

In the Time of Trouble: SAMPLE

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In the Time of Trouble: Stories for Caregivers

Introduction

This resource is designed to give support to clergy and other caregivers who are often on the front lines of human emotional battles. A routine day or chance phone call suddenly becomes the framework for a life and death challenge. We find ourselves almost helplessly catapulted from the mundane to the profound. And we wonder, sometimes, did we do well? The answer, if we are truthful, is sometimes yes, sometimes no. What is certain in every case is that we were not working alone, but had Divine help, whether we sought it or not.

Each discussion guide is followed by the story on which it focuses. The stories are fictional, although based on actual experiences. The characters are composites. This series uses fiction rather than verbatim reports or case studies in order to allow participants the freedom to imagine or identify with the characters in a non-threatening setting. We are not discussing *your* response to the situation, but a *possible* human response. No one behaves perfectly in the stories. The characters have good moments and not-so-good moments, flashes of insight as well as missed cues. So do we.

Usually, the point at which we begin feeling overwhelmed is the time we dig in and tell ourselves to “work even harder,” believing that it is somehow a failure on our part not to get it all done by ourselves. Part of this is a genuine desire to do the work that has been given us to do. The rest is pure ego. We are the caregivers, empowered to do...what? Leap tall buildings at a single bound? When does the self-sacrificial desire to do service become an ego-fulfilling martyrdom? Our culture celebrates busy-ness. If your calendar is full, you’re a success. If you have time to see someone who wants to talk, if you are able to make yourself available without a lot of schedule jockeying, you’re “not doing enough.” This resource is designed to help caregivers understand that support for what they’re experiencing is just as important as the support they give others.

Preparation

You may choose to bring together a group of people for discussion of all of the stories, or a separate group for each story. A discussion guide and author’s commentary is included for each story. You’ll need to make copies of the stories for each participant in the group. For your convenience, the stories as a group are included at the end of the Leader’s Guide.

Who would be in the discussion group? Clergy, certainly, but also social workers, teachers, youth program leaders, and pastoral visitors. The stories might also be used for discussion during a clergy retreat. The group should be billed as a support resource for caregivers rather than a “how to” seminar, although some specific suggestions are given. Following the guide for each story is an author’s commentary, plus a list of issues or questions that could be used to start a discussion. A suggested outline for the group meetings is also included. You are welcome to follow it step by step, or design your own format if you wish.

We suggest that you have at least three meetings per story: the introductory session, during which the materials are presented and the format is explained; a second meeting during which the story is discussed; and a third, in which participants move into the personal reflection stage. If more time seems to be needed, have the group negotiate possibilities. The first meeting should be a brief, “get comfortable” session, familiarizing members with each other and with the materials they will be

using. The second meeting will include a discussion of the story, and the third meeting focuses on personal reflection. The commentary is written primarily for the discussion facilitator's benefit, but could be shared with the participants after the initial discussion; however, prior reading of the commentary might influence the participants' responses.

The Song of the Redeemed

Leader's Guide

This resource is designed to give support to clergy and other caregivers who find themselves on the verge of, or in the midst of, burnout. It is not a guide to working your way out of that state – the best antidote for that, probably, is a nice long sabbatical – but it is a resource for allowing the frustrations to surface, and for assurance that, even in your compromised state, God can and does continue to work through you. Only in a secondary manner is this story a resource for handling attempted suicides. The precise situation presented is unusual, although it is based on an actual occurrence. The names and circumstances of the individuals involved have been disguised.

The story will be found at the end of this guide. This series uses fiction rather than verbatim reports or case studies in order to allow participants the freedom to imagine or identify with the characters in a non-threatening setting. We are not discussing *your* response to the situation, but a *possible* human response. No one behaves perfectly in the stories. The characters have good moments and not-so-good moments, flashes of insight as well as missed cues. So do we.

