

Peter Short: Reflections on Ministry

The work of a minister is a bewildering array. Are you not a counselor? Are you not a mediator? Community development leader, educator, advocate? And aren't you a public speaker, an administrator and a servant? You preside at the sacramental beginnings and endings of life. Surely you are comforter and priest. Isn't it you they call when all human strength has ended? When every technique of modern medicine has been tried and exhausted and a family stands helpless around a hospital bed isn't it you they call? They call you to come and be with them in the helpless place. That's the place where ministry is learned, if ever it is learned at all. You are musician and liturgist. You are janitor, stacker of chairs after everyone has gone home. Turn out the lights, lock the church door, and walk alone into the night. You are peacemaker. You are the prophet voice crying out in the wilderness. And when you stand as you often do before an open grave looking down into eternity, you are the wilderness crying out in a voice. I respect what this work demands of you, does to you. Nobody is adequately equipped for such a bewildering mandate. Nobody has it all together.

Before going too far into ministry, then, it is best to know the hard ending. The end of it is this: the thing you are giving your life to you will never possess.

I met a minister in Toronto, a bright, articulate, talented young man who came up against the intractable wall at the end of Christendom. We hit that wall sooner or later. And he carried the scars of the collision: the atrophying programs, the struggle to populate the committees, the chronic financial anxiety, the longing to find a place that would appreciate his ministry, the idiotic conclusion that his parishioners are his main problem rather than the medium of his art.

He said to me, "One day I just couldn't do it any more. I decided to take my marbles and go home. I quit. I quit for a long time. But then, one morning, I woke up and I realized they aren't my marbles."

He went back into ministry knowing something he might have known before but had not metabolized - they aren't his marbles. You let go, and you cross over when you realize they aren't your marbles.

That's a hard truth of our vocation. Eric Voegelin put it this way in his 1952 book *The New Science of Politics*:

"The bond is tenuous indeed and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss - the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men [sic] who lust for massively possessive experience."

(University of Chicago Press, 1952, p. 122)

You will always be a stranger to "massively possessive experience." They will never be your marbles. There is no point in trying to make it otherwise. The consolations of status or consecration will never make it otherwise.

That's a hard truth but it's not the only one. Here's another. There are things that cannot be taken away from you. No matter what's happened. Even in the darkness that makes you feel your way through the hours. Things that can't be taken.

The Gershwins caught it in a song from the 1930s. The song tells of precious memories, the way we were in love. There is a light shining still from that time and place, a light that will always be real, and the darkness has not put it out. The song returns again and again to say: "No, no, they can't take that way from me."

*The way you wear your hat, the way you sip your tea, the memory of all that,
No, no they can't take that away from me.*

Such memories are no faded photographs in a drawer. Those memories are a testimony. They testify that you have known love.

Love's pathway has been set down in your soul. You will always be this way - capable of love. Therefore you were made for more than just getting through another day. More joy than that.

No, no they can't take that away from me.

Many years ago my grandfather rented a small, shed-roofed camp on the Ottawa River. Five generations of our family have gathered there. But we were just renters and when the owners of the land decided they wanted it back we had to leave. My sister organized the leaving project. She said, "Come and get what you would like to have." My brother Tom wrote this response to her.

"The crafts we made as kids might have been the most valuable things in the building. I can't think of anything I would like to have that I haven't already got. Grandpa's initials on the front rock, blue dragonflies resting in the sun, snakes, water bugs, turtles, the slippery boards down to the outhouse when it rained and the palisade of cedars around it. The war on the earwigs, the skunk under the building that old Alfie used to tangle with, Josie swimming in the ice fishing holes. Getting water from the pump and the jack pine cones that made good ammunition for pinecone fights. The boat rides to Three Dog Beach and Norway Bay. The sounds of loons at night and lightning storms. Although we don't have it any more, it can't be taken from us."

When asked what he'd like to carry away from the camp he says, wise counsellor that he is, "I can't think of anything I would like to have that I haven't already got."

No, no they can't take that away from me.

One time I was called to the hospital to see a man who had come close to death. As we talked he told me that he had failed at pretty well everything he had ever set out to do. Failed at school. Failed to hold a job. Failed at marriage. Failed at parenting. Failed at sobriety. He told me how, a few nights earlier, he had drunk what he thought was a can of soup. But it wasn't soup in the can, it was silver paint.

That's how he had ended up in the hospital. They pumped his stomach and he survived, but not by much, and not because he had much to look forward to.

Then he fell silent. It was as if in the silence his failures had entered the room and surrounded his hospital bed, a mob of sneering little creatures. He looked up. He seemed to notice that I was there.

He asked, "What church are you from Reverend?"

I said, "I'm from the United Church."

Then he said, as if speaking from some other place, "I was baptized in the United Church."

No, no they can't take that away.

They can't take it away that once he was carried into a church, carried into a sacred place because in some way he was sacred too. And loved by the mother who carried him. Loved as much as life itself.

Why do I remember such things? I remember them because the work of a minister is a bewildering array. None of us will be its match, much less its master. Most if not all of us will be haunted sooner or later by the imposter syndrome. Yet the one indelible thing that remains, and cannot be taken, and is yours to give, is the witness of your life. Every life is a witness to something; to delight or despair; to beauty or vanity; to winning or life's victory in Christ. You are a witness. There are no neutral lives.

Once, after I had given a presentation on the Bible to a grade nine class, one of the students put up her hand to ask a question. She said, "Do you believe in Jesus, Mr. Short?"

I gave a long and mostly incoherent response including references to the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. When I finished she was still looking at me. Apparently neither my presentation nor my response to her question had given any indication that I believed anything at all. Then I said, "Yes. Yes, I believe in Jesus."

That girl had shown me that there is a difference between an explanation and a witness.

Here's what I know: beneath the explanations and the categories of our art there is a substrate of human frailty. What matters in the end and what is always ours to give, even in frailty, is a witness. Not an explanation. Give us a witness. No neutral life. I can't think of anything we need that we haven't already got.

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