Journeys to Chaplaincy: Our past and our present

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From music to academia to chaplaincy, nothing is wasted

Because we are made for eternal life, we are made for an act that gathers up all the powers and capacities of our being and offers them simultaneously and forever to God. — Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

By Anne Windholz

At the age of 20 I had definite ideas about vocation. I was enrolled at Benedictine College in Kansas, where I was double-majoring in piano and English. Certain that I wanted to be a writer, I nonetheless dreaded a life without music. I was also five years into a head-over-heels love affair with God and feeling a mighty attraction to the Benedictine life. Music seemed part of that call, but ultimately I decided to finish my English degree back home in Colorado. My piano professor assured me that I would regret it the rest of my life. (I haven’t.) My English professor tried to keep me from transferring. Swayed by neither (because saving money for grad school necessitated going home), I went back west. Life took turns that led away from the monastery. I buried myself in words.

After earning my PhD, I taught college English in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The same year that I was awarded tenure, I surrendered it to follow my spouse to his own college job in South Dakota. It was a hard choice and a hard time. The winter of 1996 was brutal. People stranded on South Dakota highways froze to death. Disheartened, scared, and professionally defunct, I sat at home surrounded by boxes of useless research, too many books, and two busy toddlers (soon joined by a baby brother). From outside my personal blizzard, a friend (a Lutheran friend) suggested, “Why don’t you go to seminary?”

Was that even possible for a Catholic woman? My vocation to Christian discipleship had never really burned out, just kept shining with a low glow. Now the flame began to flicker and swell, even as I was offered a tenure-track job where my spouse worked (every academic couple’s fantasy). It distracted me while I taught Romanticism, the Victorians, children’s literature, and advanced composition. I wondered about it while helping found a social justice group at the college, serving as a eucharistic minister at the local Catholic hospital, and attending retreats.

So when my spouse got his dream chance to teach at a research university near Chicago, I took the leap. I would, and did, go to seminary. I supported my years of study by returning to the piano bench, working as an accompanist for the Diocese of Rockford and gaining substantial liturgy experience. After graduating with an M.Div. from Catholic Theological Union, I served 18 months as a hospice chaplain before beginning a CPE residency. I subsequently landed a fulltime staff position at Alexian Brothers Medical Center in Elk Grove Village, IL, and was at last board-certified. The marathon complete, I was full of joy, overwhelmed that I had risked everything by giving up academia and found fulfilling service.

But the truly amazing revelation was that nothing from my former life — nothing — had been wasted. I used my writing and editorial experience to create bereavement materials during my residency and to edit a book of reflections for staff and volunteers at my new job. I inaugurated a department...
newsletter. My teaching skills were at the service of our CPE supervisors, students, and spiritual care volunteers. I enjoyed making music in our hospital chapel, accompanying masses, memorial services, CPE student graduations, and seasonal liturgies.

Most of all, I did what we all do as chaplains: listen to stories. Fiction had been my specialty as a literary scholar. It had never occurred to me, when I contemplated leaving academia, that I would still be listening to, learning from, and sharing stories in chaplaincy. Real life stories. Tragedies and comedies; tales ethical and whimsical, inspiring and heartbreaking. But there it was – a multicultural, interfaith, diverse mix of human stories worthy of a Norton anthology. The most important part of my job had not changed at all! It was still all story!

Along the way, however, a wise mentor pointed out to me that I must not merely listen to the stories. Chaplaincy isn’t fiction analysis or literary criticism. Chaplaincy demands that I – that we – also love the storytellers. The sick, the dying, the grieving and the hopeful. Agape! When I could at last receive and understand that priceless wisdom, all the puzzle pieces of my journey fit. Our wondrous God, like a shrewd and careful craftsman, does not let anything go to waste in pursuit of love. Not in this world. And not in our diverse, many-hued hearts.

We chaplains bring to our vocation a wide diversity of prior experience. Some of us are young people on fire with the desire to serve as chaplains right out of school. Others of us – many others – are older, pursuing a second or even third career. We bring along the know-how of business executives, department managers, teachers, MBAs, musicians, school administrators, marketing gurus, and auto dealers. Each of us can discover how unique skills and talents from these prior lives enrich our spiritual care.

Which has ever been the disciple’s story. After all, Christ called fishermen, tax collectors, tent makers, centurions, physicians, and prisoners. And though those men and women might have been asked to bring but one pair of sandals and a staff for their journey, their voluntary poverty nonetheless had plenty of room for their varied expertise. As Merton reminds us, “all our powers and capacities” are gifts. Gifts meant for God, they also come from God. And having received, we give them back as chaplains. As lovers of stories, healing, and hope. As lovers of the One who knows what we need even before we ask, wherever our ministry may lead. The One who keeps the flame of love glowing so that even in the cold and the dark, we may be a light to others.

