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**Conference: College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy**  
**Sunday, March 1, 2020, Afternoon Plenary Keynote Address**  
**The Westin Hotel, Times Square**  
**New York City**

## **The HeART of Conversation, and Care**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

I'd like to acknowledge my own introduction to CPSP last winter, specifically on February 23<sup>rd</sup>. At the invitation of Tina Caesar, I spoke to a gathering of CPSP members at their meeting which was held in Harlem, here in NYC. The meeting was sponsored by the Harlem Family Institute. I met Tina through Michael Connolly, President of HFI (here today) and it was at that gathering where I met your very own, Ray Lawrence.

That whole day began a wonderful conversation between us all about CPSP and the early CPE movement. I learned of what you have been doing for these past 30 years now.. and I must say, I was struck to re-discover the cultural roots of the CPE movement that had shaped my CPE supervisors - and my own experience of hospital chaplaincy during seminary. Upon graduating from Seminary, I began my training in psychoanalysis. Simultaneously, I was aware that the CPE movement was being adopted by the ACPE organization that defines so many of our hospital settings today; and frankly, in the midst of these traffic circles, I lost track of your (CPSP) journey. So, all these years between then and now, while I've been teaching and practicing at the intersection of Psyche and Religion, teaching about Pastoral Care and Psychoanalysis, I was quite delighted to discover that CPSP had been born of that transitional time for Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care, and that it is very alive and pursuing its mission to preserve Anton Boisen's

original vision: Keeping the Soul in Focus, with Care. So, here we are, lost and found, and after all these years, re-united! I'm delighted to be here with you..

### **WHERE TO BEGIN...**

As I considered this conference today and wondered what might be useful to offer into your larger conversation for the weekend, I thought about the various and many settings in which we Carers, provide Care. Whether in the sanctuary of Clergy offices, or psychotherapy clinics and private consulting rooms, or as chaplains at the bedside of a struggling soul in hospital, or on their path to the transformation we call death. I would like to add to this, teachers and students in educational settings of all ages.. We Carers, offer ourselves into these spaces and we are asked to hold so many stories and to be present in so many known (and unknown) ways... with others, always *finding a way to Care*.

I found myself mulling over the many and common challenges that we share, across this great bridge of Caring, and I considered what might join our mutual concerns for the ministries in these spaces, as a focus for our attention today: How do **WE** vitalize and re-fresh *What* we are doing, and *How* we are doing that?

Related to this, I also reflected on the many and complex issues that confront us as we work to offer our best Care, and was reminded of a central concern that I believe we all appreciate. This concern relates to the rapidly growing influence of 'professionalism' and 'corporate interest' in what we do. Of course, this is not News. We've all experienced these forces in our various settings where we work to educate, train, and offer these specialized versions of

Care that we loosely term as *Pastoral* and *Therapeutic*, and very human, in their natures.

Our rich history of Pastoral Care (I will suggest), is slayed by what we face today. The neatly organized categories of Care that were codified with terminologies and prescriptives for their dispensation - for the assuagement of suffering – as far back as our ancient sages and through the middle ages of the Roman Church, the Reformation and forward again, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century of Protestantism – these prescriptives (like, religio, socio-cultural remnants) for spiritual care, offer us pathways for understanding the evolution of pastoral theologies that fade into parochialism when faced with our modern challenges for Caring, today: we live in the midst of endless distractions and forces that fragment ourSelves daily as we seek to live between the many and often conflicting compartments of our own lives. These wonderfully rendered theologies for Care (given to us through history) don't work in our vocational spaces today.<sup>1</sup> Anton Boisen, as we know, was the great Reformer of these former dispensations for addressing the sick and suffering. And he helped us to reimagine how to be *with* one another, ***In witness*** to the suffering of Soul.

**I want to focus my talk** today on the overwhelming impingements that we all share in our respective vocations and settings today, and to propose a possibility for resisting these incursions on us all. I will suggest some ways for strengthening ourSelves, in spiritual and tangible ways, that I believe can deepen

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<sup>1</sup> *Clebsch, William A. and Jaekle, Charles R.*, Pastoral care in historical perspective. This wonderful compendium and historical overview of concepts and theologies for describing how 'soul' has been understood through time; offers myriad disciplines derived by religious movements and cultures to *Cure* it toward goals for its *perfection*.

and vitalize the Care that we offer. We are the *Carers*, we are the *Ones* who need to access this refreshment that we seek to offer, ***in presence***, with others.

