

## They came for their dying father: One chaplain's experience.

Rodney Frey - 24 July 2021

The following essay was originally written as a "case study" of a particular patient and family care experience, for consideration and discussion by Gritman Lay Chaplains. FERPA reviewed and approved.

### Introduction

Knowing my fellow Gritman chaplains, I'm convinced that how I engaged a particular patient and his family at their time of transition would, in general terms and in what is most important, be comparable. I happened to be the chaplain scheduled, as another who might have been scheduled would have done something similar. I believe we all bring to those we serve the critical competencies and skills of intense listening and heightened attentiveness, allowing us in a very short period of time to offer as much empathy for the patient's unique story as possible. With whatever empathy that is garnered, a bridge can be fashioned. We can then begin to provide, in words spoken and gestures made, some level of comfort and compassion. The nature and dynamics of each chaplain's engagement does acknowledge nuanced and subtle distinctions each brings to his or her patient care. I think we would agree, that such distinctions are greatly influenced by the life journeys we've traveled – mentors, experiences, education, faith community, etc. I would maintain that no one path is any more valuable than another, as each brings a level of authentic richness, color and vitality essential for successful patient engagement. Key word, "authenticity." I think we'd hold that we need to be true to ourselves if we are to engage others. I wouldn't want to assume a role and present myself to a patient in a manner that's not me. A final comment here; I'm still learning – I've made missteps and mistakes, and I always cherish the critiques and wisdom of my colleagues. This case study is offered in all humility.

After I provide a brief synopsis of what transpired during my chaplain rounds, I will offer some reflections on a few of the distinctions that nuance and color my patient engagement.

### **Synopsis**

As I was completing my rounds for the day, Karen, a case manager, asked if I could return later that evening, as family members were flying in from back east, to see their father who was dying from Covid complications. She mentioned that they were strong Catholics. The nurses noted that the family and I didn't need to worry about Covid, as he was no longer infectious. I came in time to spend a few moments alone with the patient, orienting myself to his circumstances (hooked up to IVs and monitors) and although he was non-responsive, I introduced myself and shared words of comfort. Soon after, the family arrived, some from back east and others from the Seattle area. There were six family members in all. Of the two daughters, the eldest was a "take charge person," and I think we worked well together. She was constantly asking relevant questions of the doctors and nurses, and kept her family informed. She also called for prayer on occasion.

I don't recall the specific order of events, but over the next few hours, we orchestrated family group prayers, along with making sure there was one-on-one time for each family member, who wanted it. Time alone, to say what had been unsaid or was in the heart. Time to share tears in private. At some level, the patient just might feel the love therein conveyed. I knew I was not equipped to provide the form of Catholic prayers typically offered at these stages of dying, but I did my best to provide comforting prayer. My prayers are generally ad hoc, and not scripted, focusing on issues at hand and emphasizing the love of the Creator. In these particular prayers, I referenced the Trinity and Jesus Christ and included the names of the patient and his family members, as best I could. On a couple of occasions, I led the family in the Lord's Prayer. The eldest daughter specifically asked to have the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm read aloud, which was also shared on a couple of occasions (I had a copy on my iPhone along with various Parables and phrases from the Gospels I've shared with patients). Throughout, I listened to conversations and asked a few relevant questions here and there, as I got to know a little of the background of some of the family members. As we continued to gather around his bed, stories were shared from their father's life, eliciting a smile, a laugh, and a few tears from family members. I remember that one of the granddaughters was particularly distraught, as she had

in recent years lived with her grandfather while going to school. I don't think I connected well with her, but her mom and aunt seemed to provide solace.