Anne Windholz, BCC, is a spiritual direction intern in west suburban Chicago. Her book, The Understory: Poems and Prayers, is available from Amazon.
Careers as neurobiologist and chaplain parallel each other

By Ann Christensen

My career pathway parallels my migration from Canada to the US/Mexico border. I was educated in Canada, which prepared me for a career in neurobiology research. After completing three years of post-doctoral studies at Virginia Tech and at the University of Arizona, I taught biology at Pima Community College. Later, I chaired the department and served as dean of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics division.

Early in my education career, I led a program to recruit and retain underrepresented minorities in the behavioral and biomedical sciences. I was unable to recruit a biomedical ethics instructor for our new clinical laboratory programs, so I studied up on the subject and taught the course myself. This opened a new field of interest for me, and I became a member of the University of Arizona’s Institutional Review Board which oversees the protection of human subjects in research. I continue to serve this group in the dual role of scientist and chaplain.

During my tenure as dean of student development and prefect of discipline, I learned of my compassion for troubled students, particularly those struggling with addictions. During a tumultuous time at my college, I began courses online at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago. I am now retired from the faculty but continue to teach cell and molecular biology as an adjunct.

My first two CPE internships were at a large academic research hospital, but for my last two units, I requested a smaller hospital with acute-care behavioral health units that serves the largely Hispanic population of South Tucson. These experiences prepared me to be a part-time chaplain for the Carondelet Hospital Network.

Today, I serve at two large hospitals in Tucson and a small community hospital in Nogales and provide a loving presence and a listening heart to those experiencing pain, fear, and life transitions. I see the divine in all people and strive to help others recognize this quality in themselves and in each other, and to tap into this source of strength and grace as they are presented with challenges. As an immigrant who speaks Spanish, I have a special zeal for assisting people who have migrated, many of whom are brought injured or ill to the hospital by Border Patrol agents. I also bring my enthusiasm for dance and mental wellness to the behavioral health unit, where I lead a Praise Dance group.

Observation of the beauty of the natural world and discovery fill many scientists with a sense of wonder, joy, and excitement. In my practice as a chaplain, I know that training in science instilled in me a sense of wonderment that I bring to every encounter. I am awed by the openness with which patients, their loved ones, and hospital staff share their stories. I am amazed by the power of love and how it triumphs over fear and death.
As a scientist, I also bring my methodical, problem-solving abilities to the interdisciplinary healthcare team. As an educator, I promote human flourishing of individuals, family systems, work groups, and communities.

However, my background can be an impediment to effective chaplaincy. I constantly remind myself not to answer patient’s medical questions, to speak less, and to humbly listen more. And when I do, all that remains is tenderness and love … and that is all that is required.

Ann Christensen, BCC, is a chaplain at the Carondelet Health Network in Tucson, AZ.
The meaning of life: Rock and roll and chaplaincy

By Marty Folan

The sun shone bright every single day in the summer of 1980. Tennis, softball, running, friends and family and barbecues and Great America theme park outings and Pepsi vs. Coke cola wars and high school teen ministry and ice cream and a blue-eyed Irish Catholic girlfriend and perfect weather and not ever wanting the summer to end because it was set to the beat and rhythm of the most outstanding rock and roll and pop music ever.

I fell in love when Air Supply’s romantic sounds of love drifted through the car speakers. My life, then and in the future, became defined by Billy Joel’s “You May Be Right.”

Writing became my life breath. Every day I wrote. Page 1 in volume I of my journal was penned on June 15, 1980. Last night I penned page 7,000 in volume XXXI. The summer of 1980 was my golden year. I turned the same age as the date of my birth: 16 on April 16, the golden framework of my life.

Nineteen-eighty flowed into ’81 with the music, freedom, running and summer fun. Then, all of a sudden – it ended. My bicycle collided with an oncoming Jeep. In a coma with many broken bones, hell became my new home. Short-term memory wiped out. Unable to reason, process or think, my brain was a platter of scrambled eggs. My first attempt to use a walker, I felt like a tightrope walker above Niagra Falls. I cried out to God for help. “Please, Lord, give me a second chance and I will give you my life in return.”

Through a million prayers, hundreds of hours of rehab, counseling and tutoring, and infinite struggling to simply find a reason to live, a miracle happened. I got my second chance at life.

And at first, I used it to become a journalist. I wrote sports, hard news, features, and columns. I hit the jackpot in 1985: Marty Folan, Entertainment Editor, Daily Egyptian newspaper, Carbondale, IL.

To sit in an arena and feel the energy of Sammy Hagar screaming, “I Can’t Drive … 55!” and interview rock stars up close and personal. Then, to sit behind a computer screen and recreate the experience in my own words for thousands of readers to enjoy. And get paid for it? This is life! This is a dream come true! It doesn’t get any better than this.

Six years later, I set out on a jog. I felt whole. As my soul poured forth gratitude to God for the miracle of recovery and the second chance at life I had received through Him, the Holy Spirit rushed down upon me with a powerful, clear and simple message: It's time to give back.