***In a brief overview of our current challenges:***

We have Chaplains with logs to fill of visits for which there is never enough time to be at true leisure with their patients. The burden of ‘demonstrating’ their value to the bottom line of in-hospital care, aligned with ‘evidence-based’ practices and their requirements for record-keeping (in and of itself this becomes a new game of deadening ‘docu-speak’) -- how we document the patient conversation: with protections for ourselves, the institution, and the patient in mind, too easily becomes a kind of prophylactic against real connection. The subtlety of this relational erosion lies in the directional flow of its philosophy, which seeks to shape our practices of Care into measurable conformities that evade and subvert our unique and idiomatic Selves. How we ‘show up’ for others, in this environment, has become ‘monetized’.

The impingements to learning with verbatims in these environments, is quite real. To even write a verbatim for the purpose of learning, for God’s sake, one must have had a real Conversation.

Clergy who are often half-time at best, in dwindling congregations, are expected to care for whole flocks of souls and to prepare sermons for Shabbat and Sunday mornings, as well. This leaves little time for teaching and guiding our youth with our time and nurture for their challenges of growing up in schools and religious communities; and even less to be invested in the ancient tradition of offering ourselves, as Curers of Souls, in these congregations.

Students seeking further education in these vocations find themselves facing myriad pressures; family obligations, financial stress, multiple jobs in a gig economy; shrinking chaplaincy departments, clergy in under-resourced communities, increasing numbers of adjunct faculty in our institutions of higher learning – we are all faced with the fundamental challenge of creating non-anxious environments for healing, growing, and learning.

Teachers, mentors, and supervisors, who cannot offer the time that is required for the slow brew of conversational rapport so essential for students to become seasoned and steeped in the slow broth of learning – the kind of learning that is central to establishing real foundations of Self. A Self that lives at home within us, the Self that is central to our various and vocational identities, as Carers..

Having said all of that.. I want to reassure you that my intention today is not to leave us in a place of despair.. however, I believe we must look at these forces, and give them our attention, to better understand how we might strengthen ourselves against their corrosive effects. So, bear with me just a bit more as I shift our focus to speak of some related forces that also threaten our capacities for Care.

We are experiencing an **unprecedented assault** on our very ability to communicate. Rapidly advancing technologies bring us into instant and constant contact; yet, we (as individuals and society) are suffering from a lack of real connecting – within the communities where we live, the institutional cultures in which we work, and within the intimacy of our closest relationships. We need

only to read the news to learn of the growing epidemic of young people taking their own lives. And while there are many and complex reasons that lie behind this tragic unfolding for our society, we are left to wonder and challenged to understand!.. how are we failing to give our young people lives of experiences and the capacity to bond deeply in their relationships with others, to foster their strength for attachment and membership within our human family; quite literally growing their emotional tenacity for ***Hanging On***... to the group!

***On another front..***

How many of you have had a sense of disorientation after a long day of reading and writing emails (digital communications) with the back and forth of ‘talking’ with real human beings through cryptic and evolving new languages of virtual space – (emoticons!) it can leave us spent with a vague sense of not having been part of anything actually ‘felt’, through otherwise personal contact. We may later see the person with whom we’ve exchanged our important emails, but we’ve missed out on the *feeling* of being ***IN*** that conversation, together.. Very subtly we are deprived of our own growth that is uniquely stimulated by encouraging the tendrils of human bonds. Like blades of new grass, these tentative tendrils of human connecting are best nourished when we are ***with*** another person. Only this proximity of ourSelves, in real time and flesh, can offer the richest soil for nourishing what we all crave of this palpable connecting of which I speak. We call it ***Presence***.

