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Relationships: Social ties and spiritual well-being

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Jesus’ invitation to friendship is waiting for us

By Laurie Brink

The oft-told story goes something like this. A little child awakes in the night as a furious thunderstorm roars outside. “Daddy, I’m scared!” the child cries out. The father, not wanting to get out of bed, calls back, “Don’t worry. God loves you and will take care of you.” After a momentary pause, the child answers, “I know God loves me, but right now, I need somebody with skin on.”

I think most of us would agree. There are moments in our lives when we just need a God with skin on.

The Gospel of John gets this. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). That God’s creative activity became incarnate remains one of the more amazing tenets of Christian faith. As Karl Rahner, one of the great Catholic theologians of the twentieth century wrote of the Incarnation, “God is the prodigal that squanders himself.” The Gospel will go on to describe the signs by which Jesus’ true identity will be made known. But for the Word to be effective in its mission of salvation, it must first be enfleshed. Embodied. Jesus is our God with skin on.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his followers that everything that belongs to God also belongs to Jesus (John 16:15), and if his disciples believe in him, they, too, may be one with the Father and the Son (John 17:21). As Jesus nears his death, he gathers for one last meal. Around this table, Jesus invites his disciples into a new relationship.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another (John 15:12-17).

Jesus is radically reorienting the relationship with his disciples. No longer is it between master and servant. Now it is between friend and friend. His disciples have become children of God. But this invitation to friendship is not only for the disciples; it extends to all who believe (John 20:29-31).

We might ask an important question here: “Why would God or Jesus want to be our friend in the first place?” According to Thomas Aquinas, the answer is actually quite simple. God desires our happiness, and the fullness of that happiness is expressed in friendship with God. It is initiated by grace, and it attests to the divine friendship between Father and Son which is expressed in the Spirit.

But as Aquinas recognized, we are at a bit of a disadvantage given our limited human nature. “Charity … is our friendship for God … which is not a matter of natural goods but of gifts of grace.” The gift of grace transcends the gulf between the limitation of human beings and the
incomprehensibility of the Divine. Grace helps to level the playing field of becoming friends with God.

Jesus tells his disciples that he and the Father are one, so “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Friendship with Jesus leads us to friendship with God, since shared friendship is in God’s very nature. As Paul J. Wadell writes of Aquinas in *Friendship and the Moral Life*,

Thomas believes the unimaginable; in fact, he insists on it. Thomas believes we can, are called to be, and must be friends of God. That is what our life is, a life of ever-deepening friendship with a God who is our happiness, a colloquy of love given and love received, a sharing in which each friend delights in the goodness of the other, seeks their good, desires their happiness, and finally becomes one with them.

But friendship is not without costs. When Jesus commands the disciples to love one another, he doesn’t use the standard Greek word for friendship love (*philia*). He uses *agapē*. The type of love that Jesus demands requires the willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice. But this sacrifice is not without reward. A few chapters earlier, Jesus had commented, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Like the grain of wheat, the love of which Jesus speaks bears much fruit. “I chose you … to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

We know quite a bit about sacrifice. Three-quarters of a million Americans have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. The majority spent their last moments without family or friends. But you were there. The frail elderly in nursing homes and the dying in hospice. You are there. Those imprisoned. Those without homes. Without hope. You are there.

That’s it, isn’t it? That’s what chaplains do. As friends of Jesus, as friends of God, you befriend those who are sick, suffering, imprisoned, abused, disregarded, and dying. You help them understand that Jesus’ invitation extends to them as well. Quite literally, you are the friend of God with skin on!

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Deathbed reunions allow lives to close with meaning

By Jennifer Paquette

Leo had been a patient in this hospital many times. Never spoken but inferred, Leo and his clinical team knew this visit would be his last. He had never deliberately abused his body, but it had been neglected through years of scraping his meals from Styrofoam containers in garbage cans and sleeping in places unsuitable for sheltering the human body. When asked what he needed most now, he replied, “To see my son.” Their separate lives had never made room for them to reach out through the years. But now, the heart was speaking its need.

The unknown was whether the son would agree to see his father after years of bitterness between them. Moreover, the procedural hurdles of a prison release for a few hours to visit a dying father would be immense. But once the son admitted to an eagerness to see his father, dozens of phone calls ensued – hospital leadership and security, the sheriff, the lawyers, prison personnel, transportation strategies, patient safety and more.

