

Restoring the Healer

Restoring the Healer

*Spiritual Self-Care
for Health Care Professionals*



William E. Dorman, DMin



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For Fran Dorman,
my best friend and soul mate



Contents

Foreword by Christina M. Puchalski, MD	xv
Preface	xvii
Acknowledgments	xxv
Introduction	3
CHAPTER 1: Embrace Awe	9
John’s Story: Routine Miracles	10
Joanna’s Story: The Gift of Breathing	11
David’s Story: Untangled Knots	13
Eric’s Story: “I’m Outta Here!”	14
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	15
<i>Constancy and Wonder</i>	15
<i>The Unexpected</i>	16
<i>When Things Fall Short</i>	16
<i>Journaling</i>	17
<i>Lighting a Candle</i>	17
CHAPTER 2: Heal Your Inner Healer	19
Mary’s Story: Final Blessing	20

Evelyn’s Story: Perseverance Personified	22
Rachel’s Story: Sometimes It Hurts	24
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	26
<i>Reality Redefined</i>	26
<i>Sometimes Things Drop into Your Lap</i>	26
<i>Not What I Want, but What Is Best for the Patient</i>	27
<i>Easy Exercises for Wonder</i>	27
CHAPTER 3: Keep Tragedy in Perspective	30
Kathy’s Story: Heart to Heart	31
Brandon’s Story: “How Much More of This Can I Take?”	34
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	36
<i>Numbers and Patients: Keeping My Perspective</i>	36
<i>Medicinal Powers</i>	36
<i>Commitment Is a Process, Not an Event</i>	37
CHAPTER 4: See the Patient as a Person	39
Raymond’s Story: Enter This Room at Your Own Risk	41
Liz’s Story: No Transfusions!	44
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	45
<i>Angels in Disguise</i>	45
<i>Behind Every Diagnosis, There Is a Person</i>	45
<i>In the Presence of the Divine</i>	46
<i>All Persons Are Equal in the Eyes of Health Care</i>	47
<i>Keeping Focused on the Main Thing</i>	48
<i>Staying Connected</i>	48

CHAPTER 5: Practice Self-Care	50
Carl's Story: Mother Knows Best	54
A Doctor's Story: The Loss and Return of Self-Confidence	56
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	57
<i>Self-Care: I Am in Charge of My Own Well-Being</i>	57
<i>Peace of Mind</i>	58
<i>Am I Obligated or Dedicated?</i>	58
<i>Five Self-Care Practices</i>	59
<i>Five Minutes to Settle Yourself</i>	59
<i>Stress Release Technique</i>	60
CHAPTER 6: Make Peace with the Tragic	61
Diana's Story: It's Just Not Right	63
Brenda's Story: Sorrow beyond Expression	65
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	67
<i>Integrity Precedes Accountability</i>	67
<i>"It's Just Not Right!"</i>	68
<i>Say Good-bye to Should</i>	69
<i>Substitute "What" for "Why"</i>	69
<i>Resiliency One-a-Day Vitamins</i>	70
CHAPTER 7: Find Balance	71
Jason's Story: When Being Able to Walk Means More Than Life	71
Thomas's Story: Agonizing Decisions for a Suffering Patient	75
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	79

“Why?”	79
<i>Patient Care Perplexities</i>	80
CHAPTER 8: Contend with Limits and Possibilities	81
Jane’s Story: A Devastated Mother and Father	82
Anthony’s Story: Manna from Heaven	83
Death: The Final Limit or the Next Phase?	85
Sometimes, Comfort Is the Path to Follow	89
Ellen and Glenn’s Story: From Errands to Emergency	90
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	92
<i>Humility Trumps Pride</i>	92
<i>Is There a Balm for a Wounded Heart?</i>	92
<i>Expect the Unexpected</i>	93
<i>Healing Rituals for the Griever</i>	93
CHAPTER 9: Show Compassion	94
Pete’s Story: “I Am Not the Man I Used to Be!”	95
Suffering: The Sixth Vital Sign	97
Dan’s Story: A Peaceful Ending	101
Coming to Terms with Death: A Threshold for Healers and Patients Alike	103
Becky’s Story: Shattered Dreams	106
Sources of Resiliency	111
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	112
<i>On Awakening: No Day Is to Be Taken for Granted, Certainly Not Today</i>	112

<i>For the Gift of the Unexpected: The Disbeliever's Prayer</i>	112
<i>A Prayer for Healing</i>	112
<i>Death: Enemy or Friend?</i>	113
CHAPTER 10: Rediscover Your Passion,	
Purpose, Resiliency	115
Passion as Energy	116
Randy's Story: Keep Your Eyes on the Prize	119
Self-Care	121
Wanda's Story: The Power of Being a Companion	122
Patients as Rechargers	124
A Grandmother's Story: Adding to the Family	125
Your Team: Energizing or Exhausting?	129
Amy's Story: <i>Saturday Night Live</i>	130
The Organization as Biosphere	131
Claudia's Story: Bearing One Another's Sorrow	131
Fear and Anxiety	134
Wally's Story: How Did That Happen?	136
Courage: A Key to Resiliency	139
Simon's Story: Courage under Pressure	141
Perseverance: Resilience Gets You Up	
When Life Knocks You Down	143
Ken's Story: A "Hot" Appendix	143
Purpose: Staying the Course	145
Vincent's Story: There Are Many Roads to Rome	146
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	148
<i>When the Flame Flickers</i>	148

