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Reiki Practice Offers a Chance to Connect

By Ed Horvat

Earlier this year, I had to suspend my Catholic orientation to become more catholic.

“Linda” battled a chronic illness that eventually took her life. She had multiple admissions to the hospital where I work. During her last hospital admission, she was discharged home with hospice. Eventually, Linda “bled out,” and her 17-year-old son and one of Linda’s friends witnessed her death. Her son called me and asked if I would conduct the funeral service. He believed that I understood and “got” his mom.

Reiki (ray-key) was the common bond that Linda and I shared, and it was the way I gained entry into her spiritual world. Reiki is a Japanese word meaning “universal life energy,” the energy found in all things. Many Eastern cultures embrace the concept of universal energy (*ki* in Japanese; *prana* in Sanskrit; *chi* or *qi* in Chinese) and believe that physical, spiritual, or emotional distress can result from energy interference. Those who practice reiki believe that there is both a physical and spiritual reality to this energy. In fact, earth *ki* and heavenly *ki* are what we are: we are physical reality and we are spiritual essence.

It can be challenging to think outside of the framework of our tradition, but that is part and parcel of a professional chaplain’s work. I had become fascinated with the results I observed from touch therapies by some nurses in the hospital where I work, and I wanted to learn more. During the 2003 symposium in Toronto sponsored by NACC and other cognate groups, I participated in a pre-conference session conducted by Reiki Master Daniel Pure, M.Div, PCUSA. After I came home, I began to gradually and selectively incorporate reiki into the spiritual care I provide to patients, family, and staff.

Reiki was “rediscovered” in 1914 by Dr. Mikao Usui of Kyoto, Japan. Dr. Usui developed the technique based upon his extensive research into sacred scriptures, learning about healing from the world’s religions. Although many believe reiki to be spiritual, it is not a religion, and it does not require those who give or receive it to adhere to any particular religious system.

During reiki sessions, a person reclines on a massage table, or can remain in their hospital bed. Often, relaxing music is played. During a treatment, a reiki practitioner places her/his hands lightly on specific energy centers of the body. Using 12 to 15 hand positions, they transmit reiki to the person. Unlike massage, the body is not manipulated. The hands of the practitioner are placed on the clothed body. These are called “holds.”

When a reiki practitioner places her/his hands on the body, reiki is said to flow through the practitioner into the client. This transfer may be felt as any type of sensation — heat, cold, vibration, tingling, unusual heaviness, or sometimes as no sensation at all. On a physical level, reiki can relax muscles, ease pain, and accelerate healing. On a mental and emotional level, anxiety can be reduced, a sense of well-being may increase and another level of relaxation can be felt. On a spiritual level, people have stated they feel revitalized, cared for, and newly awakened.

Reiki practitioners neither diagnose nor promise outcomes. They believe reiki to have innate wisdom, be spiritually guided, serve the highest good, and flow naturally to wherever an individual needs it most. Using my own Christian faith as a reference, it is very much like the “laying on of hands,” and has some similarities to the sacrament or mystery of anointing. In my Byzantine Catholic tradition, I envision that I am working with *Hagia Sophia*, or Holy Wisdom — the Holy Spirit of the Trinity — when I utilize reiki as a spiritual care technique.

Leading hospitals have embraced and legitimized reiki to the point that they offer it as a complement to traditional treatments. These hospitals include Memorial Sloan-Kettering, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, The Cleveland Clinic, and the Yale Cancer Center, to name a few. In addition, the American Cancer Society acknowledges patients’ subjective reports that reiki speeds healing, increases physical and spiritual well-being, and reduces the intensity and frequency of nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy.

The Common Code of Ethics recently affirmed by NACC and five other professional organizations calls us to be mindful of the imbalance of power in the professional/client relationship, and mandates that we must refrain from any form of sexual misconduct. During a reiki session, the body is touched. Therefore, it is important to address the issue of touch further.

