

# Let Our Language Be Our Leaven

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I can't help myself, every new idea I have usually appears as a headline or billboard in my mind – six or seven words that can capture the attention of the masses. Maybe that's a good thing. In a world where we are bombarded with a plethora of information and messaging, we need to communicate quickly, concisely and with words that convey the meaning that we intend, to the audiences we are trying to reach.

And every so often, the meaning of a word changes entirely... like.... when's the last time you used the word 'thong' to describe footwear? (Thank goodness our children school us.) And, when did 'sick' become slang for 'extraordinary or amazing?' For the most part, in health care, sick still means ill, but we are not immune to having a unique language, rife with acronyms, clinical jargon and often, political correctness.

In Catholic healthcare we, as laity, find ourselves at the cusp of reclaiming our language. When the Sisters led and served in hospitals and care homes, their very attire set them apart, communicating a clear distinction of their **mission**. Everyone knew (or assumed) their motivation, conviction, and ethics. From this, their language and actions had context, and their **ministry** was self-evident.

We still use the word 'mission' today, but the meaning has, ironically, become less distinct. In our landscape, mission or mission statements have become more of a value proposition, a market-motivated preferable future.

Mission and ministry are no longer inexorably linked. Providers of Catholic healthcare today are challenged to recreate this link, and some days, it feels more like a 'missing link' than a 'mission link.' However, the good news is that the Good News is no less relevant, the example of Christ no less meaningful.

A new language will be our new leaven. Our challenge is not to find more faithful to care and serve, it is to give those who are already disciples a voice, a witness, and a way to be the **living parable**.

Admittedly, story-telling is as old as time - it is what helps shape our culture, captures our imagination to give our experiences meaning, and motivates our spirit to reach beyond itself. Our Christian caregivers are crying out to tell their stories, they simply need a new language to bring life to their faith and distinction to their mission.



We need to refine our **spiritual intelligence**. Robert Emmons defines spiritual intelligence as "the adaptive use of spiritual information to facilitate everyday problem solving and goal attainment." There's a bit of a secular smack to this, however he further delineates a few key components as: the ability to sanctify everyday experience, and the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve problems.

St. Joseph Health System, California, developed a process called Spotighting, wherein they encouraged staff to create tangible expressions to serve the whole person, and foster encounters that were truly sacred. More than a customer service program, staff highlighted key moments – admission, bedtime and discharge – with small, yet meaningful gestures. "One labour and delivery team offered a good-bye photograph to families as they left with their infants. Another kept a card on the new mother's chart so everyone who had contact with the family could sign it and add good wishes. These small actions proved to have deep impact on both patients and staff."

These **sacred encounters** – filled with dignity, connection, care and compassion – gave language and expression to the fulfilling of their mission... "To be a community that serves, that speaks, that celebrates and prays in such a way that others – regardless of their religious belief – encountering this community experience a revelation of life's deepest truths... about human dignity, community, success, power, growth, sacrifice, debility and death. Experiencing a harmony between their heart's deepest resonances and this community's character, persons go from this encounter more healed, more whole, more able to live, to love, to hope, to die."

Caregivers need to testify that their **very lives are a sacrament** – a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people, a visible sign of the economy of truth and love. In caring for the whole person – body, mind and spirit – we seek to know and serve that invisible part of each of us, the spirit, the breath of God in each of us.

As John Paul II asserts, "It is the body that makes visible the spiritual and the divine; it is the body that makes visible the vocation of the human person to total self-giving love in a communion of persons that images God who is Love. It is the body that enables the health care professional to be a gift to others and to receive the gift of others in caring relationships that promote health, healing and wholeness."

What if our caregivers saw their work as **vocation**? What if they called their kind deeds **habits of the heart**? What if their job descriptions read **Agents of Transformation** and **Guardians of Human Dignity**?

Language can be leaven indeed.