

A Letter of Condolence

Troy Freedman, 2007

The following is a journal entry from a first-year University of Colorado physician assistant student, Troy Freedman, who wrote this narrative while participating in his one-month hospice rotation. He read this segment from his journal during a course debriefing session and has given LQI permission to share his entry more broadly.

Troy prefaced his reading by stating that this entry was written in response to the traumatic death of a patient several months earlier. The hospice rotation, he shared, provided him the space to process this difficult and emotional event. For this journal entry, Troy chose to write a condolence letter to the wife of his patient – a man who died following a lengthy resuscitation attempt in the ER where Troy was working. What was particularly difficult for Troy, he shared, was how this woman was notified of her husband's death – through a phone – and amidst words that seemed devoid of compassion or emotion.

I've wanted to write you for a long time – though you don't know me, nor I you. But I wanted to write you because you didn't know to be where I was, a sacred place at 10 in the morning when your husband died. He was in rough shape when the paramedics brought him in that cold November morning. He was really uncomfortable and we were ready for him. They pushed him in on the pram and we started undressing him when he started panicking. I had to grab his work boots, just like the ones my dad used to wear, so our doctor didn't get kicked. We moved him into the bed and it seemed like fifty hands went to work attending to him or our equipment. It pained me to cut through his Carhart vest with my shears, I wouldn't want anyone to cut mine.

As I cut the second shoulder seam, his panic abruptly stopped. Your husband's chest became my rosary for the next forty-five minutes and I counted decade after decade of prayers over him in turn with my team. You would have been grateful to this team – I was proud to be part of it. I thought about you while I pushed and pushed. I couldn't help but to think of you because with every compression your husband's wedding band, the symbol of your sacred promise to him, clicked quietly against the side of the bed.. We tried and we tried...and we tried. It felt very personal – trying to save your husband – some of us were crying as we worked... and after no more work was to be done, I folded his clothes for you and together Deb and I washed your husband, we talked to him the whole time and prayed for all of you. I was touched when I saw that your number on his cell was listed simply under "Honey".

I wanted to throw up when I learned what the doctor said to you when you called. I was angry for you...I still am a little. I am sorry he said that...I am so sorry. I heard that you met each other when you were fifteen and had loved each other since. I am so sorry for your loss and I have no idea how painful it must be for you.

I thought you might have regretted not having been there that morning, but I assure you, you were there. You were there in your promise of fidelity, you were present in his affection, and you were there in the sublime communion of prayer and sacramental union.

With deepest sympathy, Troy Freedman