

From an upcoming, untitled book that collects stories of people who work in hospice:

***CHAPLAIN DAN HALEY is the executive director and co-founder of the Peterborough Community Chaplaincy (Peterborough, ON), a non-profit organization that helps former inmates make the transition from prison to the community. In 2004, the group opened Transition House, which provides housing and palliative services for former inmates.***

I quit drinking when I was 30 years old, and met a lot of guys at AA meetings who'd been in the system [prison]. Listening to their stories deepened my compassion for them. I'm a man of faith. I attended an AA group for guys in Warkworth Institution. I saw the hellhole these guys lived in.

Nobody wants to die in jail. Prisons weren't made to be palliative care units. The poor nurses who work in the system do the best they can, but they don't have access to the same equipment as hospitals. And the system has limitations. I remember one fellow, who was undergoing chemo and radiation treatments. His doctors gave him a prescription for pain medication, but at the prison pharmacy he was told, "You can't have that. No narcotics at federal institution. No painkillers. You're a criminal." The guy was in so much pain, it was like he was being tortured. When people are dying, they're not at risk.

Our first palliative case was Jimmy, a 52-year-old lifer dying of cancer. Jimmy had raped four women, but he'd changed in the twenty-some years in the system. I met him in the chapel at Warkworth. "I heard about you," he said to me, then pleaded in a choked voice, "I don't want to die in Kingston Penitentiary. There's no hope for me. It'd be like sending me to hell to die. If you send me to hell, I'll go right to the pit."

I thought, *What a flippin' request!* I'm just a little guy from Peterborough, I got no power. Then the chaplain approached me on Jimmy's behalf, and she wrote supporting him. Jimmy's parole officer also wanted to see him get out. So I wrote to the

parole board, and developed a program at Transition House to deal with death and dying. I really didn't know what I was doing. A number of years before I'd taken the hospice training course at Peterborough Hospice because I thought, *Oh, someday I'll use this.*

Well, someday came when I didn't expect it.

I helped secure Jimmy's release nine weeks prior to his death. A group of volunteers worked beside him and supported him. We also brought his family to him. There were some unresolved issues that he wanted to patch up.

Jimmy really wanted to reconnect with his father. But his dad didn't want to come see him. "I don't wanna see that son-of-bitch," he growled. "D'you know all the harm he's done?"

That bothered me a bit, but I calmly replied, "Well, do you know all the good he's done? Warkworth has a large population of seniors – guys who've been in for a long time. He taught those lifers about palliative care. He was the first guy in Warkworth to take the course and support other inmates who were dying."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I continued, "Jimmy also worked inside with young people. He'd get in their faces and try to scare them, and tell them to take responsibility for their actions. 'You don't want to turn out like me,' he'd say."

Jimmy wanted to see his dad because he wanted to apologize to him. But that didn't happen, because during the last couple weeks, he was in and out of coma. When he was with it, he thanked me for what everyone was doing for him. He must've thanked me a million times. By the time his father arrived at his bedside, Jimmy was pretty much in a coma. But he did come out of it once, briefly, to smile at his dad.

Jimmy died peacefully on a Sunday night. That was the first time I was with someone who was passing away. Everything seemed to slow down around me. It sure felt like there was a bright light in the room. Jimmy had raped four women. His life had been brutal. Yet he died peacefully, in the arms of two beautiful nurses who held his hands when he left this world and entered the next.

A lot of the kids he'd lectured in the system came to his funeral, and told me what Jimmy did to help turn them around. Jimmy's dad was there, too. He thanked me for getting his son out of jail to die in hospital. Listening to him, I remembered Jimmy telling me, *If I'm not able, do me a favor: Turn to my dad and let him know I'm sorry. Tell him I would've liked to give him a hug and a kiss – would you be able to say that to my dad?*

So I told his father, "Jimmy wanted to make sure that you knew he was sorry and he loved you." Then I gave him a big hug and a kiss on cheek. "That's from Jimmy," I said. He was open-mouthed surprised for a moment, then he burst into tears and thanked me for stepping into his life and bringing him some closure. He admitted he was proud of what his son had accomplished at the end of his life.

Most parole officers see people like Jimmy as scum of the earth, a burden to taxpayers, the throwaways of society. But we forget they have parents and brothers and sisters. When I tell people this, I get things like, "Do you know what these people have done? They need to be thrown in a pit!"

I believe even the worst man has the right to be able to die with dignity and compassion. You may say, "Even someone like [serial killer] Paul Bernardo?" Well, if he was on his deathbed, why not? Why lower yourself to his level? If you treat him with less

compassion than what you'd do for anyone else who was dying, then you're part of the problem instead of being someone who's a loving, caring neighbor.