



INTRODUCTION TO SPIRITUAL CARE

Birth and death are the two events that come to every human being, and all religions are concerned with them. Belief in survival beyond death is perhaps humanity's oldest religious conviction. Far back in prehistoric times traces remain of such an idea in the way in which bodies were buried and in which tools and ornaments were laid beside them for use in the life to come. There is a great variety of teaching in world religions about death and its consequences, from the resurrection taught by monotheistic faiths, to the reincarnation held by the religions of India and beyond, but all believe that there is more to human existence than the statutory three score years and ten.

We must all learn that at this time, the dying person has the right to make choices and to stay an individual with their own thoughts and beliefs, until the moment of their death. *As we visit, it is very important to remember that we do not have the right to try to change the things that give these people peace and strength, only to try and help rid them of their pain.* We can only listen, show a caring awareness of their spiritual pain and help them, if we can, find their source of peace. Those left behind have the same rights to their beliefs and to the rituals after death that help them to accept the loss of a loved one and to start to heal and move on with their lives.

These factors make each of us, the dying and the caregiver, a special and unique person. What we find, be it ritual, religion, or just individuality, that makes us gain the strength to cope with the stresses and strains in our lives and to find inner peace as death approaches, is the most important discovery of our lives. This is what we need to hear, to understand and to encourage others to find. Beneath the skin we are of one family, and all the members are important.

In a sense, everything that is being taught in this course concerns care for the spirit. The deepest spiritual pain suffered by anyone, whether they are dying or not, is the sense of alienation and disconnection from other human beings. Connecting with another person heart to heart helps to fill a basic spiritual need. Spiritual care is implicit in every chapter of this course. To listen to someone with unconditional acceptance and absolute attention is providing spiritual care.

In this chapter, we will take a look at spirituality and spiritual suffering. Although it is not our job as hospice volunteers to make the suffering go away, it will help us to listen and support the dying person and their family if we can understand some of the spiritual dimension of some of the issues that they are dealing with.

A hospice worker needs to walk with the dying person and the family wherever they happen to be in their spiritual journey. We need to check our own religious or spiritual convictions at the door. If we are Christians, it is not our job to "save souls". If they wish to talk about spiritual



matters and their own beliefs, we listen. We do not try and correct them or “set them straight” if their beliefs differ from ours.

If the dying person wishes support that is specifically religious in nature, it is sometimes appropriate to refer them to a clergy person or religious leader from their religious tradition.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality may include any or all of the following aspects. It is each person’s *unique* experience of:

- A power beyond him or herself
- A sense of order in the universe
- A sense of purpose in living
- A sense of connection with everything.

It also includes the organizing set of beliefs, values, hopes and yearnings by which each person makes sense of the frequent and chaotic elements of life.