

Susan K. Boyd
620 River Street
Iowa City, IA 52246
319-339-5948
slizboyd@msn.com

Letters from Iowa City

The presence of death scared me, as it does most children. I remember standing with sweaty hands at the door of a neighbor's house, holding a chocolate cake my mother had made for a family whose mother had died. I didn't want the delivery job, but I was ashamed to admit my fear. I wanted to ring the bell, leave the cake at the door and run, but I stayed. I was afraid that the family would be angry at my intrusion. I thrust the cake at the daughter, who whispered "thank you." My faced burned, I knew my mother would have known what to say, and I wondered if I would ever know.

As a Patient Representative at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics many years later, I visited many patients daily and was there to help. My job was not to give medical aid but to communicate to staff some of the frustrations and unmet needs that patients or their families were afraid to voice. We weren't in any hurry. I searched for days, wrote notes, and finally found a pair of false teeth for a man who had left his on a tray and was losing weight without them. I found a doctor who could explain a type of surgery to a family whose own doctor lacked the time and patience to answer their questions.

I was impressed by the courage of patients' families. The cheerful and alert mother of a very ill teen-age girl asked if a needle were available anywhere in the hospital. She had been making a bed jacket for the girl and the needle disappeared.

When I brought a new one the next day, she said, "If I can just keep sewing on things, I can get through."

Most people summon a startling dignity when they endure suffering. "You only die once," a nurse told me. "The ones who die slowly don't have much going for them, but they have this one beautiful chance. They can make it a good death." They can leave messages for the living.

I remember a 60-year-old cancer patient who was in the hospital for the seventh or eighth time. We went straight from pleasantries to what mattered to him. He told me how his illness had cut a hole in his savings and all he could do was watch it—and his dream for a retirement home in the Ozarks with his wife—drain away. "Well, it could be worse," he said. "The kids are all grown up, and I don't owe anything. Not yet."

Sometimes talk is helpful. "I like to hear about people having fun in the outside world," a leukemia patient told me. "I like to know it's possible out there."

I also learned the importance of listening and letting a silence grow. "I don't feel like talking to anyone. I don't want to seem rude or anything, but what's there to talk about?" asked a young man who faced his twelfth operation the following week. "Would you mind just sitting there for a while?"

"One thing about this, you appreciate the good things in life," a woman undergoing chemotherapy told me. She couldn't read a hospital library book because in the rush of going by ambulance, she had forgotten her glasses. But she brought her wig, a beautiful creation, faintly auburn. "If your feet and head are warm, I always say, that's the main thing."

During the year, she also had cancerous lymph nodes removed, all her teeth extracted and had suffered a heart attack. Recurrent symptoms of a coronary had justified the ambulance ride all the way from northern Iowa. When I asked her how she felt, she said, "I'm still in some pain, but I tell you, you learn to live with it."

"I never knew I'd be so glad to hear the birds singing," she said that raw autumn day when not a scratch of green could be glimpsed from her hospital window, even if she had the strength to lift herself. "And the flowers along the roadside. I was glad for the birds singing and the flowers and the lambs and the little colts when we drove home."

You can bet I looked at the grass, flattened and November-dull as it was, when I walked home that day. A few years later, I was to feel the mingled numbness, disbelief and hope as I learned I had breast cancer, to be followed by chemotherapy. I had crossed into the land I had visited. I wasn't lucky and on the outside any longer. But I was prepared by the strength these people had shown me.