

Becoming a Chaplain

The very first time I set out on the floors as a chaplain, I found myself walking directly past the door of my patient's room and into the hospital stairwell, where I remained, for the better part of an hour rehearsing a single line: "Hello, my name is Anna and I am a chaplain here at the hospital." My hands were shaking; my heart was both terrified and awed to utter such words. Even now, as I say them, I still feel their immense weight—the responsibility such a statement carries, the burdens and gifts it has brought to my life.

Many outside the field do not realize that the journey to becoming a chaplain is one of deep self-exploration and, ultimately, self-awareness. Early on, one of my supervisors told me: "As chaplains, we come into a patient's room with empty hands, to remind ourselves that our very personhood is the tool we carry."¹ It is my own intimate knowledge of despair and uncertainty, joy and beauty that allows me to touch and to hold another's experience. It is my own humanity, in all its flaws and vulnerability, that brings me to another in their darkest hour. And so it is with great courage that I must try to do the messy work of looking inward just as I courageously reach outward. I must constantly be considering my own edges, my own triggers, and my own sources of strength if I am to employ my personhood with intelligence, care, and grace. This is the heart of chaplaincy as I see it.

And yet, becoming a chaplain also has everything to do with one's relationship to suffering. I came to this profession with all sorts of ideas about the pain of this world. Indeed, I had written pages and pages on sickness, old age, and death. But having ideas about suffering and despair is very different from being in the room with them. There are no words—no ideas—that touch the physicality of standing at the foot of a bed that holds a dying child. No theories that prepare one for the rawness of hearing someone longing to die or the honor that comes with making space for the prayers and pleas for an outcome that just cannot be.

When I first started my ministry in the hospital, I carried around Nietzsche's famous quote about the abyss in my pocket. I did so because I knew that it was true, and knew, also, that it was doing its work on me. I knew that *when I gazed long into the abyss, the abyss inevitably gazed back into*

¹ Ren Bunce, "The Ethics of Self-Disclosure," talk given at the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies, Redwood City, CA, November 20, 2009.

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*me.*² Coming close to suffering changed me, as I imagine it changes many chaplains, though not always in just the same way. It takes great heart to meet a dying person or someone reeling in the grips of grief and think, *This too could be me. This, too, is me in another moment, another heartbeat of time. Someday I, too, will find myself staring into the dying eyes of a loved one whom I cannot bear to lose. I offer what I can as a way of acknowledging this connection, this shared experience of humanity.* In the end, we do this work together. We try our best to comfort and support each other in any way that we can, and in return, we learn about the reality of change and loss. We come to know just how precious and fragile this life really is.³

We gaze out over the abyss and feel the abyss gazing back into us. We feel its transformative work ablaze in our hearts.

After my first year of ministry, I remember being struck by the immense capacity each of us carry for both extremes, both sides of the human condition—the joy and the heartache, the misery and the happiness. I began to see it at the grocery store, at the children’s playground, in the face of my neighbor down the street. As I shook the hand of a stranger, I started to wonder about the moment of their birth, about the things they held sacred, the hidden aspirations of their heart. As my ministry developed, I learned to listen for the story within the story, the tender threads of meaning that weave our lives together. Unbeknownst to me and amidst all my supposed failings, all my striving, *I was becoming a chaplain.*

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2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 68.

3 Anna Gagnon, “Reflections on the Art of Selfless Giving,” The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, <http://www.fredericklenzfoundation.org/file/AnnaGagnonpdf>