**Self-Transcendence and Healthcare**  
Institute of Medicine, Education, and Spirituality at Ochsner

Healthcare literature today emphasizes the care of the whole person. With the establishment of the Institute of Medicine, Education, and Spirituality (IMESO) in 2011, Ochsner showed its commitment to providing holistic system-wide care and acknowledging the role of spirituality in healthcare. The comprehensive definition of spirituality fostered by IMESO emphasizes the role of self-transcendence in the healing process. The word spirituality invokes a threefold description of human gifts: spiritual, intellectual/emotional, and bodily presence—traditionally referred to as spirit, mind, and body.

**Healthcare and Spirituality: A New Interaction**

The Hippocratic Oath expresses the close relationship of science, spirit and value for the care of the patient. In the scientific revolution, the spiritual aspects were relegated to clergy and pastoral care professionals. In recent times, with a greater acknowledgement of the interaction of mind, body, and spirit, there is a renewed interest in the role of spirituality in medicine. Spirituality has come to represent a vitality and plurality that encompass everything from Native American and Eastern practices to New Age and occult belief systems. Indeed, many medical schools are including studies in spirituality as an aspect of the practice of medicine.

Each health system must determine the extent to which it will develop and promote spirituality in medicine. The most difficult task for a health system is to clearly delineate a definition of spirituality that allows a broad understanding and acceptance of the value of spirituality in healthcare education and practice.

The definition of spirituality used at IMESO is “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”¹ The integral concept of the definition relates to self-transcendence, as opposed to isolation and self-absorption. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* suggested that Americans are living in a time, not of willing self-transcendence but of that willing self-isolation.²

**Self-Transcendence – What does it mean?**

Self-transcendence is the move toward selfhood and integrity and the ability to objectively see ourselves as others can see us, to show empathy for others (role-taking skills), and to develop a realistic acceptance of oneself. It is basically a process of self-surrender to

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wisdom and of standing outside of one’s immediate sense of time and place in order to view life from a broader, more objective perspective.

Self-transcendence is a concept that is incorporated into different spiritual traditions. In this regard we are seeking to go beyond our limited state of ego to expand our own consciousness. When we identify only with the body and ego it is a limited perspective. Spiritual traditions suggest we are more than just a frail body. The opposite of self-transcendence is self-absorption or an inordinate preoccupation with isolating oneself from others. Insofar as a person is able to forget the self, he or she able to recognize something’s true worth. Those who resist self-denial or self-surrender may be too focused on self-sufficiency and unable to be self-transcendent.

The field of assessment has been very active over the past few years in developing ways to gauge self-transcendence by examining the extent to which a person sees a larger plan and meaning in life, something beyond mortal existence. A self-transcendent person realizes that despite all the pains in life there is a permanency and constancy that gives direction, meaning, and value in life. ASPIRES, the Spiritual Transcendence Scale, is one tool for measuring self-transcendence.3

Individuals who score low on self-transcendence are more concerned with material aspects of life and see little from a larger perspective of life. Such a person may not have the competencies to face illness, disappointment, and the challenges of the political and social environment.

The same self-transcendent practice that transforms individuals also applies to corporations. Some corporations, such as Southwest Airlines, have embraced a self-transcendent philosophy that considers the welfare of employees and customers as paramount. This approach is known as workplace spirituality.

Characteristics of a Self-Transcendent Person: Trust, Endurance, Altruism

**Trust**

The first of these characteristics has to do with trust or a firm connectedness to self, others, and the divine. This journey is the process of creating a life orientation or spirituality, which results in a lifetime of seeking what is good and healthy, and thereby developing wisdom. This trust is the most important ingredient for experiencing meaning and purpose in life. Trust is engendered by the consistent practice of virtues and positive behaviors. For example, a trusting patient does not expect a physician to work miracles but does expect a combination of clinical expertise and compassionate care which includes empathy and good listening abilities.

