

Spirituality at Work: Shaping Institutional Culture from Within

Tom Harshman

In graduate school, I took a class from Dr. Vincent Harding called “Social Transformation.” Harding began every class session by placing a potted plant in the middle of the room and allotting a couple of minutes for silent contemplation. The plant was an odd-looking succulent; I was somewhat annoyed that we began each class in this way. Here I was in class with Vincent Harding—living history and a brilliant scholar—all I wanted was for him to teach and for me to soak up everything I could possibly retain. Instead, we were looking at this weird little purple vine.

As the weeks passed, the content of the course became increasingly more difficult. We began to deal with the challenges of transforming institutions and culture. About the third or fourth week, during the silent time, my thoughts seemed to focus on the topic of the day. My mind would roll

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Vincent Harding was professor of religion and social transformation at the Iliff School of Theology from 1981–2004. A noted historian, social activist, and author, his books include *There Is a River, Hope and History*, and *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*. Harding was a colleague of King’s and drafting the latter’s anti-Vietnam speech “A Time to Break Silence.”

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over my perspective, my questions, the weaknesses and strengths of my viewpoint. I imagined my colleagues reflecting in a similar fashion. During these weeks, there was a spirit of curiosity and respect that undergirded our difficult conversations. My classmates and I found ways to remain in relationship in the midst of intellectual struggle.

During the fifth or sixth week, my silent time focus shifted. I began to notice my feelings related to the readings or the themes of the class. I would notice my fear, my excitement, my anger. Again, I assumed my colleagues were having parallel reflections. Throughout these weeks, I noted feeling words infusing our interactions; there was space for the expression of emotion.

Toward the end of the class, we began visioning social transformation beyond strategies and tactics. It was during this period's silent time that I became particularly aware of the plant itself, noticing all its oddities and unexpected features. In our class discussions, I remember being struck with the creativity and innovation that emerged as we dreamed of a renewed world.

Harding was the person who first introduced me to the leadership value of a reflective pause.

CHAPLAINS AS CULTURE BUILDERS

As spiritual caregivers in healthcare organizations have evolved from external religious visitors to employed, specifically trained professionals, our roles within the institution have changed. We are now both integral clinical practitioners as well as essential business partners; we impact clinical outcomes as well as operational objectives. In this transition, chaplains have had to create ways to continue to hold pastoral and prophetic relationships within our corporate entities. In this reflection, I will share one approach we are using in my healthcare system—Dignity Health—and consider how we seek to shape our institutional culture. I will focus on the business partner dimension of our professional role—how we support caregiver well-being and resilience, encourage a work setting characterized by kindness, and participate in the operational goal of reduced voluntary turnover among the staff with whom we share our healthcare ministry.

We refer to our culture-building activities as “spirituality at work” and have developed a simple rubric for describing what we believe are essential

components of the culture we desire. We call it a “recipe with three ingredients”: life-giving relationships + meaningful work + reflective pause = spirituality at work.

The phrase *life-giving relationships* reflects the way we structure respect and compassion into our collegial interactions. We operationalize this ingredient in a variety of ways, from how we approach unintended medical outcomes to how we recognize and celebrate one another. With life-giving relationships, we aspire to create a culture where suffering is responded to with compassion and joy is enhanced within our community of work.

Meaningful work seeks to deepen the sense of meaning and purpose of our staff who work in both our care and our business centers. We focus on two different ways to experience meaning at work. First, our teams and leaders are encouraged to continue to strengthen the link between what each individual does, every day, to help someone or to further the common good. Second, we desire a work partnership in which the activity an individual performs is aligned with their personal interests and values. Our leaders are coached to attend to how a team member is finding meaning in their work, and our staff are encouraged to advocate for fulfillment within their career path.

The *reflective pause* is the third ingredient of spirituality at work and the main focus of this conversation. We trace this aspect of spirituality to the heritage of the Catholic women religious who founded the majority of our hospitals. As they sought to respond to emerging needs around them, they relied on prayer and meditation to hear the specifics of their call to serve. As we seek to respond to the emerging needs of a healthcare ministry in the twenty-first century, we believe we are well served by emphasizing a similar reflective stance. The reflective pause is operational in our organization in a rich variety of tangible behaviors and is supported by a number of electronic and print resources. An example of the latter is our “weekly reflective pause.”

THE WEEKLY REFLECTIVE PAUSE

The weekly reflective pause was the idea of one of our clinic chaplains, Brian Stoltey. He sought a way to minister to the staff and providers of a large group of clinics, so he created a reflection resource that included a quote, an image, his written reflection on what the quote invoked, and a



Not everything
that is
faced
can be
changed;
but
nothing can
be changed
until
it is
faced.

-James Baldwin
(1924 – 1987)
Novelist

There is much in life we meet with eagerness. A new love, a fulfilling job, a cherished friend, a creative passion. We come to these experiences with anticipation, even zeal. Once met, we linger, enjoying the comfort or the vitality these parts of living bring.

There are also aspects of life, we'd rather avoid. Difficult conversations, enduring injustices; our mistakes and our omissions and our addictions. We deflect; we dodge. Sometimes we worry that no change is possible and plead this to evade what we know to be true.

Often we simply fear facing our limits.

