



An Interfaith Journey on Meaning and Suffering: Perspectives from the Medical Field

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An Interfaith Journey on Meaning and Suffering:

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Abstract

The practice of medicine includes an intimate journey with patients in their confrontation with meaning, suffering, and death. This confrontation of these elements as a first-year resident or intern was emotionally and spiritually exhausting. Through this journey, I found that my patients and their respective religious traditions provided useful lenses to approach some of life's most difficult questions. Through this lens, a rich tapestry of wisdom can alleviate suffering and provide an approach to processing and integrating life's hardships towards a greater appreciation and integration of the patient with the human experience. As a physician, through my interfaith journey, I became aware of the divine voice spoken through my patients that guided my understanding of God, love, and humanity. Through each spiritual journey of my patients, I became aware of how each tradition provided a tool for approaching life's most challenging questions. In this manuscript, I explore how elements of different faith traditions molded my practice as a physician and understand the struggles that bind us all together.

Keywords: *Meaning, Suffering, Death, Interfaith, Residency, Intern*

Introduction

In the bustling heart of Washington, DC, I embarked on a journey that would transform my understanding of faith and healing. Engaging in interfaith discussions, I was privileged to witness the profound beauty that arises when diverse beliefs come together in a tapestry of mutual respect and shared purpose.

These interactions were more than mere conversations; they were a testament to the healing power of the community and the boundless potential of divine love manifesting through unity. Each dialogue revealed the common threads that bind us, irrespective of our religious affiliations. From the prayers of a devout Muslim to the meditative chants of a Buddhist monk, I saw the same yearning for peace, the same pursuit of understanding, and the same commitment to compassion. These experiences underscored the notion that developing an interfaith community is indeed a divine endowment, a means through which we can collectively heal and grow. In our interfaith gatherings, stories of personal struggles and triumphs were shared, creating an environment where vulnerability was met with empathy and differences were celebrated rather than condemned.

This inclusive space fostered a sense of belonging and affirmed that our spiritual journeys, though varied, are interwoven by the same divine thread. We learned from one another, drawing strength from our diverse perspectives and finding solace in our shared humanity. The interfaith community I encountered in D.C. was a living embodiment of healing through unity. It taught me that by embracing the spiritual richness of others, we expand our understanding of divine love. This love becomes a guiding light in its many forms, illuminating our paths and nurturing our souls. The healing we sought was not only physical but also spiritual and emotional, a holistic restoration that only a united community can provide. Reflecting on these lessons, I am reminded that the journey towards building an interfaith community is ongoing. It requires patience, openness, and a willingness to transcend our boundaries.

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However, the rewards are immeasurable, for in these sacred spaces, we find not only the healing of our wounds but also the collective strength to face the world's challenges together. Through this journey, I found that my patients and their respective religious traditions provided useful lenses to approach some of life's most difficult questions. Through this lens, a rich tapestry of wisdom can alleviate suffering and provide an approach to processing and integrating life's hardships towards a greater appreciation and integration of the patient with the human experience. As a physician, through my interfaith journey, I became aware of the divine voice spoken through my patients that guided my understanding of God, love, and humanity. Through each spiritual journey of my patients, I became aware of how each tradition provided a tool for approaching life's most challenging and complex questions. In this manuscript, I explore how elements of different faith traditions molded my practice as a physician and understand the struggles that bind us all together.

More Cooks in the Spiritual Kitchen

In my early days as an intern, I encountered a Muslim patient suffering from Post-Polio Syndrome. His condition was severe, and his spiritual resilience and patience were remarkable. He shared profound insights during our discussions that impacted my perception of faith and medicine. We had been working hard together to find a rehabilitation center to accept him for his worsening lower extremity weakness related to a worsening spinal canal stenosis, which he deferred surgical intervention.

We had been working hard together to find a rehabilitation center to accept him for his worsening lower extremity weakness related to a worsening spinal canal stenosis, which he deferred surgical intervention. After over a week of waiting, no rehab center accepted him due to his Medicaid status. Both of us were frustrated at the delay. When he was finally accepted, he told me that he had been praying to Allah every day, asking that a rehabilitation center be provided near his home. My patient had waited over a week for a placement at a local rehabilitation center. He was overjoyed when he was finally approved.

