

The fear of irrelevancy

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I went on a walk along the bay in Rhode Island. It was the path I took daily, so I was sure footed and looking at the horizon, until I almost stumbled upon an animal corpse. I'm not sure what it was. It was so bloated and distorted—spots of brownish gray fur, the size of a small dog but with much tinier legs. It smelled of warm rot and I became immediately afraid.

I stood over it, watching the flies swarm until my heartbeat settled. Then I thought how odd it was that I would be scared of the body. It was natural for animals to die, and she just looked as if she succumbed to the ravages of old age.

Death is scary, I thought to myself as I walked away. I wasn't sure exactly why. Perhaps the fear upon seeing the dead animal had awoken some ancient part of me—the part that had been passed down by some mystery of evolution. Maybe I inherited the fear from a time when humans needed to worry more about disease or attacks. Perhaps the fear signalled a deeper connection with the animal, and triggered a sense of my own mortality.

Anyways, I held on to that mysterious emotion. I labeled it and categorized it in my head so that I could recognize it. And I notice it coming up in strange places, especially in my job.

I felt it when a member of our governing church body told me that the church I pastored would die soon. I began to smell the stench in the air and I became afraid. (The church is doing fine, by the way.)

Oddly enough, I sensed the fear when I turned forty, and I was suddenly excommunicated from all the “young clergy” groups that had nurtured me for so many years. I began to wonder, *Am I completely irrelevant now? Lilly no longer cares what I think?*

I feel it when I read how a new generation is not going to church. I know I wrote a book on the missing generation eight years ago, but now that the [NYT is reporting on the trend](#), it just seems a little more real.

I smell it when pastors read [my column](#) and they ask me, “What about my traditional church? Does it have a future?”

And I remember yet again, death is scary. Irrelevance is scary.

Let’s be honest. Apart from a few oddities, most of us are church leaders because we love God and want to do some good in the world. We want our lives to matter. And perhaps that’s the scariest thing of all. We can become afraid that everybody else is doing something of consequence, and our work just isn’t important, creative, substantial, authentic. It’s just not [insert the latest churchy buzzword here].

But let me tell you, and let me remind myself—your work matters. You might be serving a church that has five people over the age of 80, and that matters. You might be smelling death all over the place, and that still matters. You may be completely clueless about how to turn around decades of decline and budgets that have been bleeding, but your work matters. You might not know how to reach out to millennials, but you’re still doing a fine job.

We’ve never had callings that made much sense. We can’t always tell what we have accomplished at the end of the day. But even when we have nothing to point to, faithfulness matters. Am I saying that we’re perfect? No. Am I saying that we do not need to change? Of course not. But many of us are doing the best job that we can, and we need to remember that it’s also the job God has called us to.

So let’s keep going to work, shall we?