Richard was always asking for more than I could give

He came to our community meal for years before I realized that I was asking something of him, too.

by Amy Frykholm in the June 20, 2018 issue

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In the last months of his life, Richard often asked me questions I found deeply irritating. The most irritating was “Are you busy tomorrow?”

I was the mother of a young child. I had a full-time job. I often reached the end of the day feeling that I had emptied myself out. I was desperate for quiet, for solitude, for sleep. Yes, I was busy tomorrow.

Richard had been an engineer at the local mine until he fell into alcoholism, which had deprived him of his career and his family. But by the time I knew him he had drawn himself back into sobriety and regained a life.

He often came early to the community meal I helped to cook. He would already be waiting for me when I arrived with the key, sitting in the passenger's side of his little red Honda smoking a long brown cigarette. Until the very end of his life, he always brought a question of some philosophical or political import to ask me.

"How do you find the state of public education?"

"Have you read anything by bell hooks?"

"Do you think the judicial system ought to look at longer sentencing times or do you think we have too many people in prison already?"

Education, philosophy, history, race relations, spirituality—nothing was beyond his reach. He thought I ought to have something to say about all of these subjects, on the spur of the moment, because I have a Ph.D. I was qualified. While I made creamed chicken to put over biscuits, he would ask, "Do you think we need more stoicism in our churches or less stoicism?"

He was a little man, stooped over and growing more so. The stoop made his legs splayed so that he walked by throwing one leg out to the side and then dragging the other one along to meet it. The effect often made me think he was going to topple over. His questions seemed random to me, as if he were reading his way through the college library, stopping briefly at subjects that held his attention before moving on.

But as he grew older, the questions grew more pointed. For almost an entire year, he asked me every Tuesday, after I had unlocked the door and he had settled into his spot behind the counter: "Are heebie-jeebies the same thing as anxiety?" I tried answering the question in various ways, until I settled on a ritual response.

"Is that a philosophical question? You know I don't answer philosophical questions."

He would reply, also ritually, "But aren't you a doctor of philosophy? Isn't that what it says on your diploma?" He was the only person who reminded me of my diploma.

Richard lived alone in a little house on Chestnut Street, and he made specific rounds in his car. He drank coffee at the Diamond Shamrock, where he argued politics with

a few other men. He stayed late in the evenings at the college where he talked to the evening librarian, a former priest, whom he called his spiritual mentor. He came to the community meals, attended the Presbyterian church, and frequented the public library. Everywhere he went, he badgered and bantered people into friendship.

At the community meals, he would run the stubs of his fingers (he had lost parts of them to frostbite) along the edge of the cake tray and lick them, even though I had explained that this behavior was forbidden. He never hesitated to pick cheese off the top of a casserole or reach into a salad for a tomato. Other guests complained about his behavior, but nothing could really stop him. He had to have one more taste.

He had a certain charm. Maybe it was his endless curiosity. He never approached me with a lecture, only with a question. He always prodded and poked at truth in a dissatisfied way, as if it had once let him down and he was not going to trust it again. But he also couldn't leave it alone. He was endlessly interested—in people and in ideas—and he tried at times to be generous.

On the other hand, he was manipulative. To keep his driver's license, he badgered a worker in the sheriff's office into taking him out for a spin to authorize his driving. I guess he knew that if he went through the normal procedures, he'd have no chance of getting his license renewed. He asked me if I would write a letter to the DMV telling them that he was a good driver. I refused. License or no, he once drove himself to the veterans hospital in Denver for an eye operation. When I saw his little red car parked outside the church the following Tuesday, I was both relieved and angry.

His curiosity was genuine but also a guise for attention, especially female attention. He never stopped gaming for it. If we had a volunteer at the meals who was a nurse, he could be relentless in asking me for her phone number. A female nurse, he seemed to think, was the ideal companion for him. He longed for women to serve him in ways that would make him feel loved. He was not above infantilizing himself for this attention. This is how he had gone through three marriages. The last one had been to a young woman from the Philippines. People in our small town still tell the story of seeing the two of them walking on the street—she impatiently ahead, he dragging himself behind—while they argued. Eventually, she left to work at a casino in another town.

Though I could see this dynamic and even despise it, I fell into it. Richard spent some time in and out of the hospital with a variety of ailments. Each time he returned home a little bit slower, more limited, and more reckless in his expression of need. Soon he could not drive. Even when he couldn't make it to the Diamond Shamrock, he still wanted one of their enormous coffees half full of artificial creamer. He asked his many friends, including me, to help him out.

