

## Mystery Seeking Tangibility

**A**s a spiritual care provider, my job is to walk with the soul as it pursues something tangible to love. The soul is an eternal secret. The soul reaches out to touch and to be touched, to know and to be known. And yet, as soon as it “touches” and is “known,” it moves and shifts into a new eternity. Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer describes the soul as “a wild animal in the backwoods of the psyche.” The soul is a “wild animal,” mysterious, alive, and beautiful. My vocational work is to tame and be tamed by this wild animal, to befriend souls and try to help free these wild creatures when they get caught in thickets and fall in ditches.

The soul holds mystery; it is mystery’s homestead. Dickens says it best in his novel *The Tale of Two Cities*:

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of these darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!

This is the mystery: the enclosed secret of each room in each soul-home. We are all Dickens’s protagonists walking through the city at night, peering into the windows of each other, and seeing mere snapshots of each other’s ever-changing souls. When I sit at the bedside of a patient, I am aware of my limitations in the face of such “secrets.” In each human there is potential, unknown energy to become and to have been, an unknown energy of a story and its meaning. The soul is home to this story. And this story is complex and eternal—I certainly won’t hear the whole story in one 30-minute visit. Humility generates curiosity; it is the spirit of listening and good questions. Humility keeps me honest, present, and awake to the secret eternity in the patient.

The spiritual paradox between mystery and tangibility is most wholly found in the life of another human being. Relationship is the pinnacle expression of spirituality because relationship requires mutual pursuit. And so, relationship is the pinnacle goal of spiritual care. Humans, in particular, relate to one another through stories. When I meet another, we may share our life story or stories we hear in movies or in the news. There is a story that brings people to the exact place, at an exact time, to meet one another. In re-

relationships, multiple stories layer, dance, and co-create into a dynamic story of togetherness. A story is like the imagination in that it seeks to speak the truth of inner mystery. When I am with a patient, I attempt to create connection and trust and make space for stories.

Stories are intimate encounters with another. The most sacred and profound moments of my life have been moments of the vulnerability that comes with storytelling and story sharing. In relationships, the soul's pursuit of something tangible to love mutually rests in each others' souls. Last year I was an intern at a community hub called Recovery Café. People struggling with addiction, coping through homelessness, and/or suffering with mental health difficulties come to the café for meals, community, and acceptance. The organization describes itself as "a place for healing and transformation." I describe the organization as a place that "feels more like church than any church I have ever been to." Recovery Café is a place where relationships are built over cups of coffee.

We were in line for coffee when I introduced myself to a quiet man; I'll call him Phil. Phil is a large, white man who is homeless and too proud to "put up a sign." Phil sat at the same café table for two weeks with his hood pulled up over his head. I noticed he didn't talk to anyone. I introduced myself at the coffee pot and asked if he wanted company. We began talking about coffee—we both take our coffee black, no 'frilly stuff.' I told him that I noticed he didn't talk to many other people. *Do you prefer to be alone?*

"No," he said. "but its my option right now"

"Because if you were not alone . . ."

"Then I wouldn't be safe."

Phil went on to tell me stories about the danger of relationships. He told me how the night before he found Recovery Café, he had escaped from a woman. The previous week, this woman had found him and offered him work. He was thrilled to have a job. She hired him to fix things around her house. One day she asked him fix a sink in the basement, a part of the house he had never been in. He went down and found an elaborate sex chamber. The woman and her partner locked him in the basement. They tortured him. Phil wept as he talked about his escape and his new fear.

Suffering breaks us open. As Phil spoke, he broke open. I broke open as Phil spoke, in a different, lesser way. We were both open and vulnerable, and when people are open, they don't have to reach as far to touch the mystery of another.

What happened when I talked to Phil? What happens when we come close to another? Why is this spiritual? The soul's mystery finds momentary tangibility in the mystery of the other, and mutual presence creates momentary sanctuary. Wild soul is tamed by wild soul, in mutual surrender. Human togetherness is the fullest expression of spirituality when it is vulnerable because our honest complexity is witnessed, actualized, and shared.

There are dimensions of mystery. There is the mystery we know exists inside of us, the mystery reflected in the world around us, and there is the source of all mystery. All dimensions of mystery are acknowledged in the tender moments of companionship. Phil's suffering made him vulnerable, but his sharing makes him spiritual. Phil reaches out from his vulnerability and finds something tangible to love: a young woman who listens and, hopefully, his own story as he actualizes it.

I think the most profound care I can offer a patient is to be spiritually awake. Spirituality requires us to be awake and alive and to fall in love. When the soul finds something tangible to love, although this love is a brief encounter with our own deep mystery, it is also love. When we love something, we want it to live, flourish, and be well. It is impossible to be spiritually awake without being prophetic. Spirituality requires presence, attentiveness, and deep listening. We listen to an inner voice that teaches us how to live and who we are. We listen to the tangible voices around us teaching us who they are and how they live. We listen to the One voice, the source of mystery, holding all things together. Nothing and no one is a mere object. This source of mystery is infused in everything—the tangible mirrors to the soul are not mirrors at all, but relationships.

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