

---

## Getting older: a spiritual carer perspective

### Faith in adversity

As a pastoral carer it has been my privilege to visit a dear old lady one day every week. I have visited her for six years, with her turning 96 recently. During these years a close and loving friendship was forged. She was a Christian, a firm believer in God.

Her life had not been easy but she had aged graciously. Her mind was still sharp, and although her eyesight poor, she could spot problems, as she saw it, in my dress, or whether or not I needed a haircut, or looked tired, on my weekly visits.

Over these years, her body let her down badly. She suffered painfully with rheumatoid arthritis, particularly in her hands, her fingers twisted at impossible angles, making holding anything a nightmare. She had adapted to nursing home life, grateful of the care she was receiving. I was always greeted lovingly, "Come in, so lovely to see you again. What have you done this week?"

And so my visits continued. She had been a keen cook, and had worked in the fashion world for some years, when young, and still dressed fastidiously and beautifully. I realized very early in my visits, that having someone who would simply listen to her stories of long ago, when she was a "young slip of a girl", who would ask her pertinent questions about those days, and who took a genuine interest in her words, meant so much to her. Ageing does not take away the human contact part of getting old, for all human beings need social interaction and touch, a loving smile or a holding of the hand, and she would happily confide in me.

She had a loving family but I feel sure that some of her confidences to me were ones that her family knew little or nothing about; her dreams, heartaches, loss of a baby son, a broken marriage and all the emotions involved, and I was touched that she would tell me these things, knowing that the confidences shared with me, stayed with me.

### Encouraging a feeling of usefulness in an older person

She was always interested in my dinner parties, or a meal shared with friends over the weekend and would speak of the dishes mentioned and how she would have prepared them. I realized that if I played dumb over my cooking abilities, and asked for her advice where I had gone wrong, she would always be able to help me out. "Next time try doing this.....or that....." She must have thought I was a terrible cook, but I knew the pleasure it

gave her to be in a position to be able to help me. And that is what sharing old age is all about. It gave her a sense of value of her own experiences, and she delighted in that. The following visits I was usually greeted with, after the invitation to enter her room, "Well sit down, tell me – what disasters did you have in the kitchen this week" and I would go ahead and 'invent' them, and ask for advice.

Her other strong interest, fashion, well – she had a field day with my outfits, telling me what I was wearing did not really suit me, or the colours were all wrong, or ask what I would be wearing when she knew I was attending a concert or a party. Then proceed to tell me what I should be wearing. Again, she saw herself as helping me, she revelled in that, and I accepted

---

---

the criticisms and advice the way they were meant for me, to help me. So we got along just fine.

### **Presence**

Some days her pain would be so bad, and medication not helping. As we all know, pain can fray temper and she would not speak much, but still wanted me with her. It was during those times that, when she did speak, it would be of the Bible and her love of God. She knew she was being watched over and of a night when she couldn't sleep, and was comforted. Her faith was so strong she found it hard to understand how anyone could not believe in God, and as her strength began to slip away, she often told me she was not frightened of dying, she believed her guardian angel would be there to comfort her. She just wanted to go to sleep, she was so tired and just wanted to go and be happy to go. Her family were lovely folk, and understood her. When my visits were ending, she would reach for my hands and ask me to pray for her. Such simple faith and so touching when prayer concluded, she would lift my hands and give them a goodbye kiss.

### **Brave endurance**

She endured her afflictions bravely, never complained and had that rare quality of love and acceptance. I appreciated her directness, her honesty, her sense of humour, and was glad that in a small way, for a short time each week to be there for her, to listen and encourage her, to accept what she was telling me, even though her beliefs were different to mine, I realized that I could do this, without compromising my beliefs, for I was there for her, not for me, and my whole for the duration of the visit, was for her. She gave me love and friendship and when she died in her sleep recently I felt the loss keenly. She was a special lady, and I will always remember the ease in which our conversations flowed between us, the unique and wonderful feeling I had that, in small way helped her on her journey of ageing and travelling towards her goal of being where she wanted to be and so happy to at last be eventually there.

### **Mutual help**

Such experiences are precious and rare and to be savoured and thought about when my life is not going so well. Her strength of character and the love her children and grandchildren had for her, even though she let them know quickly when something displeased her, showed what a wonderful lady she was. I will always remember her, and lessons learnt in graciousness in ageing.

**A spiritual carer**

---