

# An Engaged Spirituality

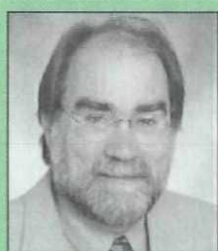
BY DANIEL P. DWYER, PhD

About 800 years ago, an apparently odd cultural integration occurred in Japan. Samurai warriors, who were highly trained warriors feared for their swordsmanship, began to embrace Zen Buddhism. This curious blend of meditative practice and martial fierceness made the samurai even more effective fighters—willing, if necessary, to sacrifice their lives in obedience to a code of loyalty.

How did this come about? These warriors faced death in every encounter with an opponent. Too strong an attachment to life, they saw, could produce a fear of death that impeded presence and induced self-consciousness. A single moment's hesitation or surrender to emotion could mean the difference between life and death. Zen taught them that "a stable inner platform of mental control," sustained and maintained by a meditative and contemplative practice, would result in a state of "no-mind"—a state in which, hampered neither by thought nor emotion, they became simple fluid action. This "no-mind" state of consciousness improved their effectiveness as swordsmen.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, spiritual development does not necessarily go hand in hand with moral development. The image of the warrior embracing a contemplative practice can be offensive. We do not forget other unhappy alliances between warriors and religious practices: the Christian crusades, Muslim jihads, and the recent tragedies involving al-Qaeda and the Taliban. These episodes were all distortions of the intentions of the founders of their religions. Still, the samurai may serve as a symbol of the challenges and opportunities we face as leaders and providers of competent and compassionate health care.

Of course, several questions come to mind: How do we balance and integrate a life of action with a deep yearning for contemplative presence? How do we develop an engaged spirituality? Perhaps the Zen samurai, as a metaphor for a life that is *both* contemplative and active, will inspire us to think more creatively about new ways of being and doing.



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## TWO MONKS

A book that appeared several years ago compares the approaches of two exemplars of engaged spirituality: Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>2</sup> Both were monks, the first a Catholic, the second a Buddhist. Their lives and public efforts reflected lifelong attempts to integrate contemplative practice with action. Although Merton rarely left the Kentucky monastery where he lived and worked from 1947 to 1968, his writings inform us about the contemplative attitude as it confronts a world of action. For Merton, the person "who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Merton advocated contemplative practice and its fruits without describing precisely how to do it.

For his part, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, left the monastery of his youth to promote what he called an "engaged Buddhism" in opposition to the war in Vietnam and to teach, write, and conduct retreats. During this period, he wrote for his students "a manual on meditation for the use of young activists." Published as *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, the book offers instructions on "mindfulness" practice while engaging in action.<sup>4</sup> In addition to teaching meditative techniques, Thich Nhat Hanh advocated spending one day a week being intentionally "mindful" in everything performed that day. In his later years, he has written extensively about meditation for people who live their lives in various worldly ways.

In word and example, both Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh formed a challenging template for the rest of us to follow in trying to integrate our lives. The trouble, however, is that we *expect* monks to talk this way; in each of us a little voice may be whispering, "Easy for them to say!"

## SPIRITUALITY AND WASHING DISHES

This reaction comes from a tradition of seeing a contemplative life and an active one as two

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opposing choices. Monks can live an engaged spirituality because monks are contemplatives. Lay people are hampered by the secular nature of their lives. The presumption is that a contemplative discipline is a condition of one's context as opposed to one's role. Yet Brother Lawrence of God taught us many years ago that practicing the presence of God can occur while we wash the dishes.<sup>5</sup> The Zen tradition admonishes seekers of special rites and rituals to simply chop wood and carry water. When they met, Thich Nhat Hanh told Merton that he had not been taught meditation skills until he first learned to open and close doors without slamming them. Remember, too, the example of the samurai.

Parker Palmer notes that some of the spiritual literature of our time extols the example and work of spiritual masters such as Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh but, at the same time, denigrates the active life as a source of spiritual growth and development. "Contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle."<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Palmer finds in the life and writings of Merton the support for a spirituality of action grounded not in a monastic spirituality but in the tension between Merton's own activist perspective and the monastic life form. The philosopher Ken Wilber has written of engaged spirituality as a consequence of developing an "integrated transformative practice."<sup>7</sup> In his view, we need to exercise and express features of our mind, body, soul, and spirit in ways that develop our personal and societal responsibilities. Wilber points out that compassion and service emerge from an integrated practice.

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF IMPERFECTION

An engaged spirituality invites us to look at the active life as the material with which to build our contemplative capacities. It calls us to go deeper into the field of action and transform it, rather than withdrawing from the world and its complications. The challenges we face at work and in our relationships make up the rich soil in which we can grow a conscious presence that transforms our work and our relationships. We don't, in the course of our work, face physical death like the samurai, but we can certainly find there many opportunities to face the death of our egos, illusions, and incessant dramas. The loss of any of these can seem as threatening as the loss of one's life. This is why we are so attached to them. But imagine the consequences of work performed out

*An engaged spirituality stays grounded in the muddle of life and work.*

of a fully conscious state—care provided with a sense of presence unencumbered by fears about the future or resentments about the past. Workers in health care organizations are faced with several particularly difficult areas that invite an engaged spirituality.

