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Narrative Medicine Essay

Trampling Down Death: Hope at the End of Life

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My name is Farid. I am a happily married father of three young boys, a hospitalist, and a man of faith. I admit that it feels unusual to state this so explicitly, or to speak of faith at all, within a professional setting. Throughout my training and career, I was often implicitly, and at times explicitly, instructed to keep my faith to myself. I was told that God had no place in the care of patients, and that I should instead embrace the superiority of the biopsychosocial model of care.

In doing so, there was always a part of me that remained hidden, untapped, and distant. For better or for worse, that is the truth. I was largely comfortable living within this tension, as within my religious ethos of life modeled through action is emphasized more than one articulated through words. Faith is lived before it is spoken.

Recently, however, I completed a master's degree in theological studies, and I was encouraged by my mentors at UCLA to consider more intentionally sharing the connections between my work as a physician and my faith. In that spirit, and with some hesitation, I offer the following story.

It was early morning rounds, and I was caring for several critically ill patients in the intensive care unit. In end-of-life situations, it is often the God I was taught to bracket or ignore who is questioned, challenged, or even cursed.

This case, however, was different.

I walked into the room to find a family gathered around their beloved, who lay in bed with end stage metastatic breast cancer. They were feeding her applesauce with a spoon while religious songs played softly in the background. The eye test, as we call it, that physician intuition formed by a single glance, showed me a cachectic, frail woman, too weak to feed herself, somnolent, with breaths that were uncomfortably shallow. The eye test told me that, sadly, she would very likely die in the hospital and that hospice care was appropriate.

In accordance with my training, I expressed my sympathies and, after building rapport, cautiously introduced the topic of palliative care. Their demeanor shifted immediately. They looked at me and said, "We believe in God". We believe in miracles. God will save her. We just must have faith."

Now what.

Was I not also a believer. Did I not believe that God is present and active in the world He loves. With internal frustration but a mask of compassion, I replied, "I understand. I just wanted to introduce myself and discuss all options. I will see you all tomorrow."

I left the room unsettled, not because of their faith, but because of how faith had been framed. I believed in God's power as well. Yet the faith and its institutions have never been a wager on a particular outcome. Rather, it is trust in God Himself, in both His power and His will. There is a well-known religious parable of three faithful men who refuse to compromise their allegiance to God, and their words came to mind: *Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace... but even if He does not, we will not serve your gods*. Their confession was not conditional. Their faithfulness did not depend on rescue. It rested on the conviction that God remains God whether deliverance comes now or in the age to come. This is a faith rooted in the hope of the life to come, rather than in the avoidance of suffering and death.

Death, then, must be named truthfully. It is not a neutral passage or a natural stage to be softened by euphemism. Death is the enemy of life, the final expression of a world that has fallen away from its source. To acknowledge death is not to deny God's power or surrender to despair. It is to refuse to lie about the condition of the world God Himself entered in order to redeem.

What struck me most in the story of the three young believers is that God does not prevent the fire. He allows them to enter it. The miracle is not avoidance, but presence. The flames burn away what is perishable, but they do not consume them. It is through the fire that they emerge purified, like gold. God does not stand at a distance from suffering. He enters it and brings us through.

It was there that I found my answer.

The next morning, I returned to the room to a similar atmosphere. The family looked at me with suspicion. I asked how she was feeling. "The same," they replied. Then, breaking my training, I entered their suffering. "Last year I lost my grandmother to breast cancer. It was a very difficult time. It's painful to think about how it's something we will all have to go through sooner or later with our loved ones."

Immediately their eyes changed. They no longer saw only a physician. They saw a human being, someone who had been through the fire and was willing to step into it with them. I continued gently. "I am a person of faith. Of course, God can do miraculous things, things we cannot medically explain. But even if He does not, we trust Him. Our faith is in the strength He will give you to get through this."

That moment changed everything. Tears flowed freely. The situation itself was unchanged, yet something essential had shifted. Courage and peace entered the room, not be-

cause death had been denied, but because it had been named and was no longer faced alone.

For the believer, death has been trampled down by death. It is also the infusion of life even now, a life marked by endurance, love, and quiet courage through suffering. This is the life that strengthens those who stand nearby. I had seen it before. In patients who suffer without bitterness. In families whose hope matures from insistence into trust. In the

stillness that sometimes fills a room when fear gives way to peace.

I did not know whether a miracle would come. But I knew this much. God was already present in that room, not only in the possibility of healing, but in the sharing of suffering, in the refusal to abandon love in vulnerability, and in the promise that even if He does not deliver us from the fire, He will never abandon us within it.



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