Ministry of Healing through Photographs

Chaplain Captures Evocative Images on Film

Mary T. O'Connor
Region I

As chaplains are women and men of the spoken word, the quiet touch, the communication that reaches the heart and soul. We do not try to take away the suffering; rather, we invite the patient to look at the suffering, asking questions such as, “What is the worst part?” or “What do you dread the most?” Through our questions we seek to help patients uncover their personal inner resources.

I came upon a discovery several years ago which enables patients to not only give a name to their suffering but also to uncover their spirituality.

I have always loved photography. When I cannot describe what I feel, I go out with my camera and frequently capture with it something which expresses a feeling.

In Pastoral Ministry, it is entirely possible to get in touch with the spiritual side of the patients through the presentation of photographs. Although burdened with suffering, the patient can be led to understand God's power and to rediscover hope.

I am not looking for therapeutic revelations. I am trying to help the patient link the present pain with previous experiences. An appreciation of that experience helps them to live more fully while they are suffering.

So much of the patients' experience in the hospital revolves around bodily functions, but by reminding patients of times of beauty and inviting them to talk of their own experience, I am encouraging them to be aware of the beauty and goodness which are essential parts of life.

In working with some patients, I begin with three or four ordered photographs and I take the patient on a journey. Before pointing out anything that the photo is saying to me, I allow the patient to hold the picture and I wait for a response.

If a person has been unable to verbalize his or her anxiety, I might begin with a picture of a ferris wheel and ask at what level the patient feels they are on the ride. The ferris wheel is highly symbolic, because even if the patient points toward the bottom of the ride, it is a starting point to remind the patient that the ferris wheel eventually goes back up to the top.

On another occasion I might bring photos of a stormy sea. I try to have a bridge or a pier in the photo. I encourage the patient to describe what it feels like to be tossed around on waves that are breaking, to be struggling to stay afloat.

I then point out the bridge and ask them if there were ever times when they found a "bridge," a Divine touch that lifted them higher than the stormy sea.

In Pastoral Ministry, it is entirely possible to get in touch with the spiritual side of patients through the presentation of photographs.

At other times, in a second visit, having heard the patient during a first visit articulate their experience of sadness and frustration at the separation or death of a spouse or being trapped in a difficult work environment, I offer in the subsequent visit some photos that will enable the patient to further verbalize their suffering.

I affirm the feeling I heard the patient express in the earlier visit by presenting photos of fences. The first photo is a hostile fence with a lot of shadows. I allow the patient to hold the photo and identify with their own suffering and verbalize the fenced-in or trapped feeling. I encourage the patient to think of ways that the fence could be less hostile.

I follow with the second photo of a fence which has roses growing through it and remind the patient that the fenced feeling will remain for awhile, but the roses represent the creative ways to lessen the suffering caused by the experience. I suggest that the patient might make the fence more bearable through support groups, long walks or a job interview.

I have noted that pictures of waterfalls or running water have a soothing effect, especially when the patient is reminded that God has promised not just a trickle, but streams of living water to refresh us.

One of the great joys in my photo ministry is having the patient see something in a photo that I did not see. Recently, I was sharing photos of different cloud formations with an oncology patient. The sky had delicate shades of pink.

Suddenly the patient said, “Look at the angel!” Seeing is perceiving! Perceiving is knowing! Knowing is experiencing! Through the cloud formations, this patient shared her life story, not just the pain she felt but also the hope of one day soon being “lifted up on angels' wings.” What joy! I have learned so much about the beauty of living and dying from the words that patients have spoken while reflecting on my photos.

When I saw how effective my photo ministry was, I put 50 photographs into a book and divided the book by seasons. A single picture appears on each page. The viewer has an opportunity to reflect upon the photo and to listen for the word or phrase that the photo suggests. Copies of the book are now available in different waiting areas of the hospital.

A book of reflective photos will evoke a state of being because feelings are universal. For example, once while I was walking near a pond early one evening, a huge orange sun began to descend through layers of blue. The sun became very still as though everything was winding down. The great monotony was being put to rest.

I felt a sense of reverence and a feeling of wholeness. This memory inspired me to share my understanding of how close we are to God, breaking into our ordinary lives in moments of beauty and peace.

Beyond the doors of perception the banquet is always spread.

Feast your eyes and share the vision!

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What would you like to ask God?
What would you like to tell God?

What gifts are you carrying in the bag to get you through this difficult time?

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Are you having trouble staying afloat? . . . Have there been times when you found a bridge, a divine touch that lifted you higher than the stormy sea?

What would you like to ask God?
What would you like to tell God?

What gifts are you carrying in the bag to get you through this difficult time?
First Photo (left):
Are you feeling trapped in sadness or frustration in your present situation? Feeling fenced in, in a corner of pain and dark shadows with no way out?

Second Photo (below):
Can you think of ways that the fence might be less hostile or more bearable? Can you envision a rose of creativity reaching out to the light?

Photos by Mary T. O'Connor

To view in color the photos in this feature, as well as some of Mary O'Connor's other photographs, visit the Vision page on the NACC web site: www.nacc.org