

# “ART OF PRESENCE”

Assisi, Italy

August 25 – 31, 2006

*Give yourself the gift of inner nourishment,  
deepening your understanding of spiritual care  
while learning practical tools for integrating  
spirituality into your daily worklife.<sup>1</sup>*

*reflections by Pamela Taylor*

I search for the word to describe the indefinable. I turn to my thesaurus: baffling, enigmatic, incomprehensible, indescribable, unexplainable, mysterious, mystifying, obscure, and unfathomable. Still searching, I explored my heart for the perfect word... and after a long silence... the only word that might come close is “ineffable” as my thesaurus concurs: beyond words, celestial, divine, ethereal, heavenly, holy, incommunicable, inexpressible, nameless, sacred, spiritual, transcendent, unspeakable, untellable, and unutterable. Yes, ineffable is the only word that will come close to describing my life-changing week in Assisi, Italy.

in·ef·fa·ble 🗣️

Pronunciation: (“)i-’ne-f&-b&l

Function: adjective

Etymology: Middle English, from Latin ineffabilis, from in- + effabilis capable of being expressed, from effari to speak out, from ex- + fari to speak

1 a : incapable of being expressed in words : indescribable <ineffable joy>

b : unspeakable <ineffable disgust>

2 : not to be uttered: <the ineffable name of Jehovah>

This experience, if it must be written in words, must also be written in the First Person Singular... because it was an intimate encounter with God, which included my calling, nature, Francis & Clare, the holy “City of Peace” and my fellow pilgrim-friends. This is not a “travel journal” but the ineffable journey of my soul “at home” in Assisi.

After reading Dr. Christina Puchalski’s<sup>2</sup> many articles on “Spirituality & Health” and hearing her lectures at two conferences, I signed up for “updates” on her GWish website. One afternoon in the fall of 2005, I received an email invitation from GWish to “The Art of Presence Retreat” which sounded enticing

but impractical for a poor, third-year doctoral student. I quickly dismissed the idea and forwarded it on to my Franciscan friar friend, telling him that he must sign up! Months later, after the deadline for deposits and with a growing “waiting list” to attend, God unexpectedly opened a way for me to go --- a gift I can never repay. As I began reading travel books about Assisi and learning more about St. Francis, my anticipation grew. Not only was I blessed to be going, but four dear friends would be there with me.

The seven days in Assisi were filled with a seamless integration of the following elements: 1) Assisi – City of Peace, 2) “Contemplative practice” in community, 3) Walking in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare, 4) Awestruck by God’s creation, and 5) Reassessing, realigning and recommitting.

The Intention of the “Art as Presence” retreat in the brochure read: “This interdisciplinary retreat is designed for physicians, nurses, chaplains and other healthcare professionals wishing to deepen their sense of connection and meaning, regardless of faith tradition.”<sup>3</sup> We were twenty - physicians, psychotherapists, social workers, nurses, energy workers, chaplains, writers, artists, poets and clerics - from all over the United States and Zurich, Switzerland – and from several different faith traditions.

Tranquil Setting: “Re-ignite your original call to service in a city built of prayer. A Franciscan convent in the heart of Assisi provides sanctuary and place of reflection, including a private garden overlooking the Basilica di Francesco. The life of St. Francis and St. Clare offers a spiritual and historical presence while providing a cogent metaphor for your journey.”<sup>4</sup>

I have been many places in my life where I felt an innate “spiritual presence,” but never was the veil so thin between heaven and earth, so alive to my over-stimulated senses, from the moment the taxi entered the gates to Assisi, at the foot of the Subasio Mountain. Mindie Burgoyne, author of *Walking through Thin Places*, articulates the “knowing” I felt there as “a thin place ... where connection to that [Other] world seems effortless, and ephemeral signs of its existence are almost palpable.”

