Reflections on My Ministry

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The door closed and there we sat, twenty-eight people who had never met, beginning an intense thirty-six-hour training institute entitled, "Opening the Door to the Diversity in Our Communities." I was sitting between a male social worker from Hospice of Seattle, Washington, and a clergywoman who was the spiritual care director for Midland Hospice Care, Topeka, Kansas. All of us had converged in Phoenix, Arizona. The institute's objective was to provide participants: a working foundation on access to culturally diverse communities; various tools and resources for starting or continuing work in diverse communities; a cultural encounter with African, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Indian communities; an opportunity for self-assessment; and a forum to consider next steps for action within each person's hospice setting.

This was my first participation in a culturally diverse learning experience. I wondered how productive we would be. Would identity and values, thinking style, communication and work style (things that matter least), keep us from dealing with things that matter most: individual growth, understanding and respect? For me, the most important facet of the institute's objective was the cultural encounter. It enabled me to understand and respect persons who were both very different from me culturally, ethnically, religiously, and so like me, morally, ethically, psychically, and most important, spiritually. I felt kinship with my new sisters and brothers at the end of those thirty-six hours, and knew that as hospice caregivers we were all better equipped to care for the terminally ill in our communities.

Although the setting and the circumstances were completely different, the basic premise of the Access/Diversity Institute was similar to the one in my first ministry setting: to discover ways to enable persons who are suffering to feel safe, to have a sense of self-value, and to make decisions about their lives with confidence. At the institute, our discussion and group interaction focused upon caring for terminally ill persons from diverse cultural and social environments. At Pine Rest Christian Hospital, I was beginning a ministry to adolescents. Most were Caucasian, living in an environment where Judeo-Christian values were taken for granted, and hospitalized for treatment of psychosocial problems. Interestingly, the experiential modus operandi that enabled learning in each setting was similar: sharing one another's story.

This article responds to an invitation to reflect on the ways my Doctor of Ministry studies initially informed and shaped my ministry in youth chaplaincy,
and how that learning has been applied to other areas of my ministry. My ability to begin my reflections from my present ministry as spiritual care coordinator of Hospice of the North Ottawa Community makes clear to me how much my chaplaincy to adolescents has shaped my entire ministry. I can quickly and effortlessly put myself back into those adolescent units at Pine Rest and even feel what I was feeling then: the insecurity of a newly ordained theologian, and the uncertainty of how to do ministry. The halls of Pine Rest were far-removed from the halls of Western Theological Seminary where I earned the Master of Divinity degree. I was unaware those many years ago that it is only when one feels safe, has a sense of self-esteem, and claims the power to be, that one can move from self to another, that is, reaching out to another enables one to transcend self and to comprehend the possibility of God. It is a spiritual experience that requires naming. I was unaware then that religion and spirituality are not synonymous; that religion can be a bridge to spirituality, but one must cross the bridge to claim one’s own unique spiritual self. I was unaware back then that healing, wholeness, and peace come when spirituality is internalized, named, and owned. I did not know it is an existential experience.

The surprising thing is that my lack of awareness and understanding of the big picture did not prevent the big picture from happening! In those first months of ministry, I did what I had to do, and grace prevailed! I experimented. I responded to my intuition. Pumping the possibilities, I made discoveries that worked. Perhaps the most exciting of them was the development of a religious history interview. I designed it after attending a seminar on faith development led by James Fowler. Fowler’s faith development theory emphasizes the importance of remembering and naming a religious experience. Therefore, one of the first questions of the religious history interview is, "What is your earliest memory of a religious experience?" Only a few adolescents were able to remember and identify one. But for those few, telling the story evoked the moment of change! Some of them for the first time signed up for religious education classes and proved to be diligent students of Chaim Potok and William Faulkner. I recall how important were the friendship issues of Potok’s The Chosen, and how sensitive the adolescents were to the quiet room experience described and lived out in The Promise. There were other evidences of change. These adolescents slowly began to trust and to accept responsibility. One young woman asked to be in charge of the library cart that I wheeled into the unit one evening a week. Angie took over my job, the first of many library assistants. I felt that when these young people, who had identified a spiritual moment and allowed themselves to feel the impact it had had on their lives, were discharged, they would make it!

