

# Listening with Compassion

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My best friend Joe was diagnosed with a brain tumour in the summer of 1999. We all knew it was not going to be a story with a happy ending, but still we tried to give Joe a sense of worth throughout his ordeal. Before the heartbreaking day Father Joe Lukaszewski's journey ended in April 2000, he was surrounded by moments of kindness. One gracious gift came through a simple act of listening with compassion.



From the first surgery, there was never any doubt about where he would live. We'd been friends for thirty years. He was the best I'll ever have. He wanted to be with someone who would love him without fuss or bother. He wanted to maintain his dignity with 'a degree of privacy. He wanted to be with someone who would protect him from well-intentioned people who might overwhelm him. I guess he knew that I'd provide him with all that because he would have done exactly the same for me. So Joe moved into my rectory.

For most of the nine months that Joe fought brain cancer, it wasn't all that hard to offer him comfort and a sense of well-being. But following the third attempt to remove the tumour, things became far more serious. Joe had lost more and more ability to communicate effectively. Words came with great difficulty. This was a deeply intelligent and intuitive man, so he knew what he couldn't do. And it frustrated him immensely.

We knew that third surgery would probably be his last. As gently as they could, the doctors at Memorial Sloan-Kettering in Manhattan told Joe the truth that the tumour always comes back with greater ferocity. And with its re-growth, the tumour becomes that much harder to contain or remove. So its return would be devastating.

Joe had a hard time getting the right words out. He'd see an item and ask me what it was called. I wanted to keep him as communicative as possible, so I'd push him to say the word. Sometimes he'd be grateful. Other times he would be furious. But through it all, he maintained his sense of class and dignity.

Toward the end of Joe's life, maybe a month and a half before he died, we took a ride out to the countryside. We visited a restaurant we'd gone to for over fifteen years. The waitresses all knew Joe, knew that he was going through something bad. The scar on the side of his head gave that this was a changed man from the smiling customer they'd come to know and love over the years. Our meal was quiet, Joe couldn't speak that well. But he did notice that another priest was in the restaurant. He signalled me that 'a collar' was present. He couldn't find the word for priest, but he knew I'd understand that 'collar' meant priest.

The priest was a local pastor named Father Jack Sullivan. Jack spotted us, too. He waited a bit, then came to our table. In the few minutes that Jack Sullivan stayed with us I saw one of the most telling acts of compassion I'd ever seen. Joe spoke a few sentences to Jack. Not one of which made a bit of sense. In Joe's head the words had meaning, but the tumour made communicating those thoughts nearly impossible. You would never have known that to look at Jack (Sullivan's face. He nodded at Joe knowingly. He looked at him with absolute gentleness and kindness. With affirming nods and gestures, he seemed to say to Joe, I got you, I understand. He never once made Joe feel that his language was beyond recognition. As Jack left our table, Joe was smiling. Someone seemed to understand. That understanding was a bountiful blessing.

People often think that in order to quell another's pain you have to know and say all the right words. They're mistaken. When we listen with compassion, it surmounts any and all hurdles to communication. And it gives unfathomable hope to the person in pain. I saw that glow of hope in my friend Joe's eyes that night, when a man named Jack seemed to get it. Hope offers more than life, it promises eternity.

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