

FROM THE INSIDE

Parting is such sweet sorrow

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In memory of Irma and the lessons she taught us, Frans and the relatives gave consent to publish this article.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow”

William Shakespeare, 1594, Romeo and Juliet Act 2, scene 2

One morning, Irma, a 30-year-old woman with long blond hair, had collapsed during jogging. Deeply comatose, she was admitted to the intensive care. The CT-scan showed a catastrophic subarachnoid haemorrhage with intracerebral expansion of blood in the temporal lobe. Most probably an aneurysm from the middle cerebral artery that had ruptured. The prospect looked grim. Her pupils were fixed and dilated. We feared that she was already brain dead, but decided to continue intensive care for 24 h to see if there would be any improvement. If not, we would withdraw all life-sustaining measures and let her die, or in case she was declared brain dead we would ask her relatives for organ donation. She was mechanically ventilated. We administered vasoactive medication and treated a diabetes insipidus.

It was 1994. As a PhD student I did research on brain death and organ donation. I wanted to see all patients on our intensive care in which brain death was suspected, and so I talked to their loved ones. Did they understand what brain death was? Did they understand that brain death was the same as death? At nine in the evening, at Irma's bed, I talked to Frans, her boyfriend. Again, I told him that the prospect looked bad for Irma and explained the difference between brain death and coma. He understood and asked me how I was not emotionally disrupted by all the suffering we—medical people—saw every day on the intensive care. I said, “We have an empathic filter.

We have compassion with our patients and their relatives, but with professional distance”. He nodded and told me he was an English teacher. I love reading English literature, so, next to the bed with his comatose girlfriend we talked about Virginia Woolf, George Orwell and other English authors. We looked at his girlfriend and he said he was going to miss her so much. I cited a phrase from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: “Parting is such sweet sorrow”. He asked me how I interpreted the meaning of that phrase. I explained: “There will come a day that you will part from your loved one. That will be a sorrow. But when it is with good memories, it will be a sweet sorrow”. He was touched by the words and cried.

Later that evening he asked me if he could lie on the floor next to her bed and if he could get a blanket to lie on. I refused. Instead, with the help of a nurse I put an empty bed next to the bed where his comatose girlfriend lay. I told him that this was the last night that he could sleep next to his love. We moved the young woman more to the side of the bed. I said to him: “Lie down next to her, embrace her, kiss her, caress her. Tonight is your last night together”. So he did. He slept that night close to his love. Early the next morning we woke him up. The neurologist examined Irma. She was still deeply comatose, her pupils were fixed and dilated and all brainstem reflexes were absent except her cough reflex. Her brain had suffered severely from the initial bleeding and herniation, but she was not brain dead. That morning, at ten, we withdrew all life-sustaining measures. Within 5 min after the withdrawal of the mechanical ventilation her heart stopped.

Frans sent me an invitation to the Irma's funeral. It is the only funeral of a patient that I ever went to in the 40 years I worked in patient care. At her grave, Frans said he would miss her deeply, but that it will be a sweet sorrow because he had so many good memories of her. He mentioned that the last night with her, in anticipation of her death, was such a valuable and sweet sorrow. On her tombstone the phrase from Romeo and Juliet, “Parting is

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such sweet sorrow” was engraved. I cried. My “empathic filter” had failed completely.

Frans and Irma taught me to collect memories, good memories, drinking coffee with my loved ones, doing things together, spending time together. We spend too much time on things that don’t matter. We stare at our smartphones, are “online” 24/7, we establish contact with our virtual friends on Facebook and think we should comment on every tweet on Twitter instead of taking a rest next to our loved ones and turn off our smartphones when we are at home. Every night can be our last. Make sure that the final goodbye will be a sweet sorrow. I learned this valuable lesson that night, 25 years ago.

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