[Personally, I think this has a lot to do with being next to each other, in our bodies! There’s a lot of energy - in and around our bodies – the delicate network

of these communication systems that weave their magnetic field through and around our flesh, these highly tuned 'signal systems' .. they are blunted in virtual space. But that is for another talk.. ]

Even the information we exchange in this virtual space can elude location in our memory. If you have ever noticed that you suffer from this 'digital dementia', of remembering content, but not recalling from whom or where you learned of it.. You're not alone. Our daily distractions combined with information overload, create the 'slick' on these virtual platforms that become breeding grounds for facile relating (even more than Fake news!), leaving us veiled with a sense of disorientation to our inter-personal worlds, with feelings of social dissatisfaction. We feel accomplished, we get our tasks done. Our emails are answered, everything is tidy .. yet, we feel lingering traces of 'meh'. Living life behind this 'plexiglass' of seeing through to the other with whom we are 'speaking', we too are seen, yet, not 'felt' with true **connection**. This sensory distortion has the effect of fillers added to cheap breakfast cereal to simulate the texture of whole grains: we are satiated, but deprived of real nutrients that nourish our feelings needed for strengthening the human bonds that grow us into larger versions of ourSelves... this strength of bonding among us creates the biome of our social and emotional immune system. These are the building blocks of our resilience, and they are critical for us to **thrive**..

***It takes courage to be Up Close; to really be, with one another.***

While this all may sound overstated and benign, it's really not. A steady diet of digital relating distorts our appetites for human relationship. It fobs off our

desire for real depth of human connection: the true quenching waters of soul Full exchange. Our deepest desires for human relating, get hi-jacked. Pornography is one, pervasive example of this hi-jacking of our desire: seeking to find the ecstasy of intimacy through our bodies, with images alone.. Pornography thrives on our fear of being *with*, and of *being known* to Another.. Our addictions and compulsions, fueled in these virtual environments, detour the real drives of our desire, gripping them into spiritually deadly feedback loops that cauterize our ability to grow and flourish.

We become misaligned with people whom we call family and friends. How many times are serious misunderstandings and hurt feelings fostered through texts and emails that flatten and miscarry this felt sense of ***the presence of our intent***. In our vulnerability as human beings, with our deep need for emotionally rich connections with other humans, we lose our way when navigating the flat-scape of our virtual worlds where our emotional antennae can betray us as we pick up fuzzy signals. We are gradually losing our courage for the deep conversations required for real connection, and living lives of inter-personal richness. It becomes easier to hide from and to ignore each other. In social passings, our eyes avert, greetings are not forthcoming, text messages are unreturned. Young people do not speak on their phones. It is more expedient to send brief, encoded inquiries, or not. We hear of 'ghosting' in the brave new world of dating. The cutoffs of new tendrils of our relating that strive to connect in virtual time and space, ***shatter real hearts***, by this failure to acknowledge one another, in fact and existence.

In these manifest results of our Electronic-Lives, like our accommodations over time of degrading 'new normals', we become smaller versions of ourselves.

We become afraid of one another: afraid to engage. We become afraid, to speak. We are afraid of having Conversation...

***Conversation is powerful. Conversation grows us.. we are changed by it.***

Sherry Turkle, a Sociologist and a licensed Clinical Psychologist at MIT, has studied the impact of technologies on human relationships for over 30 years, specifically their influence on our human capacity for 'empathy'. In her acclaimed study on Empathy, she was called in to consult with the faculty of an Eastern, private middle school. Her study began on a retreat with the faculty who poured out to her their observations of their students. According to her Study Diaries, the Dean of the School reported to Turkle, "These kids aren't cruel. But they are not emotionally developed. Twelve-year olds play on the playground like 8 year-olds. The way they exclude each other is the way 8 year olds would play. They don't seem able to put themselves in each other's place. They say to other students: 'you can't play with us'." ... "They are not developing that way of relating where they listen and learn how to look at each other and hear each other." (Turkle, pgs, 5-6).<sup>2</sup> A psychoanalyst would suggest that they are failing to understand and interpret 'affect', which is critical for growing their capacity for interpersonal relationship: in plain English, they aren't 'reading' each other emotionally – which is crucial for developing the capacity for Empathy.

