

All-City Palliative Care Lecture Series

Perfectly Hidden and Revealed

Using Nature Photography to Invite Spiritual Reflection in Patients
with Serious Illness

Stephen F. Obold Eshleman, MDiv, BCC

he/him

February 3, 2023
12:00 PM – 1:00 PM

Introduction & Disclosures

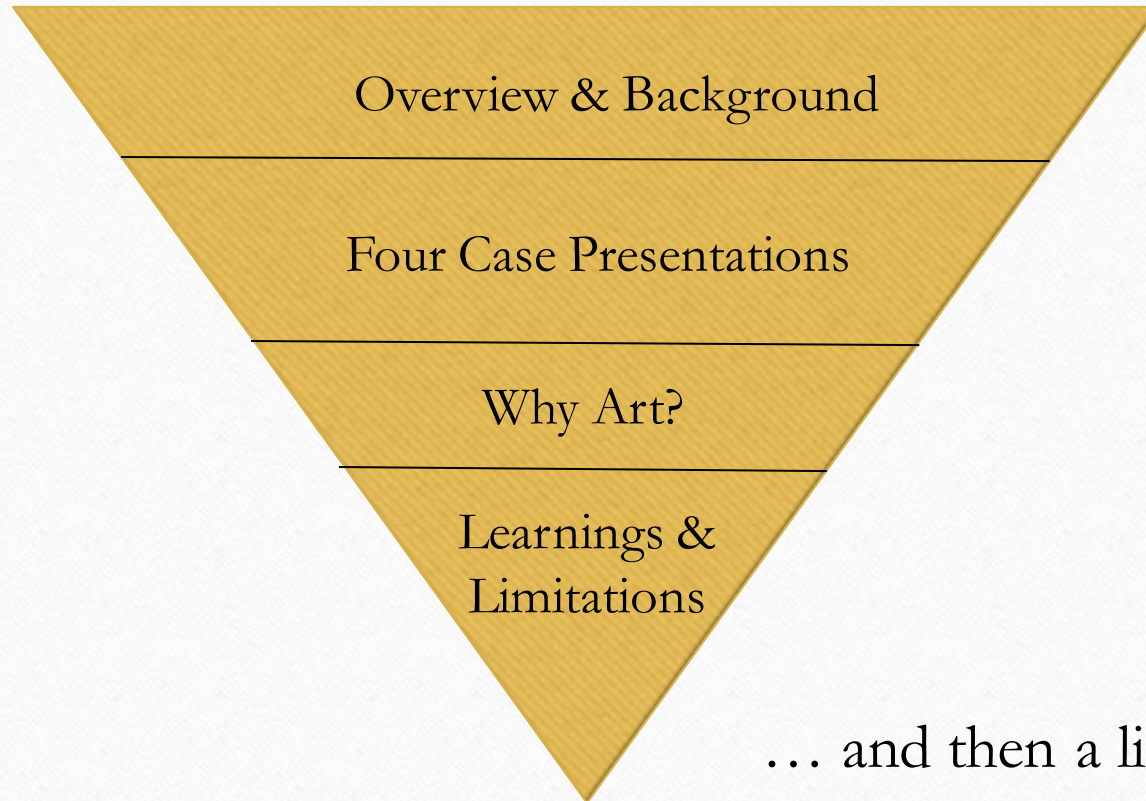
- I am a chaplain at Legacy Salmon Creek Medical Center (Vancouver, WA) soboldes@lhs.org
- I'm ordained clergy from the Mennonite (Anabaptist Christian) faith tradition
- I am not an expert in palliative care
- I have no disclosures, no conflicts of interest
- I'm an amateur photographer and all nature landscape photographs are my own; map graphics and portraits are from the public domain



Objectives

- Explore new avenues of conversing about "what matters" in the context of serious illness
- Demonstrate how patients interact with photography and their inner reality to "make meaning" in the context of severe illness
- Broaden understandings of chaplain roles (and Spiritual Care) to facilitate meaning-making, especially with "The Nones"

Main Presentation Themes



... and then a little time for Q & A



Pacific Northwest is sometimes called the "None Zone"

32% of Northwesterners claim to have *no religious identity*
(compared to 20% national figure) - 2019 Pew Research Center

Religiously Unaffiliated in the Portland Metro Area

- 34% Clark County, WA
- 36% Washington County, OR
- 36% Clackamas County, OR
- 48% Multnomah County, OR

- 2020 Public Religion Research Institute



(Mis)Perceptions about Chaplains

Chaplains show up only for "Last Rites"

Or

When a patient gets "bad news"

Or



"Uh oh, here comes a religious freak..."

