

# NURTURING THE INSTITUTION'S SOUL

*By Adopting "Theatrical Roles," Staff Members Can Help Make a Hospital More Spiritual*

*"Life and livelihood ought not to be separated but flow from the same source, which is Spirit, for both life and livelihood are about Spirit. Spirit means life, and both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contribution to the greater community. A spirituality of work is about bringing life and livelihood back together again. And spirit with them."*

—Matthew Fox<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, hospital chaplains act as spiritual directors, helping people find meaning in crises. In so doing, they tend the spirits of patients, relatives, and staff. Having myself lived through budget cuts, layoffs, and outsourcing, I have come to realize how important it is to nurture the soul of the institution and to encourage people to ask: Where is God moving in the structure?

Today people want more than a living wage. They are searching for meaning in their work. This spiritual quest has made a change in the nature of work. "Organizations are slowly evolving from arenas of purely economic and social activity into places of spiritual development," argue two writers on organizational change.<sup>2</sup> Spirituality embraces a relationship with our Creator, the source of life, and a deep concern for people and other living things, including our environment. As a result of one's spirituality, one acts out of certain values and one's life and work have purpose and meaning. A healthy spirituality can transform our world. How can we enrich the spirituality of our institutions?

In 2004, I went to Ottawa for the annual convention of the Canadian Association for Pastoral Practice and Education, Canada's professional

organization for chaplains. Sr. Elizabeth Davis, RSM, a speaker at the conference, encouraged those of us who were in the audience to think in terms of symbols as we reflected on the people in our particular institutions. Concerning such people, she asked, "Who in your organizations are the 'pilgrims,' the 'priests,' the 'prophets,' and 'kings'?"

Lee G. Bolman, PhD, and Terrence E. Deal, PhD, two experts on organizational questions, argue that one way to nurture spirituality in a workplace is to think of it as "theater."<sup>3</sup> They suggest that certain dramatic attributes—symbolism, rites and ceremonies, stories/myths, humor/play, and setting or place—might be applied usefully to workplaces. In this article, I will explore the idea of nurturing an institution's soul by using Sr. Elizabeth's symbols and Bolman and Deal's theater concept.

## "PILGRIMS" AND "PRIESTS"

We might begin by thinking of patients and their families, passing through the portals of the hospital, as "pilgrims." In the midst of a crisis, they are looking for meaning. As they struggle with their mortality they stand on holy ground, just as pilgrims do when they visit a sacred site for renewal and inspiration. And, in an age of budget cuts and downsizing, hospital staff members are becoming "pilgrims" as well. They can no longer expect to stay in one workplace for a long time. As health care professionals dealing with ever more sophisticated technology, they also struggle with the meaning of their work.

Meanwhile, hospital chaplains can be viewed as the "priests" in this drama. They use symbols and conduct rituals in an effort to make sense out of some of the confusion that patients, family members, and employees may feel. "Faced with uncer-

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tainty and ambiguity, human beings create symbols to resolve confusion, increase predictability and provide direction," write Bolman and Deal.<sup>4</sup> Symbols are an important aspect of both ritual and setting.

On the wall in the foyer of St. Paul's Hospital, Vancouver, British Columbia, is a bronze image of the Good Samaritan. As we know, the parable concerns a resident of Samaria who discovers a wounded man lying beside the road, the victim of thieves. The man beside the road is a Jew. In those days, Samaritans and Jews were not on friendly terms. But the good man from Samaria treats the wounded man generously and kindly. He takes the bruised and bloodied man to an inn and pays for his care, so that he may be nursed back to health.

The symbol on St. Paul's wall inspires staff members to treat patients with the same compassion. It has been shaped as a mandala, a circle, so that one has to look closely to tell where the bodies of the Samaritan and the Jew begin and end. Its obvious suggestion is that all human beings are interconnected

and dependent upon each other.

Ritual, another aspect of theater, is also a way of nurturing an institution's soul. One function of a hospital chaplain, and part of his or her priestly role, is to help staff members ritualize their grief when a patient dies.

Some years ago, when I was the director of pastoral care at University of Alberta Hospital, Edmonton, Alberta, a baby born there lived for nine months in the pediatric ICU. When the child finally died, the nurses were distressed because they had been the baby's surrogate parents. We decided to hold a memorial service, more for the staff's benefit than for the baby's actual mother and father. Later we began to have monthly memorial services for the children who died on the unit.

I recently worked at Providence Health Care in Vancouver. That hospital comprises a number of facilities, some of which are residential. When the facility in the Arbutus section of Vancouver closed several years ago, employees were heartsick

because, having worked there for many years, they had come to see patients and colleagues almost as family members. In order to help them with their grief, we conducted a service in which seeds from the arbutus tree, symbols of hope, were given to each participant.

