

## *A Willingness to Listen*

“I wish she would get to the point. I really have a lot to do today. Jim, be patient, you’ll probably be the same way soon enough. Maybe she just needs to have someone who will listen.” So goes many an internal conversation as I find myself watching the clock rather than being present with the one at hand! It is not fair for me to be having this conversation but nonetheless I do! There is comfort though in knowing that family members say they have the same thing going on inside themselves.

The ability of older adults to get to the point is often the origin of jokes. There is no question that as many people age their thought processes “wander.” It sometimes does take them a longer time to get to the point of a specific conversation. However such an observation, when it is generalized, does a disservice to them. The older adult often has a clear sense of clarity when it comes to the bigger issues of their lives. They have often spent a good deal of time sorting through the big issues they have to face. It may take them some time before saying what they mean and want you to hear and understand. And when they do say what the want you to hear and understand, it often gets missed in the flood of other things they have said.

Yesterday I visited a man in the hospital. He has terminal cancer and is seemingly now in the final stages of it. He loves to talk, often wandering from one subject to another. Some conversations with him take effort because one thought often leads to another thought (extraneous to what we were talking about) and that thought leads to even another. Our conversation began in the usual “How are you doing today” kind of a way. Expecting we might be meandering around the issue of his situation, I prepared to spend a good deal of time with him. Much to my surprise he quickly went from the niceties to the situation and the decision he had reached. “Jim, I can’t win this fight with the cancer and I want it to be over. I will not take any further treatment. It is time for me to let go.” His daughter, who agreed with the decision, was visibly relieved to hear him say these words. Any lingering doubt or guilt about her feelings dissipated. The choice would be made! The choice had been made! Not by her or her husband, but by her father who, after all was said and done, had the most at stake in such a momentous decision.

Why the sudden directness, contrary to his usual manner of speaking? I am not completely certain! It turns out that he had spent much time processing the decision. He had reached clarity. This much is certain! Being prepared to stay as long as I had anticipated was not going to be an issue. Upon reflecting when I returned to the office, what seems to have been the issue is that ***I was prepared and willing to stay and listen!*** People know when that is the case and feel safe speaking, knowing they won’t be rushed or judged for what they say or don’t say. They feel more comfortable in raising their inner most thoughts and feelings if they know someone is truly listening.

Everyone was well served by the willingness to listen – no matter how long it takes! So, even when the older adults for whom you care seem to plod along, be patient and attentive! You and they will be blessed in the long run.

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