**Chapter 6 - Interperson****al Competencies for Cultivating Spiritual Trust**

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*Abstract: This chapter describes three interpersonal spiritual care competencies building upon each other to cultivate spiritual trust: spiritual self-differentiation, spiritual empathy, and spiritual reflexivity.* *In the life-long process of learning these competencies, chaplains need to practice spiritual self-care that helps them self-differentiate by maintaining healthy boundaries within the power dynamics of caregiving. Chaplains practice spiritual differentiation by drawing upon their religious, theological, and clinical education to focus on differences between their own and another person’s beliefs, values, and spiritual practices. Spiritual differentiation is at the heart of interreligious care, which makes chaplains more spiritually trustworthy. Building upon spiritual differentiation, spiritual and social empathy helps chaplains imagine how another person’s suffering generates contextual values, beliefs, and coping practices that may be shaped by systemic abuses of power.* *People are more likely to trust chaplains who are spiritually differentiated and empathic. Such trust makes people want to search for meanings with chaplains, a process described in previous chapters. Chaplains become spiritually trustworthy when they are spiritually reflexive about how values and beliefs are contextually shaped by aspects of one’s social, religious, or spiritual identities. A case study illustrates how chaplains use communication skills in practicing spiritual care that is spiritually differentiated, empathic, and reflexive.*

**Spiritual Trust: The Relational Foundation for Learning and Practicing Spiritual Care**

In this chapter we describe three interpersonal competencies—spiritual self-differentiation, spiritual empathy, and spiritual reflexivity—that help chaplains establish *spiritual trust*, which is the relational foundation unique to spiritual care. Spiritual care, as we define it, is an integrative process that begins with exploring calming spiritual practices that help people to experience spiritual trust. We use the term spiritual as a simple way to describe complex and diverse relational experiences of transcendence. Many people experience and name transcendence through sacred texts, music, symbols, and rituals from religious and/or spiritual traditions. When spiritual practices help people feel held within compassionate and trustworthy relationships, they will be ready to explore what their suffering means (an essential function of spiritual care described in the chapters on meaning-making).[[1]](#endnote-1) When they feel overwhelmed by suffering, they can rest in practices that instill trust. In this chapter we build upon the description in Chapter 3 of how chaplains listen for the ways that people may experience a sense of connectedness with the sacred/transcendent/sources of spirituality.

Chaplains become spiritually trustworthy when they convey respect for the unique ways people experience and name incarnational and/or transcendent aspects of their lives that mediate a deep sense of mystery, awe, beauty, goodness, holiness, and/or the sacred. Chaplains may be especially helpful when people experience religious and spiritual struggles that disrupt practices previously connecting them to transcendence.[[2]](#endnote-2) Chaplains may invite people to collaboratively explore any sorts of calming practices that help people feel self-compassion when physiological, emotional, and moral stress overwhelms them. Calming practices help people re-experience that deep sense of connection that instills a sense of trust. In a parallel fashion, chaplains trust the process of learning spiritual care when they use spiritual practices that center and calm them when they feel overwhelmed by suffering (see Chapter 3 for a description of chaplains develop specific practices to ground themselves in their bodies). We illustrate the importance of spiritual self-care in the following case study[[3]](#endnote-3) used throughout our chapter.

**Case Study Part 1: Practicing Spiritual Self-Care**

Our chapter’s case study describes Angie, a 25-year-old, single African American woman with advanced Hodgkin’s lymphoma, who is expected to die during this hospitalization. She is unresponsive and medical examinations suggest that the systems of her body are shutting down in a way that is typical at the end of life. The chaplains on the floor have been making brief daily visits. She receives no other visitors. The walls are bare of cards, and there are no flowers in the room. You know from the prior visits by chaplains on this floor and the chart notes that Angie is alienated from her family and distances herself from people she says were “bad influences” before her cancer diagnosis and earlier recovery from addiction. She credits a return to the Pentecostalism of her youth as the reason she has remained clean and sober.

Angie has been unresponsive for more than a week. You are a student chaplain new to the oncology unit today. You had spoken with other chaplains about Angie. The nurses tell you today that Angie has had moments where she is more alert. One nurse, who is very experienced with end-of-life care, tells you that it is common for patients who are dying to experience perceptions or sensations that are comforting to them. Sometimes there is no clear medical explanation for these experiences. You were anticipating that she would still be unresponsive, and you would simply need to offer a silent prayer. Before going into Angie’s room, you take a deep breath and realize how anxious you are. If she has a conversation with you, you will have to chart your visit and report back to your chaplaincy colleagues and summarize your visit at rounds with the medical team. When you begin your conversation with Angie, she is eager to tell you about an “amazing experience of God” when she was unresponsive. Her voice is low and quiet. She invites you to sit close to her so you can hear what she says:

It was just me and God dancing together up there in the corner. I had on a red dress. The prettiest red dress. I've never worn anything like it.  We danced and danced. You know, people always say, ‘God is this’ or, ‘God is that.’ God isn't anything we know about, even if he is a darned good dancer. It’s just, ‘God is.’ [She pauses. There are tears in her eyes.] Not even, ‘God is.’ Just, ‘IS.’”

Angie goes on to tell you that she received a blessing and a healing; that even though she will die with the cancer, she has been made whole.

*Trusting the Process of Learning Spiritual Care*

What helps chaplains instill spiritual trust in those facing the void of death, like Angie in our case study? Chaplains serve as a liaison between participants in the spiritual care context (e.g., in healthcare, between patients and their medical caregivers). At the same time, chaplains enable care seekers like Angie to trust the process of spiritually integrating her suffering when chaplains are on their own journeys of spiritual integration. Spiritual integration is a collaborative and relational process of using calming spiritual practices that enhance spiritual trust in the process of finding purpose through values and exploring life giving beliefs about suffering and hope. Spiritual integration is “the extent to which spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences are organized into a coherent whole.”[[4]](#endnote-4) What helps chaplains on the parallel process of spiritual self-care/integration while caring for others?

