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PROFILES

Jay

Jay is a primary care physician and mother to a daughter.

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MPJ is a stay-at-home mom of two children, one autistic.

Tigermom

Tigermom is an adult psychiatrist and mother of three.

Yes, that's three women. Apparently, we can't count too well.

All names (and even

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2008

Healing

~ by Jay

written for High Holiday services, 5769 (2008)

For Yom Kippur this year, I wanted to write about what it's like to know you are dying, to contemplate the end of your life. Many of my patients know what is sealed in their book. I wanted to talk about that experience. That was pretty presumptuous of me. I've been struggling with this piece for weeks, and now I realize that I can't know what it's like to contemplate your own death. What I can do is reflect on what working with the dying means to me.

I started my medical training during the early days of the AIDS epidemic, out in the SF Bay Area. One of the first things I learned was that we can't cure everybody. Some days it felt like we didn't cure anybody. Can't cure diabetes, or heart disease. Can't stop emphysema. We had lots of technology, lots of monitors that beeped and machines that whooshed and medications that did all sorts of stuff. Don't get me wrong: high-tech care saves lives. I wouldn't want to practice medicine without it. But I also don't want to practice medicine as if high-tech is all we have.

When I was a second-year resident, I spent a month working in an ICU at another hospital. I learned a lot about ventilators and blood pressure and heart transplants, and I've forgotten most of that. What I remember is the family that sat with me in the conference room, listening to me tell them that their mother would not recover, and asking me if I could keep her going long enough for the rest of their siblings to arrive. That took two days; some of them were in Africa and Asia, doing missionary work. But all nine of them finally made it, and with their spouses and children they stood around their mother's bed after we'd disconnected all the machines. They stood there, and they held hands, and they sang. In that moment, I began to understand healing.

Since then, I've learned that when I focus on cure, when I go into my work with the idea that I have to fix somebody's problem, I come home drained, frustrated and often angry. When I step back from that goal and instead think about healing, I am far more likely to feel peaceful and content when I'm done. I'm still tired - I'm always tired - but it's the kind of tired that tells me I've done good work, and I can rest for a bit. In my primary care practice, people are sometimes cured, and that's pretty cool when it happens, but it's not what I set out to do every morning. I set out to be present for what my patients need, and to seek healing where I can find it.

Now I spend much of my time taking care of people for whom cure is no longer an option. People come to hospice care at the end of their lives. For some, it is a relief. They can give up the struggle, lay down their shields, stop trying to pretend everything is OK. They can ask for and accept help from their friends and families, and

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from all of us at the hospice. They can rest. For others, hospice is the beginning of another kind of struggle. It's a terrible loss to give up the idea of cure, to accept that death is inevitable. That acceptance doesn't come easily, and sometimes doesn't come at all.

What is healing without cure? Healing isn't something I do. I can be in the presence of healing, and sometimes I can facilitate the process, but I can't make it happen. Healing happens with loving presence. Loving presence can it itself be therapeutic. That doesn't mean my training was a waste - loving presence and evidence-based medicine can work together. But evidence in and of itself doesn't heal. We have to recognize the individuality of each person we treat to know how to apply the evidence. We have to agree about the goals of care before we even think about the evidence. I love hospice work in part because the goals of care are so clear, and our charter - our very mission - is to meet the goals set by the patient and family. Our goal is to relieve suffering, and to do that we have to know how that suffering is experienced.

Sometimes we use medications to ease suffering. Sometimes we use ourselves. A few weeks ago, I went with one of our nurses to visit Sally. Sally has dementia, and we couldn't really converse with her. We could tell she was suffering, though; she twisted her body and she waved her hands and she spoke in an endless, anxious stream of words that made no real sense but told us she was miserable. The nurse laid her hand on the patient's arm and spoke to her, slowly and calmly. She talked about what we were doing, and where we were, and what our patient was wearing. As my colleague spoke, I watched Sally. Her movements slowed and she looked directly at the nurse. Her speech became less pressured, and more conversational. Finally, after about 10 minutes, she sat back in her chair and took a deep breath - and smiled.

When pain is relieved, that is healing. When anxiety and fear give way to even a moment of serenity, that is healing. When someone who needs quiet is allowed to be alone, and someone who needs company has a friend, that is healing. When an exhausted caregiver can sleep, that is healing. When a son gives his mother permission to die, when he says "I'll be OK; you can go now", that is healing.

I am privileged to serve in several roles. I am witness, and I am healer, and I am also healed. That loving presence works in both directions. I marvel at the gifts I receive from my patients, but I know that it is my job to take care of myself so that my needs don't interfere with my work. That's one of the reasons I love Debbie Friedman's mi sheberach so much. We are asking God for healing, but we are not expecting God to act alone. Before we ask God to renew our bodies, we ask for strength to do the work ourselves. Every time I sing that, I am renewed, which means this community and our observance is also a source of healing. For that I am deeply grateful.

"May the Source of Strength/who blessed the ones before us/help us find the courage/to make our lives a blessing/and let us say/Amen".

POSTED BY JAY AT 10:14 PM
LABELS: [DEATH](#), [HEALING](#), [MEDICINE](#), [SELF-CARE](#)

4 COMMENTS:

 Mary P Jones (MPJ) said...

This is why I love you, Jay.

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