

Consensus

Volume 44
Issue 2 *Canadian Lutheran History:*
Remembering Today, for the Sake of Tomorrow

Article 25

7-25-2023

Thick listening at thin moments: Theoretical groundwork in spiritual care practice.

Ara Parker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Parker, Ara (2023) "Thick listening at thin moments: Theoretical groundwork in spiritual care practice.," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, Article 25.

DOI: 10.51644/BOTN5646

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss2/25>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Book Review

Thick listening at thin moments: Theoretical groundwork in spiritual care practice.

Bellous, J. E. & M.B. Clark

Edmonton, AB: Tall Pine Press, 2022.

Dr. Margaret Clark is one of those teachers one feels graced to have at any point during one's lifetime of scholarship and inquiry. I was so lucky. While in her doctoral courses at St. Stephen's College at University of Alberta in Edmonton, I observed how she masterfully fostered special moments for learning. She has a way of engaging one deeply so that one feels seen and heard and valued all at once. Her presence invites one into deep reflection about life itself. This book echoes Clark's teaching style and approach to spiritual care practice itself, to which she has dedicated most of her professional life.



This book will be of interest to pastors, chaplains, multi-faith ministers, pastoral counsellors, spiritual care providers, spiritually-informed psychotherapists, and all those studying human spirituality and ways to provide spiritual care to others.

A main thesis of this book is that spiritual care can be extended to everyone we meet by coming alongside others through the complex competency of *thick listening at thin moments*. The theoretical groundwork for this is explored in ways that "... challenge all of us to be attentive, attuned and available to others, and to ourselves, as a way to achieve widespread spiritual health" (p. 110).

Readers are introduced to the philosophic foundations of spiritual care practice and teachings from various other fields of learning as they relate to concepts of faith and spirituality. Clinical study examples and generous references illustrate what is required for spiritual care competencies and assessments. The authors provide support for reflection on concepts of liminality and relational skills required for this work. Take-away questions are provided at the end of each chapter for reflection.

This text is well organized to serve students interested in the broad field of spiritual care practice. It is a much-needed manual to spiritual care practice in Canada with larger global application. One can sense the care in the collaboration and "coming together" of the authors in creating this manual. Their writing on working with the "other" has profound implications beyond the field of spiritual care practice and the development of spiritual care practitioners in Canada.

In their collaborative writing of the book, Bellous and Clark explore and share their development of the theory behind the term *thick listening* as a spiritual competency and a quality of listening that is attentive to the other and to the self, allowing for presence with both. "Clark and Bellous strongly agree that theoretical groundwork is what fosters the development of competence in spiritual care professional practice [and]... spiritual care as it's carried forward by people around the world who faithfully and conscientiously tend to needs of the human spirit." (p. xx).

Thin moments are explored in this book for their liminal quality (often at times of loss and trauma). It is in these *thin moments* that our ordinary consciousness enters a suspended place of awareness. In psychodynamic terms, this is where the "new" can be born and enter

conscious awareness. It is a place of latent transformation of one's experience of self and relationship with the world.

For those wanting to learn more about the professional applications of spiritual care, the book includes the development of the ethical and safe use of self in skillful, meaningful, and relational ways for effective spiritual care practice. These are of benefit to those working with others in ways that seek to support meaning-making and compassionate care, including spiritually-informed psychotherapy.

Clark shares some early contributions to her thoughts about *thick listening* and *thin moments* during the virtual book launch in June 2023 hosted by St. Stephen's College at the University of Alberta where she has taught.¹ During this event, Clark refers to Walter Brueggemann's Forward in Maria Harris's book *Proclaim Jubilee! A Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century* (1996) in which he writes about Harris's use of *thick listening* as a way of speaking about prayer (p. 43). Clark reflects on Thomas Groome's referencing in *Sharing Faith* (1991) of Celtic spirituality that perceives *thin moments* at places where separation between worlds is thin (p. 43). These contributions to the field of spiritual care practice in Canada and beyond help elucidate what is meant by *thick listening* and *thin moments*.