"Did you make your split pea soup?" he would call and ask.

"No."

"Oh. You know I like that. With the ham in it."

"Yes, I know."

"Do they have any creamy peanut butter at the church?"

"I don't know. I'll have to look."

"I like the creamy. Do they have any pumpernickel bread?"

"I don't know."

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

It wasn't that I couldn't drop by Richard's house with a coffee or take him on an errand or go with him to the Golden Burro for a cinnamon shake or take him to the library for a few hours with his spiritual mentor. It was just that his need became a great abyss, and I was always standing on the precipice of it. As far as I could tell, he would ideally have liked me to bring him breakfast in the morning, help him run errands, then drop him off at the library, and make one last trip out in the evening to bring him home. Perhaps that would have satisfied him. Everything else was a disappointment, subject to his sighs and innuendo.

One day, I walked into Richard's house with a coffee, trying to relieve, I admit, the amount of responsibility I felt. I was trying to make a little deposit on what was due in our account as I imagined it, even while knowing the economy was wrong somehow.

I felt like I was making deposits in an account that was always overdrawn.

There, on his bed, was a pile of feces. I had hoped to breeze in, smile, be a good person. He would be happy to see me. He would be grateful for the coffee and glad that the “girls” at the Diamond Shamrock had given it to me for free, knowing it was for him. He would feel loved and remembered. I would feel I had done something meaningful and gotten his day off to a good start. And in front of me, there was a pile of shit. I retched.

Richard was sitting on the edge of the bed, partially dressed, feet in slippers.

“Richard,” I said. “I brought you a coffee.” I kept my eyes carefully averted.

“Oh,” he said.

“I’ll just put it over here.”

He grunted.

I left.

I called Richard’s friend Dan, who had been overseeing some of his care. “I think Richard needs more help,” I said.

“Yeah,” Dan said. “I know. That’s what my wife says. She says he has got to go to the extended care unit. But he is just against it.”

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know.”

The last time I saw him, before his death, I came by with a loaf of bread and some soup I had made at the church the day before.

I knocked and heard him yell, “Come in.” He was dressed and out of bed.

“I made myself some oats,” he said. “And I took my pills.”

“There wasn’t any pumpernickel,” I said.

“Aw, that’s all right.”

“Do you want me to heat this soup up for you?”

“Sure,” he said.

I went to the kitchen and saw the pot of oats on the stove. I put the rest in a bowl and rinsed out the pot. I heated the soup and then brought it to him.

“Thanks,” he said. He sat on the edge of his bed and ate. I pulled up a chair.

“Are you busy today?” he asked. I took a deep breath.

“A little,” I said. “I am leaving on Thursday for my parents’ place.”

“Oh,” he said. The disappointment hung between us, our third companion.

“That urinal over there is full,” he said at last.

I glanced over in the corner at a plastic container. We had once again, after only a few minutes, reached my limit, as if he were intentionally looking for it, searching for the place I could not go, asking for what I could not give.

“Oh,” I said. We both paused. I took a deep breath.

“Are you asking me to empty it for you?” My voice was soft, but nervous. “Because I don’t think I am up for that.”

“No,” he said and shrugged.

I carried his soup bowl back to the kitchen to rinse it. I walked past discarded oxygen tanks, ashtrays, and boxes of Franzia cabernet. I wondered if he had started drinking again to deal with the heebie-jeebies.

“Well, Richard, I will see you when I get back,” I said.

“Yep. OK.”

I see now that I feared the dissolution of the boundary between Richard and myself just as I feared handling his fecal matter. I did not want to belong to Richard the way that a mother belongs to her baby, or a nurse to a patient, or a daughter to her dying father.

I see also that both of us were making failed transactions. I was trying to make deposits in an account that always seemed overdrawn. He was trying to withdraw love and spend it heedlessly. We both needed some other way of relating to each other.

In his book on Dostoevsky, theologian Rowan Williams asks readers to imagine a community of language and feeling in which we know what we owe each other, a community that “no amount of failure, suffering, or desolation could eradicate.” In order to imagine such a community and begin to embody it, we might have to experience our need for that community through our own shortcomings. In our own ways, Richard and I were both looking for that kind of community. We sought an economy of grace and love bigger than any of our transactions.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Requests without end.”