

## The Truth Does Set Us Free

Some years ago my father-in-law was struggling with terminal illness. My mother-in-law had decreed that no one was to tell him the truth about his condition. She did not want him "to lose hope." My wife and I had a difficult time with that decision and struggled as to how to respond. Did we respect my mother-in-law's decision, or did we, as our hearts told us to do, speak the truth.

As we struggled my father-in-law deteriorated. One morning, while visiting him, he was in a particularly weak condition. He looked sick and he had no energy. I took a chance, decided to skirt the decision that had been made. I wouldn't, I decided, tell him he was terminally ill. But I would open the door for him to talk about it, if he decided to do so.

"George, how are you feeling today? You look terrible!"

Never will I forget the response. He filled with tears, looked me in the eye, and said, "Thank you! I know I look terrible! I know I am quite ill and not going to get better. But I was afraid to say so. I thought it would upset everyone." We spent the rest of that morning talking and listening as George shared his wishes for his last days and his wishes for his funeral. With his permission I waited for my mother-in-law to get home and sent for my wife. When they were both there, I asked George to share his thoughts with them.

His last two months were filled with honest sharing with those he most loved. They shared with him; he shared with them. It was a beautiful time for the relationships to flourish in a new way.

I relearned a lesson that day. It has deeply affected the way I visit with the terminally ill. I still do not tell them "what I know." That is, unless asked by family or doctor to do so. But I do open the door for honesty. I ask questions! How are things going? Is the doctor giving you any new information? Do you want to share what's going on inside of you? Hopefully I do so only if I sense that our relationship allows those kinds of probing questions. And hopefully I ask in such a way that an unwillingness or inability to share at that moment is graciously accepted.

The lesson relearned is that "the truth does set us free." Only when we are able to acknowledge our situation, are we able to open ourselves to the presence of a loving God, who walks with us in every moment of our lives. Only when we are honest can we discover that terminal illness is not necessarily the enemy. The enemy is living as if we have to face it quietly, stoically and alone.

When visiting a terminally ill person, old or young, respect them enough to create an atmosphere of honesty. Respect them enough to allow them to talk about their situation <sup>at</sup> and their own pace and their own comfort level.

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