

Ministry is out of control

Being a pastor is like jumping into a river. You have to let the current take you.

by [Charles Lattimore Howard](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue



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It carries us away. Outside of the cities we live in. Outside of ourselves. The river is ecstatic. Jumping in, we risk everything. We risk losing ourselves. We risk not coming back. We risk sinking to the bottom. We risk allowing the Current to guide us rather than being guided by our own feet on the banks.

From time to time I sit on the banks of the river that runs through my city. Those who first walked this land and those who first swam this river named it Toolpay Hanna, which in the language of the Lenape means "Turtle River." When the river was (re)discovered by the exploring Dutch, they named it the Schuylkill River, which means "Hidden River." Leaving my desk, I find my way to its banks. And sit. And

dream. And imagine what it would be like to jump in. I'm a good swimmer. I'd be fine. But that isn't going deeper. I want more than just a brief dip in the waters.

Faith is jumping in and letting the Current take us where It wants. It's dangerous. There are painful rocks beneath the surface that we might strike a foot on. We might be bitten by something that dwells within. We might go over the waterfall. We might not come back out of the river. While trusting and allowing the Current to guide us brings life and love, there is a cost. That cost is the forfeiture of our perceived control.

I first contemplated this notion of not being in control during my season as a hospital chaplain. My first night on call at the hospital where I did clinical pastoral education, I had no idea what I was getting into. I had just turned 23. A year before I was living in a frat house and finishing up college, and now I was visiting hospital patients, baptizing babies, and giving last rites.

For our first overnight on-call shift, the young chaplain interns in my program were given the opportunity to shadow a veteran chaplain. The gentleman I shadowed was a Lutheran pastor who felt called to chaplaincy. He was about 40 and had been at the hospital for two years. I remember the anxiety I felt when the rest of the chaplaincy department left at the end of the workday, leaving the two of us to keep watch over the whole hospital. We began by making rounds on each of the floors, checking in with each department's head nurse to see if there were any patients who could use a visit. These cold-call visits brought us in touch with people who were awaiting surgery, recovering from surgery, being treated for heart trouble, waiting to deliver a baby, and more.

About two hours in, the pager went off. We were called up to the room of a man who was afraid because of his pending surgery. I kept quiet while the more experienced chaplain listened and tried to be present with everything the man was feeling. In the middle of our prayer we were called to the labor and delivery floor, where we were asked to pray for a prematurely born baby girl. We left that room to respond to a page for a dying woman whose family wanted prayer. Nearly out of breath after racing up the stairs and down the hall, we arrived at a room holding more people than it was designed to. The African-American family surrounding the bed could have been my own. The aged saint covered in white sheets might have been one of my grandmothers. She had a stillness known only to those who are minutes from seeing God.

After brief introductions, we held hands in a circle and my mentor chaplain offered a prayer commending her soul to God “from whence she came.” While we were still in prayer, the machines signaled to us that she had passed away. After hugs and condolences, my teaching chaplain and I left the room. Standing by the elevator, he asked how that was for me. He must have seen the tears on my face. I replied: “It was beautiful and painful. Awe-filled and scary. And if I’m being honest, it pushed a few of my buttons with my mom and my dad both passing aw—.” I didn’t even finish my thought before the pager went off again, alerting us to the fact that a trauma patient was on the way to the hospital.

With speed, we made our way down the stairs and through various shortcuts that I would later use during future on-call nights. On the way to the emergency room there was a long hallway whose walls were painted with a slightly out-of-place mural of a light blue sky. The sky in the mural was filled with butterflies, birds, flowers, and other peaceful signs of nature. While walking this long hallway, reeling from the chaotic pace of an evening that would not even permit me a moment to process my feelings, I flippantly said, “Man, this is out of control.” The chaplain stopped and turned to me and said something that I have never forgotten.

“Not being in control is a part of the discipline.”

It takes a calm discipline to be able to ride the sometimes wild and uncontrollable Current of the river. I do not claim to be totally at peace with it, but what that chaplain told me has proved to be wise counsel and an important challenge over the course of my life.

There is certainly a rhythm to ministry. Annual holy days and weekly services provide an important consistency to the vocation. As a university chaplain, I move along an academic calendar, with convocation at the beginning of the year, midterms, fall break, finals, and then winter break. We resume with the second semester, spring break, midterms again, finals once again, and then graduation before entering the much-welcomed summer recess. In late August, we start all over again.

And yet, there are holy interruptions. Some are simply individuals dropping by the office because they need to talk. They might interrupt sermon planning or some of the other quieter aspects of ministry and life. Other interruptions are more jarring, like the middle-of-the-night phone call alerting you to an accident.

The times when I have found myself too often interrupted by the more serious kind of holy interruptions are the times I tend to explore other job possibilities. What I learned that first night of CPE was true: ministry truly does have moments when it is out of control. I have been tempted to swim to the banks of this vocational river and climb out. But staying within the out-of-control-ness of ministry and the out-of-control-ness of life is an important discipline for all of us to swim through.

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