Thin Places are ports in the storm of life, where the pilgrims can move closer to the God they seek, where one leaves that which is familiar and journeys into the Divine Presence. They are stopping places where men and women are given pause to wonder about what lies beyond the mundane rituals, the grief, trials and boredom of our day-to-day life. They probe to the core of the human heart and open the pathway that leads to satisfying the familiar hungers and yearnings common to all people on earth, the hunger to be connected, to be a part of something greater, to be loved, to find peace.<sup>5</sup>

Mahatma Ghandi described his “knowing” in his 1931 Spiritual Message to the World: “There is an indefinable, mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses.” Truly, the setting in Assisi was like a gentle soundtrack behind a beautifully unfolding story. The chapel bells, the gentle breeze, the narrow cobblestone roads, the friendly vendors and artisans, and the sunrise-infused iridescent mist enshrouding the valley and the Basilica di Francesco all created an atmosphere where the Spirit could be felt and experienced. St. Francis’ spirit of peace and justice was felt and seen everywhere – from the PAX shaped hedges on the lawn of the Basilica, to the PACE (“peace” in English) flags carried during a hopeful peace march, to the winding Olive tree-lined road to the church of San Damiano where Francis first heard and accepted God’s call.

Our experienced guides created a contemplative, calming atmosphere for introspection and dialogue. They shared their own stories, truth, songs, and poetry while also being receptacles to hold and bless the hurt, woundedness, grief and compassion fatigue of the tattered healers who came to be refreshed and ultimately healed. I am so grateful for these four caring souls on the journey:

*Musical artist / educator, Michael Stillwater*

*Transpersonal psychologist, Doris Laesser Stillwater*

*Healthcare clinician / educator, Christina Puchalski, M.D.*

*Theologian/spiritual director, Edward O’Donnell*



After our morning sessions of contemplative prayer, spiritual exercises, story-sharing and musical chants, we had lunch together and then free time to dialogue with the leaders individually in the beautiful garden of the monastery. The one-on-one time with each of them was very inspiring and uplifting for me.

The structure of each day was similar, depending upon the event, time and location of our daily pilgrimage. Most of the day trips were early morning, fast-paced walks up the cobblestone roads to one of the many ancient, religious sites from the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare. One had to be in good shape to keep up with the group on these early morning pilgrimages. The nuns at the monastery had strict rules about meal times, so our leaders were always cognizant of our time. We would return each morning before breakfast and then convene in the conference room by 9:00 a.m. Our afternoons were free to rest, tour or shop until we would all meet back for dinner. (In Italy, all of the shopkeepers and residents take two hours off for lunch, which was another reminder of my need for rest, coming from such a fast-paced environment at home.)

The evening sessions were very holy times of prayer, readings and worship. We sat in a very large circle around a beautiful display of fresh flowers and candles that represented (to me) the beauty, light and nature of God. My weary body, mind and heart felt restored by the music, prayers and silence of evening worship. Before sleeping, I would try to journal about the day which often seemed like an eternity filled with too many good things to remember and cherish. The cool weather was perfect for sleeping with the shutters open. Often in the night, I would walk over to the window and look down at the shimmering lights in the valley, the moon, the stars, and the gorgeously lit Basilica with the PAX and Tau cross sculpted hedges. I would thank God for such a delicious moment in time and for my friends who were with me.



Our daily pilgrimages to the places imprinted by St. Francis and St. Clare made their stories and spiritual legacies come alive. The first morning, we walked to the Basilica of St. Clare (Santa Chiara). We heard the “Poor Clares” singing beautifully in unison behind a screen on the left side of the chapel before the daily Roman Catholic Mass. Built from 1257-1265, the Basilica is filled with frescoes, figures of saints, stained glass windows and paintings depicting the New Testament as well as the life and death of St. Clare. Below the chapel, her body lies in a glass tomb and her clothes and one of St. Francis’ patched vestments are on display.



On day 3 we left mid-afternoon to walk down the beautiful, tree lined road to San Damiano, where St. Francis heard Christ on the Crucifix speak to him, saying, “Build my church.” This was the beginning of his ministry. After literally rebuilding the old church, he realized that God wanted him to

spiritually rebuild the church as well. San Damiano is where Francis, after having repaired and enlarged the monastery, placed Sister Clare and her Order, the first Poor Clares in 1212. We saw where Clare was cloistered for many years and where she died. The chapel was small but people came throughout the Assisi area for the evening service. The building and grounds seemed very reverent and peaceful; especially the inner cloister garden, surrounded by the old rock walls, halls and archways.

One of the most magnificent places for me was the Eremo delle Carceri, a hermitage built into the hillside of Mount Subasio. The word “carceri” means “isolated place” or “prison” and was used as a place dedicated to prayer.



