



Benton  
Hospice  
Service

## THE SPIRITUAL GIFT

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By Peg Elliott Mayo

“Religion and spirituality are not interchangeable terms. Of course, they may—and often do—co-exist.” Edwin “Ned” Barker, Spiritual Care Coordinator for Benton Hospice Service, is scrupulous with his language, clearly wanting to highlight meaningful distinctions in these important matters,

“Often, dying patients or their families have been turned off to what we typically think of as religious institutions—churches, mosques, or synagogues—and they want nothing to do with them. For those rooted in established traditions, this can be a shame because they may lose the opportunity for spiritual support, where they might find great comfort.”

The distinction is important to Ned, once an active Roman Catholic priest and still an involved church member. Religion has teachings, rules, and rituals with which members can readily identify. “Spirituality,” says Ned, “is easily described, but harder to define. It is real but not empirical—can’t be proven like a law of physics. It is a sense of connectedness with *something* outside of me which may or may not be a personal God. Most people believe in a power greater than themselves: that is a spiritual perspective.”

Oregon has the curious distinction of being the most “unchurched” state in the union, perhaps as a reflection of independent thinking. Ned meets with 20-25% of Hospice patients and families, but only at their request. “I offer, but it is entirely their choice if I visit. I don’t preach or try to sell a point of view. That’s not my job. Sometimes, I’m liaison with clergy, steering the right person in their direction.”

“Mostly, I listen and try to ask meaningful questions. At the end of life, there can be considerable spiritual pain but also great opportunity for insight. People wonder about the meaning of life, about relationships, about forgiveness from others and perhaps from God. They have hopes or fears about the future. They do wonder about what comes next—about personal extinction—this is important. I don’t go in with an agenda, but to be there to offer comfort as best I can.

“I don’t introduce the idea of God, but most patients I see do. I listen for what the patient believes. Some want to pray, often for forgiveness or for relief from pain. I encourage them to think of a merciful, loving God who knows we all make mistakes and who loves us anyway, like a good father or mother. I suggest the person remember they’ve done the best they could. This is often reassuring.”

“One fellow I worked with was fretting about selling his pickup, just spending a lot time worrying. I suggested that with all he’d been through—the Korean War, raising a

family—that maybe he could just let go of obsessing about the truck. That seemed to help. “

Ned has spent forty years as a social worker, eleven of them in hospice work first in Salem and more recently in Corvallis. Asked why he does the work, a soft smile crosses his face. “The people I visit. We hospice people get an awful lot back. It’s energizing. It’s spiritually nourishing. Sometimes I can be an intermediary and help families to heal. We all need to be able to speak of love, to give thanks, to say we’re sorry, to ask and give forgiveness. Survivors can often give patients welcome permission to ‘let go—we’ll miss you, but we’ll be all right.’”

Ned shared a recent experience as an example of his work. “One woman cried wordlessly through most of several visits. The last time I saw her, I talked about the gifts that the dying and those left behind can give each other, including forgiveness. Quite suddenly, she stopped crying, and her facial expression changed from tension to peace and calm, almost beauty. After a few moments, I asked her what had happened in that moment. She said, ‘I just forgave my sister-in-law’ (for a hurt inflicted 25 years earlier). She died peacefully a few days later.”

Asked what he would like emphasized in this piece, Ned was thoughtful. “Say that the role of a hospice spiritual care person does *not* represent religion, creed, or moral code and is not about selling anything. We’re there to listen, comfort, locate spiritual resources, and learn.”

Along with relief from physical pain and support through emotional turmoil, spiritual comfort is a gift which Hospice offers to those who choose it.