A visit to Alexian Brothers Medical Center and a heart-centered conversation with Fr. Richard Tessmer offered an invitation to explore what became my true calling: chaplaincy.
Over the next year and a half on Saturdays, I volunteered. Then it happened, a defining moment both in my life and in my career: “Marty, this is Julie in ED. We are bringing in a 17-year-old boy dead on arrival. Dr. Smith wants you to be with him when he tells the family.”

The boy’s name was Constantine, from a Greek family. All of them came, dozens of them. We prayed together. We cried together. We held onto one another as they said their final goodbyes.

Never did I ever feel as certain as I did that day about my purpose in life and serving God. It truly meant everything in the world to me, and from then on, the world became more sacred, meaningful, and beautiful. This was how I would give back for the second chance I received.

My shift ended, and as I walked outside, I burst out in tears. “This is what my family went through after my accident, only I got a second chance. Poor Constantine didn’t.”

I became a board-certified chaplain, and the healing power and grace of God flowed through me in ministry. Patients lost their limbs in accidents. Others struggled to make peace with loved ones before they passed away. Patients invited me into their lives as hospice chaplain to journey with them until their final breath.

But I still carry with me the passionate love for rock and roll and pop music that I absorbed from my family of musicians and singers. I discovered a rich and deep value in music that infused life with spiritual meaning, a depth that is part of me at every bedside encounter. The songs and lyrics continue to play in my heart and soul, like Mr. Mister’s 1985 hit “Kyrie;” George Michael’s “Praying for Time;” John Parr’s “St. Elmo’s Fire (Man in Motion);” Norman Greenbaum’s “Spirit in the Sky;” REO Speedwagon’s “Keep Pushin’ On;” Matthew Wilder’s “Ain’t Nothing Gonna Break My Stride;” and many more.

From when I first asked for a second chance to live, the Lord continues to invite me to serve. And I continue to respond, “Yes, Lord.”

This is life! This is a dream come true! And it keeps on getting better!

*Marty Folan, BCC, is director of mission integration and spiritual care at Essentia-St. Joseph Medical Center in Brainerd, MN.*
Acting and singing career transfers easily to chaplaincy

By Maggie Finley

Since I spent 30-plus years in entertainment (music, theatre, radio, television, and film), chaplaincy might seem a far cry from my first career. Yet like many other artists of color, my earliest performances were in church. My family boasts a couple of career musicians, including my father, a fairly well-known jazz pianist. His father, however, was a deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal church. So on some level, my becoming a pastoral minister makes me feel a kinship with a grandfather I never knew.

My mother was Catholic, and I attended parochial school under the guidance of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, resulting in a scholarship to Catholic University’s speech and drama department.

After launching my career as an actor, I never took for granted the years that I could make a modest living doing what I loved. But in the early nineties, I hit a perfect storm. I was nearly fifty, in a town (Chicago) that favored young actors. I was burned out. My immediate family members were dying at what seemed an alarming frequency, and I traveled back and forth to the East Coast to be with them. With so little industry work, I temped at Catholic Theological Union and volunteered at the University of Chicago Wyler’s Children’s Hospital.

Together they provided a safe place and soft landing, where I began to imagine my next phase. I always had a heart for the sick, and I loved hearing other people’s stories. I felt at home in the clinical setting, but knew I couldn’t handle the science needed to be a hands-on caregiver. Eventually, I heard the still small voice: “You’re not a scientist, but you can listen.”

When my husband got a job in Seattle, I followed him there and continued CPE. At first I was wary of Reverend Grant, one of two CPE supervisors at Seattle’s Harborview Medical Center. He was white, male, Protestant, and Southern. Yet not coincidentally, I believe, his very vocation was forming ministers of color – to help us find our own unique voices. As a trained opera singer himself, he understood my artistic discipline, but of greater value to me was that he pressed me to do a deep dive into my own racial identity – which I hadn’t really done before.

He supported my growth until I understood what he meant: that I encounter patients from the same heart space where I was most authentic, joyful, and good-humored. He wished for me to use my unique gifts for communication to touch people at a deeper level.

In frequently ministering to dementia patients with Providence Hospice of Seattle, music and imagination became strategies for me. Dementia patients are not often in the moment, but music often elicits pleasant memories, fostering relaxation and life review.
If the patient mistook me for someone from the past, I did not push, but listened and prompted more storytelling. Those beyond verbal skill were often comforted by my singing popular songs from their generation or liturgical songs to accompany prayer and communion.

Other transferable skills which have persisted are keeping a nice appearance and a pleasant speaking and singing voice. Both have implications for ritualizing at the bedside, family conferences, the de-escalation of anxious mental health patients, and communicating presence to semi- or unconscious patients. Grounded presence in the moment, plus my ability to improvise, individualizes prayer and ritual. My use of patient narrative and storytelling has comforted both patients/families in crisis mode or actively dying.

I was recruited to co-write rituals for the Providence Health System marking anniversaries or new organizational rollouts. I used my wit and on-camera experience from corporate industrial films to appear in new hire videos. I designed annual retreats for hospice’s interfaith spiritual care department.