The only Leo I had known bore a face of resignation, the outward manifestation of his impoverished life. Late in the morning, Leo was told that his son would be at the hospital by early afternoon. It was the only time I experienced the barest smile on Leo’s face, exposing gaps of missing teeth. Beneath the covers, his limbs and body stretched as though awakening to life and welcoming what was to come.

Neither father nor son could have predicted the content of their meeting, but each was willing to hope and trust and invite in the future. Lives transformed. But sadly, before the van left the prison, Leo died. That happens sometimes, that all a dying patient needs to know is that they were loved enough for the special person to want to come. But grace was there in the acknowledgement of their love for one another, and animus had been erased in the simple gesture of “I want to be with you.” Spirits speak, God is in the meeting, and grace is given without our bidding or imagining.

For certain, every chaplain knows that there is no end to the surprises that God brings into every encounter. Consider Chester, for example. Chester was old and did not mind telling people his age. “That,” he said, “is how I got 10 children, 56 grandchildren, and a scattering of great-grandchildren, and a few great-great-grandchildren.” And then, he would smile broadly. “And I taught every one of those youngsters how to fish. Even the girls.” Chester loved “those youngsters.” Chester loved to fish. A bonus for Chester was telling his version of the biblical stories of Jesus fishing with his friends. He believed it was important for all children to learn about Jesus. “You can’t have a better friend,” he told them.

However, and to his dismay, the offspring did not remain friends with one another – and, he suspected, not with Jesus. Chester’s journey to be with Jesus would soon be over as he approached the end of his life. I was told that his wife had died years before, and he was eager to be with her. “He has some children, and they have been contacted, but we haven’t seen any of them since he came in,” his nurse told me.
I had seen Chester several times, but never with visitors. He drifted in and out of sleep during our time together. In the awake moments, he told stories of his wife and their offspring, expressing deep love. He was candid about the sadness he felt that his children were not closer. In my previous visit with him, he had mostly slept. I was grateful he would be my last visit of the day, so that I could sit with him as long as he needed.

As I entered the ICU, I could see that Chester’s room was filled with people. My first thought was that his condition had worsened, necessitating more clinical staff. But as I got closer, it was obvious these people were not staff. I walked into a room of at least 40 of Chester’s offspring. They were laughing and sharing fishing stories, revealing the loving character of this man, “Grandpa Chessie,” as they knew him.

Chester appeared to be sleeping, but then I saw it. His right hand was making a motion from the wrist, as though he were casting a fishing line.

No one else seemed to notice. But important familial engagement was happening in the room, and I did not dare interrupt to point out Grandpa Chessie’s participation. More family arrived, and eager hugs followed, with statements like, “It has been too long. I have missed you.” This family was revealing the same love they had known from this man and never stopped feeling for one another. And Chester received years of kisses and love.

Love does not die; it must be given away or we will die.

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Healthy relationships require unity but not uniformity

By Fr. Joseph F. Mali

During the peak of COVID-19, I deeply felt the loneliness of patients and their families. Isolated from their loved ones due to the visitor restrictions, they suffered spiritual distress as well as disease. One very sick patient made no reference to his medical condition. Visibly unhappy, he looked into my eyes and remarked, “If only my wife had been here, I would have felt much better.”

The stress of life can cause us physical, mental, and emotional anguish. In our distress, we can find comfort in company. Staying connected with family and friends is essential, not only for our spiritual well-being, but also for our happiness. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, millions of people travel far and near for family reunions. The get-together brings joy to our souls.

Healthy human relationships require unity, but not uniformity. By uniformity I mean expecting people to be exactly alike in what they think, how they act, and in their values and beliefs. This kind of friendship is unrealistic. It leaves little or no room for individual differences.

In contrast, unity is living in harmony despite our differences. It is the pathway to a peaceful coexistence between friends, colleagues, families, couples, and people of different political affiliations. At a recent wedding reception, I observed the bride’s and groom’s meals. One had wine, pasta, and cheesecake. The other had juice, chicken salad, and lemon meringue. United in matrimony, they were unalike in dietary habits.

Building rapport calls for both closeness and distance. These are two sides of the same coin in a friendly environment. Without one, the other is not likely to flourish. While intimacy brings us together, distance safeguards those things that make you distinctively you.

