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Chaplaincy Training
Action Reflection #1 4-6 pages
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Reflection upon meetings with a residents

One on One encounters at Laguna Honda in the Fall of 2014:

Section 1:

I started volunteering at Laguna Honda Hospital in September. I work in one wing of this huge rehabilitation hospital. There are a total of seven hundred and fifty residents in the whole institution. The wings are called neighborhoods; and the one in which I work has sixty residents. It has four avenues of fifteen people and a meeting square for the whole neighborhood. Of those sixty residents I've been able to connect with about 5 or 6 people. I go in Friday afternoons and try to engage with new people every week. I might even go around a few times during the same afternoon and check in with people who might have been absent or asleep.

I have a really good connection with one man named Y. The interesting thing is that the first time I went to visit him he turned me away. He said: "not interested." This does happen from time to time. It is probably one of the main reasons that it is hard for me to make "cold calls" for residents. I find it difficult to go in and introduce myself, but it seems to be getting easier with practice. Bob, the Chaplain that I work under, had talked to Y about me, and Y was interested when he spoke with Bob. Later that day, Bob came up to my neighborhood and introduced me to Y. Sometimes the introductions prove to be very helpful. This was the case with Y. He is now someone that I visit every week and with whom I'm able to spend a fair amount of time.

I definitely had expectations about this meetings and all meetings. I didn't know what to expect, but I was also especially tenuous about this meeting because he had already turned me away. I almost wish that I would only go to the bedside of people that had explicitly asked for a chaplain. Instead, I knock on room to room presenting myself as a volunteer chaplain. Because of this situation, I am always going into the unknown. I don't know how the person will appear or how they will interact with me. I therefore have some anxiety when I am introducing myself to new people. Thankfully, it is getting easier with practice. In terms of residents like Y, there is a level of comfort because we now know each other.

Section 2:

In meeting with residents, it seems to vary from individual to individual. This is probably very obvious, but in terms of how I am in meeting residents, my hope is to be as equanimous as possible. Often residents are asleep or not able to speak with me because of a language barrier or brain damage. Resident “Y” is usually able to meet me. I sometimes have to come back if he is asleep or resting. I like meeting with him because he does like to talk about spiritual matters. I’m not sure what his faith is really. I think that it is Christian, or a hybrid of Christianity. He is definitely interested in talking about all faiths, the environment, politics or just current trends in the world. I’m not really sure what his sickness is, but like most at Laguna Honda, he has been there for quite a while, and he hasn’t mentioned leaving any time soon. Resident “Y” is one of my main people that I visit and I’m generally happy to see him.

There was one person that I did see who did leave the hospital. This was wonderful to see, as most people seem to be there for the long haul. All of the others that I meet with have not told me of there being any time that they would be leaving. This, in some ways, feels depressing because there is no end to a person’s stay. Of course, all things are impermanent, but at Laguna Honda there is a feeling that maybe that law of the universe doesn’t apply! I think that this is why I am welcomed by the residents who are awake, lucid and fluent in English. Even if they don’t want to talk about spiritual matters, I believe that my presence provides comfort and hope. I say this not just because I want to believe that I’m making a difference. This is also true, but I do feel that my presence is helpful because I can help provide some relief from the lack of hope and monotony of the hospital.

Doing the work as a volunteer chaplain is creative. There is no correct way to be chaplain. I like this creativity. Everyone else in the hospital has a timeline with the residents. Nurses, doctors, physical therapists all have a goal that they are trying to reach with a resident. I have no timeline or goal. I just sit with a resident and greet them with an open heart. I do sometimes get uncomfortable with the subject matter that they might bring up. This usually has to do with when they wish to know about my romantic life. I wonder if it is exciting to them, but also a way to divert their attention from focusing on themselves. In some ways being in a hospital like Laguna Honda is like doing a forced long retreat. The residents are bound mostly to the building (they do go out time to time), and sometimes they are bound to their beds. I would never wish this upon anyone, but the positive side seems to be that they are forced to deal with themselves. Many other people in the world spend most of the time not deeply reflecting about themselves or the deeper questions.

On this positive note that residents are mostly bound to one place for a long period time-positive in that they may have the opportunity to do some deeper work. I also realize that some are just feeling too sick or bad, and that is not the ideal situation to do deep inner work. But I do think that when I meet with a resident, both the resident and I have an opportunity to do some deeper work. Some are willing to go into that work. For example, I recently spoke with someone about death. We were talking about how she was going to be cremated. I asked if she was o.k.

with dying. She said that she was, but she was going to have her ashes put in the same grave as her parents. I felt that there was some sadness there. When I asked the sadness was because she didn't have a partner with whom she could be buried. Suddenly the conversation switched to how she was happy that I was now in her life because she now had a chance to be buried with someone. I told her that I was flattered, and tried to bring the attention back to her. I realized that I did blush a little.

This is where I think that the practice or job of meeting with residents helps me to work internally. I realize that I have confusion about my life as a thirty nine year old single Buddhist man. I have been a Buddhist since age twenty; most of my adult life. In this adult life of mine, have never fully ordained as monk, nor have I lived as a typical lay person. I am lay ordained in the Soto Zen Tradition of Suzuki Roshi. Suzuki Roshi said that Soto priests are neither monks nor lay people. I have leaned more towards a monk's life. I have never been married, nor do I have kids. I also was never ordained as a Soto Zen Priest, but I did years of preliminary training including sewing all my robes. That being said, I still have always leaned to the solitary life, as it seemed to give me more freedom with practice and study. I'm not always totally content with this life and sometimes wish to meet someone who would be compatible with where I am on the path. Whether or not that will happen, I still feel like it is a point where I feel a little insecure, and am sometimes feel off guard when I'm asked about my state of being single.

