

Mission Integration and Workplace Spirituality

By JIM LETOURNEAU, BCC, LMSW

“The universe is made of stories, not atoms.” — Muriel Rukeyser

Many years ago, longer than I care to remember, I recall entering the beautifully gothic Emmanuel College in downtown Toronto to begin my homiletics course with Professor McAlister.¹ Professor McAlister, an ordained Protestant minister, commanded the English language like a master poet — much to my envy. As he, in his impeccable designer suit, began our first class, I recall him saying this: “Your sermons must tell a story.” Throughout the semester, he repeatedly challenged us to allow the word of God to create some spark within us as we prepared our homilies. A sermon’s purpose, he contended, was to bring that spark to life for listeners through the use of personal stories.

I have listened to many sermons since that preparatory seminary class, and I find much truth in Professor McAlister’s lesson: Stories are a very effective way to inspire others to action. A homily is more impactful to me when a story helps me engage with the preacher’s personal life experience. I may not recall facts or figures, but I can remember a personal account. The concept of storytelling — so powerfully conveyed by Professor McAlister — continues to serve as a formative experience for me in my mission work.

Five years ago, my role at Trinity Health included a system approach to workplace spirituality. At that time, I didn’t feel terribly articulate on the subject, particularly in the context of Catholic health care. I felt it was incumbent upon me to be able to speak with authority on the subject, since that was a principal component of my job. I read many articles from experts working in both secular and faith-based contexts. I struggled to offer any definition of workplace spirituality, not to mention identifying what made workplace spirituality distinct in Catholic health care. Surely, Trinity Health’s spirituality was different from the

auto industry’s or that of any business or trade — but exactly what was that unique feature?

It occurred to me that our distinction arose from our Catholic identity and tradition. Our story goes back to the founding of our ministries more than 100 years ago. It seemed to me that telling our story was an essential component to workplace spirituality in the context of Catholic health care.

Many religious traditions, though they may not use the explicit language of storytelling, in fact practice storytelling whenever their faith communities gather. The Jewish Hasidic tradition regards “storytelling (as) a holy activity equal to Torah study or prayer.”² In Native American circles, creating myths and sharing stories helped preserve an identity and pass on a legacy to an often displaced and misunderstood community.³

Within the Christian tradition, long before the first Gospels were written, the oral tradition sustained Jesus’ life and teachings from community to community. We’re well aware of how Jesus used parables to instruct his followers regarding lessons of the faith and characteristics of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our collective memory completes



the tale whenever we hear: “There once was a man who had two sons ... “ (Luke 15:11). As Catholics, we gather around the table of the Lord to break bread and to hear the stories of our ancestors in the faith through the Scriptures. Whenever we celebrate liturgy, we remember who we are as a community and whom we are invited to become through the use of story.

Within Catholic health care, our story is a compelling one. The legacies of the religious communities that established our ministries are captivating accounts of courage, fidelity, risk taking and commitment. Whenever I share the history of Trinity Health at new hire orientation, employees engage with fascination and wonder. That rich tradition is not part of work environments outside of Catholic health care. Our story distinguishes how we approach and how we define workplace spirituality in the ministry.

But, with all due respect to our amazing founders, the story of Catholic health care does not seek to romanticize the religious communities into inaccessible models of faith. Our religious founders never intended to be viewed as exclusive or elusive. Instead, the narrative of Catholic health care must engage today’s employees as co-creators of that legacy. The religious who founded our ministries responded to their own experience of God’s call. Our charge in Catholic health care is to create work environments where our employees can view their own lives as a vocation and their jobs as a calling — in essence, to find their own meaningful place in the story.

Our story in Catholic health care is essentially Catholic. Our Catholic story makes workplace spirituality in Catholic health care fundamentally a Catholic workplace spirituality. We declare that distinction without apology and with great humility. Who we are is informed by our religious founders, the teachings of the Catholic Church and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is who we are.

But just because our story is Catholic in nature, does that mean only Catholics can appreciate that legacy? Can only Catholics participate in the spirituality of Catholic health care? Absolutely not. Mission leaders have the responsibility to tell our story in ways that connect the listeners — our employees — to that narrative. I often

have described my role in workplace spirituality as building bridges from the personal stories of employees to the story of the organization. Everyone comes to work with a story, and it is my role to connect their story with the story of Trinity Health. Through those connecting bridges, staff will find meaning in their work. Daily tasks will be seen as part of a bigger purpose. Individuals will view themselves as part of a larger community. Those are indicators of a vibrant workplace spirituality.