The study is fascinating and I recommend her book to you, titled, *'Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk in a Digital Age'*. I won't delve further

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<sup>2</sup> Turkle, Sherry, (2016). Reclaiming conversation, the power of talk in a digital age. New York, NY: Penguin Books, Penguin Random House, LLC.

into the details of her study here, because our focus is related, but elsewhere, but I can say that the study revealed an alarming sense of relational ‘miscarriage’ that is rising in our culture today. A kind of ‘canary in the coal mine’ feeling that we as a society are quite literally becoming ‘unhinged’ from each other: disconnected. In our race to grow more environments of digitally simulated contact with each other, we are losing (and I would suggest, not growing) the inter-personal strength that is needed for creating and building real human relationships and attachments. We are free-falling through the very human networks that we need to thrive and grow, ourSelves.

*Psychoanalysis* brings a specific and particular lens to how we develop our wonderful Selves. The essential techniques, or tools, of this craft make use of the ongoing transference and countertransference (present in all human relationships), and *Resistance*. Our resistance to knowing what we do not want to know. These points of defined engagement create boundaries within which this ‘specialized’ conversation can unfold. Analyzing the transference and countertransference, by analyst and analysand, with techniques to elucidate the latent content of our dreams, reveals a kind of forensics of the anatomy of ‘mind’ – our conscious and unconscious ‘mind’ - emerges. In the back and forth of this boundaried relating (the analytic dyad), a renewed and developing sense of Self may emerge. The ruptures and the reparations that unfold over time in this ‘specialized conversation’ serve to revise old narratives that have fed our operating selves. Over time, the earlier version of ourSelves may undergo many shifts of growth and renewal as the healing of old (self) wounds contributes to an expanding sense of ourSelves; in process, Growing .. again.. If this all sounds a bit

technical as a method for growing ourselves; it's really not. This process happens between two real human beings, in a room, together. And **both** are changed by it... everytime.

***Religion reminds us that Prayer can grow, and change us.***

Prayer is a practice that all religions acknowledge. Prayer brings us into focus: in prayer, the fragments of ourselves are gathered and they center our awareness on how things really stand within us. Prayer is a pathway for intimate conversation between us and our God that can grow us into larger, clearer versions of ourselves as we seek to respond to the God who is always seeking Us. In real prayer, we cannot avoid ourselves; our pettiness and our trespasses float through our awareness. The ebb and flow of our hopes and fears, are met: in prayer; we see ourselves as we are and face these places in us where we hide from knowing and being known more truthfully, with our God, and others.

Ann and Barry Ulanov write about this voluptuous conversation in their gem of a book titled, *Primary Speech*. 'If we are listening, to the other side of this conversation,' [to the Other who seeks to be known to US], 'we are pull[ed] into a life of.. unceasing abundance, .. 'Prayer takes us into our central self', ..'and through it into the very origin of all self. This [primary] speech of our prayer [of our unedited selves, reflects to] us .. new life for psyche and soul that comes [alive] when we open [our hearts] to the One who [waits for us] knocking...' (Ulanov, pg. 9)<sup>3</sup>

Our western culture has lost a strong connection to understanding the intimacy and power of this particular conversation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ulanov, Ann B. and Barry, (1982). Primary speech. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

***Prayer may not change God, (although, I would suggest that it does!) but it can change our understanding of God. Prayer changes us. Prayer grow us into better versions of ourselves. Prayer heals our brokenness, and our relationships with others; When everything else fails, there is still Prayer.***

In a short and brilliant article, ‘*Beyond co-existence to mutual influence: an interdisciplinary method for psychoanalysis and religion,*’ psychoanalyst and Episcopal Priest, the Rev. Amy Lamborn discusses the interdisciplinary relationship of psychoanalysis and religion. She writes, ‘*I envision psychoanalysis and religion, as near neighbors, moving along a space of shared concern.* This space is the location of our desire and effort to reach toward a sure and certain abundance of life; to respond with all our heart, soul, and strength to the holy Presence which ever summons us (Deut 6:5). It is the place from which we struggle to know and become [ourSelves], to live authentically and creatively, and to be grasped by what [Paul] Tillich calls our ‘ultimate concern’ (1963). In this shared frontier between psychoanalysis and religion there [is] a mutual regard for the fullness of human being and living, the opening of the self in/to freedom, and the [possibility of] receiving that which is renewing and enlivening.’ (Lamborn, pg. 518)<sup>4</sup>

***Psychoanalysis and Religion, are unique in their conversation: each, uniquely, deal directly with the mind’s capacity to make symbolic meaning of our experience of suffering. Through separate and related pathways, each practice wants for us to become the greatest versions of ourSelves... [CBT and***

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<sup>4</sup> Lamborn, Amy B., (2007). Beyond co-existence to mutual influence: an interdisciplinary method for psychoanalysis and religion. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 46, 516-526.

