

numa

caring for the spirit in island health

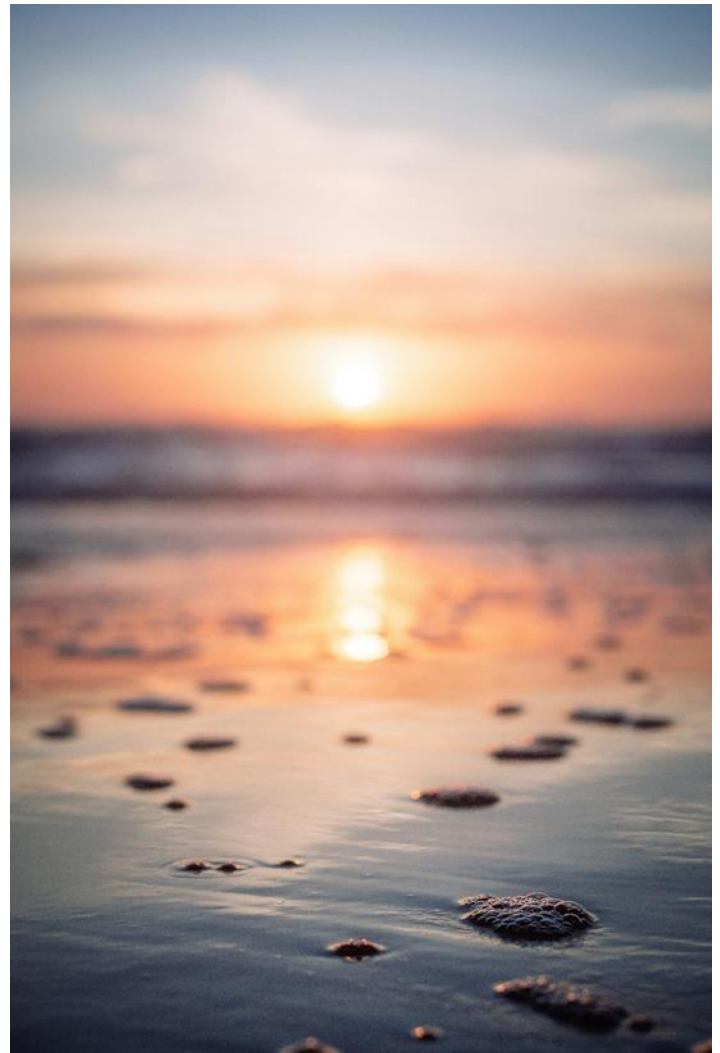
Enfolding Failure

"Are you even listening to me!?" Those were the words a dying 78-year-old said to me as I tried to support her in her difficult transition to palliative care. Even as I recount that consult today, I still recall the humiliation I felt when she caught me failing to pay attention. Active listening is the most basic skill of any Spiritual Health Practitioner, and I failed miserably in that moment. My mind and focus were elsewhere, and she knew it. Recalling this consult makes me wonder what we do as health care professionals when we fail, when we make a mistake?

Failing as health care professionals can be very serious stuff. Mistakes and errors could literally be lethal. Various professions hold lives in different ways – but we are all subject to the reality of making mistakes. To err is human, as the saying goes, but again the question is what do we do when we fail?

What often happens when we fail is that emotions of fear, guilt, or shame surface. We can question our professionalism and worry about what our colleagues might think of us. Additionally, we can feel horrible at the realization that we have caused harm to someone.

When we've made a mistake, we might be tempted to hide the error or minimize its impact. We might also



Failure can become our most powerful path to learning if we're willing to choose courage over comfort.

Brene Brown

look to blame others or the system within which we work. Failing in our work and care can affect us in significant ways.

As an organization we live under the lofty motto of "excellent health and care for everyone, everywhere and every time". This is our north star and that which we aspire to do in our day-to-day practice. But such a lofty motto can make us shudder when the care we've given

wasn't excellent – but in fact was harmful. What do we do when we've missed the mark?

Perhaps it would be helpful to remember the breadth of what *excellence* in health and care looks like. Such excellence *also* includes excelling in how we handle our mistakes. Excellence in health and care means making gracious space for when we mess up. This view does not negate the seriousness and impacts of our failings but rather it suggests that good processing of failings is an excellent thing to do. Excellence in health and care includes providing space where we can feel safe to admit and learn from our failings so that our practice, and the care we give, is improved.

A key part in creating such space for our failings is to have sturdy people around us who understand what it is

to fail. Clinical allies who can walk with us through the blunder, perhaps even sharing their own foibles, and who can lead us to better ways of practicing.

We also need sturdy folks who can help process what the failure has wrought in our hearts. (Spiritual Health Practitioners excel at this!) Good people who help hold our shame and fear, walking with us towards self forgiveness, acceptance, and growth.

Have you failed lately? Please remember, you're not alone and may you be blessed with other wise "failers" who can tend to your practice and your heart. *(This reflection was inspired by an [article](#) from the New England Journal of Medicine by Dr. Victoria Johnson. Thank you to Lydia Collin, SHP at WCGH for sharing.)*

Welcoming Thy-Thy Quach

South Island, Casual Spiritual Health Practitioner

Island Health's Spiritual Health program is excited to welcome Thy-Thy Quach as a casual Spiritual Health Practitioner for south island sites (RJH, VGH and SPH). Thy-Thy (pronounced Tee-Tee) will be backfilling current SHPs when they are away.

Welcome Thy-Thy!



To get to know your nearest Spiritual Health Practitioner click [here](#).

For Failure

Despite the initial darkening,
This is the light that failure casts.
Beholden no more to the promise
Of what dream and work would bring.

It shows where roots have withered
And where the source has gone dry.
The light of failure has no mercy
On the affections of the heart;

It emerges from beyond the personal,
A wiry, forthright light that likes to see crevices
Open in the shell of a controlled life.

Though cruel now, it serves a deeper kindness,
Wise to the larger call of growth.
It invites us to humility
And the painstaking work of acceptance.

John O'Donahue

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

Island Health's Spiritual Health team members acknowledge, with humility and gratitude, that we live and practice on the ancestral and current homelands of the Coast Salish, Nuuchah-nulth and Kwakwaka'wakw people. We commit ourselves to ongoing learning regarding cultural safety and humility and strive to ensure that the beliefs and practices of all people are supported for their individual and collective wellbeing.