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As a Christian, I prayed throughout the week, hoping he would receive the care he needed. I found it rather curious that we both had prayed to our separate creators for intervention and that it worked well. I found it somewhat ironic and humorous. *Was it Allah and the God of Christianity working together across our faith traditions? Did Allah and the God of Christianity have a sparring match over who would do the deed? Or was it something much more common in our attempts to address the same divine being in our traditions and languages?*

What I found most curious was the shared humanity and spirit I had with my patient. The beauty of medicine is not in the outcomes. It is in the shared desire and awareness of the greater spiritual meaning of what we had embarked on together. The “miracle” of medicine is when people from all walks of life work together for the common good. When the hierarchies of life and society fall away, and love comes forth, I believe that is where true love and meaning are found.

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In my interfaith journey, the common theme of love has fascinated me more about people of other faiths and myself. Despite our differences, love binds us all together. Even as a Christian, I find beauty, truth, and love in other traditions. As I work with people and learn from them, I often wonder if God, in His humor, allows us to understand His divine nature in different languages—each carrying a shared message and theme. I’m not sure. I can say that finding common ground among different faiths is much easier than I realized. The struggle is not faith itself. It is rather the engagement of the human person with the divine. For God being love, our mutual struggle across faiths is how imperfect human beings reflect, engage, and interpret that love.

What began as a medical engagement turned into a profound spiritual apprenticeship. It underscored the value of incorporating diverse spiritual beliefs into patient care, recognizing that each faith tradition offers unique perspectives and coping mechanisms that can significantly contribute to a patient’s healing process. It became evident that having multiple spiritual perspectives in the metaphorical “kitchen” of healthcare could enrich the overall approach to treatment, offering more comprehensive care that addresses physical and spiritual needs.

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Fear of Death and the Gift of Divine Transformation

In medicine, we witness daily the tangible challenges posed by the impermanence of life. The struggle against terminal illnesses, the heart-wrenching farewells, and the relentless pursuit of cures all underscore the finite nature of our existence. However, these difficulties reveal the essence of life's impermanence. Each moment of pain and loss is also a profound human connection, shared vulnerability, and collective strength. Embracing the impermanence of life allows us to see death not as an end but as a transformation. It is an embrace of the divine love that permeates the universe, a love that transcends our physical existence and continues to guide us beyond. This perspective fosters a sense of peace and acceptance, enabling us to cherish the present and honor the journey of our souls. Through understanding and accepting life's impermanence, we open our hearts to the transformative power of divine love, which shapes our experiences and enriches our existence. This lesson is a testament to the human spirit's resilience and the divine's enduring presence within us all.

I had an enjoyable experience in the intensive care unit that demonstrated the importance of interfaith literacy. The patient had experienced a sudden cardiac arrest, and the prognosis was ultimately poor. What stood out, however, was the presence of phrases and images from the Quran that the family had written and placed around the room. They also brought the Quran and left it on the patient's bed. It was both surprising and heartwarming to witness the family's faith in such a tangible way. This curiosity sparked a meaningful conversation about their beliefs on death, God, and the Quran. It is fascinating how God continually weaves faith into my practice, whether through Hinduism or the Quran. In each encounter, God seems to guide my exploration of faith and practice in ways that deepen my understanding. My priority was understanding their theology of death—a question guiding my interactions with the family.

This experience made me realize that framing the body as a portal for God's love and message helped guide my discussions. I encouraged the family to remember that the patient was surrounded by God's love and the love of family and friends. I shared the idea that sometimes, God speaks through the patient's body, signaling when it is time to let go, allowing the patient to embrace divine love fully.

Additionally, I emphasized that allowing the grieving process to unfold naturally is an important part of honoring a meaningful death. This approach helped the family embrace the experience while viewing it through a universal language of divine love. Engaging theologically and connecting with a person's faith in love touches the heart and soul. It did not matter that I was Christian; I focused on embracing their faith in love and guiding them to process death through their lens. While it can sometimes be challenging, I aim to keep the dialogue open to help the healing process unfold. I have realized that faith literacy—engaging with, delighting in, and respecting other faiths—nourishes the soul. This practice teaches me that the divine reality surrounds us, embracing us with love and guiding us toward universal compassion. It reminds me to focus on the commonalities in our beliefs rather than our differences, as love is the bond that unites us all. Through this practice, I am grateful for the opportunity God has given me to enhance love during times of tragedy and help cultivate greater love in the world.

