

BLOG 6/20/11

The following is a powerful quote about comfort that I found in a current best-seller, *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese. The story is primarily about family, lost and found, and what the biological father (Dr. Stone) passes on as his legacy. The fictional letter that is quoted by the esteemed Dr. Stone to a hospital team was sent by a parent and written to Dr. Stone (stone-cold in many instances in the novel), but in this legacy reveals a vision for sick-care that Dr. Stone *wishes* for in the future:

“Dr. Stone – My son’s terrible death is not something I will ever get over, but perhaps in time it will be less painful. But I cannot get over one image, a last image that could have been different. Before I was asked to leave the room in a very rough manner, I must tell you that I saw my son was terrified and there was no one who addressed his fear. The only person who tried was a nurse. She held my son’s hand and said, ‘Don’t worry, it will be all right.’ Everyone else ignored him. Sure, the doctors were busy with his body. It would have been merciful if he had been unconscious. They had important things to do. They cared only about his chest and belly. Not about the little boy who was in fear.... I saw no sign of the slightest bit of human kindness. My son and I were irritants. Your team would have preferred for me to be gone and for him to be quiet. Eventually they got their wish. Dr. Stone, as head of surgery, perhaps as a parent yourself, do you not feel some obligation to have your staff *comfort* the patient? Would the patient not be better off with less anxiety, less fright? My son’s last conscious memory will be of people ignoring him. My last memory of him will be of my little boy, watching in terror as his mother is escorted out of the room. It is the graven image I will carry to my own deathbed. The fact that people were attentive to his body does not compensate for their ignoring his being.”

After reading this letter out loud to his staff...”Stone stood there, silent, looking out, as if considering the letter’s context himself, unaware of his audience. No one spoke. As the moment stretched on, even the smallest noises were stilled until there was only the hum of the air-conditioning. Thomas Stone’s expression was reflective, certainly not angry. Now, as if waking up, he searched the room for a reaction, seeing if the writer struck a chord. The scoffers had reconsidered their position.

When Stone finally spoke, he asked a question, ‘What treatment in an emergency is administered by ear?’ (meaning intuitively).

The author states, “I knew the answer from reading his book...I met my father’s gaze and I did not blink. ‘Words of *comfort*.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, his voice altered. ‘Words of *comfort*.’”

Verghese, A. (2009). *Cutting for Stone*. Vintage Books, Random House, Inc. NY, NY

I have thought about this passage many times – but now I would like YOU to think about it. What lessons do you draw from it? And just remember, NOW we don't have to administer comfort "by ear." We have a scientifically based pattern for care that, if practiced, assures no family or patient will experience what is so poignantly described above.

Your thoughts? Oh, and by the way, I highly recommend that YOU read this book too – just for pleasure.