Like the process of spiritual care, spiritual integration begins with exploring and using calming practices for coping with stress. If you were the student chaplain in our case study you might feel overwhelmed by the challenge of offering spiritual care to this young African American woman dying of cancer, who has been unresponsive for a week and is now periodically stirring and more responsive. It is easy to imagine your stress response. Your breathing becomes shallow. Your heart beats faster. Your shoulder and facial muscles tighten. You feel momentarily overwhelmed by the complexities of interdisciplinary spiritual care to dying patients who experience sensations or perceptions that are comforting. You want to empathize with this patient’s emotional and spiritual experience while placing it in an interdisciplinary clinical context that honors her dying process. You want to align your body language with the compassion of your heart and your interdisciplinary understanding of her spiritual experiences of dying.

Imagine taking several slow, deep breaths while you focus for a moment on something with spiritual meanings, such as a sacred text, or a place or image with sacred meanings. Calming practices like slow deep breathing can be incorporated into regular spiritual practices like prayer, devotional reading of sacred texts, participating in liturgies, mindfulness meditation and yoga, as well as any sort of practices that instill a sense of beauty, awe, and/or goodness through the arts and nature. Calming spiritual practices ground chaplains in their own religious and/or spiritual heritage, identity, and communities, in ways that enhance spiritual differentiation, empathy, and reflexivity three core interpersonal competencies for socially just and interreligious spiritual care that build upon a spiritually integrative learning process. As we noted in the introduction to this section of the book, we use the term socially just spiritual care to describe the need for chaplains to understand how systems of social privilege and disadvantages interact in their own lives, the lives of care seekers, and within the organizational contexts where they practice spiritual care. Developing interpersonal competencies is a lifelong learning process within relationships of collaborative accountability with peers and clinical pastoral educators, as we illustrate in the following descriptions of spiritual self-differentiation, spiritual empathy, and spiritual reflexivity.

*Spiritual Self-Differentiation*

Self-differentiation helps chaplains maintain healthy relational boundaries within the power dynamics of spiritual care, so that chaplains do not become emotionally/spiritually fused with care seekers and their families, or colleagues. The importance of managing relational boundaries in the emotional intensity of intimacy and family relationships was first defined and described in Bowen’s family theory and therapy exploring intergenerational family patterns of relational boundaries.[[5]](#endnote-5) Self-differentiation in intimate/high investment relationships is both an interpersonal process of managing relational boundaries and a psychological process of managing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. “In Bowen’s approach, differentiation of self is the most critical to mature development and attainment of psychological health.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

The emotional intensity of spiritual care can cause chaplains to lose their “emotional balance” and blur the boundaries between self and other. Emotional contagion infuses chaplains with another’s emotional struggles. Chaplains may feel overwhelmed by another’s overt emotional distress. They may feel swept off their feet by the hidden currents of another’s sadness, anger, or shame. They may re-experience memories of life threats, magnifying their moral responsibility to protect others from harm. Chaplains may cope with fusion using emotional disengagement or cutoff which, as Schnarch and Regis emphasize, is not the opposite of fusion but an attempt to regulate one’s emotions and sense of self.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Conflicts involving power dynamics and relational boundaries are an inevitable part of couples and family relationships, or any relationship in which people have an emotional investment. Schnarch and Regas’s “crucible therapy” promotes “anxiety tolerance rather than… reduction” during “the natural emergence of emotional gridlock as a result of healthy differentiation.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Their Crucible approach views “gridlock as normal and inevitable, and conflict as healthy and necessary for personal growth…. The ability to maintain good cognitive functioning and emotional self-regulation during stressful situations develops through high-anxiety, high-meaning encounters, which emerge during the course of marriage, love relationships, family, school, and work life.”[[9]](#endnote-9) They define four points of balance necessary to navigate gridlock:

1. *a solid flexible self* that is not dependent on “a positive reflected sense of self from others, allowing you to maintain your own psychological shape when other people pressure you to conform. Likewise, it reflects the ability to change and adapt, accept influence from others as good judgment dictates, and heed good advice without losing sight of your goals and values.”[[10]](#endnote-10)
2. *a quiet mind and calm heart* using soothing and calming practices for managing conflict without “dominating or accommodating others, or by becoming emotionally distant or intrusive.”[[11]](#endnote-11)
3. *grounded responding* using “the ability to make modulated proportionate responses to provocations and difficult circumstances… [by] not locking into arguments or over-reacting, while also staying emotionally invested and not avoiding difficult people or situations that need to be handled.”[[12]](#endnote-12)
4. *meaningful endurance* using “the ability to get out of your ‘’comfort zone’, tolerate discomfort for growth, and persevere through disappointment and hardship to accomplish your goals.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Those in professional helping relationships learn how to psychologically self-differentiate in order to maintain healthy boundaries. The added dimension of spiritual self-differentiation is what makes chaplains competent in interreligious spiritual care (see Chapter 4 for the importance of interreligious care in the search for meanings that is unique to spiritual care). We use the term interreligious to describe a specialized kind of intercultural humility that integrates:

* *Knowledge* of the socially constructed nature of religious beliefs, values, and rituals[[14]](#endnote-14)
* *Attitudes of intercultural humility* toward cultural, religious, moral and spiritual differences, and the ineffable mystery of the other
* *Capacities* in spiritual differentiation, enabling chaplains to differentiate among and particular religious, spiritual, and moral orientations of others.
* *Skills* in spiritual self-care for coping with the anxieties/losses of letting go of absolute meaning/value systems that avoid, polarize, or minimize religious and spiritual differences.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Chaplains learn interreligious care through graduate studies, especially comparative studies of religion, and clinical training that enhances spiritual self-differentiation in religiously diverse contexts. We recognize the limitations of the term interreligious for describing spiritual care to those with humanist, agnostic, or atheist orientations, as well as those who reject the term spiritual in describing their traditions and communities (for example, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, or American Indian persons).

