

Caring for the Spirit – Encountering the Spiritual in Dementia

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The eminent Scottish theologian and well-known writer on the spirituality of ageing, the Reverend Professor John Swinton, delivered a workshop and a public lecture at the Canberra Southern Cross Club and St Mark's National Theological Centre on Monday 7 September 2009 in the Australian Capital Territory. His topic was "Whose story am I? Spirituality: Personhood and Dementia."

In the lecture, Professor Swinton focused on the role of stories and storytelling in the formation of personhood and identity of people with dementia. He explained.



"All of us live in a complex world of stories, some of which we tell about ourselves, others of which are told about us. In terms of our personal identity, there is a real sense in which we are the stories we tell about ourselves. But our identities are also composed of the stories that others tell about us. Precisely who accurately tells our story is a crucial question. Is it you? Is it your family? Is it the government? Is it medicine? Is it the church? It is of course all of these groups of people.

"But the problem is that when we experience dementia it is often assumed that we can no longer tell our own story well or accurately. Who will tell our story, when all around us assume we no longer have one? People with dementia can very easily become the victims of constructions of their stories, which they do not own."

In the workshop and public lecture, Professor Swinton looked at how, together, we might develop different stories about dementia; stories which focus, not on loss or tragedy, but on the potential for positive transformation, spiritual development and holding on to one's identity, even in the midst of profound neurological decline.

"Such a task of counter-storytelling is relational, spiritual and countercultural; it listens carefully to the stories of medicine and the real stories of suffering that often accompanies dementia. But it refuses to be defined by such stories. Instead the *new story of dementia* focuses on the person, on their spirituality and on the ways in which their identity can be held and their position in community sustained through the powerful political act of telling new stories about a human experience that we often assume we know more about than we actually do."