At the marketing director’s request, I wrote a playlet as an adjunct to a touring photo exhibit, “Portraits of Healing.” I also joined our director of grief support services (himself a former Shakespearean director) to present “Grief at the Holidays,” with spoken word, music, visuals, and poetry as well as education on self-care.

I also facilitated the closing night ritual for Jamie Moyer’s Camp Erin, a program for children grieving the loss of a loved one. As the Griot, I moved campers from theatre play to ritual, using a musical motif from “The Lion King” while the children set their handmade memory candles afloat on the lake.

These rituals spark memories. I’m reminded of how my gifts have transformed my family’s heritage into a compassionate way of caring for and consoling other families.

*Maggie Finley, BCC emerita, is a former chaplain at Providence Hospice of Seattle and a spiritual director with the Ignatian Spirituality Center.*
Career in hospital administration finally led to chaplaincy

By Tim Crowley

I was a 16-year-old high school junior in the spring of 1965 when I became a volunteer at Oak Forest Hospital, a geriatric facility in south suburban Chicago. I had an ulterior motive, as my great-grandmother was a resident, and 16-year-olds weren’t allowed to visit, except on Sunday afternoons. That was the first time that the Lord taught me the gift of presence. She died that December, but I had my first taste of what I would be called to do with my life.

I entered hospital administration by a side door. As a fairly recent college grad in 1973, I got a job selling surgical dressings and disposable operating drapes. I met several hospital administrators and asked them about their careers. Making that big, complex machine run was fascinating. Before long, I was applying to the Master of Health Administration program at St. Louis University. I was not Catholic then, but I realized that Catholic healthcare had a great attraction to me.

After graduating in 1976, I got my first job at St. Mary’s Hospital in Duluth, MN. I was asked to work with our “sister visitor program” and two priest chaplains and one Lutheran minister, with the goal of becoming a pastoral care department – a budding concept at that time. Our lead priest, Fr. Eugene McGlothlin, OSB, was a spiritual partner and guide to me. During the process, I enrolled in RCIA at my parish and became Catholic. Fr. Eugene went on to become the board chairman of NACC in 1994. He planted a seed in my brain about chaplaincy that lay fallow for a long time.

I had spent 25 years as a hospital chief operating officer or CEO when I went on retreat in 2007 at the Jesuit Spiritual Center in Milford, OH. Our retreat master challenged us, during a deep dive into the Ignatian spiritual exercises, to seek the message that the Lord had been sending us, to which we had been deaf.

After a long, sleepless night, I realized that my journey through hospital life, my service on a hospice board, all the family members that I had helped at end of life – they were all sending me toward an encore career in service through chaplaincy. Initially, I thought that would be with a hospice provider.

What I did next seemed sort of insane to all my colleagues. I resigned as hospital CEO, applied to the lay pastoral ministry program at the Athenaeum of Ohio, put our house on the market, and looked for a staff position so that I could attend seminary in the evenings. The Lord obviously liked the idea that I was listening. Everything fell into place so quickly that I wondered why I had spent the first 59 years of my life thinking I was somehow in charge. My wife, a retired Catholic school teacher and saint among women, supported me in this late career shift.

I spent the next six years working for The Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, including developing relationships with long-term care facilities. I came to understand through that work that my call was not to hospice, but rather to working with older adults in long-term care. I retired in 2013, finished my master’s in pastoral care in 2014, did CPE in 2015-2016, and have worked as a chaplain at Twin Vision, January/February 2022

www.nacc.org/vision
Lakes Senior Living Community since 2017. My wife and I moved to Twin Lakes last fall, where we reside in independent living.

My entire adult life has been immersed in healthcare. My first career taught me about organization and operation, and I still use those skills. Our residents often ask me to explain how the healthcare system works (doctors, hospitals, insurance companies, review organizations, hospice providers), and sometimes to intervene on their behalf. I guess I know where to grease the squeaky wheel.

My second career in chaplaincy has taken me to the bedside and into the homes of a wonderful group of older adults, with whom I’m sharing the love of the Lord. Walking this journey, and providing the gift of presence, with so many is a joy.

Tim Crowley is a chaplain at Twin Lakes Senior Living Community in Montgomery, OH.
After psychiatric nursing, pastoral care required new mindset

By Sr. Frances Smalkowski, CSFN

To become a sister, a nurse, and a chaplain was always a dream of mine. Also, I wanted to become an airline stewardess, secretary, and actress.

The sister and nurse parts came first. Later, I came to believe that the chaplain dream had potential when one of my own CSFN sisters became our first certified chaplain. I was in awe of her, especially since she seemed to move seamlessly from her teaching ministry to chaplaincy. This occurred when it was not usual for women to be certified chaplains.

As time progressed, I moved from basic nursing to psychiatric mental-health nursing, which helped open the door for my evolving dream. After I began CPE, during my chaplaincy student visits, I often questioned what the difference was from my psychiatric nursing visits. As a matter of fact, this was actually a struggle of mine.

I found a story from Fr. Anthony DeMello, SJ, to be very helpful as I learned how to separate those two realms. The short version is that something is better left unsaid unless it is true, helpful, or funny.

