

numa

caring for the spirit in island health

ORGANIZATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

If you have ever seen the movie *Life is Beautiful* you know the power of resiliency. Set in the late 1930s Guido, a Jewish-Italian, and his family are captured and taken to a concentration camp. It is there that Guido teaches his young son, Giosue, that the whole experience is simply a game. The father uses a mixture of will, humor, and imagination to protect his son from the dangers that surround them in the camp. It's Guido's ability to cast the horrible situation in a different light that enables them to endure the camp. It is a powerful movie.

For a long time it was this view on life that singularly inspired me in my work. As a Spiritual Health Professional one's personal psychology and spirituality were keys to experiencing a full and vibrant life. How one understood what they were going through and the various resources they could bring to bear on their situation was what could make the situation better or worse. I witnessed this on many occasions in the work that I was privileged to do. Patients and families going through deeply painful times would muster up courage and belief helping them to find a place of hope and resiliency. Truly there is power within.

But lately I have discovered that I only knew half of the

When a flower doesn't bloom
you fix the environment in
which it grows, not the flower.

Alexander Den Heijer



picture. I have realized that there is another major factor that affects how people go through life. Through the wisdom of a colleague I have come to see that personal psychology is not enough. Despite our best intentions and hard work to raise our spirits the environment in which we live and work has the power to lift or crush our spirits as well. Guido did his best but in the end the system around them was more powerful than anything they could muster.

As far back as I can remember my childhood property had large commercial greenhouses on it. My parents were Dutch immigrants who, after trying their hand in the lumber industry of the west coast, finally went back to doing what they knew best: they grew flowers. As a child the greenhouses were the backdrop to the growth of the plants within. I didn't pay much attention to them. I always assumed that healthy growth happened solely because of the condition of the plants. But I have come to realize that those greenhouses created the right environment for those plants to flourish. A good plant in a poor environment would wither and possibly die. But in the right conditions even a struggling seedling could set roots and find new growth.

In short, the spirit of an environment matters. When we fail to notice the importance of having a healthy environment we can easily put the onus for health and growth solely on the individual. Speaking of plants Alexander Den Heijer put it this way “when a flower doesn’t bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower”. And so it is important to think about the environment in which we live and work. To ask the question of what is our environment like? What is good about it? What promotes or stifles growth? What beliefs and behaviours shape it?

Cultivating a healthy environment will promote the growth of all who live in it. In a poor environment members can sink to a baseline existence. In a large organization this can be seen in the belief that we simply do our work to get a paycheck. Conversely, in a healthy environment individuals are invited to grow because the conditions around them enable them to be all they can be. Environment matters.

It’s exciting to share these thoughts in a time when it appears that we (Island Health) are paying closer attention to the spirit of our organization. With initiatives in workplace wellness, patient and staff experience, and cultural safety there is the growing realization that *how* we experience each other in the work we do and in the care we give is deeply important. There seems to be a renewed realization from leadership right on up to frontline staff, patients and families that the spirit of a space matters.

While Spiritual Health professionals are acutely aware of the inner work that promotes spiritual health they are also keenly aware of organizational spirituality which also has the potential to heal or harm. In the end it takes both, spiritually healthy people and spiritually healthy environments. When both are nurtured positive growth is inevitable.

What is the spirit of your work place? What words, behaviours and practices contribute to the spirit of that environment? Knowing what makes up your environment, the spirit of a place, will greatly affect whether you and your team are just getting by or thriving.



The Space Between Us

**The space between us
is not empty.**

**It is crowded with boxes of words
and crates of others past actions.**

**Here the walls are papered
with policy and priorities.**

**The space between us
is not empty.**

**The ground is worn
with paths of being not created by us
but in which we walk.**

**Over us the rafters hold
the hurts of home,
the angst of future,
the loss of past,
the desire to impress,
and to be known.**

**The space between us
is not empty.**

**The air is full
of whispered expectations
and the dust of insecurity,
Filled with my fears
and yours,
my pride
and yours,
my joys
and yours.**

**The space between us
is not empty.**

**So may we have eyes to see what fills this space
Remembering we can remake this place,
clear a path, cleanse the air, make a space
where we can live together.**

D. Colyn

numa is a quarterly newsletter produced by Island Health’s Spiritual Health program to draw awareness to issues of spiritual health in health care. The editor of *numa* is Darren Colyn, the Spiritual Health Leader (54428).