“Eremo” comes from the Greek ερημος which means “solitary.” Here St. Francis would spend long periods of time hidden in a cave, resting, meditating and praying. He struggled between the balance of action/ministry and prayer/meditation, as I so relate. Only after his death did his companions decide to build nearby a small chapel named “Santa Maria delle Carceri”, probably dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and a small friary near St. Francis’ cave.<sup>6</sup> Even today, it is a place of reverence, meditation and silence. Because it was raining that day, we were not able to visit the caves after the chapel service. Christina told one of the Franciscan monks about our spiritual retreat group of healthcare professionals and asked if there was a place where we could go until the rain stopped. Amazingly, Brother Serge looked surprised and told her that he was also a medical doctor and accepted her invitation to share his story with us. We were taken downstairs to one of the oldest, small chapels to enjoy the solitude and the sound of rain. Between moments of silence, we sang chants softly as we waited for the Brother Dr. Serge to come and speak to us. His story was very moving and the encounter was a blessing to us and him, as well. He reminded us to keep a bit of the “cave” within each of us as we walk the halls of our workplaces. When

he was finished speaking, the rain had stopped and we walked outside to see the breath-taking views from the mountain, and the beauty of the monastery. There were three caves where St. Francis and his followers would come for retreat. After we explored the area, we gathered around an outside altar near the caves and partook of an interfaith communion service with bread and wine. How fitting in such a beautiful, spiritual atmosphere of prayer.



There were several other holy places that we visited more briefly. The Cathedral of St. Rufino, a Romanesque style edifice believed to be the place where both Francis and Clare were baptized. “The façade is richly ornamented with symbolic sculptures, three portals, three rose windows variously decorated, and the bell tower.”<sup>7</sup> After the retreat, I had the pleasure of seeing the Chapel of Porziuncola (built upon a small piece of land which the Benedictines of Monte Subasio gave to Francis and his friars). Of all of the places where Francis stayed, this was one that was most closely connected to his holy life. Behind the little church is the Cappella del Transito where St. Francis died on October 3, 1226. In 1569 a grandiose, ornate and beautiful cathedral was built, S. Maria degli Angeli (Mary of the Angels), which protects and houses the sacred little Chapel of the Porziuncola.



And of course, the Basilica of St. Francis was the beautiful cathedral built on the west side of Assisi in March 1228, two years after St. Francis’ death. The basilica is across the street from the Monastero di Sant Andrea, the convent where the retreatants stayed. We could view the unforgettable structure by looking out of our 5<sup>th</sup> story window. Truly, it is the most photographed place in Assisi. Giotto and other great artists painted religious frescoes depicting the life of St. Francis and St. Clare. The lower structure was built first and the upper church was completed from 1270-1280.



“The silence, austerity and somberness of the lower church symbolizes the humanity and humility of the Poverello, and reminds us of the sad portions of our own life, while at the same time inviting us to mystical contemplation, prayer, and to the search of the true good, the peace and joy of spirit which Francis wished for all. In contrast to the lower church, the upper is high vaulted, airy, naturally well illuminated by its spacious windows. In this way it symbolizes the sanctity and glory of Francis, while opening our heart to the hope of eternal happiness.”<sup>8</sup>

Inside the basilica, one can experience artistic treasures, the crypt (tomb) of St. Francis, the chapel of relics (including the tunic, capuche sandals made by Clare for Francis, his chalice and the Franciscan Rule of 1223). This is one place I hope to return and explore all of the smaller chapels, inner chambers, sculptures and cemetery of the old Franciscans.

## Spiritual Exercises & Experiences

Besides the ambience of Assisi, the city of peace, the “Art of Presence Retreat” was more renewing than I could have ever hoped. The leaders were flexible, spiritual guides of renewal as we looked inwardly at our compassion fatigue and outwardly at the privilege of being caregivers in our respective places of work and ministry. Among us were people from all over the U.S. and several from Zurich, Switzerland. We were doctors, nurses, chaplains, social workers, those in religious orders and others involved in the healthcare profession. The retreat was knit together with rituals and practices from many different faith traditions. Our materials said, “We will move from care to contemplation, from loneliness to love.” Below is a digest of the reflections, meditations and experiences of each day.