In both pastoral and psychiatric visits, I spoke the truth as I experienced it. However, a pastoral visit required more sensitivity for me and a deeper listening to how God and the patient were leading me to respond, rather than framing my time and goal-setting in structured ways.

Furthermore, during my pastoral visits, I could not count on being helpful. That was different from psychiatric settings, which were consensually goal-centered. If I was offering pastoral care, the only goal was total openness to the Spirit, as well as a mindful presence. Too, nursing visits usually were more formal, with mutual expectations. Suggestions for self-empowerment, resources, and outside referrals were common in the nursing sessions. In that setting, I intervened more; in chaplaincy, I listened more deeply and with more silences.

And what about funny? Admittedly, this is one of my natural tendencies that I have used in both kinds of visits as appropriate. I learned early on the value of humor in the healing of the total person. (This reminds me of a dying 100-year-old woman I had grown to know and love. Being quietly present with her, I was gently stroking her forehead. She opened her eyes wide and said: “You’re a sister. You should know better. Why aren’t you praying out loud with me or singing holy songs?” Of course, I then did my best to fulfill her wishes.)

With close to 55 years in nursing ministry and over 37 years of chaplaincy behind me, I feel so much gratitude for all of the people who touched my life.

Oh, and in a way, I did fulfill those other childhood dreams. I did quite a bit of flying over the years, including skydiving. I have written more than I ever expected I would, which sort of satisfies my secretarial dream. And does dancing the polka on stage (while taking a tour) at Radio City Music Hall count for my actress dream?

Sr. Frances Smalkowski, CSFN, is director of pastoral care at St. John Paul II Center in Danbury, CT.
Moving from nursing to chaplaincy was a response to God’s whisper

By Kathleen Mattone

“After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.” 1 Kings 19:12 NIV

Why do we trust an earthquake and fire to get our attention, but not a gentle whisper? God has been whispering to me my entire life, and I have repeatedly paid attention to the other noises of the world. But not to the whisper.

I always wanted to be in healthcare. My mom was a nurse in World War II. As a woman of deep faith, she inspired me to empathy, deep listening, and a profound joy in living. When I prayed as a young person, I felt God calling me to healing. As in “healing the body of Christ.” All I heard was “healing the body,” and so nursing seemed the perfect career choice.

I worked for two years as a typical young adult, not too concerned with church. But I felt compelled to find new ways to bring healing outside the hospital. Joining in the work of a free clinic, I was so touched by the journeys of patients as they struggled physically, spiritually, and financially. While I enjoyed nursing, I was already being drawn into relational healing.

Fast forward to my four-year nursing degree, with an emphasis on public health. Again I was seeking meaning in prevention, wellness programming, and systemic planning to help people be/stay healthy. I was always drawn to the holistic aspect of body, mind, and spirit nursing.

It should have been more obvious.

A couple of children later, after renovating an old house into a bed and breakfast, more involvement in church through sacrament prep, catechist training, and eventually teaching religion in middle school, the whisper persisted. Funny that through the raucous challenge of middle schoolers, I discovered an invitation to study the deep beauty and mystery of theology.

On my graduate school campus tour, I looked through the chapel’s semi-circular wall of windows out into the world and the beautiful rolling hills around the seminary. I heard in my heart, “This is where you are supposed to be.”

Of course, I didn’t hear those exact words, but it was a deep feeling of divine communication. I was shaken by this rather abrupt voice and deeply moved by something I can only explain as the Holy Spirit. It was a pull, a warm embrace, a magnetic tug at my core. I returned to that chapel countless times in my four years of study, and never again felt that exact, deep loving embrace. And yet, the sense of it still lingers with me today.
By now the mother of four, I worked as a nursing clinical instructor to pay for my graduate school. I will never forget slipping down to the chapel at the Catholic hospital where I was working, and once again feeling this sense of peace, or pull, or what many would describe as call. Even though I loved teaching and sharing my reverence for nursing, I was being nudged towards something new. Not long after that chapel experience, a professor suggested that I explore chaplaincy. Honestly, I didn’t have any idea what being a chaplain was all about.

But it only took a few weeks of my CPE internship to realize that this was where God was calling me. I fell in love with the CPE process and continued to do a residency while raising four children and finishing my theology degree.

After graduation, there were no chaplain jobs nearby. While I waited and prayed, I took a hospice nursing position. God provided me with the chance to learn and practice extensive end-of-life care from a truly holistic perspective. I eventually landed a weekend chaplain position, and then a full-time day shift in a Catholic hospital. I then had the extraordinary honor to be a market director for spiritual care, for seven hospitals and managing 25 chaplain employees.

And once again, God was whispering. I received my certificate in spiritual direction and left corporate healthcare to try spiritual healing, one person at a time. Through a webinar advertised by NACC, I was introduced to a wonderful organization (discerningdeacons.org) that is working to heal the world and animate Pope Francis’ call for a synodal church. It’s an invitation into new chaplain work that I have little knowledge of, but somehow have been preparing my whole life.