***Solution focused therapies are rationally based disciplines that fail to resolve real suffering. True suffering is only requited through our capacity for symbolization; our ability to make meaning of that which is held in the boundaries of paradox.]***

I'd like to step back now from the particularities of these specialized conversations, and to remind US, that we have equal access to developing our capacity for vitalizing and enriching conversations. Anyone of us can do this. And we all need to try. We can cultivate this in our ordinary lives, just by working on it...

In *The Art of Conversation, a guided tour of a neglected pleasure*, Catherine Blyth regales her readers with witty and informative prose on the Art and Pleasure of having conversation. In her words, 'conversation is second only to sex, and a lot less hassle, and it really matters.' (Blyth, pg. 7)<sup>5</sup> For Blyth, conversation is a form of social intercourse that can be leveraged (with language skills and mastery of the social graces), angling one into any social occasion; and jettisoning one from an existing to an ascending social stratosphere. Blyth argues that the one who masters the art of conversation, rules the room! From the Board Room to the Living Room, and beyond.. conversation matters. Blyth writes, '[my] hell is not, as it was for Sartre, other people. It is a twenty-first century with six billion plus of us, on a shrinking planet, with dwindling resources, not talking. Lose the means to work out who we are, what we have in common, and we lose stories,

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<sup>5</sup> Blyth, Catherine, (2009). *The art of conversation, a guided tour of a neglected pleasure*. New York: Avery, of Penguin Random House.

the greatest consolation...’ and she continues, ‘[the] novelist John Steinbeck understood the creative balm of sympathy: (in his words)

*“We are lonesome animals. We spend all of our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say – and to feel – ‘Yes, that is the way it is, or at least that is the way I feel it.’” (Blyth, pg. 21)<sup>6</sup>*

***A good conversation can be the start of a wonderful human adventure..***

I’d like now to turn our attention to some stories about conversations that have mattered, for ordinary lives. The stories I will share are random, and they are not related. Each story conveys conversation that grew or deepened real human bonds; and as I like to say, enriched the Selves of those involved, effecting changes in their lives. Whether they took place between two or more people; sometimes strangers, sometimes lovers, and one penultimate conversation of saying good-bye: these conversations began growth that led to real change, for those who stayed engaged.

***When is the last time that you remember having a really good conversation.. one that stays with you and nourishes your thoughts and feelings over the course of days, weeks, months, and maybe over the arc of years.***

It is known that when Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung met for the first time to share their ideas about psychoanalysis, they spoke continuously for 13 hours. It is also of record, that when Warren Buffet and Bill Gates first met, at a dinner party

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<sup>6</sup> Blyth, Catherine, (2009). The art of conversation, a guided tour of a neglected pleasure. New York: Avery, of Penguin Random House.

hosted by Gates' parents (Bill had protested; he had not wanted to attend the dinner), they spoke for 11 uninterrupted hours. ..

**Wouldn't you have loved to be a fly on those walls?** To witness that kind of passion is rare, to never, in our world today. To think, of the soul-filled exertion required for two people to indulge each other's thoughts and ideas, one to the other, so intently, and to be listened to, that deeply. ... it's a lot to contemplate..

The conversation stories that I will share here do not rise to the grand heights of human discourse that Freud, Jung, Buffet, and Gates have achieved with their great minds.. but they are examples of how conversation – one that we can cultivate in our ordinary lives, can grow us. *So here goes..*

I was 12 years old in this story. I grew up out West. My family lived in the foothills of Boulder County, Colorado. My grandparents lived just over the state line in northwestern Kansas, in a small wheat farming community where my grandfather practiced law. Visiting them without my parents brought the added excitement of taking a Greyhound bus from Denver across the windswept prairies of Eastern Colorado, and sharing the company of other bus riders who roused my curiosity for learning about them, through conversation. I still recall feeling very grown up and independent to be taken so seriously by these fellow Greyhound sojourners. I listened to their stories about families, good and bad; children who no longer came home, their long ago, and recently deceased spouses, stories of the Great Depression and how they had fared. What their families had done to survive those lean years of that great American Saga.. on the high plains of the

American West. Stories upon stories over the years of those trips, grew special memories for me and they grew ME, and my sense of the world. People whose lives enriched mine simply by the exchange of ourselves through conversation. To this day, I have a special place in my heart for those Great plains and the people who live there.

