

TITLE: Meaning, Relational Meditation and the Facilitation of “Momentary Glimpses”

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NUMBER OF WORDS: 3087

APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 24,000

SOURCES OF FUNDING: None

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: None

SUMMARY (detail main elements of the work):

Chaplains, in long-term care facilities, are called upon to be present within the ebb and flow of healing and dying, wholeness and fragmentation, knowing and not knowing, hope and despair. Always it is a fluid space and chaplains are called upon to enter into this fluidity with openness and emptiness. The chaplain's role is to enter into an intentional relationship with the resident, to assist them in uncovering their spiritual sources of strength and to facilitate a connection with these sources of strength. Most importantly the chaplain's role is "to be with" persons in crises so that they do not feel abandoned.

What if what gives strength/healing is not meaning, as Viktor Frankl proposes, but, rather, the ability to see; for a moment, clearly? And what if trusting in these momentary glimpses enables a person to continue to trust the present moment in all of its uncertainty more fully? Can a chaplain assist the resident to trust the validity and truth of their own experiences of momentary glimpses? Can a shared dwelling within momentary glimpses provide a sense of strength/healing, without meaning? Through relational meditation, is it possible for a chaplain to help facilitate an openness to momentary glimpses so that the resident may ease into this awareness and die (or live) with a sense of comfort and peace?

Meaning, Relational Meditation and the Facilitation of “Momentary Glimpses”

First note: See Ann Rm 22—she’s actively dying; called for you.

Second note: Visit Tom Rm33.—he just found out his cancer is end-stage; he won’t talk.

Third note: See Mrs. W Rm12.—her husband died last night in his sleep; next to her.

-typical messages left on chaplain’s voice mail in nursing home

Chaplaincy in a long-term care (LTC) facility is one of the most challenging and healing ministries. It is in the LTC facility that one must day-by-day dwell within the reality of impermanence and uncertainty. LTC chaplains are called upon to be present within the ebb and flow of healing and dying, wholeness and fragmentation, knowing and not knowing, hope and despair. Always it is a fluid space and the chaplain is called upon to enter into this fluidity with openness and emptiness. The chaplain enters into relationships of various lengths with the intent to “stay with” if not always physically, then in spirit.

The chaplain’s role in LTC is to enter into an intentional relationship with the resident, to assist them in uncovering their spiritual sources of strength and to facilitate a connection with these sources of strength.

In a chapter in an administrative textbook entitled *Spiritual Care and Chaplaincy in the Long Term Care Facility*, it is written,

In addressing and assessing an individual’s spirituality, the chaplain seeks to understand the spiritual issues that are at work in a given situation; how can the chaplain facilitatea movement toward a sense of wholeness, peace or calm even in the midst of uncertainty. (T)he chaplain’s role.....is not to

gloss over difficulty....but rather to uncover and utilize the spiritual resources that individuals have available to them or even help them “lean into” the feelings of fear, anxiety, helplessness in order to work “through” these feelings so that they can move toward feelings of peace, trust, hopefulness. Most importantly the chaplain’s role is “to be with” persons in crises so that they do not feel abandoned. The chaplain offers encouragement and affirmation and a listening, and sometimes silent, healing presence as the individuals sort through their myriad of emotions (Micklewright).

In working for many years with people who are facing into their limitations and death, I have come to see that what often sustains people, especially in critical moments, is not always their sense of overall meaning, as Viktor Frankl notes, but rather their sense of seeing: their presence of being in a given moment and their ability to see; for a moment, clearly. It is, often, the weaving of these momentary glimpses that bring people through crises and despair. It is the act of remembering and trusting these momentary glimpses that can give a person the ability to continue to trust the present moment in all of its uncertainty—and to enter into this moment more fully.

Viktor Frankl and the search for meaning

At a Gerontological Pastoral Care Institute in MN, participants reviewed literature on aging using physiological, psychological, sociological, theological and biblical sources. Much of the psychological material utilized and applied key concepts of Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, theories of logotherapy, developed in the early part of the 20th century.

While Frankl’s theories, borne of experience, bear much weight and importance, especially for those experiencing a “crisis of meaning” I wish to propose an enhancement or variation of these theories which I have developed as a chaplain working in long-term care, in hospice, and as a minister in very poor neighborhoods and barrios in Chicago and Barquisimeto, Venezuela. I will first briefly review Frankl’s theories.

Frankl underwent a profound experience in three concentration camps during WWII. His theories, however were developed prior to the onset of the war, when he was practicing as a psychologist. Frankl's theories of logotherapy focused on the concept of meaning. Frankl found that the internal struggle of the human was fundamentally a struggle for meaning. Frankl proposed that humans can endure almost any suffering as long as they can find in it a semblance of meaning. Meaning, he said, can be understood from three vantage points: 1) by creating a work, or doing a deed; 2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; or 3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. This meaning in turn can give us purpose and ultimately, the will to live.

