In the realm of the nones: Reflections of a college chaplain

by Teri McDowell Ott in the January 6, 2016 issue

Monmouth College students trudge through snow on campus. Some rights reserved by Daniel M. Reck.

A few years ago a student at my college was referred to me for counseling because he was getting in a bit of trouble. Jeff was drinking too much and making some poor decisions. This behavior was out of character for him, and his professors thought it had something to do with the fact that his mother was dying of cancer.

When he sat down in my office, the first thing Jeff wanted to tell me was that he was "not very religious." He wasn't raised in the church, he said. He didn't know what he believed about God.

I couldn't keep myself from wondering why Jeff wanted to talk to me. If he's not religious, why didn't he make an appointment with our college's counselor?

Then it hit me. "Oh," I said. "You need to talk about death, don't you?"

Amid tears, followed by sobs, he nodded. He'd never experienced death before; not like this. He didn't know what to think or what to believe about what was going to happen to his mother. He asked, "What do you think's going to happen? What do you believe?"

Clearly this was a moment in which I could offer this young man some help—if I could find the words.

I figured that I needed to avoid churchy language. Referring to what the church or scripture says about death, eternity, or salvation was not going to work. This young man needed to know what I believed.

I told Jeff about sitting beside the beds of people named Frank, and Flossie, and Barbara after they had slipped from this life. I said how in those moments I felt a profound presence of love. Sometimes the love felt as thick as molasses in the room, like I had to swim through it to get to the bedside. "This love is what I believe is waiting for your mother, and what I believe is waiting for us all."

Jeff's eyes showed relief, maybe even a little hope. So I didn't go on to tell him that the love I felt was also mixed with a palpable sense of loss. And I didn't tell him how hard it was for me to be in that space, how inadequate I felt. He was going to find out soon enough.

When I entered an academic environment after 13 years in parish ministry, I was unsure how I would like serving a community of 18- to 21-year-olds. I love the intergenerational nature of the church, and I worried about becoming bored with the problems of the young. I had walked with church members through terminal illness, domestic abuse, and death, and I imagined that with students I would be dealing with homesickness or romantic breakups. But I have grown to cherish interactions with students, and especially with those who claim no religious affiliation. Something about my conversations with the nones feels more honest, more real.

This is not to say that my relationships in the church were false. But in church, when I didn't know what to say or what I believed or how I should act, I had liturgy I could read or a scripture I could quote that my people understood as authoritative. I could cloak myself in religiosity rather than reveal my fears and inadequacies. In the land of the nones, there is nowhere to hide. I cannot assume we share a religious vocabulary or respect for a common tradition. I am stripped of all my religious fallback positions. If I want to relate to the nones, the real Teri has to show up.

The Pew Research Center defines the nones as those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” In their latest findings about America’s religious landscape, the Pew Center determined that the percentage who are religiously unaffiliated has jumped from 16 percent in 2007 to almost 23 percent in 2014. These findings, as well as the nearly 8 percent drop in the number of those who identify as Christian, has led churches of all denominations to sound the alarm about their future.

At the conclusion of *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Christian Smith worries that “too many American adults—parents, teachers, professors, coaches, college administrators, pastors, and others—do not seem to adequately understand emerging adulthood and seem more interested in projecting their ideals and hopes for what they think young people today *should* be like than in actually understanding what they actually *are* like.” This is true for me too.

I recently sat down for coffee with Thomas, a junior from rural Illinois, who identifies himself as “interested in men” because he doesn’t believe the labels of “gay” or “homosexual” are adequate. I first noticed Thomas as a freshman at our college’s outdoor matriculation ceremony. He was sitting in the front row of his class of 400, wearing a suit and tie, even though it was blazing hot. While his peers looked scruffy, miserable, and bored sitting in the sun, listening to all the opening speeches, Thomas sat at the edge of his seat, attentively nodding his head to everything that was said. He struck me as independent and positive, someone I wanted to get to know.

I knew he wasn’t involved in any of our religious and spiritual life programs on campus, and as a young man “interested in men” from a small Illinois town, I imagined he would have plenty of negative things to say about the church. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Thomas is Roman Catholic, and proudly so. He describes the Roman Catholic Church as his “home” even though he is not currently attending and even though he disagrees with much of Catholic theology. When I asked him to share some of his impressions and experiences of churchpeople, he described them as “fantastic . . . good people who want to do good.”

“Haven’t you had any bad experiences with churchpeople?” I asked, thinking of the gay student I had counseled the year before who had been stung by his church’s

staunch views against homosexuality, as well as all the images I had recently seen on TV of Christians holding up hateful signs wherever marriage equality was debated. All he had to say in response was, “Well, my former priest was not a good person. He was angry and lacked compassion.” Thomas added, “But he was an alcoholic. He had his struggles.”

After my conversation with Thomas, I realized I had fallen prey to the exact problem Christian Smith identified: I thought I knew more about Thomas than I did.

