

# Healing spiritual suffering focus of new workshops

Richard Groves and his wife Mary had travelled the world teaching people how to alleviate the spiritual pain from all types of trauma – job loss, loss of a friendship, illness, life transitions, and death of a loved one.

Then, nine years ago, when Mary died, Richard Groves had to use those skills to heal himself.

“I thought, ‘I don’t know if I want to continue doing this.’ It was kind of my dark night of the soul. I could talk about spiritual suffering in the first person,” said Groves, an international speaker, author and co-founder of the non-profit Sacred Art of Living and Dying Institute in Bend, Oregon.

Groves’ Healing the Healers is a four-workshop series that integrates history, science, psychology and spirituality to addresses the issue of spiritual suffering, a reality faced by most people at various times, particularly towards the end of life.

The workshops will be held in Edmonton for the first time at Providence Renewal Centre on four weekends over two years, starting April 6-7.

Participants will be trained to diagnose, respond to and help heal spiritual suffering using 40 different tools including prayer, forgiveness, relating and being present with the person who is hurting.

“It’s part of life to deal with anxiety, with fear, with suffering, with disappointment,” Groves said. “And you could call those just psychological issues or emotional issues or you could – like many wisdom traditions – see that there is a spiritual component underneath that.”

Spiritual suffering is as unique as each individual, Groves said, describing the skills he teaches as a “half step” in between pastoral care and psychological counselling. They are a complement to parish ministry.

“We try to teach tools that help a person identify and diagnose the total person, and we particularly emphasize the spiritual part,” said Groves, a former Catholic priest, chaplain and bereavement counsellor. “You can’t unravel – and totally separate – body, mind and spirit. They are all connected.”

Unlike physical wounds, spiritual pain is more difficult to define, and that’s where the workshops can help, said Debbie Doornbos, program director for

Providence Renewal Centre.

“When you have wounds inside of yourself, they are not always visible. When we can understand what those wounds are, it’s a lot easier to both heal our ourselves, and then we can become more present to be a healing force for others.”

Groves hopes that graduates of his Healing the Healers series will pass their knowledge on to others, noting that the spiritual healing skills he teaches are not new. They have existed for centuries.

“It’s so old-agey. This came out of our monasteries 1,000 years ago. We’re not inventing this stuff. It’s totally based on a wisdom tradition that happens to go back to medieval Christianity and, by and large, was lost in the hospices. Regardless of a person’s religious background, we think these tools work.”

Christina Greene, who has signed up to take the Healing the Healers workshop, sees spiritual healing skills as “a way of relating to people on the same level.”

“It brings light, or another outlook, on how to help people who are palliative or are going through a different journey than what I am going through right now, how to allow them to express that and also how to help them move through that journey.”

Greene said the workshops will help her personally, and professionally as a team leader with Catholic Social Services’ St. Joseph residence, which provides comfort and care to terminally ill people who are homeless or difficult to house in Edmonton.

Groves and his wife developed their spiritual healing techniques decades ago when they were working as bereavement counsellors, and at a time when legislation for euthanasia became legal in Oregon. Both were working in hospices at the time.

“We found we didn’t have training in it. We were just hired because we had the degrees or the background. We thought we were very poor for not having specific training in matters of the soul.”

Greene calls the ability to heal spiritual pain, a basic life skill that many of us have forgotten.

“I don’t think anything is new age. Everything has been done once, and maybe pushed back into the history books as we call it. We just need to bring light to doing this all again.”