“LESSONS FROM THE BEDSIDE”

Presented at First Unitarian Church by Channing Grey, July 3, 2022

Good morning. I’m so glad for this opportunity to share with you my story about how volunteering for hospice changed my life, how it led to my awakening.

And I’d don’t mean to be dramatic, for I heard no trumpets, saw no blazing lights. I just learned from my time with the dying how to pay attention, how to get real.

It is often said that hospice work, which challenges us in ways we never thought possible, is a calling. And I will not forget the moment I received the call.

It happened on a spring morning in 2013. I was sitting at my desk at the Providence Journal banging out a story for the Sunday paper, when I got up mid-sentence, and drove to the local hospice center on North Main Street.

I just walked in the door, and announced, “Here I am. Sign me up.”

It is true that I had been thinking about spending time volunteering during my approaching retirement, and hospice work was high on my list.

I’d heard it said that sitting with the dying was like getting real close to the fire, and that no-holds-barred intensity appealed to me.

It is also true that my newsroom conversion probably would not have taken place had I not spent years in retreat, practicing meditation and studying the dharma. This was not a happy time for me. In fact, it was so painful, I thought I might need to be hospitalized.

But meditation softened me, and allowed a heart encased in the scars of childhood trauma to open to the world and see that the true rewards of a spiritual practice lie in being of benefit to others.

The path of meditation is not about finding your bliss, I came to understand, but learning to embrace the entire messy package that makes us human, and that includes the uncomfortable truth that we all must die.

In the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, the sage Yudhishthira is asked, “Of all things in life, what’s the most amazing.” He answers, “That a man, seeing others die all around him, never thinks he will die.”

Forgive me if this sounds morbid. For in my experience, accepting the truth of our situation, rather than spending our brief time on this earth hiding out, is cause for rejoicing. It’s liberating.

That was one of the first things I learned as a hospice volunteer, that you can’t feel fully alive unless you embrace the understanding that our joys are inseparable from our sorrows.

And arriving at that place, where you can gently sit with all life throws at you, is a great gift. When family members heap praise on me for watching over their loved ones as they fade from this life, I always assure them that it is I who benefit most from this work.

But let me just pause to say a bit about hospice care, which traces its roots back to the 11th century. The first modern hospice was created in 1967 by a British nurse, and reached our shores in the early 1970s.

Rhode Island's HopeHealth Hospice is, in fact, the second oldest in the country.

The idea behind hospice is to treat the person, not just the disease. It allows the terminally ill to die on their terms, to die with dignity, as comfortably as possible.

Many of the patients I've met in hospice are not only resigned to, but welcome their fate. Few enter kicking and screaming.

And that's because these are for the most part older folks who have been through the medical wringer, who have been sick for a long time and are no longer willing to endure another round of chemo or an operation that will only prolong their misery.

It's the family members, the survivors, who often have difficultly letting go, who cling to the thinnest slivers of hope and indulge in bouts of magical thinking.

I'm always touched by the notes and balloons left in rooms of hospice patients with upbeat messages like, "We love you Grampa. Get well soon."

These are no doubt left by children who are either too young to understand the finality of death, or were lied to by their parents.

The first time I visited a patient at the Hulitar Center on North Main Street, I felt like I'd come home.

Hulitar, which houses meeting rooms, administrative offices and more than two dozen rooms for patients, is the point of no return for the terminally ill. It's where patients come to live out their last hours, when family members find it too difficult to care for them.

Some don't last the night. Others defy their doctors and linger for weeks.

Hulitar is a revolving door between this world and the next, where a half dozen or more souls die every day. I once showed up for a night shift and asked the receptionist how things were going "A dozen in, a dozen out," she replied.

But despite the all-pervasive presence of death, Hulitar has always seemed to me a place of peace and comfort. Patients are assigned a single, spacious room with a

flat-screen TV, a mini-fridge, and on the wall, photos and prints that capture the beauty of nature.

And that's it. There are no IV drips, no beeping heart monitors, nothing to prolong life, even though each patient, no matter how sick, is treated with the utmost respect.

Someone once told me that they arrived at Hulitar to visit an elderly in-law who had lapsed into a coma, and were greeted by the fresh fragrance of shampoo.

