

When Modern Medicine Fails

By Marie & Wally Buyer

We live in a time when modern medicine has all but eliminated infant mortality at one end, and is capable of sustaining life well into the 80's and 90's, at the other end. While such ability may fall short of being a miracle, it is nonetheless, still miraculous.

Despite those advances, however, we must eventually face our own mortality. Death, like taxes, is still inescapable. And, when science fails, we're left to confront the dying and the questions raised. Questions, such as, "Why me?" or "What will happen after I die?" or "Has my life been worthwhile?"

The answers to these questions elude the modern physician. Their role switches from trying to preserve life to maintaining the dying person's comfort and minimizing their pain.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross pioneered research in how we might best serve the needs of the dying. In fact, she claims, and her research confirms, that facing death is often our last mortal opportunity for growth. As we retreat from the mortal trappings of this world, the things and stuff acquired through a lifetime, we are left to evaluate our *spirituality*. This mustn't be confused with one's religion, however.

The word "religion" has more to do with our adherence to an institutional belief system, and for some has the suggestion of the supernatural. The term "spirituality" is a more neutral term through which we acknowledge our common human need to find meaning in our lives and in our relationship to something beyond ourselves.

Spirituality is an expression of how a person relates to a larger whole—that which an individual perceives as greater than him or herself. The nature of this transcendent purpose can be expressed in different ways. For instance, it might be expressed through a specific religious tradition or, perhaps, through a regard for nature. For another person it might be expressed through connection to the human family itself or in some other way.

Spirituality provides a source of meaning and understanding about the significance of being human. It addresses the question of "Why am I here?" An expression of spirituality can occur without any specific religious belief.

Spirituality often contains habits, rituals, gestures and symbols that can help a person interpret and manage existence. Some of these may be acquired through or adapted from a specific religious tradition. Others may be ones that a person, family or community has developed.

Religion, itself, plays an important part in the lives of Americans. A 2001 Gallup poll found 95% of those surveyed believed in God: 68% indicated they were members of a religious institution, and 44% had attended one within the past 7 days. 58% said that religion was "very important in life."

When death is knocking on the door of someone we love and care about, it is time to step up and become Christ like. We, as the family and friends of those who might be dying, must work in concert with the medical staff attending our loved one.

By working with the doctors in this context, we can help get a better understanding of the patient's spiritual journey, thus providing a better means for making medical decisions. When a patient is near the end of life this can be especially crucial.

It will help doctors to limit suffering and not abandon the patient. Encouraging a patient to express spiritual pain is one way to help heal a person's spirit, especially when cure is no longer possible.

Facing the reality of eminent death is often the last road block to opening up the realm of spiritual awareness for the patient. Hope becomes redefined. It is no longer the elusive "miracle cure." Rather, it becomes the opportunity to seek forgiveness for past sins (real or imagined) to those close to the dying patient. Whether offering or seeking forgiveness...it doesn't matter. The key is letting the patient know that he or she is loved. By doing so, their life takes on great meaning...because they have been loved, their life becomes worthwhile.

"LOVE" in this instance is the critical factor. More importantly, it is the universal common denominator. It matters not, the dying patients religious affiliation, be they Lutheran, Catholic, Jew, or Buddhist. Love transcends all spirituality. By demonstrating our unconditional love, we become better Christians, better Lutherans, and through our spiritual connection with the dying patient, we bring them closer to Christ.

