

We asked one of our volunteers, with a background in nursing and palliative care and now working in spiritual accompaniment and pastoral settings, to share something with us of her experience in the light of the current pandemic. Here is her tender and thoughtful response.

The need for Authentic Presence and Relationship as well as medicine

'That they maybe one; as you, Father, are in me and I in you;
I pray that they may be one in us' John 17 v21

Nearly 30 years ago I was drawn into the world of palliative care, to work with people facing probable death. I left a highly sophisticated clinical hospital setting to work in a community setting, visiting people in their own homes or in the local care homes.

This move was value-driven; I needed to work in a culture that accepted and understood the natural cycle of life; that life included death. The nature and essence of palliative care spoke to my innate existential world view. I found an approach to caring that held the scientific, medical rigour as well as an understanding of the essential relational nature of compassionate care. Bringing science and humanity together made perfect sense to me when caring for frightened, disorientated ill people and their families.

When death is viewed as a possibility, grief and loss are inevitable for the person with an illness and those who love them. But I also noticed many times of intense joy and love, which were just as prevalent in many families. I wondered about this, what conditions needed to be present and how I could contribute to enabling the life-giving experiences to happen.

Hospice and Palliative Care draw from two strands of Greek medicine; the dominant modern scientific 'curing' Hippocratic Approach and the lesser known marginalised Asklepan 'healing' Approach. The Asklepan symbol of a snake wrapped around a staff is, though, well known: associated with Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, this symbol is part of the logo of both the World Health Organisation and the British Medical Association.

I had been working for a couple of years as a Macmillan Nurse when I was introduced to the essences of both the Hippocratic and the Asklepan traditions. It was a real 'ah-ha' moment for me. The Asklepan philosophy and its key elements, gave me a language and validity about the relational and spiritual nature of my work.

I learned that in the Asklepan tradition, **Authentic Presence** and **Authentic Relationships** are critical components of a carer's contribution to another in a time of their crisis and confusion. Frightened, vulnerable, grieving people need compassionate care as delivered through *presence and relationship* as well as medicines and care plans to find wholeness.

The Asklepan practitioner was encouraged to follow a path of inner growth and reflection to enable their ability to be with frail, sad individuals in this way. I noted that deep and concentrated attention flowed from internal quietness of my spirit; a still space that I needed to foster through prayer, a healing relationship with the Divine and contemplation practices. I grew to understand the Holy Spirit worked/s through my humanity.

In some mysterious, grounding way, authentic presence and relationship is a rich, transformative experience for all involved. I perceived that my relationships with ill and grieving people were two-way - I received as much as I gave. The people close to death enriched my life enormously, helped my heart and spirit to grow. When I meet another's soul to soul, I am changed also.

So, what is relevant to these times?

The pandemic has brought death and grief, vulnerability and uncertainty, and our human mortality out of hospices and health care institutions into the public domain. The temporary nature of existence has become more real to all of us.

It seems to me the lessons relating to humanity I learned many years ago are as relevant now in the pandemic as in a palliative care setting. Of course, we need good clinical care - preventative Public Health of social distancing and vaccination as well as restorative, community and hospital based clinical care. The need for these is self-evident and widely accepted.

But there is also a great need for the subtle, less tangible, and equally powerful contribution of the Asklepan approach. Broken-hearted individuals and communities need healing of the spirit from the trauma and terror also. Like many people, I know of numerous beautiful, heart-warming examples of how people are relating to and caring for each other in new and life-giving ways. Indeed, acts of simple and spontaneous kindness are usually enough for many of us to feel remembered, valued and connected to the human race.

However, some of our sisters and brothers in our local and world-wide community have deeper wounds in their heart and spirit as a result of the pandemic; families scarred with death, poverty, and loss of hope. In months and years to come, many in our interconnected world will need *Authentic Presence and Authentic Relationships* to help them find healing from their traumas; to find a new way to fullness of life as well as jobs and food.

The spiritual wisdom I discovered many years ago as a young Macmillan Nurse, lessons of the spiritual and relational nature of comfort - that healing and connectedness are as important as medicine and drugs to well-being and flourishing - are still relevant.

According to Pope Francis, '*Prayer and quiet service are our virtuous weapons.*' As one who follows Christ and his ways, I have a shared responsibility to undertake the *quiet service*; being able to be an *authentic presence* to enable transformative experience to happen for my fellow man and woman.

When I am able to be present to another, to acknowledge the *truth* of their situation, when another feels the tenderness of my attention, something mysterious and healing may happen. From the depths of my humanity to the depths of another, the isolation of their suffering may be touched and altered, and deep healing can very slowly start happening.

I believe all God's creatures, more than ever, need us to be bearers of Christ's healing touch in our beautiful world.

Peace

To this house;
To those who enter;
To those who dwell here;
To those who depart.

Peace