

Jack

How a man of few words told his unique story of stepping through the mysterious veil.
by Nancy

Most people like a good ghost story, not too scary but with mystery that unfolds in twists and turns. I'm just as curious about death as you are. It's one of the reasons I never become tired of my work. You may think that, as a hospice nurse, I have the inside story about what is happening when someone dies. Most of the time the patient can't tell us much over the last seven days when a lot of the changes are taking place. They begin to retreat as the veil between our reality and their death draws near. But a few stay conscious right up to that crossing over, and that's when tales of the other side can reveal themselves.

We know physiologically what is happening to the blood chemistries and the drop in the oxygen level. But what is really going on inside the mind? What is happening to their consciousness? None of us will ever know until it's our turn--unless the science of consciousness takes a mighty step in the future.

Jack gave me a feeling of comfort about what might be ahead for all of us. I love his story, as I loved Jack.

Jack was admitted to my hospice caseload about ten years ago with a diagnosis of colon cancer. Remarkably, I still remember so many intimate details of my experience with Jack and his wife, Evelyn, that it feels like yesterday. And Jack was on hospice for a full eighteen months which gave us a lot of quality time to know each other.

His wife Evelyn, was his second wife and they had several children between them. None of the children lived locally and there was family discord between several. That's what we've come to know. All families have their messy stuff, this is the norm. So there really was little assistance for the couple as Jack declined. They felt like an island except for an occasional visit from one of the children. Sometimes it just stirred up discord and caused fatigue for both, physically for Jack and emotionally for Evelyn.

I knocked on the door for one of my usual weekly visits. Their home was beautifully manicured in a suburban neighborhood among homes with rose gardens and flowering dogwood trees. Dressed in expensive yet informal slacks and sweaters, Evelyn always

opened the door and welcomed me with a smile. The foyer was large, and I could look straight into the living room and through the picture window to the lush and abundant rose garden. Evelyn tended her roses like her children now that her actual children had grown and gone. She often quipped, especially right after a difficult weekend visit, that her roses, unlike her children, never gave her any lip!

As always, Jack in his lounge chair closest to the picture window and was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt--much less formal than Evelyn. A table next to him held his cup of coffee, kleenex box, TV remote and a couple of pill bottles. Evelyn's matching La-Z-Boy was next to Jack's on the other side of the table. The arrangement was always the same, as if a set worker put the props back in exactly the same place for the next take of the film. I took my customary place, pulling up the ottoman to form the regular triangle for our conversation.

Evelyn was the chatty one and could keep the conversation flowing, but Jack usually answered in one to five word sentences and often only if directly questioned. Otherwise he gave space to Evelyn to answer my questions about how things had been going. "Anything new this week since I saw you last Thursday?" "Well, Jack hasn't been sleeping very well and he's keeping me awake", or "Jack, are you having any more stomach pain? "He's having pain after he eats I think...." "Jack, what's your story?" "Yeah, maybe,--but it's not bad." I really had to prod to get specifics and any elaboration from him. After the clinical questions, we gals would chat about what they had been doing, which movies seen and how they liked them, new restaurants they had tried and ones I particularly liked--just regular conversation about life in our neighborhood.

It may seem surprising, but I receive many gifts of emotional support from my clients. This is not usually from my sharing personal challenges, but the maturation I procure as a standby witness of their handling of life challenges as I observe how they handle their emotions, the skills they use in dealing with family discord, and their anticipatory grief in preparation for leaving the planet. I feel as if I am the chalice during that time. I catalyze with questions, witness the responses of the patient and the family, guide with information--basically hoping to stir the pot so the contents are swirling in one direction, all the while keeping the bowl from spilling over. When death arrives, I gently pour out the chalice onto mother earth and turn to pick up another bowl. This is literally a visual image I use to help empty myself of the emotions and human energy of each person in my care. I mentioned in my introductory story that I go outside and lie down on the ground and visualize all of the "stuff" that isn't mine seeping into the earth. It helps me be returned to my own self. However, my experience with Jack was different in every

aspect. I became personally involved with this couple.

I visited the couple usually twice weekly over almost eighteen months. Jack was about the age of my own father at the time. He was generally a strong, masculine man of few words, stoic in describing his symptoms and mostly matter of fact about his life--past, present and future. His symptoms were fairly easy to control and parry when they arose. When one visits a couple twice weekly for almost an hour or more each time, conversation gets personal. What else is there to talk about? Patients ask the hospice nurse questions about their lives too. Jack and Evelyn listened and gave advice to me during that time, as I was moving through my divorce. Theirs was a very close second marriage, and I loved watching how Jack could use one-liners or a bit of humor to melt away tension as he got a point across. It was one of those times in life, I vowed to learn how to become better at the use of humor.

