

International Healthcare Dialogue/Retreat

15-21 September 2013

STILL POINT · TURNING WORLD ~ EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION OF SPIRITUALITY IN HEALTHCARE

The fourth meeting of the international *Still Point-Turning World* Retreat was held in India at the Academy for a Better World Complex of the Brahma Kumaris at Gyan Sarovar, Mount Abu, in Rajasthan. One hundred and twelve guests attended from 13 countries.

Previously *Still Point-Turning World* Retreats were held in the USA, Australia and the UK. Guests from all over the world were invited to the meeting in India. The retreat's programme balanced a fluid structure responsive to the needs of the guests. The organising team created the structures and format, but it was the guests who, by and large, created the content. This emerged through discussion in pairs, small and large group work, and was stimulated by creative activity (poetry writing, musical interludes, drawing and journaling) with periods of silence, reflection, visualisation and meditation.

The first such retreat was held at Peace Village, in upstate New York in 2011 and brought around 60 healthcare workers and educators together to share conversations on how spirituality could be integrated in healthcare practices. The second was held in Australia at a rural retreat near Sydney. One participant described that retreat as 'moving into deeper concepts very early on into the retreat. The nurturing and comfort was crucial to the process. I felt buoyant throughout the year'. The third dialogue was held in the UK at the Global Retreat Centre in the Oxfordshire countryside and it, too, provided a nurturing context for healthcare professionals to exchange ideas about spirituality in medical and nursing practice. Some of the themes were concerned with developing strategies for resilience, creating sustaining communities of practice and developing the conscious self.

The *Still Point-Turning World* Retreat in Mount Abu continued exploring themes emerging from these earlier meetings. Importantly, the Retreat was not a showcase for individual expertise but rather for shared learning and extensive periods of silence and contemplation. Participants were encouraged to partake actively in all the processes and activities offered at the Retreat. The programme included a panel discussion whose aim was to set the tone for the exploration of spirituality during the week. Speakers were asked to reflect on 3 questions:

- What is spirituality for me now? How has it changed over time?
- How do I bring spirituality into my daily life as a healthcare practitioner?
- How have I managed the challenges of integrating spirituality & healthcare?

There were two further panels which further explored emerging themes.

Participants were encouraged to explore journaling as a tool to both record and deepen their reflections. A journal was used to capture thoughts and feelings and to listen to our inner selves. The action of writing helps to connect the creative flow of right and left brain which can lead to the magic of positive thoughts and actions.

Dadi Janki, the head of the Brahma Kumaris, met the group on several occasions. Her opening comments were:

'When we say 'Om Shanti' 'we become peaceful and the intellect goes up above. When the intellect goes up above this physical world we become clear enough to realise what is right and what is wrong, what is truth what is falsehood, what I should be doing and what I shouldn't be doing, what is charity and what is sin. Secondly, in the state of 'Om Shanti' I become aware of what I should do and the fact that I should do it right now. There will be no need to think, everything will become clear. In body consciousness the soul asks how to do something but in the state of soul consciousness there is the awareness and the experience that God helps.'

Meditation sessions were held early each morning with spoken commentary and silent contemplation on the following themes: exploring soul consciousness; overcoming anger, worry, sorrow and fear; Supreme Soul; wisdom in

action (karma philosophy) and practical aspects of integrating a spiritual practice into everyday life. These sessions were followed by a guided walk into nature or an exercise class. Creative sessions were held to access visions of wellness and good health care.

A feature of the five-day meeting was the 'Dialogues', that portion of the Retreat where six pairs of invited guests had spontaneous 10 minute conversations with each other in front of the all the participants. In these public conversations the dialogists introduced their personal interest in spirituality and how they used it in their work as clinicians, managers and educationists. This was further explored in 'Free Space' discussions which allowed the Retreat participants to move among the Dialogue pairs for discussion and an opportunity to develop their own personal perspectives on the following topics: spirituality in organisations, nursing training and palliative care; resilience; compassion and working with peoples' belief systems.

At other times there were small group conversations providing additional opportunities for everyone to share their understanding of spirituality and personal perspectives. These were in the style of 'Café conversations' where an appreciative look at Healthcare was encouraged. Again, themes were identified from the discussions and these fed into other groupings and created more opportunities to deepen our understanding. Themes that emerged included; practical spiritual tools; developing essential qualities; future of patient care; supporting carers and staff; introducing and sustaining spirituality in organisations; compassionate care; self care and development; education and training; and demonstrating spirituality at work. In the midst of all this dynamic group work, there were also 'home' groups, with a fixed membership, who met daily to review and embed the learning in a more intimate context.

Another feature of the Retreat was the use of Talking Stick at regular plenary meetings where everyone was invited to share uninterrupted personal insights of the day's work.

Half of one day was devoted to silence and in that time participants were asked to consider the following:

- How do I see the purpose of my life?
- How does healing and spirituality fit into this? Does anything need to change?"
- What is silence for me? What is the power of silence? What benefits do I gain from silence? How can I connect with the Divine in silence?

Prior to this period Brother Niwair shared his deep insights into silence with the participants. The group was brought out of silence in the late afternoon by a meditation deepening the idea of the 'still point' at the centre of activity. This was followed by a creative process aimed to deepen the experience of silence by identifying ways to integrate it into our professional lives.

The final session allowed participants to reflect on how to translate their learning into specific steps they could take back into their professional practice. Some of the key questions they considered included: What do we do with what we have learned? How can I put into practice what I would like to do? What's possible?

There were also afternoon outings and time for play with visits to Dilwara temple, Peace Park, Pandhav Bhavan and the Global hospital. The evening's entertainment was provided by local Indian dancers and we also entertained each other with stories, songs and poems which further heightened our sense of togetherness and lightness. We await to see what happens next!

Some feedback from participants:

You have created a masterpiece. I am going home enriched!

I never thought creativity and spirituality could mix. This is the first event I have experienced this happening.

I felt a lot of support and help to experience a holistic approach to spirituality.

With the thought of wanting to learn everything and with the value of participation, my experiences have been special and wonderful.

The real reason we are here together is for self transformation. I am grateful for this sacred space and the opportunity to be part of this gathering.