

Prayer in the face of deep pain

It can feel like a feeble offering to pray, but I find it harder not to.

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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There are questions that I encounter as a pastor that haunt me. I'm not necessarily thinking about the usual suspects here. Questions about the existence of God or why we suffer or the challenge of pluralism or the historicity of this or that biblical story or the conundrums of interpreting this or that passage or doctrine. These all represent familiar enough terrain and present their own challenges to faith. But the questions I'm thinking about today are much more personal in nature.

I'm thinking of questions like "I'm afraid to die—does this mean my faith is weak?" or "What do I do with my crushing loneliness?" or "Why are people so mean to me? Is something wrong with me?" These are the kinds of questions to which the first

(and sometimes last) response is often just a sad shared silence. This is life and faith beyond abstraction, beyond “belief system,” beyond words like *ritual* and *shared practices* and *wisdom*. These questions emerge out of a wound, not an idle curiosity or even an existential hunger. I am more comfortable with abstraction. I suspect many of us are.

The latest haunting question came recently at the jail. A young indigenous woman leaned forward with tears in her eyes and interrupted more prosaic streams of conversation with this: “Can I ask a question? I don’t know how to say it, but ... I really wanna know. How do I get unstuck? I’m so tired of making the same mistakes, going back to the same people and problems. I don’t want to, but ... So, I don’t know ... I guess I just wanna know how to get unstuck.” Her words dripped with urgency, longing, dread, and pain.

The “experts” in the room—the chaplain, the volunteer, the pastor—stumbled and bumbled toward a response. We acknowledged how hard it is. We talked of incremental change and the importance of community. We talked about how God is “present in the journey” (and possibly shuddered while saying it). But sometimes even true things can sound hollow in certain contexts. It’s one thing to feel like you’re in a rut at work; it’s quite another to feel stuck in patterns of addiction and abuse and relational chaos and poverty and incarceration. Some patterns seem more daunting than others. We are not all equally stuck.

And yet, I suspect that even as I grieved for the specific ways in which this young woman was stuck, I was also recognizing myself and many of my peers in her words. I suspect we all get to a certain point in life where the word *stuck* can easily creep into our vocabulary. Passion for the job seems more elusive, the sizzle of a marriage wanes, faith seems remote and inaccessible. In whatever domain of life, we settle into familiar and predictable rhythms. We realize that there are things about our lives, our communities, our world that are rather hard to change.

I was talking with my wife about this recently. Statistically, I suppose we’re at about the halfway mark of life. Of course, we could have far less than this but, you know, statistically. What do we want to accomplish? What should we be devoting these next decades (God willing) to? Is *accomplishment* even the right word to be using in pondering the road ahead? We spend so much time educating, accumulating, working, and thinking ourselves into some conception of the “good life” (house, kids, money in the bank, securing the right social standing, etc.). It’s easy, as David

Brooks says in his latest book [The Second Mountain](#), to “become strangers to [our] own desires.” Getting stuck is the easiest thing in the world to do.

I thought of all these things as I drove home from the jail on Monday. I thought about how it’s not just individuals who get stuck, but relationships, businesses, churches, institutions, even cultures. And I prayed. For all who feel stuck and for all the ways in which we need to get unstuck to live the lives we were created for. For all who are spinning their wheels and yearning to find that place in the world where they can contribute in meaningful and life-giving ways, where they can love and be loved well.

But mostly, I prayed for this dear young woman who so desperately wants to walk down better paths. The words felt useless as they fell off my lips. My prayer for her felt more like an inarticulate ache for the fullness of life that she so obviously longed for, and against which so many factors in her life conspired. It’s not vocational satisfaction or personal fulfillment on the line for her. It’s almost literally life and death.

Prayer can feel like a feeble offering indeed in the face of human pain, but as hard as it can be to pray, I often find it harder not to. I simply held her tear-stained face in my mind and pleaded on her behalf to the One who said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst ...” I said, “Well, God, you say ‘blessed are ...’ so can I please call in a blessing for one of your dear children? And not a pious abstraction, if you please. Not a hypothetical future happiness but something for a pretty screwed-up present. And if you need someone to tag along as you bless, I’d be happy to help.”

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