

Staying power: Our true vocation

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

The reason I am still in the ministry is because of the night I decided to leave the ministry. It was my day off. The phone rang, and it was the chaplain at a nearby hospital. Usually we would exchange pleasantries, but all she said was, “Come to the hospital—now.” I trusted the urgency in her voice and arrived in about ten minutes.

I found her with a young couple from our church I knew and loved. I sensed shrieks and sobs lingering in the room, which was eerily silent; the wife and then the husband fell onto my shoulders. I could hardly bear their weight as they gasped for words. Their child Caroline, whom I had baptized a couple of weeks earlier, had just been diagnosed with a malignant tumor intertwined with her spinal cord at the base of the brain. I couldn’t parse the news. Then a man in a white coat said, “We must go to Duke Medical Center—now.”

“Of course I will come too,” I assured them. The drive took forever, or maybe it was a few seconds; time had lost all meaning. Engulfed by Duke’s massive medical center, we were shuffled from one waiting room to another. No one spoke, and I felt particularly conspicuous for not speaking. *Say something!* I kept telling myself. Read a Bible verse, offer a prayer—something. But all I could do was cry, and then I would go numb, alternating helplessly between the two.

Another minister who knew the family materialized. His demeanor startled me: smiling, confident, speaking many words, assuring the parents with an utterly confident grin that “God will save your child if you just pray.” I’m ordained, he’s ordained—but I felt no kinship with him. I oscillated between wanting to strangle him and wanting to be more like him. Why have I never been able to be pious? When did I become the grim pastor who expects the worst? Sure, his style of pastoring seemed trite, absurd—and yet, what good was I doing?

About that time, the pediatric oncologist came in—calm, intelligent, well-trained, impressive. I remember him as being very tall. He had a plan. As he unfolded his strategy, I remembered those smart grown-ups who had advised me to go to medical school. And I wished I had, because as a minister I had nothing—literally—to

offer to these people I loved so much. Had I gone to medical school, I could do something.

I kept listening to him, hanging on every word, envy rising, regret surging. Not only should I have gone to medical school; I should not have gone into the ministry. I felt so impotent. I realized that I spent most of my days praying for people having gall bladders removed laparoscopically, or knees replaced metallically, and how ridiculously valuable my parishioners regarded me because of it. But here was a family in dire need, and I had nothing, absolutely nothing, to give. Reduced to tears, sitting in the corner, I knew some clever chap would console me by saying, “It’s the ministry of presence: you’re the embodiment of God’s church!” But Caroline’s parents desperately craved one thing only: the life of their daughter.

So I decided to resign and do something else—anything else—for the rest of my life. The details were fuzzy, but I knew I couldn’t live out the charade of praying for head colds and pacemaker installations when I was totally impotent in the face of real pain.

More tests were run. Surgery would be required early in the morning. The initial rush of family and friends began to drift away to other waiting areas. Some returned home. Caroline, having been poked and prodded, had been crying incessantly all afternoon and evening. Why was I still there? I am unsure why I was still hanging around; I suspect that Caroline was giving voice to my grief over a poorly spent life.

Then her parents asked me for a favor. “We are exhausted. Caroline won’t stop crying. Could you hold her for a little while so we can step out and take a little break?” And so I took this child in my arms and rocked her. She cried, and I cried, and then having expended all her energy, she drifted off to sleep. I kept rocking her until her parents came back, a little bit rested, relieved to see her more peaceful. We placed her gently in the crib, and then I left them, took the elevator downstairs, and stepped through the door into the night.

As I felt the chill against my face, I knew I would not quit the ministry. It was as if my whole life had been a preparation for this dark evening. All the wrestling with what career to pursue, counsel from professors, the books, papers, degrees, hurdles of ordination: I had been in training for this day, so that on this day I could drive to Durham and give two parents a little bit of rest—and to rock a very sick child to sleep, just to hold this little one who seemed to have as little hope as I did.

It was around midnight that I had to answer a question: Why did I go into the ministry? To do something grand and impressive? Or because I thought I might love somebody, some family, some child, in God's name? Holding Caroline, I wondered: isn't this what Mary did with Jesus when he was sick during the night? Didn't she embrace him when he was taken down from the cross? Isn't this what God Almighty had been doing with me all these years? And on one night, I was able to help. I held a child. I fulfilled my vocation, the small impotence of it all turning out to be the beauty.