Much has been written regarding the relationship between workplace spirituality and employee engagement.⁴ From a business perspective, there is a strong argument why employers should invest in formal spirituality programs for their employ-

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ees. But apart from the significance of workplace spirituality, there also may be a unique value for storytelling specifically within the workplace. A *New York Times* article cites the research of psychologist Marshall Duke, PhD, who, in the mid-1990s, discovered that children who knew more of their family’s history had higher self-esteem, a stronger sense of control in their lives and were more resilient in the face of stress. When children were exposed to what Duke called an oscillating narrative, a story that shared both the achievements and the tragedies of past generations, they developed a stronger sense of self.⁵

When children knew where they came from, it helped them to thrive in the present moment. One wonders if the same principles would hold true for people beyond childhood. If adults engaged in regular storytelling, would they be more self-confident and able to withstand the harmful effects of stress? Could storytelling in the workplace help our employees feel more resilient if they knew the rich history that led our ministries to where they are today? Until formal research is conducted, one can only speculate and answer that question from experience.

Consistently, whenever I facilitate a workshop on a spiritual theme, staff will comment, “I wish we could do more of these kinds of things.” Informal observations of employees after these experiences reveal that people have more job satisfaction, experience less stress, feel more engaged with the workplace and have more energy. Employees remark, “This is why I came to (fill in the name of the ministry).”

“This is why I came ...” is a statement of purpose. Being reminded of the meaning of one’s work is the fruit of a person’s spiritual practice, and the person feels connected to something bigger than her/himself.

Connecting to the story of Catholic health care leads to that level of the employees’ personal engagement and purposeful commitment to the mission. Many of the employees who came to Catholic health care decided to work in the ministry because of their identification with our mission. They heard our story and desired to connect with something bigger.

Someone I’ll call Ruth joined Trinity Health three years ago, after leaving a job with a doctor’s office to work in our corporate clinical department. She had seen our mission statement on our website; she was drawn to our language of “serving together” and “healing body, mind, and spirit.” She read our history and marveled at the witness of the Sisters of Mercy — “the walking nuns” — who provided education and health care to the poor in inner-city Dublin. She was moved by the courage of the Sisters of the Holy Cross who cared for the wounded soldiers of both the North and the South during the Civil War.

After accepting the Trinity Health position, Ruth, who is Jewish, attended the mandatory new employee orientation, and she recalled being moved to tears. “I realized that adopting the mission as my own would be easy for me,” she said. “In calling on us, essentially, to heal the world, it was identical to the imperative of my own faith tradition.”

This is how we want staff to connect to our story — not simply as witnesses or passive spectators. Our mission must become their mission; their story enriches our story. Employees in Catholic health care continue to compose the story of the legacy. The story continues. In future generations, not only will employees of Catholic health care tell the stories of their religious founders, they also will be telling the stories of today’s lead-

ers and clinicians: the CEO whose commitment to community benefit led him to create outpatient prenatal clinics in response to unmet needs; the doctor who dedicated the final years of her practice to providing primary care to the city’s homeless; the chaplain whose fidelity to staff on the night shift made him an indispensable asset.

I recall the famous scene from the movie “Dead Poets Society” — Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams, recites a poem to his class, ending with: “The powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”⁶ Looking from student to student, Keating asks, “What will your verse be?”

Workplace spirituality in Catholic health care is made distinct by the powerful story of Jesus, our ecclesial tradition and the religious who founded our ministries. The heroes and heroines of our faith inspire us to become more than we imagined. As mission leaders, our charge is to engage the employees who work with us in the telling of that story. Staff will connect with that legacy and be reminded of the meaning of their work. Through that connection, our employees continue to create our story and make our mission come alive.

So I thank Professor McAlister for helping me learn to write my own verse and to realize the power of storytelling to be a better mission leader.

What will your verse be?

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NOTES

1. A pseudonym to protect the professor’s privacy.
2. Yitzhak Buxbaum, “Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism,” the Hasidic Stories Home Page website, www.hasidicstories.com/Articles/Hasidic_Theories/spirit.html (accessed Dec. 28, 2015).
3. Mary Rajotte, “An Introduction to the Role of Storytelling in Native American Tribes,” Bright Hub Education website, www.brighthubeducation.com/social-studies-help/97047-importance-of-native-american-storytelling/ (accessed Dec. 28, 2015).
4. Richard A. Roof, “The Association of Individual Spirituality on Employee Engagement: The Spirit at Work,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 130, no. 3, 585-99.
5. Bruce Feiler, “The Stories that Bind Us,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?_r=0 (accessed Dec. 29, 2015).
6. Walt Whitman, “O Me! O Life!”

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