Listen for the whisper. And trust in God’s call. The journey is the adventure. I am praying for you!

*Kathleen Mattone, BCC, is a spiritual director/companion and owner of Sacred Space LLC in Versailles, KY.*
From managing wildlife to caring for people, it all makes sense

By Gary Weisbrich

I grew up on a small farm in southwest Minnesota, adjacent to a wildlife management area. My days were spent investigating Coalminers Creek, a 164-acre semi-permanent wetland inhabited by a multitude of wildlife. I knew that I wanted to be a wildlife biologist. I spent as much time as possible out in nature exploring the wetland, and my favorite class in school was biology.

After high school, my first summer job was sandblasting and painting bridges for $9 an hour. I quit halfway through the summer because a position opened with the Minnesota Conservation Corps at minimum wage, $3.35 an hour. But it was a foot in the door to the job I wanted. I went on to get a B.S. in biology with an emphasis in wildlife management.

My first real job after college was working with the National Wetlands Research Center on waterfowl around the Gulf of Mexico. I trapped fulvous whistling ducks (actually in the same genus as geese) in the rice fields of southwestern Louisiana, fitting them with radio transmitters. The goal of project to gain breeding data. But what I loved most was listening, talking, sharing stories, and developing personal friendships with the farmers and landowners.

I was also part of a team that surgically implanted radio transmitters on canvasback ducks wintering on Catahoula Lake in central Louisiana. We tracked these ducks in a Cessna 171 aircraft. I prayed in that plane on many occasions, pleading that we would make it back safely when we were caught in fog with no instrument flight equipment. Once again, I enjoyed the work but found the shared stories among my colleagues and landowners to be the most meaningful and fulfilling.

The last project I worked on was forested wetland research. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew came right over the 50 study sites in the Atchafalaya River basin in southern Louisiana, so there was before and after data – a researcher’s dream. The work was fascinating, yet the people (Cajuns and Creoles) and their culture was even more fascinating and meaningful. However, most of the time I was doing research and collecting data alone. There was something missing deep inside. It took a while to figure it out, but it was people.

It was a bit strange, since I lean toward being an introvert. But I knew I needed to do something different that involved listening, sharing stories, and meeting people where they were.

I thought that God was calling me to the seminary. Many people had asked me if I had considered priesthood, and I guess I felt that if others saw that quality in me, maybe I needed to explore it. I entered seminary and thought it would only be a matter of time before I would flunk out since I only knew the hard sciences. But I ended up doing very well.

My bishop had me study theology in Rome. I had never traveled outside of Minnesota, Louisiana, and the Dakotas, but I took a leap of faith and spent two years at the North American College. I
ended up doing my apostolate in pediatric oncology at the Ospedale Bambino Gesu (Baby Jesus Hospital), a stone’s throw away from our residence.

Through the help of several mentors and a wonderful spiritual director, I realized that I was called to ministry, but not as an ordained priest. But as soon as I did not have a job, vehicle, or a place to live, I started to panic. Fortunately, I got a call from friend who was a retired priest, and he said, “Weisbrich, untie the knots in your stomach. God will provide.”

Within a week, the co-directors of chaplaincy at Avera-McKennan Hospital in Sioux Falls, SD, where I completed my first extended unit of CPE, informed me of an open on-call chaplain position. On my first day after orientation, I was called to an 8-year-old patient dying of cancer. As I began to don my PPE outside the patient’s room, a chill came over me. For the first time, the past ten years were clear to me. Wildlife management, relationship building, listening to people where they were, working in a pediatric oncology unit – it was all a preparation for this moment.

To this day, I know this is where God wanted me to be, even though it was a winding road with several detours. A thread of my deepest desire and God’s deepest desire came together. As people tell me, “You are still taking care of wildlife, just in a little bit different way now.”

Gary Weisbrich, BCC-PCHAC, currently serves as a chaplain and manager of spiritual care at Providence St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula, MT.
Ex-technical writer uses her existing skills on the hospital floor

By Christina M. Mayer

Before discovering and pursuing chaplaincy, I was primarily a technical writer. At my first job interview, Y2K was looming, and companies were panicking, thinking that all the computers would crash and no one would have documentation. The interviewer asked just one question: “Can you write a sentence?” I started the following Monday.

The key to success in technical writing is interviewing, asking questions, listening, and establishing rapport with subject matter experts. I also had to assess existing documentation and needs, think quickly, be flexible, solve issues with difficult staff, and write out instructions and information in a concise, helpful manner. And all of these qualities have served me well in chaplaincy.

Establishing a rapport quickly

Time was of the essence prior to Y2K, so we had to work quickly with a variety of staff members. We made teams feel calm and relaxed, while keeping the atmosphere professional and projects on track. The same happens as chaplains. Imagine you are in the Emergency Department, and the family of a deceased patient will be arriving in minutes. It’s wise to gather the interdisciplinary team — physicians, nurses, security — explain the situation, anticipate questions and comments from the family to share with the team, and field these questions professionally and compassionately. We quickly establish a rapport with the interdisciplinary team and work to keep the family calm and cared for.