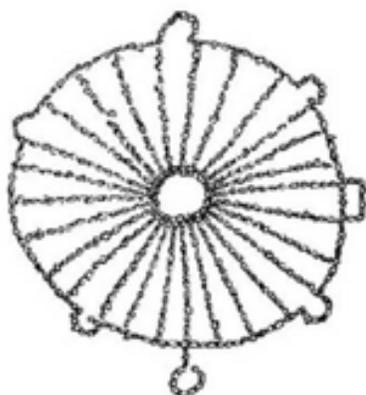
I don't remember the specific time, other than it was early into the morning hours and the family members were exhausted. Getting some degree of assurance from the nurses that their father was not close to passing, we agreed to get some rest and return the next morning. That morning I arrived before the family members and noticed some of the physiological signs of impending death. As family members assembled, we continued in group prayer and if desired, each member the option of some one-on-one time. At some point that morning, one of the daughters asked my religious affiliation (knowing from the language of my prayers I was not likely a Catholic). In reluctance and without elaboration, I said I was "ecumenical, inter-faith, having been baptized and confirmed in the Methodist Church, partook of the Episcopal Eucharist with my mother-in-law, and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church." It turned out that the youngest sister was a practicing Buddhist, and they had a friend in the UU Church. In this situation, the revelation likely assisted in my growing relationship with the sisters. During those morning hours, when it seemed appropriate, I did leave for short periods so I could complete my rounds with the other patients on the Med-Surg floor. But as the patient moved closer to passing, I stayed with the family. When he finally passed, I provided a group prayer, referencing family members and the journey now being undertaken by their loved one. I was honored to spend some eight hours with this family during their most intimate of transitions, this quintessential rite of passage, for both the dying and the living, and come to know and feel a family's love for a very special man.

### **Reflections**

As mentioned, my engagement with a patient and family starts with intense listening and garnered empathy and presenting myself with authenticity. In so doing, I seek a viable bridge that facilitates the offering of care and compassion. As each of us have a distinct history and life-journey, each chaplain, in subtle but meaningful ways, does nuance and color his or her patient engagement differently. The years of ethnographic research I've conducted, using it's

participant observation and interviewing techniques and teaching the same to my students, I suspect contributed to my own skills in attentiveness and listening. The following are some reflections on my journey that underpin my chaplaincy.

**The Wheel.** As many of you know, Tom and Susie Yellowtail, of the Apsáalooke (“Children of the Large Beaked Bird” or Crow of Montana) were primary mentors for me, Tom for some 19 years. Tom viewed the world and its peoples as if parts of a great Wheel, referencing the many rock Medicine Wheels that dot the northern Plains, such as in the Bighorn Mountains, Wyoming, (below) and the structure of the Sundance Lodge (from the eye of an Eagle). The spokes represent the many differing peoples and religions, each with their own traditions, own languages, and each equally vital if the Wheel is to turn. Yet all spokes were anchored to the



pervasive hub, the shared ubiquitous Divinity, each spoke with their own words to address the same Ultimate. Tom was the chief medicine man for the Tribe, a healer of the sick, one who “ran” the Sundances each year. Yet he was also a devote Baptist, knowing his Gospels well. For Tom, the hub was addressed by the name *Akbaatatdía*, “the One Who

Made Everything,” the Creator, and by the name Jesus Christ, the Savior. But he never mixed the two traditions, no Crucifix in the Sundance Lodge, nor Eagle Feathers in the Sunday Service.

And then there was Susie, who blew the Eagle-bone Whistle and prayed with Eagle Feathers in hand while in the Sundance Lodge, but also listened with a stethoscope in the



other hand while in the hospital. Susie was one of the first American Indian registered nurses in the country, receiving her medical training in Boston. Spiritual Sundance and scientific biomedical healings going hand-in-hand, though like her husband, one in the left hand, the other right. The differing, distinct paths Susie traveled, all led to the same ubiquitous hub, the healing source. As Tom and Susie sought to bring comfort to the many peoples they engaged throughout their long lives, with Eagle Feathers, Crucifix and stethoscope in hand, they walked the differing spokes in equity, while anchored to the transformative hub.

In 1993, just before his passing, Tom was selected to represent all Indigenous Peoples world-wide, the first to do so, at the Parliament of the World's Religions, meeting in Chicago. Begun in 1893 and continuing into the present, the Parliament is said to be the first modern attempt at seeking global inter-faith dialogue. There, in 1993 at the podium, in full regalia, with an Eagle Feather Fan in hand, before 8,000 people, Tom prayed for world peace. Next to Tom were priests, rabbis, imams, ministers, monks, among them the Dalai Lama, the many different spokes, all praying in their own languages, in their own ways. Yet together, as Tom and others would hold, ultimately offering prayers from the same ubiquitous source to our common humanity. What a sight that must have been!