What does it mean to provide spiritual care with patients who don't identify as "religious"?

- Spiritual care is about attitudes, practices, and behaviors that bring meaning to life
- "Nones" (as well as those who are religiously affiliated) may experience the natural world in a way that feels "supernatural"
- Sometimes chaplaincy is about speaking the "language of the sacred" without using religious words or practices

"I'm not religious..."

(but I'll look at these photos...)

Four case examples where photography helped assess spiritual needs

- What is a spiritual need?
- Examples of spiritual needs: connection, community, self-worth, self-esteem, hope, peace, meaning and direction, to love, to be loved, reconciliation, forgiveness
- How are spiritual needs assessed? (explicit prompts, implicit prompts)



"There's no one home..."



No one home...

An assessment of spiritual needs

- Mid 70s, ESRD, on dialysis
- "old", "fallen down"
- Projected feeling states of grief, loss of physical function, perceived loss of autonomy, perhaps lack of purpose
- "there's no one home...", "I was a foster kid"
- Feelings of isolation, abandonment
- Suggested unmet spiritual needs of self-worth and belonging to community



"We're each unique, rounded by one another."



Community & Diversity

A Form of Life Review

- 76 year-old, palliative care patient, end stage liver disease
- Noted the clusters of stones, some "big" others "small", rocks are "always moving around by the waves", all in the process of becoming "sand"
- Expressions of gratitude for life experiences, acceptance of illness
- Community organizer, political activist
- Contemplating mortality, preparing for EOL
- Spiritual need: legacy work - passing along wisdom to younger generations, specifically to grandchildren

Why Art? (Why Photography?)

What is going on here?

"Art is a lie that makes us realize truth."

- Pablo Picasso



Why Art? Why Photography?

- Allows patients to interact with an artistic medium and their inner reality
- Which allows patients to discover, contemplate and express dimensions of their "truth" they know but cannot fully express in words
- Often easier, less threatening for a patient to talk about an image that captures their attention than to speak directly about fears, concerns, loneliness, emotional/spiritual pain
- Photography "works" because it avoids technical religious language (church speak)



There is something
else going on here...

*"Tell all the truth
but tell it slant..."*

- Emily Dickinson

Soul Truth 'On The Slant'

- Indirect voices (metaphorically via poems, music, works of art) may tell subjective truths.
- Self-awareness happens best in conjunction with other voices. Parker Palmer calls these indirect voices 'third things.'
- The photographic image becomes a 'third voice', interceding between the patient and chaplain

The Power of Art as Metaphor

Metaphor is the **venture of imagination...**

to **explore new avenues of conversation** about what matters...

... by creating images that correspond to the contextual **issues that touch our very quest for meaning.**

- adapted from C.T. Goto. 2016. "Reflecting Theologically by Creating Art: Giving Form to More than We Can Say." Reflective Practice : Formation and Supervision in Ministry

Case #3



"I don't know if I'm f***ing coming or going..."



Coming or Going?

Uncertainty: The subjective perception of one's experience

- 60 year-old, ESRD, on dialysis
- "I can't tell where the road starts", "Is it going uphill or downhill?"
- Cares for elementary and middle school age grandchildren
- Anger, frustration, responsibility, duty, anxiety, uncertainty (energy in expletive, anger can make one feel "in control")
- Existential crisis: prepare for potential EOL **and** raise grandchildren

