

What Can I Say?

Nick Ruiter

While working as a carpenter in a cement factory for three years I discovered that there is nothing like being able to fall back on theory when you are caught in a pickle.

After a liquid lunch the work force of 17 decided not to return to the factory for the afternoon; instead, we stayed in the bar till closing time, leaving the boss to wonder, well, who knows what? The next day a deafening silence (the boss said nothing) had some wondering aloud whether or not to seek work down the road.

I asked the fellows if they would agree to call a meeting with the boss to apologize and to explain that we were merely getting into the Christmas spirit a little early.

We shut down the machinery and crowded into the factory production office. With notions of “Speech and Reality” and “the Cross of Reality” in my head I heard myself open with: “Fred, we want to talk to you, here and now ...”

The meeting evidently worked because the following Friday the boss rented a local hall where we were all treated to a sumptuous Christmas dinner.

That was in 1982, also the year of the first Waterloo ERH Conference. Let me add that there have been other useful ERH themes that I have integrated over time.

Together with the old notion that carpentry is what theology people do when they are not doing theology, ERH’s emphasis on working directly in society to humanize the clefts and cracks provided great freedom to live without having to seek office in church or state. This new direction led me, among other things, to manage political campaigns, to volunteer at the local community centre and to accept happily a role as a carpenter for over twenty years. Many times, for example, did I meet with a woman (it’s usually women who look after the physical plant) with a request “to move husband’s office to the attic or the basement as

we need that space for a new bedroom and the work has to be done in the next 8 months.” I also had the pleasure of working with award-winning Toronto architects on several custom built homes.

From ERH’s large Trinitarian thinking, to his theme that life is deeply temporal, to his respect for the potential of the ordinary individual, and to the smallest examples of the purpose of speaking and listening - there is much here to help one sort out one’s relation to the world, and to hear echoes beckoning one to create or to found genuine future.

The HIV Aids crisis of the 1980’s gave birth in Toronto to the hospice movement and that for me became a “yes” moment. People who had been exposed to a nasty virus died horrible deaths, at times accompanied by scorn even from within their own families. So why not work at building a place where people can die with dignity, meaning and hope? This seed was planted in 1988 and I was to walk with this seed for 6 years.

As the inward front of the cross of reality is represented by the poets and musicians – it was listening to a Prokofiev violin concerto in 1992 while driving down the highway that prompted me to pay attention to an inner voice, one that called out for *change*. Living at the center of the cross of reality, as ERH points out, is to live in a crucible of conflict, facing many directions at once, before a compelling imperative comes into view.

The time to act arrived. I spent the last 18 years of my working life in the hospice movement, tasked with creating and developing (more like *building* really) a spiritual care program for The Dorothy Ley Hospice. Dr. Dorothy Ley is a Canadian pioneer of palliative care. She died the year I started the work. She is one of very few accomplished medical practitioners who viewed spiritual care as the most important aspect of palliative care, as reflected by her writings.*

For the palliative care team, the central focus of hospice spiritual care is to develop listening skills. As both speaking and listening are important to ERH particularly in establishing relationships here are some ERH inspired insights on listening I found useful during that time:

- Listening - is appropriate in the presence of the dying and their vulnerability as the empathic response is largely silent, following, not leading;
- listening levels the inherent power imbalance between a care-seeker and a care-provider;
 - helps to establish respectful personal and professional boundaries;
 - is a delight when the moment is humorous, poignant, or memorable;
 - grants the speaker time and space to express vital narrative aspects of his or her journey;
 - helps one to remain calm even when confused;
 - invites the speaker to go deeper into his or her experience;
 - allows both speaker and listener to arrive at insight;
 - facilitates forgiveness and reconciliation;
 - allows one to become comfortable with silence, an opportunity to be still;
 - is an act of discipleship;
 - opens one to the Spirit of all time; and,
 - can affirm that the most spiritual moments are often unworded.

Finally, I am grateful to ERH for the teaching that the language of faith and spirit is not a special language, but the language we use all along.

*Ley. Dorothy C.H. "The Heart of Hospice" p.39 NC Press Limited, Toronto 1994

“Pain and symptom control must come first in the practical application of palliative care but under the foundation and attitude of spiritual care. Spiritual care is what sets palliative care apart and gives it its unique characteristics.”

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