

Cynthia Dahlin: Entering Mystery Through Darkness at the Hospital

Sermon for Seekers Church, 2/25/96

Cynthia J. Dahlin

Entering Mystery Through Darkness at the Hospital

When Sonya and Julie told me of the Lent worship themes, I knew this would be a wonderful time for me to share what it has been like for me to be a chaplain at Sibley Hospital this year. It has been such a year of growth and change, that it seems very important for me to let you know what's going on in me. I really want to thank Sonya for calling me to see if I wanted to preach. I really value and enjoy the chance to share my spiritual journey, but I am in a place in my life when picking up the phone to call and ask for a time seems impossible. I appreciate greatly the outreach.

This year, I have had a wonderful chance to learn about God from the hundreds of patients I have seen, from 8 to 20 a day, coming from many walks of life, some dying, some living with no future diminishment of health in their lives. It has been an amazing time of inner and outer journey.

Before I get started, I wanted to see how many others have participated in a Clinical Pastoral Education program at some time in their lives. I know we have so much seminary education in this room that we are very rich.

Clinical Pastoral Education consists of an assignment at a hospital, hospice, or nursing home as a chaplain, along with a group of 4-7 other students, who visit patients for 400 hours,

whether spread over the course of a year, as I am doing it, so that I spend 10-12 hours a week with patients, or compacted into a summer, spending 10 hour days at the hospital. In addition to the patient meetings, the chaplains write verbatims of their visits, especially the ones which are particularly meaningful, and bring them to discussions with their peers and supervisor. We also meet weekly with our supervisor to discuss our own areas of fear and pain as we go through the process. We lead worship services on Sundays in the Hospital chapel, devotions in the nursing home wing, and serve as late-night chaplain several times during the year.

For some, the first challenge for the chaplain is to be comfortable going in to rooms and feeling like presence and openness is a worthy gift anyone will accept. This was not a major problem. But I did have to name and claim the fact that I felt called to listen to people in times of crisis and bring meaning and spiritual resources to that moment.

I wanted to show you exactly what it is like to enter a hospital room, and how one has the power to turn the conversation to a meaningful one if the potential is there. Each of these vignettes is from a verbatim I wrote up right after the conversation, with only names and life details changed to protect the patients' identity.

Vignette 1 – (KATE CUDLIPP as patient)

C1

Hello, Mrs. Parker? I'm Cynthia Dahlin, one of the Chaplains.

P1

(With energy and relief) Oh, hello, I'm very glad to see you.

C2

I wanted to know if you wanted a visit today.

P2.

Oh, yes! I really need to talk.

C3

We can talk now, or I can finish introducing myself to the other patients on this ward and come back—whichever is better for you. (Get a chair.)

P3

I'd love to talk now. (Tearing up.) I'm sorry I can't shake your hand. This arm hurts all the time. They took out the bone, and it aches. They found more cancer in the shoulder, so the doctor wants to operate again to get that, and he wants to go into my hip to get out some more there. It's just one darn thing after another.

C4

How long has this been going on?

P4

For the last ten years. One thing, then another. This time it doesn't even seem worth getting better, because they want to dig right in as soon as I'm on my feet. What's the point. (Tears continuing.) I don't know why I'm depressed this time. I've been cheerful before. Ten years ago, my husband died of cancer, and I cheered him up the whole time. Every morning, if he'd wake up low, if he said,

"what's the point of going on?", I'd just say, "oh, snap out of it!" He went through great pain, but not for this long.

C5:

And you don't have anyone to cheer you along, like you did for your husband?

P5

No. But I've done pretty well for myself until now. It just doesn't seem worth it, to get better just to have another operation. The doctors have been great. I've had one of them for 19 years, and he's so nice. But what's the point. I mean, I call it like I see it. What's the point of going through one operation after another.

C6

Sounds like Job—just one darn thing after another.

P6

(Laughs sardonically.) Yeah.

C7

Do you see God in your life right now? Any joyful moments?

P7

No, not really. I can't imagine why he wants me to go through all of this. If I'm supposed to die, why can't it be quick?

C8

Do you think maybe God just wants you to see a few more sunrises?

P8

(Looks hard at me, smiles.) Maybe. There still are moments of joy. Sunrises and my flowers are still beautiful. (Silent for a moment. Then, very animatedly,) I wish I had a million dollars. I like to go out to dinner, and leave a \$50 tip if the waiter is friendly. Just an unexpected gift, and he is so happy! I just wish I could give away a million dollars to all the people around that just need it.

C9

You find joy by blessing people unexpectedly, just like you blessed your husband?

P9

Yes. . .

Vignette 2 – (PETER BANKSON as patient)

C1

Are you a relative of Ms. Paul's?

PH1

I'm her husband. What's happening? (Get chair.)

C2

It looks like they are working hard in there still. I am Cynthia Dahlin, the Chaplain. What have they told you so far about her condition?

