

*“Love doesn’t die with death. Love is like liquid; when it pours out it seeps into others’ lives. Love changes form and shape. Love gets into everything. Death doesn’t conquer all; love does. Love wins every single time. Love wins by lasting through death. Love wins by loving more, loving again, loving without fear.” ~Kate O’Neill*

I am a health care worker.

I provide occupational therapy to patients in a hospital setting. I saw two heartbreaking and beautiful stories unfolding, quite by accident.

The world was one year into the pandemic. My life at home and work had been forever changed. One day at work, I received a phone call from my daughter. I quickly moved to a respite area at the end of the hall of the hospital’s third floor. We conversed for a few minutes as I stood at the big wall of windows. Suddenly, I looked outside. On the ground level I saw nurses moving a patient on life support through the doors. I was puzzled by what might be happening.

Was the patient going to be transported by helicopter to another facility?

Was the patient requesting a last wish to feel the fresh air on his face?

The nurses were in full personal protective equipment consistent with the patient having Covid-19. Soon after the patient was settled on the concrete pathway, non medical people started to file out. They were also in full isolation gear but their role was different. They came close to the bed, closing their eyes.

Tears escaped and rolled down their cheeks.

Gasps, whimpers, moans, heartbreak were all present.

Big sighs, last conversation, whispered prayers left their lips.

*“Love is like liquid; when it pours out it seeps into others’ lives. Love changes form and shape. Love gets into everything.”*

The patient lay motionless, but possibly aware.

When the time came for the tubes to be removed, the machine giving ventilation powered down. A last earthly breath was taken. The visitors turned their backs. The medical team swiftly and adeptly erased all signs of mechanical intervention and led the family back to the patient. Final goodbyes were granted to those who were not allowed inside the hospital walls during the pandemic. The hospital staff lovingly provided space for the tremendous grief and an intimate transition. They hugged and didn’t rush.

*“Love doesn’t die with death.”*

This was the first loss I witnessed from above. I wasn’t invited. I gulped on inhalation and heaved out the pain that sat tight inside my chest. I vowed right there that my fellow hospital staff were my heroes.

Two weeks later, I received a phone call and again stepped into a respite room for caregivers so I could remove my mask. The second time was similar and I quickly understood what was happening. I saw a large group of Native Americans of all ages approaching on the same concrete pathway outside the intensive care unit. Moments later, the doors opened. Another Covid-19 patient was wheeled out on his hospital bed. The visitors circled the body. Someone was holding a long wooden stick. I saw the mouths of others chanting and singing. They had their rituals for the dying. They were remembering and echoing in a language I didn’t recognize. But the sentiment was universal sorrow.

*“Death doesn’t conquer all; love does.”*

Walking away from that window, I felt the dizziness of melancholy. I felt a hollowness in my gut. My legs wobbled. My throat felt constricted. The weight

of the year of treating patients with active Covid-19 or rehabilitating post illness brought numbness.

And suffering. And anger. And fear.

I didn't have compassion fatigue. I had the opposite. I felt it all. I embodied the isolation, the heartbreak, the helplessness.

I looked in the eyes of my coworkers and the eyes of the patients. I saw it all. I recognized the anguish, harrow, and desolation.

I heard it all. There were confessions of regret, disbelief, panic and despair.

Despite the collective grief, I felt overwhelming love. Beneath every tragic story, ending, and case count were acts of tremendous displays of tenderness. Accidentally witnessing loss of life prompted a flood of recognition that my team of professionals was not failing.

There were countless acts of bravery on every floor of the building. Staff soldiering on in the midst of tremendous risk and exposure. The selfless sacrifice of putting patients' needs in front of their own. Often in front of their families at home.

There were heroics that went unnoticed but impacted survival. Long, grueling hours with little time for self care or even bathroom privileges.

There was perseverance to not lose hope. The "we're all in it together" phrase used by so many in our country rang true. We lifted each other up. We commiserated. We rejoiced. And often, we cried. We loved.

*"Love wins every single time. Love wins by lasting through death. Love wins by loving more, loving again, loving without fear."*