Spiritual care combines psychological and interpersonal growth through self-differentiation with an interreligious radical respect for differences in the narrative ‘truth’ of one’s own and another’s spiritual/moral orientation to stress/suffering. How can chaplains develop a solid flexible *spiritual* self (using Schnarch and Regis’s first point of balance for self-differentiation)—sometimes called spiritual or pastoral authority? First, chaplains need graduate education in comparative studies of religion that helps them pay attention to how Christianity is used in normative and hierarchical ways to interpret and ‘rank’ other religious traditions through Christian categories and beliefs. In describing spiritual empathy and reflexivity, we will elaborate how a social constructionist comparative approach is combined with a de-colonialist understanding of the fusion between colonialism and Christianity. Spiritual self-differentiation within religiously diverse contexts must truly respect religious differences by not enacting a caste system of religious/spiritual traditions and practices, with some more superior or truthful than others.

This cognitive dimension of a solid flexible spiritual self is challenging to practice within religious traditions that have not developed beliefs, values, and practices supporting radical respect for religious differences. Chaplains practicing spiritual care in religiously diverse contexts often struggle with becoming spiritually differentiated when their religious ‘family’—the community/organization that may ordain them and endorse their vocations of spiritual care— require them to affirm the absolute truth of their religious doctrines and to practice spiritual care that ‘saves souls’ through adherence to doctrine. Chaplains often cope with these doctrinal demands by adopting an inclusive orientation to religious differences that searches for commonalities and assumes that all religions of the worlds share common beliefs.[[16]](#endnote-16) While inclusivism may alleviate religious conflicts between bivocations as chaplains and faith community leaders, inclusivism minimizes and ignores vast differences across religions of the world, especially historical trajectories and cultural contexts. When inclusivist spiritual caregivers assume there is “one God”[[17]](#endnote-17) at the heart of each person’s experience, they risk spiritual coercion by overlaying their experience of God onto another’s unique experiences, values, and beliefs.

When chaplains are able to practice interreligious spiritual care using cognitive capacities for respecting a care seeker’s narrative truth, they will be able to trust the co-creative process of spiritual care—the intermingling of their and a care seeker’s stories, practices, values, and beliefs. Chaplains practice spiritual self-differentiation by combining a *solid spiritual self* that is grounded in their ongoing process of spiritual integration with a *flexible spiritual self* that trusts the spiritually intersubjective process of searching for contextually meaningful practices, values, and beliefs.

In our case study, Angie’s description of her experience of God could easily overwhelm chaplains, especially within the drama of her emerging from a week of being unresponsive. They could be tempted to foreclose meanings cognitively through skepticism that questions Angie’s sense of ‘reality’—her conviction that God was ‘speaking’ to her. Skepticism could be a way of coping with emotional/spiritual fusion through disengagement. Such skepticism could be justified within progressive religious traditions that question ‘direct revelations’ of God. Skeptical chaplains could easily become anxious about how those in their ‘religious home’ would question any endorsement of such revelations. Alternately, chaplains within religious traditions that believe in direct revelations and miracles could become emotionally and spiritually fused with Angie in proclaiming this as a miracle. In either scenario, spiritual and emotional fusion will be more likely when chaplains do not understand what happens medically when people are intermittently responsive and then unresponsive due to the shutting down of their organs and body processes.[[18]](#endnote-18) Collaboration with medical providers help chaplains to be aware of medical reasons for a patient’s unusual perceptions or unresponsiveness. Is the patient unresponsive due to a medical episode which can be treated and may or may not end their life? Or, as in Angie’s case, are patients in their final days or weeks of life, and not responsive because this is their body’s way of minimizing suffering at the end of their life?

By using calming spiritual practices in a spiritually integrative learning process (Schnarch and Regis’s second point of balance for self-differentiation), chaplains will recognize when stress makes them cope with jarring experiences of religious differences by wanting to minimize, polarize, or use inclusion as a way of ‘re-centering’ themselves in familiar or habitual orientations that blur differences, which are shaped by childhood and culture. By grounding themselves using spiritual practices, such as deep, slow breathing that shifts chaplains out of a stress response into calmness, chaplains will re-connect with a felt sense of trust in the collaborative, co-creative process of spiritual care. With trusted others, they can explore what jarred them—what emotions were part of feeling overpowered, and what values and beliefs about religious differences were generated by their stress responses. Spiritual practices that ground them in self- and other compassion will help them use critical thinking skills in theological and religious studies to search for values and beliefs complex enough to bear the weight of suffering and offer realistic hope for healing and social justice.[[19]](#endnote-19) In our case study, chaplains could use calming spiritual practices when jarred by Angie’s description of her experience with God, in order to become more emotionally and cognitively able to co-create meanings with her, especially about how she has ‘received a blessing and a healing’; that even though she will die with the cancer, she has been made whole. Our case study illustrates how chaplains can remain spiritually balanced and self differentiated when they have developed (1) a solid flexible *spiritual* self and (2) a quiet mind and calm heart using calming spiritual practices. These cognitive and spiritual capacities of self-differentiation help them to use (3) grounded responding as they co-create contextual meanings arising from Angie’s experience. They will be able to ‘surf’ the anxiety of hearing about and responding to Angie’s amazing experience of God by being able to (4) get out of their cognitive/theological ‘comfort zone’, tolerating discomfort for spiritual growth. In order to understand what spiritual self-differentiation looks like in practice, we need to understand differences between agential and receptive power.