Being curious

Part of being a technical writer involves asking questions. Similarly, chaplaincy is about curiosity. We care for souls. When we see a patient with clenched fists, we notice and wonder what the fists mean. When we see tears, we notice and might say, “I see your tears. What do your tears mean?” Another wonderful question I learned from a fellow chaplain, which can be used in many situations, is “What are you learning?” The patient gets to decide what this means— are they learning about self, a health condition, accepting difficult family dynamics, how to better handle conflict?

Assessing the situation

Technical writers take stock of the situation. What documentation do we have now? What information do we need? Which experts can help us close the gap? Chaplains do something similar. What is happening with this patient? Is there anything that the patient needs that we can help with? Could we involve other professionals like the social worker, psychiatry, nurses, or physicians?
Being flexible and compassionate

One expert I needed to interview kept declining my invitations. Finally, I called. I learned that he did not work during typical afternoon business hours. When I said, “Tell me more,” he explained that his wife had recently died, and he had restructured his days to be with his young son. That allowed me to serve him better—which led to getting the information I needed. In the same way, as chaplains, we are flexible and compassionate with our patients. Are they still groggy from surgery? Are they more in need of the restroom at this time, or food, or visiting with a loved one?

Communicating effectively

Once, I helped document the software development life cycle from concept to implementation. We worked with project managers, developers, testers, quality assurance, hardware professionals, and others — in all, nine different teams. The teams might be stressed and under tight deadlines. They might not even like each other. But our documentation helped create useful products in a timely manner. The same skills help in chaplaincy. We build rapport with the interdisciplinary team, gather them together before we meet with a family or break sad news, anticipate possible questions, come up with answers, and create a unified force. Additionally, when charting, we are able to assess, write notes, stay organized, and educate other team members, which in turn helps patients.

Improvising constantly

I sometimes refer to chaplaincy as “pastoral improv.” I took courses at The Second City in Chicago, and you never know what one of your fellow team members will say or do. You never know the situation that the audience will hand you. To create a cohesive, supportive, and thoughtful team, you are taught to build on others’ ideas and say, “Yes, and …” Similarly in chaplaincy, you never know what a patient or family member or staffer will say or do. You must anticipate any issues or situations, but also remain flexible and in the moment. You must be ready, silently asking the Spirit for help, asking for wisdom and tact and compassion prior to speaking—and knowing when to stay silent.

I invite you to think of your past careers, your past experiences in life. What do you bring to the table? How is your past experience, your former career, helping you move forward in chaplaincy?

Christina M. Mayer, BCC, is a staff chaplain at Northwestern Medicine in Chicago and at MacNeal Hospital in Berwyn, IL.
Musician, teacher, dietician – all roads led to chaplaincy

As we near the end of our journey through journeys, this week we share three shorter accounts from NACC members about their first careers.

By Sr. Bernadette Selinsky

I vividly remember my week-long hospital stay when I developed pneumonia in kindergarten. The pediatric unit at the Green Bay hospital was full, so I was put in a room with newborns in incubators. Every afternoon I got a Dixie cup of ice cream, and every day my mother or father brought me a new toy. I got a brand-new doll when I got home for being a good little girl in the hospital.

This happy experience started my deep desire to work in a hospital someday. However, I majored in music education in college. It just seemed too hard to learn nursing completely from scratch when I already had a good start with music.

For 19 years I taught music at all levels K-8, accompanied and directed choirs and folk groups, was a cantor at Mass, planned liturgies, was on liturgy committees and gave private music lessons in Illinois, Wisconsin, California, and Arizona. Yet my heart kept yearning to work in a hospital. By God’s grace and with my religious community’s support, I transitioned to being a hospital chaplain. For the past 30 years I have been living my dream of working in a hospital!

One of my favorite parts of serving in chaplaincy is singing to patients who are dying. Music has also helped tremendously with pediatric patients. For years I have prepared and played for various prayer services held in the hospital. I am also still active in parish church music.

Not only has my musical background enhanced my chaplaincy, but my many years of living religious life help me support the faith life of the people to whom I minister. I am grateful for both! Only God could weave such a unity out of the diversity of my life.

Sr. Bernadette Selinsky is a chaplain at Genesis Hospital in Zanesville, OH.

By Sr. Janet K. Furman

I was a junior high teacher for 14 years, and during the summers and school vacations, we sisters worked in a variety of ministries. My experiences (besides earning a master’s degree) included working in our provincial house kitchen, helping to take care of infirm sisters, and serving in a hospital pastoral care department as a “sister visitor.”

And to be honest … I was afraid of hospitals! Maybe it was my childhood memory of my grandmother having surgery. So prior to the summer assignment at the hospital, I accepted an invitation to join the seminarians in a class on “How to Visit the Sick.”
That helped me discover a call to seek CPE Internship for a year. The next year found me accepted and in full-time residency! And now, 40 years after being certified by NACC and almost 40 years in chaplaincy, I am retired and volunteering with NACC and other organizations. So, the lesson of this story is to embrace your phobia. Look where it might lead you!

