



Cultivating an Inheritance

Mission Integration in a Rapidly Changing Health Ministry

By DONALD EGGLESTON, MDiv, MEd

When my father was dying several years ago, he elected to give his children and grandchildren personal possessions by which we could remember him. Some received the tools from his workroom, some received family pictures; the younger grandchildren received piggy banks loaded to the top with quarters. I received my dad's shaving brush and mug and his shoeshine kit. I placed the brush and mug on top of the mirror in the bathroom, and I put the shoeshine kit to use when needed. When I shine my shoes, my dad certainly comes to mind.

You may have received an inheritance yourself, perhaps something with more worldly value, like money, securities or property. As with any inheritance, the challenge is to use it wisely and not to squander it.

SSM HEALTH'S HISTORY

In 1872, Mother Mary Odilia Berger arrived in St. Louis from Germany along with four companion sisters, and they began to respond to victims of a smallpox epidemic devastating the community. Such was their devotion that they initially became known as the "smallpox sisters." The spirit of both our founding sisters and those who followed after them has taken hold in multiple states, several foreign countries and in the hearts of those who have benefited from their health care and social service ministries.

As her death approached in 1880, Mother Odilia encouraged the sisters in her fledgling congregation to

"continue courageously for the love of God." In speaking these words, which are referenced to this day throughout SSM Health, Mother Odilia was leaving an inheritance, a pearl of great price.

More than 100 years later, at a leadership conference at SSM Health, Sr. Mary Jean Ryan, FSM, then president of the organization, spoke for her congregation when she said to those in attendance, "This ministry is in your hands." Sr. Ryan was leaving us an inheritance. Her words, "It's in your hands," are repeated in employee orientations, formation programs, the annual Mission Days programs and in less formal settings across SSM Health.

Keeping in mind Mother Odilia's

How do we cultivate this inheritance of courage in a newly blended organization?

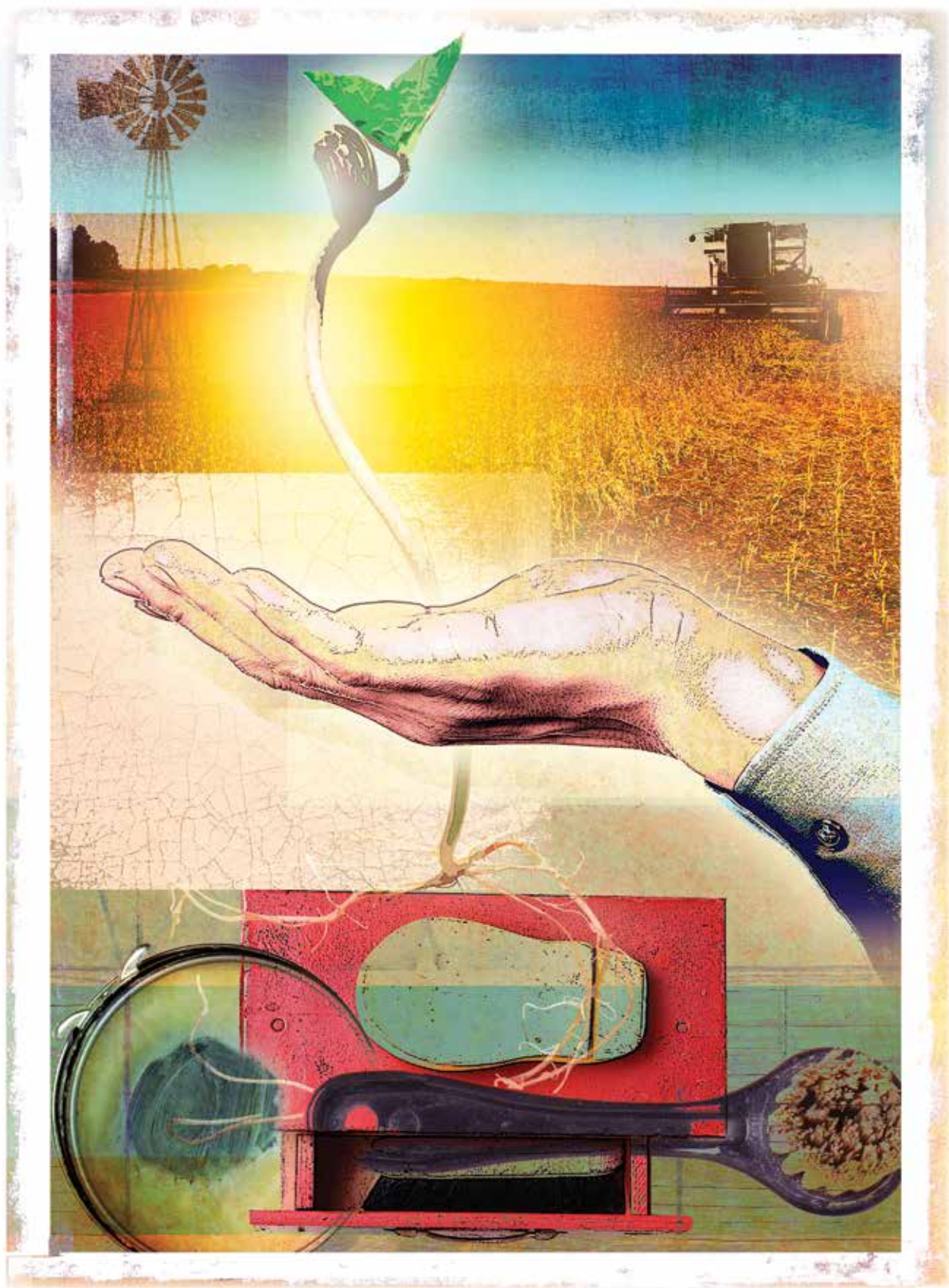
encouragement to "continue courageously," I offer one of the oldest meanings of the word, which is rooted in "cor" (Latin for "heart"): "to tell the story of your life with your whole heart."

