Sacred Space – by Pamela Adelstein

A space can be sacred, providing those who inhabit a particular space with a sense of transcendence—being connected to something greater than oneself—and for those who believe in a higher power, a sense of the divine. The sacredness may be inherent in the space, as for a religious institution or a serene place outdoors. Alternatively, a space may be made sacred by the people within it and events that occur there.

As a family physician, my sacred work space is a typical examination room. One may ask what about an examination room is sacred. Our rooms are cramped and sometimes feel tired if supplies are not restocked. Yet in these examination rooms, patients have privacy, and the mere act of shutting the door and sitting down in the same seat, in their seat in the examination room, is a cue that it is safe to proceed in talking about what bothers them.

I perform acupuncture in the same examination room in which I do usual patient care. Often, upon being ushered into the room, patients exclaim, “This is it? Where is the soothing fountain? The relaxing music? The cushioned table?” I patiently explain that this is what I’ve got. But as the acupuncture sessions continue, despite the lack of spa amenities, the room becomes a sanctuary of meditation, relaxation, and healing.

Patients often enter the examination room, plop down into the seat, breathe a sigh of relief, and say, “Phew. I am so happy to be here. I’ve been waiting to talk to you.” Or “I’m so glad I have this appointment to talk about xxx.” This is the same examination room in which patients with negative experiences at the doctor’s office would likely feel apprehension, anxiety, and dread. We can shape our patients’ experiences and sense of what a doctor visit feels like. We can use our humanity and our knowledge of the world of medicine to create a sacred space for our patients. And in this space, healing may begin.
I work at an inner city health center. Our mission is to serve as a resource for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the people in the community. We turn no one away regardless of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, citizenship status, or ability to pay. My patients have survived physical, sexual, emotional, political, and economic traumas. Circumstance has given me the opportunities which brought me to where I am today, just as circumstance has brought my patients to where they are now. In the conventional doctor–patient relationship, I am the holder of the power. The sacred part of my work is to redistribute this power and to acknowledge the common humanity that transcends us all.

I am a tool, part of the examination room sacred space. I am privileged to hear and bear witness to my patients’ stories recounting their life experiences. I also have the privilege of seeing and touching one of the most sacred spaces that exists—the body of a living being. I try to use hugs, cultural and linguistic competence, respect, empathy, and humility when I visit with patients. I try to touch gently and nonjudgmentally. Simply sitting with people, feeling and observing the tales that their bodies tell. This work is exhausting and drains me. I struggle with how to restore my energy, how not to deplete myself to the point that there is nothing left for my family, my friends, and myself. Despite the costs, my work is deeply satisfying, and it is the only way I know how to be a doctor. To recharge, I do my best to pay attention to my inner introvert and take time in solitude, nature, and reflection. There are countless daily brief but poignant interactions that I need to process on a cellular and spiritual level. When I make space and time for self care, I am better able to be present for myself and those around me.

When I walk into the examination room, I smile and speak to my patient to connect. However, it is the deeper unspoken part of the interaction that underscores the philosophy which guides my work, gives my work purpose, and connects me to more than the act of “treating” a patient’s chief complaint. One etymology of the word “to treat” is from the Latin tractare which originally meant to “drag about, tug, haul, or pull violently.” Rather than dragging and tugging, I strive to meet people where they are. I cannot prescribe away their woes. I cannot force a connection. All of this must happen organically. Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Patients don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

And so, to convey this in the space between verbal and nonverbal language, is this message I strive to speak from my heart—sometimes I am successful, other times I am not, but I always try:
This space is your space. I am here and I will not abandon you. Tell me about you, all of you—
not just the conventional aches and pains. Your energy gives me clues about what is deep inside.
Perhaps you are afraid—of suffering, of being ill, or of dying. Maybe you feel like you are
fundamentally flawed, physically, or in another way. Perhaps someone made you feel
unworthy—of love, happiness, health. Or perhaps someone told you in some way that you are not
enough the way you are. You are safe here. I will bear witness and validate who you are as real
and true and deserving. I will be a safe space for you—to hold your grief, your fears, your
sadness, and your worries—as well as your hopes, your joys, and your accomplishments great
and small. I will work to use my medical degree to demystify the workings of the human body—to
explain what is ‘‘normal,’’ what is rumor, and what is true. You have power in your body to heal
and be whole. I will be your mirror and give voice to your concerns that are so terrifying that
you feel you are the only one who suffers, and can share this with no other. I will ground you and
will help you find the sacred in yourself so that you can connect with your highest aspirations to
experience and savor what makes you uniquely human. Let us explore how what you do with
your body affects other people and the world around you. I will shepherd you and your family
through the events of the lifecycle, so that you can be present in your one and only life with an
open heart. To know that you are enough, just the way you are.

The practice of modern medicine can be deeply rewarding, as well as intensely frustrating. By
inhabiting this sacred space with patients, I am better able to let go of that which is irritating and
aggravating and instead focus on caring for others and reveling in our shared humanity.