

Conversation

Richard Groves in conversation with Therese Gaynor



Thérèse: It's great to have this opportunity to sit with you, Richard, and to have a conversation about the Sacred Art of Living Center. Perhaps as a beginning you could give a little background to yourself, your work and how it came about.

Richard: I was trained as a chaplain and worked for many years in palliative care and hospice care. I was getting a degree in counselling along with my theological degrees and always was curious about the overlap: the intersection between the mental health sciences and spirituality. I found that in end-of-life care, at the bedside, that very often you couldn't separate issues, concerns or problems from one another. This was evident when we would try to develop plans of care. The team was there – the nurse and the social worker and the chaplain. Most often, the best plans of care were ones that were integrated. They would approach the whole person's situation – and not just the patient who was ill and dying. The best plans recognised how the whole family system was involved in this important time of transition.

I'm also an ordained Roman Catholic priest and in our seminary training there was no language for diagnosing spiritual pain or spiritual suffering. That wasn't heard of. My curiosity set me looking for models that recognised and named this type of pain. Thirty-some years ago, there weren't a lot. One person that did inspire me was Dame Cicely Saunders at St Christopher's Hospice in London. As a physician, she was interested in addressing whole person care. She felt that spiritual pain was often under diagnosed or missed, especially as the end was coming. Managing symptoms of physical suffering were often addressed, but she felt that the centre piece of pain for many people was spiritual in nature. She was curious how that might be set into some kind of structure. It was her instincts around this issue that really inspired my wife and myself. At the time we were managing a hospice, and she motivated us to try to create tools that could help the teams talk about the issues of psycho-spiritual suffering during our weekly care conferences.

Thérèse: I'm imagining there might be some questions. You mentioned your wife and you mentioned being an ordained Catholic priest. Could you clarify? I'm delighted that you've brought your beloved wife Mary into the conversation.

Richard: Of course. I was ordained a priest and served in that capacity for 15 years. I had a major life-altering incident in the form of an accident where I broke my neck in several places, and I spent the better part of a year in recovery. It really came close to ending my life, and I came very close to being a quadriplegic. It was a huge turning point. During that time, I had to take a significant amount of time off from active ministry and did a lot of soul searching. By the time I was ready to return to work, I wasn't ready to go back into

working in a bishop's office as a Canon lawyer, which was my training. I was really looking for hands on care. That desire took me into chaplaincy and hospice because there I felt I could always have direct patient care; that was the part that I missed really during the years I was in administration.

Mary and I were working in the same professional fields and eventually we were married. The two of us eventually created this entity, called Sacred Art Living Center, twenty-three years ago. Originally, we really intended Sacred Art to be a local training centre for end of life professionals. But little-by-little, people from other parts of the country would hear about the courses and they'd invite us to their communities. Over the years, we also began getting invitations to teach in Asia, India and throughout Europe. There really wasn't anything quite like these courses at that time. That's how we ended up coming to Ireland twelve years ago. We had heard about Our Lady's Hospice at Harold's Cross and knew that it had a reputation and emphasis on whole person care. They were very open to the idea of hosting our courses so we began offering our two-year workshop series called *The Sacred Art of Living and Dying*, and we've been coming back ever since. We've had a lot of people in Ireland who have participated from a wide range of backgrounds and have also been teaching now in Sligo, Cork, Westport and other locations.

Thérèse: There may be a number of readers who, like myself, have participated in your course *The Sacred Art of Living and Dying*, and then gone on to participate in the *Anamcara Apprenticeship*. I'm wondering what it is about your work that speaks to those in the mental health professions and hospice care so profoundly?

Richard: I'm always delighted that so many people in various mental health professions are attracted to this work. It makes sense. A lot of what we teach resonates with those who have studied and practiced depth psychology. The courses were designed in an interdisciplinary fashion, so they really have a strong affirmation in the Mental Health Sciences. Therapists who have taken the programs have given us feedback that they feel it affirms something in the work that is sometimes missing. Many say it connects them to the heart and soul of the vocation of caring for the total person. I think they've also found that some of the tools that we teach are very transferable and can be brought into other aspects of therapy and client support. You don't have to wait until the end-of-life, until you're dying, to use these tools. They are relevant at any stage of life—especially during times of transition.