*The Role of Agential or Receptive Power in Spiritual Self-Differentiation*

A key aspect of spiritual differentiation is paying attention to how one uses agential or receptive power from one moment to the next. “Agential power influences, guides, and shapes, while receptive power receives and takes in.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Agential power is grounded in chaplains’ specialized knowledge of and training in spiritual care, and in their organizational role, which often includes interdisciplinary teamwork within health, hospice and long-term care, as well as educational, prison, military and nonprofit organizations. Receptive power is grounded in spiritual self-differentiation that opens chaplains to the mystery of the other. Agential and receptive power use different *styles of communication* that range from following, guiding, and directing, and different *communication skills* of listening, asking, and informing.[[21]](#endnote-21) Agential power usually uses directing and guiding styles, along with informing and asking skills. Receptive power uses a following style along with listening skills. How do agential and receptive power and their related communication styles and skills play out in a spiritual care conversation?

Chaplains usually begin by introducing themselves in ways that help others ‘locate’ the chaplain’s agential power within the organization’s purpose/mission—in our case study, holistic healthcare with possibilities for hospice care. Chaplains often then shift from agential power to receptive power, using a following style and listening skills to receive the other’s response—especially communicated through their body language. If the other seems hesitant to interact, chaplains might shift into agential power by using a guiding style and asking skills to gently seek permission to either say more about their role or find out more about the other’s hesitation. For example, questions about the chaplain’s religious affiliations may arise from another’s desire to find commonalities, and/or religious or spiritual struggles that make them suspicious of those with religious/spiritual authority. When chaplains use ‘in the moment’ calming practices like slow, deep breathing, they can differentiate their own need to help from the other’s hesitancy over or refusal of spiritual care. They will then be able to receive and respect the other’s response.

Let’s imagine how a chaplain might use agential and receptive power and related communication styles and skills in an opening conversation with Angie.

**Case Study Part 2: Practicing Spiritual Self-differentiation Using Agential and Receptive Power**

Our chapter’s case study continues with Angie, who is expected to die during this hospitalization. Her chart indicates that she has no family support and that returning to her childhood Pentecostal faith has help her recover from addiction. Angie has been unresponsive for a week due to the shutting down of her bodily systems at the end of her life. You are visiting her on a day where she is having intermittent periods where she is somewhat responsive.

Chaplain: Hello, Angie. I am [name], a chaplain in the Spiritual Care Department of this hospital. (Use of agential power, a directing style, and informing skills to clarify the chaplain’s professional/organizational role)

Angie: Chaplain, I am so glad to see you. I had an amazing experience with God. I tried to tell the nurse and doctor but they were too busy assessing my health and doing tests. (Angie conveys a sense of immediate trust and desire for spiritual care.)

Chaplain: I’d like to hear about your “amazing experience with God” (Chaplain shifts into receptive power, using a following style that respects Angie’s unique experiences by using her words.)

Angie: It was just me and God dancing together up there in the corner. I had on a red dress. The prettiest red dress. I've never worn anything like it. We danced and danced. You know, people always say, ‘God is this’ or, ‘God is that.’ God isn't anything we know about, even if he is a darned good dancer. It’s just, ‘God is.’ [She pauses. There are tears in her eyes.] Not even, ‘God is.’ Just, ‘IS.’”

Angie goes on to tell you that she received a blessing and a healing; that even though she will die with the cancer, she has been made whole.

Angie’s chaplain draws upon receptive power, using a following style and listening skills to echo Angie’s words without adding interpretations. The chaplain minimizes asking questions, which would put the chaplain in the ‘driver’s seat’ by directing the conversation. Spiritual self-differentiation supported by calming spiritual practices helps this chaplain recognize and set aside any immediate need to ‘fill in the puzzle’ of Angie’s narrative by asking for narrative, emotional, or spiritual details that would ‘make sense’ of the mystery of her experience. The chaplain can make a mental note to speak with the bedside nurse and/or attending physician to further understand the medical and psychological aspects of Angie’s experience. Spiritual trust will deepen when the chaplain follows Angie’s searching for meanings, assuming the role of a respectful guest who has been invited into the mystery of Angie’s “amazing experience with God.” Spiritual self-differentiation helps this chaplain honor the narrative and contextual ‘truth’ of Angie’s experience of God. Her chaplain might be tempted to use agential power to negatively judge Angie’s experience by using stereotypes of Pentecostalism. Conversely, her chaplain might become ‘stuck’ in receptive power that conflates Angie’s experience with the chaplain’s own intense religious experiences, absolutizing both in ways that blur religious differences.

This case study begs the question, how are the chaplain’s reactions to Angie shaped by their perception of interacting aspects of her identity (such as gender identity, religious/spiritual identity, racial identity, and other salient aspects of identity)? Religious and spiritual identity is always contextually experienced as intertwined with other aspects of identity. In this conversation, the chaplain’s immediate impressions are shaped by their perceptions of Angie’s gender, age, race, health status, and other perceptions of her identity. How do chaplains begin to imagine what it is like to be Angie? How do they build upon spiritual differentiation by using spiritual and social empathy to imagine Angie’s spiritual world at this moment?

