

numa

caring for the spirit in viha

THE ANATOMY OF HOPE

Quite often during spiritual care visits the topic of hope will arise. During a recent visit a patient shared what she believed hope to be. “Hope” she said, “is a dog who knows he is going to get a bone.” This view gets at the idea that hope is the ability to look past the loss in a particular situation and look forward to something better. It is intriguing to wonder why some people have hope while others do not. Why is it that some people are full of hope despite their circumstances while others are hopeless in very similar situations?

In an interesting book on hope Dr. Gerome Groopman defines hope in the following way. He writes, *“Hope is one of our central emotions, but we are often at a loss when asked to define it. Many of us confuse hope with optimism, a prevailing attitude that “things turn out for the best.” But hope differs from optimism. Hope does not arise from being told to “think positively,” or from hearing an overly rosy forecast. Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality. Although there is no uniform definition of hope, I found one that seemed to capture what my patients taught me. Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see – in the mind’s eye – a path to a better future. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion. Clear-eyed, hope gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them.”**

Hope is the thing with feathers.

Emily Dickinson



Part of the work of spiritual care is helping people to hope. This work involves helping patients and their families to find hope from within their own traditions and experiences. It involves locating sources of hope and utilizing them to inspire and help that patient and their family. Sometimes patients and families need to discover afresh what it is that gives them strength and hope. Helping people rediscover these sources of strength is integral to caring for the spiritual dimension of persons.

One key work that spiritual care providers do is that of redirecting hope. For a patient there may not be hope for a cure of their disease but they and their family can hope for different things. They may hope to make one final vacation together, they may hope to manage the disease at home or to have all the family present at the time of death. This redirecting of hope can help patients and their families discover what is still possible for them to do.

Finding hope is also an empowering exercise. Ill health can leave a person and their family feeling

