

Contribution of Gertrud Dederichs for InterContinent Issue on Pastoral Care

The continuing journey/exploration of “Healing presence”.

I want to begin my reflection with three quotes: There is first of all Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a protestant theologian, arrested in 1944, imprisoned and eventually executed shortly before the end of World War II for his involvement in a plot to overthrow Hitler regime – who in his writings from prison states a fundamental truth about pastoral care:

“When during the bombing raids (of World War II) fellow prisoners have come to me in need of consolation and reassurance I have hardly ever found myself in a position to say something. I have been lacking solace myself. All I have been able to offer, was to listen, to enter into their state of distress and desolation. And I believe that a consolation which truly comforts and reassures was born during those speechless moments of joint suffering and endurance.”

If I remember correctly, their reflection on similar experiences of joint suffering and endurance prompted MMS from Sector Africa to introduce and gift our Society with the concept of **“healing presence”** at the General Chapter of 1979.

And both of the above statements are reminiscent of the experience of St. Paul who starts his letter to the Corinthians as follows: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father and the God who gives every possible encouragement, who supports us in every hardship, so that we are able to come to the support of others, in every hardship of theirs because of the encouragement that we ourselves receive from God”*. 2 Cor, 1: 3-5

My **ministry** as a hospital chaplain has been **nurtured from various sources**: There was first of all my encounter with the people of Kenya and their comprehensive understanding of sickness, health and healing. For them health and wellbeing is essentially influenced by the quality of relationships with the wider community and with the divine. Whenever someone was sick what mattered - apart from lab-tests, medications or operations – were questions such as: What has strained or disrupted the balance and harmony of the person’s relationships? And how can we as community reach out and help to restore harmonious relationships in the social, psychological and spiritual sphere as an integral part of healing?

Having come back to my own country/culture (Germany), I was invited to work in pastoral care at a medium size hospital. Two experiential trainings at the Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago and specialized courses in Clinical Pastoral Education complemented my experiences in Kenya. Furthermore, a personal experience of prolonged illness gave me an inside view of the various needs of patients in terms of medical cure, psychological and spiritual support. Slowly by slowly, my own process validated the African concept: illness throws into question the frame of reference that we have taken for granted and it initiates us into a deeper exploration of our relationship to ourselves, to others and to God. Allowing myself to take note of and face these questions is scary. How comforting and reassuring to have people who – through their presence and listening ear – create a safe space for me to embark on this scary journey, to express fears and the ups and downs of my own emotions and to explore my questions.

And finally, I would like to mention the experience of journeying with my own mother through a process of growing dementia which has underlined for me the importance of a quality of presence beyond words. Being calmly present in situations that cannot be changed - without the need/urge to constantly do something or explore questions – has opened me to a new depth of communion which is reassuring, comforting and healing.

I have been involved in clinical pastoral care from 1991-1996, and again from 2005 until now. I have companioned patients, their relatives and members of staff in 4 different hospitals who have helped me **discover many lessons in the school of life and faith**. Journeying with people who experience frailty and dependence, people who are faced with death and dying, has been a great privilege! I have been richly blessed by people's trust, by their courage and faith with which they have faced existential questions. Especially the terminally ill have gifted and taught me a contemplative attitude of unique depth. Some of them – though they have long passed into God's embrace – still accompany me and help me to be calmly present to the "here and now", to enter empty handed into situations that seem chaotic and scary, trusting that God's healing power will well up and show itself victorious in the midst of brokenness, suffering and darkness.

Some concluding reflections – a deeper vision of life's beauty

Despite of continued medical progress it is not always possible to restore patients to former physical or mental health. Having to face and accept lasting impairment disrupts our view self and of the world, it challenges our securities and makes us question the meaning of life. What does healing mean in such situations of lasting loss, frailty and dependence? Illness and aging invite us to come to terms with the finiteness of our existence and learn to trust and surrender to God's loving hand not only in times of success and strength but also in diminishment.

Making our peace with diminishment and dying is a long and tedious journey with many ups and downs. To have travelling companions who are not bent on a quick fix and who do not shut me up with pious quotes but who are at ease with my questions and fears, and who have the long breath to cover the same terrain again and again are a precious gift. It is precisely their lack of answers, their being at ease with empty hands – that creates the safe space where a person can dare to enter unknown territory and face her/his "demons"/ scary questions. Along the joint path through the desert both the patient and his companion(s) will stumble upon by surprising wellsprings of life or be gifted with a sense of God's sustaining presence and healing love.

I want to close with a quote by Teilhard de Chardin who expressed his vision of life's beauty as follows: *"In a bunch of flowers it would be surprising to find imperfect or sickly blooms, because they have been picked one by one and assembled with art. On a tree, by contrast, which has had to fight the internal hazards of its own growth and the external hazards of rough weather, the broken branches, the bruised blossoms and the shrivelled, sickly or faded flowers are in their rightful place;"* *"The forces of diminishment are... forces of growth... of apparent failure and transfiguration.... God must, in some way or other, make room for Himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if He is finally to penetrate into us. ...And what ... is empty and void...can...become fullness and unity in God....*
In all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is You...who is painfully parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within Yourself." (Divine Milieu)