If a healthcare system has an excellent clinical reputation, but does not gain the trust of its patients through compassionate patient care and good communication, holistic health and

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healing and patient satisfaction are endangered or minimized. In the end, trust is important to the physical, psychological, and intellectual health of patients as well as healthcare providers.

**Endurance**

The second characteristic of self-transcendence is the ability to endure hardship by making a conscious decision to undertake life’s pains with equanimity and wisdom. This is the major reason for the current discussion concerning the inclusion of spirituality into the practice of medicine. “Attending to the spiritual dimensions of the patient can provide the physician with a more in-depth understanding of the patient and his or her needs. We may thus use a variety of spiritually informed therapeutic tools that can greatly facilitate the patient’s coping ability, thus enhancing well-being and recovery.”

The real role of endurance in life depends on one’s spiritual development. In many theologies, suffering and endurance help to foster self-transcendence, leading to acceptance. Endurance drives us out of the commonplace and focuses our attention on what the horizon holds. Some individuals may equate the horizon with the ultimate value; others may simply manifest an acceptance of and complete surrender to a situation. The secret to endurance, or competent suffering, lies in the meaning and purpose that one develops and cultivates with others in the community.

Endurance in the healthcare setting is especially relevant to living well and accepting death. Developing a conscious sense of purpose and meaning gives the person the ability to keep life and death issues in balance. Suffering resulting from the ravages of disease can be endured only if the patient has values that are deeper than mere words, promises, or good intentions. If healthcare systems are to incorporate self-transcendence, they must help patients endure, especially in the face of end-of-life decisions. For example, they must help patients develop the resources to face death. To be a competent sufferer is to be able to return to life, even experience a type of gratitude, in the face of pain and tragedy, and to rise from devastation to strength even in the face of death.

**Altruism and Compassion**

Altruism is the highest form of self-transcendence since it places the other before the self. If we practice altruism, we experience the nature of spiritual self-transcendence: we feel we are not alone but are part of our neighbor, our community, our country, our culture; we feel that we belong to the whole world. Socrates said, “I am neither an Athenian nor Greek, but a citizen of the world.” This statement is a practical and spiritual manifestation of self-transcendence. Practicing altruism is the highest form of patient-centered care: a healthcare professional cares for a patient with the same compassion and value as if the patient were a family member. Healing is a form of altruistic behavior that calls the professional to be one with

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the patient, healing not only the body and the mind but acknowledging the powerful contributions of the spirit in the healing process.

Conclusion

In the past, many health systems and medical training programs abandoned spiritual training to focus on professionalism in terms of technology, science, and stability. Today attention is once again being placed on the need to balance professionalism and spirituality in all healthcare professionals, particularly in the vocations of physicians, nurses, and pastoral care. The holistic/patient-centered approach of caring for and healing of the whole person brings fulfillment and well-being to both healthcare professionals and the people they touch.

Holistic healthcare practice ideally involves spirituality leading to self-transcendence and creating an alliance between the caring healthcare provider and the trusting patient. That very interaction lifts the self above its otherwise self-limited achievements, capacities, and potencies and invests the self with even greater dignity and worth. This conscious effort teaches endurance in the face of suffering.

Healthcare providers are experiencing a new awareness in terms of patient-centered care, and in this awareness is the recognition that spirituality is a valuable asset in the healing process. For spirituality embraces not only the patient’s needs but also the relationship between the patient and the caregivers. This holistic approach also extends beyond the patient and caregivers to family members. Holistic healthcare providers focus on establishing and maintaining compassionate presence and incorporating spirituality into professional development and advocacy activities.

The mission of IMESO is to advocate for holistic healthcare and spirituality in Ochsner’s medical and education practices in cooperation with the efforts of the governing board, physicians, nurses, faculty, and all healthcare staff at all of the institution’s hospitals and clinics. The Institute supports Ochsner’s mission of healing, leading, serving, educating, and innovating.

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