Symbolic Communication:
The Language of the Soul

Karl A. Netting, M.Div.
Staff Chaplain
Bon Secours Health System
Richmond, Virginia
karlnetting@msn.com
804-747-5477
Workshop Objectives

Objective 1: To define “symbolic communication” as a means through which grieving and/or dying persons express deep fear and profound hope.

Objective 2: To illustrate through story and case example the healing impact of shared symbolic communication and strategies used to interpret symbolic communication.

Human beings consciously and/or unconsciously employ symbols:
- to give what is abstract more concreteness,
- to express profound hopes and deepest fears,
- to find meaning in that which appears meaningless,
- to make sense out of what renders lives senseless,
- to gain a measure of control in uncontrollable circumstances,
- to find relief from pain/suffering, and
- to invite safe selected others next to the core of individual being.

Human beings facing grief, loss, and death communicate verbally by the use of personal story, metaphor, analogy, imagery, and dream sharing. They also communicate nonverbally by the choice of persons and familiar objects with which they surround themselves. If caregivers are attuned to “the language of the soul” they will be offered the opportunity to share in the spiritual/existential journeys of persons in search of personal validation and sacred and secular meaning.

In this session, the concept of symbolic language and its attendant meanings will be defined. Stories and case examples from over three decades of experience in the field of hospital and hospice chaplaincy will be used to illustrate the importance of listening to the voices of patients as they seek to make meaning in the face of crisis, grief, dying and death. Strategies for engaging patients and caregivers in meaningful dialogue will be examined, as well as approaches to working with members of other disciplines in interpreting the symbolism in the language used and in recognizing the implications of the symbolism for quality of care and quality of life.

In addition, strategies for using these increased understandings for continuing personal and professional growth will be examined. For example, the presenter will share poems and vignettes that have emerged from the symbolic language used by patients and how this process has benefitted his ability to cope as a practitioner who provides end-of-life and crisis care.
BASIC PREMISES/ASSUMPTIONS
ABOUT THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL

Symbolic Communication may be defined as “conscious or unconscious meaning indirectly conveyed.”

I. About Death, Dying & Grief:

- Death, dying, and grief are abstract concepts
- The experience of grief, death, and dying are unique to the individual
- That which is abstract or unknown may be simultaneously intimidating and fear-laden and/or ecstatic and exhilarating
- People who are facing issues of mortality alternate between distancing and engaging behaviors

II. About Symbols:

- Human beings often utilize symbols to:
  1. Make abstractions more complete
  2. Express the transcendent
  3. Express that which is “beyond words”
  4. Consciously or unconsciously express that which is hoped for and/or feared
  5. Make sense of that which seems senseless
  6. Find meaning in that which seems meaningless
  7. Reduce that which is awesome or intimidating to more manageable levels
  8. Gain a message of control over that which seems beyond control
  9. Give expression to that which is repressed
  10. The presence of life-threatening circumstances may intensify the manifestation of symbolic communication among patients, families, and caregivers

III. About Communication:

- Symbolic Communication may:
  1. Reveal what is required for healing and wholeness, enhanced quality of life or peaceful dying
  2. Be a way of determining whether it is safe to share at a deeper level
  3. Be a protective mechanism which enables us to deal with in-breaking truth or reality by degree.
PIVOTAL QUESTIONS

★ What major life events or processes (physical, psycho-social, emotional, spiritual) have shaped this individual?

★ What is meaningful to this person?

★ What are his/her fears?

★ What are his/her hopes?

★ Is there any unfinished business?

★ What does healing mean to this person?

★ What “spiritual resources” does he or she have?

Now ask these questions of yourself.
PATHWAYS TO THE SOUL

- Conveying safe presence
- Encouraging freedom of expression
- Recognizing uniqueness
- Inquiring without interrogation
- Mirroring
- Integrating
- Normalizing
- Focusing
- Discerning
- Teaching
- Providing spiritual guidance
- Mediating and receiving grace
FORMS OF SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION

A. Rituals
B. Body Language
C. Display of Mourning Emblems
D. Personal Surroundings
E. Humor
F. Sarcasm
G. Emotion or Its Absence
H. Dreams
I. Comatose Messages
J. Para-normal Phenomena
K. Impotence Messages
L. Symbols related to Illness
M. Religious Symbols
N. Symbols related to Unfinished Business
O. Life Review
P. Metaphors & Imagery
Q. Arts
Hospice Care: Rediscovering the Art of Healing

Hospice is a place for artists, both classical and modern. It is a place on the vanguard of something new that, in reality, is very old.

Prior to the advent of wonder drugs and technologies, medical practice was far more dependent upon what I refer to as “the gifts of the spirit.” These are, among others, the gifts of active presence (being with), attenuation (listening for what words express and hearing silent yearnings mere words cannot express); and loving touch (the laying on of hands).

In the early days the art of care was essential because the possibility of cure was unlikely. Hospice exists for patients for whom the possibility of cure is also unlikely.