Frankl's own experience in the camps, and those of fellow inmates, caused him to note that those who lost a sense of meaning often were the first ones to lose a will to live and, thus, to succumb to death.

While I resonate with much of what Frankl proposes I also struggle with Frankl's belief that if the therapist can lead a client to a "sense of meaning," then they can help the person move toward healing. I wonder: can healing take place even when there is no ability to find meaning, or when there is no meaning to be had?

I have found in my work that there are many instances when meaning has no truth or value, or place in reality, i.e., a mother in ER who wails as her 16-year old lies dead from an accidental shooting; a one-year old who lies dead from a broken skull; a 78-year old woman, filled with the stench of cancer who waits, alert, to succumb to death; a 98-year old woman who asks with sincerity, "Why is it so hard to stop breathing?"; an 18-year old catechist who buries her 10-month old daughter because there was no money for a doctor.

In such instances can a person "reason" for meaning? Is there meaning to be found? Or would it be better, and perhaps more healing, to sit with the reality of the unknown; to acknowledge it and allow it its own space without trying to put meaning on it? And would that not resonate more true to those undergoing the suffering? Would silence, in the face of mystery, itself not speak a truth?

Frankl concentrates on the concrete whys of existence (meaning; responsibility) and finds that dealing in this realm can be therapeutic. On the other hand I also believe that much of our existence deals with the unknowable, mysterious aspects of life. So my focus regarding suffering is shifting. I wonder, is it possible to intentionally dwell with another in the face of the unknowable reality of life; to dwell within the reality, in silence. To not change what is (to not attempt to find meaning where there is no meaning), but to be at one with what is, and in this experience healing.

A Theory of “Momentary Glimpses”

In practice I have tried to incorporate some of Frankl’s theories of logotherapy but I have found that it often breaks down precisely at the juncture of crisis and death as well as when ministering to those with dementia or Alzheimer’s. As a chaplain in LTC, it is these areas that I am most involved with—and therefore most attentive to. How does one accompany another at the edges of life—in the midst of crisis, in the process of dying, in the full-blown uncertainty of an emergency, or in the gentle slipping away of a memory/sense of self?

I have journeyed with over 500 people who have died. This is the gift I have received as a minister to our elderly community members. I have listened to countless stories of peoples’ lives—of how they have overcome difficult and challenging situations; of how they found hope in moments of crisis and uncertainty: of how they have woven together a lifetime of seemingly disparate experiences into a whole. Of how they have faced into and lived with uncertainty, or

fought valiantly against it. Of how they have laughed and loved and played and rejoiced in the midst of chaos. Of how they have melded with the power of creation and created anew their daily lives.

Listening has plunged me into a depth I cannot always fathom, but of which I am intensely made aware of as I listen. Listening and “being with” has caused me to see beyond words and action. There is, in truth, no separateness for all is one, deeply and profoundly one, interdependent and grounded in oneness.

A portion of what I have heard and seen and come to believe is that all of us, as humans, naturally see over and over again, in incremental glimpses. These “momentary glimpses” break into our sense of being, and for the moment, perhaps even for an instant only, they allow us to deeply experience our oneness, our interconnectedness, our being that is one with being itself. And it is these momentary glimpses that often carry us through difficult moments; that give us the ability to SEE, if but for a moment. And in this seeing, I purport, there is healing.

Frankl says that if we can “find meaning” then we can go on. In many cases this is true---but there are times, especially in crises, when we see, and it is this seeing that allows us to continue; it is a seeing without meaning, beyond meaning. It is a touching into the depths of truth and essence.

How many times have I heard the story of someone’s memory of seeing only for them to dismiss it is an aberration, a cloudy thought, a sentimental hope. But in the same breath I have heard them say that this glimpse is what has allowed them to continue on, to hope.

What are these momentary glimpses? They are simple, really, but filled with a oneness and an insight and a wholeness that is hard to put into words. To touch into such a memory,

you need only to recall a moment when you experienced true clarity, a knowing. Recall a moment when the sight of a sunset, or the gentle call of a bird, or the whisper of a wind, or the experience of two small blades of grass poking up from beneath winter's blanket caused you to pause, caused you to wonder, caused you to stop. Or recall an experience, when in the presence of another, in deep communication, eyes meet eyes, words flowed freely or in silence, interconnected, you experience a knowing, a profound oneness and peace. Or recall when, in the midst of daily life, a thought or an insight arose within you, and named a movement you had not even been aware of going on inside of you—and you smiled and you knew. Something cloudy suddenly became clear. You knew!

Some momentary glimpses arise subtly, some more profoundly. Some ebb up like a distant dream, others awaken with force and power. But whatever their level of intensity—whisper or storm—they happen often and we can, in time, come to see these glimpses more often and trust in them.