As a resident, I have encountered countless patients who yearn for miracles, particularly at the twilight of their lives. Their prayers often center on miraculous healings or divine interventions that would spare them from the inevitable embrace of death. However, through my interactions with these individuals, I have come to a profound realization: the true miracle is not in the extraordinary events we hope for at the end of our journey but in the ordinary moments that constitute our daily existence. The divine journey manifests most powerfully in the simple yet profound act of living. Each breath, each heartbeat, each fleeting moment spent with loved ones is a testament to the miracle of life. Through our human experiences – our joys, sorrows, challenges, and triumphs – we encounter the divine in its most accessible form. Every patient's life story is a sacred narrative, a living testament to the miracle of existence. The beauty of this miracle lies in its universality. It transcends the boundaries of faith, culture, and circumstance, revealing a divine truth that is accessible to all. By shifting our focus from seeking miracles at death to recognizing the miracle of life itself, we embrace a deeper, more profound connection with the divine.

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This perspective not only enhances our appreciation of the present but also imbues our interactions with others with a sense of reverence and gratitude. We are constantly reminded of its fleeting nature by the very nature of living. This impermanence, often perceived as a source of sorrow and fear, is, in truth, one of the most profound gifts bestowed upon us. Through the lens of spirituality and medicine, we understand that the transient nature of life is not a curse but a divine blessing, a means through which we undergo continuous transformation and growth in love. Dr. Siva Subramanian, a patient with deep-rooted beliefs in reincarnation, once shared his perspective on life and death with me. He viewed each passing life as a stepping stone, a chapter in the soul's eternal journey. This belief provided him as a physician with a sense of peace and acceptance, transforming his fear of death into an anticipation of the next phase of his spiritual journey.

One elderly patient taught me this lesson. He had worsening cardiovascular and peripheral arterial disease, requiring an amputation of his left lower extremity. However, the wound from the amputation continued to bleed regardless of revisions. He was likely to require additional amputations and remain at a high risk of infection and septic shock. His overall prognosis was poor. As we spoke, he shared feelings of regret and shame for past decisions, a sense that he had not done enough good, and a desire for more time to explore life's bigger questions—particularly about God and the meaning of it all. At that moment, I realized that I opened his heart a little more by simply engaging with him, listening, and being honest about my uncertainties. I allowed myself to be vulnerable by telling him that his life mattered and that he was already teaching me how to be a better doctor. Despite our age difference, we both feared death and grappled with life's most challenging questions every day. I showed him and reminded myself we were not patients and doctors but two human beings navigating this journey together. I happened to have the skills to help; he had the stories and experiences to share. After a conversation with his sister and other relatives about his options, he eventually agreed to enter hospice and palliative care. When I saw him next, his face was completely different. The man I had met earlier that day had been replaced by someone who seemed alive, at peace, and reconnected with his personality. His unkempt hair now seemed to reflect more who he truly was, a detail I had overlooked before. The patient was grateful, not because of my medical care, but because someone had listened to him and spoken to his heart rather than just his head.

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Each Patient`s Story, a Glimpse of My Journey with God

The final lesson I have learned in my journey through medicine is that each patient's spiritual story mirrors my journey with God. A patient with newly diagnosed brain cancer taught me more about God and life than any spiritual text could. He was informed that, without treatment, he had between 3 to 12 months to live. The tumor's rapid progression, its vascular nature, and its proximity to the ventricles significantly increased the risk of bleeding and metastatic spread in the cerebrospinal fluid. We discussed the biopsy and the potential complications, and through this patient, I learned the power of explaining the worst-case scenarios. By framing the risks and possibilities, patients could make informed choices—not out of fear, but with clarity and the ability to prepare for what lay ahead.

