Retired chaplains are an untapped resource—human links to the profession’s past, who hold wisdom for the present and increasing value for its future. The APC Retired Chaplains’ Writing Project grew out of conversations among chaplains connecting with each other during annual conferences. It encourages chaplains to identify the “things they carried” during their years of service that guided them in their delivery of pastoral care and to share these with their younger colleagues. This article includes several chaplains’ contributions to this ongoing project. As George R. Robie BCC, who serves as facilitator, puts it, “We continue to weave the tapestry of our experience and welcome all retired chaplains to take up the thread.”

A GROUP OF CHAPLAINS attending the retiree specialty group at the last three Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) conferences lovingly wove a common thread into the beginnings of a beautiful tapestry. The thread emerged from conversations about the importance of retaining a sense of meaning and purpose during retirement. Those chaplains didn’t know they were dream weavers, nor did they set out to fabricate the design which has evolved and which holds so much promise for the future.

Proposal

Retired chaplains already are a sizeable group within APC and our numbers continue to grow. We are an untapped resource with enormous potential. We are searching for a voice and looking for ways to benefit APC and the future of chaplaincy. Think of us as a vital link in a chain that connects the past, the present and the future. We represent hundreds of years of faithful service and experience, possess wisdom, insights and tools of the trade, all of which we are willing to share. An enormous boost comes to a person’s identity by being able to demonstrate that he or she still has “something of value” to offer younger colleagues and a way to deliver it.

Jerry Griffin BCC (retired) aptly put it in his explanation of why he continues to work part-time: “A great part of the stimulus for doing that is to contribute to the excellence of pastoral care by calling on all those years of ministry and learning the ins and outs of good care to make a difference in the lives of people.” There is no greater honor for retired chaplains than to witness how the wisdom, skills, talents and abilities that we possess are perceived as gifts and received with gratitude by those who follow in our footsteps, all for the sake of making a difference in people’s lives.
The weaving continues

With the assistance of APC’s Advocacy Resource Committee and the encouragement of many others, retired APC chaplains now have a way of contributing to the future of the profession. We are invited to tell our stories and to share some of what we have learned over the years by participating in the Retired Chaplains’ Writing Project,” which utilizes Tim O’Brien’s book *The Things They Carried* as a frame of reference.

This novel takes the reader inside the lives of members of Alpha Company during the Vietnam War and provides an intimate look at what the soldiers carried in their backpacks. These items served as vivid reminders of, and connections to, home, love and encouragement. They ranged from pictures and letters to favorite snacks, and included a Frisbee, a pair of moccasins and even pieces of intimate clothing belonging to a loved one. These possessions were windows into the souls of the men of Alpha Company and served as markers that signified camaraderie as well as their common burdens.

Most of us chaplains are not soldiers, and we don’t usually carry backpacks on our daily rounds. Yet, the act of carrying something helps to establish identity. When that which is carried is unpacked and shared in a loving, supportive manner, trust may be built. I challenged my retired colleagues to take a few moments to relax and clear their minds and to imagine that they indeed had carried backpacks throughout their service as chaplains. I asked them to identify what valuable, precious commodities were in those packs—things that they valued so much they wanted to share them for the benefit of the profession.

Tom Pexton BCC is enjoying his retirement in Wisconsin where he is active in the United Church of Christ and community activities. Tom offers an example in his recollection of a dying patient who spent most of his days watching television and railing against politicians.

One day during a newscast, this very angry man started his attack once more. As he paused for breath, I quietly said something like “Sometimes life just isn’t fair!” He stopped his diatribe as he realized that someone understood his hurt. He then poured out his pain in a way that could heal his spirit at a time when his body could not be healed. Christmas was approaching, and the patient was feeling so much loss. His family was very creative, which makes all the difference. This fellow had a hobby of working on his antique car. What could be the most meaningful gift his family could give him? They gave him a symbol of their love in a nice, shiny wrench, which recognized and celebrated one of his favorite pastimes. It was meaningful for the patient, the family and the chaplain. Caregivers, family and patient experienced a move from an angry dad to the acceptance of the end of life, complete with a symbol of love, remembering a meaningful Christmas. I wonder if that wrench was with him in the casket.

