A Nest of Human Connections

Jerry Gentry

I HAVE BEEN A HOSPICE CHAPLAIN FOR FIVE YEARS. One of my first patients, a woman in her fifties, was dying of cancer. I visited her at home a few times, where she spent most days by herself until her husband came home from work. Eventually, she declined to the point that she couldn’t be alone even for that length of time, so there was talk of her moving to a facility, which saddened her.

Once, while we were talking about this imminent move, she waved her arm in a gesture meant to include many items spread around her house and said, “These things are not just things. They mean something to me.” She slowly rose from her chair, took my arm and gingerly walked through two rooms, telling me about some of the “things” in her house, the stories behind them and what they meant to her. One was a painting that someone special had given to her. One was a memento from a vacation to another country. Each one that she pointed out connected her—in some powerful, emotional way—with another person.

It is true that when a tornado or a fire destroys a house many of the “things” in it can be replaced. Even when they are irreplaceable, such as old family photos, the residents often say, “We hate to lose them, but at least we are all safe.” So in a sense, two opposite thoughts are true: When disaster strikes, the material things are not as important as the human beings, but at the same time, certain possessions are quite valuable—because of the emotional meaning attached to them and to the human relationships they represent.

This has become vividly clear to me as I work in hospice, especially when I visit patients in a facility and notice which possessions they, or their families, have chosen to bring into this limited space. I look around the room for things that may become a topic of conversation as I try to bring pastoral comfort. Those “things” often help me guide patients and families as they reflect on the life that is slipping away. Perhaps there are pictures of reunions, weddings and vacations. In Mrs. B’s room, there are paintings that she herself painted. Her daughter put them on the wall to remain connected to her mother’s younger, healthier, creative self. On Mr. M’s wall is a picture of a train that reminds him of his lifelong career. In someone else’s room, I may see a stuffed animal, a trinket from the Smokey Mountains or a handmade quilt. Each has a story behind it, and each story involves people who are special to the patient in the room.

Years ago, my family helped a Vietnamese refugee family resettle in the United States. The family included a young daughter who, after they had moved to Florida, sent us a little doll that looked a little like Minnie Mouse, but—to tell the truth—was a knock-off, a bit tacky and not particularly attractive. Nevertheless, I kept it in a prominent spot on a bookshelf in our living room for years—not because it was anything great to look at but because whenever I saw it, I thought of the daughter’s big smile and her giggly laugh.

Even things that once upset me can become special. In my house there are marks on the wall and scratches in the furniture made by my daughter. Although I’m a little embarrassed to admit it, I
haven’t painted over the marks or sanded down the scratches, and each time I look at them, I fondly recall that my 12-year-old was once a toddler whom I held so lovingly in my arms.

As you walk through your house, sit on your porch or in your car, as you do anything that brings you within eyesight of your “things,” think about the persons who are connected to you because of them. Let the warm glow of that relationship replenish your soul and your spirit, even if it’s only for a few seconds as you gaze upon it or hold it in your hands.

Think of the “things” that you see and touch as reminders that you are special to someone, that there are people in your life who are sources of great love and support and grace. Your little physical place in the world is a nest of human connections. A weak, slow-walking woman dying on hospice taught me to never forget that. 🌟