It's this kind of care that's given to hospice patients, even if they are not expected to live to see the dawn.

And when patients die at Hulitar, a member of the staff walks solemnly alongside the body as it's wheeled from the building, just to remind the world that every life counts, that every life is sacred.

But this talk is about the lessons I've learned from my work with the dying. And those are many.

This morning's reading is one of the so-called "Four Reminders" that Buddhists contemplate before the start of their morning practice.

It is a reminder that life is short, that there's no time like the present. It also reminds us that everything is impermanent, in flux, even though we do everything in our power to make it seem solid.

I once found a surgeon I used to jog with among the patients at Hulitar. I have no idea what happened to him, just that he was unresponsive when I visited his room.

Soon, a fellow surgeon joined me, staring at his friend and colleague in disbelief.

"What the hell is going on here?" he sputtered. "I had dinner with Bill just last week. We were drinking wine and joking."

And I'm thinking, here's a physician whose stock-in-trade is life and death, and he's having trouble wrapping his head around the fact that what he's witnessing is the basic, irrefutable law of impermanence.

My training for this job consisted of a day-long session of talks, hand-outs, and the oft-repeated instruction that we as volunteers are there to listen, to be a peaceful presence.

A few weeks later, I got my first assignment, an 86-year-old woman living in a North Providence nursing home.

I figured I'd spend my time sitting with her, holding her delicate hand, and discussing the meaning of life. After eight decades of living, she must surely have more than a few insights to share.

Just to prime the pump, I brought along an article I had written about a solo meditation retreat I'd undertaken in the Vermont woods, a sure-fire conversation starter, I figured.

My supervisor met me at the nursing home, and we tracked down Maria, who long ago had taken up residence on a far-away planet in another galaxy. There she was in a barren bedroom with no family photos, no flowers, glowering at us form her wheelchair.

"Okay," she barked, "which one of you is taking me home?"

So much for sweet old ladies and the meaning of life.

I spent six months visiting Maria, before she succumbed to a host of ailments. I listened to her tell me about her kids, who she felt certain roamed the halls of the nursing home, and about her mom, who was busy at home preparing her dinner.

After a couple of hours in the Land of Make Believe, I'd wheel Maria back to the dayroom, where she spent her time folding napkins and listening to tapes of tunes like "Tea for Two."

And without fail, she'd demand to know what I did with her "stuff."

"I beg your pardon," I'd say, as her simmering rose to a boil. "My stuff. It was just here. What'd you do with it?"

Realizing I was now trapped, I'd suggest the nurses might know where it is. But that did no good. As though on cue, Maria would explode.

"To hell with you," she'd bellow at me. "I've had it with you. Get the hell out of here and don't come back."

At that point, I'd thank her, bow and leave, having learned one more important lesson: Don't take it personally. It's not about me.

You wouldn't think it, but Hulitar can be a funny place, and I don't mean peculiar. Many nights there were filled with laughter, even as death prowled the corridors.

I met one woman with just days to live, cursing her TV as she listened Donald Trump on the evening news.

No matter what Trump said, she'd hurl salty invectives his way. Then, in the middle of her rant, she looked at me with a mischievous grin and said, "I'm gonna miss this."

I have sat at the feet of saintly lamas who have lived in caves, but I'd have to count among my greatest teachers a kind man named, Mike.

Mike was an ordained Armenian priest, who had drifted away from the church to enter the world of business and raise a family.

When he noticed a small lump on his arm, he went to his doctor and was told it was nothing more than a harmless fatty tumor. The lump got bigger, but the doctor stuck to his diagnosis, until he finally changed his tune, and told Mike to think about spending what time he had left with his family.

When I met Mike, he had come to Hulitar to die. That was years ago, but I'll never forget my last moments with him.

Mike, who was probably in his late 50s, was sitting up in bed beaming, while his wife, who was just as radiant, was busy tidying up his room. Had I not known otherwise, I would have thought they were newlyweds on their honeymoon.

Soon friends who owned an Italian restaurant, showed up with steak and cheese sandwiches and bottles of wine. We closed the door, and partied for most of the afternoon.

And in the middle of what can only be described as a joyous celebration, Mike turned to me and said in the most matter-of-fact fashion, "Whaddya gonna do?"