Tom carried the courage to enter a raging storm and had the ability to show empathy through a few words of understanding. In the process, a man’s torment was transformed into acceptance. Retirement years are a good time to journey into the depths of the soul; an ideal time to sort out one’s abilities by identifying the experiences, gifts and talents, and even objects we carried with us during our careers and how they enabled us to establish our identity as chaplains and to provide the best possible spiritual care. This sorting is a continual process which becomes more meaningful when we take the next step and, like Tom, write about some of the resources we have carried as well as the differences they have made in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we have shared the riches.

Other stories of the things they carried

Gene Wickman BCC is quick to remind others he is not fully retired as he continues to serve an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregation in Pembine, Wisconsin. Previously,
Gene served for many years as chaplain in long-term care facilities and one of the ways he shared the meaning of his faith was through music.

In over twenty years of ministry to the elderly and their families, music has made a considerable, positive difference to the people I have served—and to my own life. Music has been an avenue to deepen the level of communication and bonding with another person. It truly has enhanced my ministry and has been a positive force in finding a way to relate to others on a level that is not achieved in any other way.

The biblical story of David soothing Saul’s bouts of agitation through the vehicle of music has always intrigued me. Early on as a chaplain in a nursing home, several staff members and I conducted an experiment. We interviewed families of residents who were diagnosed with mental disorders such as Alzheimer’s or who exhibited symptoms of disease such as dementia, agitation and distress. We learned about their favorite kinds of music—music they had enjoyed prior to the diagnosis or display of symptoms. We received permission from their families to play music for their loved ones whenever they exhibited periods of mental agitation or symptomatic distress. In a great majority of cases, this music produced a calming effect and noticeably reduced agitation. Clearly, it spoke to their spirits.

It has been my experience that my music, whether guitar or piano, seemed to bring joy and a connection with residents and also with family members. Even those residents who were unable to communicate at all, or whose communication skills were severely impaired, responded to music. It was especially exciting when they joined in by singing, or humming. Sometimes they would keep time with the rhythm or show signs of joy and peace as a result of the song in their hearts. Music is truly a place one meets another in God’s presence. If God blessed you with the gift of music, I strongly encourage you to bless others with the gift. In the process, you too will be blessed.

In earlier conversations with Gene, he distinguished between gifts and talents. Gifts, he says, are innate; one is born with them. Talents, on the other hand, are skills and abilities we acquire and cultivate. Dr. Maryam Mostoufi is a retired associate chaplain and the first Muslim woman admitted to APC. She continues to serve as chaplain and facilitator of Spiritual Voices, an interfaith group of individuals with developmental disabilities located in Springfield, Illinois. This group seeks to explore and develop their own spiritual beliefs and practices and to promote the rights of others with disabilities to do so. Over the years Maryam has developed the ability to use humor in her ministry. It cuts through facades, helps makes charades disappear and is disarming.

Maryam has found humor to be a unique way of reaching out to others, albeit one that takes considerable skill because it is dependent on timing as well as the ability to read people. One always needs to determine its appropriateness, and the ability to do that comes from training and experience.

As chaplains, we are present with individuals experiencing emotions ranging from joy to rage. Their surroundings may be familiar or foreign. They may be isolated or surrounded by friends, family and colleagues. Humor is an effective but underutilized tool for addressing grief, stress, pain and conflict. It may serve as a gauge to measure the climate within a work area or a waiting room, a hammer to pound in a non-too-subtle point, a crow bar to expose the malignant truth inside a chest, a wrench to carefully twist open a valve so that pent up emotions may be released or a tube of glue to hold broken pieces together. The key is to recognize that humor emerges out of the context of the situation and the relationships between those involved. The chaplain’s role is not to tell a joke when a situation appears awkward, but rather to observe the dynamics and to create an atmosphere that gives
permission for humor. Humor may set the stage for restoring balance and health to the mind, body and spirit.

Tom Pexton BCC reaches back to his seminary training to describe how the ability of the chaplain to speak a foreign language may make a huge difference in the midst of crisis.

