

From the pulpit

A hand before the eyes can obscure a mountain

Rev. Fr. Thomas Johnson-Medland

I have looked back over my shoulder a thousand times to the ricocheting sounds of ice breaking and frozen tree limbs tapping as the wind forces her way through the woods along the Delaware River. Whenever I look back, all that is behind me speaks to me about who I am, where I have been, and what I have done. History is rich in nutrients and fiber.

I have also looked up to see the black depth of space peppered with silver blue balls of gas that shimmer and swirl with color and life. I find it hard to believe that those small, distant lights are worlds separate unto themselves. Mystery is rich in awe.

Yet I cannot grasp the totality

of existence all at once. I must choose a focus, and determine how doggedly I will stay with that choice. For that choice will change the vantage points from which I look over my shoulder or up at the sky.

The Talmud teaches that the greatest of mountains can be obscured from sight by the smallest of hands placed in front of the eyes. I first read these words 30 years ago in a collection of Talmudic wisdom. These words have never left me; in fact, they have been accentuated by my proximity to death during my career in hospice.

Small things, minuscule things can hide the most majestic sights. What we focus on is important. Do we see the hand or the mountain? Some of the things we choose to focus on in life may seem impressive, but they are merely gnats, pestering us, keeping us from

noticing the vista that would inspire awe and bring us to tears.

Hands in front of mountains. Do we look at our hand, or do we escape the confines of the immediate and view the mountain off in the distance? When I look over my shoulder to see the place from which the wind has come to crack the ice and rattle the trees, I forfeit my chance to see the bridge ahead of me. Straining to catch sight of a shooting star in the vast darkness above, I neglect the pebble at my boot. Loss and gain. This for that. I must choose what to focus on. And in so doing, I alter the meaning of my life.

Somehow, this is both awesome and comforting. We cannot have it all; we must select a focus. The selections we make are tied up with the history and mystery we are always tromping around in. Who we are is wrapped up in

where we have been and which choices we have made.

This morning I was walking along the Delaware River—the divide between Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Eight hours later I am in the chapel of a Franciscan Retreat house in Scottsdale, Arizona.

*T*ime is valuable to dying patients," she told me.
"If you say one minute, mean one minute."

I must choose again where to focus. I am in Scottsdale to spend time with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the guru of death and dying. (If she heard me call her that, she would kick me hard in the backside.) Having been friends for only six years, and always at a distance, should I wonder why this great teacher, whose health is failing, has asked me to come see her? Or should I hear the call of one person to another, one caregiver to another, for the kind of support we cannot attract, or find within our hearts to accept from others?

Elizabeth and I discussed the nature of errant spiritual (and sometimes psychosocial) care; the errors in care that occur when therapeutic workers forget the most important part of the job: *listening*. Elizabeth linked listening to another important skill: *sticking to your word*. Listening and honestly communicating both open an integrity that is central to two people truly being with each other.

When we provide care, or when we are simply with people, we tend to get into our own little

worlds. We are looking for what we want to find, or are trying to find a way to say what it is we want to say. We need to spend more time hearing anew what people say—they may be saying different things than we are hearing.

Sticking to your word is, in a deeper sense, a call toward

remaining faithful to what we tell people. This skill, like listening, revolves around focus. We owe it to our patients—to those we are community with—to focus on what they say. We also owe it to them to focus on what we say . . . and to follow through.

Elizabeth made this clear. She asked me to poach an egg for her—a task she said she had repeatedly tried to teach to interns. "Only one has gotten it right," she said. I headed to the kitchen, feeling a little pressure. I said, "I'll be back in 10 minutes."

Twenty-five minutes later I came back into the room. Elizabeth scolded me for not being back on time. "Time is valuable to dying patients. If you say one minute, *mean* one minute. If you say 10, *mean* 10."

She was right and I knew it. It hit me hard, though. Not just because I had misrepresented myself to Elizabeth, but also because, in the midst of a care-related issue, I was able to feel the gravity of time and its importance to the dying. *Time is precious*.

We joked about me being a clergyman. In announcing my

arrival, her aide had told her, "Your friend the clergyman is here." Elizabeth told her she didn't have any friends who were clergymen. When she heard my voice, she told her aide, "That's Tom, let him in."

