

Practicing Contemplation for Healthy Self-care

R. Michael Stuart BCC



The Reverend R. Michael Stuart MDiv MA BCC (retired) currently serves as spiritual care manager for Home Care and Hospice of Western New York, Inc., Olean, NY. He is endorsed by the Presbyterian Church (USA).

mstuart@homecare-hospice.org

Though well aware of the need for an ongoing plan for intentional self-care, chaplains often neglect this aspect of their ministries. This article focuses on the importance of regular spiritual practice as an antidote to stressors, including compassion fatigue. The author describes the development of his contemplative practice and provides some examples of various ways that contemplation may be incorporated into one's daily routine.

SELF-CARE IS ESSENTIAL IN PROFESSIONAL MINISTRY.

Spiritual discipline and practice is a means to achieving self-care. While many chaplains seem to know this truth, they often fall short on the practice side.

The Common Standards for Professional Chaplaincy affirmed by the Council on Collaboration, which includes the Association of Professional Chaplains, includes the competency requirement that a candidate for certification will demonstrate the ability to "attend to one's physical, emotional and spiritual well-being."¹

In the critical juncture for candidates being considered for board certification, a certification committee determines whether the candidate is ready. One of the competencies which the candidate must demonstrate is this one addressing self-care. However, it is one thing to be able to articulate how one will take care of oneself in professional chaplaincy and another to actually practice healthy self-care. As Ann Sidney Charlescraft wrote in *Chaplaincy Today*, "Self-care addresses those elements of life that allow one to be well in a variety of ways spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally—for the purpose of renewal and personal growth."²

Awareness of stressors

Self-care for chaplains addresses the same spiritual issues as for patients, families/friends and staff. Chaplains regularly chart stressors for patients after a visit. Hospice charting even may extend to primary caregivers and family members. However, I suspect chaplains rarely use similar criteria to evaluate themselves and their situations.

A main stressor for chaplains in today's reality of tight budgets is the threat of termination. Often they are categorized as "non-essential employees," which means they are among the first to experience the effects of cutbacks. Other stressors include insufficient resources, disrespect, lack of pay, lack of security, perceived lack of opportunity and relationships with peers/supervisors.

Another common stressor is compassion fatigue, which Beth Hudnall Stamm terms secondary traumatic stress:

There is soul weariness that comes with caring, from daily doing business with the handiwork of fear. It lives at the edge of one's life, brushing against hope and barely making its presence known. At other times, it comes crashing in, overtaking one with its vivid images of another's terror³

Compassion-fatigued individuals may experience nightmares, depression, heightened startic (SP?) response, helplessness, anger, irritability, sleep disruption, fear, anxiety, guilt and grief.⁴

Healthy self-care helps prevent compassion fatigue and “crash and burn” health breakdowns, which take chaplains away from work. Regular spiritual practice, especially that of a contemplative nature, helps one to

- Listen to the heartbeat of God and in so doing often slow one’s heart rate.
- Relax and clear one’s mind of thoughts and feelings that raise blood pressure.
- Take a deep breath to get in touch with one’s own breathing and to become aware of God’s presence in and all around.
- Commune with God in the silence and experience the warmth, love and goodness of God.
- Feel refreshed, renewed and better able to cope with the daily stressors of spiritual caregiving.

My journey into contemplation

Although self-care has always been an important aspect of my professional ministry, I began the practice of contemplative prayer and meditation—without actually identifying it as such—during service with a Marine Corps maneuver battalion in Vietnam. As a rifleman on watch, I listened alone for God’s voice. I felt comfortable in trusting God in knowing that in life and in death we belong to God.

When I returned to the States, I felt estranged from my own culture and country and needed time to find a way to heal from my anger, rage and alienation. I found solace and some peace of mind in the silences of my journey of discernment as I continued contemplative spirituality and prayer in my relationship with God.

Over the years, contemplative spiritual practice helped me to be centered, to rest in God and to stay healthy. I practiced contemplative meditation in my daily long distance running and training for marathons. I practiced it in Embangweni, Malawi, where I served in mission as a teacher of history and biblical studies in a public secondary school at the invitation of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian.

Still it wasn’t until I was fifty that I began to practice in community during weeklong silent retreats at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. For the past two years, I have been in formation as a Genesee Lay Contemplative (GLC) at the Abbey of Genesee in Piffard, NY, where I receive spiritual direction from the abbot. My practice of daily silence includes daily praying three of the offices: terce, none, and compline. GLC meets once a month for a Day of Recollection at the monastery and for one three-day retreat each year. Our group of thirty is an ecumenical mix of Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, United Methodists and me, a Reformed Presbyterian.

