

The Meaning of Life

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Each person has “the right to be cared for by caring, sensitive, knowledgeable people who will attempt to understand my needs and will be able to gain some satisfaction in helping me face death” (Dying Pt’s Bill of Rights, 2012). I heard this today on our online lecture pertaining to death, dying, and bereavement. This quote inspired me to write my paper this evening on the movie *Wit*, by Mike Nichols.

*Wit* was an excellent movie that evokes a wide array of emotions and causes you to examine your personal thoughts and beliefs on some very sensitive topics. The movie is about Dr. Vivian Bearing, a professor of John Donne poetry at a prestigious university. Professor Bearing is diagnosed with Stage IV metastatic ovarian cancer. She opts for 8 cycles of highly aggressive chemotherapy making sure, “they give me the full dose every time” (Wit, 2001). This movie depicts her battle with cancer, illustrates the 5 stages of grief, examines dying and death, and raises many questions pertaining to end of life care.

One of the major themes in this film pertains to the Five Stages of Death and Dying proposed by Elisabeth Kubler- Ross in 1969. She introduced the concepts of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance for the very first time. There is no fixed sequence in which individuals move through this process and it’s unique to each and every person. Professor Bearing went through this five step sequence while the movie unfolded.

Stage 1 is known as denial; people are in a state of shock which allows them to survive the loss. When Dr. Kelekian is diagnosing Professor Bearing, it’s as if she dazes off for a moment to internally process the concept of her having Stage IV metastatic ovarian cancer. She

also is in denial about not being able to teach the following semester; she states, "That's out of the question" (Wit, 2001). Dr. Kelekian explains that she'll be very ill during the week of active chemo, she'll be worn down the following week, she'll feel okay by the third week, and towards the fourth week she'll have to prepare for her next dose of chemo. Before Professor Bearing signed the informed consent, she took a brief pause and a long sigh as if she was in a bit of disbelief.

Anger is a necessary stage to the healing process and people have to feel and work through their anger. People may question, "Why me?" and even direct their anger towards family, God, or health care providers (Simpson, 2012). Professor Bearing portrayed a sense of anger in several scenes throughout the movie. In one scene, the professor asks one of the nurses something along the lines of how she's doing? The nurse rudely responds with, "good", and continues to speed walk out of the professors' room. After that, the professor looks into the camera and says that all she wanted was a simple hello or how are you today. She became particularly frustrated when people would ask, "How are you feeling today" as she's vomiting her brains out or right after a four hour surgery where most of her female reproductive organs were removed due to her grapefruit sized tumor. There's also one scene towards the end of the movie when she snaps on Susie, her RN, because she doesn't want to go for an ultrasound for a SBO (small bowel obstruction) when the doctor has ordered it in the morning. Most of the professor's anger was subtle or subdued with sarcasm but it was necessary in order for her to sequent through the grieving process.

The third stage of grief is bargaining where people attempt to delay the reality of the impending loss or they bargain to extend life. The scene where Susie confronts Professor Bearing about her code status and being a full code versus being a DNR best depicts the concept



of bargaining. Professor Bearing bargains internally with herself and externally with Susie. First she considers being a full code and having everything possible done to sustain her life. Eventually, she opts to be a DNR because she knows there's not much time left for her and they've pretty much exhausted all of their options. Professor Bearing confessed to Susie that she knew her prognosis was extremely ill-fated from the beginning by "reading through the lines" (Wit, 2001). Despite the professor's lethal diagnosis and extensive chemotherapy treatments with deathly side effects, she had a troubling time accepting the fact that death indeed was near.

Stage four is known as depression; during this time period, the person realizes the full impact of the impending loss. One memorable scene shows Professor Bearing reminiscing about being a scholar when she "had shoes and eyebrows" (Wit, 2001). A few minutes later, she's curled up in the fetal position crying because she's "scared." Professor Bearing displayed the blues and Susie made it perfectly clear that she was there to talk if the professor ever needed it. She was put in reverse isolation for a few days because of severe neutropenia which highlighted her loneliness. Professor Bearing also had no children nor did she have any family or friends visit her while she was hospitalized. Can you imagine being in a hospital, literally on your 'death bed', for over eight months and have not one visitor? Not one family member? Not one friend?

The fifth stage is known as acceptance and is marked by withdrawal and calmness. Professor Bearing comes to terms with the fact that her days are numbered by stating, "This is my last scene... my minute's last point" (Wit, 2001). Towards the end of the film there's a conversation between Susie and Professor Bearing that illustrates acceptance. Professor Bearing is preparing for "it" (death) and she tells Susie that "it" will have a soporific effect. Susie had no idea what soporific meant and Professor Bearing explained that it meant, "What makes you sleepy" (Wit, 2001)? They both started laughing which made me smile; it was as if they both had

reached a sense of peace regarding the events that would take place in the near future. The word soporific is first introduced when Professor Bearing was a child learning to read the book Runaway Bunny with her father by her side. In order for one to come to terms with grief, they have to reach a level of acceptance to move forward. The professor came to accept the fact that she was staring death directly in the eyes.

