

As Her Pastor

Carroll E. Arkema

*As her Pastor,
I went to visit her
In the hospital one day.*

*Didn't want to go,
Didn't like her;
I doubted she liked me.*

*She was seventy-nine,
A widow, had one son
Who lived in Hawaii.*

*She was crotchety.
Had exacting standards,
Told it the way she saw it.*

*On the face of it,
She accorded no favors
To authorities.*

I'd known her for three years;

Carroll E. Arkema is a pastoral psychotherapist and Marriage, Family Therapist in New Jersey and New York City. This poem is from his book, *Beyond Me: Poems about Spirit in Scripture, Psychotherapy and Life*. (Eugene,OR: Resource, 2014) and is used with permission

*She always greeted me,
But she rarely smiled.*

*She'd probably have said
That liking each other
Isn't what really matters;*

*What matters is integrity,
Being honest and true:
A good heart.*

*I'd think to myself,
"A warm heart
Would go a long way, too."*

*I never did learn
What wounds
She was covering.*

*I didn't know why
She was in the hospital
Nor how we learned of it.*

*So with trepidation,
I went to see her,
Expecting criticism –*

*Where had I been?
Why not come sooner?
It's hard to reach you.*

*Upon entering the room
I saw the fear in her eyes.
Past time for criticism,*

*Beyond setting things right
Any more in this life.
She looked terrified.*

*I was scared now, too,
Unprepared for this:
Hadn't known this person.*

*But my sense of death
In the room
And the fear in her eyes*

*Did help me shift gears,
Lay down my arms,
And be with her.*

*I could see in her eyes
For the first time
That she was glad to see me.*

*A door had opened here;
There was room for me
In her room.*

*"Not doing well," she said,
And then she coughed,
Yes, she coughed,*

*She'd brought her
Hand to her mouth,
Then drew it away.*

*Sweet Jesus help me!
I'll never forget
What lay in her hand there:*

*There lay these pinkish
Gray porous chunks
Of . . . her lungs!*

*In freeze-frame slow motion
I spent whole seconds
Taking this in.*

*So shocked
I'm amazed that I stayed
In the room. Thank God.*

*This was a situation
Where being a role
Helped me function:*

*Rather than turn, run,
Sick to my stomach,
Dash to the bathroom.*

*Everything was
Different from here on;
Terms not the same.*

*I knew for sure now
What was happening.
Poor vulnerable Being.*

*Her cough made clear to me,
And maybe to herself, too,
What was happening.*

*Death was definitely
Rattling us,
A daunting force.*

*Though outmaneuvered and
Momentarily disarmed,
I was still her Pastor.*

*As her Pastor
I saw her disintegration,
Shared her anguish.
She'd kept so much inside;
Couldn't any more.
She was undone.*

*I don't remember
What I said.
But I stayed.*

*The Spirit spoke
Through my presence.
"O Esther," I said.*

*The nurse came,
Cleaned her hand.
I held her hand.*

*I didn't stay long;
She was drained.
She was dying.*

*I said a prayer;
Saw deep love
In her eyes,*

*Eyes full of tears,
Heading into rest.
Still in shock, I left.*

*The next day
The Church Receptionist
Told me of her death.*

*Peace at the last?
I think so. God knows
Her Pastor had come.*

*It's thirty-five years hence;
I'm still trying to process
All that happened between us.*

*I was her Pastor.
What an honor,
What a horror!*

*The Spirit helps
Us do far better
Than we could muster.*

*The Senior Pastor
Presided at her funeral.
But a few months later*

*I received a Greeting Card
From her son –
Postmarked “Hawaii” –*

*In which he thanked me
For my kindness
To his mother!*

*Adding that she had often
Spoken well of me
As her “fine young Pastor.”*

*A final shock—this blessing
That the Spirit sent me
From her through her son.*

*One doesn't learn this stuff
In Theological Seminary:
One can't really:*

*The guarded forms love takes
So as to keep intact
The ways wounded souls cope.*