

For the past two years I have worked as an advocate for allowing seniors to “age in the community”. My belief in this core value had been more intellectual rather than emotional. I could quote research showing “85% of seniors want to age in their own homes.” But I had never been a caregiver for elderly parents or friends, and had limited exposure to nursing homes and other long-term care programs.

For over a year my best friend Bob had been dealing with pancreatic cancer. He retired two years ago after thirty years as pastor of a church in New Hampshire. It became clear that aggressive treatments weren't working and, as he put it, he transitioned from “battling” to “living with” his disease. Bob was receiving in-home hospice care for pain management and had been able to remain active. One early morning in March his wife called, telling me Bob's condition had worsened dramatically and he was on a death watch. I was able to leave immediately and be with him for what turned out to be his last day.

When I arrived Bob was lying in a hospital bed in his living room, semi-comatose due to his pain medication. When I spoke to him he opened his eyes and gave me a big smile. Surrounding him were his wife, her two sisters, and other friends. As the day progressed, a priest arrived and we all joined in a bedside service of reconciliation. It was clear from his reactions that Bob could hear and respond to the service. Later his hospice home health aide arrived to give Bob a bed bath and shave, and check on his condition. Afterwards he explained to us that Bob could hear more than we realized, as he responded to the aide's requests to help turn himself during the bath. The aide also told us Bob might remain in this state for some days, or might pass very quickly.

Later in the afternoon I assumed the watch over Bob while his wife and sisters-in-law napped. As the aide had suggested, I put lotion on his arms and legs to help with dry skin. A hospice nurse arrived to review Bob's medication with his wife who had been administering his pain meds and keeping a log of them. Bob's oldest daughter arrived with his five month old grand-daughter. One of Bob's joys had been to hang on long enough to baptize her in December. That night Bob's wife and her sister slept on couches next to his bed. At one point he woke up, tried to get out of bed and said, “I've got to break out of here.” Sometime around 6 AM he died peacefully.

Bob told me that he had learned that a terminal condition was much harder on family and caregivers than on the sick person. In -home hospice care allowed us to not only to be with Bob at the end but also to help with his care and to provide mutual support to one another. I was very sad to lose my dearest friend. But I was comforted by being able, in a small way, to help him pass away peacefully, with dignity, among people who loved him.