At that moment, I realized how everything I had experienced during my residency had led me to this point. All my observations in the ICU, the lessons on discussing death—everything had prepared me to help this one person. I understood that my purpose was to use these experiences to give the patient the truth, hope, and space to confront the most challenging question of his life: What does he truly want? No one had asked him this in a way that acknowledged both his and his wife's concerns. It was in this sacred space that his wife admitted her fear of not being able to let him go and causing him harm, while he feared losing his chance to live and, above all, not wanting to be a burden to her.

As we spoke, something transformative happened. I shared the benefits of palliative care and explained how focusing on comfort helped some patients find peace in what philosophers call a “beautiful death.” This idea resonated with the patient, who recalled someone he knew with inoperable cancer who found joy in living fully, embracing life's currents. This conversation allowed him to search his heart and articulate what he wanted. Before I left, he asked my name again and expressed gratitude for what I had done for them. His wife echoed his words.

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At that moment, I did not try to deny or minimize it. I paused and realized how deeply my presence had affected them, how my listening and speaking from the heart had helped him heal. When someone’s life is touched so profoundly that they see another for who they truly are and show how much healing has occurred, it is an indescribable feeling—a joy that makes one feel as if they could die happy. It was a recognition that God’s presence had worked through me. The most authentic expression of the divine in interfaith dialogue is our mutual impact on each other, spreading divine love and harmony.

However, more importantly, he taught me that by helping one, we can save the world. There is incredible potency in changing a life and healing one person. It is about sharing the journey and the glory with God, who walks alongside us as one. To feel the weight of a soul is to understand the value of life. To be in awe of our impact is to realize how much God has entrusted us to change the world. More profoundly, I realized that God had granted me the wish to grow closer to Him through medicine. In just six months, this relationship has deepened immensely. Yet, he has shown me that my true medical joy comes from the appreciation, admiration, delight, and joy patients feel when genuinely listened to. It is an indescribable feeling of awe and wonder—not of my doing but of God working through me. In this light, the word “magical” comes to mind, for it is not the outcome that matters as much as the sacred space created with a patient where true soul healing can occur. Even if the body dies and I cannot heal it, I can always heal the soul. When the soul heals, a person lives and returns to God.

In many ways, healing the body reflects a physical process and a surface expression of the patient’s deeper internal struggle with God. To “help” someone does not quite capture what this truly is. It is not about “saving” them; it is about healing. A case with a Nigerian patient treated for cholangitis underscored this lesson. Initially, we suspected a liver abscess, but it turned out to be a mass. On my first day seeing him, I remember sitting down to talk with him while he was with his daughters. He responded well to our conversation, especially when he brought up faith, and I offered to connect him with a pastor.

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From there, we formed a special bond. He would later tell me that he enjoyed it whenever I came to see him, calling me “his” doctor despite the many others who visited him. He shared that he felt God’s presence through my work and felt at peace, loved as a person, not just a patient. This connection was crucial when I discussed the possibility that his liver mass might be cancerous. We had this conversation with his family present, and he appeared devastated when I first shared the news. I honestly thought I might have ruined our good relationship. I felt saddened by how things were unfolding—not so much by the cancer diagnosis itself, but because something beyond my control had overshadowed the positive bond we had built. However, the next day, he was in much better spirits. He acknowledged that the “C-word” had shocked him, but after talking it through with his family, he began to feel more at peace. Although he still grew quiet when cancer was mentioned, he slowly warmed up, smiled more, and followed my suggestion to do so. Surprisingly, this brought us even closer. He was a patient who saw God through me and felt honestly treated and heard as a human being.

God’s gift to me as a doctor is not just a passion for healing but the weight and presence to share His love, joy, compassion, and perspective with others. It is a gift I am learning to use for good, appreciating how God nurtures and grows this gift over time. It is less about myself and more about the joy I find in my work despite its ups and downs. It is those moments when I touch the heart of heaven, then return to Earth feeling elated after helping a patient heal, embrace the truth with grace, and let go of their fear, anger, sadness, or insecurity, finding peace in God’s loving embrace, whether they are religious or not. Embracing humanity is sincerely humbling; I learn and grow along the way. Instead of viewing a patient as a “trainwreck,” I see God working through me to offer solace and closure, whatever the situation. Sometimes, this process requires patience and unfolding. God works with me to reveal the truth and find the best path forward. Through my experiences and frustrations, I have become more open about my concerns and wishes for a patient. It is not about forcing them into a decision but using my experience to help prevent further harm and pain.

