

Siroj Sorajjakool, *When Sickness Heals: The Place of Religious Belief in Healthcare* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 176 pp.

The author's name and his book are out of the ordinary. It is rich with the stories of how sufferers find meaning. The stories are his personal ones and those heard from his and other patients in the course of his work of counseling, as well as from literature. They are about how pain can be transformed into spiritual development. The book is not a tract that Job's comforters would have written. It is a guide to spiritual care that helps us attend to nonbeing and the negative experiences of living so that we can integrate them into our beings. The author is adamant that—only as caregivers give witness to where the patient is, whether in sadness, anger, boredom, or despair—only the patient can discover meaning that heals. Such meaning is stronger than death or sickness. This is not a meaning that can be imposed but must be found. He opens with the memory of his usually upbeat grandfather staring sadly out on a beach near Bangkok. That young boy, Siroj, later learned why his grandfather had looked sad. He had just learned he had lung cancer and had a short time left. Siroj recalls how his grandfather made meaning of this: he built a house for his family with the time he had left.

In the first chapter, he locates spirituality in the ontological drive toward meaning, self-understanding, and transcendence. His sources are Jung, Panikkar, Macquarrie, and Tillich. He then discusses the interface between spirituality and religions: religious myth is symbolic and comforting as long as the symbols live. Living symbols help us re-balance our lives when pain unbalances us. Religious examples are drawn from Christian and Thai Animistic and other rituals. Like the cat chasing its tail, we have to learn that we participate in the reality we seek to understand: the cat is a whole. Sorajjakool is eloquently critical of our tendency in the West to think linearly and how this leads us to delineate in areas where delineation only leads to alienation. In this he locates the problem with religion in our generation. He affirms our need for fantasy and denial in suffering. He affirms that God is God and miracles can happen; however, when they do not, he is sensitive to the possibilities of transformative meaning through acceptance of what is. I was often moved by the poignancy of his examples of human suffering and transcendence.

Those readers familiar with clinical pastoral education will be interested to read of the father of this movement, Anton Boisen, who is compared to the theologian Søren Kierkegaard. Both of these men struggled within mental illness to forge the divide between despair and meaning and left us legacies of rich dialogue between spirituality and health. Sorajjakool speaks also from the experiences of ten years teaching medical students the art of spiritual care. He is well versed in the research literature about the benefits of spirituality on health, though that is not the focus of this book. Perhaps the strongest original contribution in this book is Sorajjakool's personal awareness of the cultural dimension of finding meaning and the difference that makes in spiritual care.

Deryck Durston, associate director
Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc.
1549 Clairmont Rd., Ste. 103
Decatur, GA 30033
E-mail: deryck@acpe.edu