Times of Spiritual Ennui and Spiritual Flourishing: A Clinical Pastoral Education Resident's Reflection on Spiritual Caregiving and Learning during a Pandemic

Syazana Durrani

As a CPE resident working in hospital chaplaincy during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not have asked for a more immersive training. At the height of the pandemic scare, I was in my fourth unit of CPE and my second unit as a hospital chaplain. The shock and domino effect of pandemic closures reverberated throughout the community. I would be lying if I said I was not affected by the global impact of the pandemic, which transpired at a microcosmic level at the hospital I worked at. What the national and global news displayed in the media, we experienced intimately at the hospital, from rising numbers of COVID-19 patients to our own need to cope with ventilators and personal protective equipment.

Despite the added pressures of working during a pandemic, during my hospital residency, I did find my stride. I was responsible for providing interfaith spiritual care on the women's and children's floors and was the designated Muslim chaplain for patients and families who asked for a chaplain from that tradition. I also led the weekly spiritual group on the addiction floor. My chaplain mentor reminded me that, while we were chap-

Syazana Durrani is Goodwin House CPE program assistant and in her final year as a student of chaplaincy at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace in Connecticut. Email: sdurrani@goodwinhouse.org.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry
ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

lains for the guests of the hospital (the patients and their families), we were also in a familial community with all the hospital staff. I always made sure I checked in with all the my 'family members' in the hospital, not just the healthcare staff providing direct patient care but also the volunteers and the security staff as well as the housekeeping and food service teams.

In any time and place, it always takes significant self-reflection and a variety of CPE tools to do hospital ministry. Those of us who were training to be professional chaplains during this pandemic had to contend with many added stressors and much more uncertainty than in a "typical" CPE residency.

Spiritual Ennui: Shared Experience

In my case, the pandemic instigated a sense of spiritual ennui that required me to muster an even deeper sense of self than usual to complement my journey as a spiritual caregiver. First, I needed to allay loved ones' worries who communicated their puzzlement at my continuing the spiritual work despite my being "only a chaplain resident." Because the whole world was navigating the modern pandemic together, it did not feel like there was a standard framework for spiritual care residents in terms of essential worker identity. This was especially so for me as a Muslim woman; my community is still carving out our spiritual caregiving space. This is a time of possibility, potential, flexibility, and, indubitably, some uncertainty.

Secondly, I recognized the gift that my chaplain and CPE community gave me—the container of grounded strength and wisdom that helped me continue with hospital ministry during a pandemic. My sense of belonging alongside other spiritual caregivers and sojourners was a respite at a time when the world had been thrown into bewildering chaos. Recognizing that other hospitals, communities, and CPE sites were also doing their best—that they, too, were fumbling through what we hoped would soon be a cohesive post-pandemic transformation—relieved my anxiety, reminding that we were all in this together.

Futuwwah, or Spiritual Chivalry in the Islamic Tradition

Because I grew up in a Malaysian Muslim household, religious, spiritual, and mythical stories are the bedrock of my identity formation. The gift

of CPE has been the push toward naming these foundational identities that inform and sustain my spiritual care, particularly during this disconcerting time in our lives.

The Islamic concept of *futuwwah*, better known as spiritual chivalry, was the deep well of spirituality I relied on during my training. Scholar and philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes *futuwwah* (or *jawanmardi* in Farsi) as the characteristics of courage and generosity associated with the highest level of chivalry conveyed into our world of external action deriving from our inner, spiritual life and practice.[1] What this means is that I see chaplaincy, chaplaincy training, and the identity of a chaplain intuitively as a personifying spiritual chivalry that feels effortless in its embodiment and practice, especially since this chivalry is not exclusive to a particular person or tradition. Nasr notes that the ecumenical aspect of *futuwwah* is closely related to the Sleepers of the Cave narrative.[2] The Quran recounts this parable about a group of youths who fled to the wilderness to escape the persecution of a cruel king. The group sought refuge in a cave and "slept" for over three hundred years.[3] When they awoke, they contended that they had slept for "perhaps a day or part of a day,"[4] but when one of them went into town, they found out they had in fact lived a long time ago; once their story became known, the group passed away.

The term *youth* used in the Quran in this narrative does not describe physical young age so much as it is linked to "the eternal spring of life of the Spirit"[5] that is integral to the embodiment of spiritual chivalry. Nasr describes the wide range of domains that spiritual chivalry has historically manifested in—"from the activity of the guilds in the bazaars to those of knights on the battlefield, from Sufi contemplators to sultans and viziers."[6] Thus, extending spiritual chivalry into the hospital and the work of a chaplain is not too far afield from this age-old practice in bazaars, battlefields, or sultanate courts, especially when the ground of *futuwwah* is *fitrah*,[7] or humanity's primordial nature. According to thirteenth-century Islamic mystical author al-Kashani, the goal of *futuwwah* is to enable our innateness to come to the fore and prevail over our base nature and life's hardships, giving way to "the transfer of light of *fitrah* from potentiality to actuality."[8]

What does this look like in a hospital during the pandemic? For me, being present with my own inner incongruence and sitting with its source—as a means of perpetually working on my self—equates to the patient tenacity of such striving as a means of artistry. My heart, myself, and my inner

world are my canvas. My desire for and commitment to spiritual discipline (as far as spiritual caregiving goes) are the paint colors I'm continuing to mix and apply onto the canvas to discover what the painting will be.