While I was living with Tom and Susie, I also met and worked with Father Randolph. He was from a small order of Franciscans out of Milwaukee, that had a long tradition somewhat unique in Catholic history. While practicing his Catholic religion on the Reservation, he also partook of the Sweat Lodge and Sundance ceremonies and even participated in the Peyote meetings, consuming the sacred cactus with other Apsáalooke. For him, both the Catholic and Sundance practices were mere reflections of the same ultimate Divinity. And like Tom and Susie, Father Randolph didn't mix and match the distinct traditions. Its intriguing to note that these critical mentors, at the same time, in the same place, coming at Divinity from completely different traditions, affirmed the same conclusion.

As with a macrocosm, so with a microcosm, each mirroring the other. Recently I had the opportunity to feel the joy of holding a newborn, just a few days old. She was so pure, so

beautiful, a precious bundle of love! It's been far too long since this old man held a baby. And I thought to myself, I must remember as a chaplain, each and every time I hold the hand of someone at the other end of life's journey, that they too began so beautiful. Their long, unique journey, so full of life's joys and sorrows, of hopes and dreams and disappointments, is now worn on his or her face and in their soul. And this little baby teaches me, that each and every one of us, in whatever stage of our life's journey, after removing all the baggage we've collected along the way, we're ultimately, at our core, still what we began as – a precious bundle of Love. As the outer world is a great Wheel, so too is it within each of us, as each of us travels a unique, distinct spoke, while at our core, resides the ubiquitous hub. Perhaps Love another expression of our shared Divinity?

The pivotal teachings of Tom and Susie Yellowtail, in conjunction with Father Randolph's, have been a foundation of my worldview and practice. As a result, relative to the orientation of the patient, in prayer I can just as easily refer to the Trinity and Jesus Christ (a non-starter for most Unitarians!), as I can use words appropriate for an agnostic or even a Wizard. There are even words, from a poem, that can bring comfort to an atheist. The revered words are "thought-coverings" for the deeper shared Ultimate, in whatever way It is defined. In each patient I seek to acknowledge and realize that "bundle of Love" at his or her core, shared by all patients, while also appreciating his or her distinctiveness, what is unique within each.

**The Sundance Way.** As some of you also know, my spiritual practice involves the Apsáalooke *Ashkísshe* Way (use of a Medicine Bundle, and participation in the Sweat and Sundance Ceremonies), having done so for 45 years of my life. Over those years, I have experienced a range of spiritual phenomena, from seeing water drawn



from a knot of dead Tree at the moment a prayer is given and the Tree is touched by an Eagle

Feather Fan, to my own spirit journey and metamorphosis during my fourth Sundance, which is



the basis of my Medicine Bundle. It was through the insights and spirit revealed through the Sundance that I have more fully come to appreciate and feel the Divinity in all authentic religious traditions. As the spirit flows through one spoke of the Wheel so too does it usher forth through other spokes.

Several years ago, a colleague from the University and I drove to DeSmet, on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation, to visit a friend. Along the way, we talked academic politics and trivia. As we pulled up beside the Catholic Church to park my car, we both looked up at what had been a plain white wall and were amazed to see that someone had painted on the side of the Church, in vivid, vibrant pastels, the image of the Virgin Mary! We turned to each other and both commented how splendid a painting of the Virgin Mary it was, covering the entire side of the Church. Then when we looked up again at the wall, there was nothing but white.

**World Religions.** Helping me put this inclusive Divinity into words, I've also been fortunate to have taught a seminar on world religions for twenty years at the University. My vocabulary and thoughts have been greatly influenced by the *Bhagavata*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Torah*, the *Quran* and the *Dhammapada*. The words of the Gospels have held an immediate relevance, linked to my upbringing and those I serve. Many years ago, I had the opportunity to learn from the "Jesus Seminar" (over 200 world Biblical scholars), who have studied the five books of the Gospels (adding Thomas), to better discern what is most likely the actual words of Jesus. Their research opened for me new and insightful meanings into the Parables and key passages attributed to Jesus. The words of the many religions may differ, but the Divinity remains steadfast.

A note: when asked by a patient, I have, as yet, not shared my Sundance spirituality. I fear to do so, since it might open the possibility of misinterpretation and frankly, it is too much

to unpack in the immediacy and tight temporality of a chaplain-patient relationship. I know where I am coming from and the word “inter-faith,” as represented in the Parliament of the World’s Religions, says it all for me, as the “inter-” refers to the inclusion of many traditions, going even beyond the Abrahamic faiths.

