Senior Spirituality: 
Awakening Your Spiritual Potential
Harold R. Nelson
Chalice Press, 1989 • 152 pages • softcover

This is a book worth your while. Nelson, who is a past president of the 
Association of Professional Chaplains (APC), writes out of his own suffering 
and his quest for a deeper concept of spirituality. The result is one of the most 
compelling, touching, and inspiring books on the subject.

Nelson points to the lives of such persons as Martin Luther King Jr., Moses, 
Grandma Moses, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Morrie Schwartz. His de-
scription of real-life personalities gives credence to his definition of spirituality: “Spirit-
uality is the grateful response of the soul to a loving and merciful God whose presence 
fills the universe and has bestowed on human kind the gift of life” (p. 4).

The book presents a map for discovering a deeper meaning within the concept 
of spirituality. Nelson shares his personal journey, which has allowed him to real-
ize the truths of Saint John of the Cross and the wisdom of the patients we serve 
as chaplains. Without a doubt, patients become our best teachers. He points out 
that often the crisis of illness awakens the power of spirituality. Often the still, small 
voice that came to Elijah on Mount Horeb will speak to us at a time when it 
is needed most. “The Spiritual nature that had long been asleep will begin to grow 
and if watered and nourished, it will one day flourish” (p. 15).

Nelson points to ways of experiencing mourning, detachment, meaning, and a 
restoration of relationships (forgiveness), which move one from separation of self 
to transformation and acceptance. Pain is seen as a companion to illness and adversity. However this companion can be 
overcome. As one returns to the well of faith, Nelson reminds us that pain and 
suffering can be defused. We are not alone in our suffering; Christ both knows and 
cares about our trials.

Nelson discusses the combination of spirituality and imagination and its heal-
ing result: “Imagination is both a transporter and a creation” (p. 56). Carl Jung 
calls the process an exploration of both the conscious and subconscious mind. 
Christian healing, mind-body medicine, the power of suggestion, and spontane-
ous remission are but four of the possibilities detailed in this book. Several heal-
ing modalities are mentioned, including relaxation, meditation, breath con-
trol, therapeutic touch, acupuncture massage, confession, laying on of 
hands, and prayer.

One of the most important subjects covered in this book relates to spiri-
tuality, loss, and the grief process. For seniors this chapter takes on a new depth. Rela-
tional loss, physical decline, oriental loss, material loss and spiritual loss become so 
much more than a future to be faced some day. This section targets senior loss and 
adjustment. It is good reading for the student and vital to the senior, who will re-
late first hand to Nelson’s wisdom. The focus here is on spirituality and prepara-
tion for the final journey. The concluding chapter relates to transformation and 
afterlife as they affect one’s concept of the experience of one’s own spirituality.
In the epilogue, Nelson states his reason for writing this book. “It is important to me, as I journey through life, to make a contribution for the enrichment of my community and world” (p. 151). In this reviewer’s opinion he succeeds on both counts. Thank you, Harold.

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Parish Nurses, Health Care Chaplains, and Community Clergy: Navigating the Maze of Professional Relationships
Larry VandeCreek and Sue Mooney, Editors
New York: The Haworth Press • 2002
• 286 pages • $49.95 hardcover • $24.95 softcover

This book accomplishes what its subtitle promises. The authors carefully identify the roles of these professions and show the similarities and the unique features of each. The goal is to show how effective spiritual care results through collaboration.

Larry VandeCreek needs no introduction to CT readers. His distinguished career in pastoral care research in the health care setting is without parallel. He continues his careful approach to research in the selection of the papers for this book. Sue Mooney brings her training and experience as a parish nurse and member of the Presbyterian Parish Nurse network to enhance its value.

There are three major sections representing the professions of parish nurse, health care chaplain, and community clergy. Each section contains essays from representative practitioners.

The common thread throughout this collection of essays is collaboration. As each of the three professions better understands the others, their shared ministry is far more likely to produce a greater good for the patients and others encountered through these ministries.

The authors demonstrate the importance of training in spiritual and pastoral care issues for nurses and also advocate for health care training for community clergy. As a parish pastor, I found this to be a most helpful resource for clarifying the role of the parish nurse in relationship to the other ministries. The parish nurse program owes much to pioneer pastoral care leader Granger Westberg. Through the use of studies from Australia and the United States this book provides background information related to both the value and the struggles of the parish nurse programs.

This book includes a listing of resources for individual practitioners as well as for use by established teams of ministry caregivers in parish and health care settings.