The Franciscan Sisters of Mary told the story of their collective lives by feeding the hungry, nursing the sick, advocating for both human dignity and for an abiding love for the earth. This is the inheritance that they have blessed us with for the past 144 years.

CULTIVATING OUR INHERITANCE

How do we cultivate this inheritance of courage in a newly blended organization? Let's begin with a greater understanding of "cultivation." Two years ago, I was asked to facilitate the SSM Mission Days program in Wisconsin. This was an important endeavor, as we recently had acquired Dean Health System and were working to integrate our two cultures. My topic was "Cultivating Community." While preparing, I took a personal trip to visit people I know in Illinois and Kentucky who raise both crops and thoroughbred horses. I asked a lot of questions about cultivation, and here is what I learned:

I You learn quickly enough, when you work in the earth and with animals, what things are in your control.



"I have lost crops in the past three years to both drought and flood," said one farmer. These disasters occurred despite his access to satellite technology and National Weather Service information. The farmer told me that he had learned about "soil recovery, personal resilience, faith in God, and the power of prayer" from these experiences.

2 You learn how to nourish and nurture soil, animals, water sources and even co-workers. "You nurture the crops with the big picture in mind," said the southern Illinois farmer.

Over the years, I have learned that organizations sometimes can overlook the need to nourish and nurture in their haste to bring about change and new structures. On an individual level, for example, an applicant certainly might accept a job because it provides an income. The same applicant might be accepted for the position because of his or her existing credentials (i.e., advanced degree, certifications, etc.). These two motives will not be sustainable, however, when the inevitable tough stretches occur in health care, such as patient deaths, steep learning curves, conflicts with colleagues. Without a deeper purpose, an employee is likely to default to statements like, "They don't pay me enough for this nonsense," or "I can't believe I went to school for this!" What is lacking in this instance, is the nurturing of a sense of calling, a consistent sense that my job matches my soul. The theologian Frederick Buechner speaks of this calling as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Arrival at this place requires nurturing.

