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# Crisis, Chaos & Christians: Supportive Care of Fellow Travelers

By Virgil Fry

Chaos and order. All life as we know it seems to vacillate between these two polarities. We humans spend much of our time coping with and responding to events that cause us disequilibrium. We yearn for and seek those things that bring us a sense of control, peace, and power. Tangible homeostasis becomes our rallying focus.

Even a quick glance into Scripture brings to light the innate design of chaos and order. The first two verses of Genesis immediately paint such a scene:

In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the power of God was moving over the water. (Gen 1:1–2)

Two opposing forces are depicted here. One is the violent conflict of the formless, unbridled elements of the earth—chaos. The other is the wind (spirit) from God, a creative force that harnessed the raging elements—order.

This narrative interprets our rootedness in the basic nature of life on earth. Humanity, as well as the rest of the created order, has at its core vestiges of the original creation story: chaos and order continue to be that by which we are defined. All life seemingly strives to seek a balance between these two contrasting powers. Ordered life

is essential to existence and continuance, yet disorderliness constantly disrupts.

Regarding humans, Reinhold Niebuhr has said, “We live as two things.” We continually wrestle with our finite, limited humanity and our transcendent, immortal spirituality. The body (*soma*) provides us a sense of that which is mortal, anchoring us in the middle of turmoil and disruption. Concurrently, the spirit (*pneuma*) expresses a sense of that which is immortal, unbound by earthly constraints. This continual pull lends itself to creative tension: the security of the “what is” and the transcendent power of the “what can be.” We humans need both properties, and the Lord has endowed us with the tasks and capabilities of journeying and growing through this tension.

So how does crisis fit into this scenario? Crisis is defined as something that significantly disrupts the normal, the unexpected breaking through the expected. Karl A. Slaikeu speaks of a crisis as “a temporary state of upset and disorganization, characterized chiefly by an individual’s inability to cope with a particular situation using customary methods of problem solving.”<sup>1</sup> From conception and birth, we humans encounter a lifetime of crises, those moments when disorder appears to gain the upper hand over seamliness. We soon learn, at least on some levels, to expect the unexpected.

Scripture is certainly replete with chronicles of crisis-encountering people. From Adam and Eve on through the triumphal scene of Revelation 22, the Bible records one crisis after another. From national disruptions, as that of Noah and the flood, to individual turmoils, as that of David and Bathsheba, to the universal upheaval of God's Son dying on a Roman cross, one major focus of biblical writings is crisis. Challenge any group to list familiar stories with this theme, and be amazed at how many can be fairly labeled as crisis oriented.

And yet the Bible is not interested in recalling tales of tragedy and triumph simply from a perspective of human survival. From the creation to the end times, Yahweh is the ultimate focus. God's power and desire to bring order out of chaos pervade all biblical accounts. Earth and its inhabitants, including humans, are presented as being of ultimate concern to God. His attributes as kind and loving peacemaker and reconciler are the pivotal mentoring messages for people being called to reflect God's nature.

Accordingly, much is written about treating all human beings as fellow travelers, sojourners, pilgrims occupying strange lands. The Ten Commandments and all the ancillary requirements are basically this: love God and, concurrently, love your neighbor as yourself. Life's journey, with all its highs and lows, is not just an individual process. To be fulfilled, we are called to share in the highs and lows of all other humans.

Thus foreign-born Ruth, with no civil rights, can be incorporated as a citizen of Israel because Boaz followed Moses' instructions to permit gleaning. Thus Jesus can succinctly declare the golden rule of human interaction: do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Or Paul can remind believers to be given to hospitality and to build up (edify) both the community of the faithful and the community at large. From a biblical perspective, crisis is a time to announce God's everlasting presence by his children's faithful presence. *Koinonia* and *kerygma* are intertwined. Body life and proclamations of the Lord's faithfulness reflect the core biblical message of "Good news: you are not alone."

### Types of Situational Crisis

In considering how to respond to others in supportive ways, it is helpful to define categories for various crises that humans confront. Please note that most crises can be defined in more than one of the categories.

The types of crisis we encounter are:

1. *Unexpected*—natural disaster, job termination, car wreck, diagnosis of serious illness, house fire, robbery, violence, emergency, catastrophic event

2. *Faith/spiritual*—change in relationship with God or faith group, conversion, feeling of abandonment or alienation, challenge of long-held traditions and values, questioning of status quo, feeling of lack of purpose and meaning

3. *Societal/communal*—poverty, financial ruin, change in political structure, cultural insensitivity and power struggles, civil and international war, disease, anarchy, tyranny, inequity of education and opportunities for empowerment

4. *Transitional/developmental*—age-related growth issues (infant and toddler, youngster, adolescent, young adult, middle age, older years), gender identity, educational failure or success, professional and vocational skills and identity, dating, engagement, marriage, divorce, having or not having children, new roles within family (e.g., taking on responsibility for aging parents)

5. *Prolonged/chronic/systemic*—chronic and irreversible health issues, mental illness, addictive behavior, handicap, limitation of time or finances to fulfill dreams, unattainable goals and subsequent sense of failure, unresolved grief

6. *Familial/interpersonal*—broken relationships without reconciliation, unresolved and unhealthy family expectations or rifts, abuse (physical and emotional), school failure of a child, unrealized potential or expectations of a family member, extended illness of a family member, relocating of individual or family, broken friendship, death

In dealing with these types of crisis, more is at stake than just stress management. Crisis presents a challenge, a growth opportunity that was not necessarily sought. Crisis shakes us to the core and generates high anxiety. Usual ways of dealing with disruptions fail in true crisis, and we are called upon to function in ways that are reactionary and driven by survival needs. In crisis we are forced to deal with loss, for something or someone has been wrested from our control. And such loss brings about shock, numb-

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ness, disbelief, hurt, anger, guilt, confusion, and disorientation.

