

“What is Spiritual Care?”

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What is spiritual care?

It's a question I'm often asked...and in the next few minutes I'll do my best to offer an answer.

It has a lot to do with listening...and about being present in ways that are perhaps uncommon.

As I reflect on spiritual care, I'm drawing on my experience here at First Unitarian starting back in 2013, as well as the training I received at Hospice Toronto, in Clinical Pastoral Education at Bridgepoint Healthcare, with further study through the Haden Institute.

Spiritual Care is one of the things that led me into ministry, because I was part of a small spiritual care group at Neighbourhood congregation.

I found that I loved doing that work and I wanted to learn more about it, and that's one of the things that led me to seminary.

The privilege, that is the honour, of being present to another person in what I would call "holy listening" is one of the most valuable forms of ministry we can do.

And although I and Shawn are professional ministers and we've had a lot of training, it is something that many members of the congregation, sometimes called "lay people," can learn to do as well.

So we might ask ourselves, what is the benefit of simply listening to someone else?

Well, there are very few situations in life when we are deeply listened to.

Many well-meaning people, when you relate a challenge to them, will try to offer advice or guidance.

Or they might tell you about a time in their life when something similar happened to them.

This can be interesting and meaningful in conversations between friends, but spiritual care or pastoral care is really more about deeply listening and asking open-ended questions.

More on those in a minute.

You'll notice that I move back and forth between calling this work "spiritual care" and "pastoral care."

You'll hear both of them used in congregations and people do tend to prefer one or the other.

"Pastoral care" is a term that came out of our Christian heritage.

Some people love this term; others do not, depending on their own background and personal associations with the words.

Today in 2022, when many people refer to themselves as "spiritual but not religious," the term "spiritual care" may be more accessible to more people...and it's a term that's being adopted more and more now in hospitals and other settings.

When I think of spiritual care,
I see it as attending to the inner life of the person...
the soul-level, the center of the human being
that is more than the externals.

More than whatever we show on the outside.

In this form of care, we try to create a safe container where the person can reflect on what is deeply important to them, and we do that through deeply attentive listening and by asking thoughtful and open-ended questions... without any agenda.

Many times, we get into service-oriented roles because we feel we want to "help people."

This impulse can lead us into ordained ministry or the lay ministry of pastoral/spiritual care.

Being present to another person's pain, and being sensitive and compassionate people, there may be a strong part of us that wants to make that pain go away.

But an essential part of spiritual care-- perhaps the most important part of all-- is the awareness that we do not have the power to solve another person's problems...

But that they do...when they are in touch with their own deep wisdom.

Our role is to be fully present... to honour their personhood... and to open up a space for healing energies in their life, whatever forms that energy might take.

Pastoral or spiritual care is not about solving the problems of people who come to us.

This is true whether the listener is an ordained minister or a volunteer member of the spiritual care team.

Our role is not to take on practical challenges,
offer creative solutions to problems,
tell people what they should or shouldn't do,
or offer advice of any kind.

Of course, it's worth saying that every spiritual care provider
has likely lapsed into well-meaning problem solving
at times...and certainly I've done that myself.

Our task, when we do that, is to mindfully notice what has happened...To
reframe...let go of our agenda...and return again in love.

Return to holy listening.

Our role is to listen deeply, to bear witness,
to reflect back what an individual says
in the safe container of spiritual care.

When this works well, we assist people in listening deeply
to themselves...and through that listening,
to find pathways toward what will be life-giving for them,
in their particular circumstances.

In some ways, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke was a spiritual care provider
when he spoke to a young poet in words that became a well-loved book.

He didn't give the young man the critique and the career advice he asked
for.

Instead he encouraged the young poet to listen to his own soul.

He didn't take on the "problem" (which wasn't really a problem)
of why the man hadn't found success as a professional poet.

Rilke could have gotten hooked on those externals...
after all he himself knew a lot about the poetry world...

But instead, he encouraged the young man to go deeper...
to seek out the questions that would lead him
not necessarily to external success but to internal well-being.

No matter what particular difficulties we face,
the deep listening of spiritual care invites the wisdom
that can come from the Inner Teacher, or the Divine,
however you might experience that in your life.

When you're looking for practical solutions,
you might be very well served by a psychotherapist
or a social worker or a life coach, all of whom do essential
and very worthwhile work.

Spiritual care is something different.

It's an invitation to "sit together in the mystery"
asking questions such as "what is coming up for you, as you sit with this?"
and "what are you drawing on, as you face this challenge?"

Welcoming the person's spiritual or religious outlook,
we might encourage them to connect their experiences
to a source of larger meaning. We might ask questions such as:

"Where are you sensing the sacred in your life right now?"

"What could be the gift in this experience?"

"Do you feel there's some calling in this for you?"

Now...for many if not most of us...
it is much more comfortable to
try to solve problems than it is to sit in the mystery.

This is true for people who both give and receive spiritual care.

In our complex and challenging lives, we of course look for ways to solve problems and meet our challenges in practical ways.

As a minister, it's always my privilege to accompany you, as you do that.

But enduring wisdom and abiding well-being
do not come only from the solving of temporary problems.

They emerge, very gradually, from inner work.

As a minister, I try to crack open a door
to the depths of wisdom that link us to our ancestors
and to the entire cosmos...

To the divine nature within each one of us
that can guide us toward our best choices.

When we open up to that inner nature,
when we engage with its wisdom, it moves us in the
directions life needs us to go.

We can trust those energies...but we need to make space for them. That's
what spiritual care can do, at its best.

And when we provide spiritual care,
whether we are ministers or lay people,
we must ensure that we ourselves are doing that inner work.

That we are nurturing our personal connection
with the Mystery, or the Sacred, or the Higher Power
of our understanding...

That we are engaging regularly in spiritual practice
such as prayer or meditation,
to keep our heart open to the deeper calls of life.

This allows us to sit with others who are wrestling with the challenges that come their way.

To be present to them, with as little anxiety as possible.

We are living in a difficult world...
and it is only from our own healing and wholeness
that we can encourage and facilitate well-being in others.

When we listen from a place of non-anxious presence,
unconditional love and acceptance of "what is"...

We invite others to listen to their inner voice
in the same loving way.

Thank you so much for listening.