
Knowing Yourself

Hello, my name is Louise Buttsworth and I am a member of the Toowoomba Christadelphian church. I did my training as a Pastoral Carer at the Toowoomba Base Hospital in 2017 and have been a pastoral carer there since that time. **Personally, I find that pastoral caring is a very challenging but also enriching experience.** My horizons have widened in a spiritual sense, and I am finding that the more caring I do, the more there is to learn and experience. It will be lifelong skill to refine!

In this video I want to share with you my thoughts on a topic that I feel is very important in my own pastoral care, and that is **Knowing Myself (or Knowing Yourself)**. I think that self knowledge is crucial to assist me in my care of others. There seems to be a recent trend in education which recognizes the importance of **reflection** and this is also absolutely true of pastoral care – it is important to think about my current beliefs, relationships and actions as well as reflecting on the pastoral care interactions as they occur. You will note that on about page 19 of the PVP Handbook are emphasis on **Do and Reflect** – a keystone of the Program.

I will now offer some different scenarios that I think are important for “knowing yourself” based on my own experiences.

First, the practice of pastoral caring is probably different to your own current job and social interactions, and recognizing similarities and differences is an insightful exercise. For example, my occupation is piano teaching. This is a job I very much appreciate, teaching a lovely skill which I enjoy myself. In this job, I have a one-on-one time with many people and there is much in common with pastoral care – for example, it is important to have a good relationship with each person and to have unconditional positive regard and acceptance for each student, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, ability, personality etc. The more the student feels accepted and happy to come to a lesson, the more they will learn. However, there are differences too. A 30 minute piano lesson with me is highly structured and adapted to each student as I make the most of this very limited time to cover as much work as possible. However, pastoral care is the opposite to this – the time with a patient is not about my agenda and what I want to achieve and it does not have a specific time limit. The time is led by the care receiver in both content and time frame. This is something I am always mindful of as I approach someone – I have to mentally slow down my thinking and actions to allow the person to lead the connection we might have. You may like to reflect about your own situation. Also, our everyday interactions with our family and friends is usually a two way street – in our conversations they might volunteer to share something and we respond in turn. However, pastoral care is not an interaction where we contribute on an equal footing. Our focus is on the person we are caring for, and giving our personal thoughts and stories can detract from this.

Second, being a listener and being empathetic requires us to put aside myself/yourself and our thoughts and circumstances. The more we can do this, the more “present” we are for the other person. My own brain seems to work overtime, both day and night about so many different things – both mundane and important. It requires a very conscious effort for me and also regular practice at “turning off” thoughts. I try and set aside a time each day on my own to really focus on prayer and meditation without letting my own thoughts wander off on multiple tangents. This is an ongoing challenge for me - maybe it is for you too.

Third, it is important to know what my own faith is and the capacity I have to accept others as they are and to accept their beliefs which may not align with my own. Can I help others with a different faith system but also be true to my own beliefs? It is a matter for reflection for each of us. I believe

that Jesus treated others with compassion, and it is not for me to judge. I believe that being there in the moment for a patient or older person and supporting them at their time of need is an important skill and acceptable in God's sight.

Can we pray for and with someone who has different beliefs with a clear conscience? I find that I can. I do realise, however, that I am not able to think and speak as quickly and suitably as I would like so this is challenging for me to pray with sincerity and fluency without compromising my own beliefs. There is also the complication that we know we are to "preach the good news". However, being with patients during their vulnerable time is not the place to start theological discussions on doctrine. By being there for them in their current state of distress is a witness to God's love and that is sufficient and appropriate for that moment in time.

Fourth, learning to be comfortable within my own self during the possible negative choices others might make about you or while they exhibit less desirable behaviour is an important skill. For example, a patient may not accept my offer of a visit, or may even be verbally confronting. Learning not to react both outwardly and also inwardly is indicative of being comfortable and secure in my own skin – and sometimes that is not easy. Sometimes it is about person being able to choose something in a situation where they are normally given little choice, and sometimes their behaviour or words reflect where they are at the moment in time and could indicate their tiredness, pain, fear or anger (and not a personal attack on me, as such). It may be that by me taking the brunt of an outburst might have been a helpful way of letting go of some built up stress. In addition, it may have transpired I may have "taken a hit for the team" by taking the heat from a possible later interaction with another staff member.

Fifth, another complexity is that patients may bring up topics or situations which may affect us, for example, a similar bad situation which may trigger our own memories and emotions. This then makes it hard to be totally present for the other person when your mind might start going off down its own track. These topics could be any range of things from childhood memories to current relationship issues etc. Although we cannot necessarily stop those personal thoughts invading, this is a perfect example of needing reflection time afterwards. If an interaction has affected you deeply for whatever reason, some self-reflections and/or de-briefing and supervision helps you to move forward both for future visits and for our own self development.

Sixth, it is important to be accepting with the reality of my eventual death and my own mortality. This is a tough one, especially if we are younger. Coming across young people with a terminal illness is very difficult. This can bring up a myriad of feelings for us – sadness, grief, frustration, anger, guilt. In our lives, we each perhaps have had suffering and maybe tragedy ourselves, or have been affected by the tough times of close family and friends. When this happens, we are reminded of our own mortality. How do we respond both emotionally and spiritually? Again, reflection on this is appropriate after the pastoral care interaction.

Seventh, another aspect of knowing myself/yourself is knowing our own limits and also being mindful of self-care. I find I am very tired after listening intently to a story after about an hour and therefore I need to pace visits and time in between. Also, I do try to make effort with my own health and well being – I aim for a good diet, participate in daily exercise, try to allow for enough sleep, keep doing those pesky preventative health checks, try to make time for spiritual nurturing each day, each week and with longer term breaks, contribute and receive spiritual support from like-minded people. All of this contributes to my own overall health and well-being which in turn promotes ~~to~~ my own ability to be Christ's follower and as a pastoral carer for others. Sometimes

this is easier said than done and there seem to be endless opportunities for our sense of balance to be out of kilter.

Finally, I wanted to share with you some personal news which is of relevance to this topic. I have recently volunteered to be on call at the Toowoomba hospital over occasional weekends (4pm Friday to 9am Monday) to help our overstretched leadership team. I know that if I am called out it will be for serious reasons and even just preparing for this has required prayer and faith. I have done extra activities in preparation for this – reading books, shadowing another experienced pastoral carer on her visits, and I also had a trial run with the pager when I called another carer to accompany me on my first weekend. I know I am “stepping out of the boat” with his activity and I think that is also part of our pastoral caring – having the courage to be willing to be vulnerable in a new situation that frankly may be confronting. Knowing myself, I realise that I will be a little anxious throughout the weekends when I am on call, I will be unable to sleep all that well and think I will be worried that I will not be “up to the task” of a serious event if called out. However, my fundamental belief is that God will be with me and I only need to let go but this attitude will need practice and patience!

My concluding thought concerns a prayer during our pastoral care devotion that is often said **that we may be as Christ in the hospital**. This seems a very daunting standard to live up to, but it is a lovely sentiment. I pray that I might indeed be as Christ to others in my encounters both personally and in the pastoral care setting and that I will be able to do all things as needed through Christ who strengthens me.

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