



Hello everyone,

I am pleased to join the Editorial Board of this Newsletter to welcome you to this edition of OMC Newsletter.

The year 2010 has begun and I take this opportunity to thank you for your continued support, whether it is through commitment of your time and resources or personal involvement to help deliver spiritual and religious care in this Province. It is helping to further the cause of OMC.

Our Executive Committee, the Board and the RMC and their members remain committed to preserve the good name and promote the progress of OMC. In the coming year, we are planning some new initiatives such as:

- Emergency preparedness planning in the faith communities
- Restorative Justice
- Developing multipath training for chaplains with Queen's University

As faith leaders, we must reaffirm our commitment in the spirit of the many festivals of different faiths we have celebrated recently.

On behalf of OMC, I wish you a very safe, healthy and happy new year.

Yours Sincerely,

Imam Dr. Abdul Hai Patel

Brockville Spiritual and Religious Care Awareness Week Event

by Adam Prasuhn
Regional Manager Southern Ontario

On Wednesday, October 21, the Ontario Multifaith Council joined with the Brockville General Hospital, Brockville Mental Health Centre and the Brockville and Area Ministerial Association to host two events marking Spiritual and Religious Care Awareness Week.

At a gathering of Staff, volunteers, and representatives Dr. Peter Barnes, Assistant Professor of Counseling and Spirituality at St. Paul University in Ottawa, spoke about "Culturally Appropriate Care.". Dr. Barnes addressed the benefits of cultural diversity in our society, "which gives us an opportunity to stretch and grow as a people"; the value of a person's cultural distinctiveness, which is "intrinsic to the individual's sense of self-worth"; the meaning of a person's social identity, "including such things as gender, race, social class, occupation, religion, language". All these have an impact on care-givers; and the importance of taking a "spiritual History" when a person comes in for care.

His formula for taking Spiritual History included five questions:

What is your Faith? How important is it to you? What is your Faith community? How does your religion and your spirituality apply to your health? How might we address your spiritual and religious needs?

The evening session "Caring for our Neighbor: The Challenge of Cultural and Religious Diversity." was held in the Centennial Hall of the center. It featured Dr. Barnes, Mr. Karim Khan, of the Canadian Conference for Inter-Cultural Dialogue, and a panel of representatives from different religions. We heard about culturally appropriate care for persons from various faith groups. All these presentations will undoubtedly help the Brockville community to be better able to respond to the demands of Canada's increasing cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

The Mythical Self: We make ourselves up as we speak

by Dr. Phil Barker



Dr Barker is a psychotherapist in private practice and Honorary Professor in the School of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing, University of Dundee. The following is excerpted from his keynote speech delivered at the 4th International Conference on Spirituality and Mental Health last Spring.

Much of what is called spirituality seems, to be a version of theology - institutionalized talk about something that we really cannot talk about: Something that we can only experience. It is nothingness that troubles us, as it should, for uncertainty is perhaps the most troubling state of mind.

Let me begin with the story of a ship named *DISCOVERY*. The ship after it set sail repeatedly returned to the harbour for repair until all its parts were replaced, except its name plate. Is this the same ship?

An entrepreneur buys all the discarded parts and builds another ship called *Discovery II*. Is the new ship original discovery, or a different ship with a similar name. In a metaphoric sense this is a my conception of a person and the self. Over the past 62 years the physical that has borne my name has changed out of all recognition but only continues to bear my name.

As a boy, a neighbor took a photograph of me on my tricycle in the street where I grew up. Later, when I was 12, my parents took me to a studio to have a formal photograph taken. That picture although more recognizable as me, has my teeth as the original part of the body, which are now in deterioration. The only other constant are my memories, feelings, ideas and stories about the 'me' in the picture, and their relationship to 'me' standing before you.

Self may be characterized akin to a ribbon, weaving its way out of the womb, experiences become attached; and flutter like prayer flags down all the winding ribbon of our lives. It is remarkable that my sense of

'me' should have endured, as life reshaped, remodeled and replaced every bit of what I call 'me'. Today, when I consider the 'me' that I *was*; the 'me' I have *become*; and the 'I' who appears, magically, to have anchored all those fleeting incarnations, along the fluttering ribbon of my life, I am filled with wonder. This is truly awesome. The people who took the pictures of me may have captured 'me', but they never got anywhere near snapping the 'I' who is the constant ribbon of the Self.