Real art is not always what it appears to be. Its’ beauty and power are in the subtleties, in the barely detectable brush strokes of the painter; the writer’s careful ordering of words or turn of a phrase; the composer’s unexpected pause and crescendo. The art of hospice work is also in the nuances which often spell the difference between hope and abject despair.

The spirit of hospice lives in atom-sized acts of “being” with fellow sufferers in search of life’s most troubling mysteries. In hospice the art of healing is

- the warming of the stethoscope, the smoothing voice, the gentleness of touch as vital signs are taken,
- a house call at three a.m. to comfort a family who has just lost the center of their world,
- a bath given with such sensitivity that even nakedness in the presence of a stranger preserves fragile dignity even as the body is cleansed,
- prayers formed and offered in individualized response to ultimate concern and the utmost longings of the soul,
- the way the telephone is answered and information taken and relayed in a way that says “you matter to us.”
- safe places for groups of mourners to “be” while struggling to fit life’s shattered pieces together again,
- flesh on flesh, hand in the hand of one who feels afraid and lonely, and untouchable.
Hospice is about knowing. We must know what we are doing and provide the best trained and educated persons we can find. What we know is the awesome mind of medicine – but it is how we administer what we know that is its’ heart.

Hospice exists to bless the new wonders of modern medicine even as we rediscovered the age-old art of caring. The melody we hum is an ancient love song, and it is a song of healing even for those who will not get well.

**Healing in Dialects**

I am native Virginian. I grew up in the Northern part of the state. I went to college in the Southwest region and now live in the Center.

Though Virginians speak a common English tongue, I am aware that from the Southwestern Highlands to the urban North; the Eastern Shore to the Central farmlands – native sons and daughters speak an interesting variety of dialects punctuated by a fascinating array of accents from other states and countries.

The Hospice community is another place where a common language is spoken in dialects. Our universal tongue is the language of palliated pain, healing, and wholeness. Our dialects are the result of professional training and life experiences: acquired accents, which inform our efforts to alleviate suffering.

Life experience is the reason many of us are here. We chose Hospice work (or perhaps, Hospice work chose us) because of some role models, a compassion born of personal suffering, a sense of duty or gratitude, a conversation, or a resolution which inspired us to speak a healing word. Professional training provides a focus and a jargon; a set of lenses and an arsenal of terms, specific to our training, which enable us to better understand the complex web of human maladies, hopes, and fears.

Our works’ worse danger is also our grandest opportunity. It is naive at best, arrogant at worst, to believe that one dialect can say it all; one discipline do it all; one individual carry it all. Our temptation is to value control more than cooperation; to assume that one dialect is superior to all the rest; to place the quest for power above the passion to empower. To yield is to sabotage our mission and, to demean the majesty and complexity of our goal. In effect, to drown out the voices of those who cry for aid.

In reality, our dialects are simply tools needed to decipher what patients and significant others are trying to communicate to us in their own words, out of the depths of who they are. In this venture, we need every interpreter we can muster.

**The strength of Hospice** is the interdisciplinary team and the unprecedented opportunity to employ the “dialects” in the service of the dying and the bereaved. In my tenure, it has been my privilege to experience the pure joy of “team.” Therein the dialects of body, psyche, soul and experience – voices clearly recognizable – different, yet not discordant, find union.

**The challenge of Hospice** is to embrace the dialects as we embrace one another. To see our foreign tongues, not as the source of division or contention, but as a vast repository for the alleviation of suffering.

**The miracle of Hospice** occurs when there is harmony amid diversity and where our common language takes precedence over the need to dominate. Our bond with those we serve is the language of shared humanity.

**The blessing of Hospice** is in the dialects. They enable us to hear what we must hear; to see what we must
see; to understand ourselves and others to the end that death is dignified and life is given the potential to realize its noblest expression.
Pain and resultant suffering are part of the language of hospice. The alleviation of physical pain more often takes precedence in addressing the initial needs of patients, but it is part of a larger continuum that includes emotional and spiritual pain as well.

Viewing pain and suffering within the context of hospice is not unlike looking at what artists refer to as a figure-ground configuration, wherein, there is a picture within a picture. At first glance there is the obvious, more overt image; but upon closer observation, another portrait, one more subtle, but no less pronounced, emerges. Seeing the entire picture requires a kind of vision that is able to see beyond the more pronounced image.

Moderns may find it difficult to believe that the philosophies of healing and hospice may not only co-exist, but be synonymous. For this to be so one must be open enough to allow the possibility that one can be healed, even if one cannot be well or cured, or even if one dies.

Hospice requires the work of an interdisciplinary team trained to deal with the emergence of physical, emotional, and spiritual pain and suffering. As illness progresses the way pain and suffering are experienced by both patient and their significant others is unique to the individual. It is also in flux. As the physical pain of the patient is controlled and as loved ones see the patient more at ease, both patients and their significant others often begin to be more in touch with the “unfinished business” of spiritual and emotional leave-taking. It is the “figure-ground” effect. As one aspect of human concern is eased, the way is cleared for other languages to be spoken, other needs expressed. As one picture recedes the others are more easily seen and understood.