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Short-Term Spiritual Guidance
Duane Bidwell
Minneapolis: Fortress Press • 2004 • 129 pages • $16.00 softcover

Imagine with me that Roy pops into your office one morning and says, “Chaplain, I’ve been feeling very restless lately, and it’s affecting my productivity at work.” Roy may be a local pastor, a mid-level manager, or perhaps, a nurse. You have known Roy for a few years, and it is not like him to come for a visit. After voicing his concern, Roy sits down in one of the chairs in your office and waits for you to speak. How could you respond?

One way might be to ask, “Could you tell me more?” This question invites Roy to choose whether to go further, and it also sets the tone for your subsequent supportive actions.

Now imagine that Roy continues, “I have this feeling that God is calling me to do something, but I am not sure.” One response would be to refer Roy to a friend who does spiritual direction. The process of doing spiritual direction can be fulfilling.

Over time, such a supportive relationship will help him address the deep spiritual concerns of life and aid in his growth process. Along the way, you touch base occasionally to provide encouragement. However, if Roy is reluctant to begin this process or is not ready to commit the amount of time usually required what options are open to you?

Many chaplains are severely restricted in the amount of time which realistically may be provided to one individual. Short-Term Spiritual Guidance provides a concise introduction to a form of brief spiritual direction, which a chaplain may consider in addressing the concerns of someone such as Roy. Bidwell blends short-term counseling with spiritual direction, thereby creating a new resource. By combining these two disciplines, he offers a unique combination of directee-driven spiritual direction with a discipline that enables the chaplain to set limitations for each session.
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Chapters are arranged to guide the reader who wishes to consider using this discipline. One chapter is devoted to the director's position of maintaining "knowing unknowing." It appears that choosing to remain ignorant of what the directee may say is an essential baseline position for short-term spiritual guidance. It may be argued that quality pastoral care includes this as a basic component in considering the "living human document" before the chaplain.

Bidwell provides guidelines for applying short-term counseling, including a format for the first session and recommendations for further sessions, a discussion of short-term spiritual guidance in couple and family situations, and a guideline for a six-session group process entitled "Discovering Your Purpose."

One obvious question is whether short-term spiritual guidance is a valid discipline and thus whether individuals who rely upon this tool as a primary means of providing support are acting in error. Clearly, one must be selective in choosing to apply this discipline whether with an individual, or a couple/family.

One weakness of *Short-Term Spiritual Guidance* is that Bidwell's writing style is constrained at times. There are a variety of places in the text where this reviewer would have appreciated a more extensive discussion. Nevertheless, chaplains who seek to broaden their ability to respond to those who present themselves for support will find this to be a valued text. As the subject of spirituality continues to be of importance, there is an increased awareness that issues previously considered as psychosocial actually may involve spiritual issues.

As Fortress is a Christian press, it is not surprising that the discussion relies heavily on the Christian faith. However, this reviewer feels confident that chaplains of other faiths will be able to apply the principles expressed to their individual faith perspectives.

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*Church Mouse*
Robert F. Cullum • 2003 • 344 pages • softcover • self-published: to purchase a copy, e-mail robocullum@yahoo.com

Bob Cullum takes for the title of this autobiographical book the proverbial church mouse, who sees all and knows all within any congregation. The church mouse is at once Bob himself and a mythical companion during his thirty-year journey as chaplain and later supervisor at San Antonio State Hospital.

With Cullum as guide, we move into that which he describes as "the world apart from the world." We come to know firsthand its inhabitants—both staff and patients. Through gentle and yet descriptive prose they come alive for us: Ruben, the keeper of the sacristy key to All Faith's Chapel; Christina, who retreated into memories of her high school beauty queen days; the mysterious "guest" who helps him/herself to the communion elements once every ten years and leaves a note indicating a preference for wine over Welch's.

In one of the most poignant of his vignettes, Cullum describes his relationship with Snow, an elderly African American suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Snow had been a house slave on the cotton plantation of a Confederate colonel whose task was to serve guests.

"After the first visit or two," Cullum writes, "he found a way to serve me a cup of tea." Though he terms their last meeting prior to Snow's death "heartbreaking," there is a gentle quality to the completion of this man's life as he recalls his "momma's ham shank and black-eyed peas" and adds, "Maybe you could come one day and we'd sit down together."

Although there is a bit of repetition at the beginning, Cullum's style of writing quickly engages the reader, who is then more than happy to be the church mouse observer to all the goings on, in and around San Antonio State Hospital.

Bob Cullum describes *Church Mouse* as "a collection of stories about the religious life of mental patients. ... that allows one to laugh with doctors, nurses, patients, and family." I couldn't have said it better.

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