The relation between the 'I', who conjures with all this information, and the 'me' who stores this stuff, remains an enigma. In every sense, the 'I' always seems mightier, smarter and more enduring, than the fickle 'me'. Freud characterized what I call 'me' as the *Ego*, which is watched over by *Super Ego* the 'I'. For Freud the 'I' acted as conscience, attempting to control and sanction the 'me'. In his view, the *Super Ego* had a mission to cultivate perfection. I have often wondered if the 'I' who stands in relation to 'me' - is a riddle, which I must solve, before I am erased from the pages of my life.

Beckett's famous play, "*Waiting for Godot*" as Beckett confided to one of the actors, that it was "all symbiosis" that is what underpins the relational theme of this conference. Apart from being a landmark event in the theatre it appears also to offer a landmark in life. Facets of Beckett, his life, his character, his relationships, his own wanderings, and not least his fraught Irish cultural background, ooze from the pages of his novels and clatter about the stage in his plays. If any truth is revealed, it is that a play like *Godot* is meaningless. This appears to be the play's greater truth, or perhaps that life might, ultimately, be pointless. The characters who rely on one another, show little compassion to one another. Instead, they fuss, repeatedly, paying little human heed to their compatriots, who they take for granted when they are not actually abusing them. As they mindlessly, stumble from one day to the next they await someone, or something, which might transform their miserable lives.

For a long time many assumed that *Godot* was a very

thinly-disguised God or perhaps some other kind of 'redeemer', who would somehow save, the tramps and their barren lives? The parallels with the spiritual quest are striking: pilgrims resting by the side of the road; waiting for someone to take them to a higher plane of existence. My interpretation is that perhaps the play show how most people torment and torture themselves moment by moment, day by day, as they await some special sign or event. But perhaps that which they await is already here – unnoticed in the midst of all the restless, mindless waiting.

Almost 60 years ago Thomas Szasz famously asserted that mental illness was a myth. To this very day many mental health professionals, argue that Szasz was some kind of 'mental illness denier'. The facts tell a quite different story. Szasz acknowledged that people believed that the problem (if there was one) was *life* and a person's relation to it. In an interview with Jonathon Miller in the 1970s he said: *I hold all contemporary psychiatric approaches as basically flawed because they search for solutions along medical-technical lines. But solutions for what? For life! But life is not a problem to be solved. Life is something to be lived, as intelligently, as competently, as well as we can, day in and day out. Life is something we must endure. There is no solution for it*".

We have all that we need to live; there is no need for gurus or prophets far less a savior – whether in human or divine form. We are already perfect, albeit in all our imperfections. The only question that remains is: how shall we enact our dance with life and all her gifts and tribulations?

In discussing Mind we should be less interested in the machinery of mind and more in the output: what emerges from its complicated machinations. Crick and Watson who unraveled the mystery of DNA also reduces all things 'human' to the basest level – "... *your joys and your sorrows, your memories, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.*"

This brings us to the question - who or what am I and where can I be found? Expressing near-Buddhist

sentiments, Einstein described: "*A human being (as) a part of the whole, called by us, "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest -- a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.*"

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and those close to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison, widen our circle of compassion to embrace all Creation. Striving for such achievement is... a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security. Einstein was repeating the spiritual cliché that we find our 'true selves' by embracing the wider living universe around us.

Today, much of the so-called mental health field is focused on healing and happiness. "Happiness in adulthood, is cultivation of forgiveness, tolerance, patience, generosity and compassion" observed Byram Karasu. He adds, "If this sounds more like 'sainthood' than 'adulthood' it is because the first step towards spiritual growth is growing up".

Working with people whose lives appear to be in ruins, I realized that I could give such people nothing. For me, the best way to do this is to embrace my complete ignorance of who and what they are, and to become their pupil. I accidentally discovered, that what I needed to do was to help people appreciate the paradox of the Self: we are all alone, but none of us is *apart*.

'Naikan' is the Japanese art of self reflection. In Naikan we reflect on our relations with others addressing three straightforward questions: what have I received from some named person? What have I given to that person? And what troubles and difficulties have I caused her or him?