As a chaplain, part of my role has been to help others recall these momentary glimpses, dwell within the truth of the memory of these glimpses and trust the validity and truth of their own experience. I also help them see these memories and experiences as rich sources of spiritual strength in this moment. Over time, my role has also expanded, to help facilitate these momentary glimpses in this moment, now, when possible.

This gradual understanding of my role has, over the years, gently guided me to shift my way of being as a chaplain. While I have included the traditional methods of being a chaplain (using resources of prayer, symbol, ritual, worship, counseling, talk/sharing, pastoral listening and compassionate presence), I have also incorporated methods that help to facilitate, for others, the deepening of these momentary glimpses of awareness and of oneness.

Some of the most powerful times of awakening have occurred while being with someone actively in the process of dying, or at critical junctures in their journey, or in moments of great uncertainty. Somehow the intensity and gravity of the moment seems to heighten everyone's awareness and sense of being. I have also experienced many momentary glimpses

while sitting with a person with dementia, or while in vigil, in silence or prayer or contemplation, by someone's bedside. In all of these moments there is a great sense of healing and peace, a oneness with being. I call this shared dwelling within momentary glimpses "relational meditation."

Facilitating momentary glimpses through relational meditation

As a chaplain, working with those in the process of dying, my question has often not been "how do I assist a person in finding meaning in their situation?" but, rather, "is it possible to help facilitate an openness to these momentary glimpses so that the patient may ease into this awareness and die (or live) with a sense of comfort and peace?"

I have come to understand two ways of facilitating this awareness. One is to become intentionally and meditatively present to another through relational meditation. The second way is to develop integrative skills of healing—in conjunction with relational meditation-- that facilitates this awareness through the use of presence, appropriate healing touch, guided imagery, soothing music, guided meditation, massage, spiritual direction, healing arts—each of which can open a space, within another so that they can more fully receive these momentary glimpses of depth and awareness.

I have found that, when I enter into encounters of uncertainty, when I am called upon in emergencies, when I know that I will be accompanying someone who is dying, or when I vigil with someone through difficulty, I almost intuitively, without conscious thought, now, begin to internally slow down. I begin to engage in relational meditation; my walking and movements slow. I empty my mind, willing it to stop any movement. I call upon this space of emptiness, and it comes. I simultaneously pray for guidance and let go. I enter into the situation fully open with

eyes, ears, heart, spirit; all senses are heightened and I fully listen and see. I am fully present. There is a relational movement of oneness that begins to flow. In listening and seeing, what I term “my internal meditative-self” begins to respond. Soothing words of comfort emanate, or a silent calm pervades the space: a gentle touch or a guided direction may be called forth from within; silence or prayer or presence moves in. And I remain intentionally there, as the process unfolds, until an internal movement gives me leave to gently disengage. There is a presence of healing; a sense of oneness and this oneness remains for a long time until it too gently dissipates. This process has an ebb and flow and I move with it. If I wish to will my disengagement, to separate, I can—but often I remain until what has been called forth has slowly dissipated.

In this meditative space that is shared it is possible, also, that the other may begin to intuitively move into a healing meditative space. The meditation of one flows into the shared relational space and opens a meditative space in another. Relational meditation can facilitate an opening to see clearly; to experience momentary glimpses, an inner awareness of depth.

The state of awareness I enter into in mindfulness meditation is very similar to the state of awareness and oneness I have experienced while intentionally journeying with or meditating, relationally, with those who have Alzheimer’s or dementia, those who are dying, and those who are in a process of healing or uncertainty.

I have come to see relational meditation as a process that happens in the midst of intentional relationship. It is giving over of oneself to the process of meditation, in order to be fully present to the other; entering into the unknown and remaining there without need for anything but being one with another, in their journey. In this presence healing, without meaning, may take place. In this presence momentary glimpses of heightened

awareness/oneness may be experienced. In this presence one becomes aware that all is whole even in the midst of dying and uncertainty, loss or ambiguity.

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Michele (Mickie) Micklewright, DMin, BCC, HTP is a Board Certified Chaplain with the Association of Professional Chaplains, a spiritual director and healing touch practitioner who daily practices meditation. She is attentive to the subtle nuances of relational meditation and seeks to practice integrative care within pastoral care, always setting an intention for the highest good of the other. She shares this piece to continue the dialogue as we creatively envision ways that we can be healing presence to one another and as we seek to find the words to articulate what we do as we journey with those in their movements of transition, change, loss, wholeness. Michele is currently a staff integrative care chaplain in long-term care settings. Michele has published articles and essays in various journals. She has served as an APC state representative, assisted with regional board certification processes and served on the APC task force that developed the Standards of Practice for long term care settings.