Going out, was always a day trip, the return trip was at night. On this particular return, it was a winter January evening. The roads had been passable from the Kansas line into Eastern Colorado but radio reports, as we approached Denver, were of road closings and blizzard warnings that called for no, non-emergency driving along the Front Range until roads were re-opened. I was excited, and frightened. My mother would be meeting me at the terminal. I wondered what we were going to do? I imagined that we would have to find a hotel in Denver and stay overnight. This was an exotic and exciting idea for me, having special time with my mother, in the luxury of a hotel! As the oldest of 5 children, it was rare for me to have her alone.

Upon arrival at the bus terminal, the driver unloaded our bags and groups of us shuffled into the large, domed room that was the old Denver bus station. After sitting for awhile on a wooden bench, it began to dawn on me that my mother might not be coming. I found a phone booth and made a collect call home. It was about 11PM and my mother explained that she was at the house with my brother and sisters, my father was on emergency call for the hospital in our town, and she reported to me that I-25 was completely closed from Pueblo to the Wyoming border. 'So, why don't you just find a well-lighted seat in the terminal and plan to stay at the station,' she said. 'I'll come for you as early as I can get on the roads tomorrow morning.'

I don't actually recall the mix of feelings that I must have had then, facing a long night with this change of plans. I had expected to ride home in the warmth of our panel station wagon, telling my mother the news of St. Francis and looking forward to sleeping in my own room again. Then, I had wondered if we would be staying in a hotel together. And now, I surveyed the great room with its long grid-lines of wooden benches and tiled floors, and looked for a seat in good lighting – hoping to stay safe.

There weren't many of us left by now. The crowds had moved out of the station into the streets to find taxi cabs and brave friends who had weathered the roads to collect them. There were perhaps 5 of us remaining in the terminal after midnight. I don't remember them all, but Doris and Jimmy stand out in my mind as two who took it upon themselves to Care for me that night. I look back on them now and understand they were homeless; but for that night, they were my company. Their unkempt and malodorous presence was as off-putting to me, as their company was comforting. We were captives, one to each other that night. They did not want a young girl to be alone, and I did not want to be alone, and I sensed they were enjoying the change of pace from their usual night routine at the station. They began to compete for my attention with their questions and stories. I did my best to keep it all in balance. Periodically a policeman would saunter up and ask me if my parents knew where I was. I staunchly told them the story of my abandonment and assured them that my mother would be there as soon as she could. They moved on. If they wondered whether I was a runaway, the weather was my alibi. The I-25 closure was a fact.

Doris and Jimmy would quietly slink away when the policemen passed to check on me through the night. I cringed when I saw the humiliating way that

Jimmy was treated by the police. Doris kept to herself; they left her alone. As the night wore on, my new friends asked about me. What was my name, where did I live, did I have brothers and sisters, what year was I in school? What did I want to be when I grew up...? I reported everything I knew and asked them questions in kind.. like where had they grown up. Were their parents alive? (they seemed old to me.)

I was confused by their obfuscating replies. Why wouldn't they tell me if they had brothers and sisters? Children? Where were their families? I vaguely understood that they spent the night at the station because they had nowhere else to go, and I asked them what it was like to do that every night.. I'm sure of it. That's how I am. I would have been curious because I like to know things about people. And I would not have felt intrusive, as my 12 year-old self, since my questions came from a half innocent place in my mind. I had no way of comprehending the real hardness and alienations of their lives. I had no conscious insight to their shame. I remember that Doris insisted she only stayed at the station in the winter, on cold nights. Otherwise, she insisted, she had a place she liked in the park downtown. Like she had a summer home, there. Jimmy was proud of his survival lifestyle. Through the night, we talked, and dozed. Jimmy kept watch. I felt safe. About 5AM the police swept the station and began to shoo folks out of the terminal and back onto their street beats for the day. Jimmy followed me to the pay phone where I made another collect call home. My father answered this time, and said my mother was on her way to pick me up. I hung up the receiver and looked around to see if I could find somewhere to get hot chocolate. I needed to warm up. As I approached a coffee shop, I saw Jimmy paying the cashier. I approached him, as he turned to me. Extending his arm, he

held out his hand to offer me a donut with pink frosting on it.. 'here, he said. Take this.'

