

The human moments of pastoral care

There's something uniquely precious about being physically present with people.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



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Few responsibilities within the breadth of pastoral ministry strike me as more rewarding than calling on people in their different conditions of life. I've long subscribed to the notion that a sermon is only as good as a preacher's last pastoral call. While this doesn't mean a pastoral visit should ever serve a merely instrumental purpose, it does imply that the joy of connecting personally with other people brings tremendous depth, perspective, and richness to life.

I was in John's hospital room late one evening because he called and asked for my presence. Sleepless the prior two nights, he was convinced I was the remedy for his restlessness. Upon sitting down, I realized that this visit had nothing to do with his surgery. John was interested in sharing what he called the "dark secret" that had been coiled up inside of him for decades: he had been sexually molested by a

Catholic priest when he was young. Our conversation was sober but genuine. He poured forth painfully. By the time I left, I think I persuaded him to let go of any fanciful idea that a single person or conversation would resolve this trauma.

Midmorning the next day, while on my way to Verna's house, John called to report that he'd slept pretty well. As for Verna, she was close to death. It was my luck to arrive in time to be greeted by her three adult children. At one point, I leaned over to stroke her 99-year-old face. Such smooth skin to bless. Her sons talked me through the family photos on the wall. I kept coming back to the one of Verna's grandmother, born way back in 1856.

After lunch, I stopped by the hospital to see Rose. I'm pretty sure she hasn't been around church for 25 years, though I remembered her name the instant a friend asked if I'd visit. A lung procedure two weeks earlier had triggered an autoimmune disorder that shreds nerves in horrific ways. She told me that every morning, with her fingers feeling like fire and her face tingling as if frostbitten, she asks the nurse, "Can you touch my feet and assure me they're not rock?" We laughed, prayed, and embraced.

Before supper, I squeezed in a long overdue nursing home visit to see Diane. Her physician and children recently told her it's time to move to memory care. "I know I'm not what I was," she said sadly. "But why didn't they ask my opinion? Just because they tell me I laid on the floor one night doesn't mean I hurt myself. Maybe I *wanted* to sleep on that floor." She received the bread and wine from my hands like medicine for a crumpled soul.

This 24-hour slice of pastoral calling occurred the same week that Mark Zuckerberg announced plans for a metaverse future. Few concepts hold less appeal for those of us who thrive on truly human moments. A human moment is psychiatrist Edward Hallowell's term for an authentic human encounter that has two prerequisites: people who are physically present to one another and who are emotionally and intellectually engaged. Let the tech giants get excited to equip people with virtual headsets so they can hang out and hop around in cyberspace as little avatars. As for me, I'm planning to stick with precious human moments—the stuff of life.

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