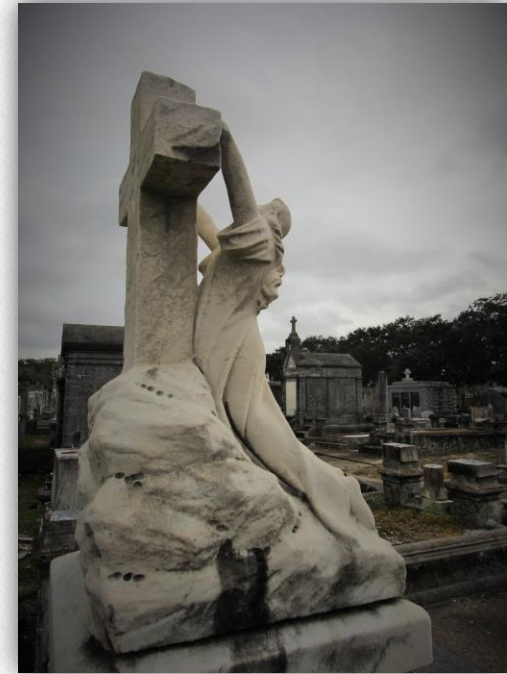
Photographs Don't Work with Everybody



"What
is
that?"

"Beef
jerky?"

No
Religious
Symbolism



Learnings & Limitations

- Implicit assessments may capture qualitative aspects of spiritual expression and reflection
- Photography creates structure to facilitate open-ended conversation about "what matters"
- Art is low-risk, positive, authentic experience of uncertainty; it calls out our subjective lens

Limitations

- Photography and its interpretative comments are subjective (it's a bit like the old Rorschach inkblot tests)
- It is speculative 'thinking' - there are differences in subjective experience which can generate multiple interpretations
- How does one distinguish 'fact' from 'inference?'

How I work with limitations

- Provide evidence for interpretation
- Notice specific observations that trigger interpretative comments
- What more can you find?

(Miller A, Grohe M, Khoshbin S. From the galleries to the clinic: Applying art museum lessons to patient care. *Journal of Med Humanities* 2013;34:433-43)

Assessment or Intervention? Both?

- Images perceived to be striking or arresting activate the Default Mode Network of the brain, which allows us to focus inward and access our most personal thoughts and feelings

(Vessel E, Starr G, Rubin N. The brain on art: Intense aesthetic experience activates the default mode network. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 2012;6:66.)

- Conditional language allows for prolonged speculation of multiple meanings
- Divergent thinking allows for new insights

