

numa

caring for the spirit in island health

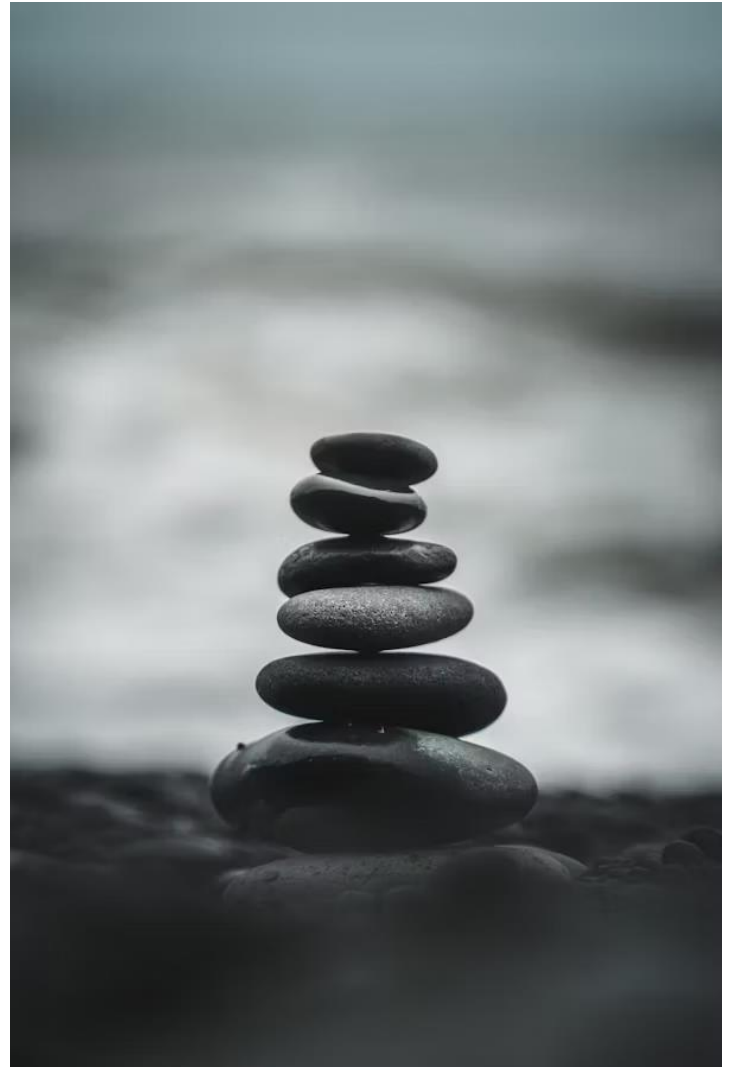
100 YEARS OF SPIRITUAL CARE

It has been 100 years since pioneers such as Anton Boisen, Dr. Richard Cabot, and Helen Flanders Dunbar developed an innovative teaching program designed to educate individuals in caring for the spiritual dimension of persons within health care. Their work was not the origin of spiritual care since many cultures and traditions, since time immemorial, recognized the importance of addressing beliefs and practices as part of caring for the whole person. Dunbar—physician, psychologist, and theologian—captured this perspective when she wrote: *“The belief that the patient should be treated as a whole goes back beyond anything most of us would consider medicine at all.... Psyche and soma, body and soul, are intimately connected and the healer must attend to both dimensions if the patient is to be restored to wholeness.”*

In this way spiritual care has really been around longer than 100 years. However, what these pioneers achieved was the demonstration of the value of having dedicated professionals on health care teams who could engage with the spiritual impact of illness. They helped establish that Spiritual Health Practitioners became integral partners alongside physicians, nurses, social workers, physical and occupational therapists, and other disciplines—contributing to truly comprehensive care.

‘Psyche and soma, body and soul are connected, and the healer must attend to both dimensions if the patient is to be restored to wholeness.’

Helen F. Dunbar



Today, this training is known as **Clinical Psychospiritual Education (CPE)**. The name reflects its nature: *clinical* in that it combines classroom learning with supervised practice in real health care settings, and *psychospiritual* in its focus on the ways in which beliefs, values, and spirituality shape a person's sense of self and well-being.

The world in which Boisen, Cabot, and Dunbar lived was markedly different from our own. Society at that time was significantly more religious, and the

Getting to know your SHP

Matt Dempsey, CVH



What drew you to this profession?

Working as a Spiritual Health Practitioner represents a lifelong desire to support the emotional and spiritual well-being of others. My own journey through physical and mental health pain has taught me how deeply our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dynamics are interconnected—and how disruptions in these connections create whole person suffering. These experiences instilled in me a profound appreciation for the transformative power of psychospiritual care, and its importance and significance in person-centered health care.

My favorite part of this work is bearing witness to being human in all its fragility, complexity, diversity, and expression. It is profoundly humbling being invited into spaces of heightened vulnerability —whether it's due to illness, loss, or life-transition. In these spaces, I am invited into the raw and authentic complexity of another person's experience of existence, in all its joy and pain. I am reminded daily that our vulnerability and fragility is the gateway to deeper understanding of what it means to be human. As Sufi mystic Rumi writes: *"the wound is the place where the Light enters you."*

In your time as an SHP is there a care story that stands out?

One experience that stands out for me was journeying with a patient through a long rehabilitation process following a left-leg amputation. As physiotherapy and occupational therapy focused on rebuilding physical strength and capacity, my role was to help the patient navigate the emotional and existential upheaval: seismic changes in self, dissonance between their identity and new physical limitations, fears of becoming a burden, and value sets that underpinned their self-esteem, sense of meaning, purpose and hope.

Together, we explored how personal values around performance, success, independence and self-reliance had shaped their identity and self-esteem, and how changes in physical capacity were causing them to reconsider these values and the impact those beliefs had on their emotional health. Through questioning narrative and perspective, we journeyed into other aspects of being human such as fragility, vulnerability, interdependence, and belonging, and how these transcendent values may impact feelings around intrinsic worth. This was not a quick or easy process; it required careful accompaniment, therapeutic dialogue, space for the unknown/uncertain, and validation of grief. But over time, the patient was able to reclaim a sense of self beyond performance and capacity, finding new transcendent meaning, purpose and hope about what 'being human' meant to them.

This experience reminded me how rehabilitation of the body must be paired with rehabilitation of the mind, heart and spirit. In the words of Emerson: *"What lies behind us and what lies before us pales in comparison to what lies within us."* Working collaboratively across disciplines allowed us to attend to the patient as a whole person, reducing suffering and restoring well-being on every level.

approach reflected that context. Today, spiritual health care and the training of spiritual health professionals has evolved, changed and developed just as other medical professions have. Just as phrenology has been left behind in medicine, spiritual health has shifted from focusing solely on religious belief and has grown into a well-established field with practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds. What unites spiritual health practitioners is a shared commitment to addressing spiritual distress in whatever form it appears, and the specialized training to support individuals of every background, belief, and identity.

As we mark **Spiritual Health Awareness Week (Oct. 19-25)**, I invite you to do two things. First, take a moment to connect with your Spiritual Health Practitioner to express appreciation for the vital role they play in providing compassionate, holistic care to patients, families and staff. Second, if you are a direct care provider, take a moment to consider how the needs of your patient may be supported by your Spiritual Health Practitioner. Might there be a "peace" missing from their care plan?



NUMA (Greek for "spirit/breath") is produced by Island Health's Spiritual Health program to draw awareness to issues of spirituality in health care. The editor of Numa is Darren Colyn, Manager, Spiritual Health. To read past issues of Numa go to the [Spiritual Health public webpage](#).