



Through a Glass Darkly

Healing and the Religious Imagination

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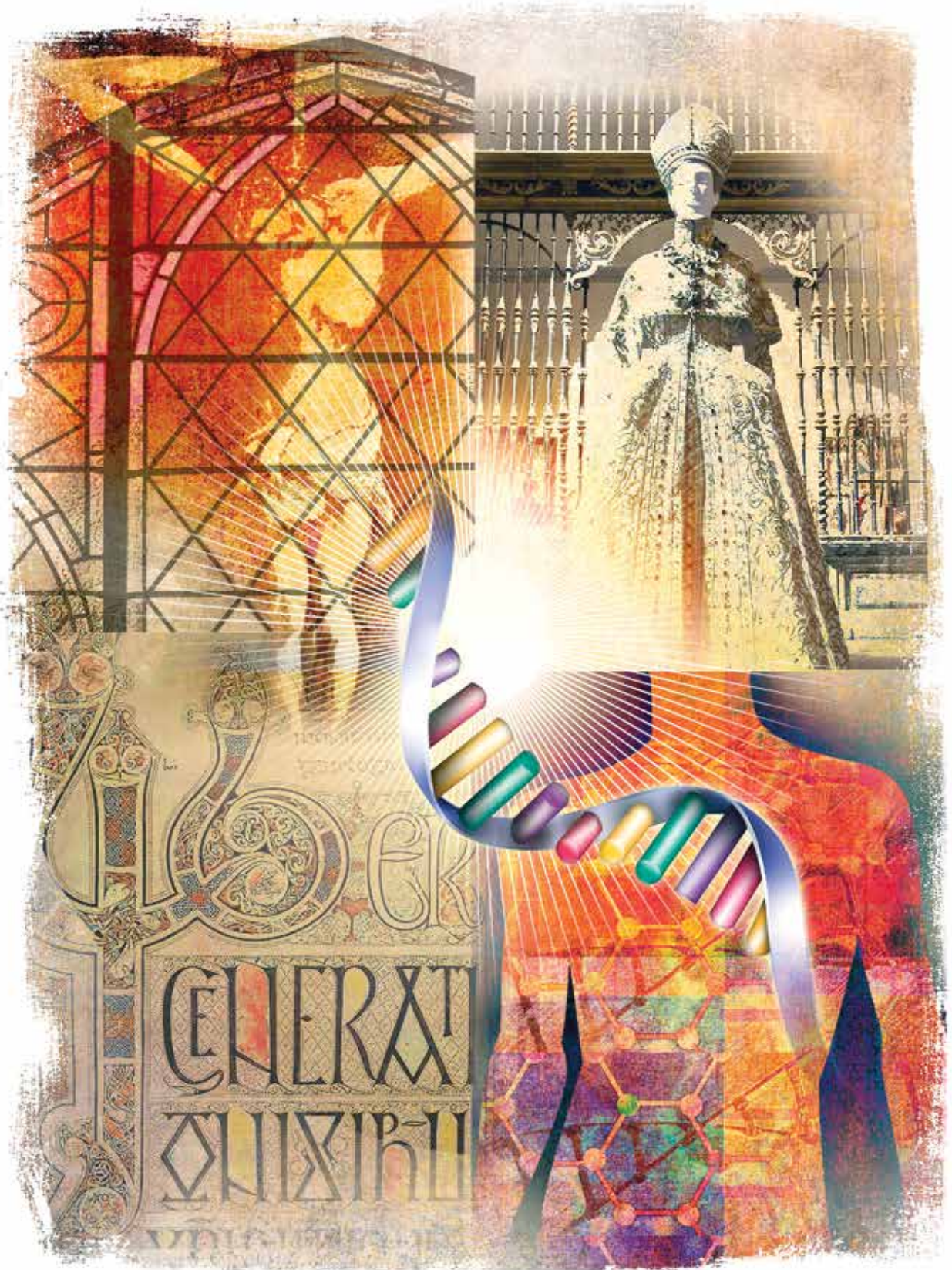
The use of design to create healing environments draws upon many aspects of human creativity. One source is religious imagination, which is the capacity to envision the transcendent when perceiving a specific, concrete and earthly reality. Two examples — one from the Middle Ages that reflects traditional themes and one recent example focused on the contemporary world — allow for an entry point for the exploration of the relationship between healing and the religious imagination.