Thérèse: You talk about, 'The dying before we die...'

Richard: That is the heart of it. Our North Star program is *The Sacred Art of Living and Dying* – a four-part training course. We offer an intensive weekend every six months and then, in between those weekend workshop-retreats, we encourage people to participate in what's called a Circle of Trust. This is a once-a-month meeting with a group of fellow students. For two hours you have a chance to focus in-depth on one of the tools that's taught on the course. That way you don't forget the lessons from the two-day training, and you can start to apply them in practical ways.

These Circles build on each other, and, by the time people come back for the second program, they've already met six times with a group where they have shared questions,

discussions, and insights. Over a two-year period of time, they're getting more than just a few days of lecture. They're really getting practical application and experience.

The overarching focus is to explore various dimensions of spiritual pain or suffering. So, for example, the first module is called *Understanding Spiritual Pain*, the second, *Diagnosing Spiritual Pain*, the third is *Healing Spiritual Pain* and the fourth is *Transforming Spiritual Pain*. One concept builds on the other, but it is possible to take them out of sequence. Eventually all four modules fit together as a whole. They teach how to better recognise the spiritual suffering at the root of some mental health issues but also give insights about the human journey and human suffering. It illuminates how to walk through life's transitions consciously and, so as you said, 'to die before you die', so that, as the ancient wisdom taught, 'when you DIE, you will not die'.

There are many deaths of the ego that take place before physical death. Losses such as divorce, aging, and illness are types of death too. Classical teachings explain that if you start working with those kinds of losses more intentionally and proactively, then by the time you do reach the end of life, it's not such a crisis. You've practiced releasing and surrendering. This is all part of the course.

Thérèse: As you speak about the course, the word 'spiritual' infuses your language. I'm wondering if specific faith-based traditions or interpretations of 'spirituality' creates challenges.

Richard: I think that's one of the attractive parts of the course. No matter where we've taught in the world, it's definitely not based on any one particular theological or religious perspective. I'm always transparent about my own background because you can't dismiss that as an influence, but really we work very hard to make the courses broad-based and inclusive. People at any place in life, no matter what their spiritual path is, can relate to the language and to the exercises. The distinction between spirituality and religion is at the core of the courses. We have found that individuals who come to the course and have a strong connection to their religious tradition, no matter the particular faith, usually feel very comfortable, respected, and welcome. Part of the richness of the course is that you have people coming from all different backgrounds. But during my time in Ireland over the last 12 years, I've seen a huge shift take place because of the crisis in the Catholic Church. People often bring questions and feelings of loss and hurt to our courses. For so many people here, Catholicism was part of their cultural background, and now they're in various stages of relationship to Catholicism. Our course provides a place to safely explore these difficult issues. One of the intentions of the course is to focus on the healing of any kind of spiritual or religious abuse. Certainly, if you talk about spiritual pain, that would be a large one for many people.

Thérèse: What do you actually mean by the term spiritual pain?

Richard: The language that we use to describe spiritual pain is very universal. We talk about four universal dimensions of spiritual suffering related to things like: a crisis in meaning, a sense of hopelessness, a crisis in one of life's significant relationships, and, most frequently, a crisis in some area of forgiveness – either towards another or oneself. These four areas are

so universal that, whether or not a person is religious, everybody can relate to them. That was part of the genius of Cicely Saunders. She, back in the 1960s in London, said if we use language that's too theological it'll turn people off – it'll exclude people. The challenge is how to find a common ground language to talk about soul suffering. How to find a language that is inclusive and recognises every person as having spiritual levels and needs, whether or not they explicitly talk about soul, God or religion.

Thérèse: While that's certainly been my experience of you and what the Sacred Art of Living Center offers, I want to revisit something you've spoken to. It seems to me that there may be those who are working with or have a primary source of pain with the Church. In the backdrop of the abuse scandal and ongoing issues, even the very mention of spirituality or spiritual suffering could elicit scepticism. What you're saying is hugely important in the context of the Irish experience.

