

## Where Does Your Spiritual TripTik Take You?

Lee Ausema still remembers the conversation he had with the spouse of a patient the day after her husband of nearly seven decades had died.

The couple were “two peas in a pod” who did everything together until declining health prompted them to move into an assisted living facility in Grand Rapids. They took turns caring for one another as their health ebbed, with Ausema visiting them regularly as the chaplain for Emmanuel Hospice, until the husband slipped quietly away one Sunday afternoon.

“When I went in to see her the next day, I said, ‘You must have had a very difficult day yesterday,’ Ausema recalls. “She had tears in her eyes and a smile when she responded to me, ‘But just think where he is right now?’

“Sometimes our understanding of the afterlife can offer a tremendous sense of peace and grace during a difficult time. Even though they were married for decades, she could release her husband, and that gave her a sense of peace.

“A person’s faith is a place where they can go to not feel so alone. Within your faith, you can feel a sense of a companionship and love as your God is walking alongside you.”

There’s a big difference, Ausema notes, between being religious and being spiritual. He contends that all of us are spiritual beings, even if we may not ascribe to a particular religion.

As a faith-based provider of hospice services, Emmanuel Hospice serves the spiritual needs of all individuals. The spiritual care team counsels people of diverse faiths to help patients and their families find solace and strength in their individual faith traditions. Ausema sees it as his responsibility to meet people wherever they are on their individual spiritual journeys as they are facing the end of life.

“All of us have a spiritual TripTik,” Ausema says. “We all have some sense of where we started and where we are going to end. Each of us takes a different path for our journey, though.

“My role as chaplain is not to take my spiritual TripTik and put it over yours. Mine is to follow a person through his or her own journey. We all find a sense of peace and comfort in different places.”

Ausema often begins the conversation with a new hospice patient by doing an assessment of where they are spiritually. He will ask questions: Where do you go to find strength outside yourself? What are the things you do to find that strength that you cannot pull from yourself?

The answers are as individual as the patient. It might be music for one, attending church for another, meeting friends for a third or any variety of things, Ausema says, that give us a sense of peace and a sense of purpose.

“At Emmanuel Hospice, we honor everyone’s faith journey – whatever that may be and wherever they are on that journey.”

Ausema also asks new patients a question that many families find surprising: How do you want to live? It’s a misconception, he says, that hospice is all about dying. At Emmanuel Hospice, the care team works with families to enhance the quality of life at the end of life and ensure that every moment matters for the patient.

“For us, it really is about them and their needs,” Ausema noted.

The next step, Ausema says, is working with the patient to determine what kinds of things bring them joy – and then finding ways to connect them with the things that make them smile and laugh. That might be a special dinner with family, a trip to a favorite fishing hole or afternoons filled with music.



“Even as we approach the end of life, we need to have things that keep us looking forward and anticipating,” Ausema says. “Think of it as being on a ship. There are some people who are comfortable sitting in the back of the ship and looking only at where they have been.

“There are others who are on the bow and don’t care where they have been, only where they are going. When you are in the pilot seat of your life, you have to listen to both voices. At the end of life, you can’t look to the future without embracing the past. Where we’ve been is an important aspect of where we’re going. On our end of life journey, our TripTik keeps going until we turn the final page – then we’re finally home.”