*Spiritual and Social Empathy*

Spiritual empathy helps chaplains imagine how another’s stress-based emotions generate contextual spiritual/moral orientations to stress and suffering—‘lived’ values, beliefs, and coping practices—that ‘make sense’ given family and cultural contexts, especially intersecting social advantages and disadvantages generated by systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of social oppression. Psychologists using brain imaging technology have mapped the neural circuits active during empathy[[22]](#endnote-22) demonstrating how “*affective empathy* describes the physiological aspects of vicariously feeling what another person is feeling; while *cognitive empathy* involves the mental processing of another’s feelings, thoughts and intentions.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Affective empathy occurs in part at an unconscious, physiological level. Chaplains need self-differentiation in order to manage affective empathy so that, as we noted earlier, boundaries between self and other are not blurred. The cognitive component of empathy uses perspective-taking to imagine what it is like to stand in the other’s shoes. Spiritual empathy uses spiritual perspective taking. Chaplains imagine the other’s emotional responses to stress and suffering, and how their emotions generate a moral/spiritual orientation to their stress or suffering.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Chaplains draw upon specialized knowledge from their theological and religious studies to combine psychological perspective taking with spiritual perspective taking that pays attention to religious, spiritual, and moral differences and particularity. As we noted earlier, chaplains need to listen for and echo back the particular words the other uses to speak of themselves spiritually. Do they use words like God? What is particular to the way they use this term? If they describe pain and suffering, what words do they use? How do their words and bodies convey emotions that might empower or overwhelm them? How do these emotions seem to influence their relational boundaries from one moment to the next? Do their boundaries blur, in their rush to disclose, or in a projection that blurs the chaplain’s identity with another’s? Does the care seeker seem to experience an emotional and spiritual disengagement in order to protect what is vulnerable and precious?

In answering such questions, chaplains draw upon their emotional and spiritual attunement to care seekers while using spiritual perspective taking at several levels. They are using spiritual empathy to gain a perspective on the care seeker’s experience of overwhelming stress/suffering—in Angie’s case, an amazing experience of God. They are also paying attention to how the care seeker experiences this spiritual care conversation. They are also considering how to be a liaison with medical providers so that the patient can receive holistic, culturally responsive care. Medical providers are trained to assign diagnostic categories to patient experiences, and you will be in a position to also provide spiritual care to staff who may be distressed about encountering a situation that may have no clear medical explanation. Just as chaplains enact their values and beliefs about spiritual care in this conversation, as much through body language as words, so, too, care seekers put into practice their beliefs and values about spiritual care in their body language and the ways they respond to the chaplain. When chaplains are experienced as trustworthy, they will be invited into a care seeker’s spiritual home with its immediate experiences of pain and suffering, lament, mystery, and hope. Perspective taking entails imagining that any and all aspects of this care seeker’s spiritual home may be sacred and/or memorials of desecration.

Social empathy builds upon spiritual empathy by considering the macro systems of intersecting social privileges or disadvantages within a care seeker’s current context contexts. Perspective-taking of another’s intersecting social systems of privilege and disadvantage is enhanced by knowledge about social oppressions, especially oppression justified through religious dogma. Intersectionality is a theory and strategic practice of identifying which systems of social oppression interact contextually to benefit or harm persons in distress. Black feminist scholars[[25]](#endnote-25) and womanist pastoral theologians[[26]](#endnote-26) help chaplains develop spiritual social empathy that pays attention to how religious and spiritual identities intersect in helpful and harmful ways in care seekers’ struggles. For example, womanist perspectives could be used to explore how racism might interact with sexism in our chapter’s case study.[[27]](#endnote-27) Social and spiritual empathy fosters an appreciation for the alterity or mystery of another whose spiritual orientation and/or social location is radically different from one’s own.

In order to understand the interrelationships among systems of oppression such as racism, classism, heterosexism, and sexism, chaplains need an overarching orientation of post/decolonialism[[28]](#endnote-28) to name the ways that colonialism exercises power over all aspects of ecological, transnational, political, and economic life. As practical theologian Lizardy-Hajbi argues, “[T]hese collective systems and dynamics are part of the larger construction of the U.S. as a modern colonial empire; therefore, post/decolonial leadership frameworks that seek justice, transformation, and the re-existence of marginalized peoples and ways of being-thinking-acting are necessary for the collective liberation of all people of faith.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Colonial systems of power can be likened to gravity. They are an interconnected and every-present force, irreversibly harming this earth’s ecology, decimating Indigenous peoples and their lands and cultures, perpetuating poverty, and locking in economic disparities. All of us who benefit from colonialist power systems traverse our daily lives with the power/gravity of colonialism holding our privileges together in invisible ways. These privileges are often misnamed as accomplishments that open doors and keep us safe from harm.

Bringing post and decolonial orientations to understanding spiritual care interactions makes chaplains realize the impossibility of ‘doing no harm’ in a world organized by colonialism. For example, the places where we live and work are built on indigenous lands stolen in settlor colonialism and the genocide of indigenous peoples.[[30]](#endnote-30) “The actions of resistance, subversion, and reclamation by those harmed and abused by colonialism constitute the beginnings of postcolonial and decolonial practice.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

Socially just spiritual care that does no harm is enormously challenging and always unfinished. When chaplains use calming spiritual practices, they may be able to feel in their bodies and their very bones their interconnectedness with a suffering humanity and creation. Social empathy often evokes lament, especially for racial violence, which may be shared together within spiritual and religious rituals of repentance and social rituals of protest (see Chapter 5 for descriptions of rituals that mourn and lament systemic abuses of power). Pastoral theologian Larry Graham describes how lament may be a process of “sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting hope” with God as “our co-creative partner in healing, sustaining, and guiding the shaken, shattered, exploded, bombed, bulleted, and drowning human community.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Spiritual and social empathy develops in a collaborative learning process grounded in spiritual and communal accountability.[[33]](#endnote-33) The profound shame, guilt, grief, fear, and moral distress of such learning can only be supported through personal and communal practices of lament.[[34]](#endnote-34)

**Case Study Part 3: Practicing Spiritual Reflexivity**

The next morning, you report your conversation with Angie at interdisciplinary rounds just before the treatment team enters Angie’s room. You preface your report by asking the medical providers for a summary of her medical condition. You use her words to describe her experience of God when she was unresponsive, and how she feels as though she has received “a blessing and a healing”; that even though she will die of cancer, she has been “made whole.” The chief oncologist, a white male agnostic, turns to the students and says, “And here we have a prime example of drug-induced delirium. People experience all sorts of things because of the medications we give them for pain management.”

