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Responding to Life itself

SUMMARY

This study is about aim and method of spiritual care giving in a Dutch context. In the Netherlands the practice of spiritual care giving is in transition. Due to cultural and societal changes in the area of religion, spirituality and care, spiritual care giving has to re-invent itself. Traditionally spiritual care giving is performed as a religious-like activity in the public sphere. In the last decades however spiritual care in the Netherlands is developing into a type of care and guiding that is legitimized in societal terms and is accounted for in a public discourse. In the traditional configuration aim and method of spiritual care-giving are determined by the specific worldview tradition spiritual care givers are rooted in. This is problematic when spiritual care giving is conceived as a public discipline. In the new societal configuration it must be made clear in what way spiritual care is beneficial for people and how that goal is achieved. These developments form the background of the subject matter of this study: the methodology (= the logic of method) of the practice of spiritual care giving. Attention is not so much paid to concrete methodological approaches, as well as to the underlying methodological structure of the practice as a whole. By what kind of professional reasoning do spiritual care givers use their approaches and interventions? What are they trying to achieve in all that they do? I call this methodological structure a 'basic methodology' or 'basic methodic line'. By this term both a plurality of methods and an underlying unity is acknowledged. Formulation of such a basic methodology is useful with respect to societal legitimation, but it is also important for the methodological development of the discipline itself. It will help spiritual care givers to structure their practice and to use the available methodological approaches in a purposive and an accountable way. In addition it would contribute to a clear profile of the discipline in the midst of other disciplines of care.

This study consists of two parts: a theoretical and an empirical one. In the theoretical part the basic concepts are explored and the available methodological approaches in Dutch and Flemish contexts are classified. The empirical part aims to unveil the reasons behind the actual performance of spiritual caregivers. In the end a basic methodology is formulated on the basis of the findings of both the theoretical and empirical research.

In a preliminary chapter (chapter 2) the concepts of 'care', 'guiding', 'practice' and 'method' are examined on the basis of the thinking of some prominent thinkers in the field. Following Ricoeur 'care giving' is conceived as a human response to the vulnerability and fragility of human existence. It is done in a configuration of three modes: 'to care for', 'see to' and carefulness (in Dutch language all these modes are formulated as a compound term with the element 'care' in it). The practice of car-

ing is structured by both a purposive (instrumental) rationality and a value (substantial) rationality. Care has an ethical foundation, is of a relational kind and can be professionally and unprofessionally organized. A practice is an organized structure of socially established actions, bound together by an intrinsic goal. The intrinsic purpose of care is integrity. The distinction between an actor-perspective and a practice-perspective is helpful for the study of practical methodology. A methodological path of professional activity is made visible by examining how a professional pursues his objectives in a concrete contact (actor-perspective) in relation to the goal (central value) of the practice as a whole (practice-perspective).

Spiritual care giving is not only a type of care, but can at the same time be conceived as a form of professional guiding. Guiding is conceived as an activity in which one person (or a group) influences another person (or a group) on the basis of specific expertise in a functional relationship with a view to (aspects of) one's well-being. The purpose of guiding is well-being. Among Dutch spiritual care givers working methodically is a controversial issue. Therefore a clear concept of 'method' is necessary: what do we mean by 'working methodologically'? Following Donkers, methodic practice is conceived as self-regulation in order to realize a certain value. Basic methodology then is defined as follows.

Basic methodology is a way of professional acting, which emanates from the central value of a practice and underlies the use of specific methods in a qualifying and regulating way.

In a basic methodology profession related reasons are given for professional activity. But what does 'profession-related' entail? In order to answer this question due attention must be given to the domain and central value of the profession. We must also have an overview of the available methodical approaches. That is what the chapters 3-6 are about.

In chapter 3 the domain of the profession (the area of life of which an exclusive expertise is claimed) is formulated as 'meaning giving' (Dutch: zingeving. German: Sinngebung). This term is used by the professional organization of spiritual caregivers in the Netherlands (VGVZ) and is more or less recognized by other care professionals as well. But what do we mean by it? With the help of Fowler's conceptualization of 'faith' meaning giving is defined as the process by which people respond to 'life itself', including that which transcends life. Put shortly: it is responding to 'the call of life itself'. It rests on the reflective capacity of human beings and is elicited by existential experiences of contingency, flaws and ambiguity. It has its source in human spirituality, which is defined as being radically struck and formed by 'life itself' be it natural or supernatural. The response to 'the call of life itself' is mediated by religious and non-religious meaning-traditions which precede our individual existence, towards which we take our stand. This process is anthropologically located in what may be called a 'personal space': an underlying domain in which one is present in front of himself. It is the same 'space' in which ethical decisions are made. In a philosophical and psychological discourse it is referred to as 'self', in a religious discourse as 'soul' or 'spirit', in an ethical discourse as 'con-