- Introduction of speakers
- Reflections on our early and current beliefs
- Visit to St. Francis' home where he was held captive by his father
- Guided meditation that led us to a room where we have a special spiritual memory
- Sharing our spiritual beliefs in small and large groups
- Reflective exercise & meditation – sharing about the “rooms” where we found ourselves during the meditation

#### Day 2 – Losing Faith; Losing Hope

- Visit to Santa Chiara and hearing the “Poor Clares” sing before Mass
- Exercise that helped us answer the question, “Am I disconnected from my spiritual self?” (We met with three different people in diads and asked each other “Who are you?”) This was very powerful as we peeled the onion of our outward lives down to our souls.
- Reconnection with faith/hope – deep relaxation exercise with full breathing style – one hour meditation – music & words from “Quantum Light Breath” CD<sup>9</sup>
- Meditation, journaling and worship

#### Day 3 – Honoring the Healer

- Large & small group reflections on “Wounded Healers”
- Listening to excerpts from “Care for the Journey”<sup>10</sup>
- Sharing “Why we became healers” in small groups
- Made a pilgrimage to San Damiano (tour, worship, picnic)
- Singing, meditation, journaling

#### Day 4 – Spirit, Self, Calling

- Connecting our spiritual selves with our professional selves
- “How can we bring Assisi back to our work/life?”
- “What led you into healing ministry?”
- Exercise in diads – “Say the words that you wish you would have said to someone who has died or is no longer in your life.” (very powerful!)
- Sharing of our “spiritual practices”
- Music, candles, meditations, singing

## Day 5 – Joyful caring: Keeping the call kindled

- Morning trip to Eremo delle Carceri (communion & lunch where Francis would go to pray)
- Small groups: “How do we sustain our spiritual essence?” and “What will we bring back to our healthcare professions?”
- Large group sharing
- Appreciation and affirmation (beginning to “let go”)
- “What is my dedication? My calling?”
- Meditation, chanting, worship, celebration

## Day 6 – Keeping the fires burning within

- How do we keep the fire burning within?
- Recommitment: each person stands and shares how they are recommitting themselves for their ministry as caregivers
- “Who is my spiritual self now?”
- “What have I learned this week?”
- Anointing each others’ hands as “healers” around the circle
- Closing ritual: Angel walk (2 lines of people standing, facing each other; each person takes a turn walking slowly through the people with their eyes closed. Everyone whispers a prayer or hope in their ears.)
- Closing ritual & lunch

## Leaving the Holy City

Leaving my new friends, mentors and the holy city was very bittersweet for me. In Assisi, I experienced a type of peace that I had never known before. And even though I did not want to leave, I left with a fresh sense of renewal and recommitment to my calling as a pediatric chaplain. In just six days, we had grown to feel like a family – sharing our nightmares and our dreams, our burn-out and our calling, our passions and our tears. Truly this was a “mountain-top” experience for me and I long to return again to Assisi.

Although the past few months have been extremely stressful, busy and fast-paced, I can “go to Assisi” by simply closing my eyes and remembering the beauty of the city, the chiming of the many church bells and the closeness I felt with the small group who gathered there. I have listened to Michael Stillwater’s CDs, looked at pictures and shared memories with the wonderful friends who were there with me. My greatest desire is to live a life more like St. Francis (who was so like Christ) and to return someday to the “City of Peace.”



(Footnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Stillwater, *Art of presence: Healthcare renewal brochure*: Inner Harmony, 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> Christina Puchalski, Founder/Director of the George Washington Institute of Spirituality & Health.
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Stillwater, *Art of presence: Healthcare renewal brochure*: Inner Harmony, 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Mindie Burgoyne, *Walking through thin places*, website: <http://www.writingthevision.com/thinplaces.htm>, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> Comunita Francescana Eremo Delle Carceri, *Eremo delle Carceri Assisi*, (small brochure from Eremo delle Carceri).
- <sup>7</sup> [Translated by Benedict Fagone], *Illustrated Guide of Assisi*, Umbriagraf-Terni.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Bock, *Quantum Light Breath CD*. To order: <http://www.quantumlightbreath.com/cds.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Stillwater, *Care for the Journey: Messages and Music for Sustaining the Heart of Healthcare CD*.

*“God bless you, holy city,  
because many souls will be saved through you,  
and in you will dwell servants of the Most High,  
from you many will be chosen for the eternal kingdom.”*

~ St. Francis of Assisi