Two days later, I read his obituary in the Providence Journal.

I suppose you could say that Mike was courageous, facing the specter of death with such a nonchalant shrug. But I think what I was witnessing was the simple act of acceptance, of giving up the struggle.

I would hope, of course, when it's my time, I would find in me the kind of acceptance I saw in Mike. But this I will not know until I face that most mysterious of transitions that awaits us all.

I find it interesting that I have spent so much time in the presence of death, and still haven't a clue what it's all about. I have no idea what lies beyond, and don't seem all that curious.

I would like to think, though, that my intimate dance with death has inured me to some of its horrors.

I am encouraged by the fact that most of the patients I visit during their final days, appear to be at peace, as their bodies shut down and the morphine kicks in.

Take Sarah, who when her time came, executed a graceful pirouette and was gone.

Sarah, who taught some sort of esoteric yoga she would not discuss, lived the life of a tomboy until ravaged by a lung disease that left her too weak to wash herself, prepare meals, even read.

When I began to visit her, Sarah was in the process of tidying up her affairs, handing over her sweet rescue dog to a neighbor, and making sure the man who shoveled her drive got a mention in her will.

All that was left for her, was her leave-taking. And one fine day, without any fuss or fanfare, Sarah checked herself into Hulitar, where, within minutes, all that was her precious essence seemed to spill out into the hereafter.

The nurses, who withheld the standard cocktail of drugs, told me Sarah was alert and chatty when she arrived in a shimmering lace nightgown. Then, she just closed her eyes and vanished, even though her heart continued to pump needlessly for another few hours.

But not everyone goes gentle into that good night. Mary, whose desperate struggle to deny the inevitable, still leaves me shaken when I think of her.

I will spare you the sickening details of Mary's condition, except to say that her cancer had eaten its way to the surface, leaving her upper body an oozing mass of rotting flesh.

I was called upon to help concoct the morning smoothie that Mary felt certain would be her cure, tossing into a blender an assortment of herbs, nuts and berries whose names filled a couple of hand-written pages.

Mary, who would not take so much as an aspirin, would lie in bed, sipping this exotic elixir, while continuing despite the gnawing pain, to wage what everyone knew was the mother of all losing battles.

Everyone, except Mary. Until her final crackling breath, she swore she'd beat this hideous, unrelenting affliction that was devouring her.

"The only people who think I'm going to die," she'd tell me, "are members of the medical profession."

You do this work long enough, and you come to think of death as an old friend. Nancy, who'd been sick for a long time, used to think that, until this constant companion of ours took up residence in her spare bedroom.

Nancy was a college professor, who lived to play golf. But when I entered her waning life, she was a frail shell of a woman, dying of a disease that was scarring her lungs and slowly suffocating her.

I'd take out her trash, pick up her contacts at the optometrist, and spend hours listening to her reflect on a life that now seemed like a distant dream.

Nancy led a miserable existence, tethered to an oxygen concentrator that restricted her life to an unforgiving radius of about 50 feet. She had withered away to a brittle 80 some pounds, and was too weak do anything but spend her days on the living room couch, reading and watching movies.

The only reason she didn't kill herself, she told me, was because of her grandchildren. But she also found the basic human will to survive far more tenacious than she had imagined.

"I hear hospice workers say they no longer fear death," Nancy once told me. "And I used to think that was true of me, until I looked it straight in the eyeball."

But like so many patients I have met in hospice, Nancy managed to keep her sense of humor, even while facing the kind of suffering no one should have to endure.

She was raised Catholic, she told me, but flip-flopped between believing in a higher power and a universe of its own devising.

She said she suspected heaven was just a place people dreamed up to assuage their fear of the unknown.

But then she added, "My sister and I have always been bad with money. So if there is a heaven, I'd like to think it's a place where you can pay your bills and have a little something left over."

"A burst of light in the darkness"

Our brief time on this Earth is like a glowing ember tracing its aimless path through the night sky, then burning out.

During that flash of awareness we pursue our relentless search for meaning. We laugh, cry, love, hate. We invent gods, create our own hells, and spend our days comparing, comparing and comparing.

But really, our lives are just momentary, miraculous bursts of light in the darkness.