Insights

Trust flying the GPS: Going Home
Ruth McCorkle, PhD, RN, FAAN

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have been dedicated to community-based oncology nursing care my entire career. In the 1970s, I was fortunate to do a postgraduate observational study1 with Dame Cicely Saunders at St Christopher’s Hospice in Great Britain and then to develop an oncology graduate program2,3 with Dr Jeanne Quint Benoliel in Seattle, Washington. As part of these experiences, and through my own psychological and spiritual development, I have been able to guide many patients as they pass from life, as we know it, to death, as we think about it. I provided them “Safe Passage.”4,5 Throughout this process, I became patients’ GPS, their coordinating system in which they trusted to know how to arrive safely on the other shore. As a patient myself now on this side of this journey, however, I recognize that the coordination of care hospice provides a great sense of relief, and thereby, trust evolves. It is the basis of the trust between the nurse and the dying patient that ensures the journey and passage to the next dimension.

I knew I was on the right path 2 weeks ago when my youngest son, John, came into my room at 3 in the morning followed by my father, who had died 20 years earlier. As they came through the door, I raised up and said, “What are you doing here?” Of course, when I woke, the vision vanished, but the image did not. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, my dad had his baseball cap with his sun visor, shirt, and plaid shorts on; dressed like he was going to a baseball game. His presence was so reassuring. It was as if Dad was telling me that, even though this is a new journey, I will arrive safely to wherever this path leads.

In working on this Insights, I went back and watched the movie “E.T.: Extra-Terrestrial,”6 because I remembered how E.T. struggled to call home to let his people know where he was and that he was okay. The next day, John asked me why I wanted to watch it. I told him I wanted to see what the intervention was to get E.T. home. He said so innocently, “Mom, they came and got him.” From this gentle young man, whom I adopted from Paraguay 25 years ago, came the brilliance of the essence of the movie. The people on the other side were just as committed to coming to get E.T. to bring him home as the people on this side were in helping him to get there. The movie also illustrated that maybe it is not death at all, but rather, another dimension of life to which E.T. was transitioning. For me, it was clear that E.T. had made a journey here by accident but found his way back from where he came. Maybe there is more than one dimension—maybe there are several destinations—for each of us to journey through at this stage of our life. These are answers I look forward to uncovering and to the many more questions I have yet to ask.

Since coming to this realization, Dr Saunders came to visit me this week at my bedside. Standing tall in her white coat with a slight smile, her presence comforted me and reminded me of the times I observed her at patients’ bedside at St Christopher’s Hospice. After 11 o’clock at night, she would kneel and pray with patients on the Nuffield Ward. It was a powerful image and brought tremendous peace to patients who experienced her presence. There is no greater gift than someone who visits and is present with you, providing safe passage for your journey.

I see this journey as a new adventure, one I have prepared for over the past few years and months and one that I am looking forward to as preparation for the next phase of my life. Personally, I remember many of the patients and family members for whom I have cared. As I leave my family, friends, and colleagues as I know them, I want to find a way to communicate to them and you that I am okay and that I, too, look forward to helping you with passage from the other side. There is no question in my mind whatsoever that there is more to life than this one dimension we live in. What I am not sure of is its timing. For me, the time I have been given has been such a wonderful gift to focus on those things that are important to me, to set my priorities and have time for my children and granddaughter. I am so grateful to the number of family and friends who have come to visit and reminisce and talk about this process with them and to get their insight. I am also grateful to Pamela Hinds, our editor of this journal, for the opportunity she has given me to share this and other writings with you. I will continue to work on some additional insights as I enjoy my continued preparation for my journey ahead, trusting in my GPS hospice team. I hope that, in the next dimension, they recognize who and what nursing is, for once a nurse, always a nurse.

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References