Years ago, the BBC created a video, “The Many Images of Christ.” It included one image of the crucifixion that depicted Jesus covered with sores from St. Anthony’s Fire, a disease that was a great scourge in medieval times. Known as the “Isenheim Altarpiece,” it is a triptych considered to be the German 16th-century painter Matthias Grünewald’s greatest work. It was commissioned by the Hospital Brothers of St. Anthony, an order founded for the purpose of caring for those suffering from St. Anthony’s Fire and the plague. The first step in the treatment of those coming to that German hospital was the prayerful contemplation of Grünewald’s painting, an invitation to see their own suffering mirrored in Christ’s suffering. That particular image of Christ invited the grievously ill person viewing it to enter into, to imagine the experience of Christ, who suffered and who also heals. Although it was created 500 years ago, the Isenheim Altarpiece can be seen as illustrating the essence of a Trinity Health project on healing design. Both explore the vital relationship between healing and the healing environment to foster healing spaces in health care settings.

A very contemporary example occurred in the spring of 2018, when the Metropolitan Museum

of Art in New York City mounted the exhibition, “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.” It drew the largest attendance of any exhibition there, ever.¹ The exhibit opened with a quotation from the late Fr. Andrew Greeley, a noted sociologist and author, about the religious imagination: “Catholics live in an enchanted world: a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are merely hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility that inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation.”

There were two main parts of the exhibition; the first displayed sumptuous vestments and other liturgical objects lent to the Met by the Vatican. Another presented evening dresses and wedding gowns, reminiscent of depictions of Mary attired as Queen of Heaven, as well as other fashion inspired by more everyday ecclesiastical garb (such as soutanes, the garments worn by priests, and religious habits). The work of many prestigious fashion designers was represented. One reviewer said, “For the 55 designers exhibited here, Catholicism is both a public spectacle and a private conviction, in which beauty has the force



of truth and faith is experienced and articulated through the body.”² How cogent a comment, when focused on a health care setting — beauty, truth, focus on the body. The exhibit certainly “captured the imagination” of the roughly 1.6 million who visited and contemplated it. This contemporary exhibition provided another angle of vision on the Trinity project: the imagination, particularly the religious imagination, brings another dimension to the question of healing design.

One focus point for Trinity’s Healing Design project is *The Saint John’s Bible*. The health care system purchased a copy of the Bible and displays the volumes in its health care settings. The development of this artistic masterpiece is in itself a story driven by the imagination of many people: in the envisioning of the project; in the way it was brought to life; and now in its many pastoral applications. It began with the desire of Donald Jackson, the Queen’s calligrapher who lives in Wales, to create the first handwritten and hand-illuminated manuscript of the Bible since the invention of the printing press.

The Benedictines of Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., embraced the vision for the Bible; they desired to mark the turn of the millennium, the beginning of the third millennia of Christianity, in a special way, and this appealed to — yes, their imagination. Their mission statement for the project reads: “At the dawn of the 21st century, Saint John’s Abbey and University seek to ignite the spiritual imagination of believers throughout the world by commissioning a work of art that illuminates the Word of God for the new millennia.”³ Although it is the project of Catholic monks, they also envisioned the work as a vehicle for ecumenical outreach to Christians throughout the world.

Thus began a “collaboration between calligraphers, artists, theologians, historians and scholars stretching across the Atlantic.”⁴ Calligraphers used quill pens, gold and platinum leaf and hand-ground pigments on vellum prepared from the traditional source of sheep skins. At the same time modern technology was utilized: computers to plan the layout and the line breaks for the text, and modern communication means for conversations between the artists in Wales and the monks in Minnesota. The placement of and content for the illuminations similarly sought to connect the past, the tradition, the text, with the world of

today, our modern society with all its gifts and challenges. The result: the pages include within them images of the Hubble telescope, the links of DNA and the flowers that grace the meadow and woodland around the Abbey. The illumina-