CPE as Artisan Apprenticeship

The moment I read my seminary's webpage description of CPE, I felt a strong resonance with the experiential education I was about to engage in. In particular, I was drawn to the description of CPE as allowing participants "to use clinical aspects in their current ministry settings and then reflect on these in a CPE group process." This reminded me of an important aspect of my own tradition: the spiritual *khanqah* in the Islamic world that oversees spiritual retreats and the character reformation of spiritual seekers.[9] Similar to monasteries and hermitages, in these spiritual spaces, "circles of disciples (were) taught, trained and guided . . . with formulaic prescriptions for spiritual exercises issued by authoritative masters."[10]

From the get-go, my ACPE Certified Educator held space for me to check out my spiritual assumptions and boundaries. The meeting and release of shame, fear, and tears were the norm as I stretched inwardly, diving deep into places I dared not traverse alone. I liken the action-reflection process of CPE to the alchemical process of the transformation of lead into gold. Another common symbol of transformation favored by Islamic poets is the imagery of a moth burning in a candle's flame:

> The moth flies around the flame
> not satisfied with light and heat.
> So it throws itself on the Truth of Truth
> and becomes annihilated, humbled and scattered (in ashes),
> remaining without form, or body or name or mark.[11]

The gift of imagery for inner work is its expansiveness of meaning and its resonance with individuals. Although burnt moths may not have any significance for someone else, for me they represent the ultimate beauty in a life that wills itself to "die before it dies" to be with its Ultimate Self/Ultimate Creator/The One and Only. Yet another favorite parable of mine that recounts this union is the Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello's tale *The Salt Doll*:

> A salt doll journeyed for thousands of miles over land, until it finally came to the sea. It was fascinated by this strange moving mass, quite unlike anything it had ever seen before.

> "Who are you?" said the salt doll to the sea.
>
> The sea smilingly replied, "Come in and see."
>
> So the doll waded in. The farther it walked into the sea the more it dissolved, until there was only very little of it left. Before that last bit dissolved, the doll exclaimed in wonder, "Now I know what I am!"[12]

Conclusion

This past year of the pandemic and my CPE residency has taught me two important distinct lessons: I do not have just one identity, and we never know just what life will throw at us. As a Muslim and as a spiritual caregiver, who I am and my responses to what is in front of me are on a continuum, and the artisanal work of CPE and spiritual caregiving invites me to be present to all these realities. The permission and the learned discipline to befriend that which I fear is the gift of this past year as well as of my several years of chaplaincy training. The more I am able to do this for myself, the more consistently I can help another befriend what they fear in a spiritual caregiving way. Perhaps that is the ultimate process of CPE—doing for oneself and thus being able to do for another so that we may ultimately return to ourselves, again and again.

NOTES

1 Seyyed H. Nasr, "Spiritual Chivalry," in *World Spirituality: Islamic Spirituality Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), 304.

2 Also known as *Ashab al-Kahf*, Companions of the Cave (Quran 18:9–26), or Sleepers of Ephesus, the group of people mentioned in the Quran and Christian tradition escaped to the wilderness to seek protection from religiously persecution by a cruel king.

3 Quran 18:10–11: *'Remember' when those youths took refuge in the cave, and said, "Our Lord! Grant us mercy from Yourself and guide us rightly through our ordeal." So We caused them to fall into a dead sleep in the cave for many years . . .*Quran 18:25: *They had remained in their cave for three hundred years, adding nine.*

4 Quran 18:19: *And so We awakened them so that they might question one another. One of them exclaimed, "How long have you remained 'asleep'?" Some replied, "Perhaps a day, or part of a day." They said 'to one another', "Your Lord knows best how long you have remained. So send one of you with these silver coins of yours to the city, and let him find which food is the purest, and then bring you provisions from it. Let him be 'exceptionally' cautious, and do not let him give you away.*

5 Nasr, "Spiritual Chivalry," 304.

6 Nasr, "Spiritual Chivalry," 304.

7 *Fitrah* is Arabic for natural constitution or innate nature. *Fitrah* shows up in the Quran (30:30): *"So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. (Adhere to) the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created (all) people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know."* There is also a famous *hadith* (a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, God bless him and grant him peace) that goes: *"No one is born except according to the intrinsic nature (fitrah), then their parents make them Jews, or Christians, or Magians."*

8 Nasr, "Spiritual Chivalry," 308.

9 According to Spahic Omer, "The term *khanqah* is made up of two Persian words, *khana-gah* and means 'a place of residence' for the Sufis, a 'place at the table' or a 'place of recitation.'" Linguistically, these spiritual institutions were not called *khanqah* in every Muslim region (for example, the adopted name in some Turkish regions under the Ottomans was *tekke*). These institutions had evolved from simple *duwayrahs* (small houses or convents) to *ribats* (Sufi hospices) before developing into multifaceted *khanqahs*, especially from the eleventh century CE onward. Spahic Omer, "From Mosques to Khanqahs: The Origins and Rise of Sufi Institutions," *Kemanusiaan* 21, no. 1 (2014): 1–19. In other regions, terms such as *buq'a* (site), *zawiya* (retreat; literally, corner) and even *madrasa* (school) were in use. Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism, The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 121.

10 Omer, "From Mosques to Khanqahs," 15-16. The Islamic concept of 'authoritative masters' derives from spiritual lineages that trace back to the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, himself, with "the idea that those who studied under a particular master shared a common spiritual heritage in the form of the master's unique 'path' or 'method' (*tariq* or *tariqa*)," thus connecting the student and teacher into a "far-fling spiritual family." A Sufi's (master's) role as 'master of training,' in addition to their role as 'master of instruction,' meant that the master "took interest in, and even assumed some responsibility for, the spiritual progress of the aspirants, and he directed,

supervised and criticized their behavior." Karamustafa, *Sufism, The Formative Period*, 116.

11 Al-Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj, *Kitab al-Tawasin*, ed. L. Massignon (Paris: Librairie Paul Gethner, 1913), 16.

12 Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Image Books, 1984), 98.