For some years I have incorporated Naikan into my spirituality workshops, to clarify our understandings of self and others. The idea that people overcome difficulties and obstacles single-handedly, the fact that this has been achieved, in any way, single-handedly is false at best, if not wholly ludicrous.

I stand before you, a successful man with stories of my triumphs and my victories in my life. To what extent any of these things might honestly be called

'mine'. This body in which I stand is inherited from my immediate family. Without my mother's original nurture the story of my life could not have begun. There are innumerable known and unknown individuals who contributed so I can be here today. The fascinating paradox of human life is that I am all alone in a crowded universe, which moment by moment supports and replenishes the 'me' of my story.

Evolutionary psychology and much of neuro-philosophy is Neo-Darwinian in outlook, and, regrettably, much of its theorizing is blinkered by technology, or seduced by scientism. Neither should we forget that the history of psychiatry is also full of examples of ludicrous, models of human being, which were used to control and contain people, when relating to their pain and distress proved too challenging.

I have come to the conclusion that what is called the spiritual quest remains the simplest thing we might do in our lives but, paradoxically, it is also the hardest. Much of what I have alluded to here today might be called 'local spirituality' I would call this an imminent spirituality, but some might think that I was trying to be mystical, when my intention is quite the opposite.

For me, being spiritual involves asking questions about who and what we are, and how this is related to everything around us? It requires no special materials and methods and is not dependent on wise gurus or gifted teachers. Some may choose to go into retreat, or study with different 'masters' but perhaps enlightenment is more likely to be found peeling the potatoes, sweeping leaves, than in meditating on the Buddha.

We can appreciate the unique *personhood* of our fellow women and men *only* by listening to the stories they tell to others. Most people I meet have no ready answers to any question concerning their unique human identity. Such ignorance seems extremely healthy. The conversation about the *Ultimate True Meaning* of human existence have long been the basis of all our meaning-making, concerning our sense of Self and the world we experience. In that sense, persons do not exist independently but are discovered *within* relationships.

Solitary activity – whether meditating atop a mountain or sweeping leaves – can bring us closer to grasping the sense or purpose of our lives; one that often is not easily put into words. Our next encounter with an individual or a group might, however, provide us with an opportunity to construct a new understanding of our-selves; as we try to teach another person something of what it *means* to be 'me'.

The British Isles, is literally awash with nautical metaphors. As a result my ship-building story makes comforting sense to me. I may not be able to give a straight answer to any of the questions I posed earlier, but I understand the riddle completely.

Let me conclude with Noah benShea's story of the teacher who, wanted to make even his death a lesson for one of his students. One night, the teacher took a torch, called his student and led him off into a forest. When they were deep in the forest the teacher put out the light. The student asked, "What is the matter?" The teacher replied "this torch has gone out", but carried on walking. Now the student grew afraid and called out "will you leave me here in the dark?", and the teacher replied, "No! I will not leave you in the dark. I will leave you searching for the light"

Each and every one of us will find ourselves, at some point, all alone, searching for the light; as the footsteps of all the teachers from the School of Life fade into the darkness. This is the gift, disguised as a challenge that lies at the heart of every life story.

THE GIFT OF PRESENCE

Rev. Cordell Parsons

Rev. Parsons, a Chaplain at London Health Sciences Centre was 2nd place winner of the 2009 OMC Essay Contest. The following is his winning entry.

For more than two years, I regularly walked with 'J'. As a Spiritual Multifaith Care Chaplain and patient, our relationship was held together in a mutual space of trust and respect, challenge and change. During that time I wanted

to ask him the same question I almost asked him many times previously when we walked together in the corridor, or sat together in the room, a question that was difficult to ask.

"What will you have?" I finally asked him, as we sat together outside the radiation department, waiting for his name to be called. It seemed that no time passed before he answered. Somehow his youthful intuitiveness knew the intent of my question.

"I want to decide for myself," he said. "I want my oncologist to give me the medical facts and then let me decide what's best for me. Can I do that?" At seventeen 'J' was learning to ask questions and what questions to ask.

"And I want to go to New York City. My high school drama class is going there for a week and I want to go with them. And I want to go without my mom. But I don't have the money. And I know my mom will be a challenge."