Another unexpected story came from David, a 19-year-old Latino from the South Side of Chicago. David fits into the Pew Center’s category of a religious “switcher.” He was raised Catholic and attended mass regularly with his family growing up but now identifies as an atheist. I got to know David after he became a regular at a meditation group I lead. David also started attending a dinner and devotion program at our college’s Presbyterian House. I was surprised and pleased that David wanted to attend these explicitly Christian programs.

When I asked why, as an atheist, he attended our religious programs, he talked about being inspired by Eboo Patel, author of *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, and a leader in interfaith youth work.

Patel visited our campus last fall and described what he believes is one of the most important questions of our time: How will people of different faith backgrounds engage one another? How will we approach the lines of faith that divide us? David took Patel’s challenge to heart. “I think everybody should at least skim the book of other people’s religion. I think we should push ourselves a little bit. We’re all too comfortable with what we believe in.”

So that was why David started attending our Presbyterian House programs. “I wouldn’t be where I am now if I hadn’t crossed the faith line. I wouldn’t know what I do if I wasn’t immersed in someone else’s religion or religious practice. I see it as another class. I go to these programs and discuss ideas with people who are different from me, and I keep thinking about those discussions as I go through my week. It shapes the way I go about my life.”

I believe the church is wrong to approach nones by trying to save them. The belief that we have what they need isn’t just a turnoff. It ignores the fact that we need to work as hard to understand them as David does to understand people of faith. This

doesn’t mean that the nones do not have needs that the church can meet. There are many ways that we can save these young adults from the loneliness, anxiety, and hopelessness that often pervade their lives. But we must also realize that they can save us too—save us from an unexamined faith, from the temptation to pretend we are something or someone we are not, and from being overly certain or narrow in our understanding of others.

Until we honor the reality that we have something we can offer each other, our encounters will never be authentic or fruitful. If I can nurture opportunities where the religious and nonreligious can rub shoulders, then perhaps these young adults will go in search of these opportunities upon graduation as well.

A few years ago a young woman approached me following a program run by our department of philosophy and religious studies at which the meaning of life was discussed. Because I had attended these philosophical discussions before, I knew Emma was an atheist. When she approached me, though, she wanted to talk about worship. Apparently, she had attended the college’s Christmas Convocation. “One of my professors encouraged me to go. He said it wasn’t mandatory, but that it was going to be beautiful. I trusted him, so I went.”

Held in early December, right before final exams, the Christmas Convocation is a traditional candlelight and communion worship service shaped by the school’s Presbyterian tradition. For some students it is the first traditional Christmas service they have ever experienced.

The year Emma attended the theme was following the light. I preached on the Magi and their journey guided by a star. At the end of the service, we each lit a candle and sang “Silent Night.”

“I loved it,” Emma told me, “It was very intimate. Intimate because it was talking about searching for this light. Then, they handed out the candles, and we passed the flame from one to another, and it illuminated the entire room. I looked around and saw everybody’s faces brightened by the candlelight, and I thought about how we’re all here thinking something different, but we’re here together. It’s like we’re all different but also all the same.”

Emma then talked about her need for a sense of community and belonging. Like many other nones, Emma had grown up going to church with her family. She was a thoughtful, passionate young woman, who had decided years ago that she couldn’t

agree with her parents' beliefs about God. "But," she said, "I miss it. I miss being in that space. I miss being in that community and that feeling of being connected through our singing and our praying."

I ventured to ask, "So it sounds like you want to find a place where you can go to worship, be a part of worship, but where it's also OK for you to be who you are. Where it's OK for you to even not believe in God. Is this right?" Emma bowed her head to consider. "Yes. I think that's it."

I risked an invitation: "Why don't you try coming to our college's chapel services on Mondays? You can come and participate however you feel comfortable. Our chapel is so huge, you could even just slip into a far corner of the balcony, if you like. Just to see how it feels."

Emma seemed to appreciate my invitation to attend chapel on her own terms. I can never guess what college students will do with my advice. A few weeks later, however, at the chapel service I noticed someone sitting in the far corner of the balcony. The only way I knew it was Emma was because I followed a shaft of sunlight from a balcony window that had caught and highlighted her red, curly hair.

For months Emma kept slipping into chapel for the service and then slipping back out. The only thing that changed was where she sat. She started in the far corner of the balcony, then slowly made her way forward row by row, until she was eventually sitting downstairs, in the back row of the main floor.

Emma graduated two years ago. I imagine she still needs a place where she can be in community with others, while also honoring her own beliefs. I hope the church will go in search of Emma and those like her. I hope Christians willing to be vulnerable, uncertain, and real will seek these nones out. I yearn for my two worlds to come together—for the church I love and the nones I serve to know the salvation each has to offer the other. I yearn for more places where we, like Emma, can hold up a candle and be made aware that although we are all different, we are also all the same.