

*As It Is Above, So It Is Below:*  
Deep Listening Under the Chapel

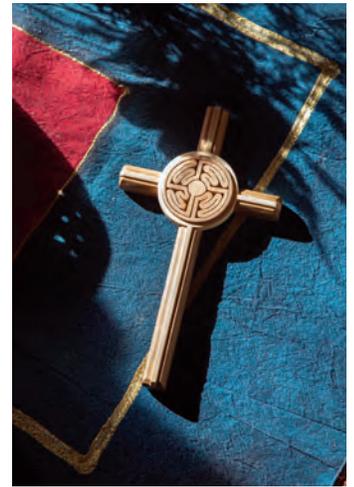


PHOTOS BY LISA ABITBOL

THE REV. KATHERINE STILES '03 DIDN'T ALWAYS WORK UNDER THE chapel, but the space under St. John's Memorial Chapel has been her most recent (and favorite) vocational home and is where she has worked for the last five years. As a member of the staff in pastoral counseling and guidance for the past 10 years, she has transformed the space into a spiritually centering room where she meets with individuals and small groups, providing spiritual guidance and counsel for students on various paths at Episcopal Divinity School. She welcomed photographer Lisa Abitbol to take photographs and offers us a tour of this special space.

**"It is a breathtaking honor and gift to be called to witness grace unfolding as I accompany students by listening to their stories and helping them cultivate their profound capacity to listen ... to themselves, to each other, and to God."**

**1** This table sits within easy arm's reach beside my chair. A flower, or even just a leaf, to remind me of the beauty of God's creation and our responsibility to steward this fragile planet home. A candle. Anglican prayer beads. A small sandalwood sculpture of Buddha and one of Ganesh, a Hindu deity. The Hebrew tree of life. Rocks from various adventures. (I often build cairns on wild beaches and bring some home to remind me of that sanctuary.) Small and tangible symbols and reminders that "God is too big for any one religion." Reminders of the profound respect for all faith traditions and the gifts each one offers by more deeply illuminating our own.



**2** Much of the listening in this room happens in silence. We can breathe into the refuge of time and spaciousness, set apart from all the busy-ness in our lives. It's so countercultural and so essential for the health of body, mind, and spirit. Authentic spiritual leadership must be rooted in the ability to know and be comfortable with our own inner landscape, including its many mysteries, so as to be more powerfully equipped and sustained to meet our external realities and challenges with compassion and clarity. As our soul-selves become more accessible to us, we become more able to see the soul-selves of others as well. What a powerful piece of spiritual formation that is!

**3** These meditation cushions represent, for me, the circle of contemplative practitioners in many traditions. How very important it is that we cultivate circles of support and "communities of practice" to help us support and sustain our lives of both prayer and activism. Sometimes all it takes is five minutes of sitting down, taking a breath, lighting a candle, and locating ourselves in our bodies to find and renew that center of calm. Or at least to get in the vicinity.

**4** I love creating spaces that evoke a threshold to the holy. For Group Spiritual Direction I prepare by setting up an altar, a spatial reminder that there is something intentional about what we are up to. Here are icons we can use to focus on when meeting in Group Spiritual Direction. Light a candle, ring the bell, and enter in.

**5** We often start Group Spiritual Direction with a reading, scripture, or often poetry. Then, with the sounding of the singing bowl, we enter into a period of silent meditation before we offer our stories and prayers. This is a Tibetan singing bowl blessed by Buddhist monks, which I carried home with me from Dharmasala, India. I was so humbled and blessed to travel with my dear friend The Rev. Mpho Tutu '03 to Dharmasala, home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, accompanying her as she interviewed him for a book she was writing about her father. The bowl carries home for me, every time I ring it, the magic of pilgrimage and the great gift and joy of being and having companions along the way.

