The Hindu Chaplain
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Medical Ministry

The Hindu Chaplain

Our faith's tolerant beliefs and powerful practices enable us to minister effectively to all in need

By Swami Sarvaananda

A chaplain is an ordained clergy or layperson who performs a religious ministry in a public institution among people of diverse faiths. Chaplains serve today in the armies of most countries (including India), in hospitals, hospices, prisons, police and fire departments, even corporations. They are skilled in offering spiritual counseling and advice suited to a person's beliefs and needs. At moments of life-changing crisis, their responsibilities extend to family, friends, caregivers, rescue personnel and even bystanders. In her essay, Swami Sarvaananda speaks of her own chaplaincy training and experience.

In 2001, i was blessed to become the first hindu chaplain in the United States, certified by the Association of Professional Chaplains. I am a disciple of the late Swami Satchidananda and was initiated by him as a sannyasin and an Integral Yoga Minister in 1977. Before entering chaplaincy studies at the University of Virginia in 1998, I lived, studied and served at Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville, Virginia. I worked as an adjunct chaplain at the university for three years, then joined the Hospice of the Piedmont in Charlottesville, Virginia, where I now hold a full-time chaplain supervisor position (see sidebar p. 58). When not at the hospice, I still live, serve and study at Yogaville. It is my hope that after reading my story, other Hindus will be inspired to take up this wonderful service to our fellow humans.

For many reasons, I believe that Hindus are especially well suited for the chaplaincy. Certain Hindu practices can be exceptionally effective in dealing with patient and family needs. Many Hindu writings--the Upanishads, Vedas and the epics such as the Mahabarata and Ramayana, as well as Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the Tirukural and the Bhagavad Gita--guide us on how to care for ourselves and for

others, as well as how to lead a better life. Additionally, many Hindu chaplains have studied under masters who have conveyed to us their deep understandings of the teachings in ways that we could easily understand and apply.

What Is a Chaplain?

A chaplain is a skilled listener and facilitator who leads an individual, and sometimes a whole family or other group, through the process of dealing with strife, making plans and moving forward. All chaplains are skilled in the basics of counseling, such as active listening, theological reflection, case study techniques, record keeping and more. Many are certified counselors. Most also have additional training in crisis intervention, stress management, conflict mediation, disaster response and more. Chaplains are bound by the same rules of patient confidentiality as doctors.

The professional chaplain understands and practices his or her own faith and is also trained in the general theological beliefs and needs of many religions, faith traditions, belief and cultural systems around the world. Generally, a chaplain has a college degree in a related field, seminary training, experience in the field of ministry and a recommendation from his or her faith tradition.

Chaplains serve their patients and the patients' families by finding out what gives the family hope and learning the family's cultural, religious and spiritual traditions. Using those traditions, the chaplain supports the family through whatever situation they are encountering. Chaplains do not impose their own views; an evangelical approach to gain a convert is contrary to the chaplain's professional code of ethics. Rather, they have the knowledge and skills to support the person's own beliefs. Indeed, chaplains often assist the client in redefining his or her beliefs when under stress.

Chaplains use the tools of various faith traditions, such as prayer, meditation and relaxation, to offer support, and they are skilled in assisting anyone, regardless of beliefs. We use the term "faith tradition" as an alternative to "religion," but both mean the same thing. If desired by the patient, the chaplain will contact faith leaders from the patient's own church, synagogue or temple. When a family does not have a faith group, the chaplain may conduct memorial services or funerals. Chaplains can act as patient advocates, serve on ethics committees and assist families with values questions.

Chaplains often serve in health agencies, such as hospitals, nursing facilities, homes for the aged, assisted living facilities, rehabilitation centers, hospice services and AIDS homes. They serve in the military, with police, rescue squads, firefighters, disaster teams and with the American Red Cross and equivalent service agencies. Chaplains can be found in various work places--the circus, NASCAR, the court system and schools, especially when a critical event occurs. Everywhere people have been in need--the Virginia Tech shooting, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11--chaplains were there. Chaplains are looked upon as leaders in their community.

Many chaplains focus on grief, bereavement and crisis issues. Almost all will provide debriefing, lead workshops, facilitate grief groups and give lectures to community agencies. Their experience and their presence are a welcome influence in any chaotic situation.

Certification

To be certified by a national board, a chaplain must be a minister, monk or nun endorsed by his or her own religion or faith tradition and must have the equivalent of 72 graduate hours in theology and related topics. The candidate must have at least four credits of study in Clinical Pastoral Education, which is defined as "interfaith professional education for ministry" and includes at least 800 hours of direct patient care. Case studies and theology papers regarding patient care are required. These are reviewed by a committee of peers, who send their recommendation to the national office. Once certified, the chaplain must keep current by completing yearly educational requirements and occasional peer reviews.

As a Hindu, much of my religious and spiritual study came directly from learned masters and from the experience of living in an ashram. Therefore, the graduate theological equivalencies for certification were met in my case through documenting the study at the feet of my guru, Swami Satchidananda, and through study with many sages from various traditions, including the visits and talks at Yogaville by Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today. I entered the chaplaincy program already having a PhD in education, and this degree went a long way toward meeting the academic requirements. I completed the University of Virginia's program in Clinical Pastoral Education in 2000.

