

## **MY CHAPLAINCY JOURNEY**

by Eileen Messina

When I reflect on my chaplaincy journey, the first words that spring to mind are compassion and liberation. I feel so grateful for the Sati Center's Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program because it gave me the sense of emotional safety needed for my training and work as a spiritual caregiver. The experiential engagement with the Buddha's teachings, as well as the commitment of my fellow students and the opportunity to take risks in being vulnerable and in meeting the suffering of others, allowed for both a deep letting go and a development of the qualities most valued in the Sati program: generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy/strength, patience, truth, resolve, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

After completing the yearlong Buddhist chaplaincy program, I enrolled in a second yearlong chaplaincy training called Clinical Pastoral Education, a professional, interfaith program offered in numerous hospitals. I was surprised at how different the CPE training was from the Sati program. Whereas the Sati training fostered a feeling of community where we were all in it together, the hospital training was structured hierarchically with a clear chain of command and authority. It was new for me to be on the receiving side of my CPE supervisor's teaching approach of aggressively challenging us during group processing sessions. This confused me at the time but also strengthened my Buddhist practice and self-understanding. Using the mindfulness tool of gently returning to my breath, I was able to relax, understand, and let go.

Though the CPE training was hard, I am very grateful for it. The interfaith approach helped me reexamine the religion I had grown up with. I realized that the rituals of my childhood

church had nurtured me. This prepared me to use rituals to support people of other faiths. The CPE program also taught me to trust my Buddhist practice and helped me learn to articulate my understanding of the Dharma. In the process, my knowledge of the Dharma and my skills in chaplaincy became more integrated into my practice—both personally and in my work with patients, their families, and caregivers in the hospital setting.

The CPE program strengthened my Buddhist practice and my capacity to meet suffering. I am more attuned now to being compassionate in an effortless way. This attunement, in turn, creates an opportunity for liberation, allowing me to see not only the depth of suffering in myself and in the world but also the boundlessness of the heart. As I think of the freedom that chaplaincy has taught me, I also think of the Buddha's teaching that in protecting myself, I can provide safety to others. In learning not to harm myself with clinging and aversion, I discovered how a chaplain can provide the space for people to open up and share the depths of their lives.

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