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tions are very beautiful, but more, as Fr. Michael Patella, OSB, the project’s chair of the committee on illumination and text has noted, “They are spiritual meditations on a text. It is a very Benedictine approach to Scripture.”⁵

And, this beautiful work of art, in seven volumes, has indeed caught the imagination of great numbers of contemporary people, Christians, yes, but many, many more. In various institutions, copies are displayed, and each day a page is turned. Sometimes small groups of workers and visitors gather to be present for a “page turning,” often marked with quiet or spoken prayer. Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise, Idaho, welcomed an edition of the Bible with a ritual pilgrimage through all the areas of the complex; they reported that it “ignites hope and healing for patients and staff alike.”⁶ In addition, a traveling exhibition sponsored by Saint John’s drew great numbers of people, in different parts of the United States.

THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

It is significant that the name for the “Heavenly Bodies” exhibition highlights the idea of the “Catholic imagination.” One review of the show explains that when the curator, Andrew Bolton, was planning the exhibit, “he found that a majority of designers seemed indebted especially to Catholic imagery.”⁷ For this reason, the exhibition opened with a quotation from Fr. Greeley. He believed that the Catholic imagination was distinctive, most deeply rooted in the Church’s sacramental life and its focus on story. In the late 1970s, a number of theologians were exploring the imagination.⁸ Greeley was convinced it was the imagination that bound Catholics to the church. Catholics’ lived conviction is that the transcen-



dent, God's very self, is glimpsed, made present or even experienced through earthly realities, such as water, bread, wine, oil, bodies (the sacrament of matrimony), family life (the domestic church) and human community. Greeley explored how Catholicism is rooted in the function of the imagination. Using his tools as a sociologist, Greeley expanded on this thesis in various ways, discovering links, for example, between an individual's image of God and ongoing connection with church life.⁹ Though Greeley explored the religious imagination, especially the Catholic imagination, its "implications touch upon any form of imagination that deals with the transcendent — 'the question of how the absence of God becomes the presence of God.'"¹⁰ When we pause before or are arrested by a particular concrete, specific reality, at times our imagination invites us to glimpse, as through a glass darkly, the transcendent within which it resides.

THE SPIRITUAL IMAGINATION

Mary Oliver, a poet loved by great numbers of Americans, died Jan. 17 of this year. One obituary noted: "Her poems, which are built of unadorned language and accessible imagery, have a pedagogical, almost homiletic quality. It was this ... that seemed to endear her work to a broad public, including clerics, who quoted it in their sermons; poetry therapists, who found its uplifting sensibility well suited to their work; composers ... who set it to music ... Her poems ... are suffused with a pulsating, almost mystical spirituality." Interestingly, the same obituary references critics who found her work shallow.¹¹ I would suggest that these contrary views arise because of the nature of imagination: it grasps things in their unique individuality and, in so doing, intuits that which is the depth of the reality. Oliver perceived the depth of the reality of the natural world, by focusing intently on concrete, unique realities; for some readers, the depth remains obscure. She said, "Attention is the beginning of devotion."¹² This is echoed in the contemporary focus on mindfulness and is an underlying reason why the iconography of *The Saint John's Bible* is so powerful in engaging the religious imagination in viewers. A reviewer of one of Oliver's books comments on the poem "Swan": "The sighting of the swan constitutes, to the poet's mind, a revelation — a piece of

extraordinary good news so powerful one must be changed by it if one is truly alive."¹³ Oliver herself wrote:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed ...¹⁴

Oliver does not link this experience with any religious tradition. I would say that she does indeed glimpse the transcendent (which, of course, is all one can ever do), but it has no name.

Oliver worked with words, the architect Steven Holl with space and structure. He designed the chapel at Seattle University, one of 28 Jesuit colleges/universities in the United States. He turned to two main sources of inspiration. First, St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Holl visited each of the sites central to Ignatius' life and studied his writings. He noted that light and darkness were central themes. His second source of inspiration came from students. "I think there has been more student input on this job than any

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other university project I have done ..." He said he designed the space to be "forward looking, but anchored in the past." His guiding concept for the design was "A Gathering of Lights" because of the way St. Ignatius' vision of the spiritual life moves between light and darkness.

