

Between life and death – one year as a volunteer in Hospice Timisoara

When I tell my friends or my family from Germany about my experience from Hospice Timisoara, the most common answer is “ I couldn’t do that”. One year I worked as a volunteer in Hospice (August 2013 – July 2014). And the year has passed by quickly.

I didn’t know exactly what awaits me here. Neither did I know if I could do “such a thing”, having no experience in the field of palliative care, especially with the ones in need. In this year I had the chance to pick up some experiences for which I am grateful. That’s why I want to share them with you.

On the one hand, there are the practical experiences in contact with the sick. The most essential and very important part in my work was to help in the daily program : to give food, to change diapers, to wash the patients. I mean their physical needs. At least as important as the needs of the soul seem to me. Actually, for that you don’t need much, only : open ears, a strong hand and a bit of patience. At first I can hardly spoke Romanian, now I know even to write, but I realized that this doesn’t matter too much, because the most important thing here is the language of the heart – as the psychologists from Hospice used to say often. I’m neither a psychologist, nor a doctor or a medical assistant. So let me introduce myself – my name is Peter Fendel, I’m twenty nine years old and I graduated Faculty and MBA in Catholic Theology and general history.

So, what can we offer to our patients?

For me, as a volunteer, the most important thing was to develop relationships with my patients, to sit next to them, to recognize them as people up to the end. Many times this idea became real in a wonderful way and I developed amazing relationships. Some of my patients used to like me playing guitar. After that we started to talk about the weather, football, but also about life and death. Sometimes my patients used to thanks me for my service and because I helped them to make their situation more bearable. Yes, this was my goal : to give a little more quality to their lives, to give them some consolation. This is a vey beautiful thing to do especially because of the number of patients who spend the last days of their lives in Hospice. During this year I took care of more than two hundred patients, about one hundred and fifty of whom died in our home. Building relationships with so many people - relationships that end after few weeks - is more tiring that I thought it would be. Also, every case of disease is sad and difficult.

Without “springs of life”, without my faith, I couldn’t work in this field. I admire my colleagues who have been working in Hospice for years! Besides practical experiences, working in Hospice for me means a struggle with my life on a deeper level. The lesson that we learn here day by day almost sounds like a stereotype : “ Life is short”. Our lives are limited, just like we are. I mean chronologically our life is limited. My opinion is that whoever works in Hospice can no longer

live the same way as before. Everything becomes more urgent and more clear also. Very often I ask myself – what's really important in my life?

Our powers are limited too. Modern medicine succeed amazingly, but in front of death we are all helpless. We are limited when sick feel pain and fear. But, after this year in Hospice, I am sure that we have something that counterbalance pain and death : caring for one another, we can spread love to the others, the faith that our life is in the hands of God.

Working in Hospice it's like a transit area between life and death. We all get closer day by day to this border – that is a fundamental part of our life. We expose at a reality that in this modern society is a taboo. I feel that in this way we get closer to a mystery and we started to have less mysteries nowadays. Nobody looks behind that line, between life and death. But also, I feel that is a feeling that starts opening when we stay in front of that line. In that place where our life is limited, the space for another life is opening too. Working in that transit area made me changing my entire perspective forever. I think that is a decision in front of so much sufferance and in front of death : it is about having the courage to let ourselves to life and being resigned despite of this experiences.

I feel very grateful for my experiences in the Hospice, for the people I had the chance to meet in this year and from which I learned so many things : my colleagues, patients, or caregivers. I still don't know exactly how, but I'm sure that this year will significantly influence my life trying to find deeper, more intense and more human experiences.