PH2

I walked in here at five of eight, and we were planning to transport her to NIH by ambulance for some further tests. She was well enough to travel last night, but just as we walked in, there was a code blue in the hall. We could see it was her room, and they told us to come out here. Is she still alive?

C3

There are a lot of people working on her. She's in danger. Do you want me to go in and see how it is going?

PH3

No! Let them concentrate on her. I can wait. Let them focus on doing everything they can for her.

C4

What is she in for?

PH4

She had a liver disease, and it was getting serious. She checked in here September 2. Two weeks ago, she slipped into a coma, and we thought she was gone. She had a code, and she says she had a near-death experience. She went through a long tunnel of light, and heard the voices of her mother and grandmother, and then a male voice said, "Go back, it is not your time." She woke up, and everyone around here thought it was a miracle. She was very intent on describing this to me, and wanted us to go back to

church. Why would God do this to me,— save her and then let her die again? Why did she come back, just to die? It's so cruel, so pointless.

C5

Sometimes it's pretty hard to see the hand of God in the terrible things that happen.

PH5

I'm not just some stupid Catholic! I was raised in Jesuit Schools, and learned a lot from Jesuits, and know a lot about faith. I thought about becoming a Jesuit. I'm sure I don't know half as much as you, but this makes me think God doesn't exist. I can't believe God would do this to me.

C6

Why did she come back? Was there anything unfinished between her and you, or with anyone close to her?

PH6

We had all these plans—we were going to buy land on the shore and build a house to retire in together. I loved her so much. Everything was unfinished.

C7

Tell me about your wife. How long have you been married?

PH7

She's a beautiful woman. . . .

Vignette 3 – (MARY CAROL DRAGOO as patient)

C1:

How are you doing? (get chair.)

M1:

Well, the chemo isn't doing too well. I don't think it's helping anymore. I'm feeling good right now, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life feeling sick from treatments. I want to enjoy the rest of my life. So I want to stop chemo, and after this radiation is done go home to France. My parents are in France now, and many of my close relatives are there. But I haven't been back to France in 4 years, so that is where I want to go. I can see all those people. . .(pause) I guess you could call it saying my goodbyes.

C2:

If you do not have more chemo, you think you will be well enough to travel, maybe see all your extended family?

M2:

My mom and my aunt are coming here today, and maybe they could help me get home. But I'm not trying to make a world tour. If I'm there, though, maybe some of my aunts and uncles could more easily come to France and see me. Here I am alone.

C3:

You said Washington was really home for you. Who are your community here? Do you go to church?

M3:

My community is my friends from work. I managed a shop in Mazza Galerie. I am Muslim, but I do not go to the mosque. My friends are mostly Muslim, too, and we pray ourselves. I went to the Washington Mosque once, but I did not like the reception I got there.

C4:

That's too bad. It's such a pretty building. But I think that happens to a lot of people in churches, too.

M4:

I think the relationship between me and God is what is important, and the mosque is irrelevant. I pray five times a day, and I try to be a good person. I think there is just one God, and different people conceive of him in different ways. Then they all fight to hold onto power when someone else describes him differently. You know, Jews, Christians and Muslims all worship the same God. This pendant I have on is of Mary—this other one is from the Koran. We worship her as a prophet, like we do Jesus. We have later prophets that you don't know about because the Koran was written after the Bible, but we recognize all the saints who were named before Mohammed. Then Muslims killed Christians and Christians killed Jews when the people wanted to hold onto their old way and not accept a change. That's all Pfffftth! But God is what is important, not man's conception of God and all the buildings and power struggles man creates to gain power and money.

C15:

You are a very theological person! You have really thought a lot about this.

M15:

Yes. I think a lot about God. And I pray hard to understand why he does what he does. I think he may have given me this illness for some past sin that I don't know about, and I pray for forgiveness. . .

Each of these conversations went on for another 20-30 minutes, each time I left, I felt blessed, centered, deeply aware that God was talking to each of these people, and they had gifted me with entrance to their own struggles with such questions as:

- How do I live if I am unable to give, and giving has been key to my life?
- How could God let the love of my life die?
- How is God related to the many churches of the world, and why are the churches so imperfect?
- Is my illness due to sin—Is God punishing me?
- Is God working with me in my suffering?

It's amazing how deeply people take theology after one or two minutes—or only 30 seconds—from when I introduce myself. They know I'm the chaplain, and they assume I'm a competent life guard, and some plunge deeply into sacred waters, and pray that I won't let them drown. That assumption cuts me deeply and tenderly sometimes—the man in the second vignette assuming that while he went to Jesuit schools all his life, at this moment when his wife wavered in and out of death for several hours, and then died, he assumed I knew more than he, that I would not let him drown.

I felt what he really meant was that at that moment, I had vowed not to let him walk alone into the valley of death, I had come to that room to represent God's promise to him that he wasn't alone. People kiss my hands, bless me, hug me, or simply say thank you—it is amazing the depth of emotion I feel, and the abundance of gifts I receive for the two things I bring into the room: Focused presence, and a willingness to hear where the pain is coming from, and walk into it, and not away from it. This is where the sacred space is.

