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## **Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!**

**By Dodd Sims, M.D.**

It's some of the best advice a young doctor can get. When you are called to the bedside of a patient whose heart has suddenly stopped, first take your own pulse. Don't just storm into the room and do something for the sake of doing something. Take a second to collect yourself, to make sure you are fully present, fully engaged before you dash in to try to save a life.

In the real world – the world outside of medical drama – I've come to think of this advice as the ministry of presence. Just stand there, just be there. It's what we are called to do at the side of someone who has just received horrible news: the shadow on the CT scan, the unexpected demand for a divorce, the death of one's child. At times like these, it may be the most important thing we have to offer, not sage advice but mere presence.

It is what Jesus offered as He was with His followers, and as St. Paul described his own presence:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. That your faith should not stand on human wisdom but on the power of God (1Corinthians 2:1-5).

This is a lesson I've had to learn slowly and painfully. Sometimes my presence is needed, not to explain over and over again with "enticing words" why a tragedy has happened, but rather just to be there, to demonstrate the power of faith. This is especially true when dealing with the medical misfortunes of family and close friends. Sometimes I'm not just another doctor to consult, but rather the son, the brother, the friend called in to stand there and do nothing.

I once had a patient in his late eighties with a horribly demented wife. Lying in a nursing home bed for years, her body became contracted from inactivity. Her eyes were open, but her mind gone. He visited her every day, always at lunch time. Month after month, year after year, he helped the staff spoon pureed food into her mouth.

When he came to my office, it was always in the afternoon, always after stopping at the nursing home to feed his wife. He shared their story; he brought pictures of happier times. Manhattan in the 1950's: she a stunning fashion model; he a dapper advertising executive – an image right out of *Mad Men*. The visits were somber, the news from the nursing home never good. She was responding less and less, refusing finally even to take the food off the spoon he held to her lips.

But one afternoon I sensed a change. He was smiling. Clearly excited to share his news, he arrived at the office almost with a bounce in his step.

"What," I asked, "happened to you?"

He answered, "She talked."

“What do you mean she talked?” She hadn’t spoken in years. I couldn’t fathom that she had suddenly talked.

With a wide grin he replied, “Just as I was leaving, she said as clear as can be, ‘See you later, handsome.’”

These were the last words she spoke, the last words he heard from her. She died a few weeks later, he the following year.

Now I have no way of knowing what really took place in that nursing home room, after he finished trying to spoon the apple sauce and pureed peas into his wife. Was he so lonely, so desperate that he imagined she spoke one last time? Had she been marshalling the few fragments of memory that remained, saving up for one last attempt to communicate with the man she had loved for over fifty years?

I just don’t know; I’ll never know. But I do know that her final words changed his life forever. That last year, he was a different person; he was at peace. At the end of his life, he knew that all those visits, all those lunchtimes at the nursing home had been worth it, no matter how painful it must have been to watch her slip away week after week, month after month.

He chose to be present, not to say something profound, something wise, but just to be there. I like to believe that his presence made a real difference in her life. I know for certain that his being present at the moment she spoke changed his life forever.