

The Story Behind the “Hospice Whispers” Necklace



Rev. Dr. Carla Cheatham

www.carlacheatham.com 512-527-4455

In 2007, I began working as a hospice chaplain in Austin, Texas. The chaplaincy is a very different ministry from being clergy for a particular religion, with ethical boundaries very similar to those of a therapist. We are called to care for persons of all faiths and no faith according to their beliefs, values, and needs without bringing our own views into the relationship.

Because of this unique calling, I am mindful of what I wear. I don't want my jewelry to unintentionally form a barrier between me and persons of other faiths or persons for whom religion has been a negative experience. I wanted a universal symbol that would speak to all persons and help build a bridge of trust and connection.

My goal is to help all patients and families know they can be honest and real with me without fear of judgment for how they live or what they believe. I didn't know exactly what it would look like, but I knew it would find me.

That year, I was browsing at the Pecan Street Arts Festival in downtown Austin, when lights flashed and choirs sang and I knew I had found my necklace! It was in the booth of dichroic glass artist, Amy Kappler, of Hippos Eating Alligators. It was perfect. It captured the spiritual nature I wanted to communicate to help offer open and safe space, even to those who may be skittish of “pastors” or may have baggage about religion. Besides, I think it's pretty freaking gorgeous! I've worn it every day since.

Everyone loves the necklace. Each day, I receive multiple compliments on it and it opens up conversations about what others see in the image. Most say, “the Tree of Life”. Often, they go on to tell me their stories. It's always a gentle exchange that leaves us both smiling and feeling more peaceful. Even patients who have dementia enjoy holding it and tilting it back and forth to catch the sparkle of light and changes in color that bounce off the glass.

In 2010, when I began training healthcare staff, I was surprised by how strongly many chaplains struggled with letting go of wearing symbols from their own religion in their healthcare work. But as we discussed how our religious images might unintentionally shut down

dialogue with patients and families, you could see them begin to realize that the potential for harm outweighed their own needs. After all, it isn't about us! My necklace helped illustrate the point and served as a model for another possible way.

As my business grew, I contacted Amy and explained what the necklace means to me and others and how I use it in my work and trainings. She graciously granted me full rights to use the image in whatever ways I wished to help promote my work. It became my business logo in 2013.

In July of 2014, I was writing up the curriculum for the chaplain training I've designed when I realized that 1) it was going to take many more months to write (and I needed to publish something soon) and 2) lay persons need help better understanding hospice so they won't avoid our services out of fear and misunderstanding. So I sketched out a list of the stories I tell in my trainings to see if I had enough to make an actual book.

The next day, I was in a coffee shop I had not been in for several years, working on this list of stories, when I ran into a friend, Greg Futch, whom I had not seen in years. We visited a few moments as he waited for a friend whom he said was helping him with a project. Mindy Reed arrived and he introduced us, explaining that she was actually an editor who helped people independently publish their work. "Oh, really?!" I said, as my eyebrows shot up.

"What about you, Carla? What do you do?" I told her I was a hospice chaplain and, pointing to my laptop, that I was actually working on a book of stories about my work to help people understand hospice more and fear it less.

Throwing her hands in the air, she exclaimed, "OOOHHH, Hospice!!!", as big tears sprang up in her eyes and she reached out to grasp my hands. "You took care of my mom and my dad and I tell everyone hospice workers are angels on earth. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!"

"Ummm, do you have a card?" I asked.

We met 4 days later and developed a plan to publish my stories as an E-book and later as a paperback. Ten weeks later, Hospice Whispers: Stories of Life published through Amazon as an e-book. It was clear what the cover needed to be! Two dear friends helped make that vision a reality. Laura Saintey painted the image in acrylic and added one small green leaf to highlight that the focus of hospice is on life, not death. Laura Jenkins photographed and photo shopped the image, and the cover was born.

Another friend, Joe McDermott, loaned me his studio and assistant to record the stories in my own voice as an audio book that came out through Amazon/Audible 9 weeks later on Christmas Eve. When the paperback published July 2015, with the same cover, and my speaking and training business grew, interest in the image and necklace grew, as well.

Again, I contacted Amy. She said she had not made this design since the year I bought that necklace, and even then had only created a few. She agreed to re-create the necklace and, after many months of working to get it just right, she is now allowing me to pass it on to all of you.

There's so much more to the story, but I hope you can see that this image has been on an almost decade-long journey of love and life and grace. I'm grateful that it has now made its way into your hands, and I trust it will bring you much joy and peace.

Blessings,

Carla

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Original image by Amy Kappler, www.hipposeatingalligators.com

Original painting (color acrylic, canvas) by Laura Saintey

Photography and photo shop by Laura Jenkins