

### **Bertha's story**

Bertha was past ninety and still walked to church. She broke a hip and without a living will underwent surgery. During the surgery she went into cardiac arrest and the son was asked what to do? He was unprepared and opted for resuscitation. Five months later and two more resuscitations later, Bertha. asked me, "Reverend, why won't God take me?" I replied, "Bertha, he has tried three times." She said, "you know I am not afraid to die!" I knew that and the son and I approached the ethics and morals committee of the hospital about removal from life support systems. After two tries in which the psychiatrist was with her when the ventilator was slowly removed we were called in for a consultation. The psychiatrist pointed out that she was afraid to die. I asked him how he knew that. He said, "Because when the ventilator was slowed down, she felt anxious." I asked him if he had ever felt anxious when he was underwater too long. He said, "yes." I said that that was what it is like to have your oxygen shut down. I asked him, "Did you ever hold her hand, calm her down, tell her to breathe deeply and say that you would be with her through those moments." He said that they were not allowed to do that in a hospital. I asked, "Why not? The anxiety over loss of oxygen is not the same as fear of death." The nun who chaired the meeting then said, "Rev. Cushing, around here life is sacred." To which I replied, "I'm sorry but around here, breathe is sacred, not life. You seem to have the two confused." We left the meeting and God finally got the last word in about 3 days later.

### **My own father's story**

My father had a stroke and spent six years recovering and resuming most of his life functions. He vowed that he hoped the next stroke would take him because he never wanted to go through that again. Now he spent those intervening years working in Hospice as a chaplain. When it was discovered that he had carotid artery blockage, 80% one side and 90% on the other as well as blocked arteries in the heart a very risky surgery was proposed. I told him he didn't need to do the surgery on my account and that it seemed he was getting his wish by design. Not being present when the final decision was made, they opted for a heart procedure, hoping it would not cause a stroke since it was just angio-plasty. Before the surgery I called and asked my father if he had a living will and a health proxy appointed. He said, "We have signed so many papers, I don't know what we signed." Now this is a man who was a minister for 40 years and worked in hospice. My stepmother got on the phone because Dad started to get upset. I asked her who was the health proxy and she said that my brother and sister would be there. I made the comment that it wasn't a committee decision and what did Dad want done? She said she knew he didn't want any machines to keep him alive. I asked if that was written someplace. She said she knew it and it didn't need to be written. She then hung up and to make a long story short, when he came out of surgery the nurse asked what was to be done when the family was not present. My

stepmother again said, he didn't want machines. She was asked to sign a DNR. She refused to do it and while they were at lunch my Dad had a stroke. He was on the machines for over 5 weeks before he died. My family still has not forgiven me for asking those questions before his surgery.

Anonymously submitted