Professor Bearing was receiving care from an interdisciplinary team. The three main characters included Susie Monahan, Dr. Posner, and Dr. Kelekian. Susie was the professor's RN and her care was quite different from both of the Dr's. Dr. Posner was one of Professor Bearing's former students and Dr. Kelekian was the head doctor managing her care.

Susie was a good nurse in my opinion. She was honest, patient, caring, compassionate, and a great patient advocate. She was truly concerned about the professor and she offered herself to the professor on multiple occasions. When the professor was suffering from neutropenia, Susie offered her apple juice and got her to a bed in the back rather quickly where she comforted her. She attempts to inform the Dr's that she thinks the chemo dose is too high and if they would consider a half dose for the next round due to the professor's signs and symptoms. When Professor Bearing was scared and crying, Susie was there to comfort her with tissues, an orange popsicle, her touch, and most importantly her presence. She also is honest with the professor when talking about her code status and the treatment. She explains that they've done all they can, they've implemented all their resources, and that the treatment isn't progressing anymore. She suggests pain management and begins to explain PCA (patient controlled analgesia) to the professor.



On the other hand, I wasn't impressed by the care rendered by Dr. Posner and Dr. Kelekian. I felt they treated Professor Bearing more like a research test subject as compared to a human being with feelings and dignity. I don't know which doctor's actions offended me more to be quite honest. They used the professor to test their eight cycles of highly aggressive chemotherapy and wanted to keep her viable for as long as possible to yield the greatest amount of information. Dr. Kelekian makes a comment to the professor about thinking of reverse isolation as a vacation; this highly offended her and his manner while saying this was quite rude. He also disregards Susie's request for PCA and instead opts for a morphine drip. In my opinion, Dr. Posner was rude, impersonal, aggressive, and an "A\*\*hole" as one of his fellow female colleagues stated. He also had a disregard for privacy and a horrible bedside manner. When Susie asked if they could reduce the professor's next chemo dose by half strength because of the side effects, he ignores her request and without giving it a second thought, he responds with, "No."

As I mentioned two paragraphs ago, I think Susie was a great nurse who was very empathetic and compassionate. Susie first encountered the professor when Dr. Posner was going to perform the pelvic exam. She confronted Dr. Posner about how he left the professor in the room when he went to search for her (Susie). She stated, "What is this? Why did you leave her like this" (Wit, 2001)? Susie also comforts the professor as Dr. Posner practically runs out of the room after he palpates the tumor during her pelvic exam. Towards the end of the movie, Professor Bearing appears to be unconscious. Susie and Dr. Posner enter the room to assess her and insert a foley to monitor her intake and output as her status is deteriorating. Susie explains the entire process of inserting the foley even though the professor appears unresponsive. Dr. Posner on the other hand makes the comment, "Shouldn't be too long, she's out of it" (Wit,

2001)! One should always remember that hearing is often the last sense to be lost; continue to talk to your patient's and think about what you say before it comes out of your mouth.

Eventually Dr. Posner asks Susie what she learned in nursing school about "the meaning of life garbage." In my opinion, Susie's knowledge about the meaning of life was illustrated throughout the entire movie. She respected her patient, acted as an advocate for her patient, treated the patient holistically, and strived to protect her patient's dignity. Before Susie left the professors room, she picked up the bottle of lotion and massaged her arms and hands which was a simple yet beautiful gesture. On the other hand, Dr. Posner had different views about the meaning of life. He was a researcher and mentioned that the bedside manner portion of medical school was a waste of time. He didn't pay any attention or care about how he interacted with Professor Bearing, his patient. When she was suffering from neutropenia, he went into her room for about 30 seconds to pass orders on to Susie without even looking at the professor. In my opinion he cared more about his research than the human life that was in his hands.

This film has taught me a lot about myself and how to better deal with dying patients. I actually watched this film twice so I could fully grasp all the concepts and themes throughout the movie. I was able to reflect on my personal beliefs regarding dying, death, research, and how I'd handle an ethical dilemma (such as calling a code blue on a DNR patient) if it arose. In order for you to effectively care for your patient's, I feel that you must truly know yourself and examine your own belief system. This movie also reinforced that it's okay to be in touch with your emotions and express them; this will aid you through the stages of the grieving process. My mom went through cancer two years ago and I was envisioning my mom in Professor Bearing's hospital bed. I couldn't imagine my mom going through that or being treated like that, and I feel every patient deserves the same respect and treatment.



Tears started flowing down my cheeks when Vivian's old professor, E.M. Ashford, came to visit her. Throughout the professor's entire hospitalization, this was the first time that anyone had come to see her. Professor Bearing immediately recognized E.M. Ashford's voice. E.M. Ashford laid in the professor's bed and held her in her arms as she read her favorite childhood story, Runaway Bunny. Soon after, Professor Bearing peacefully died; I'm still getting comfortable using the proper terminology of died or dead versus passed away or not here with us anymore. I'm glad we had this assignment; I'm not too fond of essays but this task got me out of my comfort zone and to think quite deeply about various topics. From working in the ER, I've seen many people become "numb to death" and I won't become another one! I vow that my patient's will be my priority and I will strive to do whatever I can to positively impact their lives and that of their families as well. Each of us deserves a proper death with dignity.



## References

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