Sarah’s Touching Lamp
MaryK McGinley, MBA

It was 1972. I was a young, inexperienced medical social worker in a community hospital in eastern Pennsylvania. It was the week before Christmas, a Tuesday, that I received the request to assist a patient’s husband in making home care arrangements for his dying wife. That was the day I met Sarah and Andrew (pseudonyms). He was 84 and she was 72. They would soon be celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, on February 14, her birthday, their Valentine’s Day. This gentle, loving couple would forever remind me of the beautiful power of unconditional love, respect, light, and touch.

Sarah had severe arthritis and had been in pain for many years; now she was dying from ovarian cancer. The nurses knew she was in pain and medications were ordered, but Sarah wanted to remain lucid, talking, experiencing every moment she could with her husband, being held and holding onto him.

Arrangements were made for Sarah to be discharged and receive care at home. I made a home visit 2 days later, and it was as though I had stepped back in time. Sarah and Andrew lived in the country, in a quaint, colorfully decorated and comfortable cottage home surrounded by the promise of a spring and summer garden. A workshop behind the house was where Andrew spent his daylight hours. He had made a window seat bed where Sarah was comfortably tucked in, to be near him.

He was working on her lamp, a stained glass creation of several colors: yellow, her favorite color, the color of the sun and symbolic of warmth to comfort her; white flowers with bright orange centers and green trim, the colors of her garden flowers. It was a touch-tap lamp so that Sarah had only to reach her gnarled fingers out, tap it, and it would shed its light and warmth. As the three of us sat there, I was fascinated by their fluid movements in touching, comforting each other—reaching out, their movements flowing as one, one very long life of love. How I envied and admired their love.

I visited the couple weekly. By early January, Sarah’s illness was rapidly progressing; her ability to function, to want to talk, and even to open her eyes was diminishing, but Andrew only had to reach out and touch her, and one could see her react and smile and try to hold on. The touching said it all for them.

In early February, Sarah was readmitted to the hospital. Andrew could not bear to see her in pain and worried because he could not care for her, comfort her, or meet her bodily needs after visiting hours ended.

Members from their church community wanted to help, but Sarah and Andrew were very private people, and Sarah wanted all her remaining time alone with Andrew. In what would be her last few conscious days of life, she asked me for one favor—a last night with her husband lying close to her so that she could hug him and they could just be together. Several staff nurses immediately responded, and although it was not the hospital’s
policy for family members to stay in patient rooms beyond visitation hours, an exception was arranged. Decorations and help seemed to come from everywhere among staff, who created a honeymoon room for the couple.

Andrew had tried feverishly to finish the stained glass lamp for Sarah but had not been able to do so because of his time at the hospital that final week. However, he did have a small sample he had made to work from, and that light shone throughout their night in that once sterile—now inviting—room. According to the nurses, the following morning Sarah was bright, smiling, and peaceful, and both of them were so grateful for what became Sarah’s last conscious evening with Andrew. She slipped into a coma and died on the eve of her 73rd birthday.

At Sarah’s funeral, Andrew was humbly stotic and polite. His left hand held Sarah’s during the entire viewing until the casket was closed. He accepted the kind words and expressions of sympathy from the crowd who attended her funeral. Members of their church congregation kept daily contact with Andrew. All of us had promised Sarah we would do that. Every day he could be found in his workshop with Lilly, their yellow Labrador, by his side, as he continued to work on Sarah’s stained glass lamp.

A year later, Andrew was admitted to the hospital with congestive heart failure. He was treated and released and slowed down after that but continued to walk Lilly daily and still spent hours in his workshop. On one visit, I noticed that Sarah’s favorite white cotton nightgown was draped over her window seat bed. Andrew talked of Sarah’s smell, how he missed holding her hand, feeling her snuggle close to him at night, especially on a cold night. He wanted to tell me as much as he could about her and their lives—how they met; that she had come from “a good Philadelphia family” and defied her family by marrying him, a stone mason; how lucky he was to be her husband; and how much in love they were.

Being young and naive, I did not realize what Andrew was sharing with me—his Sarah and his memories of their life together—until he showed up in my hospital office and presented me with Sarah’s colorful stained glass lamp. It was now completed and very beautiful, shining with all the colors that she loved—and that I loved too. According to Andrew, Sarah had told him that she wanted me to have the lamp, to remember them by. In our conversations, she had often said that old people value intimacy too, and she always believed she and Andrew had a love filled with passion and excitement. In their old age, their single touch of hands conveyed the power and endurance of all those years of deep, deep love and physical connection. Andrew said he was humbled by the outpouring of help when Sarah became ill.

Several months later, Andrew died. A neighbor stopped by to check on him and found him in his workshop, slumped over the work table. He had completed the design for his and Sarah’s joint tombstone, which included engravings of the lamp, flowers, Lilly, and clasped hands.

The stained glass lamp has a designated place in the front window of my home and softly casts its light every night. It reflects the lives of Sarah and Andrew and is a reminder of the value of loving someone, growing old, and enjoying and being comforted by colorful light, warmth, and the soft touch to make it happen.

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