

# The Growing Edge: Clinical Pastoral Education in the Midst of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter Protests

Patricia Wilson-Cone

Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying, and life is being born. The fruit ripens the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. . . . [T]his is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!

—Howard Thurman<sup>1</sup>

## OVERVIEW

The above words of wisdom from Dr. Howard Thurman sustained me during the summer of 2020 and my teaching term with four summer interns in the Clinical Pastoral Education program at Providence Alaska Medical Center. The summer training was originally planned for five chaplain residents and four summer interns. But this was the summer of

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Patricia Wilson-Cone is clinical pastoral education manager at Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage, Alaska. Please email the author for a list of resources that accompany this article. Email: [patricia.wilson-cone@providence.org](mailto:patricia.wilson-cone@providence.org).

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COVID-19. Before the summer term began, three residents decided not to stay in Alaska for the summer for the one unit of CPE; they yearned to be home with their families during the growing pandemic. To understand and to be understood is certainly heart-wrenching at times, but I understood as each of them came to me one-on-one to withdraw from the summer unit of CPE.

In CPE I constantly pose questions to students, particularly, “How does that feel?” At the beginning of this summer, I had to ask the question of myself and admit that I was disappointed, angry, and frustrated.

I was also forced to pose additional questions to myself: What does having no residents this summer mean for our program? Will the summer interns be able to survive without yearlong residents mentoring them? (Certainly, the staff chaplains would serve as preceptors and mentors, but the one-on-one relationships with fellow yet more seasoned students would be missing.) How would I teach with COVID-19 surging in our community? How would I address the ongoing news of social unrest surrounding the innocent deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as the growing number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the hospital? How could I supervise with integrity and not wonder, explore, and create a safe place to have open and honest conversations about the themes of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19?

Howard Thurman’s reflection is correct in this year of 2020: all around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born. In this time of “dying and being born,” I came to answer all the questions I asked myself during the course of the summer internship program and found a new path for teaching and learning for my students that we shared, together. In this article, I offer a case study centered around the questions I grappled with over the summer, the ways I came to answer them, and the new questions I was left with at the end of the experience.

CASE STUDY: THE CHALLENGE AND IMPACT OF SPEAKING EVER MORE OPENLY ABOUT  
POWER DYNAMICS IN THE SUMMER 2020 CPE SESSION

*Background and Context*

Even before I started to supervise the summer 2020 intensive CPE unit, I was processing the feedback that one of the residents leaving the program had given me. In the spring of 2020, RB, a woman of Caucasian<sup>2</sup> heritage and a Unitarian who resided in Anchorage, Alaska, took the risk to share the following in her final evaluation (published with RB's permission):

*L1.5—Recognize relational dynamics within group contexts*

One aspect of the relational dynamics within our CPE group that I've been working hard to understand better is the influence of race. I am white and my Certified Educator is African American, and I have become increasingly aware that some of the differences in how she and I approach things are cultural. The best example of this is that when she works one-on-one with a student, trying to teach the student something, her manner is sometimes what I think of as confrontational, and my response is often to feel very uncomfortable and threatened. As she and I—and our whole group—have talked this through over the months, I have come to understand that her style may be at least partially rooted in her culture and might thus be comfortable for someone who shares her culture. For me, on the other hand, coming from a particular white subculture in which confrontation and directness are distinctly not acceptable, this generates discomfort. Working with this insight has helped me to understand her better and feel less uncomfortable in these situations. It has also given me an opportunity to think about the complexity of power dynamics in our group. One aspect of our group power dynamics is that the Certified Educator is our supervisor and the one with the most power in the room. Another aspect is that the other white resident and I have more power than our Certified Educator by virtue of being members of the "norm," the dominant white culture. Our power is the power that comes with being used to having our standards and expectations prevail, and assuming that other people—including our supervisor—will share those standards and expectations. It has been a rich learning experience for me to try to step outside of the filter of my own white experience and allow my standards and expectations to be decentered in favor of my Certified Educator's standards and expectations.

When I first read this statement, my feelings were unmistakable. I was not only befuddled and somewhat discombobulated (confused, disoriented) but also excited and stimulated to see for myself the growth and wis-

dom for me and my students. I celebrated RB's honesty (even audacity) and her capacity to recognize the dynamics in the group context. This new understanding of my teaching style and how my students may perceive it has now informed my work with my future students so that they may wonder and explore with me the essence of how our working relationship evolves and develops in the group context and in individual supervision.