Who would be in the discussion group? Clergy, certainly, but also social workers, teachers, pastoral visitors. The story might also be used for discussion during a clergy retreat. The group should be billed as a support resource for caregivers rather than a “how to” seminar, although some specific suggestions are given. Following this guide is an author’s commentary, plus a list of issues or questions that could be used to start a discussion. A suggested outline for the group meetings is also included. You are welcome to follow it step by step, or design your own format if you wish. The commentary is written primarily for the discussion facilitator’s benefit, but could be shared with the participants after the initial discussion; prior reading of the commentary might influence the participants’ responses.

Meeting Format

It is suggested that you have at least three meetings per story: the introductory session, during which the materials are presented and the format is explained; a second meeting during which the story is discussed; and a third, in which participants move into the personal reflection stage.

The first meeting should be a brief, “get comfortable” session, familiarizing members with each other and with the materials they will be using. If possible, have easy-to-handle snacks within reach. Food signals comfort and informality, both of which are conducive to sharing. Go around the room and have each person give a brief introduction, including name, occupation/pastoral role, and expectations of the group. When that is completed, explain that this is a support group rather than a “how to” seminar, and that the purpose is to allow them, as caregivers, a neutral zone in which to explore their own feelings and responses as well as gain some suggestions/tips for their work in the future. Self-knowledge is important in pastoral care; the more aware we are of our own internal thoughts and feelings, the more open we are to fully hear and appreciate those of another. The stories and subsequent discussions are designed to increase this awareness.

Establish basic ground rules. Confidentiality is a must. The group has to agree that everything said in the room stays in the room. Constructive criticism is welcome; scathing critiques of another's pastoral skills is not. Attendance at all three meetings is necessary.

Introduce the material. Show them the story (stories if you are using more than one from the series) and offer a brief run-down of the content. If you are using only *The Song of the Redeemed*, then you might say: "Most of us have either experienced or known someone who is experiencing burnout. It is a very difficult state to be in, particularly since pastoral work requires us to be available for anything at virtually any time, regardless of our personal state. How do we respond when life hands us the impossible and our usual arsenal of skills is at an all-time low? What would be your concerns?" You might give participants time to talk about these concerns. Take notes of questions or problems they mention; you will need to return to them later, during the discussion time.

If you are using more than one of the stories, hand them out, give the participants a general run-down of the subject matter (you can extract this from the commentaries), and allow the group to choose which story to discuss first. If you cannot reach a consensus, then ask the group to allow you, as the leader/facilitator, to choose. Emphasize that since each story will be discussed in time, it hardly matters which comes first. Or, if you wish, decide beforehand the order in which you would like to consider the stories, and present the series in that order.

Set up a schedule for the next meetings, and establish how long the group wants each meeting to last. Settle on the logistics. If snacks are not readily available, who would like to bring some for the subsequent meetings?

Close each meeting with prayer. It may be spontaneous, drawing on the ideas presented during this first session, or a prayer which is familiar to the group. If the group meets in the evening, one of the following prayers would work well:

Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our fathers [and mothers], creator of the changes of day and night, giving rest to the weary, renewing the strength of those who are spent As you have protected us in the day that is past, so be with us in the coming night; keep us from every sin, every evil, and every fear; for you are our light and salvation, and the strength of our life. To you be glory for endless ages. AMEN.

(Book of Common Prayer, p. 113)

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray you, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

(Book of Common Prayer, p. 832)

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life, we

may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

(Book of Common Prayer, p. 100)

The second meeting. Materials needed: extra copies of the story, an easel or blackboard and markers or chalk. Have chairs placed in a circle, or some other open configuration. (You may be seated around a table).

You might want to begin with a prayer for understanding. The prayer attributed to St. Francis (p. 833 in the Book of Common Prayer and printed below) is a good one; it emphasizes the pastoral caregiver's concern to be of service to the other, not to oneself.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. AMEN.