### "PROPHETS" AND "JESTERS"

Old Testament prophets have sometimes been misrepresented as fortune-tellers. Their gift, however, had less to do with seeing into the future than with assessing contemporary problems and holding them up for public scrutiny. Often the prophets spoke out for the oppressed who, at that time, were women and orphans.

In theatrical terms, the biblical prophets were "storytellers"—like people today who keep alive the myths and stories of their institutions. Storytellers also nurture a hospital's soul. Stories are a way of communicating central myths. And myths, write Bolman and Deal, "establish meaning, solidarity, stability and certainty. . . . [They] support claims of distinctiveness and transform a mere organization into a beloved institution."<sup>5</sup>

During their orientation, all Providence Health Care employees are shown a video about the organization's history. The video tells the stories of the women religious who founded the organization and describes its various facilities. Like the biblical prophets, the founding sisters were concerned about society's outcasts. Maintaining that tradition, St. Paul's Hospital was the first in Vancouver to treat AIDS patients. To this day, many of the facility's patients come from the inner city and suffer from various addictions.

Mount Saint Joseph, another Providence Health Care facility in Vancouver, has a history of diversity. The hospital was founded to provide care for the Asian immigrants who came to Canada to work on the railroads and fell ill while doing so. Mount Saint Joseph continues to this day to serve a large local Asian-Canadian population. It also has many employees with an Asian background (the Chinese lunch served in the hospital's cafeteria is superb). At both St. Paul's and Mount Saint Joseph, employees have a prophetic function. Through their service, they speak out for the voiceless.

Health care also has a place for another theatrical calling, the "jesters." Their ancestors may be

the court jester of the Middle Ages. Though he played the part of a fool, the court jester was the only person allowed to criticize the king. He was, accordingly, often a powerful person. The jester helped people to look at themselves objectively and see problems from a new perspective.

At the University of Alberta Hospital, we staff members joined other city residents in celebrating an annual event called "Klondike Days." In the late 1890s, Edmonton was the place from which prospectors set off to look for gold along the Klondike River in western Canada; Klondike Days reminded contemporary Albertans of a glorious past. The hospital always held an outdoor barbecue dinner and provided entertainment for the staff. One year, our clinical pastoral education students—young people training to become hospital chaplains—formed a barbershop quartet and traveled from ward to ward singing for patients and their families. The laughter these modern-day jesters helped foster a sense of community among, and provided relief for, people who were in need of both.

"Place" or "setting" can also help nurture an institution's soul. A chapel was being constructed in the University of Alberta Hospital when I worked there. We pastoral care staff members wanted to make sure the new chapel was interfaith. We therefore placed appropriate faith symbols at strategic points. We made the chapel's chairs moveable so that worshippers could turn and face their particular symbol. We placed a menorah, representing Judaism, near the chapel's entrance. On the left wall we affixed a cross; on the right wall we hung a Muslim prayer rug. Nearby was the om symbol for Hindus. On the communion table lay sweet grass for Canada's native people. Of course, such symbols could not represent all the religions of the world, but there was enough variety to give people the message that this was an interfaith chapel.

Finally, in thinking about a hospital as theater, we might see its administrators and board members as its "kings" and "queens." Such people

write the mission statement that sets out the facility's values and expresses its spirituality. They dream the hospital's vision for the future. When recent downsizing occurred at Providence Health Care, some staff members accused administrators of failing to uphold the organization's values. I, however, was impressed by how caring the administration tried to be in making painful decisions. They saw to it, for example, that chaplains and other staff were available to counsel those who needed it. For new positions, they tried to rehire people whose former jobs had been lost to outsourcing. Many wards held teas of appreciation for cleaning staff members who had served there. Downsized employees were treated with dignity and respect.

#### ALL ROLES ARE NEEDED

No matter what role an employee plays in a hospital—whether a "prophet's," a "priest's," a "king's," or a "jester's"—he or she can use that role to help transform the institution's culture. In doing so, staff members can help make their hospital a place that feeds the soul. ■

The jester helped people to look at themselves objectively and see problems from a new perspective.

#### NOTES

1. Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 1994, pp.1-22.
2. Gregory N. P. Konz and Francis X. Ryan, "Maintaining an Organizational Spirituality: No Easy Task," *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol.12, no. 3, 1999, p. 200.
3. Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1991.
4. Bolman and Deal, p. 244.
5. Bolman and Deal, p. 254.