

Discerning the Spiritual in the Language of Life

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The primary goal of the spiritual guide, as suggested by the twenty-third psalm, is the restoring of soul to persons in need. This workshop focuses upon two things that can contribute to the restoring of soul in an interpersonal relationship of care: discerning secular symbols for the spiritual dimension of life and recognizing the overlapping languages of the spiritual, moral and clinical.

Professional care-givers who do their work outside religious institutions are asked to deal more with the language of life than with the language of faith. They are called upon to respond to the situation in which the person in need finds himself rather than to interpret the faith tradition that they may represent. Their task is more discernment than witness. Spiritual care in a non-parochial setting involves being able to talk seriously about life without necessarily having to talk about God. The spiritual guide in a health institution or counseling center is one who listens to the events and language of ordinary life and assists persons discerning their spiritual dimension. Being attuned to this dimension in the lives of others requires a similar attunement in one's own life and having no rigid conceptual boundaries between what is religious or spiritual language and what is not.

The spiritual guide is not one who brings in the spiritual, although her presence may suggest it to the person needing care. The spiritual is already there. The task of the guide is recognizing it, responding to it and, as Seward Hiltner said about guiding some years ago,¹ reminding the person cared for of specific resources that may have been part of his life, though they are now absent or weak. Guiding involves listening for the whole story, telling the person something of what has been heard, and reminding him that the illness, the grief, the broken relationship he is experiencing is not all that he is.

A useful plan for guidance through listening begins with a concern with the present, the now, of the parishioner's situation. "What is it like for you today." She listens for his feelings about conditions now, and then—still listening more for feelings than for facts--she encourages the person to share as much as he wants to about what led up to this. As the dialogue seems to move toward a conclusion, the guide pastor responds to what the person or patient seems to be hoping for or raises a question about that. "Then what you are most hoping for after all that you have been through is . . . ?" The conversation has moved from present experience, to what in the past led up to it, and to the kind of hopes that the parishioner has in the light of all that has happened.

In her task of restoring of soul through guidance based on listening the spiritual guide attempts to discern secular symbols for the spiritual dimension of life. Sometimes the discernment of what seems to be a secular symbol of the spiritual is recognized and interpreted by both parties in the dialogue. Sometimes the discernment takes place only in the guide—usually as a reminder of who she is and what she represents. An example of the latter may be seen in this vignette reported by a CPE student describes an encounter with a tired young mother dealing with her grief in a hospital waiting room:

while she picks her nose and rebukes her children for being rude, she sheds some tears in remembrance of the many family members she has lost in this very hospital and with a desperate look on her face says that “ it isn't always true that God gives us only what we can bear. Sometimes he gives us more and we have to shut up and deal with it anyway.” She then explains to her curious child that I am the chaplain—a good person who is here to 'help us with our grief—like when papa died and the chaplain who was here then gave us Kleenex and we took the whole box home.¹

The young mother's description of a chaplain was not something that she and the chaplain discussed, but it offered the chaplain a picture of her representation of goodness, grace and abundance of care—a powerful reinterpretation of her ministry.

An example of a symbol shared by both members of the dialogue may be seen in an incident that took place in a counseling center. A young woman was grieving the death of her favorite Aunt, and she tells of being in Aunt Rebecca's house. She wanted something of hers and took some violets that were there. She said that her aunt Rebecca could never get them to bloom; perhaps she can. Moreover, she and her aunt were the only ones who knew how to make the caramel cake. Now the secret belongs to her alone. She relived the moment of eating the cake, affirmed how good it was to her, and agreed to use the secret (the mystery) which had been passed on to her and to share it. The therapist suggested that the patient now might know more about what Holy Communion means. He did not say directly, "What you experienced was Holy Communion." He did not know that. He simply suggested a symbol and gave her a choice about using it or not.

In addition to discerning and commenting on symbols that point to the spiritual dimension of life the spiritual guide is called upon to recognize the kind of language that a patient or other is using to describe her life and be able to recognize other language forms that may be more helpful at this time. The guide may help the patient move to a different type of language to describe her experience and in doing so deepen and enrich her understanding of her experience. The workshop will make use of William J. Doherty's² identification of “Three Domains of Language and Meaning” in order to suggest ways of doing this.

Workshop participants may wish to bring in examples of ordinary language symbols of the spiritual and ways in which they have experienced the overlapping of clinical, moral and spiritual language.

¹ This incident was used in an address given to the Association of Professional Chaplains in 2006 and to be published in a Festschrift in memory of Joan Hemmenway in 2009.

2 From "Morality and Spirituality in Therapy" by William J. Doherty in *Spirituality in Therapy* (edited by Froma Walsh (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), p. 165.