



World Cancer Day February 4th 2005

Multi-Faith Ceremony February 3rd

Address: "Finding Hope in a World of Pain"

I am grateful that Cancer Council South Australia has given me the opportunity to spend this time with you, with people of many faiths and philosophies, to contemplate the impact of cancer in our world.

As I was thinking about the message and the title for this reflection, my mind moved fairly quickly to the Tsunami crisis, and then to the Middle East and Africa.

As the estimation of lives lost in the Tsunami rises to 280,000, it is very hard to contemplate the grief of individuals, families and the nations directly affected by the disaster.

Closer to home were the recent devastating bushfires on the Eyre Peninsula.

We live in an era of high alert about terrorism since the attacks in New York, Washington and then Bali, and now the daily reports from Iraq.

I couldn't help thinking that our world is in pain.

And we might ask where is hope in this world of pain.

And yet.

I am reminded of words recently spoken by former President Bill Clinton in relation to the Tsunami crisis:

An event such as this reminds us of the fragility of human existence, and the strength of the human spirit."

We see the world's response to the victims of the Tsunami in terms of donations of money, supplies and human resources. We are witnesses to the solidarity of human beings; hearts touched by the pain of others.

The vulnerability of human beings establishes connection.

And if there is anything that I have learned about the spirituality of human beings, it is about connection between human beings.

The great faiths gather together to worship God, in huge numbers or very small numbers, recognising that our expression of faith gains its greatest meaning in connection with others. And when our worship and prayer are focussed on the needs of others, the connection with God and with other people is even more profound.

It is when we are aware of others, especially others in pain, that our gatherings gain an extraordinary momentum and meaning.

What has this to do with those of you who have been told that you have cancer, or those of you who have someone close to you who has been told that he or she has cancer?

The diagnosis of cancer brings with it a whole range of fear and emotional pain.

We ask ourselves, "Why has this happened to me?" "What have I done to deserve this?" "What is going to happen to me and to those I love?" "How will I cope?"

I would be dishonest if were to say that there is an easy answer to any of these questions or tried to provide some glib prescription to deal with them.

What I have seen and learned in my practice as a palliative care social worker over 16 years is the willingness of people to stand with people in their emotional pain, to practise whatever skill and art that exists to relieve physical pain.

I see groups of people ranging from family members, volunteers and professionals who are prepared to connect themselves with others in their struggle to deal with the crisis within which they find themselves.

In my years working in palliative care I have been witness to daily miracles of care and concern from professional staff, amazing volunteers and inspiring families. To me that is where hope lies.

I see the "Charter of Paris" from which this day stems. On February 4th 2000 the First World Summit against Cancer was held in Paris. In that global call to action against cancer, a commitment was made to foster research and treatment of cancer – to improve the quality of life of those suffering from it. It is a call, not just to health care workers, but to society at large to take responsibility to change the devastating impact of cancer in our world communities.

We human beings have a fundamental instinct for survival, and anything which threatens that instinct must be challenged - on an individual level as well as on a societal level. Cancer threatens the wellbeing of individuals and of the whole society. And so it is a social responsibility to find ways to deal with cancer. It's about solidarity among human beings.

In my preparation for this talk, I was moved to find some basic definitions of "hope." The Oxford definition of: "a feeling of expectation and desire" didn't really cut it for me!

In most other descriptions of the word or idea of hope, I was struck by their passivity. It seems to be about expecting something positive to happen. And, of course, when the opposite of hope is despair, we do prefer to think of a positive outcome.

My sense, though, is that hope has a profoundly positive base. And that is the creative use of energy to seek positive outcomes, to be connected and committed to other human beings in an active way. Which is why the Charter of Paris has particular potency.

That Charter is a wonderful idea and a challenge to all of us to work hard to find ways to win the battle against cancer. The work of Cancer Council South Australia is vital in furthering those aims as well as in providing direct services and support to those affected by cancer, and through public education.

Finding hope in the world of cancer pain is being connected with people.

The greatest pain that any of us can endure is being alone in our pain. Yes, some people, like Greta Garbo, choose to be alone, but my sense is that people need support. They need to be able to express their emotional pain and find relief from their physical pain.

We live in a society emerging from the Victorian stiff upper lip, where emotions were private and people never really knew what other people felt. We're still there a bit, and we need to find ways to let others know how we feel. Not necessarily always in words.

The greatest regrets I hear expressed are things like:

"I didn't tell him I loved him!"

"I didn't know what to say!"

"I didn't know she did that!"

The basis of hope in cancer is being able to express your fear without being judged, being able to ask for what you need without being rejected, and being treated with dignity on the journey.

That hope comes from connection with the people who share the journey with you.

And, to me, that is the foundation of spirituality.

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