

## **'Dying to take care of you'**

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Most healthcare workers in Britain would understand how Sisyphus felt. Condemned by the gods, his task was to eternally roll a huge boulder uphill. Labouring to the point of collapse, he would complete his struggle, only to see the boulder roll downhill again, and for him once more to repeat his labour. It doesn't have to be like this, and it's not just about pay and conditions.

There is a growing body of evidence to indicate that the failure to attend to the spiritual needs not just of patients, but of those who care for them as well, is producing serious difficulties for individuals and the organisations that seek to support them. Recently, a plethora of studies has indicated high levels of stress and burnout among health care professionals, especially nurses and doctors. Furthermore, many of these studies point to factors other than just workloads and low pay as the only or even the principal causes. Even the best pay and employment conditions it seems will not necessarily reduce, in the long term, the exodus of NHS staff, the high levels of sickness and absenteeism, the regular reports of low morale. While pay is the issue that grabs the headlines, it seems that there may be other powerful forces at work that we have yet to tackle effectively.

The crisis is also a spiritual one - of meaning, purpose and relationships (with the organisation, each other, ourselves and the greater realm of being whatever we perceive that to be). There are some specific reasons why many health care staff are having difficulty.

1. We identify ourselves so closely with our roles that we find it difficult let go of them. Constantly playing the part, like an actor in a soap opera, we can lose the sense of who we really are (which is infinitely greater than any role we play). And, like actors condemned to always playing the same part, we burn out.
2. Trapped in the role of helping others, we tend to neglect our own needs.
3. Many organisations are like dysfunctional families, energised by issues of power, control, threat and anger, rather than positive nurturing relationships. Professionals spend as much time in power struggles with each other or shoring up traditional roles and boundaries as they do caring for each other. Professionals and patients can exhibit similar power struggles.
4. Lost in definitions by others of who we are and how we should behave, many carers endure fundamentally unhappy relationships with colleagues and patients. Studies have found between 50 and 80% of carers were struggling in relationships at work and showed higher levels of stress than comparable groups. They had literally lost 'faith' in their work, being caught in inhospitable cultures and the feeling that they should always be giving of themselves. Under such circumstances they may become indifferent, sick or medicate the pain of their disease with alcohol, drugs, food, sex, spending, serial unhappy relationships and more.

A spiritual crisis needs spiritual solutions, and the Sacred Space foundation was set up almost 20 years ago to offer some support. Nurses and doctors and other therapists arrive burned out and exhausted, at the end of their tether, hopeless and lost by what they have endured. Our work focuses on providing retreat and recuperation facilities, on methods of self-discovery and renewal of meaning in work. We teach meditation and offer various therapies and forms of (non-denominational) spiritual guidance. Courses on various aspects of healing, such as Therapeutic Touch, are also offered to reinvigorate the professional's faith in their practice. Self-care strategies for the return to work are encouraged, and we work with teams and organisations to develop caring cultures, practices and relationships. Sacred Space is not just the safe place of retreat; it is also an invitation to take a journey deep into ourselves – our own sacred space – to discover who we really are and why we are here.

With one NHS Trust, we have established an extensive programme of staff support – not only reviewing workloads and management cultures, but also teambuilding days, meditation training, access to complementary therapies, setting up a quiet sanctuary and a labyrinth in the workplace and so on. But we are dealing with the tip of the iceberg. If the problem is to be dealt with effectively, it is going to need much attention focused on it by all concerned – governments, unions, employers and individual professionals.

We have two sites in rural Cumbria where “outward bound” places are two a penny. However, what we offer is “inward” bound – a chance to reflect upon our own situations, deepen our awareness of what has gone wrong and find solutions. People come to us in groups or individuals, staying a few hours or many days according to need, and we do much outreach work in NHS Trusts.

There is an economic side to this too. Caring for staff, especially attending to spiritual needs through programmes of meditation, team support, developing a sense of meaning and purpose in the workplace, connectedness and right relationships among colleagues – these and other factors seem to be instrumental not only in making work a “great place to be”, but also a cost effective one. A recent study found that organisations that paid attention to these issues were not only happier places to work; they were also more effective and profitable as well. Perhaps the message will someday percolate throughout our health services.

There's an old joke about Tonto and the Lone Ranger. Surrounded by hostile tribes, moving in for the kill, the Lone Ranger turns to Tonto and says, “Well, looks like we've had it this time Tonto.” To which his faithful sidekick replies, “What's this ‘we’ business?” Many people at work sometimes feel their teams function like this. Relationships are not always as supportive as they might be. A dispirited workforce offers ultimately a dis-spirited service. The re-consecration of our mainstream health service through a restoration of a sense of the sacred, a spirited connection in health care, is long overdue.

For more information and supporting references please see:

Wright S G and Sayre- Adams J (2001)  
Sacred Space – right relationship and spirituality in health care  
Churchill Livingstone Edinburgh

Extensive coverage of the topic of spirituality and health can be found in the scholarly and research based journal "Sacred Space – the international journal of spirituality and health".

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### **Aims and Scope of the Journal Sacred Space ISSN 1467-9078**

Sacred Space seeks to publish papers, reports and other material of concern to all those involved in health care. From the place of sacred architecture in healing to ecopraxis and the health of the environment, from religion to 'new age' spirituality, from prayer and meditation to labyrinth walking and psychotherapy...diverse themes such as these, and more, will be included to look at many possible facets of spirituality; what it means to the healers and carers and those they wish to help.

Using a double blind referee system, we publish high quality material that is scholarly and authoritative, yet accessible and relevant. In offering a forum for debate, the presentation of research findings and other issues for thought and discussion, the journal seeks to explore the heart and soul of health care. So much of our current health care system has become dispirited and inhuman – often technically brilliant, yet lacking in both context and opportunity for healing relationships to emerge. The journal is committed to the view that spirituality is not peripheral, but central to, and pervades every of, health care.

The journal is non-denominational, and seeks to explore the nature and meaning of spirituality as it affects those who work in healing and caring ways. Knowledge and evidence as well as beliefs, experiences, values, hopes and dreams are explored which illuminate the meaning and purpose in caring and curing relationships. In so doing, the journal aims to provide an opportunity for a wide range of views that will bring the art and science of health care together, examine holistic approaches and illustrate the nature of the spiritual in healing work in all its many manifestations and possibilities. Thus, the journal seeks to challenge, inspire and nourish the seeker of the spirit of health care along their chosen path, providing windows of knowledge through which better health for all can be glimpsed and pursued.

All proceeds raised from the sale of Sacred Space support the Sacred Space Foundation, a non-denominational UK based charity which provided rest, retreat and recuperation facilities to carers who have become exhausted and burned out in their work. The publication of the journal and it's content, however, is entirely independent of the charity.