



Spiritual care chaplaincy as joining with people in the “betwixt and between” and beyond:

Meegan’s story with a big-ass mirror

by Jesse Size



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Abstract

Spiritual care in a hospital setting regularly involves joining with people in the “betwixt and between” of life. This paper considers Michael White’s (2016) rite of passage metaphor and the way that it supports double-story development by acknowledging the difficulties people experience while also recognising that a hospital admission can include the possibility that one might arrive at a new place. This paper also explores ways that narrative approaches such as re-membering conversations, outsider-witnessing practices and enabling contribution can support meaningful spiritual care when joining with people at the end of their lives. These narrative approaches enrich the act of joining with people in the betwixt and between and beyond as part of a spiritual care presence.

Key words: *chaplaincy; spiritual care; narrative pastoral therapy; spirituality; hospital; rites of passage; re-membering; documentation; enabling contribution; end of life care; narrative practice*

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I work as a spiritual care chaplain across two hospitals. Spiritual care is part of caring for the whole person (Koenig, 2014). It gives attention to matters that are part of creating meaning, purpose and connectedness in people's lives (Spiritual Health Association, 2023). Spiritual care seeks to provide an appropriate space for presence; conversation; sharing of sacred texts and resources; and ceremony and ritual related to people's beliefs, traditions, values and practices. Spiritual care in a hospital also involves joining with people at the very end of their lives. This paper focuses on conversations that took place between Meegan, a cancer patient at the end of her life, her mother, Paula, and myself and the ways that narrative approaches help us to meet not simply in the "betwixt and between" (White, 2016) but also in the beyond as part of a meaningful spiritual care presence.

Hospital as liminal space: Joining people in the "betwixt and between" and beyond

A hospital admission can be a challenging or difficult event in a person's life. I have found Michael White's (2004a, 2016) rites of passage metaphor helpful in my work as a spiritual care practitioner in a hospital setting. Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner, White wrote about the rites of passage that facilitate transitions in life. These are described as having three phases:

- 1. The separation phase:** This involves a separation from what is known and familiar – a leaving of one's ordinary world that may or may not be welcomed or planned. White described the way a hospital admission can be seen as a separation (or "discharge") from previous expectations, roles and responsibilities that are no longer, for whatever reason, currently appropriate or acceptable.
- 2. The liminal or "betwixt-and-between" phase:** White described the way that this separation catapults people into a liminal phase "often characterised by heightened expectations, periods of confusion, and degrees of disorientation" (White, 2004, p. 51). White noted that such disorientation can give rise to despair when these experiences are not understood as part of what it means to journey to a new place

in life. This is where the rites of passage metaphor can offer an alternative receiving frame that serves to acknowledge people's experiences of distress and disorientation while informing "alternative interpretations of the crises that precipitate admission, ones that shape more positive outcomes for all involved" (White, 2016, p. 87). In this way, a hospital admission can include the opportunity to arrive at a position in life that was not available previously: a position that can include new identity claims and preferences that would suit them better and support quality of life after reincorporation.

- 3. The reincorporation phase:** This final phase frames discharge from hospital as a time of reincorporation (or "readmission" into their previous lives and responsibilities). This could involve sharing accounts of the journey that acknowledge what has been clarified, learnt or gained along the way and gives consideration to how the person has arrived at a position in life that was not available to them before.

Most of the patients and staff members we meet with as spiritual care practitioners are experiencing some aspect of this betwixt and betweenness – a disruption, a diagnosis, a problem that is placing strain on the person's life and relationships. White's metaphor supports double-listening in the way that it both acknowledges difficulty and also recognises that a hospital admission can be an important part of journeying to a new place in life. In this paper I consider ways that narrative approaches can help people to access the things in our lives that are significant, meaningful and hopeful in the betwixt and between and ways we can acknowledge the things that have been clarified, learnt and gained along the way.

There is another element that is often a part of spiritual care chaplaincy. Chaplains will sometimes be with people at the very end of their lives and may at times play a role in the remembering of and saying goodbye to a person's life. This paper also considers ways that narrative approaches such as outsider-witnessing practices, re-remembering conversations and ways of enabling contribution can support meaningful spiritual care presence during these times. In this way, narrative approaches enrich the act of joining with people in the betwixt and between and beyond as part of a spiritual care presence.

Meegan's story with a big-ass mirror: Documenting alternative knowledges and enabling contribution in the last stages of life and beyond

Visibly distressed, Meegan and her mother, Paula, came to the spiritual care area where I work. In Meegan's words, she was "having a moment". Meegan, 51 years old, explained that she was dying. She was running out of energy and running out of time. Meegan spoke about how ordinarily she was the strong one for others. Now she needed something that might reach her in her current state of exhaustion and overwhelm. Meegan wondered if there was something the spiritual care team could offer – a prayer practice, a ritual – that might be helpful for her at this time.