Open up the discussion of the story. "We've all had a chance to read *The Song of the Redeemed*. What are your initial reactions?" Go around the room, making a list of key points as they are stated (summarize as best as you can). Once everyone has spoken, invite the person who made the first point to elaborate. If a point is unclear, asking "Can you show me where that is in the story?" is a good way to draw the person back to the specifics, then reconstruct where the thinking went from there. Discuss each point in turn, allowing plenty of time for personal reflections. If, for example, someone remarks, "That reminds me of the time I...", you could ask, "Were you satisfied with the way you responded then? How might you respond now?" Then, "anybody else have any ideas?" You want participants to begin talking about their experiences as well as the story.

You may need to re-negotiate the time limit if you get to a sensitive point and the clock is running out. This should only take a minute, and isn't a formal voting matter. About ten minutes before you're due to end, simply note, "We're coming close to our agreed-upon end time, but I'm sensing that we may want to go past that point. Can we extend the time by, say, a half hour?"

Questions/Issues for Discussion

1. According to the story, Ellen is aware that she is experiencing "burnout". Would you know if you were? If someone you knew were experiencing burnout, would you feel comfortable with gently pointing it out to him or her?
2. If you discovered that you were experiencing burnout, what would you do about it?
3. Does Ellen really believe that "hospital visits are encounters with God merely orchestrated through her"? Do you believe it?
4. Where in the story does God work through her even when she doesn't know what to do?
5. What gift(s) does she receive through her encounter with Jesse?
6. What would you do in this kind of emergency situation? Have you had similar experiences you'd like to share with the group?

If the group's focus is on a particular part of the story, or if it seems stuck on a certain area, you might want to consider re-working the section through role-playing. If time is short, make the suggestion that the group improvise different ways to re-enact the scene at the next meeting. They shouldn't rehearse the scene beforehand, but should be prepared to "wing it" with the group. Get volunteers to take on each part. You can have more than one "cast." After the scene has been completed, questions should center on the feelings involved ("How did you feel when Ellen said...." Or, "Would you have felt competent in the situation? Why/why not?") If the role-playing uses up your second meeting time, you will need to add an additional meeting or agree to a longer third meeting.

Close the meeting with a prayer, either spontaneous or one of those suggested previously.

The third session is the time to really focus on personal reflection. The group has read and discussed the story. The facilitator can ask whether there are any thoughts or ideas that have come up since the second meeting that the group might explore, or if previous points require elaboration. If not, then the following exercises can be explored:

Exercises:

A. Practice saying "no."

1. Practice deferring the request to talk; assess the anxiety level, do some preliminary assistance, schedule another time for a longer talk
2. Situation: you are at the dinner table with your family. The phone rings. What do you generally do?
3. Situation: you're about to leave the office after a long day. You've had two counseling sessions, a committee meeting, it's Thursday and you haven't even looked at the lectionary for Sunday's sermon. As you close the door, someone from your parish – someone who always has a problem – approaches, asking for "just a minute. I need to talk to you about something, and you're the only one who understands me. Please, can't you take just a minute?" What do you say?

B. "Go and do likewise."

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Our reputations can be precious things. We want to be thought well of, and there is nothing that says success better these days than a full calendar. Being tired somehow means we're doing our job well, or at least we're doing a lot of it, and there's a kind of badge of honor attached to showing up at a clergy meeting a bit frazzled around the edges. We're out there doing ministry, by God! But it is by God's side that we are intended to work, not in front – and when we don't stop doing God's work long enough to actually be with God, our work suffers. How many hours a week do we set aside for meditation, prayer, *play*?

How many things do we do because it looks well for us to do them? How many things because they are the expected thing to do? How many because we know the local press will be there? And is taking this job on a matter of obligation, responsibility, or reputation? Any number of activities could be applicable, from serving on the board of a community group, accepting a speaking position, offering to pray at a function, serving as guest speaker, and so on. Examine the *why* behind the assignments we accept. If we are honest and find ego there – that’s an activity to take off the list.