Hindu Beliefs and Practices In the Chaplaincy

Hindu beliefs and practices uniquely prepare a chaplain for serving people in distress. Pranayama, hatha yoga, meditation, vegetarianism and the study of raja and jnana yoga prepare the body and mind. Bhakti yoga keeps one in touch with a higher power through devotion and maintains prayer and faith in one's life. Hinduism's emphasis on service enables the practitioner to meet others' needs, before one's own. In short, a disciplined, devoted and dedicated Hindu can serve others well without depleting his or her own resources.

The challenge for all chaplains is to successfully minister to those of other faiths. Belief in the Hindu teaching, "Truth is One, Paths are Many," enables a chaplain to assist each patient with full respect for--and from the perspective of--the patient's own beliefs and traditions. Various professional studies and experience in the field have demonstrated to me that, when discussing one's own beliefs with those who follow other paths, the essential key is to present the concepts in an easily understood manner. When a patient shows interest in my beliefs, I build on the foundation of his or her own world view to present a few Hindu concepts, but I do not approach such discussions as an opportunity to change anyone's beliefs.

The Rig Veda states, Ekam sat, vipraha bahudha vadanti, "Truth is one; seers express it in many ways." This fundamental Hindu principle is a cornerstone for good chaplaincy care. The chaplain respects religious differences while acknowledging that there is an essence of sameness, believing that truth, joy, love and light can be found on any path. One analogy that works well with patients and families is to note that when we go to a restaurant, we all go to be nourished. One orders spaghetti, another salad. We are all fed according to our interest, desire and needs. Thus each has found a path that works for them. Understanding "where people are coming from" is essential in chaplaincy.

A belief in karma is shared by many people. In counseling, the understanding that each action has a reaction and that somehow, someday, balance will be found makes it easier to understand anger and find acceptance in a situation one hasn't caused directly--such as the impending death of a loved one. This view is helpful when assisting families in processing and coming to terms with what is happening. Understanding karma helps people to have greater acceptance and even to surrender to what unfolds. If something is happening, there is always a reason behind it. It becomes the person's duty to deal with the present and not resort to pondering the "what if's" of the past that might have changed the present. Instead, plans can be made, action taken and all can move forward.

No practice is so easily applicable to patients or families as pranayama, breath control, for everyone breathes to the end. Deep, full breaths taken slowly relax and invigorate the entire system. Learning to use the three-part breath as a regular pattern enables anyone to breathe more fully and brings in more oxygen. Alternate nostril breathing regulates and relaxes; combined with affirmations--"Breathe in the health, breathe out the illness"--it allows the person to visualize and support healing. Other breathing techniques, if taught gently, can also aid the patient and family.

One can even assist in regulating another's breathing pattern. Matching your breathing to that of a patient who is breathing either too slowly or too fast, and then slowly changing our breath to the recommended pattern can bring even the non-awake patient to the correct breath. I have seen this technique work, if only briefly, even with patients on breathing machines and those who are near death. Of course, if a person is healthy enough, a more extensive practice of breathing techniques will bring great assistance in the healing process. In addition to using pranayama themselves with patients, chaplains can also teach staff, volunteers and the family to practice and to use it with the sick.

Prayer, common to every religion, can be described as one's chance to talk to God, meditation as a time to become deeply silent and listen for an answer and contemplation as a time to think about how to apply what one heard to one's daily life. This approach is invaluable in dealing with changes in life, in any faith tradition. Today these practices are also referred to as "centering oneself," "visualizing positive thoughts," "finding one's inner path" and similar phrasing.

Finally, the practice of inner stillness--just being, not doing--is essential in assisting patients and families as they deal with turbulent emotions. Inner stillness, a great healing force, brings outer stillness.

On Regaining and Keeping Health

In my hospice chaplaincy work, I deal with terminally ill patients and their families. Recovery is usually not an option. But in most other forms of chaplain work, recovery is very much the goal. In that work, I have found that people must first be taught that true health is more than a condition of the body.

My explanation is: "When you are in perfect health, you will be happy everywhere, relaxed everywhere--always at ease and in peace, within and without. You hate no one, dislike none. Total love, universal love emanates from within. There is no tension anywhere, no stress or friction. These are the signs of real health. A healthy person doesn't hurt anyone. You are not afraid. You don't have to fear and you don't cause fear. A healthy person emits a loving, pure vibration."

Swami Satchidananda taught us, "The human body is a temple. Keep it strong and supple; treat it gently. Live in a way that makes your body light and healthy. The body is a vehicle of divine expression, as are all forms of creation. To become a good instrument of the divine, maintain your health. Have an easeful body, a peaceful mind and a useful life."

With this approach, we can face any situation and still be, from a broader perspective, a healthy person. Sharing this with patients and families enables them to understand that true health is more than healing from a particular disease. On the practical side, a health crisis can awaken people to the value of a lifestyle which includes a vegetarian diet, not eating in excess, no smoking, drinking or recreational drugs, plenty of exercise, relaxation and attention to reducing stress. Combined with a positive attitude, including service to others, these beliefs and practices can make a great impact on the lives of all patients and family members.