To that end, my CPE training during the summer of 2020 was different, not only because of the new COVID-19 requirements for social distancing and minimizing risk of infection and spread but also because multicultural dynamics were thrust to the forefront of my teaching as the social justice uprising and Black Lives Matter issues were paramount in the community of Anchorage and beyond.

In the introduction to my book *Multicultural Diversity: Opening Our Hearts*, I discuss the value of communication when dealing with various cultures:

Inherent in cultures are expectations, judgments, biases, language, expectations, and many other characteristics. To be able to skate in and out of a plethora of environments, roles, positions, and embrace the culture, putting on the right hat at the right time and never missing a beat, takes skill and experience. It's an incredible dance that has been mastered by few.<sup>3</sup>

It is my feeling that discussing multiculturalism is a form of healing our differences and the terrible conflicts the country is presently encountering.

### *The Learning Context*

To better understand the discussion later in this article, it is important to understand the demographics of the community and the hospital setting in which this clinical pastoral education occurs, as well as the mission and values of the hospital institution.

Anchorage, Alaska, is the largest city in Alaska. It has a population of over 280,000, with over 390,000 living in the metropolitan area that includes a joint Air Force and Army base and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The racial and ethnic makeup of the community is as follows:

- White: 66.0% (62.6% non-Hispanic)
- two or more races: 8.1%
- Asian: 8.1% (3.3% Filipino, 1.2% Korean, 1.1% Hmong)

- American Indian and Alaska Natives: 7.9% (1.4% Iñupiat, 1.1% Yup'ik, 0.8% Aleut)
- Black or African American: 5.6%
- other race: 2.3%
- Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders: 2.0% (1.4% Samoan)
- Hispanic or Latino (of any race): 7.6% (4.4% Mexican, 1.2% Puerto Rican)

Providence Alaska Medical Center (PAMC) is a 364-bed Level II hospital in Anchorage. The mission of PAMC is to serve as expressions of God's healing love, witnessed through the ministry of Jesus, steadfast to serve all, especially those who are poor and vulnerable. PAMC holds core values of compassion, dignity, justice, excellence, and integrity. Our Spiritual Care Department, which includes chaplains, CPE residents and interns, and support staff, provides care to patients, their families, and staff. The CPE program is well-supported by the medical center as well as by the regional executives. The Chief Mission Integration Officer for the Providence Health & Services Alaska region serves as the chair of the Professional Advisory Group for the CPE program at PAMC. The manager of the Spiritual Care Department enthusiastically aids the CPE program in orienting the students, teaching didactics, and providing the students with staff chaplain mentors. Additionally, the Chief Mission Integration Officer for PAMC advocates for the CPE program, most recently when there was a question of CPE interns being allowed to continue in the time of COVID.

The CPE summer intensive unit introduces students to the clinical method of learning and crisis ministry. Participants are typically seminarians, clergy exploring chaplaincy, and/or qualified lay people discerning a sense of call into professional ministry. Summer CPE units at PAMC are twelve weeks in length, generally beginning June 1st and ending in late August.

### *The Learning Community*

The makeup of the summer CPE class consisted of three women (Rev. CG, Yup'ik, of Athabascan and Russian Alaskan Native heritage; Rev. DA, of African American heritage; Rev. MW-B, of African American and Choctaw heritage), and one man (Rev. DE, of Caucasian heritage).

*The Curriculum*

At the beginning of each CPE Unit and at midsession, each student selects the hospital care unit wherein they want to work during their CPE. I use the participatory theory of Ira Shor, wherein each student has the authority to use their voice and make suggestions for the development of the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> An open and honest dialogue surfaces in the group when it's time to select the hospital units where they want to train. This opportunity not only gives voice to the students' interests but empowers them to share the feelings and experiences of different patients according to caregiver, patient, and family race, age, gender, spiritual values, sexual orientation, etc.