<i>In Awe of Resilience</i>	148
<i>Passion Care: A Reflection</i>	149
<i>Purpose Is a Multifaceted Jewel</i>	149
CHAPTER 11: Offer Kindness and Humility	151
Grant and Ted's Story: At the End of Being On Call in the Hospital	152
Praise the Housekeepers: An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure	154
Everyone Matters: Nothing Like a Power Outage to Put Things in Perspective!	156
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	157
<i>AWake-Up Call</i>	157
<i>Confidence Counts</i>	158
<i>Without My Help, Sometimes Things Fall into Place</i>	158
<i>A Prayer of Humble Thanksgiving</i>	159
<i>Humility's Helping Hand</i>	160
<i>Standing in Humility's Sacred Presence</i>	160
<i>Meditation Starters for Humility</i>	161
<i>Reflections of Myself</i>	161
<i>The Health Found in Humility</i>	162
<i>Humility and Joy</i>	162
<i>A Bragger's Confession</i>	163
<i>In Search of Self-Forgiveness</i>	163
CHAPTER 12: Express Encouragement, Gratitude, and Humor	165
Ron's Story: Gratitude When Efforts Are Unsuccessful	166

Encouragement: The Power of Appreciation	168
Giving Thanks: The Gift of Gratitude	169
Humor: Laughter as a Healing Power	172
Charley's Story: When Dress Codes Are Secondary to Patient Care	175
Prayers, Meditations, and Reflections	175
<i>Count Your Blessings</i>	175
<i>Encouragement's Life-Giving Water</i>	176
<i>In Praise of Humor</i>	177
Afterword	179
About the Author	181

Foreword

IN TODAY'S WORLD of deep uncertainty, people are often stressed, questioning the choices they made in their lives and feeling disconnected, unfulfilled, and anxious about what the future might hold. Health care is part of this world and its uncertainties. There are huge changes and challenges in every facet of our clinical professions. Regulations, electronic health records, and packed schedules seem to intrude into the sanctity of the clinician-patient relationship. The complexities of the health system result in clinicians having to help patients navigate system issues that are also complicated for them. At times, the suffering of patients and their families becomes too much for clinicians to bear in the face of an increased workload and system complexities. It is well documented that physician burnout, depression, and suicide are on the rise. Some of the reasons cited are system issues that undermine the physician-patient relationship, the lack of sufficient time to spend with patients in order to provide the best care, and the reductionist medical model that does not honor the humanity of the patient and the clinician. Many clinicians write about needing to be emotionally detached in order to deal with this stress. But for most clinicians, the greatest joy and meaning comes from serving patients. Having to detach in order to "survive" is harmful to the clinician's well-being, for it results in a loss of fulfillment and

disconnection from the essence of the vocation. It also results in a distancing from personal wounds and suffering, which leads to greater detachment and burnout.

Where is it, then, that we as clinicians find our healing? It is in the midst of our sacred relationship with our patients: When we sit in silent awe as our patients describe their hope and gratitude in the midst of their struggles with advancing cancer. When we open up to the teachings of our elderly patients who, despite their advanced dementia, share words of profound wisdom. When we celebrate a correct diagnosis and our partnership with our patients in their healing. When at the end of the day we experience gratitude for the privilege we had of entering into relationships, even in small snatches of time, with our patients. It is in those moments that we experience the meaning and the purpose of our lives. And in that instance all is well.

William Dorman's *Restoring the Healer* offers the insight and resources for all clinicians to reconnect with their call to be healers. He shows us how to find awe again in the healing encounters with our patients. He inspires us to infuse our reductionist medical model with humanity, spirituality, and compassion. He helps us touch the wounded healer within and gently restores us to openness to the mystery of all we do, even in the midst of professional uncertainty and stress. He helps us recapture our enthusiasm—the enthusiasm we all had when we decided to enter the healing professions—to be present to others and to make a difference in the lives of all the patients we serve.

Christina M. Puchalski, MD

Preface

YOU HAVE COMMITTED your life to the well-being of others. You offer hope and encouragement to your patients, in addition to providing care. This book is an appreciation of the profound difference you make and an acknowledgement of the stress you experience in your efforts as a healer. That's why I am convinced that *your* self-care is equally important to the well-being of your patients. If you are not well, how can you serve your community? At its heart, this book is directed toward your well-being. My sincere hope is that it offers insights that you will find both illuminating and rewarding, and that it will help you heal.

During your education and training, you were introduced to the concept of spirituality within the context of health care. It is common today for health care professionals to see physical health as encompassing body, mind, and spirit. Spirituality is a vital factor in human well-being. And yet, it is typically reserved for end-of-life care, cultural diversity, and the treatment choices a patient makes based on his or her religious or spiritual beliefs.

