

UNCOMMON STRENGTH: A TALE OF THE ART OF LIVING

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The topic of death can be difficult to discuss. The author of the following narrative has had the privilege of knowing one person who continues to face the topic of her own mortality with strength, humor, and honesty. This is not a tale of perfection, nor is it a tale without anger and doubts, but it is a tale of how the author has gained knowledge, insight, compassion, and understanding of how to face our mortality with uncommon strength.

I first met Evelyn when we were working together at a youth and family agency, and we quickly became friends. I was impressed with her knowledge of social work theory. She seemed able to listen forever to clients as they described their current situations and the challenges confronting them. What a contrast to my often-racing thoughts when working with clients. I was always in a hurry in those days. The more clients I saw, the more productive I was being; the more paperwork I completed, the more time I had to work quickly with other clients. Watching Evelyn interact with clients left me feeling a mixture of impatience and envy. Why did she spend so much time on one issue? How could she find the patience to walk a client through that one issue?

Evelyn had been in a car accident many years ago, and it left her with injuries that continued to cause her pain. Yet she managed to show up for work every day, and counseled clients without any mention of the terrible pain she must be feeling. I could tell she was hurting when she would take ibuprofen or massage her arm. Sometimes, when she thought no one was looking, I saw pain in her facial expression. I watched well-meaning people walk past her asking, "How are you?" while never waiting to hear the answer. Evelyn would look up at them, begin to respond, and then trail off as she realized they weren't interested in an answer.

A critical look at my own practice led me to realize that I was doing the same thing to my clients. "How are you today?" I'd ask a

client, waiting for their response before continuing on with, "Great! What I'd like to cover today is..." It took a lot of practice—and many false starts—before I was able to ask a client how they were doing and actually listen to the answer. Part of listening for the answer required me to become more confident in my own ability as a social worker. To "go with the flow" of where my client was at, I first had to learn not to be frightened of where the flow was headed! Even today, I wince when I see young social workers engaging in the same practice of not listening to the answer, whether it is with clients or passing co-workers in the hallway.

Eventually, Evelyn left the agency to begin work on her master's degree. We stayed in touch, and she shared with me all the wonderful new ways of seeing the world that she was learning in her program. Evelyn talked about how much more effective she could be with clients now that her knowledge of theory and research had been expanded. During this time, I began to spend more time listening to my clients and realized that productivity can't always be measured in billing hours or paperwork completed. Sometimes, productivity meant making a difference in someone's life. It would be nice to say that my agency had an epiphany and began to focus on the same issues that I was focusing on, but in the dollar-and-cents world of running a viable agency, it isn't always possible to be so idealistic. But I learned to listen, and to have compassion for those I served. My hours of "productivity" were much more, well, productive! It was the

ability to be “in the moment” with a client that allowed me to be much more effective in my intervention. The focus was not on seeing as many clients as possible, but on seeing as many clients in a compassionate and client-focused manner as possible.

Evelyn finished her master’s degree and began to look for full-time employment. Then, a bombshell. “I have end-stage liver disease,” Evelyn told me. She was told she could die in months, or last a year. “I don’t know how long I have, but I’d like to live it with the people I love, doing the things I enjoy.” It all seemed surreal to me. How could she be dying? While I tried to deal with the emotions I was feeling, I felt a certain sense of clinical detachment. “This is denial,” I told myself, “You’ll pass through this stage eventually and maybe go on to anger.” But my lesson wasn’t to be about going through the stages of grief. My lesson was to heal a much deeper, older sort of grief.

When I was 18 years old, my father died. He was a big, hale-and- hearty sort of man. At six feet tall, 190 pounds, he was the sort of father that could destroy any threat to our family. He was a war hero and the recipient of many medals, including the bronze star. My father could defeat any enemy; he was immortal. After all, he served one tour in Korea and three tours in Vietnam without ever getting shot. He was particularly proud of the fact that, of all his medals, none was a purple heart. Even as I grew up, I never lost my sense of awe towards my father. He simply didn’t make mistakes and could not fail at anything. But then he died. My sense of betrayal was compounded by the fact that he knew he was dying and chose not to tell me or any of my siblings. He had contracted a bone disease in Korea, and it finally took his life. I noticed that my father was sick, but he had been sick many times before and always recovered. When he had appendicitis, he told my mother he had the stomach flu. It wasn’t until his appendix burst that he finally agreed to go to the hospital. Even as I visited him in intensive care, I knew he would be up and about within a matter of days. And, of course, he recovered. He even took us on a 1,200 mile road trip within a few weeks of returning home from the hospital.