While these adolescents were experiencing change, something happened to me as well. Sharing their life stories helped me know their pain. I wondered if I was identifying with my own adolescence. I began listening more intently
to their life stories. I had heard and read many fictional and biblical stories before, but I had not thought of them as real life stories, nor identified with them as though another's story could be my story! As I saw myself in their stories, I became less critical, less judgmental: I wept, reached out, comforted, and cared! And I accepted being cared for! In *On Becoming Human*, Ross Snyder says that one is not born human; one becomes human. I wondered if that was happening to me. I remembered discourse from that same book: idea moves to attitude; attitude moves to behavior. I began to recognize subtle change in my behavior of *being* with another. I realized that I was carefully looking into a person's eyes, and becoming intentional in my touching!

My ministry has spanned eighteen years from the first days on the adolescent unit and my participation in the Access/Diversity Institute. The content has not changed, but the minister has! I moved from insecurity, uncertainty, and unawareness to a place of confidence in my interaction with others, and I have the ability to be present intentionally and authentically. The intense focus of the Doctor of Ministry program and the guidance of my faculty supervisory committee (Professors Elton Eenigenberg and Stanley Rock) were fundamental components of the metamorphosis. For five years I stumbled along creating a very workable chaplaincy program on the Adolescent Unit of Pine Rest, but frequently, I felt I needed more depth, more of a sense that I was pursuing the best ends by the best means. I enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program, and chose a project that would bring all the raw edges of my chaplaincy into one organized design of ministry to institutionalized adolescents. In the process I gained a panoramic view of my particular ministry:

1. The theological, biblical, and ministerial charge:
   a. God intends human experience to be meaningful, "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).
   b. Being human is a gift of God. Human beings are good. Life is rich and satisfying, not in spite of the suffering, but because in those times, one experiences the awesome, holy presence of God when there is a significant other present to sustain and to guide. It is in those times that the process of healing begins.
   c. The spiritual caregiver is the vehicle through which God works the process of healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling. The goal: healthy, whole humanity living in community, a kingdom of God concept.

2. Spiritual care in the Christian tradition:
   a. Clarification of how tradition defines the role of spiritual caregiver in the twentieth-century setting.
b. Spiritual caregiver in a counseling setting facilitates an environment for growth and development for a person struggling with events that are life-threatening and overwhelming.

c. Spiritual caregiver in an educational setting encourages self-reflection with the goal of acceptance and understanding in one’s relationship with God and others.

d. Spiritual caregiver in a religious setting creates worship experiences in which a person may hear God’s Word and respond to God and community in a way that is satisfying.

3. Spiritual care where the clinical model is foremost in treatment:
   a. Spiritual caregiver as member of the treatment team emphasizes the importance of being clinically knowledgeable of diagnosis, assessment, treatment, and documentation.
   b. Spiritual caregiver as member of the clinical staff encourages honest, authentic interaction.

I wrote this panoramic abstract during the four weeks of on-campus study in the first year of the doctoral program. My assignment for the next three years was, first, to examine, analyze, question, and reflect upon my ministry to determine if what I was doing as described in sections two and three of the abstract indeed accomplished the charge expressed in section one. Second, to avail myself of a variety of learning opportunities that would better equip me for my ministry, and to define objectively my competency in writing. Third, to give written and oral evidence that my ministry to adolescents institutionalized with emotional and behavioral problems was facilitating faith development and spiritual formation.

