

OUR EMOTIONS, OUR INNER LIGHT

A friend told me recently that one of her grown children had, several months ago, brushed off her concern about something. The “something” wasn’t important. What was important, particularly in retrospect, is that my friend felt slighted — and dealt with that small hurt in a way that turned out to be life-changing.



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Normally, she told me, she would have reacted angrily, though she would more likely have expressed that anger to her husband or a close friend rather than risk a breach with her daughter. “This time, though,” she said, “a thought came to me, who knows from where. It was as if a voice was speaking to me inside my head, and it said, ‘Stay with the pain.’ So uncharacteristically, I did. Instead of lashing out at my daughter vicariously, or analyzing why communications between mothers and daughters so quickly become tense, I relaxed and let myself feel the hurt.” Gradually, she said, as she applied that little message to other situations, she began to realize how often, almost reflexively, she deflects pain, either by getting angry, or by trivializing her feelings or the event itself. (“It wasn’t a big deal,” or “Adults shouldn’t get their feelings hurt so easily,” or even, after an older relative died, “Everybody dies, so why waste time grieving.”)

The unexpected effect of allowing herself to feel pain more deeply, she said, was that she also became more aware of the opposite, of the little joys that life presented. She found herself feeling happier, laughing more, “living less in my head.”

“Somehow I felt more real, more alive — even if I sometimes hurt more than I had before,” she said. “And I also found myself becoming more sensitive to the pain of others, more compassionate in general.”

I thought of my friend and her newfound wisdom when I read Dorothee Sollee’s lovely quote in Celeste Mueller’s article in this issue (page 18). How often, in our busy lives, do we fail to attend, to really attend, to our own experiences, and so, as Sollee would say, douse our own inner light?

I have been doing a lot of spiritual reading lately, and one thing is very clear to me: We experience the deeper spiritual dimensions of our lives not when we multiply words in prayer, not when we rush around, even if it’s in doing good things for others, not when we try to figure things out on our own, but when we engage fully in the present moment and attend to our own inner life, especially to our unedited emotions. We experience our inner light in stillness, even when we are in the midst of action (because it is an interior stillness we are talking about.)

I thought of my friend’s experience, too, when writing the review of Martin Helldorfer’s book, page 75, and when reading Kami Timm’s article about nonverbal cues. Isn’t it in that deep, still center of ourselves, where Spirit speaks to spirit, that we pick up the cues of unspoken need?

I began this Editor’s Note with a story because this issue of *Health Progress* is about how we who work in Catholic health care communicate, and might better communicate, our mission, and how telling stories helps us do that. I especially call your attention to the vignettes titled “Spreading Our Stories” that appear throughout the special section. These are stories about how mission is communicated in our member facilities and systems.

In response to an e-mailed request to mission and communication leaders, we received numerous such vignettes about creative ways of communicating mission. We will continue to publish these in upcoming issues, either those we still have on hand, or others we receive. If you have one to share, please e-mail it to me at pschaeffer@chausa.org, with “mission vignette” in the subject line. Keep the length to about 600 words, and tell your story well. We will use the best of those we receive.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, November-December 2010
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