

## *Interfaith Chaplaincy*

I currently serve as a volunteer Buddhist chaplain at one of the local jails here in Portland, Oregon. I've been doing that for nearly one and one-half years. Last year, in addition, I served at the Portland Veterans Administration Hospital as a chaplaincy intern. I was there part-time, so it took about five months to complete the internship for one CPE unit.

I was raised as an Orthodox Jew. Much of my family on both of my parents' sides, including my paternal grandparents and uncles, had died in the Holocaust. I was born not long after. Probably from birth, I was raised to fear Christianity and Christians. I had very little contact with Christians until junior high. I did not enter a church until I was in college. I stopped actively practicing Judaism in my early twenties, but still consider myself a "cultural" Jew. I formally became a Buddhist 22 years ago, having begun a meditation practice seven years before with Buddhist organizations but considering myself a "secular" meditator for the first few years. In the ensuing 22 years, and especially in the last ten years, I have become what others might consider a somewhat orthodox Buddhist. For the 22 years, I've practiced in the Theravada tradition, and for the last ten, I've had a Thai Forest lineage monk as my teacher and attended retreats mostly taught by Thai Forest lineage monastics.

At the jail, I am explicitly a Buddhist chaplain. I co-lead Buddhist meditation groups, visit inmates individually for spiritual counseling, and hand out Buddhist materials. We are able to offer Buddhist meditation, because it is under the auspices of the Chaplain's department. When an inmate approaches me to ask a question or to request literature, I am able to say, "I'm the Buddhist chaplain. How can I help?" If they are not interested in Buddhism, I tell them to send a request to visit with one of the other chaplains, such as one of the Christian chaplains. I have been asked to pray with Christian inmates. They offer the prayer, and I witness. I've never been asked to offer the prayer, only to witness. I'm happy to be of service to anyone who wants to experience opening their heart in any form that is useful to them. I'm only one of two non-Christian chaplains visiting the jail (out of 30+ volunteer chaplains; the other non-Christian chaplain is Muslim), so I seem to be the "go-to" chaplain for someone seeking counseling or literature in any tradition other than Christianity or Islam. Sometimes, that is enjoyable; sometimes, it is just a complete misunderstanding. But it is always well intended.

At the VA, though, I was an interfaith chaplain. That meant I was there to serve every patient, and every patient's family, no matter what their spiritual practice or orientation is. Of course, whenever there was a patient who identified as Buddhist, I visited that patient. In my cohort, I was the only non-Christian, so I also got to visit most of the patients who identified as other than Christian, including Jewish. But the great majority of patients at the Portland VA who identify with a religion are Christian, so most of the patients I was there to serve were Christian.

When I first started my internship, my understanding was that, after seeing a patient, I had to complete a form template questionnaire for each patient I visited, the first question of which was whether how the patient had identified religiously on admission was correct or if we needed to change their records. On a fairly frequent basis, it led to the patient asking me my religious orientation. I would first reply that every chaplain at the VA was interfaith and that I was there to serve everyone. With some patients, that ended that line of inquiry. But many patients pursued it, and ultimately I had to respond "Buddhist." On a few occasions, they then either asked me to leave and send a Christian chaplain, to which I had to respond that it was against hospital policy to do that as we are all interfaith, or they challenged my ability to serve them. On a few other occasions, they shared their experience with Buddhism and Buddhist friends, which was quite pleasant. But overall, it was challenging and it felt like it was inhibiting my ability to serve as a chaplain there. After some time, I shared this experience with my supervisor, who immediately told me to stop asking that question so that the question of my own religious orientation would come up much less frequently. I was very grateful, and the quality of my interchanges with patients changed after that. Many of the patients assumed I was a Christian. I never felt quite comfortable with that assumption. Under the Fourth Precept for laypeople, which relates to speech, it is a violation of the precept not to speak when speaking is called for. But this seemed to me to be a gray area, and I never challenged the assumption that I am Christian unless I was directly asked.

But a very real challenge for me was offering prayer. I realized that if I wanted to serve as an interfaith chaplain, I had to find a way to offer prayer in a way that was congruent with the patient's beliefs and, at the same time, felt authentic for me. Apart from the discussion of prayer in the Buddhist chaplaincy training program, I had no previous experience with offering Christian prayer, and I heard very little of it. Perhaps because of my upbringing, I never felt comfortable addressing prayer to Jesus. As for God, I had stopped being a practicing Jew in part because, although I tried hard, I could never relate to that image of God, the cranky old man in the sky with a long gray beard who needed me to continually praise him every time I offered a blessing or prayer ("Blessed art Thou, oh Lord our God, King of the Universe . . ."). I tried to reassure myself that words are just words, and this was just a question of semantics. I was meeting the patients on the common ground of shared spirituality, if not actual belief, and I was helping these folks to open their hearts and even find healing in the process. But it never fully worked.

One member of my cohort, a long-time Episcopal priest, offered a great piece of advice: When he approaches the bedside and the question of prayer comes up, he asks three questions:

1. What are you praying for?
2. What language do you use in prayer? / To whom do you address your prayer?
3. Would you like to offer the prayer?

After asking those questions, I always felt comfortable witnessing prayer offered by the patient or family member, whether or not it was Christian. But most of the time, the answer to the third question was a request that I offer the prayer. I tried to imitate prayer I heard Christians in my cohort offer, but that felt truly uncomfortable and inauthentic for me. Then one member of the cohort suggested that I offer standard prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer. I gathered standard prayers from my fellow interns, fellows and chaplains, and it was quite helpful. But there were still many occasions on which either offering the standard prayer felt inauthentic, or there was no standard prayer I knew or could find that was appropriate.

Unfortunately, I never found the way to completely feel authentic working as an interfaith chaplain at the VA. As a result, I've decided that, at least for now, it works much better for me to be the explicitly Buddhist chaplain at the jail and not to try to do interfaith work or even pursue more CPE units if it requires being an interfaith chaplain.