For instance, a hospital patient may find meaning in religion. The person’s doctor, though compassionate, may be nonreligious. Nonetheless, the physician honors the patient’s faith and offers the option of spiritual care. The doctor does not subscribe to the patient’s creed, which is the distance, but as a healthcare provider, the physician is in a healthy relationship with the patient, which is the closeness.

If the goal is homogeneity, the bond will either dissolve, or one of the parties will lose his/her individuality, and become like a caged bird without freedom. Moreover, history shows that the quest for sameness, especially in religion, often leads to violence and inhumanity.

Yet, there is another extreme we must avoid: detachment without connectivity. Don’t cling resolutely to your personality or interest to the detriment of the bonds you have forged in this life. We need to manage diversity and the variety of perspectives which arise from different race, religion, culture, gender, sexual orientation, etc., by putting aside our differences and finding common ground.
As chaplains, this is something we live every day. We may be Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, or followers of any other religion. But we offer spiritual and emotional support to diverse populations, whether they are people of faith or no particular tradition.

In my life and work, I identify as Catholic. Yet I care for patients with different backgrounds. In my interaction with them, I make no attempt to proselytize them — respecting differences. Unity of faith is not my goal. My purpose is to offer support that promotes their well-being. To this end, I meet them where they are, but without surrendering my conviction.

Sometimes I humbly admit my ignorance of their practices to make a good connection. In those moments, I ask them to tell me how I can help. Some are just content with the visit. Others request religious articles from their traditions, and I gladly bring them. Despite our difference, they receive me and welcome my intervention. This way, I build relationships with them without losing my identity.

Bridging our differences does not mean sameness. It is understanding, accepting, and living with diversity. Don’t expect others to be exactly like you. Neither should they hope for you to be their carbon copy. If you agree, it is well. If you disagree, it is also fine.

While maintaining your ties as couples, peers, colleagues, or citizens, give others space to have a healthful life apart from you. Open the cage for the bird to fly away. If it is yours, it will return to you. No need to cage it!

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Spiritual direction points toward deeper relationships with God and others

By Amelia Stratton-Smith

The world is in great need of healing. Nearly two years into the global pandemic, our spirits and social well-being need attention as well as our physical health. We have more technological communication than ever before, yet many feel isolated from traditional social structures. New patterns of distraction and multitasking disrupt meaningful interpersonal exchange, while soundbites replace depth and a sense of mutuality. The practice of spiritual direction may be uniquely suited to address our present moment.

With roots in Christian monastic traditions, spiritual direction has become more accessible in recent decades, with training programs honoring diverse faith traditions. It is a ministry of hospitality that invites the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeking to find deeper meaning within the beautiful and messy realities of our particular experience. This focus distinguishes it from clinical psychological therapies, which generally focus on problems with the aim to fix or improve functioning through counseling.

The God who is revealed through the Abrahamic traditions seeks to know and be known by human beings and is fundamentally relational by nature. Only by growing in knowledge of ourselves and our inner workings, and our relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and strangers, can we come to any understanding of the Mystery we call God. New insights and understanding emerge in the space between us, and the intentional framework of a spiritual direction relationship supports such exploration.

Some practitioners prefer terms such as “spiritual companioning” or “spiritual friendship,” to avoid the misperception that any authoritative steering takes place. Instead, the relationship seeks to provide a safe, respectful, and confidential space for individuals to explore divine presence at work in their lives. During periods of crisis, psychological counseling can be an effective complement to spiritual direction, while each discipline performs a different role.

The person seeking guidance on their spiritual journey is traditionally called a directee. However, the spiritual director does not impose theological beliefs or agendas, trusting God’s presence to reveal itself through a person’s own interests, perceptions, and wisdom. An incarnate God meets us in the particulars of our own embodied experience, and any aspect of life may provide content for reflection. Spiritual directors will listen for themes that emerge from four main categories of experience: interior thoughts and feelings, interpersonal relationships, a person’s social structures and organizations, and a person’s relationship with the natural environment.

Contemplative listening practices set spiritual direction apart from other relationship patterns and caregiving models. Starting with the intention to listen for God’s presence, pauses of silence make space for new insights or understandings to emerge. The spiritual director will use minimal prompts, briefly repeat the directee’s own
words for emphasis, or paraphrase what they’ve heard to draw out the directee’s own inner wisdom. If direct questions are posed at all, they will be open-ended and non-leading. Over time, the quality of gathered awareness that spiritual direction cultivates will show up in all our relationships.

