

Learning More About

“The Love that Moves the Sun and the Other Stars”

By Rebecca Cole-Turner, Ph.D.

In my early forties, I suddenly developed a severely debilitating heart arrhythmia that left me breathless when I would try to walk across a room. It made climbing stairs almost impossible. I was quickly hospitalized for five days while my electro-cardiologist catheterized my heart and tried to figure out what was going on with it. The problem was eventually totally corrected and my heart was healed of its life-threatening, irregular rhythms the following April by the then still new technique of radio frequency ablation. However, during those five long and anxious days flat on my back, as I prayed I began to ask God some important questions:

Where are You in all of this, God?

What is the meaning of this sudden health crisis for me and my life?

What legacy of faith am I going to leave for my precious daughters and future grandchildren?

How have I invested my energies and gifts in life so far?

If I'm given more time to live, "what is it I (you) want to do with my (your) one wild and precious life?" (as the poet Mary Oliver asks in her poem, "The Summer Day").

Having practiced full-time as a licensed psychologist for adults in a private practice in Memphis, Tennessee, for the previous six years, I had already been thinking a great deal about how I wanted to be able to offer my clients something more than effective psychotherapy. More and more, my clients were coming to me wanting to discuss their spiritual issues, questions and concerns and how these affected their lives as much as their psychological concerns. I yearned for a richer awareness of my own spirituality and of the resources of my faith in order to offer my clients the best help for healing heart/body/mind/spirit. At the time, however, I did not really know what I needed or where to find it.

My husband, Ron, is ordained and I knew what courses he had taken while in seminary. But the kinds of courses I wanted to experience were not offered by most seminaries. Three years later, by the time we moved to Pittsburgh in 1996 for Ron to take up his new position at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, I decided to audit a course and take another course at PTS for credit in the area of pastoral theology. I even began to think about completing a M.Div. However, it wasn't until the seminary began their new Certificate in Spiritual Formation program in 1999 that I found courses that seemed to address my questions.

By then I had begun to believe that I was being called by God into a ministry of spiritual direction, but making such a drastic career change required more thoughtful, prayerful discernment and information. I also knew that I needed to prepare myself and be renewed spiritually before beginning such a program. But I had to start somewhere, so I jumped in.

The Certificate in Spiritual Formation program is a cooperative partnership offered jointly for both laypeople and clergy at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Occasionally, courses are also held at locations such as the PC(USA) Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina.

Many of the courses are a week-long, beginning on Sunday evening through Friday afternoon. There are also weekend courses that begin on Thursday evening, ending on Sunday afternoon. Occasionally, courses may also run for six weeks, one evening a week.

The program requirements consist of an Immersion Week or a long weekend, six elective courses, a supervised practicum and a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage requirement is usually a ten-day pilgrimage with a group to sacred site(s) in the British Isles or Europe but it can also be met through a pilgrimage completed in the US or by taking two extra courses in the program. Reading assigned texts is required before each course begins and usually there are assignments after the course is completed to write a paper that helps integrate the learning that has occurred.

I began the certificate program in 1998 and finished in the spring of 2005. During most of this time, I was also working full-time, helping to get one daughter launched into college and another into her career and then her wedding. I was also active in my church and volunteer work as well. This program offered some helpful flexibility within the requirements that allowed me to create my own tailor-made program to help me grow in the areas I felt I needed. For example, one

highlight was the two courses I took outside of the program offerings during the summer continuing education program at Vancouver School of Theology. These credits were allowed to count for one of my required electives. One course was taught by Rev. Dr. Margaret Guenther on “Spiritual Direction and Literature” and this course helped me further discern my call to a ministry of spiritual direction. The other was taught by Dr. Roberta Bondi on Julian of Norwich, a woman who has been an important spiritual “mother” for me for almost thirty years. She so beautifully illumines how all-encompassing is God’s magnificent love for us when she wrote in her *Revelations of Divine Love* over six hundred years ago, “God enfolds us in love and will never let us go.”

The Certificate in Spiritual Formation program usually (but not necessarily for everyone) begins with the foundational course, a week-long Immersion Week or long weekend course called “An Invitation to a Deeper Spiritual Life.” It consists of lectures, discussion in small groups, worship, prayer, guided meditation and time for personal reflection on your own spiritual journey. I was able to write my personal spiritual autobiography and there was time to process the feelings that were evoked and to discuss the reflections I had within small groups. Since time for contemplative prayer was also a part of this week, it also allowed me more quiet space with God to further consider my call to spiritual direction. A special bonus of this week were the spiritual friendships I formed within the group.

Other week-long courses I took included one on Thomas Merton given by Rev. Dr. Bonnie Thurston (I wrote a paper regarding Merton’s appreciation of

Julian of Norwich's theology); a course taught by Dr. John Burgess called "Life Together: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Life Today" (I wrote a reflection paper called "Living and Dealing with Conflict in a Christian Community" that helped me think through some difficult situations that were occurring in the church I was attending at that time); a course called "Praying and Teaching the Psalms" by Rev. Dr. Donald Griggs (I developed a six-week Bible study or weekend retreat called "Calm and Quiet in My Soul: Psalms of Comfort, Lament and Hope for Women," a Bible Study for Busy - and Sometimes Harried – Women); and "Mystical Spirituality," a course on the Christian Mystics led by Rev. Dr. Graham Standish, who also taught the six-week, one evening per week course I took entitled "Becoming the Blessed Church," which helped me consider my gifts for church leadership.

The practicum is completed under supervision near the end of the program. It is designed to help participants reflect on their own spiritual leadership gifts and develop ideas and programs for living out those gifts within their Christian community. I completed a project that centered around designing a weekend retreat I was asked to give for a women's church group in Chatham, New Jersey. I called it, "Renewal and Grace: Changing Lives and Changing Our Lives," and I gave the retreat for them later in the spring of 2005.

My final requirement for the certificate was a ten-day pilgrimage with a group of other students in the program to sacred sites in Rome, Subiaco and Assisi, Italy, in June and July, 2004. As part of my journal for this experience, I wrote a series of pilgrimage poems.

Although I completed my program in 2005, I plan to continue to take courses in it because the topics enrich my life as well as my current work as a spiritual director, retreat leader and teacher. Most recently I took a course called “Journeying Through the Inner Life: Dream Work and Spiritual Formation” taught by Rev. Dr. Bernard Tickerhoof and one on retreat leadership with Rev. Julie Johnson.

I have also agreed to become an instructor in the certificate program: in April of 2009, I am scheduled to teach a course in Celtic Christian Spirituality as well as lead a pilgrimage back to the wonderful sacred sites Rome, Subiaco and Assisi, Italy, in the summer of 2010.

In the end of his own quest for his true “home,” as recorded in *Paradiso*, Dante’s Pilgrim sees that Great Love which is our Bright and Morning Star (Revelation 22:16) as he finds God. And in understanding this great mystery, he becomes whole, his will balanced and healed and restored to perfect rhythm by God’s love and grace for the first time:

“ . . .like a wheel in perfect balance turning,

I felt my will and my desire impelled

by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

Attending and completing the Certificate in Spiritual Formation helped to renew and restore my spiritual life. It assisted me in continuing to explore God’s grace in my life while I began to answer more fully God’s call on my life as it unfolded into a ministry of spiritual direction, retreat leadership and teaching. Through my studies in this program, my heart has continued to heal in many

more ways than my surgery provided 15 years ago. My life continues to become more balanced as a result of it as well, and I am grateful to God for this wonderful program.