

Spiritual companion

A hospital chaplain's Buddhist teachings aid those in grief

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TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF

[SLIDESHOW](#)

Tim Ford walked into the hospital room where a man lay dying and went to work.

His job? Comfort the man's sister and niece who had come to say their goodbyes.

Ford listened as they talked about bingo, ice hockey and go-go dancers. The women laughed as they recalled how their brother and uncle swore he only visited the go-go place for its French fries.

"I think it's good that you're here," Ford said softly to the women, as the man in the last stages of terminal liver disease slept fitfully, his breathing labored, hanging on to the last few hours of his life. "I don't know what the purpose is that he's still here, but I think part of it is to give you some of his peace and him some of ours."

He didn't have to say amen.

And he usually doesn't. It isn't typically part of his vocabulary.

Ford, 36, chaplain in the palliative care unit at VCU Massey Cancer Center, is Buddhist, an unusual combination of work and faith in a part of the world more accustomed to Baptist preachers and Catholic priests. Ford doesn't flaunt his Buddhism with his patients and their families: no chants, no incense, no cross-legged meditation in their rooms. In fact, most never know Ford is Buddhist unless they ask. His job is to comfort, he said, not to convert.

"If I do my job well," he said, "it doesn't matter what denomination I am."

But he does live his faith.

He chants mantras under his breath as he walks the hospital halls. He keeps prayer beads in his car for long trips. He meditates often. Lay ordained in the Kagyu tradition, he considers himself an American Buddhist, an amalgam of various teachings. Worldwide, Buddhism has an estimated 376 million followers, or 6 percent of the world's population, according to www.adherents.com.

Ford practices Aikido, a Japanese martial art that is physical, philosophical and vocal. He talks about karma and truth and his goal of helping others see "the big picture." With patients, he usually listens more than he speaks, though he readily acknowledged with a smile that outside of hospital rooms, "I'm not especially good at being silent."

He's not sure what his patients expect from him because of his Buddhism, but he knows this: "What they expect of me as a chaplain is my presence, my compassion, all of those qualities I consider Buddhist, but they wouldn't call Buddhist."

Dr. Thomas J. Smith, chairman of the division of hematology/oncology and palliative care and co-founder of the palliative care unit, believes Ford's meditation skills "give him the patience to listen well and earnestly." In multidisciplinary palliative care, which aims to make patients comfortable as they near the end of their lives or help them adjust to serious, chronic conditions, those attributes are valued alongside medicine itself.

"I don't think being Buddhist matters one bit to most people," said Smith. "It's the care and caring that matters and what transcends. He is really gifted at helping people during their most difficult times."

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Ford grew up at VCU Medical Center.

He was born in the old Medical College of Virginia Hospital, now known as West Hospital of the VCU Medical Center. His father, George, was - and still is - a biophysicologist at VCU's School of Medicine, so as a child Ford explored the hospital and developed a "backstage" view of the maze-like complex.

"I love giving orientations to interns and resident chaplains," he said with a smile, "because I'm the one who knows all of the tunnels and secret little back ways to go places."

One of his favorite spots is the Jefferson Davis Memorial Chapel, an out-of-the-way retreat on the 17th floor of West Hospital. He might be the only Buddhist in the world who seeks spiritual refuge in a room named for a Confederate leader.

Ford, who appreciates such peculiarities, has a rich sense of humor.

During one of his daily meetings with physicians, nurses and other staff in palliative care, a patient's complicated situation prompted one doctor to mutter, "Lord, have mercy." Without missing a beat, Ford said, "Yes, I do believe he does."

Ford grew up in a family that was spiritual but not religious. He attended Sunday school and church only a few times even though his mother, Maggie, an accomplished pianist, often played at churches.

He attended St. John's College at its campuses in Annapolis, Md., and Santa Fe, N.M., and wrote his thesis on mind and spirit, which prompted a member of the review board to suggest he check out Zen Buddhism. He visited a Zen group and found it "interesting, but not earth-shattering." He returned to Richmond and began looking for a spiritual home. Since Buddhism was the last thing he'd tried, he visited Ekoji Buddhist Temple, a multi-denominational community of Buddhist groups on Grove Avenue. It happened to be "Tibetan night."

