

Ceremonies for Entering a Nursing Home

Let Your Heart Take Courage

By Cary Kozberg

Rabbi Edwin Friedman has observed that rites of passage by which religions mark important life transitions and separations- the “nodal” occasions of birth, adolescence, marriage, parenthood and death- have the unique capacity of both encompassing contradictions relevant to the task of grieving and moving on. As life progresses, rites of passage give meaning to the changes in role and status we experience. They clarify that a new stage of life has begun and help facilitate closure of a previous stage.

Certainly one of the most challenging and painful experiences of transition and separation in modern life occurs when one must enter a long-term care facility. Moving from one’s own home to a nursing home is a change that entails not only separation from home and family but also from one’s former life. This transition marks a definite shift in role and status, usually requiring a redefinition of self-understanding.

As Thomas Robb observes, there is a virtual absence of secular or religious rites of transition for late-life events, and this absence conveys the message that advanced age has no meaning or consequence.

With this in mind, it would seem that the rite of passage an elder experiences when leaving his or her home behind to enter a nursing home should be marked in a formal, liturgical way.

Creating ceremonies that mark the beginning of this last stage of life can help a person cope in several ways. First, the ceremony recognizes the need of the elderly person to understand herself or himself in the context of the losses suffered and the separations endured. Second, it provides a ritual vehicle for the expression of anger, ambivalence, frustration and abandonment. Third, a ceremony can help new residents and their families accept the physical, psychological and spiritual changes that have and will occur when one experiences this particular life transition.

The ceremony should be designed to affirm these losses and separations. Honor the memory of that which has been given up, place it in a larger context and facilitate the process of moving on. When this is accomplished, the ceremony also accomplishes a fourth purpose- it can offer hope.

If one agrees with Rabbi Friedman- that the capacity for a new relationship depends on how the previous one is terminated- then ceremonies that mark the passage into a nursing home should help new residents bring closure on the previous stage and better prepare them for what lies ahead. To put it differently, ceremonies of leaving one’s home and entering a nursing home affirm that “every goodbye is also a hello.”

Through scripture, selections from liturgy and appropriate poetry and prose, such a ceremony should declare, "Let your heart take courage!" For those in Jewish or Christian faith communities, it should remind them of the Ultimate Source of hope who never abandons one and that turning to this Source can bring comfort and a renewal of purpose and meaning.

By communicating that there is an opportunity to live in a rich and meaningful life even after nursing home placement, a ceremony provides residents with a resource that enables them to retain their sense of individual identity and thus serves as a source of hope and consolation.

The attendance of adult children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews should be encouraged, for the ceremony can also be a source of solace and meaning to family members for whom transition is emotionally arduous. Again, to cite Friedman, religious values such as hope, renewal and consolation are more likely to be heard when a family is working toward the success of the rite. Involving family members in this rite of passage increases the likelihood that the family's emotional process will more easily resonate with the spiritual message being put forth. It can also be a catalyst for resolving long-standing family issues. The ceremony should be organized with the needs of both the resident and the family in mind.

It goes without saying that whatever is offered should be adapted to the resident's limitations, cognitive or otherwise. If the resident cannot participate in a meaningful way, family members may yet find such a ceremony meaningful and therapeutic.

If at all possible, the family's clergy person should attend, particularly if the facility has no chaplain. Because the marking of life-cycle events in a religious context seems to capture the healing process of therapeutic encounter better than any other form of religious experience, the ceremony may be a useful pastoral tool for helping families work out issues that the transition to a nursing home has brought to the surface.

By focusing on the personal needs of new residents- helping to shepherd them from the stage of initial shock into that of reorganizing one's life- the ceremony provides a fresh liturgical alternative to the collective, congregational experiences that most clergy rely on when conducting worship services in nursing homes. By addressing the new resident's need for personal prayer and other personal spiritual activities, clergy can provide a more effective ministry to nursing home residents.

The transition from home to nursing home is a moment in life that is stressful and challenging for individuals and their families, both emotionally and spiritually. Drawing on the wisdom and resources of religious traditions, ceremonies and rites that appropriately mark this transition can be an effective response to the feelings of loss, anger and hopelessness. At the very least, they should affirm the belief that, despite intermittent visits by the Angel of Death, nursing homes are supposed to be places where life and its sanctity are honored and celebrated. With a bit of creativity and sensitivity, this supposition can be realized.

Cary Kozberg is the director of rabbinical and pastoral services at Wexner Heritage Village in Columbus, Ohio.