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How do you find holiness in frightening places?

In *Sacred Spaces in Scary Spaces*, hospital chaplain Stacey Merlin invites readers into the hidden world of trauma bays, ICU hallways, and quiet moments at the edge of life and death. With unflinching honesty and deep compassion, she shares stories from years of accompanying patients, families, and staff through unimaginable loss, fear, love, and grace—including during the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. Merlin reveals what it means to sit with suffering without trying to fix it, to offer presence when words fail, and to honor the sacredness of every human life. This is a book for anyone who has faced fear, walked alongside suffering, struggled to make meaning of loss, or wondered how love and holiness endure in the hardest moments of life. It is a testament to the power of presence and gratitude—and a reminder that even in the scariest places, sacred space can be found.

Foreword by Dr. Ruth Sandberg

There are many reasons to read this book. First, this work offers a rare glimpse into the inner life of a hospital chaplain, something that most of us never get to see or experience. Stacey Merlin shares the emergencies, sorrows, moments of laughter and silliness, and times of transcendence. Stacey speaks to the ebb and flow of her daily encounters with her patients, including times of feeling inadequate or ineffective. She reveals her initial hurt when patients first seem to reject her and her personal growth as a chaplain as she learns how to find what each patient needs for their own soul.

Especially touching, her descriptions of what chaplains endured through the COVID-19 pandemic lay bare the tremendous loss of life every day, the existential fears of the dying, and the pain of losing hospital colleagues. Stacey offers us wisdom to help us confront the reality of death based on her many years helping dying patients find peace in their last moments.

Second, Stacey is the epitome of what a chaplain is, what a chaplain experiences, and what a chaplain feels and suffers in their daily sacred work. She poignantly shares stories about many of the patients she has known over the years, detailing their struggles and strengths and the emotional, theological, and psychological challenges that hospital chaplains face daily.

Stacey does not pull any punches. She describes her chaplaincy experiences with searing truth and deep love. She describes the sacred holiness of her work, along with the gut-wrenching truth of life's unpredictability, pain, loss, and fragility.

Third, Stacey tells her story of how childhood, her teenage years, and young adulthood set the groundwork for her later identity as a chaplain. She asked questions at an early age about life's unfairness, struggles, and the never-ending push-pull between faith and doubt. These questions remain with Stacey in her role as a chaplain. In fact, these unending mysteries about the nature of life are part of what makes her identity as a chaplain so powerful and honest.

As a Jewish chaplain, Stacey shares her poignant journeys encountering other faiths and how she came to appreciate the breadth of human religious and spiritual quests. As a result of these diverse experiences, she has deepened her own connections to the Holy.

Most importantly, readers of this book will be enriched by Stacey's example of religious openness, human caring, and respect for the sacredness of life. Your life will change as you take this journey with Stacey.

Ruth Sandberg, PhD
Leonard and Ethel Landau Professor of Rabbinics
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Sample Chapter: Sometimes, it really is that simple

How will I know what to say? How will I know what to do? I walked down the hall of the hospital with an authoritative badge proclaiming, "Stacey R. Merlin, Chaplain, Pastoral Care Department." This was the culmination of a dream and three years of hard work. I was scared and exhilarated, energized and overwhelmed, eager and hesitant all at the same time.

I struggled to figure my conflicting emotion, perplexed given that I had exceptional training. I hadn't felt this way as a volunteer. Where was this coming from, and why? What was this strange

feeling? This space in which I chose to connect was both holy and daunting, sacred and scary. Questions plagued me.

“Am I good enough? Am I enough, period? Are any of us enough?”

“God, can you hear me?”

“Does the person I meet on the other side of that door know how unsure I am at times?” And yet, I was called to knock on that door, never knowing who was on the other side.

I walked down the hall, crossing paths with a tired-looking little boy holding hands with his tired-looking father. I stopped to say hello and asked how they were doing.

“I want to go home, I’m bored,” complained the boy.

“My name is Chaplain Stacey, what is your name?” I replied cheerfully.

“Elijah,” he murmured as he played with his ear.

“You look like you could use a friend to play with. Can you wait here for a minute?” I asked as I winked at his father. I walked to the pastoral care office and chose a plush bear, a few crayons, and paper. I returned to the little boy and said, “This is my friend George, the Bear. He needs a friend. Will you play with him and take him home with you?”

The little boy nodded yes as his father thanked me. I walked them to the elevator and waved goodbye, smiling to myself and thinking, “That wasn’t so bad, Stacey.” Sometimes, it really is that simple.

The holiness of helping can seem preposterous. We expect holiness to be shrouded in solemn mystery. Too often we fail to recognize holiness when it happens, especially in the small moments of daily life. But creating sacred space merely requires choosing to be present to another human being—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

I often felt like I wasn’t doing anything of consequence, discovering only years later how big a difference I made in someone’s life. Like giving a bear named George to a tired little boy. Sometimes, it really is that simple.