Community Outreach

Chaplains encounter many opportunities to represent their faith in a multi-faith environment, both in a hospital or hospice and in the broader community. I am often asked to participate on panels or give talks on Hindu beliefs and practices, especially as they pertain to health care. Hospitals are now publishing information for staff on essential practices and beliefs of various traditions, as the patient population has become more diverse. Those planning community and facility memorial services frequently seek persons to represent various faiths. As a chaplain, I am regularly asked to participate. In 2007-2008, I had the honor of being on the Planning Committee for the 2008 National Conference of the Association of Professional Chaplains chairing the Spiritual Needs subcommittee. We developed an interfaith service and other thematic services with prayers from many faiths.

Conclusion

Hindu chaplains are needed in health facilities, in prisons, in the military and as part of disaster and emergency response teams. If you are a practicing Hindu who has the temperament to serve others in such situations, chaplaincy may be a choice for you, either as a volunteer or as a professional. Volunteer chaplains usually serve only members of their own faith community within the above-mentioned settings. They should have the endorsement of a temple or ashram, and a background in counselling is very helpful. Specialized training may be required to serve, even as a volunteer, in a larger organization.

One obstacle to Hindus becoming chaplains has been the lack of an equivalent certification to that of a religious seminary in the West that issues degrees as authoritative as those from a major university. For Hindus, most study is within the person's family, in the temple and at the feet of a guru. This type of learning--which has served Hinduism well through the last several thousand years--has been hard to document to match the seminary model. The good news is that a few of us in the health care field are working to gain recognition for the traditional training methods of our faith and others.

If you have a college degree in a related field, and are active in faith practices and in your temple, you may well be qualified for chaplaincy training. You may call your local hospital where pastoral education is offered, contact the Association of Professional Chaplains at www.professionalchaplains.org or e-mail me, Swami Sarvaananda, at swsarva _@_ yogaville.org for further information.

In the Course of a Chaplain's Day...

Chaplaincy work in the emergency services is invariably intense, dealing with accidents, disasters and crimes, while a military chaplain may deal with anything from a soldier's fraying marriage to the horrors of the battlefield. Most of my own work, though, has involved assisting patients in a hospice, a facility that provides palliative care for the terminally ill in a home-like environment. It is a quiet, often contemplative, setting in which reflection on higher things comes naturally. The following stories (slightly altered to preserve confidentiality) are drawn from my experience.

In one case, a dying woman's 12-year-old granddaughter arrived at the hospice from across the country. The grandmother, unable to speak or even open her eyes, frightened the girl when she grasped her hand and would not let go. With the help

of other therapists, the chaplain was able to calm the parents and allay the child's fear. For the next three days, until the grandmother died, the chaplain stayed close, meeting the family's needs as they arose.

Another patient, we'll call him the Commodore, had helped develop the submarine program for the United States. At the time the chaplain met him, he could barely hold a cup. He had traveled around the world, examined many cultures and faith traditions and concluded that there is no life after death. The chaplain and the Commodore spent many hours over many months discussing philosophy, questioning beliefs and having fun challenging one another. One hour before he died, he said, "Pray for me, chaplain." The request was in recognition of their friendship and did not signal a change in his beliefs. The chaplain responded, "Thank you. It has been an honor to discuss and share with you. I will indeed pray for all of us." Later, the chaplain was honored to officiate at his funeral in Arlington National Cemetery.

One 95-year-old patient at the hospice had been an enthusiastic golfer. The chaplain had met her three years earlier, when she could walk, go out with others on town trips and smoke on the porch of her retirement home. On what was to be the last day of her life, she lay in bed unable to move; but still her mind was sharp. She asked the chaplain to play "Imagine Golf." The lady verbally played five holes at her favorite course, describing the layout, picking the club and narrating her shot. On the fifth hole she got to the green, took her last breath and died before sinking the putt.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, a mentally challenged 42-year-old man and his dying mother arrived at his sister's home in Virginia. Floodwaters forced him and others out of the facility where they were living and onto the streets. Abandoned, he walked home to his terminally ill mother. With no help from the overwhelmed rescue workers, the two took her car and somehow drove all the way to Virginia. The daughter called the hospice for help. The team placed the son in a facility, which was difficult, as his records had been lost in the flood. As soon as the mother knew her son was cared for, she died within hours.

One chaplain encountered a horrific traffic accident on her way home from work. The couple in the crashed car had been fighting; the husband was killed. The chaplain offered her help to the emergency personnel, who asked her to move the wife to a quiet spot and try to calm her down. After some time, the wife did pull

herself together, and asked the chaplain to pray with her over her husband's body. She then removed his wedding ring and accompanied his body to the emergency room. The chaplain, her job done, went back to her car.

It is the nature of a chaplain's work to deal with everyone impacted by a crisis. On a daily basis, I help people face their inevitable transition, help the survivors come to terms with their grief, handle the mundane matters that accompany death and find a way to move the living ahead in their lives.