3 One farmer told me about an age-old practice that still has relevance in his farming: allowing a field to lie fallow. He described it as "purposeful waiting." He educated me on how you cannot use a field relentlessly without giving it necessary time to recover; he told me that you move a field to a fallow state by reason of "facts and instinct." Perhaps when we integrate organizations, we might look for what is absolutely crucial in terms of strategic, operational and mission integration and what is best left to "purposeful waiting."

4 My favorite: "Fertilizer is key, the natural stuff," said my pal who raises thoroughbreds. "On this horse farm, do you know where I get the good

stuff to grow those whopper tomatoes? You ought to be around here on a hot summer day in Kentucky!" He proceeded to show me a vehicle called a "honey wagon" that tumbles horse manure and water in such a way that it can be spread on the field where he grows several kinds of vegetables.

What do we learn from "fertilizer" when it appears in our organization? Do we have the humility (from the Latin word "humus," or "soil") to learn from previous attempts at organizational change or integration that did not go so well? On an immediate level, what steps do we take to integrate new people into a work group? What can be done to learn from conflicts in a work setting?

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In essence, what can we learn from the "honey wagon" when it rolls through town?

For any organization to successfully cultivate and integrate an inheritance, it requires an intentional, deliberative approach to be authentic to its history and heroic figures, as well as to the values, history and heroes of the newly integrated entity. We need to be fully aware of how both the existing organization and its new partners (and, thus, new employees) can begin "to tell the story of our lives with full individual and collective hearts." This process fosters the necessary courage for the actual integration to follow.

At SSM Health, we have developed an extensive assessment methodology for evaluating the potential of mission integration. During the due diligence process, prior to determining the strategic and operation compatibility of potential partners, we conduct an extensive evaluation as it relates to their history, mission and ethics, as well as their understanding of health care as a ministry of the Catholic Church. This discernment process can lead to decisions both to undertake and dismiss new partnership opportunities.

LOOK TO ONE ANOTHER

While organizational culture is certainly complex, it is forged by identifying what everyone has in common — the collective desire to be identified by more than job duties, roles and profes-



sional credentials. We all need work that reflects our very souls; otherwise, why be in Catholic health care?

Listening to feedback from employees, leaders and integration teams about the integration process is vital in order to ensure that a culture is not mindlessly imposed on the new organization and its employees. The opportunity for feedback and honest questions about such things as organizational history, practices and policies, as well as how to make new employees more welcome, have provided the opportunity for discussions that ultimately will result in a new work community. Asking for feedback on the multiple points of adjustment, no matter how unsettling the questions may be, allows employees to make decisions about whether this new, blended organization will be good for them, and then, how to become better situated and integrated within the blended organization.

One simple question that can yield a lot of information with employee groups is this: "Tell me about a part of the culture where you worked before that would be a shame to lose in the new organization." This question has been most beneficial in generating dialogue over the initial phases of integration. Other key questions to ask include:

- "Who are the people who are emerging as true leaders during this time of tremendous change in this organization?"
- "As you understand the mission and values of our organization, where do you see them taking hold?"
- "What is the most difficult part of this process for you?"

From answers to questions like these, you will come to see what needs nurturing and what needs to lie fallow.

Margaret Wheatley, an observer and teacher of organizational life, offers a wonderful summary of the process for cultivating a new organization. It's from her book entitled *Turning to One Another*.

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?"
Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.
Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don't know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what's possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change the world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

The cultivation of an organizational inheritance is a process of forming a culture. It is progressively built through interaction upon interaction, question upon question, decision upon decision. Culture is cultivated through discernment ("purposeful waiting"); looking for all opportunities to fertilize and nourish combined legacies; and, ultimately, through faith and prayer that our efforts will be worthy in God's eyes, yielding a bountiful harvest.

To do anything less would be to squander an inheritance.

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