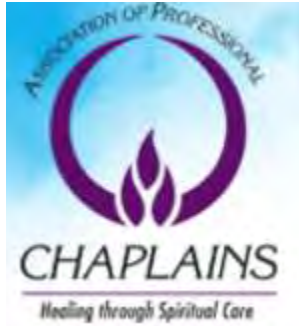


Spiritual Resilience

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October 22, 2016

APC Forum, February 2017, Vol. 19 No. 1



The following paper on the theme “Spiritual Resilience” was presented during National Spiritual Care Week (October 16-22, 2016) at the MedStar Washington Hospital Center in Washington, DC.

In my experience as a chaplain, I find the hospital to be an ideal place to grasp the meaning of spiritual resilience. Every single person I meet – patients, family members, staff – is dealing with and looking for the means to cope with change, the unexpected, the unexplainable and sometimes the unwanted. Spiritual resilience is about digging deep inside and defining a sense of self and purpose for when times are tough. In essence, it’s about counting our blessings and recognizing what gives us the strength, the will and the hope to live.

Recently I knocked on the door of a patient, an 81-year old man, and introduced myself as a hospital chaplain. “Would you like to talk?” He motioned me to come in the room. “How do you feel?” That common expression came out of my mouth but in an instant I regretted it. His face contorted with rage. “How the hell do you think I feel? They cut off my leg yesterday.” I wanted to kick myself for not reading the room and the patient’s body language better. If I had, I might’ve noticed the sheet covering his lower body was raised on one side but not the other. I knew that my next words better be the right words. As a chaplain and a listening presence, I’ve learned that the best strategy sometimes is to turn off the mind and turn on the heart. My eyes closed. “That must be so hard. I can’t imagine what you’re going through. Tell me what gives you strength.” In other words, tell me about your sources of spiritual resilience.

The tension slowly eased out of him. He pointed his index finger upward. “God, God is giving me the strength, prayers are giving me the strength, my wife is giving me the strength.” In barely a minute the patient had identified his spiritual issues and resources and the means by which he is coping. We talked about his upcoming 51st wedding anniversary and the prayer his wife reads to him every day. It was on a bookmark and he asked me to read it out loud. It was a prayer about surrender.

When patients come to the hospital dealing with life-changing experiences, something happens inside that is very bewildering. They no longer feel in control over their lives. The person might’ve been driving down the road minding his or her own business, talking to a friend, going to a meeting or school, leading a fulfilling life, but in the blink of an eye, they wake up in a hospital bed with wires and tubes attached to arms and legs. The patient is no longer in control. They no longer know themselves. Their identity has been transformed from a self-sufficient person to a person dependent on others for their continued physical life, pain relief and even a glass of water.

It is the job of the chaplain not to lessen the reality of their injuries, but to gently remind the patient that their true identity comes from inside, and is not determined solely by their external situation. I find that people intuitively understand that truth, but they struggle for it to be affirmed. It’s in the time of crisis that the patient looks inside and examines their own belief system and core values to find purpose and meaning.

In another pastoral conversation, the patient told me about the pain in his legs. He showed me the scars running from ankle to groin on one leg and then the other. When I asked how he was dealing with this

discomfort, tears came to his eyes. He told me about his faith and identified God as the source of his strength, but sometimes, “I forget the Lord because the pain is too great. The devil makes me forget that God is in my life,” he said. The patient doesn’t fear the pain, the hardship or even the possibility that the leg might be amputated. He identified his greatest fear as that he “might forget that God is with me.”

These are stories of spiritual resilience and accepting that, sometimes, bad things happen to good people. In the story of Job, the lesson to be learned is not about loss; it’s really about faith and hope. Having faith is not some super shield or guarantee against problems in life, but rather a promise that God is with us even during our difficulties. Job, who suffers ill health and the death of his 10 children, did not waver in his faith. Like the good shepherd of Psalm 23, Job believes in his heart that God takes care of and watches over his flock. King David drew upon his own spiritual formation as a young shepherd, when he wrote those inspired words, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

As a chaplain, it’s a special blessing to be present with patients, family and staff and to guide them in their journey to draw on their own unique sources of spiritual resilience and to deal with the dark valleys of life.

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