*Spiritual Self-Reflexivity*

Once chaplains have begun to develop spiritual differentiation and empathy, they will be ready to learn spiritual self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity has been described by pastoral theologian Kathleen Greider as “disciplined, accountable practices to decrease our unconsciousness and increase in depth our understanding of our life narrative, sense of self, participation in relationships, and social-historical location.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Chapters 4 and 5 also describe the role of self-reflexivity in the search for meanings distinctive to spiritual care. Spiritual reflexivity goes beyond theological reflection to understand how a chaplains’ and care seeker’s social, religious/spiritual identities interact in the process of exploring contextual values and beliefs about suffering. Reflexivity begins with identifying one’s own stress-generated beliefs and values (for example, about Angie’s suffering and her experience of God), and then, intentional values and beliefs that emerge from using calming spiritual practices. Spiritual self-reflexivity is then used to identify how one’s stress-oriented and intentional beliefs and values are shaped by one’s own intersecting social privileges and disadvantages. The next step is to use spiritual and social empathy to imagine the other’s stress-generated values and beliefs and how these are shaped by their social location. We have described how chaplains would begin that process in a spiritual care conversation with Angie that searches for and co-creates meanings about how she experiences God as blessing, healing, and making her whole as she faces death. The case study now presents chaplains with the opportunity and challenge of using spiritual differentiation and empathy to imagine this oncologist’s beliefs and values about Angie’s experience, and how these might be shaped by his social identity and medical training. Spiritual reflexivity includes understanding possible interactions among (1) your beliefs and values about Angie’s experience, your role as her chaplain, and your social location, (2) Angie’s beliefs and values about her experience, her role as a patient, her social location and medical condition, and (3) the oncologist’s beliefs and values about Angie’s experience, his role as her doctor, and his social location. This multi-layered process of searching for meanings is explored more fully in the second section of this book. In this chapter on interpersonal competencies, we describe how spiritual self-reflexivity is an interpersonal competency that makes chaplains accountable for (1) tracking how their own beliefs and values influence the search for meanings in spiritual care encounters (2) understanding how another’s social location shapes their values and beliefs. Chaplains become relationally self-reflexive[[36]](#endnote-36) by using educational and supervisory relationships to understand the complex interactions among their and another’s beliefs and values. A collaborative search for meanings in spiritual care is like a jazz improvisation. Chaplains are playing in the ensemble while using spiritual reflexivity to listen for and understand each player’s unique contribution.

How might chaplains respond to the oncologist? Chaplains using calming spiritual practices during grand rounds will be more able to draw upon their competencies in spiritual self-differentiation, empathy, and reflexivity. They will likely realize that an immediate response is called for, given the ways that this oncologist’s beliefs about Angie’s religious experience could cause medical harm if he is not familiar with research on experiences of “God’s benevolence” have positive outcomes.[[37]](#endnote-37) This oncologist’s judgment could make Angie question her spiritual experience and her need for a process of integrating this experience of cancer as she faces death. If she does not trust her medical team, she may hold back important subjective medical details that could be red flags about suffering or improve her quality of life. She may well experience internalized racist and sexist shame associated with sacred aspects of who she is. How might you as chaplain advocate for Angie who, like many persons of color, have experienced health disparities and justified mistrust of medical providers?

Spiritual self-differentiation helps chaplains rely upon (1) a solid flexible *spiritual* self and (2) a quiet mind and calm heart using calming spiritual practices. These cognitive and spiritual capacities of self-differentiation will help them to use (3) grounded responding with this oncologist, as chaplains ‘surf’ the anxiety of responding to his interpretation of Angie’s experience. Here is an example of how a chaplain might respond: “Dr. #, as you may know, research demonstrates that experiences of God’s benevolence have many benefits for patients. Knowing about the variety of experiences patients have at the end of life, can we, as a team, embrace Angie’s experiences and support her in her search for wholeness as she faces death?” After using their agential power to guide and inform this oncologist and the team, the chaplain could use receptive power to listen for this oncologist’s beliefs and values about holistic healthcare, and his possible distress about facing a situation that does not have a clear medical explanation. The chaplain could follow-up in a later conversation, inviting the oncologist to say more about his beliefs and values.

This extended case study illustrates the complexities, challenges, and benefits of socially just, interreligious, evidence-based spiritual care that draws upon competencies in spiritual differentiation, empathy, and reflexivity. Chaplains learn these competencies and practice them within clinical learning communities. They are not solo virtuosos. For example, chaplains in our case study’s grand rounds conversation may or may not be able to practice interpersonal competencies to the best of their abilities. They will take this experience back to their learning community so that they can all learn together and strategize next steps in advocating for Angie and engaging her treatment team in further conversations.

**Learning to Use Interpersonal Competencies in Assessment**

Interpersonal competencies in spiritual differentiation, empathy, and reflexivity are practiced in spiritual assessments that go beyond simple assessments (like questions about religious identity or how important religion or spirituality is) often asked during initial conversations (see Chapter 3 for a description of spiritual assessment as an interpretive process in meaning making in chaplaincy practice). Being research literate is yet another learning outcome, beyond the scope of this chapter, that integrates knowledge (in this instance, psychological research on when aspects of religion and spirituality help or harm) seamlessly with spiritual and social empathy and reflexivity in person-centered spiritual care. In other words, knowledge is always integrated into the flow of a spiritual care interaction that gives primary attention to the needs of those seeking care.

