

When suffering comes to your front door



Highland Views

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Living in the mountains surrounding Asheville can feel like inhabiting a wild-life sanctuary. Every kind of furry and feathery neighbor comes to visit.

As does any humane human, I hate to see animals suffer. This morning I looked out on our patio to see one of our squirrel neighbors struggling to walk. I went to the window for a closer look and saw that it had either been attacked or was suffering from a disease. Chunks of fur were missing and it looked distressed.

The squirrel limped toward the bushes, then stopped, turned and crawled toward me near the window. I couldn't help thinking it was "asking" for help. It slowly disappeared into the vegetation. I felt helpless, though I know this is the cycle of life and death.

I've seen great suffering through the years. I've seen people waste away with cancer and other diseases, watched people kill themselves before my eyes — especially with drugs and alcohol — seen many people suffer with mental ill-

ness and physical disability.

My mother was wracked by pain from arthritis for as long as I can remember (she was the first person on the West Coast to have a double hip replacement operation — in the 1960s). Later, she had both knees replaced, and then wrist implants. I called her my "bionic mother." A strong woman.

As an instructor in a school for brain-injured adults, then as a chaplain in jails and streets, I got up close and personal with mental illness, addiction, violence toward self and others — human pain in many forms and many faces.

How do we face pain and suffering, especially when it presents itself right in front of us where we can't turn away -- when we can't ignore or deny it?

Most of us, I think, respond with compassion. We may want to run away — "Let someone else deal with this" — but we want to do something. We would end the pain and take away the suffering, if it was at all possible.

Some might, with good intentions, choose to pray. Nothing wrong with that. If a person wants to ask God for help — either to help the sufferer or to help the helper — who can criticize? Though some may use prayer as a retreat to protect themselves from facing pain or to "distract from the act" of help-

ing, I think most people simply turn to someone else because they are at a loss at what to do.

Have you looked into the eyes of suffering? I know it sounds strange, but the eyes of the dying squirrel brought this back to me today. We don't want to see it, but we have to sometimes. Unavoidable.

Miguel stood behind steel bars in the county jail, inches from my face, to whisper his pain. He missed his family. Miguel's eyes filled with tears as he told me his son had just died — he couldn't be there to see his son for the last time.

Miguel asked if I would go to the house for him, to be with the family, to see his son. Without hesitation I said I would be honored.

Arriving at the house I saw people coming and going. As I walked in the open front door a relative greeted me, expecting me. Some friends were talking and eating in the dining room. Others were standing around laughing, telling stories. In the main room — the "living" room — was Miguel's son, laid out on the couch, clothed in jeans and a colorful shirt, surrounded by candles, incense, flowers. Soft rock music played.

As some watched, I sat by the body to gaze into the boy's face. Deep breaths reminded me to be present as Miguel's

representative. As a father myself I felt tears well-up as I placed my hand on the boy's forehead. His skin felt clammy and cold but there was great beauty in that moment sensing this young life had known a loving family.

Touching his body made me more human, more alive. Closing my eyes I knew this wasn't about me, not about faith or God, not really about suffering or death. It was real. It was good. Terribly sad, but good.

The next day when I entered the jail, Miguel was waiting at the bars. He grasped my hands, pausing in his gratefulness to feel the hands that had touched his dead son. It was a profound, life-giving moment for both of us.

A person is privileged to be present in these vulnerable moments. We suffer too. We can't always help — sometimes we shouldn't, if we imagine we can "rescue" or "fix" another's pain. It simply helps to touch our own humanity, feel our own vulnerability, and look for hope in the eyes of another.

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