The Power of Stick Figures

WEST HAVEN (12/2/2015) — He asked just a few questions: What’s on your mind? What’s a sentence that describes that? How would you direct a figure to express what you’re feeling? And then the Rev. Kurt Shaffert’s pen began to flow across the paper, turning those descriptions into a cartoon. Somehow, beneath his fingers, a simple stick figure became articulate: dots for eyes turned pensive, and a leaping figure radiated joy.

Process cartooning, said Shaffert, Chaplain at the Veterans Administration Hospital in West Haven and a UCC minister, offers multiple means of expressing oneself: verbal, visual, emotional, physical, and audible. The process he uses, developed in concert with drama therapist Mary Lou Lauricella, steps the participant through a series of reflections (and a series of cartoon panels) to help them reflect on a topic of concern. In this exercise, he produced three panels and an item for followup. In other settings, with other issues, the sequence may run longer.

It’s all about the process, he emphasized, and not about the product, which belongs entirely to the person working with him. He has used it with a wide range of ages and to help people consider a wide range of experiences. Though he may sometimes yearn to share those cartoons, those stories are not his to tell — he simply provides a new medium for the participants to bring their authentic self “to the work of holding, containing, and bearing witness,” a concept found in the work of D. W. Winnicott.

For Rev. Shaffert, cartooning is a critical element of his authentic self. He learned to read from Charles Schulz’s Peanuts, and had youthful ambitions of becoming a professional cartoonist. In college, however, he majored in philosophy and English, not art, because, he said, of “my utter fear of being graded poorly on something so subjective.”

The pen in his hand, however, kept drawing, and when he had to come to terms with a series of personal stresses, it offered him a way to share his mixed emotions in a tender way. Like upbeat music that tells a story of horrible sadness, he said, cartooning let him tell a heartbreaking story in a way that “doesn’t slay, because it is set in beauty.”

Last summer, with scholarship support from the New Haven Association, he took part in workshops at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River, Vermont, where the instructors told him “We’ve got what you can learn, and you’ve got what we can’t teach.” He reveled in the work and the companionship of smart, spiritual, and humane people. “It’s a call,” he affirmed, “a different calling.”

At Silver Lake Conference Center, he put his skills at the disposal of conferees in God’s Imaginarium, a conference for 5th and 6th graders. The young people co-wrote a narrative about a Church World Service mission project, with each of the twenty conferees responsible for a page in the comic book, and making a way to move the story from the previous page to the next. It was a way to make the CWS mission their own, and it also became their conference’s “yearbook,” allowing each one to go home and proudly tell friends and family, “That page was mine!”
He has continued drawing his own work as well, using both the “standard” three-panel format in a daily strip he shares with friends and doing the artwork for special event posters at his workplace. Sermons, experiences, and conversations have sparked a series he calls “Images for Pastoral Care,” short booklets exploring a theme or issue in ministry. He even submitted a cartoon pamphlet as part of his documentation for certification as a Clinical Pastoral Education full supervisor.

Rev. Shaffert has begun offering his own workshops on cartooning ministry, both in its process-oriented and product-oriented manifestations, celebrating images for pastoral care. For more information, write to him at kurtshaffert@yahoo.com.

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