**Entering Someone’s Sacred Space – A Chaplain’s Role**

As a spiritual care provider or chaplain in a hospital setting, I am asked a lot of difficult questions borne from someone’s journey through cancer, kidney failure or the loss of a limb or a loved one.

A spiritual care provider does not necessarily answer questions but journeys with those who suffer to articulate their own questions and empower them re engage with their own spiritual resources.

There’s a patient in the hospital room I’m about to enter. She’s angry and sad. She almost died a few days ago and is now recovering. Some say she tried to end her own life. There is *always* a story behind why people do the things they do.

When I enter a patient’s room, I don’t enter it to fix a problem. I enter holy ground – the sacred space of another human created in God’s own image. I enter to take part in their experience of pain, sorrow, anger, disappointment and sometimes in forgiveness, joy and reconciliation. I enter to take part in that person’s story to journey with them through the darkness of despair, the wounding pain of unmet expectations and the breath robbing sorrow of death.

I enter into the patient’s sacred space and introduce myself in a soft and gentle tone.

*“I’m Jonathan from spiritual care. I am here to support you through your time in the hospital with the big things in life – hope, faith, meaning and purpose. I’d like to listen to your story.”*

The patient replies with a sombre and distant stare, *“I lost my faith years ago.”*

(Sometimes people assume I’m there for religious purposes and then they don’t want to talk. But I’m there for more than that – I’m there for whatever is meaningful and important to them in that time).

This is the critical moment in my encounter. If I, as a Biblical scholar and professor, give her an answer or a response such as, *“This is what God meant for your life,”* or *“You must trust God through this,”* or *“Things can’t be that bad,”* or *“What does the Bible say about this?”* I won’t be helpful to her, in fact I will carelessly devalue her sacred space by not listening and joining her in her pain.

Like Moses before the Lord, I take off my sandals. I enter her sacred space. I sit down beside her and mirror her words with empathy and invite her into the sacred space we now share, *“You lost your faith! Tell me about that.”*

With deep pain, disappointment and hopelessness in her voice, she takes me into her life as a little girl who went to Sunday school. She was eager to learn, and knew Jesus, but was told not to ask questions. She was taught it was not our place to question God:  He was sovereign, absolute. *“But I could not stop asking questions,”* she said angrily, *“that is part of who I am.”*

My job is not to proselytize (that is to convert people to my faith), my job is to help her find her own spiritual resources – that is – to journey with her and help her find what she has lost (or as my colleague puts it – to listen in on the conversation with the Divine).

*“So I became angry with him. I have spent the past twenty years denying him.”*I felt my heart plummet into my stomach with sadness. I grew angry with her. I have seen how the church (in general) has failed, how faulty theology has separated us from embracing one another, from embracing God.

Like Job in the ashes, I sat with her in her pain… We remained silent for some time feeling the isolation of lostness. *“I felt hopeless. I tried to end it all. There is no point going on, not without questions,”* she said as she hung her head lower. Now was the time for me to examine the resources in her spiritual tool kit. To lift them up, dust them off and help her remember them. *“I do not think you have lost your faith,”* I said.

Her head shot up and her eyes widened.

*“It sounds like your faith is in your questions.”*

*“In my questions?”* she retorted.

*“Yes, in the tradition you come from, the little girl going to Sunday school and learning about Jesus – Jesus asked questions. When Jesus hung from the cross He cried out, ‘My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?’ Jesus asked God a very profound question. In His darkest hour, when He was enduring the weight of the world and of all ages; He asked God a question. If Jesus, who is a model for us, can ask God questions, why can’t we?”*

**Jesus quotes Psalm 22 when he asks God that question. The Psalms are filled with questions toward God. We do not ask someone a question if we think they will not answer, or if they do not exist. When we ask God a question we put the ball in his court and await his response.  Questions become the strongest assertion of our faith. *“Hmm,”* she sighed, *“I never thought of it that way before.”***

I left the patient to ponder her newfound spiritual resources. A couple of days later I was honored to enter her sacred space again. Her countenance no longer showed despair and hopelessness.

She said, *“You know that little girl I told you about. She still believes. I realized it when you suggested that my faith was in my questions. I do like to question. I question everything.”*

This person was empowered not through theology or answers, but because someone sat with her in her sacred space and listened to her story until she found her own way.

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https://transformcma.ca/entering-someones-sacred-space-a-chaplains-role/