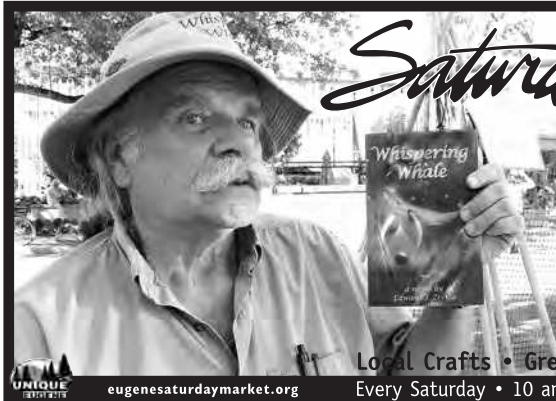


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Soul Work

Fr. John Malecki in Eugene this weekend.

Father John Malecki is a wise man whose life at 84 is still evolving. A Catholic priest since he was ordained at age 26, Malecki completed his Ph.D. in counseling psychology at the UO in 1969, followed by a 15-year practice. When he was 70, he began a course of study at the C.G. Jung Institute of Boston, where at age 80 he presented his doctoral dissertation on the inner life of people with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Additionally, he is a distance runner, whose first race was the New York City Marathon, at age 65.

The Eugene Friends of Jung brings Malecki to Eugene this weekend, where he will speak at 7:30 pm on Friday, Sept. 9 at PeaceHealth's auditorium. Whether we are caregivers, the grown children of aging parents or are ourselves elders (as all of us will be eventually), we will find Malecki's approach to dementia different from the medical model. He will share his experiences and studies in "Images from the Unconscious of Early- and Middle-Stage Alzheimer's Patients" on Friday, and Saturday he offers a short workshop from 9 to 11:30 am on how to reach a person suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

I spoke to Malecki by telephone from Teresian House in Albany, New York, where he lives with Alzheimer's patients for whom it is also home. Among the many hats this interesting, life-embracing individual wears is that of staff psychologist at a consultation center, where he runs spiritually based "wellness groups" for people with chronic illnesses. He also serves as chaplain for a community hospice.

I asked Malecki one question: What drew him to develop a respect for suffering, particularly the suffering of Alzheimer's and dementia patients? He paused for a moment, collected his thoughts, thanked me for the question and answered, beginning with the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, which opened the door to new ways of practicing for those working in the church.

The response to suffering that had worked for many years, he said, was simply to cite "the will of God." But after Vatican Two, such simple expressions were insufficient, and clergy was encouraged to see the whole problem of suffering as people experienced it.

In the climate of the times, Malecki pursued a doctorate in psychology at UO. Counseling provided a rational understanding of suffering, he said, but the practice left out the spiritual aspect.

"Working in counseling threw me into the cauldron of suffering," he said. "I saw the destructiveness of severe depression, of addiction. This was where I experienced no longer hiding behind theology by working with the dying, those with terminal illnesses — not settling for the ritual. You sat with them, you cried with them. The experience profoundly changed me," he said. "It taught me to empathize."

But by age 70, the cognitive approach was not enough for Malecki, and although it took him 10 years to complete his studies at the Jung Institute of Boston, in part because he commuted from Albany, he



'I was passionate about the work. The patients taught me the meaning of suffering. And I saw how deeply we had underestimated the capacity of these people.'

- FATHER JOHN MALECKI

said he would do it all again. "I was very challenged," he said. "They took no prisoners."

He found himself at age 80 with the need to present a doctoral dissertation to graduate as a Jungian diplomate. At that time, several interesting things happened all at once. The center where he lived in New York built a new building for Alzheimer's patients. Second, he was invited to a conference on Alzheimer's at Harvard, where he asked the chair of the department, "Do you do any group therapy for Alzheimer's patients?" No, he was told. No medical school in the country does.

Malecki realized that he had a built-in laboratory where he lived. Moreover, it was a place where he could control the variables in the study. So he began his work with Alzheimer's patients.

"I was passionate about the work," he said. "The patients taught me the meaning of suffering. And I saw how deeply we had underestimated the capacity of these people."

Malecki took a moment to tell me that the term "primary process" has a specific meaning in psychology. "You might use it to describe children of a certain age who live in a primarily unconscious state," for example. "At times," he said, "Alzheimer's patients are in primary process, such as when they pray. It's beautiful."

Sounds like grace to me. I've been overwhelmed by the suffering of the people of the Gulf Coast and the death of the historical city of New Orleans for the past 10 days. I welcomed Malecki's blessing as we concluded our interview as a moment of such grace. Friday night you can hear for yourself what this remarkable man has to say.

EW