As I said earlier, when asked about my personal life, I will try to bring it back to the person which whom I'm meeting. But, I am now mindful of my being a little wobbly with my single status. I try to explain that I have spent a lot of my life devoted to practice. This sometimes makes sense with some people, but not with everyone. My own work is to become more and more comfortable with being single in a society that is not necessarily supportive of this status. This is work that I am doing inside, but am also using my interactions as a place of practice in this field.

The other thing that I feel a little insecure about is my role as a chaplain. One resident, who isn't particularly friendly, said something like maybe I walked into the wrong department. It was kind of funny when she said this, but also shook me up a bit. It made me reflect if I am the correct person for the job. I think that there are many parts of the job which do suit me well: my wish to help and connect with people, my interest in religion and spirituality and my social nature. I realize that there are other aspects of the job which prove challenging for me: the greeting new people, the negativity that may come from residents and the general challenge of spending long hours with suffering people.

I think this is why I thought that it was funny when the resident made that comment about maybe I walked into the wrong department, because maybe it's true. I feel that I have time to discern if this is the "right" career for me. It also seems that the beauty of chaplaincy is that

there are a million different options: working in a hospital, hospice, military, sports, schools and the list goes on.

I'm really glad to be serving at Laguna Honda to the best of my ability at this time. I do have a lot to learn and feel that I'm learning by working with residents. Even though I only see four to six people regularly, there are endless learning opportunities. I feel that I can help the residents look at their life more deeply and then I am also often knocked off guard by a comment that they might make. These comments help me to look deeply at where I may be holding onto a fixed view. To really be able to meet people effectively, I wish to, as much as possible, not have fixed views.

Section 3:

In terms of expectation, things rarely turn out how we might imagine them to be. This means that if and when I worry, it truly isn't helpful. That doesn't mean that I shouldn't prepare, or get ready for a situation. If I know that a situation might be difficult, I can prepare, but not worry. So in the example of meeting with residents at Laguna Honda, I am mindful of my expectations, but I don't really think that they will be what happens. I do prepare myself to attempt to be open no matter what situation arises. I prepare myself by taking a deep breath and bring to mind the ultimate fact that nobody really knows what is going on. In doing this reflection I feel freed up to meet an individual where they are in that moment, and also where I am. Abiding in this principal or state of "not knowing" helps me to become free of fixed views which hinder me in chaplaincy work.

For me the Buddhist principals of greed, hate and delusion come out in the work of a chaplain. For me it is mostly delusion and hate (well more like aversion). I feel that I have delusions about who I am and my roll in the world. Because of these delusions, I am sometimes insecure when either purposely or not purposely challenged by a resident. I mentioned earlier that when I'm asked about my role as a chaplain or my status as a single man, these subjects can make me feel a bit wobbly. I practice with these subjects by reflecting on them deeply in private and also when in conversation with the resident. I hope to become more and more skillful and non-reactive. I can again bring in "beginner's mind" or the "not knowing" mind. This helps me to be free in my work as a chaplain.

When aversion comes up, I practice mindfulness and if I can in that moment, reflection. If I can't reflect in that moment, I will reflect later. I am very aware when aversion comes up. I feel physically uncomfortable, and I also feel myself trying to leave the situation. I usually try to stay with the situation for a little longer and not just leave in that moment. This is similar to Zen training, especially in sesshin. There may be pain in the body, but it is usually good to sit with the pain for a little while before moving. This way, one can learn some information about the pain. In the same way when aversion comes up with a client, I try to sit and learn about the aversion

and discomfort. If it persists, I might leave out of self-compassion, but at least I gave the aversion some time to be studied.

Impermanence is also another good tool in working with residents at Laguna Honda. Sometimes it seems very static there. Patients can be there for year after year and it can seem as if there is never any change. Reflecting on, and talking about impermanence is very helpful. I feel that this can help move the energy which can appear static. I may mention this to a resident while in conversation. I won't say things will get better, because I don't actually know that this is true, but I will say that things will change, because that is true. I feel that using impermanence this way is helpful. It is true and it can help relieve the suffering of sticking to the fixed view that things are permanent.

Working on oneself in any and all situations is beneficial to the world. Questioning my role and existence in the world can be helpful. It can also be harmful if I am not gentle with myself. I work on giving myself Metta (loving-kindness) while doing this work. This helps me when the inner confusion and pain is great. It helps me to remember to be gentle. It isn't pleasant to see my fixed views, and it also isn't always pleasant to meet with suffering people. Sometimes people can be mean. With my practice of metta and a sense of humor, I can meet and work with most people at Laguna Honda.

In conclusion, meeting with residents at Laguna Honda is helpful for self and others. I feel that I can work on myself when meeting a resident, and I can help a resident to the best of my ability. I'm able to help residents by the various tools that I have: listening, prayer, meditation, philosophy, kindness and understanding. My prayer is that this work is beneficial for everyone and that I will become better at doing the mysterious work of a chaplain.