Western’s program requirement of the project abstract at the beginning of study was a powerful component. It was immediately obvious to me that the study was uniquely my own. From the start, I recognized the unequivocal need to balance theory with experience. That balance of theological objectivity and pastoral subjectivity required a scrutiny of my ministry, of my self-functioning in that ministry, and of my vision for the future of those involved in that ministry. A brief overview of the project abstract illustrates that balance: Section one outlines an objective study of biblical texts to provide clarity to my role as chaplain and to my understanding of personal worth as it relates to the adolescents with whom I work. Three texts (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6) taught me (1) that every human person is created in the image of God, (2) that neither the Fall nor the Flood destroyed the image of God in humans, (3) that humans are forever in relationship with God, and (4) that human wholeness is a condition resulting from the progressive work which God carries out in persons. Next, studies in the theology of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer convinced me that being created in the image of God is a relational concept. No person exists as
a solitary being. In fact, the paradigm for all humanity is Jesus who, living in perfect freedom, served everyone he met. Jesus is a perfect example of a horizontal integration of co-humanity in a vertical fellowship with the love of God. Finally, this section enabled me to define my call as chaplain in the light of Isaiah 50:4: the tongue of a teacher and a sustainer of the weary ones. I knew I could not teach these young people who struggled with authority, but I could help them find truth for themselves. I began to think of teaching as guiding. As genuine partners, the students and I would courageously seek to bring something new to consciousness: knowledge. This knowledge would prompt wonder, and wonder, curiosity. Knowledge can be powerful, and both teacher and learner are responsible for the use of that knowledge and power. In my study I used the metaphor of a shipwreck to describe the pain adolescents experience upon entering the hospital. The loss of self and world means that life will never again be quite as it was. The chaplain is to be a sustaining presence in those moments of change. Thus, being with another requires me to be comfortable being who I am. I must understand and know myself.

Sections two and three of the project abstract explain the tasks and methodology of my particular chaplaincy and their fulfillment. The subjective balance between the two makes the project uniquely my own. Other persons could use my study as a guide in their ministry, but no one else could do the ministry in the same way as I. Personal discovery in one enables what is learned to be imparted to ministry in another setting! When I discovered how to minister to troubled adolescents I internalized being pastoral so that in any situation I communicate with the tongue of a teacher and as a sustainer of the weary ones. Wherever I go and whatever I do, being pastoral is being me.

The goal of my project was to enable adolescents suffering from irretrievable loss to experience: (1) that they were part of a group; (2) that they were safe; (3) a growing sense of self-esteem; (4) decision-making about their future; and (5) a meaningful relationship with others and with God. The process, diagramed as follows, would culminate in spiritual formation and faith development:

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After I had completed the three-year degree program and defended my dissertation, I felt assured that my chaplaincy to adolescents at Pine Rest was in accord with my deepest faith and values. My research showed that my intuitive and creative responses in ministry were very often effective and that I needed to trust them. And surprisingly, the thread that wove itself through worship experiences, education classes, activities, and counseling were those existential moments of sharing personal stories with another. Storytelling had been a significant part to my childhood experience. My grandmother was a storyteller, and I have vivid memories of lying beside her in bed as she shared life stories with me. Even more important than the stories were the sound of her voice and the rhythm of her pulse that gave me a sense of aliveness, a wholeness that continues to energize my being. Realizing that storytelling has that capability, I intentionally integrated it into every aspect of my ministry to adolescents.

During my chaplaincy at Pine Rest, adolescents were often admitted for from three to nine months. As part of their schooling I taught one religious education class each semester. In a course on "Great Women in History," I named women of the Bible as archetypes who can teach us how to live.

The biblical women we studied struggled, often without immediate success, and their struggles began to teach the students about their own. Adolescents do especially well in discovering self-awareness from a group discussion with peers which in a roundabout way exposes their own problems.

We read Tamar’s story in Genesis 38, together with its homey retelling in Sarah’s Daughters, by Pat Logan. Logan includes details about Tamar’s family, the wedding, and Judah’s family relationships. Our discussion was guided by a series of questions: "What do you think Tamar’s relationship with her parents was like?" "How do Tamar’s experiences with culture and family living compare with yours?" "What are your thoughts about how Tamar acted to achieve what she considered right?" "Have you ever had to choose between two evils?" "What did you do?" "How did you feel?" "What have you learned from Tamar?"

For most of the students, using the Bible to learn something about themselves was new. Telling one’s story in class prompted some anxiety at first, but after one or two persons shared, it became easier and apparent that the students appreciated and honored the confidences. Naming and owning a character trait, plus defining a behavior that might show positive growth was a step forward. The intimacy and the comfort of others giving voice to private myths made the learning both real and fun. The content and process of the class had helped the students find something new and special for themselves.

