

The gift

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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For as long as I can remember, I've been told that I'm good at empathizing with others; that it's one of my gifts.

One of my father's most treasured memories of when I was maybe 3 years old was a moment when he was seated at his desk, the burdens of the world weighing heavily on his shoulders, and I climbed into his lap and just cuddled with him. I apparently sensed what he needed, and I provided it as best as a toddler knew how to do.

I'm glad for that story, and I've mostly been glad for this gift that I've apparently been given. I don't really brag about it, because I don't think it's something brag-worthy. It's not only the nature of the gift, you understand. It's also that I haven't always been proud of it, or wanted it.

I was the kid on the playground who got upset when watching two classmates fight. I was the sensitive guy in high school who was the safe confidant for those around him. I was the guy basically holding pastoral counseling sessions in his dorm room in college, because I was always the good listener, the dependable one who'd be there for others in a pinch, the one who'd defer to other's stated desires at the expense of his own.

A guy like me can get taken advantage of fairly easily. I can point back to many instances over the years when my needs took a backseat to those of others. But people saw this as a commendable thing. They'd even offer compliments and reassurances to that effect. At times, there's a fine line between sincere appreciation and ass-kissing, but I took it as a reaffirmation that I'd been given something. A gift. The type of gift that a good pastor needs.

This is what I was told over and over. "You're such a great listener." "You're always there when I need something." "Finally, someone I can trust."

I internalized all of it. This was the right and good thing that I was doing; this was what I could offer to the church and to the world.

When the right personality mixes with an empathetic, sensitive, "gifted" one, the wrong sorts of things can happen.

I've been called out on this before. Don't let yourself get taken. Say what you need. Tell them what they should hear. Give tough love. Breathe fire.

Breathe fire.

I wanted to, so badly. I wanted to shut off the emotional valve, to close up that part of myself that would allow me to give in, to feel, to defer.

Then, one day, I did.

I finally reached a point where I'd given too much of myself away. The right personality had gone to the well one too many times. I'd burned out, and decided no more. No more giving in. No more deference. No more getting taken. Just show up, do what's needed, and leave. And if necessary, breathe fire.

I locked the gift away. I no longer needed it. It was time to do something else. It had caused me too much pain.

The problem was that I kept being a pastor. And when you serve as a pastor while leaving your emotion at home, you can only be of so much good. Sure, you can do the basic stuff. You can probably get away with writing a decent sermon and saying something interesting during Bible study, but if that's all you think ministry is, you're not doing much.

The phone call came on a Saturday evening. A man was having surgery in the next week. A strong man. A husband and father of three. An EMT with the fire department. Tumors in his abdomen and leg and so many other places that had made its way into his lymph nodes. The church had been praying, the community had been rallying and showing the family such incredible, unprecedented amounts of love.

The cancer in his leg had become so unbearably painful that they were going to amputate.

What did this mean for him afterward? They'd cross that bridge later. What mattered was pain management, quality of whatever earthly life he had left.

Sunday night, I sat in my living room, thinking about the visit I'd make the next morning. I'd head in and pray beforehand. I'd sit and hold the hands of this man and his wife, and I'd say some small thing to God about healing and comfort and assurance. I'd search for the right words to say and hope that someone would hear them.

I thought about all of this, and the gift decided that it was tired of being locked up.

Every dimension of this situation came at me at once. What would this mean for this family's future? What were the kids going through? Why does this crap happen at all? What difference would my presence make? The accompanying emotions washed over me, and I let them. Fighting them would only make things worse.

Time seems to slow down in a moment like that. I don't know how long I was there, releasing every last sigh too deep for words into the universe, but I knew that I had to stay with it until I was really finished.

And then a voice from some deep internal place said, "This means you're still human. You couldn't resist it forever. This is who you are. Just be wiser about it this time."

With that, I was as ready for the next morning as I could be. The one who'd given me this thing would be there, and maybe do something through me or despite me. I didn't know which, and I wasn't going to dwell on it. The very least I could do is show up. Not just drive there, not just walk into the room, but really show up. I'd know the gravity of the moment, even if it was fully possible I'd be worthless in the face of it. At least I'd know, and at some level I'd want to understand.

I have a gift. I haven't always loved it, but it's mine.

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