The Mysterious Effect of the Quilt

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All of us have heard that a picture is worth a thousand words, yet the 25 pictures on each of the quilts in our office often evoke awed silence. I want to tell you the story of our quilts.

I learned back in my diploma nursing program that healing must address the body, mind, and spirit. In the 40 years since, I have come to appreciate that people are more than their disease; people can be patients with cancer, but they are not cancer patients. Patients must have excellent medical and nursing care, of course, but they also want to be known as unique individuals.

We opened the doors to a new community radiation oncology office in June 2011. When patients come into the office for radiation, their lives have been changed forever by something they did not choose. We offer care that reflects the concern for the whole person. We do not have a television in the waiting room; the quiet encourages community building and personal interaction. We have journals in which the patients can share their thoughts and a table where patients can work on jigsaw puzzles, which can be relaxing and meditative. Each patient receives a personalized certificate of graduation to mark the completion of radiation treatment and a bell that marks the momentous occasion. All of these interventions have been well received, but something was still missing.

In my work as an inpatient oncology and hospice nurse, I have had the privilege of working with two amazing art therapists. I witnessed the transformation that can occur when people begin to create. Beth was a hospice patient, in a nursing home, and confined to a wheelchair after a stroke. When Beth made a simple picture of herself driving on the sandy beach in a convertible with her hair blowing in the wind, the smile on her face revealed the freedom and liberation she discovered. When Irene, a bed-bound hospice patient with hand contractures, created a simple yet lovely picture of a vase of flowers from crumpled multicolored tissue paper, she experienced the pure joy of self-expression and pride as her visitors raved about her creation. During a team-building retreat for the inpatient oncology unit, each staff member created a small paper square representing something important to them—a family picture, a picture of their pet, their favorite vacation spot, or even a favorite mantra or saying. The art therapist then mounted all the squares onto a display quilt that we hung in the unit. The quilt was a constant reminder to serve our patients. Having seen and been part of this transformative power, I wanted our office to have an art project.

After brainstorming with our office specialist Robin Mehl, herself a master quilter, we gave our patients small fabric squares and fabric pens for them to design their own quilt squares. After a few initial demonstrations, the creative desire became contagious. Many people protested at first that they were not creative, but with a little encouragement, even the most reluctant submitted squares. We purposefully chose 6 inch by 6 inch squares—small enough to be manageable but still significant.

One gentleman named Bob liked the idea so much he submitted three squares, one for each round of his cancer treatment, saying, “This really gets me going!” Bob’s squares are all simple line drawings with sayings like, “If you get boxed in, climb right out and begin again.” On one, a green monster says, “If you happen to get sick, I will give the monster a kick!” The third is a picture of a bald person with an earring that says, “I’m too sexy for my hair, that is why it isn’t there!”

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This square was so popular that it mysteriously disappeared for a while. Another patient’s husband had “borrowed” it before it was quilted to help cheer up his wife who was losing her hair from treatment that week.

One woman embroidered a pink ribbon with “Celebrate Life.” Another copied a beautiful garden from a magazine and included a quote from Martin Luther: “Everything that is done in the world is done with hope.” Several squares express gratitude to the staff for making a difficult experience a little easier. One square has a dove of hope and one of a little doll with yellow pigtails. One square is upside down, a nod to what cancer can do to life.

Another artist encourages those who come after to never let the cancer define you. She writes that, through her journey, she has gained the confidence to really live. A separate square touches on the same theme: “Where there’s life, there’s hope.” We have many squares with butterflies, yet another symbol of hope and transformation. A woman named Joy found meaning as she was reminded daily to lie still for her treatment. On her square she wrote, “Be still and know that I am God.” One square is a beautiful picture of our office orchid taken by a patient who is a photographer. Another square is titled “Half Time,” a thank you that has evolved into a book called Forty2 Days of Radiation vs. the Prostate Driven Life, by David B. Sharing (2012), which began as daily musings.

The children of our patients love to get involved too. It is the beauty of simplicity that touches our hearts as the children offer symbols of encouragement to their relatives. The staff is in awe of the resilience we witness in the face of crisis and uncertainty.

The two quilts currently hang in the office waiting room (a third quilt is on its way) and we watch as patients stand before them and smile. Their smiles grow bigger as they gently sort through the pile of squares waiting to be quilted by Robin. There are no words for the depth of feeling that we witness.

What are the feelings that the quilt evokes? Is it the connectedness of shared suffering? Is there a realization that we are not alone? Do we understand that we are part of a community and that we matter? Do we appreciate the strength of spirit and encouragement that is shared? Do we develop empathy for one another as we share our stories? Is it the humor that takes us out of ourselves? It is a mystery.

Rita J. Boucher, RN, is quoted in Mary Elizabeth O’Brien’s (1999) book, Spirituality in Nursing: Standing on Holy Ground: “Spiritual care may draw on such basic needs as the need to belong, to feel attachment to a person or group, to reach out beyond oneself, to have a meaningful life, and to be creative” (p. 195). Bruce Moon (2008), an art therapist, artist, and teacher, wrote a book titled Introduction to Art Therapy: Faith in the Product that confirms our experience with the quilt. Moon says that healing energy exists in the creative process; that artful expression can tell our stories when words are not enough, that art can enhance coping skills and help us manage stress. And, not to be overlooked, art is fun! Moon says, “There is often a whimsical quality, an infusion of play and imagination and pleasure . . . a quality to art that allows emotion and mystery into the realm of one’s daily life” (p. 145). We have witnessed the power of art time after time with the quilts in our office. Art becomes a manifestation of what my patients often tell me: that although they would not have chosen cancer, they are grateful for the gifts they have received through their journey. They are now awake and fully alive.

Witnessing how patients can accept and even embrace the inevitable suffering of life is inspiring. They discover empowerment in choosing how to respond day by day. Creating helps them to overcome their feelings of hopelessness as they look beyond their circumstances to find their true selves.

We—caregivers, patients, everyone—can witness and celebrate the wonder and resilience of the human spirit, tap into the mystery that is within, and connect with that universal energy. Then, we are no longer victims. We are heroes living fully with courage and trust in the present moment. Our quilts are one example of holistic care for our patients: body, mind, and spirit. We are grateful to journey together in the mystery.

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References