Jack's story is not technical; it is spiritual. Hospice care supports a patient with physical, emotional, social, and spiritual challenges. The spiritual is not my forte', but I always ask a few questions to lead a patient toward understanding their beliefs about an afterlife and their religious preferences. Their beliefs often underlie their choices during their end of life transitioning. The suffering we witness in hospice, although it clearly looks and shows itself in the physical realm, can be triggered by existential pain. If we know what is under their physical pain, we can often help with it's relief.

At about three months in and as we had started to develop more of the comfort of friendship, Evelyn told me that she had gone to church the day before for the first time in quite awhile. As usual Jack sat quietly, letting her fill in her story of Sunday's experience without comment. Then the phone rang and Evelyn jumped up to answer it in another room.

Jack was not religious or particularly spiritual. He had been raised a Catholic, but he hadn't gone to church since childhood. He hadn't accompanied Evelyn the day before. We could hear Evelyn settling into a long, chatty conversation in the other room. We weren't talking, and the silence was building and lengthening. Jack never really started a conversation, so I took a deep breath, "Jack do you have any beliefs about what will happen after your death?" He just looked at me and held my gaze but didn't answer. I wasn't very comfortable with quiet, and in my need to fill the silence and my feeling of awkwardness, I poked a bit deeper. " Well, do you see your body returning to the earth like, dust to dust, or do you think your spirit will move to a different plane?" Again another silence as his eyes kept drilling into me. I hadn't a clue as to what he was thinking, but I felt he was sizing me up. Finally, he very matter-of-factly returned, "Well,

I'm leaning towards an afterlife. . . recently." He left it at that, but since he had said "recently," I figured it might be an opening so. I asked, "Recently? Since your cancer diagnosis?" Apparently he had appraised me and decided I was trustworthy since this is when Jack decided to reveal his story. The story that will always stay with me.

Jack told me he had gone to the hospital for the exploratory surgery to figure out what was really happening in his gut. He knew there was a mass that needed viewing and hopefully removing. He said he awoke into an awareness of the surgical suite while he was still on the operating table. He was aware of the movement of the professionals around him--a couple of scrub nurses, the surgeon, the anesthesiologist. Everyone was moving through their expected functions as he heard the surgeon say, something about, "nothing to do but sew him back up." He had the immediate awareness that cancer filled his belly and they couldn't really fix it. No one paid any attention directly to Jack as he still appeared to be under anesthesia.

He recalled not feeling afraid or upset, but as if he was observing himself and the activity like a play. Then he said, " I became aware of four other figures in the room. They were standing on the edges against the walls, not really involved in any activity. No one spoke to them or gave them any directions but walked by as if they weren't even there. It was because of the surgery team's behavior that Jack knew that he was the only one aware of their presence.

He described the figures as being four men dressed completely in black, but he couldn't make out their faces. He said it was like TV when they blur out the faces to protect the identity of the speaker. At this point he looked up at me, slightly tentatively, gauging my reaction. I was fascinated and asked, "were they frightening or scary?" I think he noted my lack of judgement and my acute interest, so I could feel him relax and want to lean into the story. For a man who did not easily share, I could feel his excitement in getting to tell someone the details of his unusual story. I'm guessing he felt that I, as a hospice nurse, wouldn't label him as crazy and at the same time could honor his secret.

"No, they weren't frightening in any way. In fact, I felt really happy and relaxed. It felt like they should be there. As I said, I couldn't recognize them by their faces, but I seemed to know that they were men from my life--maybe an uncle, my grandfather, a couple of friends. Anyway, it didn't matter that I couldn't recognize them. I just had the immediate knowing that they would be my ushers when it was my time to pass over." This was a lot of words flowing out of Jack. How long had this been captive inside, bubbling and waiting for an opportunity to escape?

As I type this story, I got a chill as I often do when I tell Jack's story. I still feel so lucky to have been the one to hear it first hand from Jack. He was as alert and oriented as I am as I was when I typed it, and as you are, the reader, reading. He had no confusion, dementia, or other psychological issues. He was fully present. He didn't seem afraid, or anxious. He was matter-of-fact as he described the four men, his ushers, accompanying him to the recovery room and then walking out of the room as he began to truly awaken physically from the anesthesia.

