

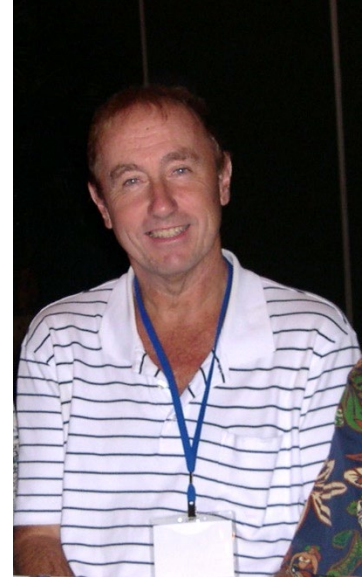
SERVING WITH LOVE IN LIFE'S DARK PLACES

by Don Carlin, M.Div. / Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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[Editor's Note: Don Carlin is a deacon at the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, Philadelphia, and a per diem hospice chaplain with the Hospice of Pennsylvania.]

It was Saturday afternoon and I found myself in Willie Mae's neighborhood, with time for one more hospice visit before my workweek ended. Throughout the day, Willie Mae, age 84, had been very much on my heart and mind, although for all I knew, she was not in any medical crisis. I "went with my gut" and stopped by her house for a visit. I entered a living room filled with people and tears. "Had Willie Mae just died?" I wondered. What I next learned was far more shocking. Willie Mae's 15-year old great-grandson, Jamal, who lived in this home and who often helped with Willie Mae's care, had been gunned down on the street the night before. He had managed to stagger into the house, and then had died in his grandfather's arms. Murders were common enough in this neighborhood that Jamal's death had never made the news. Now, his mother and grandmother and grandfather shared their tearful stories with me, while his great-grandmother, bedbound upstairs, awaited my visit. When I left the house an hour later, I was weak, shaky and numb.



Willie Mae would join Jamal in heaven a couple of months later.

Don Carlin – Hospice Chaplain

As her health declined, she lost her ability to talk or to give me any feedback about the hymns and scriptures and prayers that I shared with her. Sometimes she slept soundly throughout my visits. "I'm not sure Willie Mae was aware of anything I did today," I once told her daughter. "That's quite OK," her daughter said. "You showed up. That's the important thing."

Just a few months ago, I began visiting Douglas, age 61, who was dying of liver failure. He had already received one new liver 2 years earlier, and now that liver was failing. Doug's only family was his 91-year old mother who had just moved into a nursing home. The plan was to get Doug from the hospital to his mother's nursing home so that she could wheel herself to his bedside as often as she wanted to before he died. I knew a little bit about Doug's substance abuse history – and I knew more about the deep faith that his mother had – a faith that she had tried to share with her son over the years. I wasn't sure what Doug would think of my visits and attempts at chaplaincy support. He was a private man of few words. "Doug," I asked point blank, "please tell me, how can I be of help?" "Just show up," he told me. "Just keep showing up."

In Douglas' last days of life, he added to his request. Doug had essentially stopped eating, but still had a craving for grapes and pineapple. My coffee shop waitress twice prepared for me fresh cold grapes and pineapple to take to Doug. He would sit up, thank me for coming, gobble up the fruit, and lie down to sleep. Grapes and pineapple – and the priestly blessing from Numbers Chapter 6 – were my last gifts to Doug before he died. After he died, at 3 AM, his mother, her pastor and I had a prayer service at Doug's bedside before the under-taker came. Doug would be cremated, and there would be no subsequent service.

Luis, a male prostitute most of his adult life, died without family in one of Philadelphia's largest nursing homes. He was in his 70's, and despite limited fluency in English, Luis loved my visits, which often included the recitation of the 23rd Psalm, the singing of "Jesus Loves Me," and our praying together the "Our Father." The nursing home staff and our hospice staff loved Luis, and we knew there would be no family to claim his body or to do anything to memorialize him after his death. We agreed, before Luis died, to gather as his "family" after he died, and to have a prayer service at his bedside before officials from the city morgue arrived. I had the sacred privilege of leading that service several years ago. I thought of that service for Luis as I prayed over Doug just after Christmas 2012.

