

Encountering the Divine Through a Meal and Dialogue: A narrative reflection

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For college chaplains or religious leaders, chaos is where some of our most beautifully divine work happens. We might not enjoy all the ways our bodies and hearts store such experiences, but on a vocational level, we know that in turbulent times the divine is active within our community. In these times, it is our call to point out how the Divine is on the move and invite others to encounter the work of the Divine.

The work of creating space for people to experience the Divine, and to engage with the emotions that come with tension, can be challenging. Being a non-anxious presence isn't easy to put into practice. In fact, at many points I have found myself presenting like I am calm on the outside while internally, I'm screaming. In those moments, I remember to steady myself and breathe. I connect to the moment and to my surroundings, rooting myself in the present. And in doing so, I am able to find a deeper calm that allows me to face what is before our community.

As spiritual practitioners, we must ground ourselves before beginning the work of creating space for others. Being calm allows me to be open to the Divine as well as open to the reactions of the community. I am able to see students and faculty, to hear their pain or joys, and to offer up space for the dialogue, healing, and learning. It is a vulnerable and treasured place to hold in a community, one that brings a unique lens to the landscape of learning.

One such moment sticks out to me. It was soon after I arrived on campus and I was still getting my bearings as chaplain. Naively, I assumed I had it all figured out and was ready to address the concerns of our campus. I was not ready for what was to come.

On a crisp, fall day I arrived at the office and was asked by the Dean of Students if I'd made my way to the chapel or had seen what had occurred. I told them I had not yet made my way to that side of campus and they instructed me to join them on a walk. When we arrived at the steps of the chapel, the doors had been vandalized, covered in spray paint messages of hate, bigotry, and racial slurs against Jewish and Black community members.

I was unsure of what we would do to address this concerning and shocking discovery. Thankfully the dean took charge, calling in housekeeping and maintenance to begin the clean-up process. We met with Campus Safety to review cameras on campus and try to identify who was responsible. There were conversations about calling the local authorities or the proper protocol for the follow-up process with students.

My role was to provide support to our staff as they began the clean-up process and to work on a communications response to students. I was available for students who saw the vandalism and helped them process the experience. As it became clear that my plans for the workday were shifting, I shifted my mindset from problem-solving mode into pastoral care and support mode.

As I cared for others, the maintenance team stripped and repainted the doors as quickly as possible. In fact, they were able to do so before the majority of campus knew what had occurred.

In the aftermath of the cleanup, we were able to identify who the people were who had vandalized the chapel. Relieved that the vandalism had been removed and the chapel doors were back to their natural state, I wondered what to do next. As a community that prides itself on being small and connected, we had to face the reality that two of our own could do such a hate-filled thing. The vandalism left our community with many questions. How could we allow this to happen? Did others know they were going to do this and not speak up? Many students felt betrayed. Others felt rage and sadness. There was great heartache as we wrestled with this reality. The questions grew and stirred among students and faculty alike as they sat in my office. In time, I realized all the questions were becoming variations on the same one: What could lead to such hate in our community?

The immediate response was standard for the academic world, sending an email to the community stating that this is not acceptable behavior consistent with our honor and social codes. Student Life and the Dean of Students staff also discussed how the images and language used were hate speech and caused harm and hurt within our community. The dean let staff know that the vandals would be held accountable for their actions.

As the administration went about their business handling accountability, it was my task to create space for the community to process the event. I knew that sharing a meal with others helps lower anxiety and opens people—creating a place for vulnerability to be experienced and wisdom to be shared.

Our campus, while affiliated with the Presbyterian Church USA, is located in the south in what some refer to as the Bible Belt. It is a heavily Southern Baptist-influenced area, but there are small pockets of Reformed and progressive Christian communities. The closest non-Christian faith community is two hours away. But nestled in the foothills of the mountains, there is our institution, a small progressive liberal arts college.

The majority of our student body is Southern Baptist, with Roman Catholic affiliation a close second. We have numerous Christian-based student groups and while there aren't any official non-Christian student organizations, we do have Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist students. What makes our campus unique is that most student groups provide weekly meals. Students, no matter their religious background, are welcome to the meals and programs. Several students will attend every group just for the food and fellowship.

