

The Path of Spiritual Inquiry

An Interview With Richard Crocker

College Chaplain and Associate Dean, Tucker Foundation

by James Burger

T ruman Capote, Mark Twain, and Tennessee Williams--writers of a skeptical nature, to be sure. And three of College Chaplain Richard Crocker's favorites. "It's better to be concerned and questioning," he tells me. "Even though there are no ready answers."

On a daily basis, Chaplain Crocker sees people turning both toward and away from faith as they try to make sense of the world and their role in it all. Honest inquiry can be a difficult but rewarding part of the spiritual journey, with outcomes and responses as different as the individuals themselves. "Some people want to give up on the whole enterprise," he says, "while others become very devout and traditional. Still others are relativists about it."

Richard Crocker was born in rural Alabama. At Brown University, he was an English major, with a focus on American Literature. He later attended Divinity School at Vanderbilt and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He has been the pastor of two Presbyterian congregations, in Tennessee and in New Jersey, and was Chaplain at Bates College and at Elizabethtown College, in Pennsylvania. Married with three children, he has been at Dartmouth, in dual roles as College Chaplain and Associate Dean of the Tucker Foundation, since January, 2003.



Photo: James Burger

CHAPLAIN RICHARD CROCKER

HOW AND WHERE DO WE FIND INSPIRATION?

This December, Chaplain Crocker, with Lisa Thum, Assistant Dean of the College, Upperclass Deans' Office, presented Spirituality in the Workplace as part of OLPD's course offerings. The three-hour workshop centered around the awareness of spiritual dimensions in our work. "Many people feel the need for inspiration during the day," he explains. "Most of us want to know why we are doing things. We want to have a sense of contribution and purpose in our connections to spirituality. And many are looking for opportunities to reflect, but are uncomfortable sharing their own spirituality with co-workers. What is appropriate in the workplace? How and where do we find inspiration?"

As a precursor to the workshop during the stressful end of term, Thum arranged for a labyrinth to be set up for a week in Collis and in Rollins Chapel. Faculty, staff, and students were encouraged to walk the labyrinth and meditate. As with such an exercise in a monastic environment, individuals found the experience powerful, with its literal, symbolic, and spiritual twists and turns. Many spoke of "finding a center" during their walk.

Chaplain Crocker often encounters people who say that they're spiritual but not religious and are more concerned with a personal experience than an institutional one. The two may or may not be mutually exclusive, and he draws a diagram to illustrate the parallels and overlaps. "There can be an enormous difference between religion and spirituality or between education and intellect," he feels, stressing that while people can have one without the other, balance comes with the intersections.

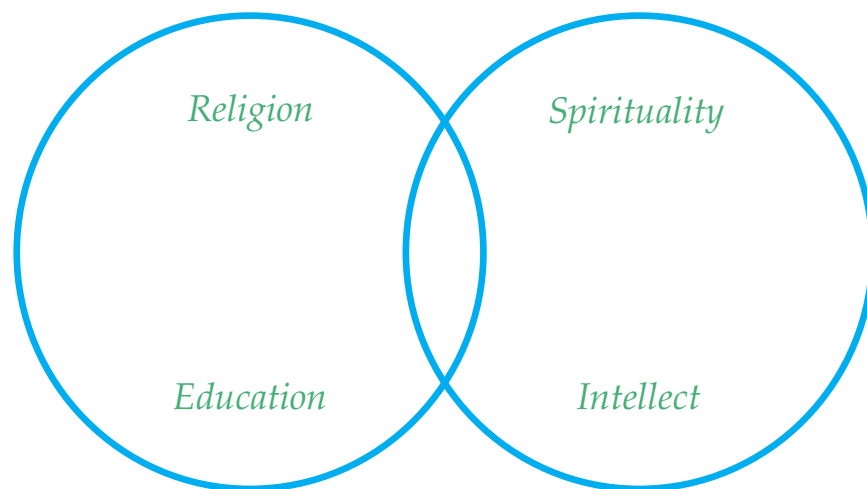
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In his role at the Tucker Foundation, which originally was a chaplaincy, he is involved with many of the volunteer service programs for which it is now well known. Most recently, he was a member of Dartmouth's Tsunami Relief Effort, which was coordinated by Stuart Lord, Dean of the Tucker Foundation, and featured the campus-wide efforts of faculty, staff, and students. On January 6, Chaplain Crocker was one of the speakers at a gathering that offered the Dartmouth community an opportunity to grieve together. Privately, he has spoken with individuals who question the spiritual meaning of such a terrible tragedy.

Based on the feedback he has received, Chaplain Crocker hopes to offer the Spirituality in the Workplace workshop again this spring. "It is important to recognize that there are people on campus to whom you can speak about spiritual issues," he says reassuringly. "This is, after all, a community of inquiry, and we shouldn't be afraid to discuss spirituality while respecting the differences in practice."

*Visit the Tucker Foundation and the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life Web site at
<www.dartmouth.edu/~tucker>.*

*Information about Dartmouth's Tsunami Relief Effort is available online at
<www.dartmouth.edu/~news/features/relief>.*



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