

## THE SOUL OF A CHAPLAIN

### Day One

It's 7 o'clock in the morning, and I am on a highway hurtling toward the Golden Gate Bridge at an alarming rate of speed, gripping the handlebars of a large and throaty motorcycle I barely know how to ride, and I am praying to God I won't die.

There's a bus on my right and a stream of cars buzzing by on my left, and a big pickup truck is riding my tail. A hellacious racket is filling my helmet—it sounds like a steel bucket filled with golf balls rattling inside my skull. Now the highway takes a sharp curve into a gusting wind, and I am remembering all about the paradox of prayer—which is that sometimes you do it even when you don't totally believe in it.

If you knew me, you might think that a strange confession, since I'm an Episcopal priest and priests are supposed to enthuse a smooth confidence in the power of prayer. But I've seen enough tragedy in my life to know that prayer will not rescue us from drunk drivers or sleepy truckers or that bus driver who just forgot to check his side-view mirror and came dangerously close to smearing me against a concrete abutment. To think of prayer as protection seems like an insult to all the pious people, far holier than me, who have suffered unspeakable pain through no fault of their own and despite their own earnest prayers to be saved from the time of trial. Jesus, for example, comes to mind.

And still, I pray.

I am hurtling down this treacherous highway because I'm starting a new job today as a hospital chaplain resident in San Francisco. For the next year, I'll be sitting with and praying with people during the worst moments of their lives, after heart attacks and cancers and accidents on highways bring them to the critical care unit where I'm assigned.

My job will be to absorb the look of heartbreaking bewilderment on their faces and not look away; it will be to help them know they are not alone and that they have not been abandoned. I will help them make sense of what has happened in terms that fit their religion or worldview, whatever that is. The key, as Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl taught us, is to find meaning in our suffering—because any meaning, it turns out, is better than no meaning at all.

I am told that we recover and heal more quickly when we can make sense of our suffering. But no one can make that sense for us—we have to put the pieces together ourselves. The best that people like me can do, I think, is to be a companion along the way: a Sam to a hospital full of Frodos, each patient on an impossible and desperate quest, while I do my best to stay close at hand with the few modest provisions I've managed to remember to bring.

If anyone knew how terrified I am right now, they would wet their pants. It's the economics, not the thrill, that got me onto this bike: I can park for four dollars a day, compared to thirty dollars for a car; I get 55 miles to the gallon—better than a Prius—and compared to commuting on a bus, the motorcycle saves me two hours a day.

Plus, it's doing wonders for my prayer life. The same could be said for this new job, which I know will be impossible without prayer, even as confused as I am about it.

To be honest, I'm not sure what scares me most: this commute or this job. At the ripe young age of 60, I'm not even sure I can handle the job. All I know is that I feel called, at this time in my life, to leave the confident proclamations of God's victory over death to younger priests. Instead, I am called, these days, to settle into a long, loving look at death; to return its steady gaze; to maybe even make friends with it, sing songs of praise to it like St. Francis.

The traffic is roaring past the Marin Headlands, and suddenly a river of sea fog pours onto the highway. We ride into the mist; the clatter of the road drops to a strange, echoey hum, and for a moment everything seems suspended and nearly motionless. I wonder if this is how it feels just before death, as the senses shut down and the world fades out. I think of the people I will be meeting this week, hooked up to ventilators and IVs, unable to speak except through their eyes, who at this very moment are learning the answers to all my questions.

Now the traffic sweeps into the Robin Williams tunnel, and the hellacious racket of engines and tires is bouncing off the elliptical walls, creating a nearly out-of-body saturation of sound. I think of the melancholic funny man for whom this tunnel is named—a good Episcopalian, it turns out, who chose to meet death on his own terms. I wish I had known him; and somehow, in this passage, I feel his blessing.

Nearly as soon as we've entered it, we see the light at the end of the tunnel, and the splendid bridge breaks into view. Its orange towers rise above a river of fog; beyond, the city of hills is glittering in the golden light. I gasp at the sight. I wonder. I shudder. I give thanks, and I pray.

Matthew Lawrence  
Sutter CPMC Hospital  
San Francisco, CA