Quite often such loss is felt more keenly because of the cumulative effect of numerous small losses experienced over a short amount of time. The proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back” is often small, but is added to a load that is too heavy to take any further weight. Perhaps this can be illustrated by our varying responses when someone “cuts us off” on a freeway. Sometimes this action stimulates a highly charged desire for instant revenge. At other times, the same action is viewed philosophically, and the offending person is given space in which to maneuver. Same offending action, but decidedly different responses. The difference lies in what we have already dealt with before the freeway incident; in other words, how full our coping bucket is with other pressing concerns.

### **Caring Responses to Those in Crisis**

In what ways are we, as fellow travelers, to respond to others in crisis? Is it really possible to “weep with those who weep,” or do we hope that mere platitudes will suffice? Are those who are hurting drawn to seek us out for comfort and solace, or are they driven away by our simplistic phrases (“Be warmed and filled”) or, worse, our total avoidance?

Perhaps the best way to answer the call of hurting people is to consider our own needs for supportive care. All of us know what it’s like to need a cup of cold water in dry, thirsty times. All of us know the need for another’s warmth, touch, and genuine listening ear in times of despondence and disorientation. All of us know the therapeutic healing that occurs when someone else genuinely communicates “I care” with words, eye contact, and presence. Such self-awareness, together with the model of Jesus’ encounters with people in crisis, teaches us the depths of love that can be reciprocally shared in the simplest acts of care.

The definitive phrase from some in the Christian world is *pastoral care*. Churches of Christ have traditionally

downplayed that term because of teaching on the distinct role of pastors versus evangelists. The pastoral concept, however, is highly biblical. Jesus himself calls us his sheep (John 10), and pastoral care is certainly a part of the flock’s concern for each other. Jesus makes it clear that care for the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, and the ill equates to care for Jesus himself (Matt 25).

Consider this definition of pastoral care from Lawrence Holst:

[T]he basic, fundamental role of pastoral care [is] the attempt to help others, through words, acts, and relationships, to experience as fully as possible the reality of God’s presence and love in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Our call as Christians is to identify ourselves as the needy and the disenfranchised, and to carry the good news of healing, grace, and mercy through the broken vessels of ourselves. It is in the trenches of human despair that we preach our strongest sermons. And without lives that reflect a willingness to track others into those trenches, our messages sound hollow, ineffectual, and impotent. The paradox of the gospel hinges on this truth: broken and bruised, we appear strong and unblemished to the living God. The strength of pastoral care is not in people who appear perfectly together, but in people who acknowledge their own need for a Power to bring order out of chaos.

And so we go. We go into the hospitals, the prisons, the AIDS clinics, the shelters for the homeless and abused, the homes for unwanted children, the institutions for the mentally ill and mentally challenged, and the nursing homes. But it’s not just to organized institutional places of crisis that we go. We also go to the neighbor whose child has run away from home, to the church member who has lost his job, to the friend who confides that her spouse is abusive, to the stranger who cries out for help, to the loved one who receives distressing medical news. We go, with or without the right words to say, because we see ourselves in them. We go, and God’s Spirit bonds us with the “peace that passes understanding.”

We bring with us treasures to such encounters. We have within our spiritual toolboxes special gifts—gifts of engaged listening, empathy, kindness, unconditional acceptance, scriptures, prayers, encouraging words of hope. Gifts that keep us from trying to fix or explain away the unexplainable but that, instead, empower us to offer companionship and a shoulder on which to lean.

Crisis affects us all. It's innate, a part of the created order since Day One. Order is nice and necessary, but it's never permanent. May we be willing to receive the outstretched compassionate hands of others, and may we be willing to offer our own compassionate hands to others in their times of crisis. May we give ear to the following anonymous words:

*If this is not a place where tears are understood,  
Where do I go to cry?  
If this is not a place where my spirit can take  
wing,  
Where do I go to fly?  
If this is not a place where my questions can be  
asked,  
Where do I go to seek?  
If this is not a place where my feelings can be  
heard,  
Where do I go to speak?*

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Karl A. Slaikeu, *Crisis Intervention: A Handbook for Practice and Research* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1990), 15.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Holst, *Hospital Ministry: The Role of the Chaplain Today* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 46.

### Additional Readings:

Boyd, Glenn E. *The A.R.T. of Agape Listening: The Miracle of Mutuality*. Agape House Press, 1996.

McFarland, John Robert. *Now That I Have Cancer I Am Whole*. Andrews & McMeel, 1993.

Switzer, David K. *Pastoral Care Emergencies: Ministering to People in Crisis*. Paulist Press, 1989.

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### Notes continued from “With the Affection of Christ . . .”

<sup>23</sup>Hawthorne, xxxv.

<sup>24</sup>Bonhoeffer, 39.

<sup>25</sup>It was in conversation with fellow minister Mark Love regarding the necessity of guarded intimacy and of relationship boundaries in ministry and how these are modeled in scripture that the seeds of this study were planted.

### Notes from “Clothed With Joy.”

<sup>1</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Themes: Philippians* (Waco, TX.: Word Books, 1987), 107.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.