

Summary/Reflection of MGH Spirituality Conference (October 2018)

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There are so many lessons that I learned during this one inspirational and spiritual day that I will take with me throughout my entire career as a nurse. The first lesson I learned is that burn out does not happen from caring too much, but actually from walling yourself off. We must come back to humanity and re-discover the reason why we chose this profession that many may consider spiritual work. Nurses have a holistic approach and do not just care for patients physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, as well, which is what makes us stand out from other professions. Nurses have the ability to make such a difference to patients and their families and they should be encouraged to do so. In a very vulnerable profession, it is important to make sure that you actually are making yourself vulnerable and open to human connection. One of the speakers at the conference explained how you never know, a single patient interaction may help you remember your sense of meaning and purpose. We all benefit from human connection and there is a reason why we come in contact with each other and why we are on the path we are on. It does not matter what religion we are or if we share different beliefs, because one thing that we do share is a universal connectedness, which supersedes any and all differences. Humanity should be explored by asking patients open-ended questions, focusing on the whole person, and allowing for silence, which is often the time when things come forward. Healing and touch is much more than simply physical; we have to acknowledge human beings in their wholeness. Spirituality helps us get in touch with what is most important to us and to our patients as patients are often searching for meaning, direction, self-worth, and love throughout their journeys. Healing happens through relationships with others as relationship is the context for spiritual development.

No amount can be placed on valuing a patient and his or her self worth while creating a “community of two,” especially with oncology patients as they may blame themselves, worry about others, search for meaning or direction, and may suppress their feelings. It is important to try to surface the sadness of patients and create safety and trust. However, healthy engagement occurs when we know ourselves well first. Many situations described during this conference included healthcare providers advocating for what is best for the patient. Often times, the patients and providers are compelled by families to perform unethical practices, which leads to severe emotional disturbance for healthcare professionals. This can be avoided by finding out who the patients are as people and what experiences mean to them. Sometimes patients want spiritual guidance or acceptance of their decisions to end their suffering by dying. It is important to be aware that spiritual pain and physical pain go hand in hand. Sometimes, patients want to know that it is okay to die, even though it is not what their families want. Sometimes, so much more value can be placed on providing the patient with a peaceful death rather than continuing to push for further life sustaining treatment that comes along with more suffering for the patient but keeps the family happy that the patient is still physically on this earth. The ability to advocate

comes from having a relationship with the patient and finding out what is important to him or her and what his or her values and beliefs are. A “good death” for patients includes being culturally and spiritually aware, helping their family recognize their suffering, creating a peaceful environment, initiating palliative care early, supporting the dying patient, and withholding your own personal judgement.

A lot of what was talked about during this conference explains the exact reasons why I chose nursing. I chose to go into nursing because I want to spread my faith as a way to comfort patients suffering through illness and treatment. I love the fact that nursing is not just caring for patients physically; it requires you to be holistic - to care for them in body, mind, and spirit; I want to take part in the healing process. Nurses become an important part of the patients’ and families’ lives during what is probably the most difficult time they will ever have to experience. As a nurse, I expect that I will be coming into these patients’ lives as they begin a journey they did not choose - and I will be their guide. It is so important to truly be present in every patient interaction and be in the experience as if it was the first and last time because sometimes, all it takes is one moment or one encounter.