

Unreadiness

By [Tammerie Day](#)

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When I worked for a business consultancy, I loved the pace and the learning. We worked with companies trying to make large-scale changes as quickly and efficiently as possible. The rate of growth and learning and change in these companies was steep; people would say a month in this kind of hyperdrive was like six months in normal operations. As our team moved from company to company, we felt like we were operating in some kind of quantum drive, gaining years of experience in months.

A chaplain's 24-hour on-call in the hospital can feel like that, as if it is equivalent to six months of church life, but without the committee meetings. Yesterday I baptized a 24-week-gestation preemie who was not going to make it; I also baptized a 44-year-old cancer patient who also was not going to make it. There was a woman with dementia mauled by dogs, a baby whose head trauma looked heartbreakingly suspicious, and their families, struggling with both guilt and grief. The list goes on, as do the struggles. I know that my 24-hour slice of the lives of these people is just that: just one day, in their lives and in mine.

When you have reached your limit as a chaplain and yet there is another human being already out beyond her limits, and you need to reach out to her, that means you are both reaching past your limits into a space neither of you really wants to be in. You have to accept it may not go well at all, and yet the alternative is to leave the other alone, forsaken. And so you reach. Awkwardly or skillfully, with words or without—you reach.

When that happens, it can feel—to me anyway—like drowning. And suddenly I think I can imagine where clinical pastoral education came from. A chaplain somewhere, deep in the ocean of the night, finds a spar from a shipwreck and holds onto it, swimming toward morning light, bringing a couple of other people along, and then crawling up on a beach. Resting. Breathing. Then sleeping. And waking to wonder, how did I get here? And can I do it again? What will help me do it again? Because the dark ocean is full of people.

As these chaplains find each other, and compare stories, they realize they want to help each other not drown. And so, CPE. A process for learning not to drown, led by CPE supervisors. Such simple plain words for those who guide souls through the deeps.

Can I help, I wonder, when I still need so much help myself? Can I learn to be a helper of helpers? To do that, I have to take a breath and turn over, face down in the dark ocean of my own pain, loss, memory, and suffering. This is the first courage . . . the one I hope will lead to the others.

It is laughable—well, it's not, but I *have* to laugh—that one of the first communal steps in this journey toward becoming a CPE supervisor is called a “readiness assessment.” Let's just call mine an unreadiness assessment, and let me get on with it. I have a breath to take, and an ocean to face.

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