Richard: It's critical. To be honest, I run into this in many other places, such as North America and other places in Europe. Recently I have been teaching in Poland and Eastern Europe and the same issues are also showing up there. But this has been a particularly painful situation to watch in Ireland. The Republic of Ireland hasn't always been completely monolithic in its theology, but it certainly is dominated by the Catholic tradition. It's woven in the psyche and the history of Ireland and its people. This time of crisis impacts individuals, but it also impacts the society as a whole. So, whether or not you yourself have been the victim of abuse, you suffer when you watch a part of life that has been very dear to you challenged, and you see its brokenness revealed. It has been the source of profound individual and corporate suffering. I do think that providing a place to come and safely discuss that suffering and explore that pain is immensely healing. After finishing the course, an evaluation I've heard time and time again is that people, before they came to our workshops, decided they were walking away from the whole topic of religion and participating in religious practice. After the courses, because of the way they're structured with the use of ceremony, meditation and ritual, people often find a way to connect to what's underneath the specific theology to a larger human, spiritual hunger within the soul.

Thérèse: Could you give an example?

Richard: We present our teachings through the lens of diverse spiritual backgrounds and traditions, which offers people an opportunity to consider other points of view on spiritual wellness and suffering. For some people, it may be the first time in years that they've allowed themselves to be around anything that was explicitly spiritual. They'll usually say it felt safe in this context and many express that something had been missing in their lives – not in terms of a return to formal religion, but in terms of a deep connection to community and something larger than themselves. I truly believe that these courses have been a container for reflecting on the big questions of life.

But I don't think it would work if I or our program facilitators came into this with a lot of anger ourselves, or if we came into it with an agenda to just hammer and rail against any religious institution or against religion in general. It wouldn't work. It would be a place

where the people would come and complain and go home. The transformational part of this work is to hold the paradox and tension of the need for the sacred. Our story includes where that need gets broken and highlights our own humanity as well. We can point to it out there in the institution, but it's usually going on inside of ourselves as well.

Thérèse: As part of your teaching on *The Sacred Art of Living and Dying*, you introduce a range of practices that support those experiencing and/or working with pain. Can you say something about these practices?

Richard: There's a whole tool chest of practical tools that we teach. While some of them require more in-depth training before a person would be equipped to use them in the field, many are appropriate for people who do have professional backgrounds. For example, we teach a whole series of tools around how to work with people who are in altered states of consciousness, from being on the Asperger spectrum through serious dementia to patients in coma. These practices have been really well vetted and used for years now with remarkable outcomes. It includes simple practices, like sitting at the bedside of someone who can't communicate and holding their hand and pacing the breath – between the patient with your own breath. Others involved observing sensory feedback from patients and matching their experience with your own. You learn and trust that presence communicates something profoundly healing, even when verbal responses are not possible. Presence is a real form of connection that brings comfort and creates a safe space – both for care receivers as well as care providers. This is one of about twenty tools that are demonstrated in the workshops. All of these tools are best practices with serious clinical research and support.

Thérèse: And in all of this, you speak of a quality of presence...

Richard: Yes, presence is the meta skill underneath all of the other particular skills that are taught. And I suppose any good training in the helping professions would have presence woven into it, but in this case we put even more emphasis on the concept of soulfulness. We talk about drawing on a larger presence than our own limited consciousness. Whether we want to call that Presence the universe or grace or spirit or the connection between two souls depends on a person's disposition and spiritual belief system. The language isn't as important as the concept. Throughout history many have tried to define the soul – calling it True Self or the Teacher Within. To me it does not so much matter what we call it but THAT we call – acknowledge and call it something. When I am in that kind of presence, the mechanical tool that I introduce is less important than the intention.

