

I remember Mrs. Fortner: Self-serving ministry

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

A free association exercise: Random memories from the 18 months I spent as a chaplain intern at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas.

Computer lists of patients generated by the clacking dot matrix printer and folded neatly to fit into my coat pocket. My tiny notes and check marks slowly accumulating beside the names as the day went by.

The sound of Coyle, my supervisor, with his gentle southern accent and a well-polished shoe hanging from the leg he casually crossed over his knee as we sat in his office and explored the hidden parts of my life.

The student carrels where I found ancient books left behind by old Chaplain Bennet, the one who carried a clicker to record his visits and logged more pastoral care contacts per month than any chaplain in the history of the hospital.

“Howya doin’, Chaplain Bennet?”

“Fine Harry, how ‘bout you?”

Click.

The man with no tongue; the woman with no jaw; Mrs. Havens, self-appointed prayer warrior, doing battle with Satan in the family room while the doctor across the hall rubbed the paddles together and said, “Let’s try it one more time.”

And I remember Mrs. Fortner, sleeping peacefully under a fluorescent tube that cast a bluish light onto her arms and face.

Who was I? I can barely remember. I was 27, living in a mobile home with my wife and a new baby, our first. I was planning to continue the journey of the mind by earning a Ph.D. as soon as my time in the hospital was over.

I didn't know much about life then. My shadow self was slumbering peacefully in the depths of my being, awaiting the reveille of maturity. I paid no mind to the churning in my gut. I had no interest in talking about feelings or emotions, which of course meant that I was more completely owned by them.

Being the first-born son of two first-born children, I learned early that pleasing authority brought many dividends, the greatest of these being praise from a supervisor. Praise was the choicest of the emotional sweetbreads, handed down from on high with a pat on the back and with words of commendation recorded in some permanent record that I was sure existed somewhere.

I lived to please in those days. Authority figures first, then, if possible, every person who crossed my path. I wanted the woman delivering linens to like me. And I felt that having such a pure desire in my heart was one of the reasons I had been called into the ministry in the first place.

Most of my focus was reserved for looking good in our group sessions and making sure that I saw every patient on my floor. Every patient at Baylor Medical Center had to be seen by a chaplain; that was the policy. If a patient filled out a feedback card and "visited by a chaplain" was not checked, the offending intern would be confronted immediately.

So you can imagine my dismay, one Friday afternoon, when I discovered that I had somehow forgotten to visit Mrs. Fortner. The records indicated that she had been there, in a room at the end of the hall, for a week and that she would probably go home over the weekend.

My carpool was leaving in 15 minutes. I had just enough time to pay the good lady a quick call, check her off my list and go home to a nice weekend without worrying about a nasty confrontation the following week.

I knocked on the door softly, then pushed it open a little and called out, "Hello." There was no answer. Pushing the door open further, I saw that the light was dim.

"Mrs. Fortner? This is Gordon Atkinson, the chaplain. May I come in?"

Still no answer. But sometimes patients aren't able to speak, so I peeked into the room. Mrs. Fortner was sound asleep.

I felt a wave of irritation. I had to leave in a few minutes, and I needed to get this visit done before the weekend. I was afraid of being confronted with the very legitimate question of why she had been in the hospital for a week, yet I had not seen her. At that point I made a series of very selfish decisions that shame me even to this day. First, I tried to wake her. I called out her name a little louder.

“Mrs. Fortner!”

She didn’t move.

I called out louder still, with the same result. Mrs. Fortner was sleeping soundly, and the call of the chaplain was not bringing her back to this world.

I walked to the side of her bed and looked down at her peaceful face. She looked to be around 80 years old. She was very thin, and her grey hair was teased into neat, fluffy curls. But I really didn’t see Mrs. Fortner. She was only a means to an end for me. She was standing between me and a peaceful ending to my week.

I had entered a shadowy world of ethical contradictions. I was too honest to lie about the visit. I could have put a check by her name and claimed that I had visited her, though she didn’t remember it. For some strange reason I was unable to blatantly lie, but I was perfectly willing to disturb the rest of an elderly woman.

Leaning over her bed, I called her name one last time. “Mrs. Fortner?”

This time she heard me. Her eyes flew open and she shrieked in terror, waving her hands in front of her face. I tried to reassure her.

“Mrs. Fortner, it’s the chaplain. It’s okay.”

Her shrieking got louder. She held her hands over her face and moved her head back and forth, shouting, “No, no!” in a pathetic cry. When I tried to calm her down, she only cried out again.

Then I saw them—faded blue numbers tattooed on her forearm, faint and a little blurry, as if they had burrowed deeper into her arm over half a century. Of course I knew what those numbers meant, and my face flushed with shame.

My frantic attempts to comfort her were only making things worse, so I walked out of her room and down the hall, my mind reeling with black and white images of the

holocaust. In that moment the selfish nature of my actions became clear to me. God only knows what sort of horrible memories I awakened in that poor woman by startling her and standing over her bed like that.

I had hoped to avoid a weekend of anxiety. Instead I bought myself a weekend of doubt, sorrow and self-loathing. I was a somewhat overly dramatic young man focused only on my own life, and without much grace for myself or others. By Monday morning, I had decided that I probably shouldn't be in the ministry and confessed the whole episode to Coyle. I told him that I was seriously questioning my fitness to do the work of God. I feared there was no real compassion in me and that my only motivation was selfishness.

Coyle listened to the whole story without saying a word. When I was finished, he was quiet for a few moments. He looked right into my eyes, and it was hard for me to bear. I recall looking down at his perfectly shined shoes.

Then he spoke.

"Well, it was a shitty thing to do, no doubt about it. You caused that poor woman some pain and suffering. Yes, you did. But it strikes me that this is all still about you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, when you were in her room, you really didn't care about her. You were just there meeting your own needs. And now that it's over, it's still all about you. You're talking about your selfishness and your self-loathing. You, you, you. Did you ever stop to think that your call to the ministry might not be up to you? When did you start thinking that ANYONE is worthy to be a minister of the gospel?"

I was completely speechless.

"Gordon, your ministry will not be defined by your low moments, or by the mistakes you make, or by your own strength and worthiness. Your ministry will be defined by how you respond to the call of the Spirit of God. You need to own up to your own weakness and humanity. You need to find grace and forgiveness for yourself if you ever hope to point to grace and forgiveness for others.

"It was an ugly thing to do, and you did it. Okay, what have you learned about yourself, and how can you use this to be a better minister in the future?"

I stammered out a response. “I don’t know. How does a person learn to care more about others and quit thinking so much about himself?”

“Gordon, that’s a question that I can’t answer for you, but that answer is one you must find. If you plan to stay in the ministry—and I hope you will—you must be on a journey to find the wellspring of compassion that God has given you. I think you’ll find it, when the time is right.”

I nodded my head.

“I think you might begin this journey by promising that you will not forget Mrs. Fortner. Remember her and you will always remember what an ugly thing it is when a minister’s only motivation is to serve himself.”

Those were words of wisdom, and I have not forgotten them.

I am now in my 40s and have spent a good number of years in ministry. I am grateful to Coyle for his kind and true words. I’m sure Mrs. Fortner has gone on to meet her maker. If I could speak to her now, I would ask her to tell me the story of her life. I bet it was an interesting one, and I regret not taking the time to know her. I would probably apologize, but wouldn’t dwell on that part. I’d like to tell her that I have not forgotten her, and I have forgiven myself. I remember Mrs. Fortner, and because of her, I remember the best and the worst in me.