

Elizabeth Johnston Taylor, an associate professor in the School of Nursing at Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, CA has an article in a recent edition (9/24/07) of *Advance for Nurses*, which our Director of Nurses passed on to me suspecting I might find it interesting. Entitled, *Spiritual Pain*, it explores why and how nurses might respond to a patient who expresses such pain. She notes that patients often don't recognize the nature of their pain, nor do the nurses. Whether the issue arises in response to a scheduled therapy session, "What's the use?" or in response to severe physical pain, "Why does God let this happen to me?" she rightly notes that it doesn't matter. It is still a cry for a spiritual need to be addressed. I found her insights for nurses on the mark and applicable to anyone ministering to or caring for anyone in any capacity. More to the point, I found it to be a wonderful tool for anyone sensitive enough to hear the intent of another person's cry for spiritual healing – be it a nurse, an aide, a housekeeper, a clergy person, a lay-person, a family member or a friend. Its application in the area of ministry with and for older adults is provocative.

She suggests the ethical goal for such ministry. It is not to fix a problem. It is not about glib responses or preaching a specific theology. "Fixing others' spiritual problems, correcting spiritual suffering and converting patients to a nurse's (*your category*) beliefs are inappropriate goals." Enabling the person to self-discover the pain and understand their own response to it is the goal!

She notices the many ways caregivers silence the request for help. They change the subject; they minimize the pain ("It isn't that bad, is it?); diminishing its importance with a humorous remark; offering a quick solution ("Maybe God is testing you and trying to make you stronger.); focusing on information that is tangential to the spiritual pain (So what church, if any do you attend?); imposing your own solution; and imposing positivity ("Just give yourself time; it'll all work out.).

Instead of these potentially hurtful responses, she suggests listening silently, offering only words of understanding and acceptance; a liberal use of restating what you have heard and asking open ended questions (questions that do not presuppose the answers).

Such an approach, I believe, is healing in that it allows the person in pain to discover the real meaning of his/her pain, allows that person's own resources to be tapped in coping, and affirms the person's gifts as a spiritual being who has temporarily gotten side-tracked. It is Pastoral Care 101 in a new package! All caregivers and people engaging in ministry with and for older adults forget its lessons from time to time and need a reminder. We do not fix other people's spiritual pain, we enable the process by which healing becomes possible.

Jim Stinson
Consultant on Older Adult Ministries