C. The Balancing Act

How do you strike a balance among three desires – the desire to be available and caring at all times, the desire to take care of yourself (and your immediate family), and the desire to love and serve the Lord, holding back nothing? That’s the challenge of doing ministry in a way that is healthy: knowing how to balance the three loves in your life – love of God, love of yourself, love of others. You may notice that I’ve changed the order as it’s stated in the Summary of the Law. Not that I want to improve on Jesus, but basically the thing won’t work as it’s stated in scripture. No one can love another human being until learning to love oneself; no one can love oneself until he or she comes to know and love God. It’s that tricky second step that messes us up. If we don’t love ourselves, then we aren’t secure enough to be able to say “no” when we really cannot be available or have made another commitment – especially if our “no” is disappointing to someone else. The momentary loss of face we experience, or the moment of blackmail (when we are told that a *good* Christian would always have time) hold power over us only when we are using another’s perception of us as the gauge for our own value. We need to be able to assure ourselves that, yes, we are good Christians, and, yes, we are saying “no” for now.

Practice scenarios

- a. Pretend that you are riding on a bus, subway, or some form of public transportation. You are wearing a clerical collar. You’re near the end of your pay period and cash is very low. You are approached by someone you don’t think is *really* poor and hungry, and asked for money. You say you don’t have any to spare. The person turns belligerent and announces, loudly, “...and you call yourself a Christian!” How do you feel? How do you respond?
- b. A member of your parish was taken ill during the week. You heard about it and made a phone call right away, but were unable to make a personal visit because of other scheduling problems. The illness is not life-threatening. On Sunday, a member of the congregation announces that so-and-so is quite ill, and wanting visitors because “no one has come to see her at all.” You hear someone murmur, “That never would have happened when Fr./Mo. ___ was here.” How do you feel? How do you respond?
- c. The previous rector of your congregation was unmarried and spent most of his/her time taking care of the parish, attending birthday parties and picnics and other family events. You are married with three young children all under the age of 12. You are expected to attend every night meeting of every committee, and to be at the office on Saturday afternoon. When you protest, citing the hours listed in your contract and

your need to be present to your own family, a parishioner blurts out, “How could you be so selfish? You’re supposed to serve God first!”

Once finished with the exercises, ask the group to summarize what has been learned in the three sessions. You can make a list (this tends to help clarify points), but it’s not necessary. Close with a prayer.

The Song of the Redeemed

by Angela Boatright

It was the pigeon on the windowsill that brought her back to her life.

Morning Prayer seemed like it had been going on for centuries. Once or twice, the reader had stopped to ask about the pronunciation of a Hebrew name. Her mind was elsewhere, and she responded abruptly – “That’s fine. Just keep going” – and the reader, startled and uncertain, plunged in again. The words were lovely, but today had no meaning. “For only in you can we live in safety...” The students droned together, voices blending from familiarity. Her thoughts ran on in another direction. How long had this group been gathering? A year? Two? Twenty? Had it always been this boring? What are we doing here? What are we saying...and Why? She caught herself clenching her teeth. This had to stop. It was only Wednesday, and there was a Eucharist to celebrate, hospital visits, a meeting about baptism... And then she had heard the tap on the window, lightly, once and then again. A small reddish-brown-and-white pigeon sat on the sill, looking intently in her direction. It tilted its head to one side, as if to ask “what’s up?” Blinking, she realized that she was. It was time for the collect. She was “on.” Hurriedly, Ellen selected one and started speaking. Her choice, she thought, was more for herself than others: “...guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks...” A few more minutes, and it was over. The group cheerfully disbanded, headed toward some coffee and sweet rolls, leaving her and her upheaval behind. “Well, it’s you and me, God,” she said, then added, “Mostly you.”

And so began the day for Ellen Sherwood, an emotionally empty priest.

Back in the office, Ellen picked over some mail, glanced at the lectionary for Sunday, stared blankly at the list of hospital visits. One choice seemed as fruitless as the other, so she opted to do the visits. Perhaps on her way there, as she thought about the people – people she loved very much, actually – something would renew her spirits. Some spark of something would move her out of this state... get her out of herself and back into the world.