Several times she has said to me that she can smell clergymen. "They are all OCD, and I can smell them a mile away." I told her that I agreed with her about the OCD thing, but that she had missed my scent.

We reminisced about the first conversations we had ever shared, about how to best provide therapeutic spiritual support for patients and how to help pastors learn to listen. Back then, Elizabeth had been very direct and very clear. Years later, she had not changed. I reminded her that her advice for me back then for the other clergy was to "scare the hell out of them. Get them to put down their prayer books and listen to what the dying are telling them."

She asked about my prayer beads. Prayer ropes are a part of traditional Orthodox spirituality and I am in the Orthodox priesthood. We pray the Jesus Prayer (a short devotional prayer) on each of the knots tied into the rope as they pass through our fingers. My beads, which I had picked them up at a Buddhist temple, were a pleasant switch from the usual knots. Elizabeth asked if she could wear them. I *had* to give them to her; they looked perfect on her. At that moment I had a sense of deep joy and resignation. She has done so much, had so many wonderful moments. This is the force behind her drive.

My visit was not only about being with a friend who wanted

to discuss some spiritual issues, reminisce over some work we share, and laugh at some good stories. It was about learning how to value where we have been and what has passed through our lives. A look at meaning and response.

Elizabeth had been trying for years to get me to read Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Every year she would

recently published articles. I knew that Elizabeth was unable to hold them and focus long enough to get through them all. I asked her if she would like me to read them to her. I will never forget her smile as she listened to me read them. It was such a "meaning-full" event for me to read these words to the teacher who had taught me how to think, feel, and listen in new ways.

did, she gave me a swift kick in the backside. "There, it is finished. Take me outside for a cigarette." And that is what we did.

My time with Elizabeth was another reminder that the choices we make affect the way we weave the tapestry of our lives. Everything is connected. All of it makes up the meaning of our lives. The choices we make determine what comes next. Where we look matters. Friends matter. Listening matters. Following through with what we say matters. Trust matters. Feathers matter.

As I was waiting for my van back to the airport, the wind blew from behind, from over my shoulder. When I turned to acknowledge the presence of that breeze—of that something from my past—what blew in was the serenity that this had been what I was meant to do.

I was glad I had come to be with a friend. I was doing what I am here on earth to do. This one choice was about all my choices. This trip had meaning, and that meaning was connected to *my* meaning.

I will always be about the task of caring for those close to the veil. Somehow, death and dying is what I am here to work with. Living in the midst of the dying is my call . . . my vocation. Sharing stories with anyone who cares to offer, who cares to listen, is what is most important. I am here to listen. I am here to tell tales. I am here to be friend and community for those around me.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Lighthouse Hospice for making his trip to Arizona happen, and Hospice Pharmacia, the company that Lighthouse works with for its patients' medications and for pharmacological education.

There is a drive in all of us to seek happiness and meaning. We are . . . most happy when we feel we have been "meaning-full."

ask if I had read it. Although I had always wanted to, I had never gotten around to it. So the one thing I had to do before going to see her was to read the book. The day she told me I had better come soon, I finally bought it. By the time I had finished my arrangements for the trip, I had finished the book. Thank God. Elizabeth was right in all she said about helping people hear the meaning in their own lives. She was right about *listening*. Meaning is most important.

There is a drive in all of us to seek happiness and meaning. We are most stable when we are able to recognize our meaning; we are most happy when we feel we have been "meaning-full."

We spent time talking about rabbits, pets, and wild animals. She asked me to find her a hawk feather. She loves feathers and misses being able to find them for herself. I was able to find her one and sent it to her for Valentine's Day this past February.

I had brought some of my

It was deeply healing for both of us to share what I had learned—from her. My words reflected my process, a process that Elizabeth has been a part of, and sharing what I had learned from her was an acknowledgment that friendship is a circle. When I finished reading my articles, I asked if she thought I "got it." She said, "Yes, Tom, you do."

I told her there were thousands of us now: many, many workers in hospice and other professions who understood the work that she had begun. I told her that we would carry on in this same vein. I asked her to trust us to do the *great work* that she has begun and to give us her blessing, so she could do what she needs to do—which she now says is "to get out of here."

She began sprinkling me with imaginary fairy dust, or holy water, saying, "Mazel tov." I thanked her for all she has done for us—for me. She told me she was not done with the blessing, to "turn around." And, when I