'J', for more than two years, has been challenged with a rare form of cancer. Aside from his ongoing ambiguity around surgery and treatment, more treatment and more surgery, his relationship with his mom — a single parent — and his strained relationship with his stepfather and biological father, only added to his challenge: To live fully and die with dignity or die without dignity. Now, however, as our conversation ended with the radiation technician calling his name, I was reminded of what Hippocrates said in the 5th century. "It is just as important to know the person who has the disease, as it is to know the disease the person has."

With ongoing information and education provided by the medical team, and with the gift of awareness of his many medical challenges 'J' made it his responsibility to know a lot about his

disease; and he was beginning to come to terms with his limited treatment options. He knew, too, as he shared with me many times, that his disease will finally win. Nevertheless, 'J' was now openly confronting his fears while finding a new sense of empowerment as a person.

"'S', I feel good about what I need to do, but I need you there with me when I talk with the medical team and my mom. I want them to listen to me. I need them to understand how I feel and what I want for myself. Can you be there for me?"

'J' was learning to except answers; to demand them when necessary. His questions marked the end of his role as a passive patient and son. He had begun to put himself front and center when it comes to his own medical care. 'J' was learning to be responsible both to and for himself.

'J's mom 'M', had questions of her own about her son's attitude shift. "What do you mean 'J' wants to go to New York city without me? No why! And what do you mean he wants to make his own treatment decision? What about me? I have always been there for 'J'. Don't I matter here?"

Everyone realized that there were challenging times ahead for 'J' and 'M'. Simply because 'J' wanted to make his own choices meant that 'M' wanted to make hers. As the weeks advanced, however, 'J' lovingly won over his mom and everyone on the health-care team – Nurses and Social Workers and Doctors. The team had accepted the satisfaction of knowing that whatever happened to 'J' would have to be the result of his own choices, not someone else's.

'J' learned much on his journey, and he taught the team much in the process. Eventually, when 'J' decided to be primarily responsible for his own well-being, to take his life in his own hands,

everyone on the team then adapted and asked him the same question: "What will you have?"

His response was definitive. "I want to go to New York City with my friends and I want to make my own treatment choices."

After an hour-long meeting with his oncologist and his primary nurse, and as I walked with 'J' and his mom down the long corridor for coffee, it was now understood that New York City was no longer a dream. "New York, New York, here I come", shouted 'J'. Ongoing discussion with Social Work, the oncologist, 'J's high school teacher, the Canadian wish foundation, and his mom, made New York City happen. Shortly after his needed spiritual pilgrimage with his cherished friends, shortly after returning home and getting his first dog, 'J' died.

I periodically look at the pictures 'J' sent me of New York City, and of his dog. Wonderful images of a young man who knew what he wanted in life and who responded with fortitude.

Author Sarah York reminds us that "sometimes it is a stranger, even more than someone close to us, who is able to recognize and affirm who we are – to acknowledge that yes, we are 'real'. " Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that the most precious gift we can give to anyone is our presence.

"What will you have?" " I am glad I had the fortitude to ask 'J' the question.

ESSAY CONTEST - 2010

The Ontario Multifaith Council on Spiritual and Religious care is inviting all college students registered in religious education in Ontario, to participate in the OMC Essay Contest – 2010.

TOPIC: Dr. Keith Meador in his article "Spiritual Care

at the End of Life: What is it and Who Does it?" makes the statement that a 'good death' includes: "...adequate pain management and the time to make peace with one's neighbour and with God while supported emotionally by family and friends."

Comment on this statement from your own experience in Spiritual and Religious care.

PRIZES: 1ST - \$1,000; 2ND - \$ 500; 3RD - \$ 250

Essays will be received in hard copy at the Ontario Multifaith Council (address below) or by e-mail to: dfrans@omc.ca between March 1, 2010 and April 30, 2010.

For Questions: Please contact Ron Hunt, Essay Committee Chair at ronald-hunt@sympatico.ca

OMC AT A GLANCE

The Ontario Multifaith Council:

- consults and advises the government of Ontario on faith group matters relating to the provision of spiritual and religious care in government run or funded institutions
- ensures the availability of persons (Board members/appointees and volunteers) with adequate understanding, ability, qualifications and appropriate status within their faith group
- collaborates with the Government in providing multifaith awareness training and education to persons who work or volunteer in government institutions and transfer payment agencies

Please email us with your suggestions and content submissions. If you would like to write something for the newsletter, please let us know.

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