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The simple truth is I love people. Even with their quirks and imperfections, I am learning that God works through me for my growth and His pleasure, showing me how we heal together. The spiritual and physical come together as one. I have learned that every story has a silver lining that can provide healing, hope, and closure. It is not always about solving a problem; sometimes, it is about being the parachute that catches someone as they fall, easing their transition into the next phase of life. In doing so, I am also learning that to heal the soul is to heal the world. When a patient thanks me for healing their heart and soul, it feels like the greatest gift I could receive.

The irony is that patients often serve as God’s way of revealing His steadfast love and presence when least expected. Divine humor is woven through human struggle, adventure, and life. It is through us that the essence of God is magnified and glorified—not in purity but in the messiness of life. Because if God can create something beautiful from tragedy, what is there that He cannot do?

Conclusion

The most fulfilling moments in medicine occur when the spiritual and physical aspects come together. Learning a patient’s story—their quirks, humor, struggles, and joys—creates a beautiful narrative I can engage with, learn from, and share. In their unassuming way, each patient teaches me a lesson about life, a new way to be, or a better way to live. When we recognize the spiritual waters we tread, the world transforms into a magical, mysterious, and fantastic adventure to explore. Not as the superhero of the story but as a partner in God’s journey with us—venturing into the most profound and most sacred elements of life.


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We come alive after experiencing the deepest joy and seeing more opportunities ahead. When we leave a loving mark on a person's soul, we realize it is God working with, through, and in us to make that happen. I'll never grow accustomed to that feeling or be unsurprised by it. God works not only in mysterious ways but also with the clearest of intentions—to make us whole. As this patient taught me, the accurate measure of a person's life is the soul's weight—measured by memories, love, community, impact, joy, and a relationship with God. This is where human life finds heaven—not in some distant future, but in the present. It's in life's most difficult moments that love and meaning are truly found. Through these interfaith experiences, I've witnessed how embracing diverse spiritual perspectives enriches our collective understanding of divine love. Each conversation, each shared prayer, adds a new thread to the tapestry, deepening its beauty. I've come to understand that our greatest strength lies in our ability to listen, learn, and grow from one another. In moments of shared vulnerability and support, we experience the true essence of divine love, a force that heals, nurtures, and guides us toward a more compassionate, inclusive world.

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As my journey progresses, I am continually enveloped in the profound realization that the divine thread of love weaves through each of our lives, connecting us in ways both seen and unseen. This intricate tapestry, spun from the myriad expressions of faith and resilience, demonstrates the boundless potential for understanding and unity within our shared existence. The lessons I have garnered from my patients, peers, and interfaith companions have been invaluable. They have shown me that the divine manifests within us uniquely and beautifully, offering glimpses of a higher truth that transcends all boundaries. The interplay of human vulnerability and divine strength is a testament to the sacred bonds that unite us all, regardless of our spiritual paths. Through my experiences as a physician, I have come to appreciate the profound spiritual journeys of my patients. Each patient's story is a unique tapestry woven with threads of faith, struggle, and resilience. Their narratives offer me a glimpse into my sacred journey with the God of my understanding. As I listen to their hopes and fears in the quiet moments, I witness their connection to the divine.

Whether through whispered prayers, heartfelt confessions, or silent meditation, these interactions reveal the delicate interplay between human vulnerability and divine strength. Each encounter reinforces the notion that our paths, though distinct, are guided by a shared quest for meaning, healing, and love. In these sacred exchanges, I find reflections of my spiritual journey illuminated by my patients' diverse expressions of faith. Their stories are a testament to the enduring presence of divine grace in our lives, offering comfort and guidance as we navigate the complexities of existence.

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As I walk alongside them, I am reminded of the transformative power of compassion and the unifying thread of love that binds us all. Through their eyes, I glimpse the vastness of the divine, and in their struggles, I find echoes of my quest for understanding and peace.

About the CFIG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFIG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFIG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

About the Author

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**Ideas at their best
when they interact.**



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