



SAYING GOOD-BYE WHEN YOU CANNOT BE AT BEDSIDE

*Written by
Rabbi Tsurah August
JFCS Chaplain*

The voice on the phone said: “There is a family whose father is dying in the ICU. They would like you to help them.”

The call came to me from a fellow hospital chaplain, because I work with dying patients and their families, helping them cope with and help make their final hours with their loved ones more comforting, and meaningful.

3 months ago, I would have quickly gotten the room number and made an appointment to meet the family there. But this was 2 weeks ago, and that scenario was already impossible. No visitors – no family and no chaplain! Our “visit” was made entirely by phone, without the family or chaplain present at their father’s bedside. And it was moving and beautiful!

Saying our final Good-bye to a loved-one is hard enough. Not being able to say Good-bye at all can be agonizing.

This time of Covid-19 has prevented one of the most important natural human yearnings from being expressed: Being with and saying good-bye to a dying loved-one.

What can we do to have a “Loving Good-bye” with our loved ones when we cannot be with them?

Over the years, I’ve received many phone calls like the one I shared at the beginning of this article. And, much as I would have liked to rush to a patient’s bedside, this was not always possible, so I guided their family members by phone in saying good-bye. Now, without a chaplain available, you can still make this a meaningful and comforting time for your loved one and family.

Here are some practices that have worked for me by phone, when extenuating circumstances prevented me and the family from being physically present.

In advance of the “visit”, invite your family members to join you in this “loving good-bye” and set the means (Zoom, FaceTime, etc.) and time frame. Cap the time at 20-40 minutes, depending on how many people will be on the call.

(BTW, this definitely can work with only the family members on the call. However, there may be a nurse or other staff able to help you connect the patient to the call. Even unconscious patients can hear. I recently had a doctor set up a FaceTime call. The Pastoral Care Office may be able to help you in this.)

You may want to begin the call by having everyone light a candle in their own homes or having a photo of your loved one in front of you. Feel free to be creative! Do whatever makes this feel like a special moment.

If your family has a connection to a spiritual or religious path, you may consider beginning and ending the “visit” with a prayer or blessing.

There are 5 categories of “good-bye gifts” that end-of-life professionals consider to be helpful. They can be said out loud by whomever wants to speak, or held silently.

The first is an expression **Gratitude**. Gratitude for how the patient has enhanced your life. This can include general or specific acts or words, such as “I am grateful for how hard you worked to support us”, “I am grateful for your unconditional love”. Or “ I am grateful for the time you....”.

The second is to assure them that **They Are Not Alone**. This may seem strange, since they are physically alone. However, this lets them know you all are thinking of them and that your love is with them.

The third is **Forgiveness**. This can be a challenging one. Throughout our lives there are moments when we may act or speak in ways that are painful to others. A sharp word, a teen-age acting out, a fib, etc. Even the kindest of people have these moments. This is the time to ask for and offer forgiveness, even if the patient cannot initiate or respond.

However, there are situations where asking or giving forgiveness is not authentic, because the pain is too deep or unresolved. In this situation, I recommend simply saying “We have done the best we could”.

The fourth is We Want the Best For You. We Will Take Care of Each Other the Best We Can. This can be very comforting to the dying person who will no longer be able to take care of you. It can also help deepen the family bond and reassure frail and vulnerable survivors.

(Many End-Of-Life counselors suggest saying something in the order of “You can let go now, we will be OK”.)

The fifth, and final, is You Will Be Loved and Remembered. This speaks for itself.

Now take time to share memories! Laugh, cry!

I hope these suggestions help you find a way to say “Good-bye” that is right for your family. No matter how near or far you are from each other and your loved one, your care and love transcend time and space. No matter what!

About Rabbi Tsurah August

Rabbi August is the staff chaplain for Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Greater Philadelphia, where she provides emotional, spiritual and religious support for patients, families and staff, in hospitals, hospices and long term care residences. She provides bereavement, end-of-life counseling and facilitates bereavement and other support groups.

She is a member of the Philadelphia Board of Rabbis of Philadelphia and *Neshama*, the National Association of Jewish Chaplains.

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The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number is 1-800-273-8255