science' and in daily speech as 'heart'. In this space man is orientating himself in physical and moral space (Taylor). This means that in order to guide someone in this area, it is necessary to enter this personal space. In the remainder of this chapter definitions are given of major concepts such as religion, spirituality, transcendence etc. Religious meaning giving is conceived as a special kind of meaning giving as such. Religious meaning giving entails a special way of handling the 'ultimate'. It has three characteristics: imagination of what may present on the other side of the border of 'the ultimate', seeing one's life in the light of this imagined reality and dedication to it.

In order to know how to guide the process of meaning giving, we must know how this process works. That's the subject matter of chapter 4. It is argued that a psychological approach to this question is not sufficient, because it tends to reduce meaning giving to psychological processes. It does not pay enough attention to the freedom of choice and evaluation that are at the heart of the meaning giving process. In addition it leaves out the question concerning the contents of meaning giving: *which* meaning is sought for? Therefore a philosophical approach is chosen. On the basis of the history of the term 'meaning' three different kinds of 'meaning' are distinguished: *experience of connectedness, hermeneutical activity and motivation to act*. These three forms (figures) of meaning cannot be reduced to each other but they do relate to each other. The way they relate makes visible the dynamics of the meaning giving process (Fig. 4.1). People experience connectedness with the world, attach meaning to it in hermeneutic activity by which motivation to act is generated. This is the experiential line of the meaning giving process. The motivation to act points to spirituality which in essence is a motivational force. Then people start to act, attach meaning to their own actions by hermeneutic activity which in the end generates a new experience of connectedness with the world. This is the active line of the meaning giving process. The meaning giving process entails both a response to the question of meaning of life in this world and a response to the question of meaning of my own actions. There is a twofold result of this process: engagement with the world and participation in the world. The meaning giving process is thus conceived as a circular, dialectic process between the poles of 'man' and 'world'. Meaning giving is not only about what the world means to me, but also what I myself may mean to the world.

Guiding with respect to the meaning giving process can be useful when these three different forms of meaning do not match. Then the 'circle' is broken and engagement and participation cannot sufficiently be achieved. In guiding a spiritual care giver can intervene in all three modes of meaning. One can of course support a client in hermeneutic activity, but one can also give him an actual experience of connectedness or support him in doing something in both a ritual or non-ritual way. Interventions in one mode of meaning influences the other ones.

The process of meaning giving takes on a narrative form. It is manifest in stories that people tell. In all their stories they communicate how they experience connectedness, which meaning they attach to events and actions, and by which things they are struck and radically formed and which life course they see for themselves. Therefore guiding the meaning giving process implies careful listening to stories,

Careful interpretation of stories and a purposeful connecting of stories. But what is the purpose at stake?

In chapter 5 the central value of the practice of spiritual care giving is examined. What is this entire discipline for? It is examined what practical theology can teach us in this respect. First: the analysis of different types of pastoral care shows that different aims are formulated in each type. Second: analysis of the widely recognized functions of pastoral care formulated by Clebsch and Jaeckle shows that the goal of the practice is a layered one and can change through times. It leaves the question if it is possible to formulate a kind of umbrella-goal. Therefore four recent Dutch goal formulations are analysed. They all appear to be of a layered structure. These layers show some important aspects of the methodological structure, but they fail to serve as a clear methodological point of reference. They are too complex and diffuse for that and the relation to the public discourse of well-being is rather loose. Therefore a fresh approach to the question is made, which departs from the concept of well-being. The following conclusions are drawn.

- The central value of the spiritual care giving can be formulated as ‘existential well-being’. It is defined as well-being with respect to ‘life itself’.
- Existential well-being is not a kind of well-being on the same level as well-being on other domains of life. It is well-being on an underlying level. It integrates and structures the well-being in the other domains of life and gives colour to them.
- Existential well-being consists of three layers: relational safety, vitality and plausibility of meaning traditions, and spiritual conformity (the extent to which one lives according to the perceived call of ‘life itself’).
- Existential well-being manifests itself on the interactional level by engagement with life and participation in life.
- A practical indication of existential well-being is the extent to which one can agree to life as it is.