We now describe how to integrate spiritual assessment into the early phases of getting to know those seeking spiritual care. The **Spiritual Assessment and Intervention Model** (Spiritual AIM) provides a conceptual framework for the chaplain to:

1. focus on an individual’s primary unmet spiritual need—through observing the patient’s words and behavior in relationship with the chaplain, as well as through the chaplain’s self-awareness of the interpersonal dynamic with care seekers
2. devise and implement strategies for addressing this need through embodiment/relationship
3. articulate and evaluate the desired and actual outcomes of a focused conversation[[38]](#endnote-38)

Spiritual AIM is best understood through illustrating how it is used in spiritual care. Along with generalized forms of assessment, assessments of specific stressors have been developed, such as the PC-7, which measures unmet spiritual concerns of palliative care patients near the end of life.[[39]](#endnote-39) While we illustrate AIM by continuing our case study, this assessment approach can be used in any kind of spiritual care setting, like a faith community, educational context, military, correctional/prison context, or in disaster relief.

**Case Study Part 4: Assessing Spiritual Needs**

Spiritual assessments explore how people’s beliefs, values, and spiritual/coping practices function for them. In this case, Angie feels that her faith has been a crucial force in helping her to stay sober and is a great source of support. In the course of your pastoral conversation with Angie, Spiritual AIM serves as a roadmap for utilizing your relationship to facilitate spiritual healing. You set out to make an assessment and diagnosis about the prominent spiritual dimension that Angie is most in need of healing. AIM helps you and Angie identify one primary spiritual need. Having this focus will help to avoid a meandering encounter, which is of the utmost importance especially given the tension with the medical team and the fact that her life is coming to an end. You observe Angie’s actions and reflect on what you know about her history. You listen to her lovingly recount her spiritual experience of dancing with God. You use this information to make an assessment and craft spiritual interventions, which will inform how you interact with the patient but also how you advocate for her with the medical team. You will know that the assessment is “correct” if Angie demonstrates some of the Spiritual AIM outcomes. If she does not, you can assess a different spiritual need and try those corresponding interventions.

Angie’s history of broken relationships and addiction indicate to you a spiritual need of reconciliation/to love and be loved. Angie tells you that she does not trust her medical providers and she can sense their judgements and dismissive attitudes, especially about her spiritual experience. Your interventions focus on empowerment. You identify the ways in which Angie is feeling powerless and remind her what is still in her power. This includes allowing her strong and loving relationship to wash over her whenever she is feeling alienated from others; articulating her needs and wishes and choosing which medical providers she feels she can trust. You act as her partner in prayer, a practice that connects her with God.

Spiritual AIM emphasizes the importance of the relationship, prompting you to look inward and recognize your reactions to Angie. Part of the reason why using any spiritual assessment model is helpful is because it balances emotions that arise in the caregiver, activating the analysis required of making an assessment. This process results in a relationally based yet somewhat more objective assessment. In embodying a truth teller and prophetic voice to Angie, you acknowledge the systemic and explicit prejudice she is facing. But you also offer compassion for her feelings of powerlessness, while reminding her of the influence that is impossible to have taken from her. Angie is able to state her truth and her wishes to her medical team and to continue to trust God.

**Conclusion**

This chapter describes and illustrates the life-long learning process of integrating specialized knowledge with interpersonal competencies that fine-tune communication skills for particular spiritual care encounters. Developing interpersonal competencies in spiritual care is a deeply relational process grounded in a felt sense of spiritual trust experienced in one’s body through calming spiritual practices. This grounding in a relational web that includes transcendent dimensions enables chaplains to trust the process of spiritual care, especially when care of self and/or others elicits religious and spiritual struggles and interpersonal challenges.

**Reflection Questions**

1. Describe a spiritual care encounter with someone whose spiritual orientation and/or social location is radically different from your own. How might you combine a *solid spiritual self* that is grounded in your ongoing process of spiritual integration with a *flexible spiritual self* that trusts the spiritually intersubjective process of searching for contextually meaningful practices, values, and beliefs?
2. Drawing upon the same spiritual care encounter, how might you draw upon spiritual self-differentiation to make a grounded response to a ‘jarring’ difference between their practices, beliefs and values and yours?
3. In spiritual care with those whose suffering is compounded by intersecting social oppressions that are religiously justified (for example, a gay or lesbian person whose community or family justified prejudice with religious beliefs), how would you respond to their suspicions about your religious/spiritual beliefs that make them hesitant to trust you?
4. What aspects of education, spiritual formation, clinical training and/or religious/spiritual tradition/community help or hinder you from demonstrating radical respect for differences, counteracting cultural and religious abuses of power that judge others’ beliefs, values, and practices as less true/meaningful than their own?
5. Socially just spiritual care is enormously challenging and always unfinished. The profound shame, guilt, grief, fear, and moral distress of such learning can only be supported through personal and communal practices of lament. What helps you remain committed to a collaborative learning process grounded in spiritual and communal accountability?

**Recommended Readings**

Doehring, Carrie. *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, Revised and expanded ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015.

Lartey, Emmanuel Y. and Moon, Hellena (Eds.). *Postcolonial Images of Spiritual Care: Challenges of Care in a Neoliberal Age*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020.

Graham, Larry K. *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, (2017).

Snodgrass, Jill (Ed.). (2019). *Navigating Religious Difference in Spiritual Care and Counseling: Essays in Honor of Kathleen J. Greider*. Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2019.

