

The Contemplative Approach in the Workplace

BY DANIEL P. DWYER, PhD

I have worked in the health care field for more than 25 years as a professional caregiver, manager, executive, and, more recently, leader of spirituality retreats for physicians, nurses, and managers. I have lived through tremendous change that involved pressure, stress, and depletion of energy and enthusiasm. Like many in the health care field, to survive I prepared for work every morning by putting on an emotional suit of armor to defend myself against the conflicts and challenges I would face. Although the armor protected me from the stresses of service and management, it also kept me at a distance from myself, my colleagues, and those we were called to serve. And, in the end, it failed to protect me from burnout.

Today, in my retreat and consulting work, I continually see men and women wearing their own suits of armor. They are physicians struggling with colleagues in newly merged groups, burdened with paperwork and productivity requirements; they are nurses tired of watching patients' durable power of attorney statements being ignored; they are managers and executives drained by the constant requirements of decision making and the anger of competing groups. All question the meaning and purpose of their work, the price they and their families are paying, and the sense of imbalance in their lives.

These health care workers take the same action I had taken; they distance themselves from these painful processes, guarding against a full appreciation of a larger meaning and purpose. Those of us who have struggled with similar issues, who desire to be more compassionate and fully available in our jobs, are, I believe, seeking a contemplative approach to work. We suspect that the daily turmoil is an invitation to achieve a deeper awareness of the present moment—what James Finley calls “the divinity of just what is.”¹

I regret that it took me so long to find a contemplative approach in the religiously sponsored organizations for which I worked. My sister superiors would attend annual retreats, and several of



Daniel Dwyer, PhD, is a consultant and retreat leader based in Metamora, MI. He specializes in the areas of ethics, spirituality, and physician mission integration.

them spoke of visiting a spiritual director. One of them ultimately led me to spiritual direction for myself, but it was as if I were unable to receive the gift. As St. Augustine observed, God always wants to give us good things, but our hands are always filled with something else.

Times, however, are changing. In my retreat work I see that many leaders and servants of the healing ministry are yearning for a way to be more fully present in their work life, more capable of balancing the demands of the industry with their personal and professional lives. I think they are seeking a contemplative way and are thirsting for information, guidance, and support from their workplace within which to practice this approach. Providing these elements is a wonderful way for Catholic organizations to enrich workers' lives, and through them, the lives of those we serve.

Beginning a contemplative philosophy can be a tricky proposition. My experience has been that when employees become more contemplative, they are at first confronted with a deep sense of dismay and even pain as they come to terms with how unbalanced and powerless they have become. Some begin to reevaluate whether they are meant to be physicians, nurses, chaplains, or managers. The initial process raises core issues of meaning and purpose that eventually change the nature and context of work, sometimes leading to painful and confusing processes of moral and spiritual development. The contemplative way is about personal transformation; it is about love. Like any birth process, it does not come without a certain amount of pain.

What is the contemplative approach to work and living? It is an intentional, conscious effort to enter life just as it is. Thomas Kelly, in *A Testament of Devotion*, called it “continually renewed immediacy.”² Each of us has had moments of contemplative presence: watching a sunrise, looking at clouds in a blue sky, gazing at the face of a sleeping child. The contemplative way brings lit-

Continued on page 55

The contemplative way brings gifts of immediate awareness of the present moment.

study-group leaders. Because the book is long, it might seem impractical for use by study groups; but its high quality may well, in the end, make using it worth the effort.

*James J. Walter, PhD
Austin & Ann O'Malley
Professor of Bioethics
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles*

Spirituality & Health Care: Reaching toward a Holistic Future

John Shea

The Park Ridge Center, Chicago, 2000, 140 pp., \$12.95 (paperback)

IN THIS FASCINATING EXPLORATION OF the contemporary conversation between health care and spirituality, Jack Shea blends insightful research and poetic intuition with his own singularly masterful style as storyteller. On one hand, he accurately summarizes the practical concerns that health care professionals today bring to this dialogue; on the other hand, he clearly respects the diverse intellectual approaches taken over the centuries in the professional study of the multifaceted mystery of spirituality.

I recommend this book to all who work in health care. It is single best overview I have read to date about where and how spirituality fits into our workplace culture, our patient/resident care, and our community partnerships. Any book by Jack is stimulating and inspirational. In this one, as he addresses the convergence of some very complex issues in health care delivery today, he is also comprehensive and incisive. In the words of my colleague, Sr. Diane Traffas, OP, "he is certainly up to date and hits the nail on the head about an exploding spirituality culture."

*Gerard T. Broccolo, STD
Vice President, Spirituality
Catholic Health Initiatives
Denver*

tle gifts of immediate awareness of the present moment; these gifts awaken in us a sense of our oneness. These moments are present in our work as well: the silence spontaneously emerging from a dialogue-filled meeting can bring us back to the present moment; a pause before entering an examination room to see the 35th patient of the day can transform the visit from a rushed and fatigued experience into an uplifting and renewing one.

How can we create a process for inviting people to become more contemplative in their approach to work and life, especially when their work life may be full of challenge, conflict, and stress? The first step is recognizing how defended we are against living in the present. Because the state of being defenseless is perceived with fear and resistance, leaders must be willing to acknowledge and support the development of contemplative practices and a contemplative philosophy for their organizations. When leadership supports and sponsors these practices, workers begin to drop their defenses and fully live in the present.

A contemplative act can be any act habitually engaged in for the purpose of becoming more present to life. A contemplative act awakens and sustains the appreciation of the preciousness and holiness of each moment lived. Thus, it can be meditation, prayer, or reading scripture. It could also be walking or jogging, writing in a journal, painting, knitting, or playing a musical instrument. Thomas Merton told a story about greeting a Zen Buddhist monk returning to the monastery after a year apart. When Merton asked the man what he'd been doing for the past year, the monk said, "I've been learning how to open and close doors."³

For a busy manager, a contemplative

practice may be waiting for the phone to ring three times before answering, praying or meditating before beginning the morning, or even driving to work in silence—without the radio or a cellular phone as distraction.

A contemplative workplace creates a safe space for individuals to share the experience of connectedness, interrelatedness, and oneness. A leader or chairperson of a department can begin a meeting with a moment of silence, sponsor a monthly gathering for employees to share contemplative practices, and fully support mission integration programs based on group rituals and prayer.

How do we teach each other about the contemplative approach to life? We are surrounded by teaching material, and the contemplative approach invites us to start exactly where we are. A colleague in your surgical group is verbally abusive to receptionists. A vice president must struggle with downsizing her division. A pro-choice physician becomes hostile over the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*. Each of these situations offers an important lesson for you to learn, which may appear in stillness when you stop and reflect—without being defensive. The opportunities for growing into a contemplative approach to work are as numerous as the moments in each day. The ordinariness of each moment contains the key to appreciating the divine. □

NOTES

1. James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart*, Sorin Books, Notre Dame, IN, 2000, p. 19.
2. Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, Harper & Row, New York City, 1941, p. 31.
3. Thomas Merton, cited in Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, Bantam-Doubleday, 1993.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, January-February 2001
Copyright © 2001 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
