

## FAITH IN FOCUS

# Ward Healer

## The spiritual exercises of a hospital chaplain

BY AARON BILLER

When one thinks of a hospital and an 84-year-old woman, one doesn't think of a tiny nun rising daily at 3:20 a.m., trekking by subway to arrive at 4:45 a.m. for her shift as a pre-op chaplain at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. Many people Sister Elaine Goodell's age use walkers, but Sister Elaine runs from room to room, providing what one patient calls "spiritual bodybuilding" to hundreds of patients annually of all ages and faiths—and nonbelievers, too.

For Sister Elaine, multifaith hospital chaplaincy is a fourth career. In her previous "acts" in life she has been a nurse, a convent-based nun and a college professor of music. She joined the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Aberdeen, S.D., in 1944.

"I'm inspired by Dt 12:18, where Moses was directing the people to Canaan and their new home," says Sister Elaine. "He said, 'You are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to.'"

"When I was in South Dakota I tried to rejoice; but in the back of my mind, I felt I didn't really belong there," she says. After many years at the convent, she took a sabbatical with a clinical pastoral education residency program in Houston and earned credentials as a board-certified chaplain.

Then she made a bold move in

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1985, at age 60. With her belongings in the trunk of her car and a man's hat strategically positioned in the rear window, she acted on her "hankering for hospital work" and a vision of living in the Big Apple. The Reeder, N.D., native drove to Manhattan. Sister Elaine initially stayed with one of her sisters in the Bronx. (She has nine younger siblings.) After a quick break—a trip to Atlantic City—her sister gave her a Manhattan phone book to search for her new career.

"I sent my résumé to John and Carolyn Twiname, who then ran HealthCare Chaplaincy," explains Sister Elaine. "A few days later, I called Rev. Twiname. He said he was looking at my résumé right at that moment and asked me to come in to interview with the Rev. George Handzo, who directed the chaplaincy department at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. He said they were looking for a priest to be a staff chaplain, but maybe a nun would do."

Rev. Handzo, today vice president for pastoral care leadership and practice for HealthCare Chaplaincy, recalls the interview: "I still have in my mind the day I stood on the sidewalk after meeting with this little 60-year-old nun whom we had just interviewed for our new staff chaplain position. I had just given her the speech about how we were interviewing several people and would get back to her. She looked me straight in the eye and said to me, 'Well, I'm the person you want and if you hire me, you'll never regret it.' How right she was."

HealthCare Chaplaincy and the 12 health care institutions for which it manages professional chaplaincy services present an annual Wholeness of Life Award to one person from each institution who "with a purity of devotion selflessly cares for others... simply because it is what compassionate people do." In 2009, Memorial Sloan-Kettering selected Sister Elaine as its honoree.

"I wondered if the work at a cancer hospital would be depressing," says Sister Elaine. "It was not. I found such a warm spirit there. The staff works so well together. Coming to New York, I knew after a few weeks that I had found my niche. HealthCare Chaplaincy and Memorial Sloan-Kettering are really the best."

Sister Elaine's colleagues and the thousands of people she has helped would agree that her greatest talent is her ability to connect with people. Her first stop each morning before dawn is to check the operating room so she knows who is going into surgery. "It's all in how you introduce yourself. I want them to know that I'm here for them at this crucial time in their lives. No pressure. I say, 'If you would like me to say a prayer for you and your surgeons, I'll be glad to do that.' Rarely does someone refuse, and they're grateful."

Sister Elaine is a humble woman, but when asked about instances when she has helped people, she shared a letter:

This note comes with heartfelt thanks for your gracious prayers and kindnesses. You came at a moment when I and my family sat in fearful silence before my operation and brought with you an anchor for our unguided spirits at the very moment we needed that solace.

I thank my doctors and the nurses who cared for me, but my greater obligation is to you and your chaplaincy for that healing no physical act can provide. It gave me courage, reawakened my mind and soul to the Lord's hand in this effort and left me with the strength to reflect without anger or bitterness. Your work merits more recognition and gratitude than you realize.

