

My most memorable client

I called her my three foot high teenager, with that exaggerated roll of her eyes if anyone talked down to her, but for all that attitude, she was only five. I had a hard time fitting her in with my perception of a preschooler, and she would never have the happy carefree existence that the normal preschooler should have. She had bone cancer, and after a grueling round of chemotherapy, during which she lost all of her hair, her right leg was amputated below the knee.

Yet in other ways, she was just like any other kid. I followed this girl, who we can call Summer, through a year of her treatment. The challenge for me, volunteering on the Sparrow Pediatric Unit, was to understand her as a child and yet talk to her as the adult she wanted to be. I tried playing Monopoly with a child who couldn't read or count. She didn't want to play house with the toy food, but instead, she wanted to put on a pair of oversized rubber gloves and help me clean the dirty toys. Her normally bright face would shut down if anyone offered her direct sympathy, but she loved to sit and talk like a grown up. Part of my care for her was treating her in the way she wanted to be treated – a miniature adult who wanted some control over her life.

One of my main concerns for Summer was to have her know that she was as beautiful as I saw her to be – Risk for Disturbed Body Image in nursing terms – but this could defiantly not involve princess dress up. One day, after her amputation, I stopped by Summer's room to check on her and found her with one of the most despairing faces I have ever seen but still refusing to cry. At that moment, I realized that children could really feel everything that an adult could feel, even if they couldn't express it. An adult would have been reassured by my saying that the cancer was now gone from her body, but she couldn't see it that way. She couldn't be reassured by the future, and so I just stayed and talked, trying to interest her in the present.

One more tragic event happened to Summer. At home, she refused to wear her prosthetic and fell on her amputated leg, breaking her femur. Unaware of this, I had been deeply moved by my earlier encounter with her, and I bought her a necklace with a glass dragonfly on it. The day after her fall, I wandered into the hospital with my little gift. At first she didn't want to see me. No Sympathy please. I just want to give you something, I said. I slipped the little glass wings into her hands. Through this encounter, and many others, I have seen the role that a nurse could play in the lives of children, and it has fueled my desire to become a pediatric nurse.