

BOOK REVIEW

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Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying, by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley. New York, NY: Poseidon Press, 1992, 221pp, \$21.00

Probably there is hardly a member of IANDES who has not read Raymond Moody's little gem, *Life After Life* (1975). On the final two pages of that book, Moody responded to a hypothetical objector as to the value of his study of near-death experiences (NDEs): "I can think of no other way to answer this than to point again to the universal human concern with the nature of death. I believe that any light whatever which can be shed on the nature of death is to the good" (pp. 183-184). Surely the deeply felt yet comfortable dialogues of *Final Gifts* are helping raise the blinds to that special light and even opening windows to warm sunshine for those who, as authors Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley write, are "able to listen and understand."

Callanan and Kelley are hospice nurses who have, for well over a combined total of twenty-five years, chosen to care for the terminally ill. They are leaders among the growing number of health care professionals who are not only familiar with NDEs and open to their value but, in addition, intimately familiar with *pre-death* experiences of the dying and of *their* value—to caregivers, to the dying themselves, and to all of us as we inevitably share in the event of another's death and of our own.

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The title of Callanan and Kelley's book—*Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying*—is a true mirror, a fullblown, foreshadowing description of their helpful and heartfelt narratives regarding dying patients. The authors tell us that after working closely, often over weeks and months, in individual home-care settings with patients who are dying slowly, they have discerned what they have termed "Nearing Death Awareness":

The experience of dying frequently includes glimpses of another world and those waiting in it. Although they provide few details, dying people speak with awe and wonder of the peace and beauty they see in this other place. They tell of talking with, or sensing the presence of, people whom we cannot see—perhaps people they have known and loved. They know, often without being told, that they are dying, and may even tell us when their deaths will occur.

Dying persons' requests are sometimes difficult to decipher. Their recognition of the importance of these needs, along with concern for family and friends, can cause the dying to control the time and circumstances of death until those needs are met. (pp. 22–23)

Callanan and Kelley present in a smooth-flowing and logical order more than 60 one- to four-page accounts portraying patients during their final days and weeks of earthly life, living and sharing this aspect of their Nearing Death Awareness. Each account is a personalized story told in dialogue from the nurse's viewpoint, recounted as by a welcomed friend of the family astutely alert to any agitation or comment that might imply a potential need.

In keeping with their past and present roles in nursing education, Callanan and Kelley build into their graphic stories approaches and reflective thinking that a caregiver or family member might use to pinpoint a patient's need. The following lines are taken from a narrative about Andrea, beginning here with her comment to her husband regarding his father:

"I feel like he's angry at *me* because I might die and leave you stuck to raise these kids alone," she sobbed. "Does he think I would *choose* this to happen?" . . .

Too weak to participate in any of her care, Andrea slept most of the time and had increasing periods of restlessness and confusion. But a clear and insistent phrase in her incoherent ramblings was "We *must* go to the park." I asked Tom what that might mean. I was concerned that her restlessness indicated that something was making her uncomfortable.

"She and Pop used to take the kids to the park all the time," he said. "It's Pop she's waiting for—I'm certain!" . . .

When he saw Andrea, he exploded into sobs, cradling her in his arms. . . .

"Could I stay here tonight?" Pop asked.

"Yes, we'd like that," Tom said.

Andrea died peacefully that evening, in their king-sized bed, surrounded by Tom, her children, and Pop. (pp. 134–135)

In Andrea's case, persistent listening and an open relationship between family and caregiver finally led to the understanding of a special need, a special communication, however "confused" the ramblings. The result was a final gift of peace for each person involved.

A brief section from a narrative about Alan will further illustrate the scope of Callanan and Kelley's sensitivity. "Communication" is used in this case in a different sense; but it points, nevertheless, to another good and perfect gift. Alan was one of those people who believe that "when you're dead, you're dead." He had often told his wife that he was perfectly content simply to know he would live on in her memories. During the final days of his bout with cancer, he lay perfectly still in a coma:

One morning Alan's breathing changed while Margaret and I were with him. He opened his eyes and looked toward the far corner of the room. Smiling as if recognizing someone, he sat up in bed and reached out his arms. He sat that way for a few minutes, then closed his eyes, slowly dropped his arms, lay back, and died. Margaret was awestruck.

"I hoped he'd just stop breathing and die easily, and he did, but this . . ." she said, shaking her head. "It was as if he saw someone, and tried to reach for a hug." . . .

" . . . he sure saw something we didn't, and he's gone somewhere else now. So he'll be waiting for me when I go." (pp. 173–174)

Margaret could be joyful at having been a party to Alan's instance of Nearing Death Awareness. What, however, of someone who had left a dying person for a few minutes, returning to find the loved one lying dead on the floor next to the bed? Wouldn't the natural inclination be to blame oneself for having left the bedside? How many people would be inclined to imagine that anything akin to Alan's experience could have incited the fall?

Through *Final Gifts*, caregivers, each of us, and the dying themselves are given the opportunity to become aware of what might be learned from this profound process call dying. Callanan and Kelley's outstanding book opens us to the light of their insight, living along with their narratives, recognizing in retrospect the recollected images and responses of our dying.

References

Moody, R.A., Jr. (1975). *Life after life*. Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books.