

Quiet Oaks: Mixed Emotions and Mustard Seeds

By Bob Filipczak, spouse of former resident and current volunteer

A neighbor contacted me to let me know her father had just been admitted to Quiet Oaks. She knew I had a lot of history with the place after years of volunteering and spending my last days with my wife, Amy, there. I was immediately sad for her and her family, knowing that it meant it was time to say goodbye to a loved one, but also glad because I knew she and her father and her whole family would be taken care of. The nurses, the staff, the cooks (like me), the volunteers, the gardens, the very boards of the building seem to conspire to lift up people who are facing the end. Quiet Oaks provides care at a level that both exceeds and transcends typical end-of-life care. It sounds boastful, and maybe it is, but I'm proud to be a part of it.

It's that jumble of mixed emotions that I want to talk about, because at first glance you might say "how can you be glad that someone is in hospice?" It's both. It is, as they say, complicated.

At the emotional level, the barrage of feelings that hit you when you admit your loved one to Quiet Oaks is intimidating. You've got profound sadness on multiple levels, relief, trauma, fear, love, confusion, frustration, strength, resilience, courage, foreboding, waiting and the lost feeling you get when you don't know what to do next.

Truth is, you've done it. You've done "what comes next" by bringing your father, mother, spouse, child, uncle, aunt, dear friend, etc. into Quiet Oaks. Now you must wait, which can be one of the more difficult tasks you've ever faced. The alchemy that happens when all of the emotions catalyze in your heart creates a new thing, something we do not experience often in our busy lives, a thing that catches us off-guard. It's called healing.

Healing is a continuum, a timeline with no end, a journey if you will forgive the cliché. To my mind, healing is a spiritual awakening. Deep grief often walks hand-in-hand with healing, though it's hard to see that at the beginning.

At Quiet Oaks, we see the beginning of that healing, day after day, admission after admission, even when the family does not see it. When I'm at the kitchen sink, and a nurse walks by to interrupt the family in the middle of dinner, I know what's happening. I can feel it in my bones. He or she is going to tell them that their beloved has passed. It's in the way the nurse walks, in the very spaces between their steps. I've seen it time and time again.

Then I bow my head in reverence. I know that what I'm witnessing is holy, sacred and profound. I don't think that's an exaggeration.

The spiritual gift of healing is like the proverbial mustard seed. It's tiny. It's likely to get lost, temporarily, in all the emotions that flow through you and your family as you enter the hospice experience. But it's there, after you are exhausted from everything else you have gone through, it's there. In the silence, in the stillness, it finds a place to root itself. In the cracks in your broken heart, it finds a bit of room in which to grow.

Healing is this gift we don't really tell you about, and maybe we can't explain it until you start to experience it yourself—maybe months later. It can't be explained in a brochure. But I have seen it, as has everyone who has spent more than a little time at Quiet Oaks. The passing of a loved one is a deeply spiritual, intimate experience, and what it leaves behind is that mustard seed of healing. And healing will change you, and, if you let it, it can alter the trajectory of your life.

And so, in my heart, I celebrate when people enter Quiet Oaks, as contrary as that may seem. I know that if I look hard enough, I will see the beginning of something truly wondrous. In those moments, I am privileged to witness the minute beginnings of healing in their lives.

When I tell people I volunteer at hospice, I often hear "Wow, how can you do that? It must be so hard." I want to reply, "how can I look away?" How do I explain that what I see—what we all see—is a spiritual awakening as healing takes root in the lives of the people that come through Quiet Oaks.

BECAUSE OF YOU - THE FUTURE OF QUIET OAKS IS STRONG.