In the group process, I subscribe to the approach described in *The Community of Self* by Naim Akbar. This is where I see the manifestations of the interpersonal relations (IPR) group developing and surviving. The students learn how to help themselves, help each other, embrace the concepts of agreeing and disagreeing, and thrive instead of becoming threatened in their learning.<sup>5</sup>

I knew my CPE students were excited to learn how to be creative, effective, and energized in their spiritual care visits to hospitalized patients. At our medical center, students were not allowed to attend to COVID-19 patients in person, but they were able to connect with families of COVID-19 patients via telephone and shared a listening ear, prayers, appropriate spiritual readings, etc. They wrote up these experiences in verbatims, shared their inner pastoral challenges in IPR, and were vulnerable in supervision in sharing how they felt, what they heard, and how it impacted their pastoral identity.

During these turbulent and trying times, I embraced self-reflection and self-care, believing that these practices would help us all in developing a clear pastoral identity and enhance our pastoral formation and that the group formation would reinforce each student's pastoral competency. "Self-reflection may be defined as the use of the mind to observe its own workings—workings that may take the form of thoughts, feelings, fantasies, images, and memories. It may also include reflection upon the activity the mind is engaged in at the moment—trying to understand the patient[s]" and their feelings.<sup>6</sup> During these episodes of self-reflection in IPR and individual supervision, it was apparent that the stress of the times we were living in was wearing on everyone. Our didactic on self-care gave us some necessary resources, and the interns readily discussed and embraced the

concepts of self-empathy and self-care. I believe it was my educational theory of “Each one teach one,” an African proverb, that allowed this summer group to learn and work together. We all had a shared interest in naming our fears, our challenges, and our celebrations.

Over my many years of CPE supervision, my appreciation of Malcolm Knowles has grown immensely, and I resonate especially with his take on contract learning, which he views as “a new way to put it all together.” Knowles states, “It solves the problem of the wide range of backgrounds, education, experience, interests, motivation, and abilities that characterize most adult groups by providing a way for individuals to tailor-make their own learning plans.”<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of every unit, I have each student develop a learning contract that consists of a personal goal, pastoral goal, professional, and group goal. Then, throughout the unit, we refer to that learning contract and reflect on those goals and how the verbatims, didactics, sermon seminars, visits with patients/families, and other unit activities impact them. At the end of the unit, the students consider how they grew and developed throughout the unit and whether they reached their learning goals in some fashion. The final evaluation is my primary method for determining how the students subscribed to self-reflection and whether self-awareness became more ingrained in their daily pastoral walk with patients, families, and caregivers.

#### *Unique Tools for Teaching This CPE Session*

With the reality of COVID-19, my usual methods for teaching and supporting my students had to be changed and supplemented to meet the needs of the current environment and climate of social justice unrest. Not only was distance learning necessary, but the social and political climate compelled me to teach with a greater focus on race and multiculturalism. To this end, I employed several additional tools and approaches, which are included as resources at the end of this article.

#### *“Look Well to the Growing Edge”—Supervisory Dynamics*

My work with DE, the Caucasian man who was the only student with any prior CPE in the group, was difficult and ineffective. During our IPR discussions about race and multiculturalism, we would all share about the

news and various articles we were reading. Early in the unit, DE shared an article by an African American attorney who disagreed with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) concept, which I took to be a clue that DE did not support the BLM movement.

After hearing the perspective and personal stories of his two African American women peers, DE stated that he understood where they were coming from. For the rest of the summer, because of the subsequent articles he shared with the group and his apparent engagement with the group, the rest of the group and I understood that DE supported BLM. He gave us no indication to think otherwise.

To my surprise, in his final evaluation DE wrote that he wished he had been more forceful in expressing his opinion in the IPR group that, while he agreed with BLM as it related to African Americans, he did not agree with the BLM organization in principle as it was contrary to his own beliefs. Specifically, he held strong opinions about the lack of a father figure or nuclear families in the Black community. He also felt that the BLM organization represented a pro-LGBTQ agenda, which he found contrary to what he believed were biblically mandated themes of a nuclear family consisting of a mother and a father and his belief that homosexuality and transsexuality were condemned in the Scriptures.

It appears these opinions may have influenced his work with patients. Earlier in the summer, through a verbatim presentation DE shared with the group, his peers and I discovered he had not provided healthy spiritual care to an African American male patient in the Emergency Room one night. His peers gave him useful feedback about the encounter, and DE engaged in immediate pastoral reflection about his actions. He seemed to provide the appropriate responses in the moment but, reflecting back after DE's final evaluation, I have to wonder if he was dissembling.