Years ago my close friend, who served as rabbi on the Jewish chaplaincy service, sometimes invited me to visit Jewish patients with him, especially if he would be away for a few days and they were high-risk surgical patients. Our hospital attracted heart patients from various southern states, and on one occasion we visited a couple from Florida the day before the rabbi was to leave. He said that I would visit them each day, and they were happy about that. The next day, during a presurgical visit I mentioned that I could do the Numbers blessing if the patient wished. He said he would like that, so I said it in Hebrew. Little did I know how often I would repeat it.

When he went off to surgery, I spent considerable time with his wife. Being so far from home, she was grateful for the friendship and staff support. Her husband made it through the heart surgery, but when he regained consciousness, he still had the breathing tube down his throat. Nevertheless, before I left, he raised a hand for me to say the Hebrew blessing.

The next days were difficult for the patient and his wife. The medical staff wasn’t sure if they could successfully wean him from the ventilator. Each day I would be with him for a time and before leaving, say the blessing. It seemed to me that the blessing kept him making the effort to go on. Finally, after several difficult days, the breathing tube was removed, and we said the prayer together.

On another occasion, a call came to the pastoral care office on a Friday afternoon I found a distraught woman about 45-years-old standing outside the patient’s room. She had just arrived from California to see her brother who was dying of AIDS. I don’t know when she had seen him last, but I had experienced relatives of patients coming after a long absence, where the mixture of guilt and emotions escalated into a frenzy. The patient was not responsive and near death.

The woman said they were Jewish, and I explained that at this time on a Friday afternoon there was no rabbi in the hospital or pageable from the community. As the chaplain on duty, I was the only one available. I offered to give a Hebrew blessing, and she responded, “Yes!” We prayed at the bedside, and he was gone. Clearly, the Numbers blessing helped her to deal with the loss of her brother. She so desperately wanted to do something for him, and the knowledge that she had arrived in time to pray helped to calm her. Chaplains should be aware that liturgy, even the repeating of a short Hebrew prayer, may make a big difference in patient outcomes. Many times I’m thankful for those three units of Hebrew that Professor Herbert Gordon May taught me in seminary.

These contributions from three colleagues prompted me to reflect on a time when my life was in turmoil, and I was on a quest for peace and tranquility—a way to relax by “taking the edge off,” so to speak. I found exactly what I needed in the Boundary Waters and Quetico canoe areas of northern Minnesota and Canada.

I would pitch camp at the edge of a lake or below river rapids and sit there watching the water. Over time, I witnessed first hand the enormous power present in water, wind, ice and fire.

Once, when walking along lakeshores and riverbanks, I noticed an abundance of small stones of various shapes, sizes and colors, all of which had a common characteristic: they were smooth. Their rough edges had been worn away by the power of nature.
I picked up a handful and thought about the patients I served and how numerous, expensive medications often were used to "take the edge off" their pain and discomfort. What could I as a chaplain do to help ease them as well? I filled a small backpack with the smooth stones, took them home and began to carry a pocketful on my daily rounds.

During my conversation with a patient, I used what I call a "memory hook." If I heard a word, someone's name, a phrase or an expression of faith that obviously had significant meaning for the patient, I'd store it in my memory bank. At the end of the visit, I'd take one of the stones, write the word or words on it with a felt tip pen and place it in the patient's hand. This small, smooth stone was a physical, visual reminder that there are spiritual powers available to us which are greater than even the most marvelous human creations. The gift of the stone was one way I found to demonstrate that we as chaplains have a role to play in helping to "take the edge off" patients' pain and discomfort.

The examples shared in this article remind us of the importance of language—the language of empathy, the soul moving attributes of the language of music, the opportunities inherent in the language of laughter and how the language of Holy Scripture reaches across religious, cultural and ethnic lines. Wind and water also have a language. They leave their imprint not on a manuscript but on beautiful, smooth stones waiting to receive a precious word or two extracted from the plethora that make up a conversation—words important enough to be held and saved as keepsakes. Thanks to Maryam Mostoufi, Tom Pexton and Gene Wickman for sharing the stories of the things they carried that gave meaning to their service as chaplains.

Our tapestry is a work in progress. You are invited to take up the thread and to weave your story into its rich design. For more information and/or to contribute to the Retired Chaplains' Writing Project, contact George R. Robie BCC (grrobie@neb.rr.com).