

numa

caring for the spirit in viha

REFUGE

Some time ago a staff person contacted me to talk. He came after his shift and as he sat down he began to talk but didn't get very far before tears were streaming down his face. Frantically grabbing for tissues he said, "I can't believe I'm crying". He was embarrassed by his tears. This is something many of us learn early on in life; that we are not to cry. Children are hurt and invariably the words come, "There, there - don't cry." We are told not to cry.

His tears stemmed from a recent experience with a patient. The patient under his care shared how afraid he was of dying. He spoke about the many things he would not experience: a family wedding in the fall, a new grandchild in the spring. The patient then asked what dying would be like and wondered whether there was anything after death. All of this proved too much for the staff member. He didn't know what to say to this patient. He remained mostly quiet and then mumbled some thoughts as the patient left.

Over the days to follow he could not shake the image of this frightened man and his own helplessness in answering his questions and providing some sort of comfort.

As we considered his difficulty with this situation we explored his own feelings toward death and dying. We talked about the frustration and difficulty that lies in witnessing another person's grief. But we also discovered



the gift that he gave that patient that day. He had created a place of refuge for this patient, a place where his fears could be shared, heard and understood. I told him that perhaps it wasn't answers this patient wanted but rather someone to listen to him, someone to hear him.

This staff member's story reminds me of one shared by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, who recognized the importance of the spirit in health and the recovery from illness, about how the best comfort we can give people is simply our presence. She writes:

"Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence within us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal, but rather the sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing. Many things grow this silence in us, among them simply growing older. We may then become more a

What soap is for the body, tears are for the soul.

Jewish proverb

refuge than a rescuer, a witness to the process of life and the wisdom of acceptance.

A highly skilled AIDS doctor once told me that she keeps a picture of her grandmother in her home and sits before it for a few minutes every day before she leaves for work. Her grandmother was an Italian-born woman who held her family close. Her wisdom was of the earth. Once when Louisa was very small, her kitten was killed in an accident. It was her first experience of death and she had been devastated. Her parents had encouraged her not to be sad, telling her that the kitten was now in heaven. Despite these assurances, she had not been comforted. She had prayed asking to get her kitten back. But her kitten never came back.

In her anguish she had turned to her grandmother and asked, "Why?" Her grandmother had not told her that her kitten was in heaven as so many of the other adults had. Instead, she had simply held her and reminded her of the time when her grandfather had died. She, too, had prayed but her grandpa never came back. She did not know why. Louisa had turned into the soft warmth of her grandmother's shoulder then and sobbed.

When she finally was able to look up, she saw that her grandmother was crying as well.

Although her grandmother could not answer her question, a great loneliness had gone and she felt able to go on. All the assurances that Peaches was in heaven had not given her this strength or peace.

Simply put, there is nothing in the world that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another.

Jacob Needleman

"My grandmother was a lap, Rachel", she told me, "a place of refuge. I know a great deal about AIDS, but what I really want to be for my patients is a lap. A place from which they can face what they have to face and not be alone."

Taking refuge does not mean hiding from life. It means finding a place of

strength, the capacity to live the life we have been given with greater courage and sometimes even with gratitude."
(Rachel Naomi Remen, **My Grandfather's Blessings**, p. 164)

While this staff member felt like he had failed this patient with his inability to answer his questions, he had actually provided him with an even greater gift.

He had provided a safe place where this man's fears could be expressed and heard. His tears were not evidence of a lack of care but exactly the opposite.

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.

When it balances on top of the brim,
you are understood.

When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you
the room where you stay
starts a new life

and the place where you wrote
your first poem

begins to glow in your mind's eye.

It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

John Fox

When Someone Deeply Listens To You

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