"It was like I'd belonged there all my life," he said.

Ford went off to Naropa, a Buddhist university in Colorado, and earned a master's degree in religious studies. He found fulfillment working an internship at a hospice and for the first time seriously considered becoming a chaplain. If Ford had any doubts about his career path, they were eliminated by a Buddhist mentor who advised him: "Who are you to hold back your gifts from the world?"

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Once in a while, Ford encounters a patient who wants no part of a Buddhist chaplain.

"Two sentences in, he asked me flat-out, "What denomination are you?" Ford recalled of a patient earlier this year. "I told him I was Buddhist, and he pretty much chased me out."

Far more often, patients and their families welcome Ford as a soothing influence in an agonizing time. He eases into situations, but must quickly assess what his role should be. One of many chaplains in the hospital but the only one dedicated to palliative care, Ford views himself as a complement to family clergy, not a replacement.

He'll talk with families, hold hands with them, laugh or cry - whatever he senses they need. He's glad to say the Lord's Prayer and rather enjoys spirit-filled "Praise Jesus!" exchanges, speaking in terms that make those he is serving most comfortable. In a pinch during his career as a chaplain, he's also served communion, baptized babies and read the Kaddish at a Jewish funeral.

"He has the ability to speak [patients'] language and address fears that might be overlooked," said Patrick J. Coyne, co-founder and clinical director of the 11-bed palliative care unit, on the fourth floor of VCU Medical Center's North Hospital.

Mostly, Ford listens. Silence, he said, may be awkward to some but it can be more useful than words for people who are hurting.

"A huge part of Buddhism is being in that huge, fertile emptiness," he said. "I'm not one that thinks everybody ought to talk about their feelings. I just think they ought to have the invitation."

Wilma Raucci's husband, Rick, a truck driver, died in 2006 of kidney cancer. He was 53 and spent his last days in the palliative care unit.

"Tim stayed with me as much as he possibly could the last four days of my husband's life," said Raucci, who lives in Chester. "Truthfully, I'm not a religious person, but we spoke about spiritual stuff because I do believe."

Raucci also believes the care her husband previously received at the palliative care unit extended his life by a year and helped him - and his family - come to grips with his impending death.

"If it wasn't for [Ford] and everybody up there, I don't think I would have been able to go through what I've done and the acceptance that I've had," said Raucci, who showed her gratitude by sending dinner to the staff last Thanksgiving. "They are our family."

Not all of the patients and families Ford meets are dealing with imminent death, but a majority are. He is well-versed on the subject, having become a certified thanatologist - one who studies the social and psychological aspects of death and dying.

He's come to view death as "an adventure" and believes one of his most important tasks is helping the dying face death without fear. He encourages patients and their families to confront the cold reality of their situation, accept and move beyond it. "Embrace the blessings of the world," he says.

"Much of suffering - this includes physical suffering but more spiritual suffering - comes from us grasping too hard for what we think ought to be rather than accepting what really is," he said, echoing the essential "noble truths" of Buddhism. "We cause ourselves so much more pain by trying to make things what they aren't, than we do ever by accepting the pain of what is."

Understanding the process of death and dying is one thing; coping with it, day after day, is something else. The work can be emotionally wrenching, and part of Ford's job is offering support for the staff. He also must listen for his own distress, which comes from trying to be as "vulnerable" as possible when counseling patients and families.

"I know on a day when I lose two or three patients, I need to take care of myself," he said. "I take it easy. I meditate. I take long walks. I pray a lot. What builds up over time is much more subtle, and I don't always catch it until months later when I realize I'm very low-energy or starting to get depressed. Then I just have to take some time off."

Rejuvenated, he returns to the palliative care unit, walks past the nurses' station and the plaque that reads, "What the caterpillar thinks is the end of the world the butterfly knows is only the beginning," and enters once again what some who work there consider "sacred space."

"If I could say in one word what I try to do with the patients, I think it would be companion," he said. "I try to walk with them. I try to show up - emotionally, spiritually, psychologically. I put myself in the room with them and let them know they're not alone."

"This," he said, "is what I'm meant to do."

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