

# Spirituality of Healing

*Kwok Pui-lan, Episcopal Divinity School*



*Kwok Pui-lan is Professor of Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her areas of teaching and research include Christian theology, world Christianity, religion and culture, Asian religions, and women's studies.*

**D**URING ORIENTATION, I tell students that if they want to train not just the mind, but also the body, they might want to consider taking the course "Spirituality of Healing." My students come from diverse backgrounds: health care professionals, priests, cancer survivors, musicians, artists, teachers, and business people. The majority of them are Christians who are interested in exploring the spiritual foundation of healing, and the connection between the body, the mind, and the spirit.

As a Chinese professor, I want to introduce a cross-cultural perspective of healing, drawing insights from Chinese and Christian traditions. I believe that if students can learn to appreciate Eastern and Western ways of healing as cultural counterpoints, they will develop a broadened understanding of healing, and acquire the tools needed to learn from traditions other than their own. In the beginning of the class, I emphasize that healing is an open book and no one has all the answers. I encouraged students to share what they know about the subject and participate actively in class, so they will feel a sense of ownership of the learning process. I share the insights from Jane Tompkins's compelling book, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*: "My chief concern is that our educational system does not focus on the inner lives of students or help them to acquire the self-understanding that is the basis for a satisfying life. Nor, by and large, does it provide the safe and nurturing environment that people need in order to grow."<sup>1</sup>

## Engaging the Body

Healing has so much to do with the body. In Chinese philosophy and medicine, the human body is often seen as a complex and integrated organism, a microcosm of the universe, and not as a machine with separate parts to be fixed. In contrast, early Christian writers were influenced by Gnosticism and neo-Platonism and espoused a hierarchical view of the spirit over the flesh. The Augustinian understanding of sexuality and original sin further contributed to a negative view of the body, the separation between spirituality and sexuality, and the repression of desire in Western Christian traditions.

In designing the course, I hoped to recover the body as a locus of spiritual wisdom. I define spirituality as that dimension of the human subject by virtue of which the per-

son is capable of integrating the body, mind, and spirit, of maintaining just and right relationships with other human beings, and of communion with the divine and the whole cosmos. To counteract the prevalent body-mind split in higher education, I want to engage the body, and respect the different ways of knowing and multiple intelligences of the students. We began each class with a short meditation guided by a chant from Thich Nhat Hanh. I also teach them tai chi, and explain how the movements enact the interplay between yin and yang, and amply illustrate the principles of balance and transformation in Chinese medicine. When I invite an acupuncturist to demonstrate in class, many students are eager to be "guinea pigs."

For each session, I ask one volunteer to create a centerpiece as a visual focus for the topic discussed, and another to select a poem or invocation to read. In the classroom we often debate about truth and discuss virtue, but seldom attend to beauty and imagination. The creation of centerpieces becomes an important channel for students to interface what they are learning with their own spiritual journeys, and a means for community building. We conclude each class with a short ritual led by me for the first few times and then by student volunteers. Over the course of the term, the centerpieces and closing rituals create a rich visual memory, much like a mosaic of contrasting colors, shapes, and sizes. To allow creativity to flow and to foster a noncompetitive learning atmosphere, students are encouraged to take the course pass-fail, instead of for a grade.

## Personal and Systemic Dimensions of Healing

Because American culture is highly individualistic, many popular self-help books on healing focus on the personal dimension: diet, personal health, aging, and coping with pain and depression. To broaden students' horizons, I talk about the different images and metaphors used to describe the body, the diagnostic process, and the roles of the healer in Chinese and Western healing systems. As students see that healing has personal, interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and spiritual dimensions, they become more open to discussing the difficult issues of racism, homophobia, and gender discrimination. I use personal narratives from well-known writers like James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Richard Rodriguez, and Andrew Holleran to discuss racism and other forms of internalized oppression. I enlist the help of both white students and students of color to share their reflections, and ensure that students of color do not feel that we were dealing with "their problems," or that their lived experience is put under microscopic scrutiny.

As I taught the course in the fall of 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that gays and lesbians had the legal right to marry under the Massachusetts constitution. The issue of sexuality has direct bearings on spirituality and healing, because it touches on the desire and longing for intimacy, the seeking of fulfillment in erotic relationships, and the risk and vulnerability in opening oneself and loving others. We began the discussion with sexual identity development, so that both gay and straight students would reflect on their journeys of coming to know their own sexuality. We discussed how sexuality is socially constructed and different cultures have diverse expressions of the sexual self. It was important to explore biblical teachings on sexuality, since the Bible has selectively been used

to legitimate discrimination against gays and lesbians. Many gay and lesbian theologians have helped rediscover the profound connection between sexuality and spirituality, and between human eros and the love of God. We challenged each other to think how an expansive understanding of human sexuality would influence our sexual expression and bodily practices as both gay and straight people. The closing ritual was led by a student, who created a wonderful liturgy blessing our bodies.

I concluded the class with a section on healing and social transformation, because I wanted to include practical suggestions and strategies for how we could bring what we had learned into congregations and workplaces. We engaged in a critical analysis of the middle-class structure and ethos of mainline congregations and workplaces, and explored ways that spirituality could be more relevant to corporate life.

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## Success and Evaluation

How do we evaluate the effectiveness of a course that includes meditation, music, poetry, lecture, discussion, centerpieces, and ritual? The most important indicator, by far, is the level of student participation, because the course is designed in such a way that collaborative learning is key to its success. The enthusiasm shown by students in taking turns to create an aesthetic and communal learning environment, and their engagement with the readings and discussion, indicate the degree to which they embrace this pedagogy, which does not involve their brains alone. Through reading their weekly journals, I derived a broader picture of how individuals were learning in class.

It is helpful to ask students in the beginning to name their fears and vulnerability in taking this course, and to suggest ways of overcoming such challenges. The course's success also hinges on, and is dependent upon, the general learning atmosphere of the school. Otherwise this type of learning is likely to be labeled "soft" or "nonacademic." My school's mission statement stresses the goal of embracing diversity and multiculturalism in our curriculum and pedagogy. Students are asked to integrate their own spiritual pursuit with what is happening in the classroom, which does not always happen — even in a divinity school. We say repeatedly in class, "When the student is ready, the teacher will come."

## Learning to Teach

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer explores the inner spiritual landscape of the teacher and emphasizes that we teach who we are, and that the identity and integrity of the teacher matter. In teaching this course, I have experienced a dynamic and intimate interplay between my knowledge and passion for the subject, my embodiment of the values taught in the course, and my role as a model for the students. Throughout my graduate training, I never participated in a class that involved the body, which means I have had to acquire a new set of skills and expand my teaching repertoire. I applied for a grant to go to Italy to learn more about religious arts, and visited Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village in Southern France and the Taizé community as a participant observer. I discussed with colleagues in theological schools about teaching spirituality and exchanged syllabi with them. I practice tai chi and yoga and have observed reiki, chi gong, foot massage, and demonstrations of healing touch. Located in Boston, I have used the resources available from the Mind/Body Medical Institute of Harvard Medical School and Boston's Chinatown to enhance my teaching.

<sup>1</sup> Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), xii. ■



*Ex votos at the Santuario de Chimayo, New Mexico, petitioning and giving thanks for healing (Courtesy of Linda Barnes)*