Over the months of Jack's continuing slow decline we would adjust meds and treatments to assure him of removing any physical discomfort. By this time Evelyn was comfortable leaving Jack and me alone to chat. Every now and then I would ask, "Hey, Jack, have you seen any of your guys lately?" Not a highly professional question, but I was fascinated by his story and was always interested in knowing more without wanting to be overly prying.

Everytime I asked him, he had a response. His answers were always short, matter-of-fact and no big deal but did not hesitate to share his latest encounter.

"Last night I woke up at about three in the morning and one of them was bending over the bed looking into my face. As I looked up and saw him, he nodded slightly, stood up, and walked out of the bedroom door and down the hall."

"The other day I was brushing my teeth the other day and leaning over the sink. We have really bright shiny gold plugs in the bottom of the sinks. All of a sudden I saw one of them leaning over my shoulder reflected in the plug." I asked, "What did you do?" Jack said, "Well, kept brushing my teeth, of course."

I spread out my questions over time as I didn't want to be pushy or invasive, but I was fascinated and inspired and actually hopeful and reassured about another realm of existence to which I had no entrance fee. I was the one comforted.

As we continued along Jack's course and he became increasingly impatient in the dying process. He and Evelyn had been trying to live a fairly normal life, but he just didn't have the energy or stamina to go out and eat or sit through a movie at the theater. He began to ask me about what he could do to "hurry this up."

A little background: I work for a Catholic hospital that does not believe in PAD

(physician assisted death). When Jack was my client, it was hard to even discuss this in our team meetings. Our medical director--an older physician who has since retired--was a devout Christian and did not support the Oregon law. Physician Assisted Death had not been used more than a couple of times in our department, and no one felt comfortable talking openly about it. We all felt its presence as the elephant in the room, but no one could be open about the process, the steps, how it really happened.

However, because it was/is a law, and patients have the legal right to pursue this, and I support every individual right of choice, I wanted to understand more. As employees of a Catholic hospice, we are asked not to provide direct information or be present in the room when the medication is ingested. However, as you will note in these stories, a hospice nurse is much more than a technician, and we become close to our clients and care about them. I was not about to walk away from Jack because, and if, he chose a path which was controversial.

Jack was adamant he wasn't going to wait around anymore to die, and he contacted the state agency called Compassion and Choices. During my first visit with him after he called them, he must have felt a need to sell it to me too, saying, "Gee, even my guys seem to shrug when I see them! Like they're saying what gives? You're taking a hell of a long time!" Of course I laughed and he knew I was still on his team.

Compassion and Choices used to call the patient back and give phone instructions on the steps to go about obtaining the orders and medication, but now there is actually a packet of information sent that includes steps written out and even includes directions to the physicians involved so they can be assured they are filling out the documentation appropriately and according to the law.

This process is lengthy, with waiting periods between many of the steps to insure the patient is not entering into this decision without a clear, committed mind. In Jack's case, he was clear as a bell. Evelyn, as a practicing Catholic, was not, and it caused a lot of emotional upheaval between them. On one of those last visits, Evelyn pulled me aside and said she had been praying about how to handle this and was flooded with a clear, overwhelming feeling of acceptance and love for Jack. She was able to come to agree to disagree with Jack and allow and support him in making this last major choice in his life. We cried together as I am right now, and I was and still am overwhelmed with my respect and admiration for this couple who faced the most intense and yet ethereal question together, disagreed, faced each other in love and stepped back on life's path shoulder to shoulder.

Together they planned a celebration weekend and BBQ, to culminate in Jack's death. The plan for that party really underlined Jack's sense of humor. It was almost like he wanted to have the last laugh on these kids who had been causing them so much grief.

In their blended family of several children and grandchildren, there was estrangement, mistrust, and disappointment felt by these parents toward their adult children. Theirs was not a close family. Before one son would come, it was ensured that the other daughter wouldn't, and so on. So in looking forward to Jack's scheduled death, they didn't know what to do about the kids. Jack and Evelyn asked if I could present their decision to the kids. In fact, Jack came right out and said, "It's time you really stepped into the bad-ass position. You can take the heat, I'll back you, so will the guys." Of course I agreed, there wasn't another choice.

