

Spiritual Life

RICH BARLOW

Faith helped nun through the shadows

Sister Bridget Haase tells the story of a patient at The Boston Home, a residence for people with multiple sclerosis and other neurological diseases, who mentioned Haase's long tenure. Haase, who has run the facility's spirituality and wellness program since 1999, asked how the woman knew that.

"When you first came," she replied, "I could move 10 fingers, and now I can move two." In Haase's world, the passage of time is marked by the progression of disability and measured by lifeless fingers rather than years. Haase thought she understood this dynamic. Then last year, the Ursuline nun was diagnosed with breast cancer.

A woman whose religious life spanned almost five decades and who had encouraged her patients to find spirituality, suddenly found herself feeling that the desperate prayers of one sick woman were too puny.

Haase had to rebuild the muscle of her faith. Battling disease tested her conviction that illness is a comma in life, pausing the flow of living but not ending it.

"So much of life and faith is lived from the head. . . . The hardest way to get it down to the heart is through difficulties and challenges," she said in her small office at the sprawling brick home in Dorchester.

Haase, 63, who lives in a Dedham convent, was diagnosed last April. She'd almost missed a mammogram that caught the cancer she says the clinic squeezed her into the one open slot between then and fall and the grim diagnosis began an ordeal that would have tested Job.



Sister Bridget Haase (right) greeted Anna Holland, a resident of The Boston Home. After Haase was diagnosed with breast cancer, she learned that "faith is so easy until you need it."

She had surgery in June, around the same time her mother died after years of battling Alzheimer's disease. "I was not able to be with her in her last hours because of my surgery, nor could I go to her funeral," she said.

Neither the June surgery nor a follow-up one were successful, so last September, she had a mastectomy, just days after Hurricane Katrina ravaged her hometown of New Orleans, flooding out family members.

Each steppingstone of disappointment tripped her trust in her prayers.

"I just felt I was under the night sky of life," she said. "I discovered faith is so easy until you need it. . . . God had given me a test, like an

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SISTER BRIDGET HAASE

MCAS, and I found out that all my answers did not match His multiple choices, that a lot of the answers I thought I had

no longer kind of went along with how life was evolving."

Reeling psychologically, she came to feel that her prayers weren't sufficient. She put out the spiritual equivalent of an all-points bulletin, asking everybody she knew to pray for her.

"Everybody," she emphasized. "Folks here [at The Boston Home], my religious community. I've been stationed all around the world." Haase has done humanitarian work in Africa and Mexico "so I have a lot of contacts that way. . . . I asked them to pray with me, for wisdom for the doctors and courage for myself. I continued to pray, very much so, on my own. But there comes a time when you know you need others to lift that prayer."

One of those she asked to help was Boston Home resident Eleanor Kasilowicz, who recalls her shock at Haase's illness. "Sister is someone who is a giver," said the 47-year-old nurse. "She never slows down. And for something like this to hit her."

Kasilowicz, whose mother died of breast cancer, took a spirituality and wellness program that discussed death and dying. It taught her to put aside her natural reserve, and her anger over her condition she has lupus for the first time. Praying for Haase allowed her to return the favor.

The heartfelt prayers of patients at the home, their own lives so desperately ravaged by sickness, touched Haase. With her mastectomy, her prognosis was good. Her faith, like her health, rebounded.

It's not the same faith she had before. She knows now in her gut that prayer has shadowy valleys as well as sunny peaks.

She acknowledges that she might feel less sanguine if things had turned out poorly for her medically. Yet she notes that her religious belief had been strong enough to weather earlier tragedies her father's suicide, her mother's illness, watching innocent children she cared for die in Africa.

Working at The Boston Home, she knew in her head what it must be like to face illness that will never go away. Now, she says, her heart knows it, too.

