

Theology/Philosophy Regarding the Spirituality of Healing
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I remember sitting in Catholic Mass as an adolescent and looking around at all those sitting in the pews with me. I was fascinated by their faces, and what I could read there in the unguarded moments of prayer and song. What I saw often moved my heart in a way that was new to me, in a way that I took notice of, in a way that made me wonder about these people and the details of their lives. I wanted to hear their stories. It was clear even to my young mind that just by listening to them I would be able to offer some comfort. It was also clear to me that every single one of those people was deserving of the gift of being heard and held.

Ten years later I found myself working in a homeless shelter and exploring theologies very different from the Catholicism of my childhood. After hundreds of moments of listening to the shelter's guests share their stories and holding them in both tears and laughter, I found myself longing to do more. One day during our morning prayer service a poem was read, written by Marianne Williamson, and one of the lines was this:

Dear God, deliver me to my power to heal.

I remember being broken open by those words. That night, I wrote in my journal, "I want to be a healer." I understood intuitively that healing was different than curing; that this call I was feeling was not pointing toward medicine but something less tangible, more intimate. It took me fifteen years to figure out I was being called to pastoral care.

"For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. For your immortal spirit is in all things."

~ Wisdom 11:24, 12:1

"For do you not know that you are God's temple and the Spirit of God dwells within you?"

~ 1 Corinthians 3:16

"We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

~ 1st Principle of Unitarian Universalism

"We are spiritual beings, created in God's image. The spirit of God lives within each person; therefore, all people are inherently good."

~ Unity (New Thought) 2nd Basic Principle of Belief

Imago Dei – the assertion that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. This core belief, instilled into the very depths of my being by the three spiritual traditions that have formed me, is the container which holds all I believe about pastoral and spiritual care. All beings are worthy of care, compassion, and love. As C.S. Lewis says, we are all "possible gods and goddesses... All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to this destination... There are no ordinary people."

There are no ordinary people. Each of us is created in the image of God. Most of us have forgotten this fact; or it has been buried under the effects of trauma or neglect; or obscured by fear and grief. When we lose our awareness of the divine within, and our connection to the divine in others, there is suffering, grief, anxiety, loneliness. Spiritual care, first and foremost, is reminding, affirming, and guiding people back into the fullness of their own divinity and their connection to all beings and to God.

This means, too, that I as a pastoral caregiver must attend to my awareness and connection with my own inner divinity and with God. Through self-care and regular spiritual practice, I can be mindful of my own emotional, psychological, and spiritual health, allowing me to be self-differentiated from those I serve and helping me to maintain healthy boundaries in my work. By allowing myself to connect with these beautiful, sometimes broken places within myself and my own life, I can open myself to presence and compassion with more agility and confidence, assured of my abilities and pastoral authority.

Henri Nouwen writes, “When we have found the anchor places for our lives in our own center we can be free to let others enter into the space created for them and allow them to dance their own dance, sing their own song, and speak their own language without fear. Then our presence is no longer threatening and demanding but inviting and liberating.”

Therefore, I must not only be grounded in my own spiritual center, but also walk humbly through my work, aware of the space I occupy - not coming in too large, but also not being afraid to step in to fill the places I am asked to, and capable of filling. Being humble does not mean that I have no responsibility to encourage, sometimes even insist upon, challenge and change. True humility – intentionally occupying the space I am meant to (and trained to) occupy – calls me to claim my ministerial authority, informed by my skills, training, and intuition.

Pastoral care is not always “particularly pastoral or ‘nice’...[it] disturbs as well as comforts, provokes as well as guides. It breaks silences and calls for radical truth telling; it names shame and guilt, calls for confession and repentance, and moves vigilantly towards forgiveness and reconciliation,” says Bonnie Miller-McLemore in her book *Christian Theology in Practice*. However, in order for pastoral care to be effective and meaningful, all of these things must flow forth from a deep, underlying compassion.

In Latin – *compati*. Com = together. Pati = to suffer. To suffer together.

In my experience, being treated with compassion is being fully seen and heard; feeling that someone else is fully present with me and willing to stay, no matter what is happening. No matter what. And while that can be comforting, it can also be scary, because it means that I am being fully seen and heard while at my most vulnerable. In my brokenness, in my woundedness, in my *suffering* someone else is right there – not just observing, not just supporting, but really *being* with me, truly knowing me in that frightening place.

As a spiritual caregiver, this is where I am called to reside with those I serve. It is beautiful and terrifying, and many times a hard place to be. Compassion, whether giving or receiving, erases the illusion of other. I have to be willing to let go of any ideas of separateness. I have to understand that we are all one. I have to be open to whatever is and whatever will be. And I have to be brave. Christina Feldman, in her book *Compassion*, says, “learning to nurture a heart without boundaries is truly a journey that asks for profound understanding, receptivity, and courage.”

How do I sustain work of this depth?

To live and work from a place of deep compassion requires intention, as I mentioned earlier, in the form of self-care and spiritual practice; AND none of us can do this work alone – neither as spiritual caregivers nor those doing the work of healing themselves. We human beings are social creatures, requiring emotional and physical connections to be whole, to reflect back to us the truth of our divinity, and to offer strength and courage when our own are failing.

Parker Palmer speaks to this in his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, saying, “First, we all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader. Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher's voice.”

For the spiritual caregiver, it is the community of colleagues that helps me to remember and refine that inner wisdom, the community of friends and family that offers comfort and support, and the community of those I serve that reminds me of our common humanity. For those in need of healing (which, arguably, is all of us), connection with others – caregivers, friends, family, church – offers safety, support, and guidance as we do the work of healing ourselves.