I continue to find peace, wholeness, healing and health in my daily spiritual exercises by practicing the presence of God in the Benedictine way of life. I adapt them to my personal understandings of faith and use Protestant biblical reflections like Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s in my *lectio divina* where I focus on a word or phrase that leaps out at me from a passage of scripture. As Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, “[S]ilence before the word leads to right hearing and thus also to right speaking of the word of God at the right time.”⁵

The writings of Kathleen Norris have been particularly helpful to me. She has a Presbyterian faith background and is an oblate in a monastic community in the Midwest. In her book *Acedia and Me* she writes,

[T]o perceive my essential task as living with myself as I am, even as I continue to confront myself and my behavior so that I might more fully conform my ways of thought, talk, and action to what is good ... even though I fail far more often than I succeed (this) does not discourage me It is expected.⁶

My journey toward self-care, both personally and professionally, has been a process of inner discernment toward a spiritual practice and discipline that will bring me to a place of health, wholeness and healing. For me, it's a growing in self-awareness to the God within that I seek in my spiritual practices. This continues to be a process of practice and discipline with spirit guides and mentors for help and support.

Establishing a contemplative spiritual practice

Many books are available on contemplative prayer and life to get started. A short list of those I have found helpful follows this article. I also have received spiritual guidance from Thich Nhat Hanh's writings and attendance at a workshop of his community in San Francisco. Richard Groves and the Sacred Art of Living community is another helpful spiritual mentor.

The practice of contemplation lends itself to a variety of settings. As a seminarian, I was encouraged to read Psalm 139 "with my heart" three times a day and then to meditate on it, and to practice this contemplation exercise for a month. At the end of that time, I was amazed as to how it spoke to me personally particularly through individual verses. A few weeks after I recounted this story in a recent sermon, a chaplain colleague who serves the population at Brockport State Detention Center told me that she had recommended the practice to a prisoner who experienced similar insight.

I served for six years as staff chaplain at St. Charles Medical Center, Bend, OR, a Level I trauma center with high acuity. Each day my colleagues and I gathered in the chapel prior to the lunch hour for centering prayer, which we took turns facilitating. Staff and patients were invited to join us. Following a reading from *The Fire of Silence and Stillness*, a bell was rung to signal a 15-minute silence.⁷ At the end of this time, the selection was read again and a closing bell rung. This time of focusing left us with renewed spirits and also helped to stave off compassion fatigue.

More recently, I have developed a presentation that describes how I incorporated contemplative practices into my workday:

- Use brief moment(s) between patient visits to retreat to the chapel and focus on a word or phrase from *lectio divina* or to practice breathing exercises.
- Walk outside and/or pause for a moment of prayer in the hospital garden.
- Stop to listen to music presentations in the hospital lobby area.

Outside of the hospital, I often exercise both body and spirit by climbing nearby Pilot Butte at sunrise or working out at a local fitness center. Once every two months I treated myself to a full body massage.

In addition to monthly meetings with my spiritual director, I meet with my Celi De support group from the Anamcara Apprentice Program at Sacred Art of Living Center, which includes hospital colleagues: three staff chaplains, manager of spiritual care, two physicians (OB/GYN and oncologist) and three nurses.

Norris reminds us that even when spiritual practices and discipline become a part of our daily lives, we still encounter times of aridity. She shares a story of a desert father who told his disciple, "Brother, the monastic life is like this: I rise up, and I fall down, I rise up and I fall down, I rise up and I fall down."⁸ My personal spiritual journey echoes this path toward discernment with God *pachoko, pachoko*: "little by little" as I learned to say in the Malawi language of Tumbuka. May it continue to be so!

¹ Qualifications for Professional Chaplaincy, Section II: Identity and Conduct, IDC7 www.professionalchaplains.org/uploadedFiles/pdf/common-standards-professional-chaplaincy.pdf accessed February 15, 2012. The Council on Collaboration also includes American Association of Pastoral Counselors, Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Canadian Association for Spiritual Care, National Association of Catholic Chaplains and National Association of Jewish Chaplains.

² Ann Sidney Charlescraft Alexander Tartaglia, Diane Dodd-McCue and Sandra B. Barker, "When caring hurts ... A pilot study supporting compassion-fatigued pediatric critical care nurses," *Chaplaincy Today* 26, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2010), 18.

³ Beth Hudnall Stamm, *Secondary Traumatic Stress: Self-Care Issues for Clinicians, Researchers and Educators* (Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press, 1999), xix.

⁴ Charlescraft, "Caring," 17.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 80.

⁶ Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer's Life* (London: Riverhead Books, 2008), 208.

⁷ Paul Harris, ed., *The Fire of Silence and Stillness: An Anthology of Quotations for the Spiritual Journey* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1996).

⁸ Norris, *Acedia*, 208.

Additional resources

Allaire, James and Rosemary Broughton. *Praying with Dorothy Day, Companions for the Journey*. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1995.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *I Want to Live These Days With You: A Year of Daily Devotions*. Translated by O.C. Dean, Jr. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Chittister, Joan. *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*. Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2008.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2001.

Merton, Thomas. *Lent and Easter: Wisdom from Thomas Merton*. Compiled by Jonathan Montaldo, The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living. Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 2007.

Newell, J. Philip. *Celtic Prayers from Iona: The Heart of Celtic Spirituality*. Iona, Scotland, UK: Wild Goose Publications, 1994.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monk*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1981.

Rupp, Joyce. *Inviting God In: Scriptural Reflections and Prayers Throughout the Year*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2001.

Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.