

Beyond Cliches: Helping Students Walk Hard Pathways

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He turned up at my seminary office door about mid-term. I was glad to see him for I had noticed in class a growing lethargy and disinterest. He began the semester with his most engaged, extroverted, self in high-gear. Now just coming to class was a mountain to climb. He was currently a youth minister in a local Baptist church, had been a successful track star in college, and seemed to be happily married. Or so he thought.

"Things are not going well at home," he began, somewhat sheepishly (presuming I would think that all Christians--not to mention ministerial students!--should have things all sorted out and in perfect relational balance). I knew that he was juggling two jobs, a full class-load, and the shared care of a baby. Financial distress, pressures from home, and a conflictual church situation had brought this gifted young man to a most painful juncture. His marriage was falling apart; they could no longer talk. They had married before finishing college; she was convinced that she had married the wrong person and was determined to see a former dating partner. Their little boy cried a lot, intuitively picking up the stress around him. My student friend had many questions, hard ones. That he had turned to me as his pastor required sensitivity, discernment, and reliable guidance. Quick answers would only reinforce a rather judgmental "Christians must always live victoriously" theology that had formed much of his

Christian identity. Thus, I pledged to walk this hard pathway with him, seeking solutions as companions in suffering.

Daily campus ministers' lives intersect acutely hurting college students. Cut off from home pastors, youth ministers, and the matrix of faith that nourished them, they turn to the caring presence of the campus minister. Some come without this foundation of support "back home" and contact you because of a student referral. The presenting problems are varied: differentiation from their parents; conflict in new living situations; illness or divorce in their families; fears about sexual-orientation; addictive behaviors of all sorts; the fraying of childhood faith in light of new challenges; vocational discernment; and, of course, issues involving self-acceptance in light of the grace of the gospel. You have worked in the university setting long enough to know that, in many respects, it is not an ivory tower. The most crushing problems humans can face are placed on the shoulders of the young adults with whom you minister.

How can we most effectively share the yoke of tragedy, pain, and suffering with those students God has entrusted to our care? When I remember to do some of the following, I am much more effective as God's tangible instrument.

First, we all know the importance of helping students to express what they are feeling. For them to be comfortable in doing this, we must create a "hospitable space" (to use Henri Nouwen's term) where they can enter fearlessly, trusting they will find acceptance. Hopefully, the phrase "you really shouldn't feel that way" does not come easily to our lips. Feelings have a certain sovereignty about them, as Wayne Oates taught me. They must be explored to discern their legitimacy; expressing them is a necessary first step in this process. Expressing one's feelings of fear, self-doubt, or

abandonment helps that one face the reality of the threat. It moves one from a state of denial or escapism to an honest evaluation of the present problematic circumstances.

Second, when the words "you ought..." rush to my mind, it is usually because I am not fully present to the individual, patiently listening and hearing the deeper undertones of the conversation. It might also mean that I am succumbing to that ever present temptation to arrogate to myself spiritual authority that belongs to God alone. I do believe, with Richard Foster in The Celebration of Discipline, "that God has more to say to us than any of us can hear by ourselves," yet we must be suspicious of any presumption to know exactly what is right for the life of another. I am finding it is much more helpful to see myself as a mirror, reflecting to the student what I sense God is doing in her or his life.

Third, we know the importance of the ministry of presence, but at times we attempt to carry the emotional load of too many hurting people. I have found it helpful to meditate on two biblical images, the "shared yoke of Christ" (Matthew 11:28-30) and the "sustaining circle of faith" (Acts 14:19-20) for perspective on proper investment of care.

The first image reminds me that I do not labor apart from the strengthening presence of Christ; the yoke of ministry to students is shared by the "true yokefellow." He bears with me the pain carried by the student, and thus each has a lighter load. Martin Luther put it this way: "When I suffer, Christ and all Christians suffer with me, and their strength becomes my own." The supply of strength is not dependent upon what I can muster, but in Christ's own presence, welling up within the relationship of walking alongside.

The second image reminds me that persons are sustained through community. The campus minister cannot be the sole source of care for the student in crisis. Just as the believers gathered around Paul, forming a "sustaining circle" that lent forbearing strength to the wounded apostle, so can the students in your context of ministry provide ongoing care for one experiencing life's brokenness.

An active member of the Baptist Student Center on a campus in Texas died a couple of years back. The campus minister offered great care and sensitivity. Not only did she, with much student assistance, conduct a memorial service on campus, but she also travelled to another part of the state to attend the funeral in the home church of the student in order to minister further to his family. She did not even try to do these significant acts of ministry by herself; students participated with her in every aspect of this acute trauma. She not only modelled for them an appropriate response to the tragedy, but included them in the pastoral care of the family and friends; indeed, she was strengthened in her role by their accompaniment in ministry.

Fourth, nothing carries more weight than telling one's own story; recounting the faithfulness of God in one's own struggle makes authentic "the hope that is within us." The words of the old hymn "God Will Take Care of You" come to life when we share our own experience of being sustained through great exigencies.

Sharing our own failures and griefs with our students allows them a close view of the healing and sustaining grace of God. We do not minister except as "stewards of our wounds," in Wayne Oates fine phrase.

This is much more important, I believe, than beginning with a theological explanation (or an informed attempt!) of the problem of evil, suffering, and pain (although this is a besetting temptation for a teacher

of theology!). Abstracting from or generalizing about "these kinds of problems" tends to trivialize or negate the reality of the pain of the present situation.

Finally, we must help students find some faith answers in the midst of personal difficulty. We are called to be reliable guides in the pathways of Christian living; hence, we must help replace the security blanket of a faith that is changing, that I refer to as "moving from a borrowed to a personal faith." Hand-me-down answers (perhaps perceived as no more than clichés at this point) will probably not suffice; the search for a gracious God amidst great upheaval mandates a more refined vision for life. This will require reconceiving divine and human responsibility (see my brief article, "Why Does God Allow Evil, Pain, and Suffering" in The Student, March, 1988, for a suggestive proposal).

Theodicy continues to provoke the serious thinker; noticing the inequities and tragedies inherent in human lives calls us to exercise a "faith that seeks understanding." Job-like we tenaciously cling to the goodness of God in the face of these; Sarah-like we sometimes cave in to ludicrous laughter at the thought of God salvaging promise and purpose out of the current horizon. We must not fear sharing with our students some of our own perplexity regarding the mystery of God's ways. Above all, I believe, we must avoid a fatalism or crass determinism that lumps all that occurs (tragedies included) under the rubric of God's will. Much occurs in the world that is against God's will; human freedom, the provisionality of creation, and the larger forms of systemic evil all contribute to life's incompleteness and dashed dreams.

How fortunate are college students who have a compassionate, accessible campus minister. In the critically formative years of higher education, our perceptive care for them can be instrumental in ensuring their ongoing participation in a life of faith. May we be properly attentive.