

KEEPING DEATH BEFORE MY EYES

My love of monasticism has taken many forms. At Saint John's School of Theology, I was immersed in the study of monastic spirituality in the contemplative setting of Collegeville while enjoying colleagues from all over the United States. Those years were very formative for me.

These last few years I have found contemplative Benedictine influences coming to me in a new way, combining my monastic background, musicianship, training in counseling, and skills as a hospital chaplain. I work in a large regional medical center as a music-thanatologist, using harp and voice at the bedside to respond to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the dying through prescriptive music. Music-thanatology is a new field with roots in the medieval monasteries, where monks used music and prayer to tend to the dying, helping them move toward a peaceful death. The motto in these monasteries was "care of the body and cure of the soul." When they could no longer cure the body, the monks realized they could care for it and alleviate spiritual and emotional suffering at the end of life. Thus the rites around the deathbed were centered around forgiveness, increasing a sense of belonging, and addressing fears.

Though most people prefer not to die in a hospital, most people spend their last moments there or in an extended care facility. They have little time to prepare for death as they are often concentrating on recovering until it is no longer possible, leaving them sometimes with only weeks, days, or hours to process the fact of their dying. Music can be helpful during this process. I often play for people who are unconscious or deaf and I witness their relaxation, deepened respiration, and lowered heart rate and blood pressure. We are such musical creatures and take music in on very deep levels, absorbing it not only by the ears but by the skin and bones as the vibrations of sound penetrate a room. Music also provides space for patients and their families to experience their emotions without anyone telling them to stop, and there's a kind of healing that comes through that dynamic. Healing comes in many ways. Most patients and families find the music helps them not only to relax and express emotions, but to stay in the present moment and feel a sense of peace.

Both birth and death are miracles. And though grief is often associated with the process of dying, I often feel like a kind of midwife helping the patient be born into a wider existence. It can be so hard to sit in the grief of impending loss but looking at things that are beautiful - the tenderness, love, strength, and courage exhibited by the dying and their families - is really quite amazing. It is a profound blessing and privilege for me to be a part of these deathbed music vigils. No



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two are alike. I've learned to respond to the uniqueness of each patient's situation, starting with his or her breath and heartbeat, the patient's own particular rhythms. I look at the patient's diagnosis, symptoms, level of pain or anxiety, and address all of those things through improvisatory music.

I have indeed learned the meaning of Benedict's admonition, "Keep death daily before one's eyes," in this practice of contemplative musicianship.

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