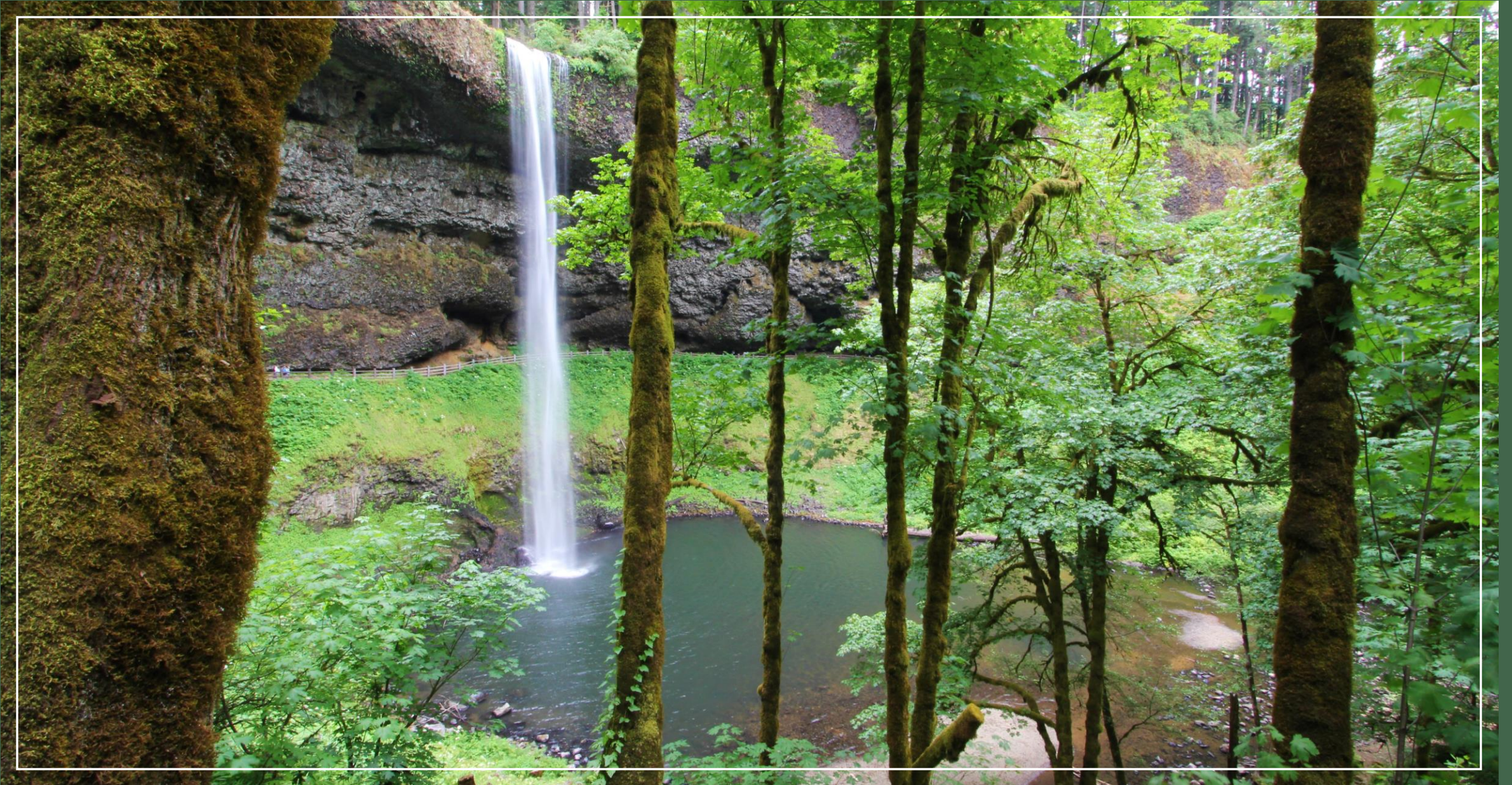


"I'm just sittin' in the weeds..."

