

# presence

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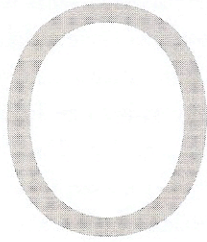
A Philosophy of Spiritual Direction Training • Spiritual Direction with Evangelicals  
Healing the Postmodern Soul • Attentiveness to the Spiritual Needs of the Seriously Ill





## Presence in a Health Care Setting: Sacred Time, Sacred Space, and Sacred Touch

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ver a hot meal of enchiladas, beans, and rice, two dozen employees gathered in a hospital conference room on a warm spring day last year in Austin, Texas, USA.

The employees included nurses, X-ray technicians, social workers, and administrative assistants. Together they read, silently reflected on, and then discussed Edward Hays's *Lenten Psalm of Awakening*. One woman, a social worker, remarked, "This poem about the Christian time of Lent reminds me of my religion's observance of Ramadan." She then explained the similarities and differences to those gathered, most of whom were Christian. After the gathering, I spoke with her about her faith journey. She said, "Every time I come to these programs, I hear something that relates to my own spirituality. I think each of us with our differing beliefs is like a unique flower that has been brought together with many other flowers of every color to form one beautiful bouquet."

How can such a variety of "beautiful flowers"—such a wide array of various religions and spiritual practices—come together for spiritual direction while at work in a hospital? Can meaningful spiritual direction occur in a health care setting? The Seton Cove, an affiliate of the Seton Family of Hospitals in Austin, has been experimenting for the past several years with ways to provide spiritual direction to hospital staff, patients, and their families. In a health care setting, the lines between the sacred and the secular, the living and the dead, become very thin. There is a need for deep listening and presence among staff and patients alike. The question, of course, is how to make time and space for such an encounter, given the challenges of appropriate staffing levels, acute illness, family dynamics, and differences in religious perspectives and spiritual practices.

Seton Cove's initiatives in health care are ecumenical, yet rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. When Daughter of Charity Sister Mary Rose McPhee, the former chief executive officer of the main hospital within the system, founded Seton Cove in 1995, she wanted to

create a center where hospital employees could renew themselves in body, mind, and spirit. While Seton Cove has evolved into a spirituality center for the entire community, a central focus remains that of providing holistic care and support for health care employees. In order to meet the needs of stressed hospital staff as well as gravely ill patients, the staff of the Cove realized that they needed to reach out beyond the walls of their center and physically go to where the nurses ministered and the sick suffered. As a result, Seton Cove's spiritual directors go to more than a dozen sites and clinics to offer individual and group spiritual direction so that employees and patients alike can experience the gifts of sacred time, sacred place, and sacred touch.

### Sacred Time

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. (Ez 11:19)

Like thousands of people every year, Doug (names have been changed to protect privacy) went to the hospital with chest pain and unexpectedly learned that he needed a new heart. We at the Cove met this fifty-year-old gentleman in his hospital room a few days after he received the news. I asked him what kind of support he had during this journey, including a faith tradition on which he might rely. He related his story: life on the road as an insurance adjuster, roots in a Christian tradition that he had long ago abandoned, and a cynical outlook toward all things religious and spiritual, even toward life itself. His sudden pain, however, summoned him to stop and get help. He was not interested in speaking about his connection with God, but he was open to receiving support and a listening presence while he waited for another person's healthy heart that could be transplanted into his body. During the next weeks, Cove staff visited him on a regular basis to offer spiritual direction.

One day I sensed some inner stirrings within Doug





"Waiting" — Pamela-Sukhum

and asked if he had noticed an internal shift during his stay. He shared a new insight that had come to him as he lay waiting in the hospital. He began by talking about how his family dynamics fostered a cynical outlook. His occupation had reinforced this perception of humanity. As he had spent these hospital days in silent waiting, however, a different perspective began to penetrate his jaundiced worldview. He observed the clear motivation of caregivers, who gave themselves selflessly on his behalf. Their unconditional love began to soften his calloused outlook. The more he reflected on their

kindness, the more he was moved to deep gratitude for their generosity and a new appreciation for the sacredness of his own life. He wanted to share this insight and pray for an "open heart." We thanked the old heart that had brought him to this moment and prayed for not only a new physical heart but also a spiritual heart open to give and receive love.

A few days later, Doug received his new heart. When he returned to the hospital for rehabilitation, Doug described another transformational moment. He had woken up one night with cynical thoughts about a





situation. As he lay in bed, reliving this old pattern of hypercritical thinking, his new heart started to give him chest pain. Immediately he recognized a connection: his mind was affecting his body, which was affecting his spirit. This was the same downward spiral that had been his habit before the transplant. I affirmed for Doug that spiritual insight is often followed by a period of forgetting and that the way forward is not self-judgment but rather an intentional return to gratitude. He reaffirmed his prayer for an open heart and made a commitment not to harm another heart with cynicism. His pain subsided, and his openness of heart created space for his entire being to experience deep levels of healing and peace.