Thick listening at thin moments is a phrase which first came to Clark while preparing to teach her first course on theological reflection at St. Stephen's College in 1990, the version of which I took twenty years later. The emergent impulse for this book was no doubt seeded at that point as Clark formulated this question: "Can you imagine *thick listening* as a quality of multidimensional contemplative mindfulness that understands and appreciates the deep interfacing between everyday life experiences and *thin moments*, where separation brought about through differing worldviews, paradigms and filters increasingly thin and transparent" (pp. 43-44).

How do we nurture the ability to be present to another? Bellous invokes French philosopher Simone Weil during the book launch, stating that the practice of being present to another allows others to enter their humanity more fully. An underlying theoretical concept for spiritual care work, as proposed by Clark and Bellous, is that it is at its essence a "ministry of presence." They explore what spiritual care looks like in practice through case studies and propose that the related qualities of presence and character are of interest to all of us in all of our relationships.

In many ways, spiritual care practitioners are engaged with mediating the sacred spaces—holding the liminal place for the divine presence to be experienced by the patient. The work of spiritual care practices has often been marginalized. The establishment of this theoretical groundwork will help provide the foundation for the field to have agency in practice, research, and in seeking support for program funding.

Bellous and Clark contend that theory is critically important for pragmatic reasons to supporting the work of those who are working alongside the patient. Competency-based learning is approached in this book in contrast to concept-based learning and course-based learning. Competency-based learning has more to do with including the attributes of a person's character in the spiritual care relationship, rather than the direct application of skills and knowledge. Spiritual care practice includes ways of working with the patient's

¹ Bellous, J. E. & M.B. Clark. "Book Launch: Joyce Bellous and Margaret Clark, "Thick Listening at Thin Moments" St. Stephen's College, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/fYpr1NNUNEY>.

worldview to enhance their spiritual well-being and understand what the patient is experiencing, which in turn can inform the medical team.

Bellous and Clark plan on writing and publishing a follow-up book in the next year with more case studies that build on this theoretical groundwork. During the book launch, Bellous refers to class comments from one of her past students at Taylor, who noted the difference between the different positionings of the medical practitioner and the spiritual care practitioner in relationship to the patient. The spiritual care practitioner makes the “felt connection” with the patient bedside. The doctor requires more distance from the patient to do their job effectively whereas the spiritual care practitioner needs to get close to the patient to do their best work. The medical professional has been the one who requires the distance of standing at the doorway itself, for example, versus the latter who requires a relationship at the bedside to do their sensitive job well. Bellous looks forward to exploring her interest in the ways that those two theoretical positions can begin to dialogue with each other and in looking at the differences and strengths of the two postures towards the person in the bed.

In reference to competence in spiritual care practice, Clark spoke at the book launch of Hubert Dreyfus’s contribution to the field in 1980. At that time, he inquired and critiqued the quality of learning that was possible over the internet and determined that the embodied learning required for this field could not be accomplished this way. I hope that this proposed follow-up text will include further explorations of experiences, possibilities, and potentialities of *thick* and *thin* qualities of experience and relationship—with self and other—over the internet. More and more, we provide learning, counselling, and spiritual care services at a physical and geographic distance through the internet (in large part due to the COVID pandemic affecting these changes in delivery). As someone who has been exploring, alongside my advisees and students, the ways to support relational intimacy and transformation in the liminal spaces of the internet (as an expressive arts therapist/educator), I contend that much more needs to be explored and written about the importance of spiritual care competencies in the virtual space.

Dr. Margaret B. Clark is a Certified Supervisor-Educator of Spiritual Care (CPE) within the Canadian Association of Spiritual Care / Association canadienne de soins spirituels (CASC/ACSS). She was a Supervisor-Educator and Spiritual Care Practitioner for 22 years at the University of Alberta Hospitals in Edmonton, Alberta alongside years of serving rural faith communities and teaching. Dr. Clark co-authored this book with transformational educator Dr. Joyce Bellous who writes from her interest and research into human spirituality and teaching at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario and Taylor Seminary, Edmonton, Alberta.

“Thick Listening at Thin Moments: Theoretical Groundwork in Spiritual Care Practice” will no doubt become a seminal text for spiritual care practitioners for years to come.

Ara Parker
Martin Luther University College
Wilfrid Laurier University