I often had music playing as students entered the classroom. One week I introduced Richard Strauss’ Death and Transfiguration as an example of a tone poem and helped the students hear the rhythmic pattern of the kettledrum as symbolizing the irregular heartbeat of the poem’s subject. As they identified the
struggle and achievement motifs, the thought that classical music can tell a story about life began to excite them. After I had particularized the rising sound of the instruments as symbolizing the departing soul, we talked about the long and difficult struggle to achieve.

Music, film, fiction, and art were also tools for learning. We listened, for example, to "Time in a Bottle," a song about a man who wants to save the time he has spent with a person dear to him. We talked about the lyrics as a group, and then each drew a bottle and filled it with things we wanted to cherish: dreams, wishes, goals, and memories. Just naming them was important, sharing them with another could wait. These troubled youth were learning acceptance as the other side of resolve. The self-knowledge engendered by this experience generated individual growth, understanding, and respect. Whether they were dealing with it consciously or unconsciously, the experience contributed to their continuing therapy.

An observation C.S. Lewis makes in his "Meditation in a Toolshed" was instrumental in helping me develop meaningful worship services that were optional for the adolescents:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at a beam are very different experiences (God in the Dock, 212).

If I stand back and look at worship objectively, I see liturgy, preaching, and methodologies which encourage reverence and devotion to God. From this perspective, worship can be defined as reverence paid to a being or power regarded as supernatural or divine, the action or practice of displaying this by appropriate acts, rites, or ceremonies. This descriptive definition is completely inadequate for worship services designed for young people.

If I then move to a position which allows me to look along worship, so that my vision is fully influenced by it, the picture becomes very different. I am no longer absorbed in simply trying to define worship because I am now in a position to look through (along) it, that is, by means of it. What worship is, is superseded by what worship directs my attention toward and allows me to see
and experience. For example, when I look at my glasses lying on my desk, I see them as a detached object. When I put them on, however, I surrender to the great reality of what they now enable me to see and experience as I look through them.

Ideally, to look through worship is to move existentially toward God, to encounter God, and to experience Presence. For the adolescent hospitalized for emotional stress, experiencing Presence may be finally accepting the reality of life, an awesome experience for the young. After worship one morning, a young man wrote, "Why do I suffer? Because I live. Shit will happen, but I am going to live as best I can." He was not being distasteful or morbid; he was seeing life differently. The conflicts at home, the pain and hurt, the embarrassment of being mentally ill are realities, not violations of living. Looking through worship is a way of bringing God to people and bringing people to God. Ideally, the goal of worship goes beyond reverence and devotion to encounter with God and others.

It was the struggle to make worship an experiential encounter that prompted me to enlist the help of the adolescents. Six adolescents of mixed religious experience joined me to form a worship committee. Even more varied were their presenting problems at the time of hospitalization: bulimia, drug dependency, tragic loss, sexual obsessions, and violent behavior. We met weekly to design youth worship, plan special religious celebrations, and offer mealtime prayers and devotions in which children and adolescents of any or no religious tradition could participate in comfort. Our meetings were an experiential encounter, and the creative energy that emerged from the group was matchless. We used whatever aids were needed to make the worship space comfortable: music, flowers, candles, banners, incense, art pieces, dance, contrasting colors, and lights. Entering the familiar chapel space, adolescents were greeted with friendly smiles, a word, a touch. We wanted the sense of community and the comfort of the worship space to stimulate new strength and to give release from tension. We began the service by asking the young worshippers to recall a peaceful, quiet moment from their past. Once identified, the feeling was recalled and worship became both safe place and enriching encounter. For those few moments threats and retreat were replaced by hope and life. The tension between what is and what ought to be forced awareness, and worship became existential. Worship became looking through and encountering God.

There is no way to measure the impact of worship. Some adolescents may not be aware. Some may not know the reality of change. Individual stories emphasize the difficulty of integrating the past into a meaningful present through worship. Joel, who had been consistently abused physically and emotionally by his father, came to the hospital by court order for violently attacking little boys in his neighborhood. He had no religious affiliation. However, he attended
worship regularly and became actively involved. During the Christmas season Joel played the role of Luke in the Christmas drama. He made a scroll and wrote the text from Luke 2 on parchment paper. He was a joy to work with. But during this same period of time, Joel attacked two little boys who were playing on the hospital campus. He had to be isolated in the quiet room for a time. I can still hear Joel praying, "God, I can’t stand how I feel when I think of my dad. Help me." I trust an awakening spiritual awareness will be the sustaining element for Joel; however, I believe that before healing can begin, he will have to come to the point of trusting another human being enough to share the horrible details of his story.