And it is we who heal ourselves – others can only facilitate, guide, and nourish the process. The stories we tell about ourselves (and to ourselves) matter. Our thoughts and words have power. Without supporting the healing process with positive thoughts and also changing negative patterns of thinking into nourishing patterns, it is almost impossible for real healing to occur. We have the power to change the narratives we tell about ourselves and our lives – and this in turn can change our reality. There is scientific evidence supporting the theories that holding attitudes based in hope and faith, believing transformation can happen, can have profound effects on our holistic health and wellness – and sometimes even on the world around us!

Not only are the stories we tell important, but the words we speak can also strongly affect what's happening, whether we are speaking these words to ourselves, to others, or to God. Thus, prayer can be used as a powerful tool in aiding the healing process. As a spiritual caregiver, through the use of intentional prayer, and by being mindful of what I say and how I say it, I can offer people different language, ways of reframing, and opportunities to tell different stories. In addition, through my intuition and training, I can learn to allow the space and silence in which old words can settle and new ones can be found.

When I was 29 years old, I came to a place of despair and deep unrest. After struggling for years with my sexuality I was finally at a breaking point, but didn't know how to get myself out of my old story and into a new one. I could not see the way on my own so I called in my two best friends to help. They sat with me in silence as I paced the floor, gathering courage, looking for words for the new story I wanted to tell. They stayed with me, present and loving, until I could finally say, “I'm gay.” The moment those words were out of my mouth (and the tears that accompanied them), I felt different. My life had changed. A new story had begun and I was the one telling it. My friends embraced me and whispered words of encouragement and hope, supporting me as I began the long process of healing and discovery.

I cannot force anyone to heal. Medicine can cure and maintain a certain amount of physical health, pharmaceuticals can assist in maintaining mental health, even some religion can help in holding the worst of our spiritual distress at bay, but wholeness in body, mind, and spirit can

only be found through desire for it, faith in its possibility, and courage in working for it. In the words of Maryam Hasnaa, I am a person who “holds space for someone as their inner healer awakens, so that they may heal themselves.” I as a spiritual caregiver am a guide, companion, and witness to this process.

In addition to being present for their journey, I can offer comfort and solace to those I serve. In fact, sometimes this is all I can give, as the situation or circumstances may not offer an opportunity for anything more. Along with a non-anxious presence, the tools I believe to be the most beneficial in my work are the following:

- Deep Listening is the most important skill a spiritual caregiver can have. It is a way of being in the world that is sensitive to all facets of an experience: external, internal, and contextual. The quality of our listening can make a profound difference in any interaction. With a curious mind, open heart, and loving spirit we allow the time and space for whatever needs to be shared, and we are able to hear beyond the surface to the essence of what is happening.
- Physical Touch is essential to intimate connection and our sense of belonging. The warmth of another’s hand or body pressed to ours lets us know we are not alone and that we are loved. In the exchange and interplay of energy (through modalities like Healing Touch, Reiki, Massage, etc.) physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is encouraged and enhanced.
- Music is a powerful form of communication, bringing us into harmony with each other and the natural world. Through rhythm and tone we can attune ourselves to something larger, reconnect with memories buried deep within, and stir emotions that move us toward healing.

When my grandmother was dying from injuries sustained from being hit by a car, my family gathered around her hospital bed for several days before making the difficult decision to remove all life-sustaining care. Through deep listening to the medical staff and to my grandmother’s body’s needs, we were able to discern the truth underlying our fragile hope – her death was imminent. As we stood vigil by her bedside, she would become agitated and anxious. When we reached out to touch her, laying our hands on her arms, legs, and head, her body would relax and she would fall into peaceful sleep once again. And it was music that sustained me through this tragedy. I would go home for a few hours each day to rest and refresh myself, and I would just lie on my bed and listen to songs that comforted me, letting them wash over my body and soul, soothing me for a few moments. It was music that also allowed my family’s grieving to transform into the beginning of healing, as we carefully chose hymns for us to sing with our community of family and friends at the funeral that would offer support and solace.

In this important and transformative work that I do, I often think of the story of the bleeding woman touching Jesus’ cloak, especially Luke’s version in chapter 8, verses 43-48:

“And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

“Who touched me?” Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.”

But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.”

Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

This woman, sick for so long, outcast from society, with no reason to hope for any healing, believed so strongly in God’s power to heal her that she was willing to brave the crowds, risk Jesus’ wrath, and take the chance that her hopes may be disappointed yet again. She had enough courage to not only hope for healing, but to actively go out seeking it, reaching out to grasp it. And because of her faith and courage, she was instantly rewarded with not only physical healing, but the warmth of God’s compassionate love and the welcome embrace back into connection with her community. I, as a chaplain, am given the opportunity to accompany people on this same journey. I can offer words of encouragement, bolster faith when it is weak, provide gentle challenge when stories are stuck, and offer guidance away from harmful or negative thoughts.

Unlike my 22 year old self, I understand now that I cannot heal anyone, BUT...when there is a desire for healing, and hope in the possibility, I can become a powerful conduit of God’s love for those whose lives touch me as I move throughout the hospital or care center. My mindful presence and humble authority create space for the hidden, broken, bruised, or despairing soul to enter and be held, be heard, and be healed.

Personal Mission Statement for Spiritual Care

To paraphrase Rumi: Wherever I stand, I shall be the soul of that place. And I shall also be the emptiness wherein all others find rest.

As a spiritual caregiver I guide, companion, and witness with others as they discover and express the god within themselves and heal their connection to the divine in all Its forms.

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