I've never forgotten that pink donut. The communion of generosity. And while I don't recall the details of our night talks, I've never forgotten that night. Through conversation we kept each other entertained and reassured in the company of one another. On this random, overnight stay in the Denver bus terminal, a lot of things changed for me. I learned things I had yet to understand. I had felt a powerful experience of bonding with my strange, new friends. They grew me.

When my mother arrived, I introduced her to Jimmy. I emphasized to her his importance to me and told her of his protection of me during the night and I shared the story of his gift of the pink, frosted donut. I wished my mother had been more generous in her greeting of him. She thanked him briefly, and whisked me away. I felt ashamed of her coolness to him.

On our drive home, up I-25, I tried to explain to her the wildness of my night at the station, with the police, and the people, and the wonderfulness of Doris and Jimmy; our talks and the sadness I imagined of their lives. She listened while driving, and smoking a cigarette. It was clear to me that she was curious, but not penetrated by the forces that had opened me. When we arrived home, I took a hot shower. As the water warmed my body, I began to shiver. In spite of my exhaustion, I felt very deeply alive. I remember crying without understanding, why. Something had stirred me, in a new way. I struggled to understand the great differences between me, Doris, and Jimmy; in contrast to the bonds I felt with them that carried me through our night. My own life was not 'Unreal', but now I felt the limits of my own reality. I had been stretched beyond those limits, by that

night. My world view was adjusting to accommodate this new experience, translating it into larger personal awareness. The shuffling of new perspectives brought a palpable shift to my sense of place in the world. This disorienting sense of inner spaciousness, carved out by my sleep-over experience at the bus station, had been opened up for me by Doris and Jimmy, who Cared for me, through our conversations. From one day to the next, I was another version of myself! Having learned some limits of my own reality, I grew.

In other examples of conversation growing people together, and apart. I am reminded of a couple who met at a conference. Both in their late sixties, they were solo travelers, with spouses back home. Assigned seating arrangements at the dinner gala offered an occasion that sparked a collegial conversation between them, that (shall we say..) didn't end at the table. Seven years later their conversation (and conjugal love) has grown them into many new and splendedored versions of themselves. More confident, and flexible in spirit, they feel like enriched versions of themselves. Both agree, that without this fateful meeting – as they describe it – they would be much the poorer, for it. They are grateful they had the courage to keep their conversation going.

To view this experience through the lens of mere marital infidelity, would be to miss the great moment in life for these two souls. In reality, both spouses became aware of this relationship and each for reasons and circumstances of their own, over their long marriages with children now raised, the original couples have accommodated this powerful connection that came to them, through a third coupling. In unexpected ways they are all relating, which has nourished everyone involved. ***The soul is ruthless, it pushes us to grow.***

In a different case, a very young couple who had recently married were having a difficult adjustment to their new life. Further inquiry revealed they had married, to settle down. When I asked what that meant, 'to settle down', they both acknowledged that by marrying, they had hoped to stop arguing...

As they began their guided conversation to sort through pieces of themselves that had never joined easily, they began to discover the crushing limits of the marriage they had forged for themselves, built on their fantasies and 'ideas' of lives that neither of them actually wished to live. Exploration of the early connection that grew between them when they first met revealed the desperate bonds of a 'Hansel and Gretel' coupling that gave them refuge, for awhile, as mutual travelers in the dark forest of life. Twelve years later, through some raging conflicts and tears that filled an ocean, their terrifying and tender conversations grew them gradually and painfully forward into truer versions of themselves. Divorce (they agreed) for them, had been truer than the marriage they had attempted. Their 'uncoupling' resulted for them in a process that felt more sacred, than the marriage they had tried to construct with their Roman Catholic wedding ceremony. Finally able to relinquish the 'ideas', and their mutual needs for salvation, that they had imposed on one another, they see each other more clearly now; in some ways that they admire, and others not so much! Their respective lives are now unfolding along iterations of separately discovered life goals and purposes. And as to their connection? They feel closer now, and more separate, than ever. The conversation they forged, while not knitting them more closely together in a shared life, released them to their own true living. They are closer now, for knowing that their relationship is not for marriage.