Like the Bible, the format of counseling sessions is storytelling. Young Adam’s story was a perfect example. Adam was diagnosed manic-depressive. He was known on the unit for his grandiose fish stories. Staff was disgruntled with him; peers walked away from him. During the religious history interview, I asked Adam if he had a favorite Bible story and if he could explain its appeal. His immediate response was, "David and Goliath." Adam paused a moment, looked at me rather intently, and continued, "When I’m out on the lake in my boat, if a storm comes up, I think of the storm as a giant. I know I can beat it, just like David did." When I asked him if his fish stories were a way to describe his fear, he broke down and cried! I was not prepared for that, nor did I realize Adam knew his problem. I had named it. He feared he was crazy. From his own world and in his own words, Adam drew an image of hope: he could and would fight the giants. Adam let me know his grandiose stories helped him "keep it all together." This information provided direction for treatment.

Sometimes I wonder how much time elapsed before the biblical Jacob trusted someone enough to tell the story of his experience in the desert with an angel of God. I wonder whether a witness to Peter’s denial of Jesus told the story, or whether Peter himself told it to close friends as they sat around a fire on the shore of Galilee. Recalling those Bible stories, and knowing they had to be shared in order for us to know them, reminds me of a counseling session with Eve, a seventeen-year-old woman who had not been in school for most of a year. She had spent most of that time in one chair in front of the television and she now weighed 560 pounds. The first time I met Eve I was impressed by how well she expressed herself and by her beauty. She had a lovely smile, dancing blue eyes, and long, shining auburn hair. I was fascinated with her and shared my impressions while touching her hand. We became friends. One afternoon Eve shared her memory of the day she started eating. She was an illegitimate child who lived with her forty-eight-year-old unmarried mother, her grandmother, and three bachelor uncles. She never felt loved. As a four-year old, Eve felt she was her family’s shame, and so began to eat! Food was her way of leaning into life. Naming what she had been denying for thirteen years
was a powerful moment of understanding. It moved her beyond the place she had been but a second before. She suddenly perceived herself differently. She saw with new eyes and heard with new ears. John Westerhoff names that "conversion." William Loder calls it the transformational moment. I call it a sacred spiritual experience and recognize it as the beginning of healing. Is it any wonder that these experiences in the Adolescent Unit of Pine Rest Hospital have informed and shaped the whole of my ministry?

As I draw these reflections to a close, some conclusions become clear. The impact of the Doctor of Ministry program upon my ministry in youth chaplaincy and later in other areas of ministry is woven throughout this article. The scrutiny of the total picture required by that degree work prepared me to be intentional, focused, and mindfully sensible. In discovering how to minister, I internalized being pastoral so that being pastoral is being me. Furthermore, the concept of a worship committee, conceived and developed at Pine Rest Hospital later became a most exciting component of my ministry at Church of the Savior in Coopersville, Michigan. It resulted in a weekly, existential worship in which the worshippers encountered self, others, and God! Finally, wherever I go in ministry, I continue to use movie, film, fiction, and art as tools for storytelling and discussion. Storytelling helps us know we are real, alive, and okay. Storytelling affirms our being intimately connected, and perhaps it is that connection that enables us to transcend our crises and move toward God to accept God’s love.

Having completed this piece, I know I need not have wondered about the productivity of the group gathered for the training institute in Phoenix. We were hospice people, storytellers who often journey with another who is dying. In those sacred moments at the end of life, stories are shared, gratitude and love expressed. The spirit of one touches the spirit of the other, and culture, color, status, or religion no longer matter. What matters is simply being together! Those moments, like the many described in this article, are sacred spiritual happenings in which God’s presence is known. As one of those storytellers, I believe my role in that group was similar to one I have come to know well: a teacher and a sustainer of the weary ones. My ministry continues.