Sr. Janet K. Furman, BCC Ret., was a staff chaplain at St. John’s Hospitals, Oxnard and Camarillo, CA.

By Maritza Ramos Pratt

I came to chaplaincy after spending 28 years as a clinical dietitian in Puerto Rico, US Army, Texas, and Florida. I took care of many patients in the cardiac and oncology units. I planned special diets for them, helped family members to adhere to the new program, and many times prayed at their bedside.

While I was working as a clinical dietitian in Orlando, FL, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was recovering from a double mastectomy when a chaplain visited me and gave me a beautiful stole to wear. He prayed for me, and we talked and talked. One day I asked him how to become a chaplain. He told me to look for CPE classes online.

Fortunately, I already had a master’s degree in pastoral care and theology from Loyola University, New Orleans. I was accepted for my first unit of CPE at Florida Hospital Adventist System in summer 2004, the only Catholic in the group. I ended with 5 units of CPE due to a cancer recurrence (ovarian cancer, 2004).

Since I used to feed patients and teach them their diets to improve their health, as a chaplain I feed the patients’ mind, body, and spirit with spiritual support from above and a lot of listening and caring for their spiritual health. Our mission was: To Extend the Healing Ministry of Jesus and I love that 100 percent, all the time.

I am retired now from the Adventist hospital after 18 years, due to medical and health conditions, but continue doing God’s job with cancer survivors at home as I coordinate a Hispanic group in Orlando. I also wrote a book, “Sobrevivir: La Vida, Pandemia y Cancer.” (To Survive, Life, Pandemic and Cancer). It is available on Amazon.¹ I am now working on the English version.

I do keep in contact with all my colleagues at the hospital and help them as best I can from afar. For a time I was in a wheelchair; for a time I was blind; and I suffered other side effects from all the cancer treatments. But I am alive, by God’s grace, and serving the Lord with all my love. Be blessed!

Maritza Ramos Pratt, BCC, is a retired clinical chaplain at Adventhealth System in Orlando, FL.

¹ At www.amazon.com/SOBREVIVIR-Historias-Hispanas-Enfrentando-Pandemia/dp/B09JJKGX3Q
From canon law to chaplaincy, the connection is compassion

By Rev. Chidiebere Ogbuagu

The spring of 2009 went a long way toward shaping my spiritual journey from canon law to pastoral care and mission leadership. Quite a tough year! But God enlightened me and steered my decision compass in the way God knew and loved best.

At that time, I was simultaneously serving as a canon lawyer and as an on-call priest chaplain at a nearby hospital and healthcare center. Serving as a “defender of the sacrament of matrimony” in annulment processes in a U.S. diocesan catholic tribunal, I wondered about the connection between my ministries as a canon lawyer and as a chaplain. Earlier, I had served as a judge of both first and second instances in both diocesan, inter-diocesan, and regional tribunals for marriage annulment.

Canon law (a codified body of law governing church’s activities and administration) applies ecclesiastically endorsed legal principles to Christian life and ministries. However, salvation of the human person is its ultimate goal. Salvation in this sense is understood as ensuring that justice prevails in the relationship between the people of God, and that such justice is applied with equity and mercy.

As I walked through the corridors of the hospital where I served as a chaplain, I began to connect the dots and ask more questions about my dual roles. It appeared that as a priest chaplain and a canon lawyer, I was offering similar services but in diverse ways.

As a priest chaplain, I was engaging my patients and families in their pains, sufferings, and life stories. As I actively listened to their stories, remaining non-judgmental, I empathetically connected with them and provided emotional and spiritual support. As a canon lawyer, I listened to the stories of my clients going through emotional, spiritual, and psychological pains—sometimes attributable to marital crisis, religious-clerical crisis, administration crisis, etc. One couple might be asking for separation while the bond of marriage continued; another might be asking the judge to declare the nullity of their marriage.

In both chaplaincy and canonical cases, I found compassion as the substantive link that connects and defines both ministries. But how is compassion related to canon law? What connection exists between law and mercy? Do they not oppose each other? If they don’t, do they complement or supplement each other?

Those questions kept bugging me, as I deepened my reflection. Eureka! Finally, I found my answer in the last canon of the 1983 Code of Canon Law: “Salvation of the soul is the supreme law.”

My final decision to pursue the chaplaincy ministry and healthcare mission leadership came after my Clinical Pastoral Education classes. As the journey into my inner self gradually deepened through the CPE programs, I found more solace and strength to connect to the stories and lives of others, especially of patients and families I serve at healthcare facilities. I am joyfully and gratefully serving as a chaplain and mission leader. I hope that my ministries continue to bring to all, healing and consolation in diverse situations of life, reflective of the healing ministry of Jesus.

Rev. Chidiebere Ogbuagu, BCC, is vice president of mission and pastoral care at HCA Florida Mercy Hospital in Miami.