The Guidelines for Ethical Conduct established by Spiritual Directors International set appropriate boundaries to preserve the dignity of all participants. The director is accountable for “establishing and maintaining appropriate physical and psychological distance” and “recognizing the imbalance of power in the spiritual direction relationship and taking care not to exploit it.” Personal preference and circumstances will determine whether participants in a spiritual direction relationship interact with each other in other areas of life, which requires careful attention.

Chaplains are uniquely privileged – and burdened – to encounter patients and their families at some of the most difficult and potentially lonely times in their lives. It is a privilege to stand on sacred ground with people facing ultimate reality, to share the vicissitudes of mortal life and the search for meaning. The most significant quality we bring to these encounters is our capacity for full attention and grounded presence. A spiritual director helps deepen our relationships with the source of vitality and meaning.

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Resources:


For more information about spiritual direction see the website for Spiritual Directors International: www.sdicompanions.org


If you are interested in finding a spiritual director or training programs to become one: www.sdicompanions.org/find-a-spiritual-director-companion
Patient learns that friendship means accepting as well as giving

By Jennifer Paquette

Douglas was on a cardiac unit awaiting a transplant. His home was 90 miles from the hospital. In the hope of finding a suitable heart, his care team had been reluctant to release him to his home. But people were depending on Doug, his preferred name. He had moved his aging parents to a house near his. His brother had lingering brain damage. Both the parents and Doug’s brother depended on him financially.

I met Doug three weeks into his hospital stay, shortly after the insertion of an LVAD (left ventricular assist device). He was a college professor and only recently had been “exploring God,” he told me. He had joined a small church near where he lived and became active in it. Everything about Doug was intriguing and engaging, especially his openness and eagerness to learn about God. At the conclusion of our first meeting, I asked to bless him. He had never known what it was like, or even meant, to be blessed. From then on, whenever I visited him, he would not allow me to leave without a blessing.

The day came when he would leave the hospital. Having an LVAD meant having a team of friends who, each in turn, could always be with him. Having friends was no problem. I had seen many when I visited him. In the midst of our final meeting, his nurse dashed into the room. “When is your team going to get here? You cannot leave until they are all trained on your LVAD,” she commanded.

Doug stalled, even stammered a bit. “They’re all at work. Do they really have to be here before I go?” On her way out of the room, the nurse called back, “No exceptions!” I was incredulous. Did he genuinely think he could leave without their support?

“Why are you reluctant to call them?” I knew he had been schooled for days on the necessity of the support team, their roles and functions. He tried the “busy at work” line. But I knew all of them to be close friends who had volunteered for the role. Other than his fierce independence, I could not imagine a reason.

“Doug, if the situation were reversed – if any one of them needed your assistance, would you not take a few hours off from the university to be where they needed you to be?”

“Of course.”

Unwilling to concede for some moments, he did not look at me. Finally, he said, “Are you going to sit here until I call them?”

The respect we held for each other allowed me to chuckle. He then looked at me with a broad smile.

“I trust you,” I said. “I’ll leave.” And so I did … after the requisite blessing.
Helping heart patients, especially those on an LVAD, means a significant responsibility for the patient’s life. And Doug’s friends had said they wanted to do this for him – not just a “well, OK, I’ll do it.” When Doug was able to reverse the situation in his mind and realize that this was not all about him, he came to understand the pledge his friends had made to care for him, to appreciate and receive their love, and, indeed, their need to fulfill those roles. As Doug was for his parents and brother, we were born to be caretakers for one another.

Some weeks later, I was attending an early meeting at the hospital. A fellow chaplain met me at the doorway of the conference room as the meeting ended. “Doug is back in the hospital.” Her face held the message I never wanted to hear. “Is he still alive?” I asked.

The tears filling her eyes answered my question. Doug had died on the ambulance ride to the hospital.

When I arrived at the bedside, his friends had left. I sat there, holding his hand and praying. He had come to be my friend and I could not leave him alone, especially knowing that one more procedure remained; the surgical team would need to remove the LVAD for study. Prior to their arrival, various hospital staff who had cared for him and had come to know his pure goodness visited at the bedside with me. Doug had touched so many lives. He cared about others. His genuineness was real.

The surgical team arrived and took him away – but not before I gave him one final blessing.

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