Continuing Education – June 2010
The Power of Presence

In her NPR essay “The Power of Presence,” psychologist Debbie Hall says, “Presence is a noun, not a verb; it is a state of being not doing.” She goes on to say that “true presence or ‘being with’ another person carries silent power – to bear witness to a passage, to help carry an emotional burden or to begin a healing process. . . . I am . . . repeatedly stuck by the healing power of connection created by being fully there in the quiet understanding of another.” (To read or listen to the entire essay go to www.npr.com, This I Believe, “Debbie Hall: The Power of Presence,” December 26, 2005).

All hospice patient family support volunteering is about BEING as well as DOING. Whether volunteers are involved in an ongoing relationship with a patient and family or providing support at a moment’s notice the following gifts are invaluable and worth restating.

- **Communication Skills.** An ability to listen, to converse and to BE when there are NO words. Being able to listen more and talk less is key to developing a good relationship. Volunteers who value what is heard (without adding personal opinion, advice or experience) offer the best support to patients and families. All volunteers need to develop and practice an awareness of their communication skills.

- **Sense of Humor.** It is helpful (and wise) NOT to take oneself too seriously. Laughter can be as healing as medicine. This is not about forced humor. Do not be afraid of laughter. Offer fun if it seems warranted—share a new joke or cartoon; relate a funny story; watch a comedy—provide some light-hearted fun!

- **The Outside World.** Bring flowers; community news; a video; music; books; a special dish you make; something the patient likes.

- **Ingenuity and Creativity.** Perhaps you can interest your patient in drawing, keeping a journal, writing or dictating a poem or a life story. Do you like to read aloud? Do you play an instrument or have music to share? Creativity can help the patient gain release from stress, release from pain and release from anxieties and fears. Listen to your patients stories and honor them.

- **Talents and Skills.** One’s past experience—profession, hobbies, talents and interests—are invaluable assets in developing creative ways to enhance your assignment. “Who You Are” may be just what is needed. We are the sum total of all the days we have lived—and the fact that you are “there” is even more important.

- **YOURSELF!** You are bringing the greatest gift of all—yourself, your presence, your gift for life. The greatest gift you will receive is the privilege of taking a final journey with another human being. It is precious time.

By being available to provide support in the form needed by our patients and families, the presence of our volunteers can and does make an essential difference.

(adapted from “Continuing Education: At A Moment’s Notice: The Power of Presence,” March 2006.)