**Prayer.** A short but dense reflection on the power of the spoken word. As we all do, I take prayer very seriously. Here’s my take on it. While a word is a “thought-covering,” (a Buddhist notion), i.e., a morpheme cluster representing something, which thus accommodates the possibility of differing words referring to the same phenomena, e.g., the “hub,” that does not dismiss or undermine the animating power of the spoken word. I was first made aware of the power of the word while working with the Apsáalooke in the mid-1970s, at a time when about 90% of the population were fluent native speakers (though certainly bilingual English). They have a phrase, *dasshússua*, literally meaning, “breaking with the mouth.” When a word, spoken from the heart, is voiced, it has the potential power to animate and alter reality. This is why the Apsáalooke don’t say “goodbye,” it’s too final, but say, *diawákaawik*, “I’ll see you later.” Hence the power of an Indian Name to affect the disposition of a person’s life journey. When Tom and Susie adopted me into their family, during a Medicine Bundle Ceremony in 1976, he bestowed on me the Name, *Maakuuxshiichíilish*, “Seeking to Help Others.” I’ve been humbled by the Name ever since. The key is that when a word is so inexorably linked to the Divine the Divine materializes into reality. This notion is also echoed by the great scholar of world religions, Mircea Eliade, calling the process an “hierophany.” When symbols or symbolic actions (from the spoken word, to religious objects, to a sand mandala, to a rock temple, to a pilgrimage to a sacred site, to the fanning of a dead tree with eagle feathers) replicate the sacred, the meaning and power of the sacred shines through into the world. The symbolism of the ritual act of the Christian Eucharist or the Muslim Hajj is an example. From the transcendent Divine into our material reality, and into our lives. I suspect you can think of other connections and examples close to home. A reflection on the power of prayer, words spoken with deliberation, from the Heart.

**Multiple Worlds.** On reflecting on Tom's Wheel, Sundance spirituality and the power of the spoken word, these in turn are premised on holding a certain corresponding ontology. In fact, I hold two rather distinct views of reality. Without going into detail, I certainly adhere to the scientific paradigm, with its foundation in Cartesian Dualism and Aristotelian Materialism, in its objectification, rationalism, and empiricism. But I also adhere of the Indigenous/mystical reality, with its foundation in Monism and Platonism, in an interconnected, participatory world brought forth from the transcendent Forms. This is the world of Sundance healings and the miracles of Jesus. My two journeys with cancer were rendered successful because of the science of chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant, along with prayers of Sundancers and a Medicine Bundle. As Susie Yellowtail held, I too hold that there is more than one ontological spoke in the universe. There need not be mutual exclusivity. On a practical note, having multiple ontologies helps me to understand and sympathize with patients oriented one way or another, or anything in between, and if a patient is caught between the seemingly exclusivity of one worldview over another and a decision is needed to be made, help that patient discover for him or herself, their own path.

**A Course.** And finally, but most timely. My current chaplaincy was influenced by a Unitarian Universalist Leadership Institute course that I, along with a few other UU lay pastoral folks, recently completed. The several-month, multi-module spiritual training covered a wide range of topics, with three of the modules dealing with issues associated with dying and death. Those lessons had relevance on those who *came for their dying father*.

**In the Stillness.** I carry my cell phone with me as I enter each patient's room, with the ringer turned off. On it are passages from the Bible, such as Romans 8:38-39 and Psalm 23 and Parables, such as the Mustard Seed, Sower of Seeds and Watchful Servant, and many other texts I've come to appreciate and, if the moment warrants, I read to a patient. The following is one such text, adapted from a Buddhist meditation.

In the stillness, may you hear the voice that whispers deep within . . .

“you are loved.”

May you continue to be filled with loving-kindness,  
May you be peaceful and at ease,  
May you be well,  
May you be whole,  
May the Spirit abound within you and flow from you.  
From my heart to yours, “you are loved.”

Tom Yellowtail’s life and his cherished stories were central in three of my books, *The World of the Crow Indians: As Driftwood Lodges* (University of Oklahoma Press 1987), *Stories that Make the World: Oral Literature of the Indian Peoples of the Inland Northwest* (University of Oklahoma Press 1995) and *Carry Forth the Stories: An Ethnographer’s Journey into Native Oral Tradition* (Washington State University Press 2017). More extended discussions on the Tom’s Wheel, the *Ashkísshe* Sundance Way, the power of the spoken word, and the two ontologies can be found in *Carry Forth the Stories*.