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Chaplaincy Vignette.

The last week of my internship I found myself on the third floor cancer ward with patients who were surprisingly strong enough and awake enough for a visit. It was Wednesday, and I was doing my rounds when I came to the hospital room of a woman in her mid- sixties who had been struggling with cancer for 3 years. I knocked on the door. "Come in," she said. She was a petite woman with very short grey hair from chemo. Intelligent gray-blue eyes peered behind her stylish gray glasses, and I could sense that she identified as a strong, thinking, self-sufficient person.

I opened the conversation in my usual way, "Hi I'm Sara from the Spiritual Care Department and I was just stopping by to introduce myself and to see how you are doing." I continued, "I understand that you are Jewish, is that still true?" I joked.

She answered, "Yes, but I'm not religious."

"Well, I understand," I said, "After all I'm Jewish too."

I moved a little bit closer to her and asked if she would mind if I sat down for just a moment. She asked me what I was doing at the hospital and I explained that this was an internship that was part of my training to become a rabbi. I then asked her whether she had much support during these tough times. She told me about the many friends and family who helped her and insisted that she felt very healthy and strong. I understood just then how vulnerable she must be feeling at the hospital, and how it simply didn't add up to the image she had of herself as independent, capable and strong. I then asked her whether she had a spiritual practice.

She answered rather curtly, "My friends."

Sensing that her resistance was actually an opening, I asked, "Do you believe in God?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes a bit and waved her hand, "God is irrelevant to me, if God exists he doesn't have much to do with my life." She paused. "I'm sorry I don't want to offend you." "Well," she continued, "I have all kinds of religious people praying for me, nuns, and Christians and Buddhist monks."

Sensing from this comment that she was more open to prayer than she had originally let on I said, "Well I before I go I always like to offer a blessing to patients. Is that something that would interest you?"

Like many others before her who had also professed their indifference to God, she said, "Yes, I would like that."

After washing my hands, I sat down again by her bed and took her hands in mine. I looked at her lovingly and told her that first we would pray together in English, then I would say the

blessing for healing, and that I would then share the priestly blessing with her. I bent my head in prayer and thanked God for the strength and support God had given her. I prayed for the intelligence and guidance of her doctors and nurses, and I asked God to help her to completely heal. I then chanted the Misheberach in Hebrew. She gazed upon me as she received the blessing and began to cry. I finished with the priestly blessing:

May the Lord bless you and keep you  
May God shine God's radiance upon you and grace you with God's presence.  
May God pour God's splendor upon you  
and grant you peace.

Afterward, teary, she apologized for her tears and said, "Thank you so much, I guess God is not so irrelevant to me after all. Thank you."

This summer I have received so much. After giving each blessing, I myself felt so infused with God's radiance and love and the gift of being present when a person's heart opens up to divine love and compassion.