

Deeded Body Memorial Service

Good afternoon. I am Noelle Andrew, Director of Spiritual Services at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. It is my privilege to be with you on this sacred occasion as we honor the life and death of your loved ones who gave of themselves for the benefit of our students.

After hearing the testimonies of these students, I am humbled by their words and their experiences in human anatomy class as they learned what it is like to explore and discover the intricacies of the human body. Some say that the complexity and wonder of such a collection of nerves, bone, and tissue is what causes them to believe in a higher power. Who else could create such a masterpiece? Others would argue that this is what inspires them to appreciate mystery; seeing beyond the physical genius of the body to something deeper, some secret beyond our grasp. All of the students acknowledge that they are forever changed by this experience. And that is perhaps the clearest indication that, through their dissection and examination, these students came to appreciate the more important life lessons offered in this class, lessons of compassion, generosity and hope.

In the past, many healthcare providers were taught to not get too close to their patients; that by getting personally involved, there would be the risk of caring too much which could lead to burnout. And yet, without establishing a relationship, the practice of good medicine is nearly impossible. There is a balance. As a chaplain, the temptation is often there to speak what the patient finds unspeakable. Given the clinical setting, what's new to the patient and family is often quite familiar to us. But when I stop, wait and listen – something precious happens – a story is begun. It may be wordy, it may be wordless, but regardless of age each of us has a story that plays a significant part in our health care. To separate the two may simplify a case but it removes the intangible benefit of relationship. We must serve with compassion in health care, going beyond the diagnosis and finding the common humanity that we share. Only then, do we practice good medicine. Offering compassion is now seen as essential to a good doctor/patient relationship.

The good news is that science now confirms there is a biological basis for our compassion. With the discovery of mirror neurons, we are beginning to link science with a greater understanding of empathy. As it turns out, empathy is hardwired in our brains. When one person witnesses another human being doing an activity, the same neurons are activated within them, as if they too were doing the same activity. This may be the source for compassion and as such, is an innate part of who we are as human beings. In a very real sense, we can't help but feel sadness when we see another person in need. We can't help but feel joy when we witness another person who is happy. As professionals, it is wise to realize that our humanness, even down to our neural cells, calls us to be compassionate with others. It is this relationship, this common bond that will actually help us to be more effective in our work.

When these students first went to anatomy class, they were not prepared to realize how deeply they would appreciate the task before them. The words, "There is no greater gift than to lay down one's life for another," come to mind. Deeding one's body is as close as a person gets to fulfilling these words. This gift reflects the generous intention of the donor to give others a chance to discover the wonders of the human body, a body that once held a vibrant, living being. When each donor's heart was examined, it was also honored for the spirit of love and generosity it sustained. That generous love has now been multiplied, like a ripple effect into eternity.

Each donor taught us this lesson by deeding their body. Their very act of donation is hopeful. They gave so that others would discover meanings that could not be acquired in any other way. They gave in the hope that all of us here gathered would emulate them, in their vision of love without end. And so, let us vow to remember that whenever despair and tragedy threaten to overwhelm us, we will choose to hope beyond what is evident to what may seem impossible. Today we bear witness to these donor's intention that love never dies. By living out the very values that these donors have taught us, that of compassion, generosity and hope, we honor them this day and forever more. These are the principles of good medicine, the essentials of professionalism in healthcare that we commit to live by. May God bless our continuing efforts to practice these always to the best of our ability. Amen.

The Committal

At this time, we will respectfully commit the physical remains of your loved ones to the earth. We remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. May the souls of the faithful departed now rest in peace as their journey has ended and their wishes have been fulfilled. In this life, they blessed you here gathered, their loving friends and family. In death, they have blessed these students in their training and practice of medicine, therapies and dentistry. We hallow them for the gifts of love that they have so generously bestowed upon us all.

May the memory of your loved one's selfless gift forever inspire each one of us to act out of love for one another so as to emulate love freely given.

We now commend their spirits to God, to that Eternal Love that knows neither beginning nor end but participates in the great mystery of creation. May that love continue to dwell in each one of us today and forever more. Amen.

