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The final journey: Understanding dying

by Robert Callahan | Jackson County Chronicle

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She does not mean to be flippant, but when Maggie Callanan says she and death "work hand in hand" it's the truth.

Callanan, a hospice nurse for more than 25 years, spoke to a captive audience Friday morning at the Holiday Inn Express in Black River Falls, presenting what she called a "crash course on dying."

Among those in attendance were several employees of Black River Memorial Hospice.

Ellen Ness, Black River Memorial Hospice Manager, said Callanan's presentation was a timely one, citing the recent passing of colleagues at Black River Memorial Hospital.

"We are all kind of grieving," Ness said. "I wanted something that would help our staff."

"I am a hospice nurse, simple as that," Callanan said during an introduction.

Callanan was named the Hospice Clinician of the Year in 1995 and received the National Hospice Organization's Heart of Hospice award.

In February 1997, *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness Needs and Communication of the Dying*, hit the shelves in bookstores across the country. The book, written by Callanan and colleague Patricia Kelly, has sold more than half a million copies.

At the moment, Callanan is putting the finishing touches on *Final Journeys*, which is due to be released March 25.

Callanan discussed the phenomenon of dying rapidly and dying slowly during her presentation. Callanan first touched on the phenomenon known as near death experiences, or dying rapidly.

Leaving the physical body, seeing a brilliant light, relief from pain and experiencing a life review are among the characteristics of a near death experience, Callanan explained.

Callanan said a life experience can be a lesson in the old saying, "you reap what you sow."

"If you have been mean while you are here, you feel that pain," she said.

Callanan once asked a survivor of a near death experience to put the experience into words.

"Our language is finite, limited," Callanan recalled the survivor answering. "The experience is infinite."

Callanan explained a return to society following a near death experience can be difficult.

Those who survive near death experiences may develop new allergies, become sensitive to light and become less materialistic.

"This is a life changing experience," Callanan said.

When responding to an individual who has survived a near death experience, Callanan indicated it is essential to listen, have patience and be non-judgmental.

Callanan also discussed the phenomenon of nearing death awareness, or dying slowly.

Callanan recalled a time when a hospice patient became very worried about her car, while a patient of Kelly's worried about "getting to the airport."

"This is sounding important," Callanan recalled thinking.

Much research and many more similar experiences led Callanan and Kelly to write *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness Needs and Communication of the Dying*.

"I just absolutely did not get any of it," Callanan said of her first interactions with patients experiencing near death awareness.

Callanan noted nearing death awareness occurs in patients who are dying more slowly.

Defined, nearing death awareness is "an expanded awareness often developed as death approaches, having distinct parallels to near death experiences, but occurs without earning or disruption of vital signs."

Recurring themes of near death awareness are:

- The individual is in the presence of someone not alive
- The individual is preparing for travel or change
- The individual is seeing a different place

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- The individual knows when death will occur

Callanan said patients who experience near death awareness often communicate in subtle ways.

"They say things in sort of hidden ways," she said. "Patients tell us what they want."

While many label near death awareness as "confusion," nothing could be farther from the truth, Callanan feels.

Callanan explained many patients experiencing near death awareness have asked for reconciliation, whether it be personal reconciliation, moral reconciliation or religious reconciliation.

"Listen, listen, listen," Callanan said of the stories that dying individuals tell.

Callanan explained that her patients have been her greatest teachers throughout the years.

"I expect you to go forward and gather from your teachers," she told the audience, which included Charla Schapfel.

"I enjoyed (the presentation) very much," Schapfel said. "Having read the book I recalled many of the stories. To hear her tell them is even better than reading."

Callanan has spoken to audiences internationally and in all but four states in the nation.

When not writing, Callanan has taken part in as many as 30 speaking engagements a year.

Having written two books and traveled the world, Callanan hopes to soon get back to her roots: nursing.

"I am now missing patient care," she said. "That is the fuel for my engine."

Callanan hopes that through hearing her experiences people might change their perception of death.

"Death does not have to be a painful, powerless thing. There are many choices that people do not understand," she said. "It is imperative you put yourself in the hands of the experts. In my opinion, that's hospice."

Callanan also urges individuals to talk with their families regarding their wishes.

"There is a lot people can do," she said. "You can't soar and write the last great chapter of your life when you are rooted in physical agony."

There was no cost to attend Callahan's presentation thanks to a generous donation by Milt and Lydia Lunda.

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