It is the hope of the Hospice team that as the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of patients and significant others are addressed that another kind of figure-ground picture will begin to emerge. It is our prayer that as the more fearful and intimidating aspects of the journey through dying to death are addressed that another, far more beautiful, portrait of the experience will begin to emerge.
I know that she is not in denial. She knows that she is dying and that time is short. “I have always shopped at Costco,” she says. “The next time I need Sweet and Low I won’t need to go there. When you buy there you have to buy in bulk and I know that if I do that I won’t outlive my supply”.

She is a pragmatist; No self pity, no- why me?, no denial here. Just “waste not, want not”, “Our days are numbered.” “It’s in God’s hands.” Just “Swing low sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home”- maybe even before the Sweet and Low runs out.

Costco, “swing low”, sweet and low- what is this? Is this poetry or melody? Or is it just part of the meter, part of the beat, part of the rhythm of livin’ and dyin’ and believin’?

“Swing low”, Sweet and Low. So bitter sweet.
MOURNING BEE

Dedicated to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit
St. Mary’s Hospital
Richmond, Virginia

On this night, in any other setting, you might have thought it was an old fashioned “quilting bee”. In any other setting. There they were; intent, focused, gathered around a common frame of reference. There they were; chittering, in hushed tones, like a family of sparrows around a common nesting site. There they were holding up pieces of fabric; mixing, matching, seeking out the perfect blend of color and size and symmetry. Consensus building, as if the world hung in the balance over the final issue, as if, nothing but absolute perfection would do, as if, nothing else would suffice on this night.

On this night, in any other setting, you might have thought it was a clatch of church or pioneer women, an old fashioned “quilting bee”.

But on this night, in this setting, unlike any other, what unfolded was a “mourning bee”.

There they were at midnight, hovering angels in blue and white smocks, preparing the body of a fallen child who did not live to leave the nest. There they were; anointing the fledgling with cleansing waters and aromatic balm. There they were; pushing back the night with whispered and reverent and prayer-like banter. There they were; holding up tiny out fits, mixing, matching, seeking out the perfect blend of color and size and symmetry to wrap, to fold her in: Consensus building, as if the whole world hung in the balance over the final issue, as if nothing but perfection would do, as if nothing else would suffice on this night.

There they were; on this night, in this sacred setting; focused, pushing back against death’s sting and, with this Mourning bee, constructing a patchwork comforter fashioned of professional artistry and tears delayed and unrestrained compassion. There they were; on this night, in this setting; providing shattered parents and grandparents, whose little one will not leave the nest, a blanket of warmth and grace and loving kindness, on this night.
Angel Presence
(To Ellen)

She waits with me as the fog descends; lovingly in search of some formula, some prescription to ward off my plunge into the darkening mist.

I know she is lonely – as one living among the dead – yet she faithfully moves in and out of the veil offering space and intimacy in what must seem to her a solitary ballet.

She is a creature of light and color. If she could she would paint the fog bright yellow and cut a skylight in its ominous dome. But radiance, even hers, will not penetrate the dense cloud over the wounded soul too long devoid of spectral splendor.

Why she stays, why she waits is a mystery – but without her angel presence – I am lost.
THE COMFORTER

Comfort, Comfort ye my people says your God.  Isaiah 40:1
I will not leave you comfortless.  John 14:18

Religious observances across faith traditions give us comfort for our spiritual journeys even as they remind us of divine and humane callings to provide for the comfort of others.

Webster’s dictionary defines a comforter as:
   A person or thing that comforts;
   The Holy Spirit;
   A quilted bed cover.

“Comforter” is an old fashioned word which, by its very definition, has a personal, a spiritual, and a practical dimension. All have to do with the provision of warmth or care.

During a recent luncheon to honor our volunteers, the work of hospice was compared to a patchwork quilt or comforter that had been carefully stitched together with skill and vision, hard work, and loving hands. It is a fitting analogy.

On a chilly night it is the mere presence of the comforter which makes all the difference. When patients and/or significant others shiver in the face of death or grief, or caregiver stress, it is the sheer power of a warming persona, often without words, that fends off the penetrating frost.

I have a very old quilt that my father’s mother made out of old silk neckties. When I look at it I know that every patch has a history. In a patchwork comforter some patches more readily catch the eye; some come to the foreground; some may appear more vital or more important to the integrity of the fabric than others. In reality, the absence of any patch – no matter how brilliant or retiring – allows the cold to rush in.

To those who walk through the dank, awesome dark night of the soul human comfort is the buffer, the cushion of warmth against the elements of fear, loneliness, despair, and grief. The mission of hospice care is to blanket the community with a patchwork comforter with no holes.

When I think of the hospice comforter I like to imagine that every piece of work is a patch and every patch represents a story of physical and emotional, and spiritual need being validated, addressed, enfolded, covered, and tucked in.

The presence of the comforter will not forever drive away the cold or defeat the darkness or keep at bay the frightening shadows we all will face. But says the comforter:
   I will be with you,
   I will lend you warmth,
   I will not leave you comfortless.