I was very disappointed that DE shared his concerns with me only after I had provided my draft final evaluation of him and that he had not discussed this with his peers or me during the final evaluation presentations. None of these opinions nor his assessment of the summer intensive were part of the evaluation DE presented to the group. During our last individual supervision session, when I challenged him, DE indicated that he had been afraid to express these views that were contrary to those of the rest of the class and the certified educator and feared he would not acquire the unit of



CPE as a result. My final evaluation of DE included my reaction to DE's final evaluation and our discussion.

Reflecting on the summer, and especially what DE had written in his final evaluation, I felt appalled, disgruntled, and speechless. I wondered why he was afraid to be honest and vulnerable enough to allow him to explore these feelings within the group. I wondered what was it about me that had prevented him from sharing openly and honestly in our one-on-one supervisory time.

#### CPE EDUCATION GOING FORWARD: A NEW SET OF QUESTIONS

While COVID-19 is with us, the distance-learning classroom via Zoom will also be with us. Navigating around the interpersonal disconnection and lack of trust to allow vulnerability will be a continuing challenge but one that I will seek to improve for myself and my students. One of the challenges I have noticed with Zoom is that some students require more time to allow themselves to be vulnerable with the group and/or supervisor. Additionally, technical issues can cause barriers to arise. We are always looking for ways to improve supervision via Zoom.

What I enjoyed about our discussions this summer was that I was always able to reflect on my group theory of Irvin D. Yalom by refocusing the group back to the here-and-now. Yalom states, "Group membership, acceptance, and approval are of the utmost importance in the individual's developmental sequence. The importance of belonging to childhood peer groups . . . or the proper social 'in' group can hardly be overestimated."<sup>8</sup>

What saddens me is that DE appeared to be engaged with the group and to feel comfortable in sharing and giving feedback. However, we also understood from him that he did not feel he had anything to learn from the group. Furthermore, the group identified a level of arrogance in DE, which he owned and affirmed, along with his effort to teach them. DE also exhibited a male entitlement to a certain level of respect and deference and demonstrated White privilege in his language and posture. I'm still struggling with my own feelings of whether I did enough to validate DE. Did he win my approval? Did I accept him as a Caucasian male who pushed against my African American womanist theologian persona as the certified educator?

On the other hand, I'm not sure DE welcomed the creative thinking that I exhibited in the group and in individual supervision. I believe that

when the values of supervisor and CPE residents and interns diverge and appear to be in conflict with one another, they need to be identified and openly discussed.

As I go forward in my CPE supervision, I have a new set of questions with which to engage and grapple: With a student like DE, should I change my supervisory stance to meet them? Was I right in confronting DE in his final evaluation by stating my recommendations that I wish he had been open and honest to explore his stance on BLM and the LGBTQ community? How do I continue to incorporate the importance of critical conversations about race and multiculturalism and the need to have these dialogues in our CPE curriculum? I am challenged to address my conflicting feelings about DE. I was unable to uncover his discomfort and his lack of true vulnerability and sharing with the group.

The fall 2020 resident unit started with the same three women from the summer 2020 unit, but the group was enriched and empowered by the addition of a new resident (MS, an Orthodox Christian Caucasian male). MS offered the opportunity for the group and for me to continue to grow and learn from a Caucasian man regarding BLM and COVID-19.

In the end, though, I do think students need to demonstrate that they can integrate these conceptual understandings into pastoral practice. I believe it is imperative that we nudge and wonder and explore with ourselves and our students how race, racial conflict, cultural differences, sexual orientation, gender identity, age differences, and faith or spirituality impact how we minister to our patients. My hope is that I will be better at identifying and calling out any racism, sexism, classism, genderism—all -isms. Only by ensuring that dealing with all of these -isms is a necessary part of their growth in self-awareness and a core part of the CPE curriculum can I teach students how to provide adequate spiritual care.

At the end of this tumultuous and important summer, Thurman continues to be a powerful resource for me as I seek to integrate my learning.

It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men and women have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash, and dreams whiten into ash. . . . This is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Howard Thurman, "The Growing Edge," In *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 305.
- 2 All racial and gender identifications are based on students' own preferences.
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