As our theme is entering mystery through darkness, I want to briefly discuss a few areas of mystery I have entered during my time at Sibley:

1. The first is the mystery of experiences of God. I have found that people go through the darkness of death and suffering and enter God, or heaven, or a spiritual safe place. I have encountered an amazing number of experiences of God. People have heard God speak to them to comfort them about death, showing how their spirit will live after they leave their body. Some people have seen God as light, some have encountered angels, or heard the voice of God speaking to them in times of pain, sleep or meditation. All of these experiences have brought the person calm and peace. Now that I have seen this so many times, when I find a patient who is not anxious, I assume that the person might have a story about an experience of God to share if my visit allows it. Many patients have entered terrible times of darkness and fear, only to find that God has not altered the facts of the situation, but offered presence and peace. It is like the scriptures about the temptation of Christ; they have gone through the trials of life, conquered them in some way, and then the angels ministered unto them.

I have found that I am much less afraid of death than I was before I began this experience, and have seen some

really beautiful scenes of community around deathbeds, especially when the Metropolitan Memorial Church, which many of the youth are visiting today, is involved. (And not to create an idealized Victorian picture, I have also seen other scenes of lonely and fearful death.)

2. I have entered the mystery of call and claiming of my own relationship with God in a new way after drifting more in a grayness, as Diane described, than a blackness. I have been able to claim my gifts around chaplaincy. I really enjoy going to the deep places people are willing to go, and seem able to sense a willingness and keep the door open. I first claimed this by feeling the joy and energy I feel after really feeling I have helped someone shift, claim their faith, or open a hidden area of pain that they want to deal with. Next, I could see that my feelings and experiences were unique and different from the others in my CPE group, and that I wanted to work with the dying patients and visit time after time, building a relationship, and that this was scary, but wonderful to me. The fact that I was sharing my experience with a group helped show me that others did not feel this, it was mine. I have found that I have a skill in groups, and was asked to run a spirituality group for patients on the psychiatric ward, and am facilitator of the CPE group when the supervisor can't be there. The Sibley Death and Dying Task Force, working on end of life quality of care, has included me in many meetings, to help think about how the nurses should more routinely call in chaplains to ensure that terminal patients have a chance to work on spiritual issues. And, after several years of not working for pay, the affirmation has felt very good. As I have felt more like I have something to offer, I find I have asserted myself much more in the other parts of my life, after acting as a follower for several years, feeling myself to be a novice in religious and spiritual life. My Mission Group, Hope and a Home, might be able to confirm

the fact that I am more likely to put out new ideas or different opinions and expect them to be worked with or contended with in the group.

3. Finally, I have gone deeper into the mystery of myself. I was worried at the beginning of my CPE year, that since I was the only one who had experienced group therapy, small groups, spiritual groups like Marjory's Circle of Stones, I would not get much from the group. Sometimes, I was very angry at how reserved and unwilling to share some of my peers were. But, I found that some of the people moved tremendously over the last 6 months, and I found ways to use the group that I never imagined. The group helped me to begin to put up self-protective barriers between myself and dangerous people, or to at least contemplate that there are evil people for whom the general practice of openness and listening place myself in danger.

Also, the issue of how to deal with the tremendous intimacy and tenderness which can occur in sharing some of the times which come up while sharing responsibility for caring for those whose life balances on a thread was important for me. A man who strokes the face of another dying man, can be very attractive. I had to learn to speak my feelings of tenderness to men, which I tend to avoid, fearing the sexual component of that moment of attraction and intimacy. Speaking of the feeling places the value on it, and allows the relationship to go on smoothly. Holding onto it can wreck the relationship, as it is infused with lots of powerful secret feelings.

I have had to face feelings of inadequacy to face certain situations, such as when a patient cannot not speak, and simply do my best, and know that God is there with me helping me, and the group helped me grow in this area. I have also had to work on my assumptions about life, finding that my assumption that people should be in couples, or committed relationships, was not shared by everyone—I had never noticed

that I believed this before. I found I also assume that people share a goal of making their life more alive, more deep, more exciting; I have an assumption of growth. Some people do not live like this, and do not want this, and my energy doesn't give them space. Looking over the ways I comfort and counsel people helped me to see my assumptions, and left me with the pain that they are not everyone's.

The last six months, have been a real privilege for me. I have heard how God works in the lives of others, and claimed more of my relationship with God. I have walked into others' darkness, and tried to find the mystery, and celebrate that mystery together with the patients and other chaplain interns. I will finish my CPE placement at the end of April, and then face the life challenge of finding the same meaning in on-going mission. It has been very meaningful that this has occurred during the year of my 40th birthday; it really feels like the lessons of Marjory Bankson's Circle of Stones group are being confirmed for me—I have the promise that I will enter new stages, continue to grow, and that God will find new ways to use me throughout my life. But perhaps to grow, I have to seek out my deserts, my wilderness spots, to allow changes to occur. And then I will be ministered to by angels.