The Christian season of Lent is a time of fasting, penitence and holy introspection and it was upon us in the aftermath of the vandalization. Knowing that food was a good motivator for our students and that we observe Christian seasons on campus, my office decided that Lent would be a perfect trial period for intentional programming. During Lent, we met once a week for a meal and study. We set up smaller round tables where six community members could sit. We sent an invitation to the campus and posted flyers to advertise the program. The goal for the meals was to create a space where students could share, learn, and grow through conversations and grow to appreciate those who were different from them.

Each Christian student group on campus took a week and had their leaders guide the discussion. While this was a Christian observance, our non-Christian students were welcomed to join, and

many did. We shared a simple soup and salad meal and dug into *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love* by William Willimon. My office selected this book because it takes a hard look at what Christ meant when he called us to love the others among us. It is a book rooted in biblical teaching and reshapes what love can look like, calling for us to love the other for who they are without asking them to conform or become like us. It also offers up some concrete, tangible ways that people can practice love and welcoming others without disregarding differences.

During the first weekly gathering and meal, it was awkward and there was a lot of silence. Students sat with those they knew; there wasn't much mixing of the social groups. As the weeks progressed and relationships developed, conversation bloomed and there was mixing and shifting of seats. We got to know one another through the various meals. We went from discussing which soups reminded us of our childhood, or which one reminded us of our grandmother, to asking about where we grew up and what life was like for those different from us. By the end of our time, we shared ways we had seen love and grace extended on our campus in the season after such destruction. Students and community members got to know one another and see one another a little more clearly.

When the season of Lent was complete, we returned to our regular programming, yet students were craving that weekly connection. They sought one another out to continue this time of growing in relationship and learning. The following semester, when we returned to campus for the fall, we brought back the meals and lessons. However, this time we met once a month and discussed current topics in the new cycle. While there were new members in our community this round, there were plenty of familiar faces.

Returning participants led the way on building relationships and having authentic discussions on matters of life and faith. The awkwardness didn't linger as it had in the beginning. The foundations of honesty, respect, and care were already there. Students were able to jump into relationships from the past spring like no time or space had occurred between them. New students were welcomed into the community much more quickly than the previous year. Our campus felt the impact of this space, where they could share opinions and respect one another, and this time around, it felt almost second nature in our community's DNA.

After that first Lenten season, the students stepped up to lead future conversations and lunches. They went from not talking to one another to requesting certain topics they wanted to dig deeper into with one another. While the meals have changed days and meeting times, this has become a highlight for our community and a tradition. The soups might have been replaced with pasta or other hearty dishes. But the thing that kept this group of students going was the connection to one another and to the Divine. They seek it out and they find ways to continue to live in relationship with one another.

The students and community have gone from an awkward, mostly silent, group, to one that seeks out tough or hard conversations to learn with and from one another. Students have learned firsthand how faith and life are joined together and that one must live the principles of their faith—not just talk about it in the abstract. And when we do talk about difficult subjects, we need to do so with others, not just those who think or believe like us. It was a true gift to our community during a season of hate and turmoil. And it was something that opened our campus to healing and moving forward.

It seems simple enough now, looking back. A meal and conversation. Gathering around food, sharing stories and praying together, brought a community closer by developing deeper relationships. These practices allow space to be vulnerable with our emotions and to draw connections to fellow community members. Through time, the repetition of weekly meals and conversations, allowed us to deepen our sense of connection to one another and to the Divine.

I'm not sure if young, naive Chaplain Maggie would have dreamed of such a reality for her community. I would certainly not wish hate or turmoil on anyone. This experience, however difficult it was in the moment, opened the door for us to create something for our community that hadn't been there before—the space for authentic relationships to thrive. We shifted campus culture to share our opinions and beliefs with others openly. Students felt empowered to explore difficult subjects together moving forward. While this hasn't solved all our campus problems, it did reframe how we handle conflict and challenges when they arise.

As we look ahead to the uncertainty and transitions in higher education and in the political world, one thing is for certain, change will bring challenges for our communities. Some change will be good. Some change will not be good. When my community is faced again with a tumultuous time, I will remember these students and this experience. I will look to them as my example of ways to welcome vulnerability and connection. I know I will be changed by those I encounter and by the Divine—that the community will not remain the same and will be moved to change for the better.

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