

## **Meaningful Connections: Balancing the Art, Science, and Mystics**

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It was a usual day in ALS clinic – busy and intense, yet full of meaning. Unexpectedly, our clinic’s nurse practitioner asked for my help urgently with one of our patients.

She led me down the hallway to another clinic room where I found my patient lying, pale, barely breathing on the gurney. I had never met him or his wife in person before. The first and last time I spoke with them both was by video for a telemedicine visit. He had been referred to me because he was suffering from severe panic attacks related to shortness of breath that was the result of his progressed ALS. We were trying to find ways to provide him with relief including meditation and medications, and today’s in-person visit was to follow up.

During our first video visit, I was struck by his conviction. Despite being in a constant state of panic, he was so clear about his wishes. He shared he was not afraid of dying and was firm in his beliefs about what lies on the other side. He knew he did not want to prolong his life on machines. When it came time for him to need continuous life support, he wanted to be made comfortable. His peace with these decisions transcended the physical gap between us, permeated across the ethos, across the computer screens and internet connections.

I felt that peace during the chaos in the clinic room. His wife, tearful and afraid. The clinic staff, confused and concerned about the ability to care for a patient that was actively dying in front of our eyes. Yet, what grounded us were his clear convictions for what passing away comfortably meant to him. Our collective focus in that clinic room was ensuring we honored his wishes, shared with me only a few short weeks before over video.

In that moment and in time reflecting since, I felt gratitude and relief that I had the chance to speak with him. That the universe had allowed this connection and had put us in the right place at the right time. That he had died in the clinic with his wishes honored and not at home without support for him or his wife. Since he was not enrolled in hospice, his wife would have had to call 911. He may have been forced to be surrounded by strangers or, despite his wishes, experienced invasive, painful interventions in his final moments. Instead, our team advocated on his behalf for no machines, no tests, and created space for his wife to hold his hand and grieve.

In healthcare, especially medicine, we talk about the “art” and the “science” of providing care. Often, we say we need to balance those two concepts to ultimately provide the best care for people. Over the years, through the gift of practicing palliative care, I have added “mystical” to my list. I’ve learned to balance all three—the “art,” the “science,” and the “mystical.” Moments with patients and people that are unique, unexplainable, and intangible, and yet very real and palpable. Times where I am surprised by the gift of being in the right place at the right time for that individual. They are too profound to be coincidence and continue to inspire my connections with people who invite me into their worlds, even if only for a brief time.