A spiritual care practitioner will facilitate a basic and often informal spiritual care assessment in the early stages of conversation with a new patient. You want to know something about the place of religion or spirituality and any related practices in the person's life. You want to know what is important to them and the kinds of things that have been sources of hope, meaning, comfort, strength, peace, love and connection (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001). These matters will be different for each person and will be received through the richness of storytelling. In a hospital context, some of these matters will come through the patient's description of what they are up against. This is where a patient will often describe an experience of betwixt and betweenness. Though the person may find themselves in new and uncharted territories, we can begin to explore what is helping or sustaining them at this time, whether big or small. Sometimes we may learn from previous experiences of betwixt and betweenness.

This was especially true in Meegan's case. Very early on in our conversation, Meegan shared some stories from her life that included staring down significant adversity. Paula worried that I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if Meegan shared more stories with me. These would be stories with distressing and confronting content. I said that within each difficult story are stories of how people have found their way through and that these were the stories I loved hearing most. I also mentioned that sometimes these stories can also be really important for others – things I wouldn't have said before I started engaging with narrative practice. These

were words taking seriously narrative ideas about listening for double-storied accounts, the ways people respond to traumatic experience, and the importance of stories of survival.

I think this opening back-and-forth helped set the tone for the conversations that followed. We spoke about how others would come, as Meegan had, facing their own challenges, including facing up to death. I asked if Meegan would like to describe what she had learnt along the way – her skills or "practices of living" (White, 2004b, p. 47) – with the idea that this might offer something meaningful or helpful for others. We agreed that Meegan would choose a day when she was feeling okay. I would ask Meegan questions like we were putting together a map of how she had found her way through her difficult (betwixt-and-between) life experiences. I would document the conversation and put it in a form we could give to others.

Meegan may have felt her own life dwindling, but it was significant to her that she might be able to make contributions to others even beyond her time with us all. Meegan said, "If you write this and there's people here that it can help, give it to them". In this way, Meegan was being invited to speak not only on her own behalf but also as a representative of others who had been subject to similar types of adversity. I think this allowed for Meegan to feel comfortable to "speak through me" and not just "to me" (Denborough, 2008, p. 16). The possibility that Meegan's stories and experiences might benefit others framed our conversations as a collective project in response to a social issue that affects many (Denborough, 2008).

Meegan said that documenting these stories could be a way for her to continue to be strong for her loved ones:

Jesse: Do you think some of these conversations could be part of what you leave with those important people as well?

Meegan: You know what, if we get something nailed out, damn right, Jess, I'll share it. Because you know what? They've been around that long; they know most it. I've tried to help them in many, many ways. I'm the strong one of all of them.

These conversations would ultimately allow Meegan to offer her strength to both her loved ones and others in difficult circumstances beyond her time with us.

It was important that the document would be in Meegan's own words.¹ Meegan described herself as a "diamond in the rough" and a "black sheep". Educated, middle-class, white, heterosexual, male clergy like myself might, by contrast, describe themselves in more "smooth" and "shepherd-like" terms. Meegan shared a story from her past about a meeting with a church pastor that didn't go well. The barrier wasn't faith or belief, it was Meegan's colourful language. The "shepherd" didn't want the "black sheep" to swear. Meegan didn't feel like she could be herself. The relationship didn't continue.

The next time we met together, Meegan did indeed share harrowing stories featuring themes of violence, abuse and addiction. These were important storylines, and both Meegan and Paula spoke about the impact and legacy of these experiences. But the larger focus was on the threads of survival, resistance, restoration and hope that were woven throughout. Our time together became a conversation about how Meegan had broken cycles of violence, abuse, trauma, addiction, secrecy, shame and despair.

Meegan shared stories that were complicated and devastating, but her response in the face of violence and abuse was clear: she wasn't going to hide. She wasn't going to be recruited into self-loathing, self-blame or self-doubt. She wasn't going to let secrecy "steal her voice" or "strangle her vocal cords" (McPhie & Chaffey, 1998, p. 44). We spoke about these matters as part of our conversation. I was particularly interested in *how* Meegan dealt with shame, in beginning to trace some of the history of this skill/practice for living, and in drawing out aspects of Meegan's preferred identity stories:

Jesse: Situations like this can often come with secrecy and shame so it stays under the rug.

Meegan: I dealt with the shame, for sure.

Jesse: How? How did you make sure there was no more sweeping under the rug?