We set an appointment for me to be at their home for calls to each of the four adult children, one by one with Jack and Evelyn in the room. I introduced myself and shared a bit about where Jack was in his dying process. I let them know about his choice to act upon PAD, and the couple's invitation to a weekend visit to party and celebrate. He would end the event with his death. When I look back on it now and write out the story, I am surprised again and again by the courage, strength and the humor Jack wove into his last weeks. The kids were stunned and morbidly curious, yet accepting. As Jack and Evelyn took over each call, answering questions and delving into more personal comments, I would leave the room. When they finished, Evelyn would call me back. We did it four times. I could hear Jack cracking one-liners about "getting this f...ing party going," and "sh..t, even Chris and Linda might be able to shake hands again if they see a job well done".

On the appointed weekend, Evelyn had arranged for a caterer to handle the Sunday BBQ, and a keg of beer was delivered on Friday. Yes, they really intended a blowout party. I was invited to be present, and I stopped over first on Saturday to find the home full of food and adults, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Many were overtly drunk with loud boisterous shouting, and all were comfortable with this behavior. This was the public goodbye celebration, and it really gave me a sudden peek into Jack and Evelyn's past. I was actually brought up short as the people present did not appear to match in appearance and behavior the lifestyle that Jack and Evelyn now lived in this wealthy suburban neighborhood. Every time I was with Jack, I learned more about him.

Jack reigned from his hospital bed or a lounge chair, mostly observing quietly with a twinkle in his eyes and a slight wry smile. They had a rowdy weekend with lots of

drinking and telling of tales. There were no arguments. Either all had agreed to be civil, or Jack's choice had truly melted the animosities. Now they were united in looking up to this brave singular man with a bit of awe--and on their good behavior.

At that time in the PAD process, a volunteer would attend from the Compassion and Choices organization. They handled all of the medications. I arrived at 3:30p.m. and mingled with the family. Two women arrived at 4p.m., introduced themselves, and went into the kitchen to prepare the medication. Everyone seemed to sense the time was near, so chairs were brought into the family room and placed in a ring around the room. All were on their best and quietest behavior.

Jack's bed was lengthwise next to the picture window looking out onto Evelyn's beautiful rose garden. He was literally on the stage. The volunteer brought in the first medication --the one to prevent vomiting--and as he was swallowed the two pills, the room became silent with expectation. Now there was a waiting period for the medication to take effect so Jack wouldn't vomit up the actual deadly medication. The silence stretched on. What does one talk about in this last forty-five minutes? The weather, the latest baseball score? There was an awkward stilted energy in the room. No one had ever been here before and didn't know how to conduct themselves. These roudy folks were cowed into awkward silence. Jack had said his goodbyes; he wasn't about to fill the silence with small talk or profundities. That wasn't Jack.

I can't remember how it happened. Maybe a child running in needing attention, or perhaps Jack just said, "stop looking at me and just talk amongst yourselves!" That would have been his way. But all of a sudden the party broke up again and people got up to begin socializing yet again. It went on around Jack and Evelyn and me. He sat in bed, she next to him holding his hand, and I was to his right side in another chair. We just sat and gently smiled at each other, waiting. I asked Jack about "his guys" one last time and he said, "Can't wait to meet them!"

The volunteer signaled the time had come and all of the family gathered again for his last curtain call. I remember there being about twenty-five people in the room, sitting and standing. Jack sat up at the edge of his hospital bed with his feet on the floor, facing everyone, and Evelyn sitting next to him on his left. The volunteer brought in the glass of medication. I don't remember exactly what he said, but a brief "thank you" and "happy trails." In my memory he remains like a strong, stoic cowboy. I got up to leave the room so I would respect the agency's policy of not being present during the taking of the medication. It took only about thirty seconds, and I re-entered when the volunteer

gave me the signal. I was surprised that he was still sitting upright on the edge of the bed. There was complete silence in the room, but within about three minutes he started to become woozy. I instructed Evelyn to get into the bed with the head of the bed raised. She spread her legs and we were able to get Jack in between so his torso was supported on her chest, his head on her shoulder. We watched as he gently closed his eyes.

I haven't been involved in more than ten cases of PAD, yet each was profound, dignified, awe inspiring, and surreal. How does one observe another human being here and fully alive and present one moment and gone in the next fifteen to twenty minutes. I am always left with deep and profound awe at the courage it must take to "drink the hemlock." I have always witnessed this as beautifully quiet, dignified and even joyous. The families have always been moved in the same way. It takes me days to recover from each ethereal experience.

Still as I drive by Jack and Evelyn's home almost every work day, I always send out a silent greeting to Evelyn. The deep questions of where Jack's life and spirit have gone never leave me, and the mystery remains. In this case, I was and remain sure about one thing, Jack, would finally recognize the four loving men who ushered him along to his new place of being.