Often, transformation begins with the smallest cognitive dissonance. In this instance, Doug had a cynical worldview, yet his caregivers nurtured him in ways that contradicted his pessimism. Through the grace of sacred time offered in spiritual direction, he was able to resolve this friction by opening his heart and mind to a new possibility, that of receiving and giving kindness. A medical crisis can create a rare opportunity for the most calloused heart to crack open so that a new spirit and a "heart of flesh" begin to emerge.

Bearing witness to and providing care for those experiencing a medical crisis can also provide an impetus for exploring one's own inner life. Therefore, Seton Cove also offers an unusual form of group spiritual direction for hospital employees. Monthly Tranquility Luncheons are offered at ten sites within the hospital network. At these half-hour programs, lunch is provided for employees who choose to attend the sessions, which are interactive and provide space for silence and contemplation. Topics include mindfulness, connecting work and spirituality, care for the caregiver, and compassion fatigue. Essential to the success of the program is the financial and logistical support of clinical managers, department spiritual directors, and hospital administrators. Once a quarter, a member of Seton's leadership team shares insights on workplace spirituality in a health care setting at an hour-long luncheon offered at two sites. In 2009 attendance at these programs exceeded twenty-five hundred employees.

A typical Tranquility Luncheon begins with a poem, scripture reading, or quotation. For instance, some recent programs have focused on poems from John

O'Donohue's *To Bless the Space between Us*, which provides easily accessible yet rich fodder for introspection. After the spiritual director guides the group through a period of reading and discussion about the poem, there is a time of quiet for inner reflection, which may include journaling. Participants are then encouraged to share with a neighbor whatever came forward for them during the silence. A final sharing with the whole group allows the spiritual director to listen to the experiences of those present and offer feedback and further questions for reflection. Sessions will often close with a rereading of the poem or scripture. Other months, a space might be created for participants to listen to each other's sense of vocation and then bless each other's work, or the entire presentation might be a guided meditation.

Tranquility programs have raised consciousness about the spiritual dimension of being a health care worker. These programs often lead participants and groups to seek out further support from a Cove spiritual director, either informally after the program or in a more formal setting. For instance, after a traumatic event, hospital units will ask a Cove spiritual director to convene a gathering of employees for a time of sacred listening to one another. These group spiritual direction sessions provide a reflective space in which community becomes a healing balm. A collective awareness forms, in which life experiences, even the most painful ones, become a sacred text in which health care workers sense the movement of the Holy.

Whether the individual is a patient or an employee, the need for reflection and spiritual formation often becomes particularly acute in a hospital setting. Seton Cove's spiritual directors offer spiritual direction opportunities geared toward specific patient populations, including a group for men who have received heart transplants and a group for people under age forty who have received heart transplants. Another group is for those who have been diagnosed with serious, chronic, or incurable illness and their caregivers. The group uses Philip Simmons's book *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life* as a supporting text. Simmons was an English professor who was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease) and used his illness as the catalyst for writing twelve insightful, emotionally honest essays on life, death, spiritual transformation, and



the art of learning to fall into the Mystery. We use these rich essays at the start of each group spiritual direction session to help participants reflect on and discuss how that same Mystery is unfolding in their lives as they journey through illness.

### Sacred Place

Because health care is such a fast-paced, demanding environment, employees rarely find any physical space in which to exhale and reconnect with the inner resources that allow them to continue to do their work with a healing spirit. Seton Cove has worked with hospital administrators to set aside rooms as sacred space for employees only. These Tranquility Rooms, as they are known throughout the hospital system, are small rooms where employees can find respite from the rigors of health care in a quiet, private setting furnished with art, finger labyrinths, comfortable furniture, soothing music, mechanized massage chairs, and contemplative literature. Tranquility Rooms are available at eight different sites. These sacred places have become quite popular. During one quarter in which usage was tracked, the Tranquility Room at the largest hospital was accessed 958 times. It is estimated that more than 3,500 employees use the Tranquility Rooms each year.

One employee e-mailed Seton Cove with the following: "I had a few minutes to visit the Tranquility Room today and all I have to say is ... thank you! What a wonderful, comfortable environment in which to get centered and reflect on the day. Being here for sick [children] twelve hours per day can really challenge the mind, and the Tranquility Room allows me to regain focus so I can continue to provide excellent care."

By setting aside these rooms, the hospitals have made a commitment to the self-care of staff. They have also realized that the very setting aside of a space for tranquility sends the message that employees need to take time for renewal and for connecting with their spiritual sources. The belief is that employees who do their inner work are better equipped to care for patients and their families. In fact, many employees have shared that tranquility programs and the Tranquility Rooms have fostered an awareness that all of their work is a prayer and that the hospital itself is a sacred space in which God is working in and through them. Their testimony calls to mind the

words spoken by Jacob at Bethel: "Surely, the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" (Gn 28:16).