1. Doehring draws upon trauma research to describe the role of spiritual practices in searching for meanings, illustrating how listening to sacred music revealed meanings as she grieved the death by suicide of her second son, in Carrie Doehring, "Searching for Wholeness Amidst Traumatic Grief: The Role of Spiritual Practices that Reveal Compassion in Embodied, Relational, and Transcendent Ways," *Pastoral Psychology* 68, no. 3 (2019): 241-259. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hisham Abu-Raiya, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Julie J. Exline, "Understanding and Addressing Religious and Spiritual Struggles in Health Care," *Health & Social Work* 40, no. 4 (2015):126-134. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The case study is adapted from course materials created by Duane R. Bidwell, Ph.D., Claremont School of Theology at Willamette University. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kenneth Pargament, Kavita M. Desai, and Kelly M. McConnell, "Spirituality: A Pathway to Posttraumatic Growth or Decline?," in *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth: Research and Practice*, ed. Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006), 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. David Schnarch and Susan Regas,” The Crucible Differentiation Scale: Assessing Differentiation in Human Relationships,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 38 no. 4 (2012): 639. Their scale measures these components of self-differentiation: Solid Self, Connectedness, Anxiety Regulation through Self-Soothing, Anxiety Regulation through Accommodation, Reactivity through Avoidance, Reactivity through Arguments, and Tolerating Discomfort for Growth. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Schnarch and Regas, “The Crucible Differentiation Scale,” 642 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 641. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. When academic degree programs do not include courses in comparative studies of religion supporting interreligious practices, students and religious leaders may perpetuate spiritual harm through interreligious naivete. For an introduction to how comparative studies shape interreligious dialogue, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Building on developmental assessments of intercultural competency, Morgan and Sandage have proposed a theoretical model of interreligious competency (IRC) where people have a greater capacity for spiritual empathy and “complexity in understanding (a) one’s own religiosity, and (b) other religious perspectives.” Jonathan Morgan and Steven J. Sandage, "A Developmental Model of Interreligious Competence," *Archiv für Religionspsychologie / Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 38, no. 2 (2016): 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Marianne Moyaert, "Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 25-52.; Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Linda S. and Walter Dixon, *Spiritual Care for Non-Communicative Patients: A Guidebook*. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Thatamanil describes how religions provide 'interpretive schemes' for understanding suffering, and 'therapeutic regimens' for spiritual practices and rituals that help people experience a transcendent sense of trust. He describes interreligious learning as a process of co-creating meanings in an ongoing process of interreligious learning. John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020). The relevance of Thatamanil’s scholarship is explored further in Chapter 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Doehring uses process theologies to define and describe agential and receptive power in spiritual care relationships. See Chapter 2 in Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, Revised and expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For a complete description of communication styles and skills, see Chapter 3 in Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Jean Decety, “Dissecting the Neural Mechanisms Mediating Empathy,” *Emotion Review* 3, no. (2011), 92-108. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Elizabeth A. Segal, Karen E. Gerdes, Cynthia A. Lietz, M. Alex Wagaman and Jennifer M. Geiger (eds). Lietz, Cynthia A. *Assessing Empathy*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Doehring has used the term theological empathy to describe imaging another’s lived theology or theological orientation to a particular stressor. See Carrie Doehring, "Teaching theological empathy to distance learners of intercultural spiritual care," *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 5 (2018): 461-474. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Intersectional theory was first defined and elaborated by Crenshaw Kimberlé, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision For Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019). Phillis I. Sheppard, "Building Communities of Embodied Beauty," in *Black Practical Theology*, ed. Dale P. Andrews and Robert London Smith Jr. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015): 97-111. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See, for example, Phillis I. Sheppard, "Mourning the Loss of Cultural Selfobjects: Black Embodiment and Religious Experience after Trauma," *Practical Theology* 1, no. 2 (2008): 233-257. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Lizardy-Hajbi uses the term “’post/decolonial’ in order to acknowledge both the separate contextual and theoretical streams from which challenges to coloniality have arisen in the literature, as well as to highlight their common foundational aims as critiques to colonial being-thinking-acting” Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, "Frameworks toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 19 no. 2 (2020): 98-128. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Lizardy-Hajbi, "Frameworks Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships," 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. “Settler colonialism, on the other hand, often involves the movement of large numbers of people from the colonizing country to the colony, imposing the colonizers’ military, economic, and administrative patterns on the colony.” Lizardy-Hajbi, "Frameworks Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships," 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Lizardy-Hajbi, "Frameworks Toward Post/Decolonial Pastoral Leaderships," 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Graham, *Moral Injury*, 139, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Kathleen J. Greider, “Religious Location and Counseling: Engaging

    Diversity and Difference in Views of Religion,” in *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*, ed. E. A. Maynard & J. L. Snodgrass (New York: Spring, 2015): 235-256. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Graham, *Moral Injury*; Melinda McGarrah Sharp, *Creating Resistances: Pastoral Care in a Postcolonial World* (Boston: Brill, 2019); Richard Coble, *The Chaplain's Presence and Medical Power: Rethinking Loss in the Hospital System* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018); Nancy J. Ramsay, ed., *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practice* (Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2018); Emmanuel Lartey, "Postcolonializing Pastoral Theology: Enhancing the Intercultural Paradigm," in *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practice*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018): 79-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Greider, “Religious Location and Counseling: Engaging Diversity and Difference in Views of Religion,” p. 248. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Greider, “Religious Location and Counseling: Engaging Diversity and Difference in Views of Religion,” p. 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Kenneth Pargament, Serena Wong, and Julie Exline, "Wholeness and Holiness: The Spiritual Dimension of Eudaimonics," in *The Handbook of Eudaimonic Wellbeing*, ed. J. Vittersø (Tromsø, Norway: Springer, 2016): 379-394. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Michele Shields, Allison Kestenbaum, and Laura B. Dunn, "Spiritual AIM and the Work of the Chaplain: A Model for Assessing Spiritual Needs and Outcomes in Relationship," *Palliative and Supportive Care* 13, no. 1 (2015): 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. George Fitchett, Anna Lee Hisey Pierson, Christine Hoffmeyer, Dirk Labuschagne, Aoife Lee, Stacie Lavine, Sean O’Mahony, Karen Pugliese, and Nancy Waite,"Development of the PC-7, a Quantiﬁable Assessment of Spiritual Concerns of Patients Receiving Palliative Care Near the End of Life," *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 23, no. 2 (2020): 248-253. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)