

How Angela had her first haircut in 15 years

Becoming **able** to really listen

When Angela's brother, Charlie, died she lost the person she loved most on earth. Angela never married and has no children, she had only two siblings. She thought of Charlie first if she had any money to spare, and even if she did not. She liked to get him something from her small weekly allowance which was barely enough to cover her own needs, as it was: a pack of cigarettes his favorite brand, *Marlboros*. And Charlie was first on her mind when she made her Christmas list. When he got sick and had to go to the hospital repeatedly, she cleaned his apartment before he returned -which is saying a lot because cleaning her own apartment was not something Angela was ever eager to do.

The news came to her early one morning from her other brother, Martin. Charlie had died. Angela came up the stairs to the office and broke the news to the staff. When I came in later that day, it was a different Angela I saw than the one I had cheerfully taken leave of the afternoon before. She held my hand tight and her eyes, the tears overflowing, had the look of those who know that life's dark waters have swept over them.

But even the deepest grief does not give you respite from the ordinary demands of life. Angela's family, and we, the staff, had to think ahead about getting her ready for Charlie's wake and funeral. How would we support her there? Who would accompany her and, an issue we could not entirely ignore, how would she look?

Her close and loving extended family wanted her very much to look as they did. They did not want her to have the appearance of someone different and marginalized. Neither did we, the staff. So we began the process of getting her new clothes. Angela did not want to have anything to do with such superficialities. How could she, in her grief? We understood, but talked to her about how much it would mean to her family to see her nicely dressed. She relented but drew the line at one thing: she would do nothing with her hair.

Angela had not cut her hair in fifteen years. It fell stringy and uneven down her back. Sometimes it got matted in thick knots. She did not say why, but she just did not want her hair cut and the staff could do nothing to change her mind. Heaven knows we had tried. What were we going to do now? We began with the method of first preference in residential counseling. What I call *gentle badgering*.

"You will look good, Angela, with your hair cut. Your family will be so proud of you. Won't you get it cut and set for their sake? For Charlie's sake? It would be the *right* thing to do."

Angela stood firm. She would not.

As I went home that evening after yet more unsuccessful efforts to persuade Angela to go the hairdresser, I had a vague sense of *déjà vu*. I had been in this place before, this tug of war with a client. The staff holding on to one end of the rope with arguments of what was *reasonable*, and *socially appropriate*, and the clients at the other end, clinging to a *truth* about themselves and their experiences that we could neither see or understand.

Some years ago I might have got more firmly entrenched in my position and tried even harder to yank Angela over to my side, the side of “reason.” Like a mallet hitting a gong, I might have repeated the same old arguments. I had explained this fifteen times over; perhaps sixteen is the magic number? But in my years of working at *Advocates*, I have become better **able** to recognize this futile tug of war, and even more important, more willing to drop the rope and walk over to where the client stood.

The next day, I was going to try something else. I sought Angela out.

“Ange”, I said, “Will you have a haircut if I have one with you?”

Angela paused for a few seconds. “Will you?”

“I will,”

“Then I will too”.

When Angela’s friend Fran heard this, she said she said she wanted to come too. So the three of us trooped in to a walk-in salon. My budget-conscious supervisor joked that we should have asked for a group discount.

I sat on a swivel chair. Angela sat on the one next to it. When she put out her hand I could reach out and grasp it in mine.

“About an inch off, “I told my hairdresser.

“I want my hair just like hers” Angela said, pointing to me.

Soon, long strands of Angela’s hair fell on the floor and what remained on her head framed her face in waves. I recalled that Angela had been considered the most beautiful girl in her high school class. I couldn’t turn to look at her without risking being jabbed by a sharp pair of scissors, so I caught her eyes in the mirror in front of us and smiled.

Angela smiled back.