Meegan: My best friend is the mirror. And I taught myself, you can bullshit a bullshitter, but you can't lie to yourself, Meegan. And I would get in the mirror, and I would power myself up every god damn morning. I am not ashamed, and my story will help, and I am going to tell it.

Jesse: When did this come? Because you were 13, that can be a tender age.

Meegan: I think the youngest age, when I rebelled and started to become a bit on my own. And then I got my first boyfriend who started to beat me. So that's when, you know.

Jesse: When things like this happen, a lot of people go smaller, but that doesn't seem to be your experience.

Paula: No, she became bigger.

Jesse: I remember you saying you were a rebel, a black sheep?

Meegan: Yes, I was always kind of the black sheep.

Jesse: So you weren't going to play by the rules of staying small or sweeping things under the rug?

Meegan: That's playing how they play. I'm different. I'm different. I was making a change, Jesse, and that's what it was about.

Paula: Family would say, "don't come and visit". And Meegan would come and visit and bring friends and say, "Hey Aunty, how are you going?" So they had no choice but to deal with it.

Meegan: I loved all my aunts. They used to take me when I was a kid and they had quality time with me, but when I brought up the sexual abuse, at first, no one believed me. I'd already started that transition of "fuck you; I'm not going to be here. I'm going to be with friends", doing all that shit. But even then, I was always still close to home, parties or if family come, I always wanted to be there.

Jesse: Family didn't want to believe it because it was too painful?

Meegan: Too painful. But guess what. It did happen. And you're all going to admit it.

Paula: And you're all going to deal with it.

For the rest of the conversation, I asked questions inviting Meegan to reflect on the different ways this storyline of "getting in the mirror" showed up. I listened for the values, hopes and dreams that were reflected, where these skills and practices of living might have come from and so on. Meegan shared many stories of fighting *for* the things that were most important to her.

Love, justice and responsibility were powerful themes throughout.

Alongside these conversations, we spoke of ways Meegan was approaching death. Meegan didn't want a funeral. She wanted to be cremated so that her ashes could be given to her loved ones. Her family were creating a Zen Garden where all her loved ones could assemble to say their goodbyes. She didn't want a big emotional gathering. She wanted humour and colour. She wanted to give everyone a bag of sunflower seeds and she had something special planned for some important family members. She did, however, say that she thought it would be good to share these stories about her life with all her loved ones once they were documented. Before Meegan's time with everyone was up, however, Meegan spoke about how she really just wanted to make memories with her loved ones while they could. At the end of our conversation, Paula spoke about how much this time meant to them. Meegan had come to the office looking for something she didn't have at that time. She left energised by her own strong story (Drahm-Butler, 2015) and the contribution it might make to others. Perhaps we could say that, in rites of passage terms, Meegan had shared an account of the journey acknowledging what had been clarified, learnt and gained along the way and about how she had arrived at a new position in life.

I was really animated about the prospect of further conversations and had a bunch of topics and questions queued up. We had a future time together booked in, but Meegan and Paula never came. I sent a text checking in but didn't hear back from them until I bumped into Paula on my way into the hospital some weeks later. Paula said that Meegan was in hospital again and had lost a lot of weight. She asked that I come by later that day.

It turned out that things were close to the end for Meegan. I wanted Meegan to know that I would share her story with others, so I asked something of my fellow chaplain who was working with me that day. She had shared with me her own history that included experiences of abuse. I asked her how she would feel about reading a transcript of our conversation together, and if she felt comfortable, to write a brief outsider-witness letter that could be given to Meegan as an outsider-witness practice. It was enough for me to leave my colleague, who was slightly aware of outsider-witness practices, with the transcript and the following directions:

- **expression:** note any words or expressions that catch your attention
- **image:** Consider what these expressions suggest to you about what might be important to Meegan or what she stands for in life and consider any images that come to mind as you read these expressions
- **resonance:** note what stands out to you and consider what it is about your own life that has you being drawn to these expressions
- **transport:** reflect on what might be more possible as a result of hearing Meegan's expressions and any aspects of Meegan's story that you would like to stay with you.

My colleague was genuinely moved by Meegan's story and wrote a letter to be passed on to her. Here's a brief excerpt:

These are some things that feel more possible as a result of hearing Meegan's story:

Being prepared to tell my story. I actually find this quite hard, because I feel a sense of – not shame, but embarrassment about my past. But I do feel challenged to speak more openly about it.

The importance of love over hate, forgiveness over harbouring grudges. These are no easy things to achieve – and I try hard to embody these. I feel really encouraged that Meegan has been able to achieve these things through far more difficult circumstances than mine.