Of course, this kind of process requires a discipline of some kind of contemplative practice because without that, I am not going to drop into clear and undistracted awareness. Without tapping into these innate meta skills, I may get discouraged or reactive in the face of others' suffering and illness. We often hear about nurses and other people in the medical field 'burning-out'. I think this concept of presence is huge because it's a bit of a guard or a protective edge against care provider burnout and compassion fatigue which causes us to lose our most talented resources.

Thérèse: Sounds like a critical resource...

Richard: Absolutely. It has a beneficial effect for the patient but it also enables me to be in

the presence of trauma, to be in the presence of pain, of suffering and not get burned out. That's part of the training and the skill set that we draw from too. Two therapists can be in the same kind of situation working with the same traumatised patients, but one picks up secondary traumatic vicarious affects and the other thrives. There's been a lot of work done around the whole topic of exquisite empathy and what it's like to bring a different kind of empathetic presence that doesn't burn individuals out when they are grounded in that skill we call presence. It's no surprise that people say "while I came into this work through the *Sacred Art of Living and Dying* training to be a better helper (or a better therapist, or a better care provider), it also enhanced my own personal well-being. My personal relationships benefited as well as my professional and client interactions". This is what we mean by bringing both soul and role into greater alignment. The results should lead to an improvement in all areas of living. Of course, not even soulful presence removes all stress, fear and anxiety. But once you know how to name those emotions and work with them within a greater context, you possess a real psycho-spiritual lifeline when those stressors show up.

Thérèse: Can you speak to touch – the use of sacred touch?

Richard: Sure. Once again, the context and intention is everything. We do have to observe and respect our professional norms and guidelines, but one of the outcomes of these cautions can be a lack of human interaction. For example, human rituals can be a means of putting human interactions into a sacred context. It can be as simple as doing a guided visualisation process, which is one of the main skills that we teach, but depending on the background of the patient, we might come light a candle or sound a chime to create a sacred space for our interaction. If a person is comfortable with spiritual language, I might call on God or the divine, or the angels, or their ancestors to be witnesses to the visualisation experience. In the past such practices might have been in the realm of clergy, but we model ways in which these skills and practices can be facilitated by a nurse, therapist or family care provider. In this context, the patient would also be asked if they were comfortable with the use of healing touch, the laying on of hands or other simple and appropriate way to make physical contact.

Again, these practices do require some instruction and discernment but when we contextualise these tools in this way, the results are often outstanding. People in our workshops will often say: "Gosh, the priest came and gave me the anointing, but he just read a few prayers out of a book and then left". They're missing that human touch and that individualised context of the interaction. Clergy who take these courses, and we've had many, will say it's enhanced the way they approach the sacraments. One priest, many years after taking our courses, told me that he now hears confessions differently. "I'm an Anamcara confessor, or soul friend confessor". I think it's wonderful that we all can return to our traditions and enhance them through this work.

Thérèse: Often you speak of your wife, Mary, and certainly I've felt her so present. Can you say something about legacy? What do you see as your and Mary's legacy?

Richard: In our courses, we always make a point of honouring the contributions that Mary brought to the creation of these courses. It's interesting that you mention Mary because people who never met her, she's passed on now almost 10 years, will say that they feel a

sense of her presence. I think it's because the part she brought is anything that is beautiful: the music, the ceremony, the art, the environment, the powerpoint slides, the use of films, and the use of media. That was her creative gift. I bring the verbal part, the lectures and the concept and the history, but she brought that beautiful part, and there was a kind of wedding of spirits there that shows up in our courses. Even though she's gone, it's so embedded in the DNA of the courses that people do encounter Mary there.

That also makes me think about legacy for the future. Mary has passed on and 10 years later her influence is still felt. I am a great-grandfather now. I'm not going to be able to do this work forever, I know that. I'm grateful that I can do the work at the moment, but how do I look forward and pass on legacy? Mary and I both felt strongly that this work has to be stronger than just our own individual personalities. That reality has been proven over the years as we've trained other people who are now on the road facilitating and teaching. We're the founders, but the material stands on its own. We've been challenging people here who have graduated from the courses in Ireland to become leaders in this work. If we're going to come back in June of 2019 and start another two-year series of courses, which is our intention, we want to do it differently.

