

Prone to Wonder

Ixperience chaplaincy as a kaleidoscope of paradoxes: awe-filled joy and unimaginable suffering pieced together in seemingly impossible ways to make a whole that is piercingly beautiful. One way this picture bears out in my life is the way this vocation of being present to other people's stories has empowered and inspired me to learn to live my own story with more curiosity, openness, and love.

During my first months as a hospital chaplain, I watched a scene unfold that has stayed with me ever since. Walking onto one of my units, I saw a patient at the other end of the hall struggling to take a prescribed walk. She was leaning heavily on her partner and her IV pole, wincing with each step but determined to carry on in the hard work of healing. In front of them was a small child, a girl I would estimate to be about six years old, who was carrying an object I couldn't see clearly from that distance. The girl was taking slow, formal, measured steps as if she were walking down a church aisle instead of a hospital corridor. From my vantage point, the whole thing looked like a wedding procession. It felt like I had stepped into the child's imagination for a moment, and suddenly everything felt very holy. In that reverent frame of mind, I approached the family, greeted the girl and her parents, and looked down to see that the sacred object the child was bearing so elegantly like precious rings on a silk pillow was, in fact, the kidneyshaped tray hospitals use for medical waste.

This beautiful family taught me about my own soul that day as they offered me authentic glimpses of their souls. They showed me resilience in the creativity of a child, the healing determination of a struggling patient, and the grounding support of a partner putting real hands and feet on love. As I joined them for the next steps of that laboring walk, listening to their story led me to begin asking new questions of myself.

From Sunday school to seminary I studied God the Creator, the Great Physician, and the Ground of Our Being. But suddenly here were all those things incarnated right in front of me, wearing a hospital gown and carrying a kidney tray. I began wondering how the theology I'd studied and professed was (and wasn't) aligned with what the very real scene in front of me showed me about the nature of God and God's relationships with humankind. Chaplaincy—and now CPE supervision—has become a series of wonderings like this, and it's the questions, often more than their answers, that help me engage my soul in ministry.

It brings me both deep peace and a bit of a grin that asking these tough

adult questions has brought me closer to the faith of my childhood in many ways. In my formative years, my Baptist tradition taught me that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ would save my soul. In my early adult years, many at my seminary scoffed at that language, and I gradually moved away from it. In chaplaincy I learned a third option: both/and. We have a richly varied and equally valid spectrum of understandings of what is ultimate for each of us; what is uniquely ultimate for me is centered on my faith in a personal relationship with God. Both of these truths are essential to my ministry.

When I consider scenes like this family's tableau, I don't have answers, solutions, or explanations—nor do they need them *from me*. What I have is relationship. I don't know where God is when a child dies or the brave survivor of a long struggle with illness dies suddenly from violence. All I know for sure is that I believe in relationship. I believe God is here—even when a situation leaves me feeling baffled, angry, or heartbroken—and that my soul is connected to God. As a chaplain, I am here, fully present, and what I can consistently offer is relationship, in whatever form best serves the spiritual needs of the person with whom I am ministering.

A former CPE student recently thanked me for helping her learn to ask better questions. It's one of the most meaningful affirmations I have ever received because for me it's the questions that help us connect with our own souls. It's the questions that help us understand the story we're telling ourselves about a current situation, and that understanding empowers us to choose whether we want to keep telling that story or consider another one. Is it a kidney tray or a ring pillow? Simply asking the question can help us click the kaleidoscope to form a new picture. Is it a wedding procession or a walk in the hospital? Maybe it's not the answer that matters so much as it is the question that lets you see that your soul is on a journey of love either way.

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