Light enters the space in multiple ways, reflected off baffles, through colored glass; the alcove for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament has walls entirely covered in melted beeswax, giving a luminous glow. A large reflection pool is at the entrance. At night, lit from within, the chapel is a beacon of light radiating outward to the campus and city.¹⁵ This artistic expression explicitly draws upon a religious tradition, the story of Ignatius, the components of liturgical space, the lived lives of students and their desires

for their worship space; it is an expression of the religious imagination. (However, those who visit this space, who seek quiet or solace in this space, who pray in this space, may or may not glimpse the transcendent through it.) The dominant artistic element, light, is a universal natural symbol, and certainly has the potential of engaging the spiritual imagination.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALING DESIGN

This article has focused primarily on visual representations that engage the religious and/or spiritual imagination. Of course, many other elements could be considered, such as an appeal to the other senses, perhaps especially sound. From the narrower focus on visuals here, there are many implications for the healing spaces project Trinity Health has been exploring.

An initial consideration is that Western, Christian culture, which provided continuity with a long tradition of religious stories, symbols and artistic representation, no longer provides the dominant “past” that, for example, *The Saint John’s Bible* and the chapel at Seattle University draw upon. Furthermore, today, the “present” is more fractured. Our cultural references are more varied. Representation that draws only on the past does not have the potency, for most of our contemporaries — especially the young — that it once did. The kind of deep engagement with the past, in dialogue with the present as described in the examples above, is essential if visual artistic representations are to engage the imagination of people in today’s culture. And there is an added challenge: our self-consciously aware multicultural society.

Two specific spaces illustrate the complexities of this task. The first is a chapel in a nonsectarian hospital that includes symbols from Christianity, Judaism and Islam arranged so that one can sit to face any one of these. The space is cramped, poorly lighted and rather ugly. The symbols are the most stereotypical from each tradition. In my judgment, this chapel provides a place of quiet, which is welcome, but does not engage the religious, nor spiritual, imagination. One could say it has no heart. The second is a church in Los Angeles. Around the walls, there are varied representations of Mary, each from a different South American country. There is also a small chapel for the reposition of the Blessed Sacrament. At the end

of Mass, many worshippers gathered in the space below each statue of Mary. They brought flowers, some knelt, all were quietly present to a religious representation which, it seemed, truly engaged them in prayer, appealing to their religious imagination. The church was “alive” as a place of encounter with the transcendent, through the images of Mary.

A teaching from the Second Vatican Council provides a context for approaching the task of healing design in Catholic facilities. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* places emphasis on the presence of God in the lives of all persons of good faith, even those who have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God. Furthermore, “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel ... and given by God who enlightens all that they may at length have light.”¹⁶ Artistic representations drawn from the Catholic past, when placed

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in dialogue with today’s world, have the potential to engage the religious imagination of many people (patients, staff and visitors), Catholic and others. Artistic representations from the natural world and contemporary life (see, for example, *The Saint John’s Bible* illustrations referencing the images from the Hubble telescope and of DNA, or the many beams and artifacts saved from the conflagration of the World Trade Center) have the potential to engage the spiritual imagination. In both cases, healing is invoked, as it was with the Isenheim altar.

The creation of *The Saint John’s Bible* was the collaborative work of many individuals and groups, linked in their desire to design and execute an artistic work with deep pastoral resonance. The task of creating artistic representations for Catholic health care settings requires exactly this collaboration: seeking themes that will link past and present at the service of healing and finding these themes translated into paintings, sculptures and other visuals that invite contemplation. The pursuit of such spaces and images also has a larger social role. It will help to nourish the imagination



of those involved in its execution, and those who will meditate on its expressions. This is a vital task in our modern, technological society, because the imagination “requires a nourishing environment or it will atrophy—[because] imagination is at the heart of the question asked by any religious leader.”¹⁷ The hope is that Trinity Health’s project will not only aid the healing of individuals, but through the power of the religious imagination, will contribute to the healing of modern society.

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NOTES

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