

## Dancing

*By Sheila Johnson*

Earning my Masters of Divinity required a weekly working schedule of fifteen unpaid hours for a period of one year. I visited patients, comforted their loved ones, and periodically encouraged the medical staff. I was blessed to have a supervisor who assigned me to every department in the hospital, thus giving me a more diverse and rounded pastoral vision. I experienced families and patients in the cardiac, psychiatric, neo-natal, trauma, cancer, orthopedic, intensive care, and emergency room units.

This I know: The hip bone is truly connected to the back bone, which is connected to the neck bone, which is connected to the head bone, and the Spirit of Life and Death is connected to every bone in our body. The Negro spiritual, “Dem Bones,” composed and sung by the Delta Rhythm Boys, gets it right. It’s a universal metaphor for who we are as humans.

On my visits, there are times when the patient requests a chaplain and the family is upset by their demand. And there are other times when this scenario is reversed—the patient wants nothing to do with a chaplain. Sometimes the nursing staff requests a chaplain to come in because they simply don’t know what to do with their patients who are close to the end of life. It’s common for us to receive spiritual questions from atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Jews, Latter Day Saints, Catholics, Southern Baptists, Methodists, and many other religious sects and denominations.

This I Know: Regardless of creed, color, sexual orientation, gender, or background, we are all scheduled to have our dance with life and death.

Yesterday, an elderly woman, with one of the sweetest spirits I’ve ever met, sat watching and waiting for her daughter to cross over to the other side. She seemed to be at peace with the situation as her daughter had suffered for so many years in and out of the hospital. Her daughter had ovarian cancer, and had defied every pronouncement of death by her doctors for eight years beyond her diagnosis. Very gently, and almost whispering, the elder said, “As hard as living can be, dying can be even harder. I watched her enter into this world, now I have to watch her leave. She danced through every situation with joy until the cancer took over. Now she is dancing with death, and the dance is almost over.”

On the other side of the bed sat the patient’s daughter who had never experienced the death of a loved one. Sobbing and giving the nurses a hard time, her spirit was filled with hurt, anger, and sorrow—natural components of grief. She didn’t want to understand death, she just wanted her mother to live. Her grandmother, who had experienced so many dances with life and death tried to console her and reminded her of the beauty of her mother’s life.

This I Know: We may not know the day or the hour, but we will all have our dance with life and death.