### Patient Listening

"Patients, nurses and chaplains have ranked talking and listening as the number one spiritual intervention and need," says Sister Elaine. "How fortunate for chaplains to have 'listening' as their profession and to enable another's story to be spoken and shared."

"Listening is a lost art. Listening to a patient is what keeps me going at age 84. You can see the difference that true listening makes."

"Elaine has told me, 'When you notice I'm no longer effective, please tell me, and then I'll retire,'" says Walter J. Smith, S.J., president and chief executive officer of HealthCare Chaplaincy. He says: "Elaine is compassionate, fearless and will find the resources to help. More than once she's called me at home at night with a request: 'Walter, it's Elaine. I've got a patient with a sensitive case and you must come tomorrow morning to help him.' Of course, I go."

"There was another case 10 years ago," recalls Father Smith. "A Russian-born woman with terminal cancer wished to be received into the Roman Catholic Church. I baptized her. When she died, her funeral service was held not in a church but at a funeral home on the Lower East Side. Elaine called me and said, 'Walter, we've got to go to the funeral. She has a small family, and we need to give them support.' Of course, we went."

Elaine tells the story about the end

of a visit with a young man in his 20s and his mother and sister on the evening before surgery.

"I asked if he would like a prayer for him, the family, his surgeon and the team. His mother and sister immediately said, 'Oh, yes!' But the patient reached over to the nightstand, picked up a polished stone and said, 'This is my support!' I acknowledged his comfort zone,



commenting on the stone's beauty, and then continued, 'No pressure on you, but if you wish, I can add a prayer.' He looked at his mother and sister and said, 'I guess it won't hurt.' I told him that was the one and only guarantee I could give him. When I finished, silence ensued. Then he abruptly leaped out of bed, hugged me so tightly I could not move and said, 'That prayer was exactly what I needed!'"

As Sister Elaine explains it, "Prayer brings an underlying sense of peace and comfort. For me, prayer is a powerful force, energizer, bridge, reflector or sign. I think prayer can enlighten, enliven, inform, gratify, teach, enable and enlarge the world of the patient in our care. On the other hand, we must watch that it not be a crutch or substitute for genuine visiting or sharing."

### Spiritual Bodybuilder

Sister Elaine recalls a young man who had osteogenic sarcoma, one of the

most common forms of bone cancer in children. "Through years of admissions, chemo and continued infections, amputation of the leg was suggested to ease his suffering and to promote his healing." The evening before his surgery, he shared his ambivalence about surgery. He knew he had the support of his surgeon whatever his decision. "Wanting advice which I could not give him, we said a prayer. I then remarked, 'After a good sleep tonight, you will know exactly what you should do.'

"The next morning I ran up to his room to see him. He joyously said, 'I have cancelled the surgery with 100 percent support from my surgeon.'

"Today he is a lawyer, married, and has two sons," reports Sister Elaine. "He called me his 'spiritual bodybuilder.' He said that the counseling, conversation and just the company and my insisting that he would get out of the hospital aided his healing."

Not all of Sister Elaine's recollections are happy ones.

"A surgeon once cornered me in a hospital and said, 'Sister, I want you to know that I have never had any feelings for my patients—never.' Then he said, 'What shall I do?' We visited about this, and I gave him some simple tips for social interactions. Periodically I began to hear how caring and compassionate this doctor was! A few years ago he insisted on accompanying a very ill patient 200 miles south of his hospital in a helicopter," Sister Elaine remembers. "There was a sudden blizzard and all were killed."

Sister Elaine draws inspiration from the late cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, who wrote: "If I were asked for the most striking insight into human nature and the human condition, it would be this: No person is strong enough to support the meaning of his or her life unaided by something or someone outside of himself." Says Sister Elaine, "Hopefully, I have been that someone." 