Because instrumentalization of spirituality would be at odds with the character of spirituality itself the relation between spirituality and well-being must be established carefully. There may be a positive correlation between spirituality and well-being, but this positive correlation must be conceived as indirect, dialectic and critical.

In chapter 6 the available methodological approaches in Dutch and Flemish literature are described. They can be classified according to the various aspects of the meaning-giving process as described in chapter 4. *Relational models* derive their methodological structure from the relational aspects of the process. *Formal models* derive their methodological structure from the formal aspects of the process. *Spiritual models* derive their methodological structure from the motivational aspects, whereas the *functional models* derive their methodological structure from the functional aspects of the process. Transversal analysis however shows that these models do not exclude each other. Bridges can be seen between them. They point to each other. This leaves once again the question how all these methodological approaches can be configured to serve the central value (goal) of the practice.

The empirical part of this study starts with a brief account of the research design in chapter 7. It is a theory informed research. Central question is: in what way are the theoretical concepts of the chapters 3 t/m 5 present in actual professional performance? Eight selected spiritual care givers from different fields have given a thoughtful answer to the question what they are for. In addition they delivered an account of an actual professional conversation (both individual and group conversations). On the basis of these two documents the respondents were interviewed. In this interview they were asked for the reasons for their conversational interventions. This material was analysed on the basis of the key concepts of the chapters 3-5. This was done in the hermeneutical-phenomenological tradition. As a result eight methodological profiles are presented in chapter 8. The cross-case analysis in chapter 9 shows that the concepts at stake indeed are present in the actual performance of the respondents. An underlying order could also be discerned: by realizing relational and formal values spiritual care givers come to realize spiritual values in life-functional perspective. In addition it could be concluded that all respondents in some way or another attempted to realize a deepening movement in the conversation and the relationship. It was also observed that the passive (experience) line of the meaning process got more attention than the active (acting) line. The question 'What does life to me' got more attention than the question 'what am I doing with life'?

In chapter 10 the results of the theoretical and the empirical part are brought together in formulating a basic methodology line. It all starts with a description of the specific kind of relationship that spiritual care-givers want to develop with their clients. It is named 'guiding encounter'. It refers to a personal encounter in which guiding takes place. It reflects the fact that spiritual care giving is both a form of care and guiding. In this guiding encounter there is equivalence and difference of the relationship at the same time. It is a personal encounter with a focus on the 'theme' and the deepest level of the encounter itself: the motivational, spiritual level. That is why all respondents speak in some way or another of a 'deepening process' they want to elicit. Spiritual care givers want to support and help people to live out of a 'spiritual conformity'. This objective however is not pursued for its own sake. It is done in the perspective of 'life functionality'. Living out of their spiritual conformity helps people to take up their lives, to hold on to their lives and to continue their lives with some more strength, joy, hope etc. in the face of all that life is asking and giving. This 'life-functionality' is the over all-perspective in which the practice of spiritual care giving is meaningful.

The 'deepening process' is achieved by realising a characteristic configuration of relational and formal values. I used the concepts of 'theory of presence' and 'ethics of care' to clarify what spiritual care givers are doing on the relational level. The relational values however are not effective without formal, hermeneutical, values and the formal values are not effective without the relational ones. The discussion of the formal values results in a description of the different ways spiritual care givers are dealing with the stories they hear. They can be progressively involved in these stories. It starts with making room for the story en ends with analysing the

story with respect to possible frictions of the meaning giving process. The extending of perspective (deepen, broaden, lengthen and widen) is a narrative technique that is used as a means. It is described how spiritual knoweledge and knowledge of meaning-traditions fit in to the guiding process.

All this is brought together in the formulation of methodological line of thought. Just as medical and paramedical professions follow the line 'anamnesis-diagnosis-treatment-control' and nurse practitioners may follow Tronto's line 'caring about-taking care of-care-care receiving', spiritual care givers follow their own methodological line of thought. It is formulated as '*come close-deepen-let happen-connect-celebrate*'. All the social scientific expertise and the expertise concerning meaning traditions must be located somewhere on this line. The image of the antique 'miqve' can serve as an icon of this methodological line (Fig. 10.2).

In a final section the significance of this methodological baseline is being reflected upon. It may be useful not only for the development of the profession, but may also be of importance for education, training and supervision of spiritual care givers.