

“Wading in the Water”

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How are you?

This is a seemingly simple, three-word question. How are you? Yet, sometimes asking the question “How are you?” isn’t really asking about another’s well-being. A friend once observed that when you are on the phone with your partner, saying “I love you” can mean everything from “you mean more to me than life itself” to “I am running late and have to get off the phone.”

In the same way, “How are you?” can be a true inquiry into someone’s emotional, physical and spiritual health and it can be just acknowledgement of another’s existence. Back when we regularly shopped in stores, who hasn’t been greeted by a clerk asking “How are you?” or “How are ya?” Such a casual relationship between clerk and patron suggests they don’t want to learn about the state of our soul and are merely saying “Hello” with words that, in a literal sense, mean something else.

As a minister, I am interested in the state of people’s souls so I often ask this question with intention. If I am visiting someone with a serious illness or living through profound grief, I usually don’t ask “How are you?” as such a question is emotionally tone-deaf. How do you think I am? they could rightly reply. So I ask instead, “How are you feeling today?”

Those who have known me for awhile know I also often ask a question from the Quaker tradition: “How is it with thy spirit?” This is another way of making clear that we are creating a space together where you are invited reflect on your emotional, physical and spiritual health.

As the pandemic goes on, I have read articles that argue that asking “How are you?” is now always the wrong question. How do you think I am? we could all reply. Perhaps we need an alternative. Formal, old-fashioned Chinese includes a phrase, used among friends, that is one-part question, one-part greeting that gets more to the heart of self-care: “Have you eaten?”¹ This would be a fine question

¹ <http://blog.tutorming.com/mandarin-chinese-learning-tips/why-do-chinese-people-ask-have-you-eaten>

to ask each other these days.

Throughout our quarantine time, the staff and other leaders of the congregation and I have been dwelling on the question “how are you?,” in the most intentional way. We care about you and how you are navigating this strange new territory.

Yet, even when posed most sincerely, there have been times I would not know how to answer my own question. I have been feeling many things – sorrow with the loss of our members, fear about the future, peace from my time in solitude, inspiration from the many ways we have adapted how we do ministry together and have responded to this crisis with generosity, compassion and love. Through it all, my short-term memory and executive functioning have decreased exponentially. With this ebb and flow within, my state of being changes regularly and I do not know what I need. I imagine I am not alone.

Long ago, we planned a “healing service” for this Sunday. We weren’t sure what this would be, just that it would be a service with a somewhat different format focused on facilitating a healing experience for participants. We chose this Sunday as it is Mother’s Day, a holiday that, it itself, can inspire complex emotions that warrant some attention. And we chose Mother’s Day as the archetypal Mother is one who knows what we need before we do, one who offers nurture, care and healing. Now that we are in a pandemic, if there is ever a time when we want our moms, it is now.

Our Pastoral Care Associates team regularly reads a book related to pastoral ministry. This year, we read a book about providing end-of-life care.² Together, we learned the story of Henry, a story that has, at its center, the truth that we often don’t know what we need until it heals us. This is Henry’s story.

Henry became a widower at a young age when his wife died in an accident. He never remarried, instead committing himself to his role as a high school music teacher. It became the center of his identity.

One terrible night, Henry and a car full of teenagers drove off a bridge as they tried to get to a musical performance in the middle of a bad storm. One young woman died instantly and Henry almost drowned. The other passengers were

² *The American Book of Living and Dying*

able to get help and pull Henry from the water but he suffered brain damage from the lack of oxygen. He was in a coma.

Months went by. Doctors, in consultation with his loved ones, made the hard decision to remove him from life support. But he did not die. As it clearly was not his time to pass,

Henry's team did everything they could to pull him out of his coma. Knowing his love of music, they invited a harpist to come play by his bedside every Thursday evening. Sometimes a hand or eyelid would twitch but he was, for the most part, unresponsive.

One evening, a cleaning woman entered his room. She had a small radio on her cart, quietly playing the gospel station. The song "Wade in the Water" came on. A moment later, Henry asked the woman, "Could you get me a glass of lemonade?" When she told the nursing staff about his question, they rushed to his bedside. He was awake and lucid.

Henry shared his experience of being in a coma. He said it was like being somewhere between life and death. Part of him was still in the cold river from the accident. Another part of him could leave his body and travel great distances. His descriptions of what he saw were verified by others who were there themselves. Henry said he appreciated the thought behind the harpist but harp music wasn't his thing so he would often leave on Thursday evenings.

At some point, when he was back in the river, he had a conversation with the young woman who died in the accident. She assured him that she was okay and her spirit was at peace. A huge relief washed over him. Then, when he heard the familiar strains of "Wade in the Water," he knew it was time to come back.

The lesson for us as care providers is that we can make many assumptions about what another needs but sometimes it is an unintended connection, a woman passing by with her radio, for example, that heals us. As the water was Henry's gateway between life and death in the accident, it makes sense that this particular song would help him navigate these two worlds.

I recently learned about the history of this song.³ It draws inspiration from the Book of John, chapter 5, verse 4: "For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole..." It is a song about healing.

How can we be healed if we don't know what we need? Perhaps this is a time for us to go "wading in the water," a time to try new and different ways to nurture ourselves and one another to see what satisfies our thirst.

In this spirit, the remainder of the time usually dedicated to the second reflection will be shared with spiritual leaders in our community, offering their paths to wholeness...

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wade_in_the_Water#Meaning