In facing reality, we embrace both truth and vulnerability. We engage the imperfection of life; we accept the flaws in human activity. We acknowledge that we, individually and collectively, have not loved fully, freely, justly, kindly. No longer hiding from discomfort, we find openness a resource for healing, empathy a powerful ally in renewal.

We discover if transformation is possible. We access the power embedded in honesty, the courage possible when hiding from truth no longer exhausts our strength. We may not fully realize the change for which we hope, but we will actualize the freedom that comes with integrity.

If renewal is attainable, we've now begun that journey; we are now co-creators of the possible.

What realities have I been avoiding? How can I access the courage to discover what is possible?

 Dignity Health.

Figure 1: Sample of Weekly Reflective Pause

thoughtful question. Those in Brian's care responded with enthusiasm to these regular writings. In the system office, we began to wonder how this practice could be spread. We also wondered if the practice could become a vehicle for shaping both a leadership culture of reflection as well as a work culture of grounded purpose.

For the past year and a half, I have authored the system's weekly reflective pause. I follow Brian's inspiration—choosing a quote and an image, reflecting on the quote, and ending with a self-reflective curiosity. We limit the reflections to about 225 words, so the writing is often more poem than prose. The quotes are chosen with consideration of what is occurring within our system or within the larger culture, with an eye to incorporating a breadth of spiritual traditions and secular writers. For example, this year our organization explored a ministry alignment with another large not-for-profit Catholic hospital system. At particular points in the process of that discernment, the weekly quotes and reflections focused on clarity, core values, courage, grief, or change. In the spring, our care and business centers celebrated a values-related employee recognition; the weekly reflective pause focused on living with integrity.

Another consideration for choosing the quotes has been the attempt to reflect a diversity of authors. Choosing quotes has been a disheartening reminder of the absence of many voices in our shared culture's lexicon; particularly rare are the voices of women, people of color, people of a variety of gender and sexual identities, and others whose words might reflect an experience of oppression. Many larger religious traditions have codified writings, but even so, the process of selecting quotes has highlighted the systemic exclusion of a diversity of voices, even when collected writings exist. I am grateful for the colleagues who have helped me pay attention to this disparity through their challenges and suggestions.

REFLECTION AS A RESOURCE FOR LEADERS

The weekly reflective pause is distributed broadly; a good number of our 65,000 care and business center employees ultimately receive or have other access to the electronic PDF. The pause is an important tool for our leaders. Leaders (including our System Board) are educated on how we understand the pause to support their success as leaders. We think this occurs in at least three ways and that leaders can use the pause quite deliberately.

We believe the weekly reflective pause helps create unity around our mission and deepens our leaders' sense of meaning in their work. For the most part, our employees, including our leaders, have a solid sense that they are doing meaningful work at our organization; in our annual employee engagement survey, "My work is meaningful" consistently scores at the top of how our employees experience their vocations. We have a strong brand inspiration of delivering *humankindness* and, amongst leaders, solid knowledge of our mission, vision, and values. All of these serve to forge unity amongst our workforce. The weekly reflective pause is yet another resource for mission alignment. Received by all levels in our organization, the pause can be a shared focus for the week. It is used to begin meetings or staff huddles; one of our care centers uses it in conjunction with their sponsored exercise program.

We believe the weekly reflective pause strengthens leaders' ability to self-reflect and expand self-awareness. Leaders are generally trained to reflect on circumstances outside of themselves and to consider the different impacts of various decisions. They are often less adept at considering their own attitudes, values, and assumptions and the impact these have on the decisions they make. In clinical training for spiritual care, these two "muscles" (self-awareness and skills for ministry) are overtly taught and reviewed for competency. The last two sentences of the weekly reflection are always questions. These questions invite the reader to consider an aspect or two of how the reflection of that week might relate to them personally. For leaders, we hope that this subtle inquiry will in a small way strengthen their capacity for self-awareness and in turn allow for more internal awareness of the influences on their management activities.

A reflective pause can stimulate creative thinking and innovative decision-making. We hope that the three artistic elements of the pause—the visual from nature, the large-font quotation, and the poetic style of the reflective words—help the reader access their more creative side. Healthcare today requires innovative thinking and creative solutions to transition into sustainable care models. We hope that activating a less linear thought process allows for more creative and organic leadership, strategic thinking, and innovative problem-solving.

OUR HOPES

Beyond these possibilities, the pause helps humanize the rapid pace of our workplaces. It helps create an organizational habit of deliberately slowing down and consciously clearing our thoughts. This in itself enhances work satisfaction. Our teams may be more fully present in their work; leaders may more fully enjoy the vocation of leadership.

It is not clear to me the degree to which the weekly reflective pause is an avenue for prophetic challenge within the organization. I hope that the choice of quotes and the diversity of authors stir readers' well-worn paths of thinking and allows for novel consideration. I hope that the narrative uses language that adheres to the readers' imaginations and uproots conventions. At times, I hope the gestalt of the pause redirects us from making decisions that may be practical but come at the expense of kindness or justice. As a pastor, my hope is to use my institutional location to invite and challenge our organization to live up to the mission and values on which we were established and to fulfill our aspiration to embody *humankindness*.

In our efforts to create space for both care through comfort and care through challenge, we draw on the ministerial authority of our roles within our organizations. Tools such as the reflective pause may offer an avenue for influencing strategy and institutional decision-making.