I couldn’t believe he had the nerve to die when I had just started school at the local university. The first one in my family to attend a university, no less! Didn’t he want to see me graduate from a university? Yet he abandoned me, and didn’t bother to tell me about his plans to do so. My mother’s attempts to explain that he simply tried to spare me more pain by not telling me of his impending death fell on deaf ears. Not only was I angry that he didn’t trust me enough to tell me he was dying, but I had things I wanted to tell him about how much I loved and respected him. I wanted him to know those things before he died. I wanted to tell him and see him smile when he heard my words. Over time, I realized how selfish my thoughts were, in an intellectual way. I was able to rationalize that I “understood” how he came to the decisions he made, and of course he didn’t *want* to die. But under it all, there was still that nagging feeling of abandonment and resentment.

Evelyn’s news threw me for a tailspin. I realized all the “work” I had done regarding my father’s death was just an intellectualization of an event. The raw emotions surfaced quickly and I had to bite it down while I listened to Evelyn explain her situation. She told me that she decided to inform me of her situation because of my experience with my father withholding his information. For that, I will be forever grateful to her. As we fumbled along, finding our way with each new health issue, Evelyn remained patient, pushing me gently to move outside my comfort zone and understanding in her quiet way when I couldn’t. Hospital visits were torture to me. I remembered visiting my father when he had appendicitis, and I remembered his final hospital visit: his arrival by ambulance, and waiting in the waiting room forever until the doctor came to tell us my father was “gone.” We didn’t understand what the doctor was saying. “Massive myocardial infarction...did what I could...it didn’t work.” My mother had to actually ask the doctor, “You mean he’s dead?”

While I didn’t explain all of this to Evelyn, she intuitively knew. When she would go to the hospital, I suddenly became very busy, telling her I’d come visit as soon as possible.

Then I would arrive, stay a few moments and have to leave to go back to work. "You know, it's okay if you can't come see me," Evelyn said. In her quiet way, she had put the issue squarely in front of me, and I realized she was right. I stopped hiding behind the "fact" that Evelyn seemed to have to go to the hospital when I got very busy and realized that I got very busy when Evelyn had to go to the hospital. This realization freed something inside of me, though. I wasn't able to visit her every time she went to the hospital, but when I did visit, I was much more at ease. Even as she faced the end of her life, Evelyn tried to help me find my way through my sense of betrayal, loss, sadness, and anger.

My lesson is not done, and Evelyn is still with me to help along my way. Sometimes it seems I take one step forward and two steps back in my ability to accept that this beautiful person who brought so much healing to other people may not be here one day. When I teach about grief and loss, I am much more effective in my ability to explain the process. The concept that "people grieve in their own way, and wherever they are in the grieving process, that's where they should be" means so much more to me now. I am much more comfortable thinking and feeling about what the loss of my father meant to me. I may never be finished learning this lesson of celebrating life and understanding the circle it makes with death, but I am no longer afraid to move along the path of learning and most importantly, of feeling. I am able to face issues of loss with my clients without feeling as though I need to change the subject or end the appointment. I am also much more likely now to bring up the topic of loss, to notice when my clients *aren't* saying something about it. I recognize avoidance in clients because I have been there myself; I recognize when my client is in a place where Evelyn had quietly pointed out my own avoidance.

I can be fully present with my clients when they discuss their feelings about loss, instead of having a million thoughts going through my head about my own loss, or how to appropriately respond to a statement my client just made. I understand the use of myself in ways I never had before. I can sit quietly with

a client and allow us both to digest information that was just disclosed instead of searching desperately for the "right thing" to say. When I began this subtle shift in my practice with clients, the response was almost immediate. Many of my clients remarked that they sensed a nonjudgmental attitude and felt they could disclose anything because I would understand. I didn't always understand, but I did accept. I accepted their understanding of what the loss meant to them, and of where they felt they needed to go next in the grieving process. I learned that acceptance can sometimes be more important than understanding in relationships, and that intellectually understanding a situation does not mean one has emotionally accepted it: the difference between "thinking" about a situation and "feeling" it.

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