***The soul is ruthless, it pushes us to grow.***

And finally, a penultimate conversation of leave-taking. And I tell this story from the third person.. A woman in mid-life returned home to spend a final week with her father who had been diagnosed with a terminal cancer. He had just weeks to live. Their own relationship had ‘stalled’ many years ago. In spite of her efforts to engage with him, for reasons of his own (which she had finally come to accept), she let it be. But now. What could she say? How to open up a final conversation when so much relational space lay fallow, between them.

In the days preceding her trip to pay her final respects, it occurred to her that she could be intentional. She could make each day more pleasant, and speak from her heart with thanksgiving. She needn’t say anything that felt untrue; she could keep it real. She needed, she said, to bring closure for herself, in order to move on. In those last days together, she attended to his physical needs, ran errands for her mother, made meals, shared their usual cocktail hour in the evening, choosing each evening to focus on a particular aspect of his giving to her, over her life, and to purposefully thank him for it.

On their last day, she went to sit with him in the sunroom of their family home. Not knowing what he would say, she resolved to sit with him and receive whatever he offered. After some time, he began to ask about her work. He had not asked her anything in over ten years. Slowly, she spoke. She described what she did and how things were going. He asked her if she liked it. She smiled, and nodded. She did. Then she asked him how he was doing, ‘how do you feel?’

‘This is very hard.’ They sat in silence.

‘What’s hard?’ she asked.

'Dying', he said.

More silence.

'What is hardest about it?' she asked tentatively.

'Physically, physically it's really hard', he said. 'Emotionally, too... letting go,' his voice broke.

'Hmm,' she nodded, receiving this communication from his existential ledge.

As they spoke softly, she became vaguely aware of something that seemed different. On closer notice, she saw that his eyes – the whites of which had been orange with jaundice - were pure white, and the blue of them shown like a cerulean sea. She caught her breathe, inwardly, realizing the presence of his inner light, his higher self, glowing through his disease ravaged body. Her own body tingled with awareness of this penultimate sharing, between them. The loss of those years of their own relating could not be recaptured, but they could be redeemed, in this moment of final leave-taking. This last acknowledgement, shared in each other's presence, of how they were now.

When it was time to leave, she took his hand and said, 'I have to leave now, and we need to say good-bye,' she paused, and then continued, 'everything that has happened, is done. We're good. Go on, go ahead. We are here.' Her tears flowed softly, his eyes were misty. His voice croaked words of his love for her. And as she kissed his forehead, she told him of her love for him, always, and she looked at him. In those cerulean eyes, she saw the larger version of him. Then, she said 'good-bye'.

As Carers, we are uniquely poised on the frontier of these tectonic cultural shifts that are changing how we work with people, and how we speak with them; in our respective lives and settings for Care. How we Care, is evolving with or without our express choosing. I believe we are called to defend these spaces of our Caring by cultivating our inter-personal strength for having real conversations and contact with others, contacts of **vitality and meaning**.

I have intentionally avoided the specifics of describing how our related disciplines of pastoral care, chaplaincy, psychotherapy, and I add education, aim to train and form us for our sacred work with others. My hope, rather, is to invite you deeply and sensuously into the discovery of your own desiring.. for REAL conversation and relationship. I want to revive your appetites for being *with* others, in deeper and more related ways; pursuing conversations that can change your day! AND your LIFE!, and those of others.

If we (merely) become the new bots of simulated mirroring for our patients, parishioners, and students; striving for opacity, cleverness of speech and personal avoidance, and non-identity in our rooms: refusing to show up for REAL engagement, we quietly slip into the cultural flow that seeks increasingly to deny us all of the **Vitalizing** effects of **FACING IN** to the conversations that grow us into **Larger** versions of ourSelves, and **Enrich** our lives.

***The HeART of (really) good conversation, is the co-Mingling of our Souls.***

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