
In the dark times, every one of us
needs to be reassured.

One-to-One

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I'm part of the supportive care program at St. Vincent's Hospital here in New York City. It's a kind of buddy system created by Sister Patrice Murphy to make sure people with AIDS get the help and care they need outside the hospital. I volunteered for the program through my church.

One of my first assignments was Jay. The term bothered me. Was Jay my assignment? My patient? My client? In reality Jay became my friend. I met him while he was in St. Vincent's with AIDS-related pneumonia. After he got out, we'd get together several times a week to talk or go to a movie, eat pizza, watch television.

Sometimes I'd help him cook or straighten out his insurance paperwork, even balance his checkbook. We went to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade together. I always kept in mind why Sister Patrice founded the program: to comfort people with AIDS and reassure them that they did not have to face this tragic disease alone.

But there were bad days. I remember one. Jay heard that Barry, a friend he'd known since their boyhood together in Nebraska, had just been hospitalized with AIDS. We were walking through Central Park on our way to visit him. The news had made Jay uncharacteristically bitter about his own prognosis. He was so down that I began to feel depressed too. What had I got myself into? Was there really anything I could say or do to truly comfort Jay—or anyone, for that matter, who was dying of this terrible disease? It seemed futile.

“What made me think *I* was any

different?" Jay asked as we walked. "What made me think *I* would keep going when all the others are dying?" I was silent.

"I'm just another statistic, that's all," Jay blurted out as we reached the old stone steps that led out of the park. "Another squiggle on a chart." We started up the steps.

"You're wrong, Jay," I finally said.

Jay snorted derisively. "At least let me be a statistic, Joe. At least that."

"You're *more* than that," I shot back. "You are a person and God knows exactly who you are. He knows your name is Jay and that you live on Perry Street, that you like Chinese food and chess..."

Again Jay snorted and started taking the steps two at a time. I caught up with him at the top. "We're individuals, Jay, not statistics. God loves us, one-to-one. He loves all of us as we are, each of us—"

Frustrated, I stopped. Preaching was one thing I told myself I'd *never* do with my "assignments."

Jay stayed quiet and I suspected from the forward hunch of his shoulders as we hurried along Fifty-ninth Street that I'd annoyed him with my outburst. I said a quick silent prayer that somehow God would make up for my lack.

In his hospital room Barry was propped up in bed, two pillows wedged under his head, an IV needle in his arm, a plastic bag of clear fluid emptying slowly, drip by drip, down the tube into the vein in his wrist. His lunch tray lay on a bedside table, the lasagna barely touched, the salad wilted, the chocolate pudding mostly gone.

We made small talk and it felt forced. Jay's mood was somber. He seemed to be deep inside himself. I stepped back from the two old friends. After my "sermon" in the park I already felt I'd intruded enough.

"The night nurse," Barry finally said with a wry smile, "claims I have the most cooperative veins in the

unit." He nodded at the IV. "How's that for distinction?"

A pause filled the room. I gazed at the fluid dripping from the bag. Then Barry spoke quietly. "What am I talking about? Distinction. I'm just another sick person who's never going to get better and die alone, just another number..."

For a moment Barry's words hung in the air. I watched Jay. He wanted to say something. I could see he was feeling his friend's pain and isolation.

"Let me tell you something, Barry," he said, his voice lifting. "You're not alone. Do you know why? Because God is with you. And God knows your name. He knows you like chocolate, and that you're sick. God loves you, Barry, one-to-one." Then Jay turned to me. "Isn't that right, Joe?"

I was about to answer when I saw a flicker in Barry's eyes, a flicker that told me that, like Jay, this was something he'd known all along. "Go on, Jay," he said, "I'm listening." ◀