The hospital lobby resembled a futuristic atrium: it was airy and cool, accented with a skylight opening onto the heavens, thriving plants, and glassed-in balconies circling more than a dozen floors above her. The whole thing drew the eye upwards, like incense rising above the altar in pleasing praise of the infinite. Usually, she loved the healing quality of this lofty lobby; today, however, her eyes fell to her feet as she mechanically moved to the elevator, entered, pressed the button, and leaned back against the wall. Two doctors shared the space with her. They glanced her way, spotted her collar, looked a bit puzzled, then nodded as they stepped out onto their floor. She smiled automatically. The door closed, and she was alone. The intercom blurted out something about a code 711, and she wondered briefly what it meant. Sounds more like an aircraft than an illness, she mused, impatiently stabbing the eleventh floor button. Better mark the psalms I want to read, she thought, and took her prayer book from her bag. She wanted to get there, start the visit and lose herself and this mood, in the work. At the same time, she wanted to delay because there were no words in her to share. Not a thing. She’d been taught that hospital visits are encounters with God merely orchestrated through her, but today even that knowledge was small comfort. She was on “E,” and she knew it. Thoughts about the kenotic Christ emptying himself flashed through her mind. She could see herself sitting in class in seminary, writing it all down, rushing to get every word...

The door slid open and she found out what code 711 meant. The elevator bank was flooded with white coats, security guards and what looked like city police. She started to step back into the elevator, but the door had closed. Standing at the very back, leaning against the wall, Ellen studied the scene in front of her, trying to sort it out. There were the guards, and some doctors, she guessed, and then she saw the reason for the commotion. Hanging from the balcony was a young man. She saw him clearly: the dark hair, the large eyes, the opened mouth, the sneakered toes just touching the narrow ledge, the reddened fingers gripping the glass. And then her mind registered the reality of what her eyes were seeing: the man was suspended from the eleventh floor, holding onto the glass with his fingertips.

“Oh, God,” she murmured. She could think of nothing. “Lord Jesus, have mercy,” her mind worked furiously, the abbreviated prayer racing through her thoughts as she registered what was unfolding. This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be real. But it *was* real.

“What do you want, Jesse?” a guard was saying. “What is it you want?” The man, Jesse, ignored the question, blurting out instead, “Is that a *priest*?”

Everybody pivoted, a perfectly choreographed turn, like the crowd parting at the entrance of the star in an old movie. And there she stood, collar gleaming in the shadows. Ellen’s heart sank. What could she possibly say to this man? She swallowed, heard herself saying, “Yes, I’m a priest. What can I do for you?” She wanted to stay planted against the wall, or perhaps sink into it, but her body seemed to be moving forward. The guards shuffled aside until she was standing just a few feet in front of the man. His desperation was palpable. She looked into his eyes and saw panic, pain, madness. “What can I do for you?”

“I want you to give me absolution for what I’m about to do.” *No*.

“And what are you going to do?” Her voice sounded calm. She wondered how that could be, when everything else was in pieces. The Jesus prayer continued in the back of her mind, now just as much for her as for Jesse. “Please, let him see you, Lord,” she pleaded silently. “Please, let him see you. I have nothing. Nothing.”

“You know what I’m going to do.”

“No, I don’t. Why don’t you tell me?” Jesse made a slight move, momentarily losing his balance. The guards started to surge forward, but he righted himself. He yelled at them to stop, and they did. Ellen was still standing there, staring into Jesse’s eyes, trying to get through to something lucid and true. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on with you?”

“It’s all no good.”

“What’s no good?”

“It’s all no good.”

“Jesse, why don’t you tell me about it? I want to understand.” She sat down, placing her prayer book on her lap. The gold cross gleamed against the black fabric.

“What good would that do?” he asked.