The decision not to keep secrets and to face the mirror; to deal with one's fears head on. The decision to face my fears is one I too have made, but far later in life. There is a sense in which Meegan has instigated the justice she needed by confronting the people responsible.

When I went to be with Meegan she was being attended to by nursing staff. Paula emerged from Meegan's room and explained that Meegan was exhausted and asked if I could come back at another time. I said this was no problem but also gave Paula the letter from my colleague. Paula said she'd read it to Meegan. Paula did read that letter to Meegan and told me they were both moved by it. Meegan said to her mum, "If my story can make a difference for even one person then it's all worth it". Meegan died a few hours later.

Paula met with me at the hospital in the days following Meegan's death. Paula shared tender details of their final moments and told me that Meegan had asked for me to share some words at the Zen Garden gathering to remember her life. By this time, I was able to share with Paula a document from our conversations with Meegan that captured her words about breaking cycles of violence, abuse, trauma, addiction, secrecy, shame and despair. This was quite moving for Paula who asked that we make copies available for everyone at Meegan's gathering.

Below is an excerpt of this document² that offers a window into some of Meegan's:

- skills and practices for living (getting in the mirror)
- preferred identity stories ("diamond in the rough", "black sheep")
- hopes for her life (living without shame, love over hate, standing by family)
- ways of understanding her identity and skills of living in more-than-individual terms ("I'm not this person on my own. My grandparents and my mum brought me up ...")

Meegan's story with a big-ass mirror

Words drawn from a conversation with Meegan and Paula

The mirror as my best friend: Breaking cycles of violence, abuse, trauma, addiction, secrecy, shame and despair

My best friend is the mirror. I taught myself, you can bullshit a bullshitter, but you can't lie to yourself, Meegan. And I would get in the mirror, and I would power myself up every god damn morning. I am not ashamed, and my story will help, and I am going to tell it.

I don't have any secrets, I just don't. I find them a bit evil sometimes. They bring uncertainty. They bring a lot of doubt. I'll never be shame about nothing. That's why I'm rare. Diamond in the rough they call me.

No more sweeping things under the rug

I was the black sheep ... I said, "no more sweeping shit under the rug in this family. We're done with that".

That's playing how they play. I'm different. I'm different. I was making a change, and that's what it was about.

On fighting for the things that are most important

I got that low. My kids kept me going. If it weren't for the kids, I could have gotten even lower ... I went to my counsellor and went to a couple of AA meetings. That was a big achievement. I realised I didn't need to drink; it was a coping mechanism.

I also went home and took down every curtain in my house. My mum said, "Do I need to call the doctor, what's going on?"

I said, "I don't want to hide behind nothing anymore". People found that very strange, but it was me confronting every single fear. If I had the curtains shut, I would be constantly peeping. That's not who I am. I am free. As soon as those curtains came down, Meegan came back. I wasn't going to be a worrier, I'm a warrior.

On the importance of love, togetherness and transparency

You just needed the family to stand by you, go with you: the full hog. No more bagging, no setting them up to fail. Hate is the only thing that holds love back.

I'm not this person on my own. My grandparents and my mum brought me up ... I was really supported and loved – cradled so to speak.

These words were important for me also. As clergy or as a chaplain, it is not unusual for me to officiate at a funeral, but Meegan didn't want a funeral. She didn't want the gathering to be an especially sad occasion. With this document, Meegan's own words and hard-won

knowledge could be central to the gathering. We could keep Meegan's strong story (Drahm-Butler, 2015) close to us and honour her hope to make a contribution to others. One of the significant aspects of this document for Meegan's farewell gathering was Meegan and Paula talking about how the mirror can also be a place for ongoing relationship (or "saying hullo again" [White, 2004]):

Paula: I will fight alongside her until the fight is over, and I've said to her, even then, I'll talk to her every day. I'll stand in the mirror, and I'll say, "good morning, sweetheart!" And I know she'll be there. Just like I know my mum and dad are there, right? I talk to them all the time. Just because you can't see people doesn't mean they're not there.

Meegan: I actually believe you have stronger connections with those people because, you know what, you have to recall. I actually love those chats ... they mean something to me.

... I'm a green person, but if I've got to have a flower, a sunflower it will be. My loved ones can plant sunflower seeds at home. If they plant one or two a year, so be it. I just see that as my big smiley face, you know what I'm saying? Strong and bright. I like how they grow that whopping big stem, like a Tree of Life. And they can grow in all kinds of environments.