Ashley Montagu in his book *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, asserts that touching is something that we *need* to maintain health. But Montagu points out that society limits our touching behavior, that anything beyond a handshake or a back pat takes on sexual overtones in our culture. Montagu also maintains that “skin hunger” runs much deeper than a desire for sex. More recently, Phyllis K. Davis, Ph.D., in *The Power of Touch*, states that touch is the basis for survival, health, intimacy and emotional well being: “Touch is communication on the most basic level. The need for touch is a necessity throughout our lives, from birth to death, which serves to sustain us emotionally and physically.” I would expand Montagu and Davis’ definition of “health” to also include the spiritual dimension. Returning to an example from my Christian tradition, the Gospel is replete with examples of Jesus using touch to heal. Dr. Usui found similarities in the scriptures of other religions also. It is this kind of touch that a reiki practitioner focuses on.

Linda’s energy was apparent just being in her presence. But I had the opportunity to tap into her energy through touch. Linda was a reiki practitioner, a physician, and a businessperson. She was a woman of strong faith and deep spirituality outside of any religious structure.

The indigenous peoples of this continent do not have a word for religion in their languages. Their spirituality is inseparable from, and completely integrated into their lives. No word exists to separate it from other aspects of living. I became aware that Linda’s way of living was like that. Her spirituality was integrated into her being — her life-force.

In addition to the support I was providing to Linda, I was also being ministered to through her reiki energy. I became very calm and still. Images of water appeared in my mind’s eye, and I was on a lake. I was in a boat on that lake, and the gentle waves and the quiet were calming. There is an energy exchange during reiki, and even though Linda was in the hospital bed, she was still a healer.

Because Linda's son saw her bleed out, I was concerned about that final image hurting him, so at the funeral service I spoke about water. Linda and her son lived near water. Water is the lifeblood of our planet. Without water, life as we know it would not exist. The surrounding forests, fields, and farms all depend on water. Water is both sacred and commonplace; it is the stuff out of which life came. Earth's water molecules are billions of years old, they have traveled around the globe unnumbered times in an endless cycle. Water is the ultimate connector, and Linda was and is, ultimately connected to, and integrated with, life.

Since symbols help us to understand spiritual concepts, a pitcher of water was present during the service. I explained that the container symbolized Linda's physical life and presence. The water inside represented Linda's spiritual essence — and in Linda's case, that essence often spilled out from its container. I invited her son, alone or with others, at some future time, to empty the container, pouring out the contents into the natural world. I explained that her essence and life-force are no longer contained in her physical body, but her life-force and energy continue to be part of life. I let those present know that they would find themselves missing her physical presence, but I encouraged them to smile when they saw a raindrop, a tear, or pass a body of water. Linda's essence has been released from physical boundaries and restraints, but it has not disappeared.

Since then, Linda's son has poured the water into a river that feeds the lake they live near, which will eventually empty into the Gulf of Mexico, and on and on. She was buried on a West Virginia mountaintop surrounded by nature, and we passed many streams to get there.

If I had not been exposed to reiki, I would not have had a meaningful relationship with this particular patient as a professional chaplain. By extension, I would not have been in a position to help her young son honor his mother and place her life within the context of her values and belief system.

Linda would not have framed her concept of reiki within my religious and theological understanding of *Hagia Sophia* or the laying on of hands, but we were able to relate to each other spiritually. The Common Code of Ethics for Chaplains provides a framework for us to exercise professionalism in this wonderfully diverse world in which we live. One of the premier mandates calls us to be grounded in our respective faith; affirm the dignity and value of each individual we encounter; respect the right of each faith group to hold to its values and tradition; and respect the diversity of those we serve, refraining from imposing our own values and beliefs on them.

During the Sunday of Pentecost in my Byzantine Catholic tradition we intone the special hymn, "O Heavenly Comforter, Spirit of Truth, You are everywhere present and fill all things. Treasury of Blessings and Giver of Life, come and dwell within us." Indeed, Holy One, dwell within us. There is work to be done.

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