“Sometimes, when my son – he’s seven – when my son is upset, he sits with me and we talk about it. I thought maybe we could do that...”

“My mother died when I was seven.”

“She did?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to be with your mother?”

“Yes.”

“Jesse, why don’t you come and sit with me? Tell me about your mother.” Jesse’s glance softened for a moment, then suddenly he put one leg over the balcony. He was now straddling the glass ledge, halfway to safety, halfway to death. The guards started to move forward. He glanced at them, and they backed away. From the corner of her eye, Ellen saw another woman coming next to her. She spoke in cool, confident, measured tones and

introduced herself as a psychiatrist. Ellen, relieved, closed her eyes and breathed, seemingly for the first time since she had stepped off the elevator. Her heartbeat was so loud she could barely hear the psychiatrist talking with Jesse. Coming to herself, Ellen wrote a quick note about his mother, and slid it to the psychiatrist. She took the note, but didn't read it. Ellen closed her eyes again, trying to summon up every description of Jesus healing someone she could remember. There was Jesus stretching out his hand. Then another image intruded: there was Jesus standing on the hill, looking down on Jerusalem and yearning to comfort it like a mother hen. Something stirred next to her. The psychiatrist had moved away for a moment. Ellen opened her eyes and looked at Jesse. He was staring at her, dark eyes wide.

"Why don't you come and sit with me?" she said, extending a hand. Jesse leaned forward momentarily, and the guards lunged. With a speed she hadn't thought possible, he lifted his foot over the glass barrier and was, once again, suspended from the balcony. The look of desperation, momentarily diffused, had returned. And so it went. The feeling of powerlessness was overwhelming. The guards and police and the psychiatrist took turns speaking with Jesse; he somehow managed to hang on by his fingertips as the minutes – so many eternities compressed into blocks of sixty small seconds – dragged by. "What do you want, Jesse?" one officer asked again. "I want *her*," he said, pointing, and Ellen, momentarily forgotten, now was catapulted back into focus. *Lord*. No words came into her mind, so she simply extended her arms toward him and smiled. "You want to be with her, Jesse?" the officer asked. He nodded.

"Then come," Ellen said. *Come to me all you who labor...and I will refresh you*. "Come and rest. Just come." She patted the floor next to her. "Come and sit with me."

The muscles in Jesse's face worked as he thought it over. "They're going to arrest me," he said, glancing at the police. One of the officers quickly responded, "No. We just want to help you." He stepped forward, palms outstretched.

"Stay away," Jesse said, and the officer quickly retreated. His face worked again; he seemed about to say something, then suddenly he leapt over the glass partition. Ellen could see his face, a blur of emotion and release. The face was red, and his eyes were filling with tears. Jesse dove into her lap, placing his face on top of the prayer book, his lips somehow landing perfectly on the cross in a simple, innocent kiss. Her mind tried to figure out how he had managed to land so perfectly, then let it go; he had done it, he was safe. It was over. The officers came forward, ready to restrain him. Jesse had one arm around her back, and they couldn't pull it away. "Wait a moment," Ellen said. "Wait. He's holding on ..." Jesse stayed there for a minute, sobbing into the cross. Ellen stroked his head. When he let go of her, the officers came forward and bound him. The hospital team, well-trained and efficient, whisked him and themselves away in record time. In the space of five minutes, the elevator bank was cleared. Ellen was alone, staring at the balcony. Below, the plants continued to thrive. Above, the skylight still allowed a shimmer of light to shine on them; visitors stepped into the revolving door. She wiped the tears from the prayer book, and with tears in her own eyes, held it close to her heart. "Thank you," she murmured, and slowly walked down the hall to begin her visit.

*O ruler of the universe, Lord God,
Great deeds are they that you have done, surpassing human understanding.*

Rev. 15:3

This story is based on an actual event. But, as in all of the stories presented in this series, the characters are fictional. If you should find yourself on these pages, it is only because humanity shares much in common; when you mix us together, we find that we are not so very different after all.