In this way we were receiving words that not only would help us to remember what was important to Meegan, but we could also hear Meegan's (and Paula's) own words about how we can access love, strength and connection with Meegan even though she is no longer with us physically. Paula and I have plans to meet together in the future and I am wondering if she might like to draw upon "Meegan's Story with a Big-Ass Mirror" for outsider-witnessing and re-remembering conversations.

If Meegan, Paula and myself had more opportunities to meet together, I wonder about the re-remembering

conversations we might have been able to have about some of the important people in Meegan's life. Meegan spoke about how she loved recalling and forging even stronger connections with her loved ones. These conversations might have been wonderful avenues for exploring both the gifts Meegan received and the contributions Meegan made to others. I wondered if such conversations might offer something meaningful to Meegan in her experiences of betwixt and betweenness. I was also interested in the ways Meegan and Paula might continue to richly describe the practice of getting in the mirror – this recalling and strengthening of connections that transcends time and space, and even life and death. I wondered about the ways it might offer something significant for others when things like grief, separation or loss are part of their experience.

Conclusion: Intersections between narrative therapy and spiritual care in a hospital context

Meegan came to the spiritual care area hoping she might be given something that could meet her in her experience of weariness and overwhelm. Approaches such as double-listening and outsider witnessing allowed Meegan to be energised and strengthened by her own strong story (Drahm-Butler, 2015) and the contribution it might make to others. Documenting Meegan's strong story allowed her words and hard-won knowledge to be central on the day we said goodbye to her. It allowed us to honour Meegan's hopes about making a contribution to others, and it offered us clues about how we might find ways to say hullo again beyond Meegan's time with us all.

In many ways, spiritual care in a hospital setting involves meeting with people in the "betwixt and between" (White, 2016). Sometimes it involves joining with people at the very end of their lives. To meet with people and with their loved ones, to be able to draw from the riches of re-remembering conversations and outsider-witnessing practices, and to be able to consider ways of enabling contribution are some of the many beautiful ways that narrative approaches can support a meaningful spiritual care presence during these times. I have come to think of spiritual care in this setting as joining with people in the betwixt and between and beyond.

Ultimately, I only met with Meegan twice – an initial conversation to chart the course for our time together and then one “big-ass” (Meegan’s words) conversation with Meegan and Paula. It’s important to note Paula’s place within these conversations. Paula accompanied Meegan every step of the way. Paula was with Meegan when she came to the spiritual care area. Paula added richly to the telling of Meegan’s life. Paula received and read the letter from my colleague. Paula was with Meegan in those last tender moments of Meegan’s life. Paula was the go-between for all the farewell gathering planning. Paula, in Meegan’s own words, was Meegan’s rock, her best friend. Paula spoke to me about how Meegan processed these conversations. While we only had one major conversation together, Meegan felt like it covered the things that were most important to her. Many rich and significant narrative conversations and practices take place over long periods of time. Sometimes they can take place within a conversation or two. Drawing on narrative practices such as letter writing, re-membering conversations or outsider witnessing raises the odds that this will be so.

I keep a copy of “Meegan’s Story with a Big-Ass Mirror” in the little nook of the door on the passenger side in my car. I like being able to remember Meegan and the things she stood for every time I make my way into the hospital. Meegan’s expressions make me think a lot about how I can befriend my own mirror, drawing strength from my own sources of sustenance so that I can attend to and embrace the things that are most important to me in life. I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the conversations I’ve been able to have with both Meegan and Paula, and I’m also grateful for the riches of narrative therapy and spiritual care.

As a way of concluding this reflection on my conversations with Meegan and Paula, I will include the final prayer that the family had invited me to write and offer as part of the farewell gathering, a prayer of commendation. As we prayed for Meegan, I knew that Paula would recognise that each line of the prayer reflected some aspect of our conversations together. It is a prayer for Meegan, but it also carries Meegan’s own language, experience and hopes for her life with us all and beyond.

Farewell on your journey to your very own star,
to Beetlejuice Supernova.

We know that there’s only one way with you –
to go out with one hell of a bang.

So we say something of a farewell,
and we have all kinds of feelings
both now and in the days to come.

But do not fear, Meegan, that you will be lost in
the universe.

You came into this world cradled in love,

And you will be with us
in the love that lives deeply within all of us,

And you are carried now
to a place where love rises in bright fullness.

We will remember you;

We will meet you in the mirror;

We will plant sunflowers
and carry your brightness and joy with us.

Go, in your own way,
just you like you always have, dear Meegan.

Amen.

Notes

- ¹ The title of the document – “Meegan’s story with a big-ass mirror” – comes from Meegan’s own description of the themes of our conversations. It’s not hard to picture the smile this title would bring to Meegan and her loved ones!
- ² The author is happy to share the whole document on request.

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