We want to do it with an eye on how Ireland can take this work and make it its own and continue it forward. I think you have some amazing talent here that we really want to call forth. Our challenge, in the best way, is to learn how this program and content can continue to live on here. One of our core teachings is around this concept of Anamcara, which is a very Celtic notion of soul friendship, and your culture gave birth to that. We're from the outside as Americans. Bringing some of that wisdom back here after having been inspired by the tradition is important to all of us at Sacred Art of Living Center. Now we'd like to encourage the next generation of Celts to rise up and see how Anamcara can live into the next generation. I think that's critical because this isn't just for the current students. I think there's a perennial wisdom in this material.

Thérèse: Keeping Brigid's flame alight...

Richard: It's the rekindling. The metaphor that Brigid represents is someone who almost transcends any one time and age and culture and even spirituality. That's a notion that captivates our imagination. On a very personal note, it was interesting, after doing this work for so many years, to come here to Ireland. In some ways it became a second home to us. The irony or the paradox was that Mary was taken to hospital, and she was dying on Brigid's Day, on February 1st. It just struck us completely. We said, "How is this possible?" I mean, you don't plan those things. She had been living with advanced cancer for nine years, so it could have happened at any time, but to me there was a kind of synchronicity there. At the opening of every one of our programs, Mary always incorporated the lighting of an oil lamp and the carrying of it around the room just to bless the space with light. She was, in some ways, the light bearer inspired by Brigid who is the fiery arrow light bearer. That's the thing. How do we hand that light on now to the next generations? That has to be the work.

When you work in different cultures you see the differences, the strengths and the weaknesses of each of our cultures relative to each other. I would say the one thing I notice here in Ireland is that there is sometimes a reluctance to take the lead. Whereas, in other

cultures, that's not so much the case. If I'm in Germany or the Americas, people will often say: "OK, we're ready to be trained, and begin teaching this on our own". Here, in general, what I've noticed is a kind of reluctance to take the material. Often, what I hear is: "Well, it's your material. You know we could never do it your way." I say: "I wouldn't want you to do it my way. I want you to take it and make it yours." If any group is perfect for moving the work forward, it's here in Ireland. So much of the historical roots of this work really go back to this culture and this history. Hopefully, that's a dance that we can do, where this can move forward.

Thérèse: Just to finish, Richard, I want to say thanks again for your time and your gift. I've loved your courses, and they've certainly enriched my life. Maybe you can mention what's going to be available over the next year or so.

Richard: You're welcome. In June of 2019 we'll be starting another four-part series in *The Sacred Art of Living and Dying*. We'll be offering the Circles of Trust, which is based on the inspiration of Parker Palmer's Center for Courage Renewal in the United States. We're always very grateful for that influence in our group meetings. When I come over to Ireland, we often also offer training programs on the Enneagram. It's been one of our mainstay teachings at the Center for more than 20 years. I'm very committed to it and think it's a brilliant sacred psychology that brings those two worlds together. We'll be offering all of those programs here in Dublin and over in Donegal at the Ards Retreat Centre.

Finally, we have offered our deep-end training, called *The Anamcara Apprenticeship*, here in Ireland twice now and about 100 students have graduated from it as well. With our new trained Irish teams, I hope we can continue to offer that training as well. The last little bit that I've been doing here in Ireland is a men's weekend retreat program. Because the ratio of men and women is so imbalanced at these kinds of programs, we would like to address how to best support the male audience. In June we're going to be doing a men's spirituality weekend called *Quest for the Grail: How to Explore the Masculine Side of Healing*. I'm hoping that might attract more men to the work because we need both genders. We need all kinds of people involved in this. We've signed up for another couple of years of commitment here, and I hope people will consider joining us.

Professor Richard Groves is the co-founder (with his wife Mary) and the Executive Director of the Sacred Art of Living Center in Bend, Oregon. He is the co-author of *The American Book of Living and Dying: Lessons in Healing Spiritual Pain*. His work can be found at www.sacredartofliving.org.