kept her feelings to herself. How would our mother remember what her mother looked like when she last saw her as a very young child? Is she hallucinating? This is frustrating all of us. We want to be here for her, but she looks right past us as if we are not in the room.

I wanted to respond to the family's concern of being left out at this emotional end-of-life time. Now that their mother seemed like she was trying to reconnect with her mother, the family seemed to feel rejected. Bertha was in conversation only with her mother. She was not talking to her family who dutifully sat in shifts at the bedside afternoons and evenings. She left family out as she talked to the upper corner of the room where she said she saw a great light and her mother. Bertha's talk with her mother set up a private space around her where her family did not feel welcome.

I explained to the family that as people prepare to die, they make contact with loved ones that already have gone to heaven. A loved one may act as a guide to ease them forward as they shed their earthbound body. The guide may talk back and forth with the ill person for months. And then one day, it happens. The guide leads the patient into the light toward God in heaven. Bertha was experiencing not only the physiological process of dying but also the spiritual side of dying.

The dying person's words often are directed toward their mothers. No one knows why. Conversations of the dying with their mothers do not mean their feelings for those family and loved ones alive and concerned at their bedside are unimportant. Instead, it is apparent that dying persons are present in a zone—a place in time—where we who are alive cannot be. It is as if the curtain between life and death has lifted for them and the dying can see what we cannot. And in

this window to heaven, there are beings that were important in their lives. These spiritual beings come to lead the dying across to heaven.

To address the family's surprise that Bertha was now drawn to her mother, I told the family that people often shield their family members from the hurt they have felt in their childhood. Sometimes, the person wants to spare the family pain. Other times, the person may find it easier to put on a persona of "I'm okay. Don't worry about me." as a buffer that neutralizes their own feelings allowing them to go out into the world stronger because they can repress the hurt. Pretending they are all right makes it easier to go on. Bertha may indeed have been traumatized by her mother needing to leave her as a young child, but, stoically, did not speak of her grief. This reconnection with her mother brought Bertha joy as evidenced by the uplifted tone of her voice when talking to her mother. Bertha must have absorbed enough of her mother as a young child to recognize her mother's love now. Love is everlasting.

The family and I discussed how Bertha's talks with her mother did not mean she loved them any less. Families who lovingly take vigil at the dying person's bedside can take heart that the dying patient is not trying to exclude their presence. The person may just be somewhere else temporarily. Being in this "other" zone between life and death does not mean the patient has forgotten them.

It appears from stories of those who have died and returned to life that the presence of family at the bedside may be heard and seen by the dying. So, I encouraged the family to continue to be present to the end of Bertha's life. They would feel good about doing so and Bertha would also be comforted by their presence. Loved ones who learn about death and dying find such knowledge is an experience in consciousness stretching. Family members who recognize the joy of a patient's connection with deceased loved ones develop awareness that

there is life beyond life. Families can support the dying person's experience in this space between heaven and earth.

Talks with those with whom we may have unresolved issues may show that life and death is a continuum. Death is not a period, but a comma in the story of life. Death is a transition not a termination. Death is not the end. We all continue to grow up to and through the death event.

This biblical command pulls together what we all saw was happening. Bertha was following the light.

*Set your course toward the radiance of the light.*

***Baruch 4:2***

So often, when someone near death talks to people on the other side, that someone is labeled as hallucinating...not being in touch with reality. We need to set the record straight about what really happens at death. Dying people are not hallucinating. Their feet are on earth and their visions are of heaven. Their growth is often being assisted by forces other than their conscious will. Love is part of that eternal existence.

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

***1 Corinthians 13:13***