

Lives Embraced Through Memories

The Window Watcher

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As an oncology clinical nurse specialist, I have the opportunity to meet patients in a variety of unique settings, including hospitals, extended care facilities, homes, apartments, and our inpatient hospice unit.

Miracles are unexpected joys, springing coincidences, unexplainable experiences, and astonishing beauties. Absolutely anything that happens in the course of my day, except that at this moment, I'm able to recognize its special value.

This quote from Knowlton (1990, "October 7") best describes the gifts and lessons we receive from our patients each day. It is in the setting of a patient's home that I have the greatest privilege—seeing patients in their own special life. It was in this unique setting that I met Jillian.

Jillian was a 32-year-old patient with end-stage cervical cancer who had been treated surgically and had an ileoconduit and colostomy. Jillian no longer responded to multiple chemotherapy regimens and was experiencing increased abdominal pain from extensive pelvic and spinal metastasis, bilateral leg edema, and a draining vaginal fistula. Jillian resided in a housing project. Her former job was listed as "street walker" or, in other words, a prostitute.

I was overwhelmed by three things when I first met Jillian: the starkness of her apartment, the overwhelming odor of Jillian's extensive draining pelvic wound, and, most strikingly, Jillian's violet blue eyes and magnificent smile which dominated her ever so cachetic face. I also was intrigued by the large, unshaded, undraped window that dominated the room and asked her if the vastness and light disturbed her. Jillian said, "The window is my life! Through that window, I see all of the street, the people, and feel the world around me and manage to survive."

Jillian introduced me to the window and its characters. Each person on the street had a name; she knew their routine, what they wore, and where they went. She knew when they got new suits or coats. She knew all the small animals, squirrels (like one she named Nutterbutter), the blue jay, robins, and pigeons. She knew the trees, their leaves, and how they changed. From books borrowed, she became a wizard of the environment. She knew all the businesses in the area and who ran them. Her family was all around her.

It was at this time that I began to call her "the window watcher," and soon started bringing the world to her: pine cones, leaves, bird feathers, small stones, cups of snow, and even a Mason jar filled with rainwater from the street. At each visit, we talked of life and what it meant to each of us. Filled with pain, but ever so eager to talk, Jillian struggled to remain at the window until it was time to leave. Jillian gave

me a gift that can not be purchased in any store nor wrapped in a package. She gave me the gift of "presence in the moment."

Thank goodness I have walked in circles long enough to wear the soles of my shoes so that the diamonds on which I stand can now get my attention (Knowlton, 1990, "October 7").

It really is what is right next door that matters. Thank you, Jillian.

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Reference

Knowlton, J. (1990). October 7. In A.W. Schaeff (Ed.), *Women who do too much*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

The Window Watcher

The window watcher watches her wonder world below
The window world from which she forever waits
Her horizontal throne the deathbed near a small window pane.

She views her kingdom below with new eyes
Former walker of the streets she sees her customers with intrigue
Her past view of the world has been through eyeglasses of deceit.

Her kingdom spans city blocks and miles of seasonal delights
Figures moving, working and whispering unheard sounds
She sees them now as she has not before.

Seasons become her view, season viewing consumes her life
Winter winds lick the panes, snowflakes dance to a Christmas tune
Spring flowers, and green grass and signs of life.

Summer sounds, laughter, children biking, hot dog carts, crisp flags snapping to a breeze
Fall leaves rustle, pumpkins about, trick or treaters and candy-filled bags
And winter comes back around and comes back around.

The window watcher watches no more
The window now empty, a faded vision remains
The window watcher watches though her new window from above.

—Mary Murphy, dedicated to Jillian