### Sacred Touch

In the Christian Scriptures, the Gospels report numerous healings in which the sick found wholeness through physical contact with Jesus Christ. This touch represents an incarnational experience of connecting with the Divine through our whole beings. Picking up on this need for touch, Seton Cove has initiated a program of holistic touch. Two of the Cove's spiritual directors who are also nurses offer this service to hospital patients. This modality creates an environment where sacred presence is readily experienced in profound ways by patients and families. As a resource for the heart transplant team and the palliative care team, Seton Cove spiritual directors follow a number of patients through their arduous journeys, including helping people of all faiths or no faith find meaning in their suffering. Touch has been the doorway for many patients to recognize their capacity for inner healing and peace. The program has evolved to include patients with cancer and other complicated diagnoses. Last year Seton Cove made more than 600 holistic touch visits and had seventy-five follow-up visits at its spirituality center. Since the program was initiated ten years ago, the Cove has offered a class teaching this modality to health care workers and to the general public, particularly those who have sick loved ones. More than two hundred nurses and one hundred family members have taken the class.

People who receive a life-threatening diagnosis are faced with the ultimate question of life's meaning. In a health care environment, however, their focus becomes fighting the diagnosis with a regimen of multiple treatments, appointments, and diagnostic procedures. It is like being on a treadmill that never stops. Consequently, the pressure to keep looking for answers in medical science overshadows the ultimate search for meaning. It takes courage for a patient to take time to stop, reflect, and seek spiritual direction. One such patient was Jeff.

When we met Jeff, he had realized that he needed some spiritual help. He had been diagnosed with a malignancy that could not be cured. Jeff was trying all possible treatments to keep his diagnosis from progressing and felt that holistic touch and spiritual direction could be





helpful. He had been raised a Christian but had not had any spiritual practice since his youth. He was now fifty-three years old.

Jeff had been an engineer and looked on his diagnosis as a project that needed to be managed. He had specialists for mind and body, so he concluded that he needed some spiritual expertise too. He was open and realistic about his need for spiritual support and was unsure where to find it. He came to Seton Cove on a referral from a social worker at the hospital.

Jeff's first session at the Cove began with twenty minutes of energy work before spiritual direction. This holistic touch facilitated his capacity to relax in his body, which ached all over. Stillness of the body quieted his mind and facilitated interior stillness. From that interior space, I asked Jeff what he sensed was the deeper movement of his spirit within this illness. During this and subsequent spiritual direction sessions, Jeff responded that gratitude was the movement. He developed a deep appreciation for each moment of his life with an open-heartedness that welcomed every experience.

Jeff then faced the difficult challenge of returning home to visit a family he had left thirty years before. I explored with Jeff how wisdom gained from dealing with illness might also assist him in meeting with his family. Jeff chose to meet his family with a grateful, welcoming spirit, which paved the way for reconciliation. On his return, he made his will and included his niece as executor. He then became active in a church community and visited a retirement center to serve those who were unable to participate in church services.

Over a six-month period, Jeff's body continued to decline while his spirit thrived and led him to the power of breath as a means of centering himself and negotiating the task of letting go. We discussed how in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian contemplative traditions, the breath is a potent metaphor for the divine Presence. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasize the importance of the breath, which forms a primal connection between humanity and God: "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gn 2:7).

Being with Jeff during his last weeks was an experience of divine and human intimacy. While experiencing

much pain, he lived vibrantly and longed to see another spring. Jeff would share a sandwich at a local market over laughs, and with equal presence and passion he would enter the silence of grief, the grief of leaving a life he had learned to love as he dealt with his diagnosis. Spiritual direction helped Jeff negotiate the terrain of terminal illness with a grace that blessed all who journeyed with him as he cultivated a sense of gratitude for each moment of his life.

Toward the end of his illness, Jeff wrote the following meditation on the healing that comes when we focus our awareness on the current moment. Though he has since died, his presence continues to speak of the deeper Presence that animates us all.

### A Meditation for the Moment

I am thankful to be here in my existence another day, even if this day is filled with struggle.

I believe my existence is worth struggling for.

As the Creator of all Life, You have been there guiding me to reach this moment ... the gate of my earthly existence. When I allowed confusion, doubt, pride and shame to populate my world they seduced the moment from me. That precious moment was my life.

Then I struggled to take control of the pain and sorrow in my life, and be in charge of the eternal plan. When did I become my own god?

My life unfolds moment by moment, painful or glorious. I embrace them all. I'm not numb, but sometimes fear is watching.

Hearing every breath, feeling my heart beat in my chest, or even when my body aches all over, I may only know one true thing.

I'm here ... if only for this moment.

Through the raw, challenging, unpredictable realities of health care, unique opportunities arise to offer group and individual spiritual direction to patients, their loved ones, and employees. By being present with an open mind and heart, spiritual directors can meet the needs of those in a health care setting in creative ways that allow for deep transformation. Through the gifts of sacred time, sacred place, and sacred touch, space is created for a healing that is needed by all, no matter what their role in the hospital. ■