Stay here and keep watch with me, watch and pray, watch and pray. Taize Chant

Vigil defined in the Australian Oxford Dictionary: *keeping awake during the time usually given to sleep esp to keep watch and pray.*

Both the Taize chant and the definition give us clear direction for how to use our time when we keep vigil, especially during the hours of darkness. We vigil for different occasions but in this instance, I am focusing especially on keeping vigil with the sick and dying.

Recently my husband and I had the privilege of keeping vigil, along with his siblings and their families, during his mother’s last week of life. I believe that all who engaged in this process felt blest that they had done so, even those who at first were reluctant. I have kept vigil on quite a few occasions, some with hospital patients I didn’t know and sometimes with members of my own family. As a result of these experiences I have identified some common elements of keeping vigil.

When I refer to prayer I will use Catholic references as that is my standpoint. Anyone keeping vigil can adapt the suggestions to suit the particular religious or spiritual practices of the sick person.

- **Silence** is a very important part of keeping vigil. It is good to take the measure of conversation levels from the sick/dying person. Sick people can tire quickly and some can struggle to tell people who have come to visit to be quiet. As a person keeping vigil, you are in a different role from a visitor – you are there for often long periods of time – and you need to be consciously focused on the other person’s needs.

  This is not to say that there can’t be noise and laughter, but times of silence invite rest and also the opportunity for the sick person to direct the conversation. Sometimes it can be helpful to suggest to the sick person that you will just sit quietly and be a
presence in the room with them. Reading, craft or similar quiet activities can create a connection in ways that words sometimes can’t.

In recent years, scientists have posited that the energy in an atom doesn’t come from the matter contained in the atom but from the space between. In the Christian context, I would name that space the Holy Spirit. So sitting in quiet communion isn’t doing nothing: it is intentionally creating sacred space to allowing the Spirit to be truly present. Depending on the situation and the relationship, it may be good to hold the person’s hand. Touch can be very important and is an unspoken way for us to share our care, love and respect for the person.

Sitting in silence allows us, if we have come from the hurly-burly of life, to enter into the present story of the person we have come to be with. The space between becomes a very tangible means of connection. Silent spaces during vigil also allow us time to reflect on what is rising for us in this particular situation, to sit with our own emotions and concerns.

- **The spoken word.** What we say and talk about will depend on the person we are with and the nature of the relationship. I have found it can be helpful in the case of the dying particularly, if there is more than one keeping vigil, that personal stories concerning the person be shared. It can be good to inquire of the person if the level of conversation is good for them.

Sick and dying persons can often hear very well even though they may not give an indication they are listening. I believe it is important to create as positive an environment as possible as there is still so much we don’t know about how we can affect that space between mentioned above. It can be helpful to encourage the person and support how he/she is handling the situation. If appropriate, it is important to reassure the person of our love and support.

- **Attending to the person’s needs.** It can be confronting for those of us not associated with the medical profession to witness the physical situation of a sick/dying person. Sometimes we will be the frontline in the incidental care of the person: eg. refreshing their mouth, helping them eat etc. If you are unfamiliar with the person’s current physical needs and capabilities, inquire of the staff the appropriate ways you can
assist. Remember to advise the person before you touch them or for example reposition their pillow, that you are going to do it. I believe it is important to show great respect to sick/dying persons as often their dignity can be compromised.

- **Praying with the person.** It is important to respect the faith life of the sick/dying person. It is not for us to impose prayer in this situation. If the person can communicate, ask if he/she would like you to pray with them. If they agree, it is appropriate to ask what they would like to pray for at this time. You may be surprised at the divergence between your assumptions and the person’s needs.

How you then pray is a matter of your own levels of comfort. Some people can easily pray in their own words; others of us find it easy to pray the traditional prayers. My mother-in-law was devoted to the Rosary so it was a regular part of our prayer time with her. Others may wish to hear pieces of Scripture. This can be as simple as repeating some short lines eg: *Jesus told us: Do not be afraid, I am with you.*

*Come to me all you who are burdened and heavily laden and I will give you rest.*

*Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom*

*I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.*

*As the Father has loved me so I love you.*

Most religions have formal prayers appropriate for such times. In our tradition, we have the Sacrament of the Sick (used to be know as Extreme Unction) which is administered by a Priest.

The afternoon before my mother-in-law died, four generations gathered to share memories and pray a Prayer of Farewell.

- **Prayer of the heart.** Sitting in quiet allows time for your own silent prayer for the sick/dying person, for all who are suffering and for yourself. Sometimes putting yourself in the position of the person who is sick will give rise to prayers for healing your own story. One songline I found repeating itself in me was from Psalm 128: *With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.* Prayers of the heart can be wordless, merely an
open, receptive presence full of desiring the best for the ‘other’. I keep coming back to using the space between to communicate gratitude, forgiveness, love, - all the positive energy you can muster.

- **Music.** Music can be helpful depending on the people involved and the situation. I have been at the bedside of dying people and the family have played their favourite CDs; others have sung parts of the songs they remembered the person singing. Sometimes relaxation music can be helpful. Some CDs by Monica Brown *Comfort My People* (particularly the tracks “In Quiet and Trust” and “Let Your Heart Take Comfort”), *Holy Ground, Quiet My Soul* would be appropriate as a way of praying in this circumstance.

- **Communicating with others eg family, staff etc.** It can be helpful to communicate briefly with the attending staff and keep them informed if you notice any significant changes. As other family members arrive, a brief word outside the room to bring them up-to-date can be helpful. Pay attention to the younger generation: it is good to prepare young children sensitively to what they may see and to ease possible fears. Young adults can also need assurance and confident modeling of ways of being in what can be for them a vulnerable position.

**In conclusion**, I am committed to keeping vigil in such circumstances if it is the wish of the sick/dying person because I believe that standing with them during their time of trial is being the presence of God for them at that time. I also believe as God’s creation we are all connected and deserving of respect and care, especially in our times of need. As humans we are relational beings and most of us thrive in a positive, caring environment. Also as a Christian I believe it is our mission to care for the sick and vulnerable., remembering Jesus’ imperative: *Whenever you do this to the least of mine, you do it to me.*

© Carmel Duffy & Emmaus Productions June, 2008