If one is trying to achieve a high level of quality while, at the same time, providing competent and compassionate service, one is sure to be presented with challenging opportunities. In work, an engaged spirituality discovers and honors a spirituality of imperfection. John Tarrant reminds us that "Spirit forgets the necessity of imperfection."<sup>8</sup> Tarrant means by this that we are always tempted to pursue a disembodied spirituality free of noise and pain.

But an engaged spirituality stays grounded in the muddle of life and work. In our yearning for zero defects, we deny the reality of our humanness, deny that the soul of health care comes with sorrow and pain. Quality improvement and risk management have become highly technical, bureaucratized systems of measurement and analysis, involving committee deliberations. Underneath these procedures is a deep well full of shadow material: failure, grief, and pain, much of it displayed publicly by public commissions and newspapers. The accounting firm scandals reported in the press last year are examples of the difficulty we have as humans in facing the truth of our inadequacy and willingness to cover it up. We all know about our own errors and missteps. In risk management, we face disclosing the bad news and suffering the consequences in financial losses and public relations. An engaged spirituality does not make excuses for our limitations. It does, however, consecrate acceptance of mistakes by balancing rigorous self-examination and corrective action with forgiveness of one's self and one's organization.

The spirituality of imperfection is an intensely personal, as well as organizational, experience. Individuals who make mistakes face issues of guilt, shame, and lack of forgiveness. When errors occur in medical and clinical practice, those who make them often remain anonymous; the patient suffering the error never learns the name of the person who erred. But because that person often goes unnamed and unpunished, he or she is likely to experience a complex and long-lasting sorrow.<sup>9</sup> In such cases, an engaged spirituality welcomes and embraces the imperfect as a necessary and paradoxical part of excellence. When we deny the presence of the imperfect in our organizations, we push it into a kind of shadow bag that we drag behind us—and which waits to surprise us and embarrass us. An engaged spirituality, on the



other hand, celebrates our successes but honors our mistakes as equally important sources of information. It requires a skill normally absent from our deliberations: the capacity to be still and notice without judging—to be present to a moment that may be full of pain and be able to grieve and then forgive.

The diversity of the ethical and moral values and approaches contained in our organizations is a second challenge that invites an engaged spirituality. Each technological advance has created new and more complex issues to face. We are confronted daily by increased severity of disease and challenges in caring for the terminally ill. The diversity of our patient populations, employees, and medical staffs has expanded the number and texture of the voices and spiritualities that must be heard. The dominance of the principled approach to ethical decision making has waned in recent years as we grow to appreciate a more relational process that honors our stories and views. Every situation is an invitation to be present to ourselves and each other in relationship. If they are honored and received, such conversations generate insight and resolution. But doing so requires acceptance, even surrender, of one's own perspective.

#### TRUTH VERSUS TRUTH

This process is distracted by pain and fear. And each moment of the discourse is an opportunity to be consciously present. An engaged spirituality is essentially relational. We are invited to know ourselves and each other better and deeper in these deliberations. Nor are ethical debates confined to the bedside and intensive care units. Moral discourse occurs in the administrative suite far more often than we realize. The passion with which some issues are debated is fueled by underlying differences about right and wrong and our attachments to being right or wrong. We are invited to meet ourselves in these situations, mirrored in the resistance of our colleagues. An engaged spirituality embraces paradox. Niels Bohr once said that "the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth."<sup>10</sup> When our organizations reflect the spiritualities of numerous religious traditions and a diversity of moral and spiritual development, paradoxes abound.

Knowing about and believing in an engaged spirituality is not enough. What is required is a practice integrated into one's life and work. To learn a spreadsheet or insert a subclavian central venous catheter takes knowledge but mainly practice. An engaged spirituality is, well, *engaged*:

An  
engaged  
spirituality  
embraces  
paradox.

consciously, intentionally folded into one's life. It requires some form of meditation practice, a regular exercise program, spiritual reading, and ideally, participation in a group experience that supports one's practice. An integrated practice supports and nourishes mind, body, soul, and spirit in a disciplined and regular manner.

An ancient symbol of integration, the mandorla, consisting of two overlapping circles, adorned the stained-glass windows of medieval cathedrals and other religious settings.<sup>11</sup> The mandorla (the Italian word for almond) is the oval, almond-like space that is formed signifying integration. A mandorla can also be said to form in the space where our work and our commitment to conscious presence meets and becomes one; in the space where the supposedly opposite poles of contemplation and action are resolved in a merging of body, mind, soul, and spirit. The mandorla is a healing symbol of the benefits that come from reconciling two apparent opposites: light and dark, excellence and error, paradox and certainty, all coming together in each of us and between us. It is a fitting symbol for an engaged spirituality that integrates action and contemplation in the context of providing conscious and compassionate health care. □

#### NOTES

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