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Rx: Faith

God had always been part of my life, even when I'd ignored and pushed Him away. So why was I denying my patients?

by Vera Tarman

“**W**hat is your relationship with God?” In all my years as a doctor, I had never thought to ask my patients that simple question. Why had I been so blind?

Under Wraps

I was born in Germany in 1957 and my family immigrated to Canada when I was four years old. My mother had died an alcoholic and the relationship between my father and me was strained with bitterness. I left home at 17 and lived on the streets for a time. What belief I had in God was put aside as I experimented with drugs.

But God was looking out for me even when I was ignoring Him. A friend steered me away from the worst of the drug world and, eventually, I found my way to a YWCA shelter. There, I encountered a responsive and protective social-service system. I ended up in a treatment centre that enabled me to complete high school. While there, a teacher encouraged me to go to university and a professor recommended I go to medical school. Without these “angels,” as I’ve come to think of them, I have no doubt I would have died along the way.

Graduating, interning and starting my own practice, I learned to minimize the importance of faith, even

though God had been watching out for me throughout my life. In the medical world of the late 1990s, doctors and nurses never talked about religious matters. It was considered inappropriate to mention God and faith to other doctors and nurses, and certainly to your patients.

I had kept my faith under wraps for so long that I never considered it of any use in my work.

Journey to Sobriety

But about seven years ago, I was treating a patient who was HIV positive. She’d received a knife wound in a scuffle and was heavily into drugs.

“I don’t know what to do, doctor. I keep trying to destroy myself,” she told me.

Without knowing why, I asked, “What is your relationship with God? Do you think He could help you?”

She looked at me and smiled sadly. “I had a relationship with God once, but I’d forgotten about it until now. Yes, I can try to pray again. What have I got to lose?”

Remarkably, the woman mended her relationship with God and that enabled her to achieve sobriety in the years she had left.

Boundless Rewards

I realized that my patient had spoken for the both of us. I, too, had a relationship with God once, but over the course of the years, my medical training had pushed my faith aside. I’d minimized its importance even when I had seen many times over that medical treatment alone is short-lived and ineffective without the spiritual

dimension to sustain the changes.

Now I had come full circle. I knew that the only way I could truly help my patients was by being honest and forthright about my faith. By neglecting

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this part of myself, I had not given my patients all I could as a doctor.

When I came to work at The Salvation Army’s Homestead in Toronto four years ago, I found myself in an environment that allowed me to be true to myself. Why was I keeping my secret when it could help others? At The Homestead, I could ask people about their relationship with God and invite them to explore that part of themselves.

I believe a relationship with God is essential to recovery, any recovery, from physical to mental to spiritual. Indeed, a person can’t recover fully without it.

Embracing my faith has made me a better doctor and a better person. The rewards are boundless. I see each person in recovery as another “angel” reborn to teach others down the line. And this good work goes on, even into eternity. 