

“Be Not Afraid”
by Tony Lorenzen
Healing Ministry
Vol. 14, Number 1, Winter 2007

The day after Christmas I traveled across the country to visit a family member who is battling cancer. I'd seen this scene before: The hospital bed is in the living room. The family members are standing, sitting, bustling around taking care of every need. The oxygen tank is hooked up to the patient's nose through the plastic tube, and the patient is weak and unable to sit up for long stretches. The patient might as well be bald for all the short-cropped gray hair.

I'd seen this room dozens of times before, but the family was always someone else's family and the patient was always someone else's loved one. I'd done my CPE training in an intensive care unit and I'd served for a year as a hospice chaplain. I'd walked into rooms like this before. And I'd left rooms like this one, too. Left them much the same as I'd leave this time – with the family tearful, grateful beyond words for my visit, a patient holding my hand not wanting to let go. This time, however, I wasn't the chaplain. I was family. I wasn't the minister or the preacher or the reverend or any of the other things hospice families had called me. This time I was a sibling who had traveled across not a few states to hug family and hold my own kin's hand and share in making the tears as well as helping dry them.

Many people asked me while I was a hospice chaplain, if it was depressing work. I had to answer in all honesty that it wasn't. It was difficult, dealing with death is not easy, but it wasn't depressing. I saw too much love for it to be depressing. Although there were times when I witnessed the pain, anguish and hurt that dysfunctions, addictions and abuses of all types can wreak on families and individuals, more often than

not I also witnesses the immense power of love to overcome the pain of illness and the emotional pain created within families. Too many times I saw firsthand the joy of reconciliation, both of people to God and people with each other to call my work depressing.

Working as a hospice chaplain, I was granted the great honor and gift to minister to people and families through times of suffering and pain, both physical and emotional, as patients and their families came to terms with death and dying and loss and grief. As is the case with most ministries, I also received much in the way of blessing from those patients and families with whom I walked the last days.

They taught me much about love and the need for family, a group of people who will love you and take care of you unto death. It may be your biological family or it may not. I learned a deep love for the twenty-third psalm. I must have prayed it a hundred times with people who believed it is the literal word of God, people who weren't sure and people who asked for it because it was the only religious thing they could think of in their hour of need. Its ever-lasting power for me is its fearlessness. "Even though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

I don't fear death and illness anymore. When I walked into that living room after Christmas and the patient was a member of my family, I was sad, and there were a lot of emotions, but fear was not one of them. "Cancer, death - you guys have no power here," I remember thinking. "I've seen you guys up close. There's nothing new for you to show me here." For being able to bring that courage to my own family, that is a gift. A gift of God and of all the patients and families and nurses and social workers and volunteers with whom I worked in hospice. I don't know what cancer will bring to our family and

we may yet have a lot to go through. I'm not sure what will happen. There's only thing I'm sure of: I'm not afraid.

Epilogue: After this essay was published two events in my life and my ministry happened on the same day. My sister Lisette Marie Lorenzen Jackson died at the age of 48, ending her battle with cancer on the same day I received preliminary fellowship from the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association – March 23, 2007. My family and I had agreed that they would not phone with the news of her passing until after my appointment with the MFC. They didn't need to. When I awoke on the morning of my appointment with the MFC I knew. After meeting with the MFC, my inability to reach anyone in the family by phone confirmed the feeling I had upon waking – my sister had passed. My ministry will forever be intertwined with her crossing over – we both crossed barriers that day. I wasn't afraid. I pray she wasn't either.