However, my understanding of spirituality is broadly based and ecumenical. It is grounded in the basic human experience of wonder and awe. Such experience-based spirituality is a natural outgrowth of simple, child-like fascination. Perhaps you occasionally experience moments of amazement when you marvel at

the intricacy, delicacy, and complexity of human well-being. You experience life's beginning and end, its meaning and purpose, and its possibilities and limits. Spirituality and science have one essential ingredient in common: experience as the basis of wonder and awe. Perhaps your fascination with the wellsprings of life is what initially inspired you to devote yourself to such a demanding profession.

So this book is not about patients per se: it is about you. As a caregiver, you are trained to focus exclusively on your patients. The unique perspective offered here shifts that focus to your emotional and spiritual well-being as well. In the process, both you and your patients can benefit greatly.

Central to your professional identity is your confidence in your knowledge and skills. You value being perceived as clear-headed, decisive, and steady. It is important that you keep your professional persona intact so that your colleagues see that you are able to take the heat in the kitchen. There can be a not-so-subtle pride among health care professionals about being able to handle whatever comes their way, and to move onto the next patient or case without blinking an eye. Bravado is instilled in you as part of your training and socialization as a health care professional. Certain teams and disciplines pride themselves on being able to jump from one crisis to the next. But make no mistake, practicing spiritual self-care is not a weakness: it is a strength.

It is quite possible that you grasp the importance of self-care but wonder, "Where in the world will I fit one more thing into my busy day?" This book respects the demands on your time and suggests ways in which you can practice self-care as you go about your patient care. Self-care is not indulgent. It is not

another thing added to your already busy day. It is (or can be) an integral part of it.

Call to mind those times when you were a patient: having a routine checkup; making an appointment because you noticed something you thought merited attention; ending up in the emergency room following an automobile accident. In those moments, you were the patient. Your well-being was the primary focus. Granted, this role may have made you uncomfortable. And yet, you may have experienced some degree of gratitude for the care you received during those moments. It is my hope that this book will stir a similar gratitude for the care it extends to you.

I realize and respect the apprehension among health care professionals when it comes to personal feelings and emotions. Your worries about work or home are best kept confidential. You are in a culture where the expression of second thoughts—worry, frustration, or despondency—is not encouraged. You want to appear self-confident, dispassionate, and unflappable. Health care professionals who are troubled by professional or personal situations seek confidential help—if they seek help at all. It might be said that health care professionals hide emotions and feelings because of a culture of secrecy.

This culture can lead to unwelcome outcomes. You may become anxious, fretful, withdrawn, or irritable. You may develop headaches, tight shoulder or neck muscles, or an upset stomach. You may turn to substances—controlled and over-the-counter—to help you get through the day. This book offers a healthy alternative to self-destructive behaviors.

It seems to me that the conversation in recent books and journals about *compassion fatigue* hints at a growing willingness

among health care professionals to consider their own well-being. What you experience may be more aptly called *caring fatigue*, a phenomenon inclusive of the drain on your body, mind, and spirit. The self-care aspect of this book directly addresses this situation, offering you insights about how to take care of yourself. It's intended to be both preventative as well as restorative in nature.

I hope my initial comments speak to your heart and mind. Maybe these few words resemble an *informed consent* of sorts, one that provides you a better idea of the nature of this book, which is to offer you healing. It is my hope that you will allow us to continue this conversation in the following pages.



You may be wondering, “Why you? Who are you to dispense this sort of counsel?” This book rests on my eighteen years of experience working as a board certified professional chaplain in the anchor hospital of an integrated health care system. The system included hospitals in town and across the state, a physicians’ medical group, and a health plan. At that time, the downtown hospital was one among several major hospitals in the community.

When I began my work, I was assigned to all the critical care units in both the organization’s community hospital and the downtown hospital. These units consisted of the following: a cardiac critical care unit and an adult intensive care unit at the community hospital and a cardiac critical care unit, an adult intensive care unit, a subacute care unit, a neonatal intensive care unit, and a pediatric intensive care unit at the downtown facility. I made routine rounds on these units, carrying a pager to respond to

requests for a chaplain. In addition, I was involved in overnight, in-house on-calls, during which time I was the only chaplain available.

I had two other major roles during my time as a professional chaplain: I served on the Hospital Ethics Committee (HEC) and the Crisis Support Team. Along with the HEC chair and the HEC coordinator, I helped plan the agenda for the monthly meetings and held a key role in responding to requests for ethics consults. I assisted in setting up the ethics consults and routinely participated in them. The Crisis Support Team provided critical incident stress management support to the clinicians, staff, and employees throughout the organization. I had a leadership role in this team and also served as a responder to support individuals and/or teams experiencing a trauma.

True to the experience-based foundation of the book, what I write about is rooted in my time spent working in the hospital. That included the spiritual care and emotional support of patients, families, and staff. In this book, I have drawn from these experiences but masked and disguised them in order to preserve and protect privacy and confidentiality. These accounts capture the spiritual and emotional stress involved in healing, highlighting the importance of spirituality and self-care for the healers' own well-being.

As a chaplain, I witnessed the toll and drain experienced by health care professionals, such as:

- ▶ Physicians and nurses delivering a premature fetus, and gently and compassionately handing the body to the mother to be cradled.