

# The Gifts I Cherish

BY JO-ANNE ROWLEY, RN, BSN, OCN

A vase filled with peppermint carnations sits on a shelf at the nurses' station. The card reads: "For your kind care." On the counter below, a box of chocolates, each one elegantly wrapped in foil, waits to be enjoyed. In the lounge, thank-you cards and notes written on pretty stationary compete for space on the bulletin board. Flowers, candy, cards — gifts from our patients and their families telling us that we made a difference, that we touched their hearts, and that they thank us.

Over the years there have been many gifts. I still have the bottle of rose-geranium lotion from Elizabeth, who died of breast cancer several years ago. And a little wooden tray, a gift from Robert, who married his sweetheart two months before he died of lymphoma. I place my keys in this tray each evening when I come home from work. For a moment, I remember Robert and smile. On the patio, a small seashell windchime tinkles in the breeze. Alice collected those shells — she died of melanoma five years ago.

Not all gifts evoke sad memories. Joanne, a leukemia patient, once presented the nurses with a large box of chocolates, followed by her husband, a dentist, who marched in behind her with a dozen toothbrushes! Then there's Darcy, who presented us with the finest fruitcake on the planet. Once I noticed Darcy's name on the admission list and I mumbled "Ah, Darcy.....a fruitcake." A new nurse on the unit, unfamiliar with this tradition, quickly snapped "No, she's not, she's very nice!"

Flowers, fruitcake, and chocolate are lovely gifts, yet they are not the ones I cherish. The ones I cherish run deeper, are intangible, become more dear with time. They are given without celebration, without intent. They are the gifts that nurses receive every day — the insight into our patients' lives, the stories, the struggles, the aspirations, the dreams our patients share with us, the dramas that unfold daily. The mother who sits by her child's sickbed through the night; the woman who works tirelessly to raise money for her sister's heart transplant; the husband who accompanies his wife to chemotherapy each week, holding her hand throughout, telling her she is

the most beautiful woman in the world.

These are stories of devotion, stories of love and commitment, stories of strength. These are the gifts that strengthen me.

A few years ago, an elderly Russian lady who had had a stroke was brought to the hospital. She was comatose, and her respirations were shallow and irregular. The doctor's orders read "Do Not Resuscitate." Her daughter, a woman in her fifties, sat at her bedside, and spoke softly to her mother in their native Russian tongue as she tenderly stroked her forehead. I introduced myself, and explained that I came to change the linens and to reposition her mother so that she would be comfortable. As I worked, she told me he had brought her mother to America only a year before, having secured a small apartment for her. Each day she visited with her mother. Although she diligently tried to interest her in various social activities, there was only one place the woman wanted to go: to the grocery store. Although the market was just a few blocks from the apartment, her mother would put on a good dress and her best black coat with the fur collar for the occasion.

At the store, the woman stood for long periods of time staring at the produce. Never in her life had she seen such abundance. There were green peppers and oranges, three kinds of lettuce, and tomatoes as red as jewels heaped high for the picking, squash and broccoli and eggplant the color of deep amethyst, and exotic fruits from countries she never heard of.

To this day my memory of the old Russian woman lives on. Every time I see an apple or a grape, I remember her in her best black coat staring at the gifts before her. Although she never spoke a word to me, I see through her eyes and I feel her joy. And that is her gift to me that I shall treasure forever.

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