Cusps & Thresholds



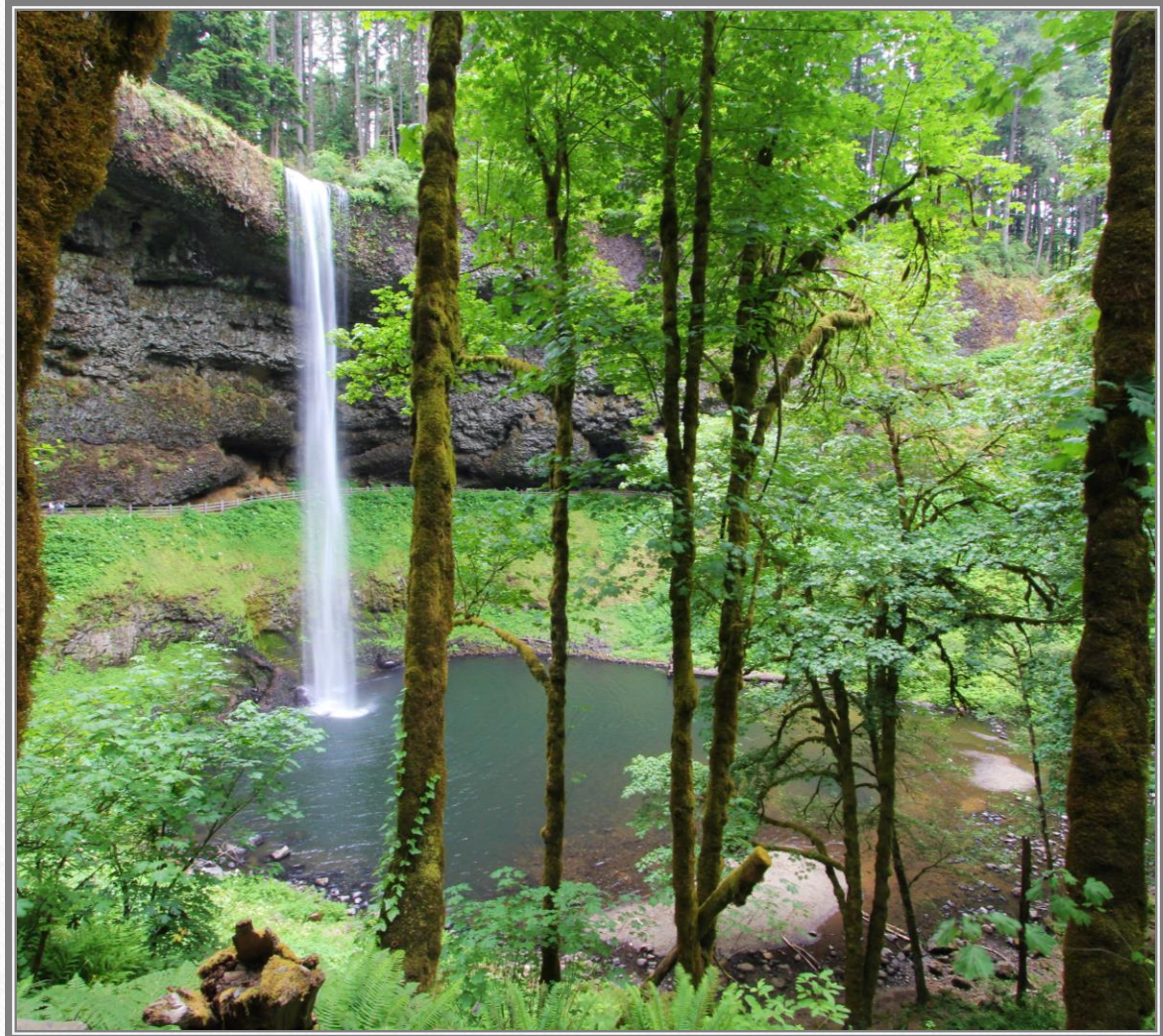
- 78 year-old, palliative care patient, severe aortic stenosis
- "I'm not sure if I want to restore it."
- Contemplating whether to pursue restorative treatment or comfort measures
- Grief, suffering, despondence



"I want to do a cannon ball and jump in."

Cusps & Thresholds

- 78 years-old, palliative care patient, severe aortic stenosis
- Clearness of water, solid rocks, "pure", "peace", "grace", "serenity"
- "Is it wrong to want to die?"
- Chose comfort measures later in hospital stay



Bibliography

Goto C. Reflecting theologically by creating art: Giving form to more than we can say. *J Reflective Practice* 2016;2016:78-92.

Miller A, Grohe M, Khoshbin S. From the galleries to the clinic: Applying art museum lessons to patient care. *J Med Humanit* 2013;34:433-438

Obold Eshleman S, Varner Perez S. I don't do religion: Using nature photography to engage patients in spiritual reflection. *J Pain and Symptom Management* 2022;64:305-309.

O'Connor TS, Chow M, Meakes E, et al. Three doors to spiritual reflection: Ethnographic research on the role of emotion, images, and sacred texts in spiritual reflection done by non-chaplaincy health care professionals. *J Health Care Chaplain* 2012;18:43-56.

Palmer PJ. The truth told slant: The power of metaphor. In: Palmer PJ, ed. *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2004:89-112.

Pargament KI. *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. New York: The Guilford Press; 2007.

Pulchalski C, Ferrell B, Virani R, et al. Improving the quality of spiritual care as a dimension of palliative care: the report of the Consensus Conference. *J Palliat Med* 2009;12:885-904.

Shields M, Kestenbaum A, Dunn LB. Spiritual AIM and the work of the chaplain: A model for assessing spiritual needs and outcomes in relationships. *Palliative & Supportive care* 2015;13:75-89.

Smith AP, Read JE. Art, objects and beautiful stories: A "new" approach to spiritual care. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 2017;71:91-97.

Vessel E, Starr G, Rubin N. The brain on art: Intense aesthetic experience activates the default mode network. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 2012;6:66.