Eva was a lady whom I miss. One of my treasures is a simple photograph she handed me just days before she died. In the photo, she is sitting on her bed (she was a double amputee) with 2 great-grandchildren beside her. Despite my love for Eva, I often dreaded visiting her, for the tiny rowhouse that she lived in was filled with chaos: children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, crying, shouting, barking dogs, crawling cockroaches. Eva never let me leave her side without my singing old hymns with her, and sharing prayers and a blessing.

I was happiest in warm weather when I could find Eva sitting in her wheelchair outside on the sidewalk. Despite open drug dealing nearby, and people walking up and down the street with open beer cans and wine bottles, my outdoor venue with Eva was far quieter than my indoor venue. I got used to singing and praying in this very public place. Everybody in the neighborhood got to know who I was! Eva was grandmother to the whole block, and everyone knew not to mess with her “minister.”

These are but four of hundreds of stories I could share. *What is so critically important in “serving with love in life’s dark places” is simply “showing up.” We show up. We are present. We allow our presence to represent God’s presence.* After a while, we might even have opportunity to talk about God’s presence. We let our hugs represent God’s hugs. We light one candle in the darkness. It is amazing how much light one candle can give. We plant one seed. “Only God can count the apples in a seed.” We trust that the seed we plant will grow in God’s good time.

Although I grew up on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania’s Endless Mountains, I have lived and worked in New York City and Philadelphia for 35 years. In that time, I have learned that there is no such place as a God-forsaken place. God is everywhere, and “God’s Spirit moves where it will.” A challenge of urban hospice ministry is helping people see where God already is, and where God is working. I love to trace God’s guiding hand in my life, and to help others begin to trace God’s guiding hand in their lives. A verse of *Amazing Grace* that I often sing with older adults and hospice patients is this: *“Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; ‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.”*

The people I visit amaze me with the stories they begin to share. So often, it doesn’t take long to detect God’s guiding hand and the “grace that has brought them safe thus far,” is the same grace that “will lead them home.”

By nature, I am not a bold person. I have always been more introvert than extravert. Ministry to people in dark places forces me to pray without ceasing, and this is a good thing! As a “priest,” I intercede to God on behalf of people who sometimes seem far from God. This is a sacred privilege. I ask God to help me partner with God in God’s work, and to put me in the right place at the right time. With Willie Mae, and Doug, and Luis, and Eva, “divine detours” and “divine delays” were always helping to put me in the right place at the right time. I can never thank God enough for this. I can never thank God enough for all of God’s gifts. Every person God places in my life becomes a “people gift.” People’s trust in me is gift. People’s words to me are gift. Eva’s photo and Luis’ prayers were gifts to me. People of all conditions and all faiths have promised prayers for me even as I pray for them. After I give people who haven’t spoken in weeks a final blessing, sometimes I hear the words, “God bless you too.”

However, all the gratitude, all the goodness, and all the grace do not take away the stress of this work, and its sorrow. I say this as a caution. After 1,400 deaths in 6 years, I stepped away from hospice work in June 2011 for a long Sabbath. It was a Sabbath that I needed and demanded. My return to hospice work has been at a slower pace with more Sabbath time built in. Also, I need to add that my hospice work is never done alone. Although, at any one time, I am generally the only hospice staff member in the room with a dying person, I know that I have the back-up and support of the other hospice team members. When I do “informal hospice work” for the members of my own church and neighborhood who have life-limiting and terminal illnesses, I also know that I have the emotional and prayer support of church family. One of the first clear messages I got when I moved from the farm to New York City years ago was this: “You cannot go it alone in New York City.” That message has likely saved my life.

In 2000, a Jewish colleague introduced me to the Montreat Conference Center. Montreat introduced me to POAMN. Just knowing that POAMN is there and available has been a support to me. In memory of my Jew-ish colleague who died in hospice care in 2012, I close with the story of a former 101-year old Jewish hospice patient. Blind, deaf, and living with dementia, she never left her nursing home bed. I brought to this patient the gift of myself, and I would place my bared hairy arm close to her hand. Nothing gave her more comfort than stroking my arm for the longest time. That stroking was a gift to me too. We ministered to each other, and in my private daily prayers, I asked God to grant her God's eternal Shalom. I believe God answered my prayers.

May we bring to all dark places the gift of ourselves. A retired Methodist minister friend once taught me this prayer:

*“I would be silent, Lord, and expectant,
So that I may receive the gift I need,
So that I may become the gift others need. Amen.”*

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