

It was the most frustrating assignment in the summer clinical pastoral education program at the former Georgia Retardation Center in Atlanta: serving as chaplain to 40 non-verbal, developmentally challenged, acutely ill institutionalized children. I spent hours reading medical charts and reports, sitting in on consultations, conferring with nurses and doctors, all in an effort to learn more about the little ones in my care. It was my usual way of navigating a new situation, but this time, my usual way failed me. By week four of my residency, my supervisor pulled me up short, "You know a lot ABOUT your clients but you do not KNOW your clients. Get out of your head!" I panicked at the thought of failure, and not knowing what to do, I wandered through a labyrinth of non-descript green halls until I came to the small room where two toddlers, a brother and sister, lay motionless in gaily decorated matching cribs. They were the children of two Polish Ashkenazi Jews whose parents were Holocaust survivors. Both toddlers had inherited a genetic disease, Tay Sachs, which left them incapacitated and in constant pain. They would soon die, and knowing that had filled me with despair.

This particular morning I plopped down on a rusty, lopsided folding chair between the toddlers' cribs, my head in my hands, and let their moans drown the sound of the pity party playing in my mind. Totally absorbed with the fear of failure, I did not hear the toddlers' parents walk in the room until a very pale, thin man with a wispy beard began to fiddle with the mobile suspended over his son's crib. He startled me, and I sat bolt upright on eye level with a very pregnant belly. My shock must have been obvious because the young woman protectively cradled the roundness and said, "We know. We know that we may be bringing another child into the world with this disease." I stared in disbelief at the toddlers' parents, "Then why?" I asked as their children's cries filled the small room, "Why would you do this? How could you do this?"

Rather than tackle my questions, the father pulled up some folding chairs and he and his wife sat down facing me. Instinctively they reached for each other's hands and began rocking back and forth while singing a song in Yiddish. I did not understand a word, but I felt their grief - so raw, so searing - and I had to look away. In the eternity that followed, they shared a story with me about extended family and village life in rural Poland; a life centered around a small but vibrant synagogue. It was a story that changed overnight to include ghettos and cattle cars, round-ups and starvation, forced labor and "showers", acrid smoke and mysterious disappearances. The newest chapter of this story included dislocation and immigration - first to Israel and then to Atlanta and a small neighborhood where they could walk to synagogue - to seek medical treatment for two grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

"I don't understand how you can have any kind of faith," I confessed. It seemed like the truest thing I could say in the moment. Without batting an eye, the couple grabbed my hands and the fingers of their dying children and they began to sing - the same song, but this time in English. I imagined it a song passed down from generation to generation, father to son, mother to daughter.

*As long as a soul still yearns,
and an eye still watches;
our hope is not yet lost.
The children of Israel still liveth.*

Later I discovered that this song was a 19th century Jewish poem sung by Jews as they crossed the threshold into the “showers” of Auschwitz and Birkenau. On this particular day, however, it was a song sung by two young parents who, despite evidence to the contrary, clung to the hope that the God who centuries earlier knit together a village of dry bones scattered in the dust of a valley of despair (Ezekiel 37) would fill a small room with Life.

I remembered this decades-old visit between two observant Jews and one doubting pastor-wannabe as I listened to Steve Bell read the words of an impossibly courageous 16 year old prophet and environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, “I don’t want your hope. I want you to panic.” Looking back, I wish that in that startling moment when time seemed to stand still, I had reached for the hands of the ones seated beside me and urged us all to hum an old Jewish song of hope for I believe all of us in that room understood with frightening clarity that we carry in our hearts the unspoken losses which time inflicts on us and our loved ones. It may be that the best thing we can do in the face of loss, then, is to muster a bit of courage to crawl, not sprint, through time, and in doing so, fill the skies with a resounding “NO!” to panic. Maybe, just maybe, if we simply hold hands, perhaps collectively we will find ourselves brave enough to sit with grieving parents and millions of young protestors as they grapple with the recognition that that our individual endings are NOT the ending of everything and that beauty, healing, wholeness, peace, love, joy, and yes, even hope remain possible once we are gone, for such is the promise of the God of Life.

Prayer practice: Sit quietly with God you meet in Psalm 46.