

“Engaging the Any Old Kind of Day”

John 3:1–17

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It was just an any old kind of day.
The kind that comes and slips away.
The kind that fills up easy my life’s time.
The night brought any old kind of dark.
I heard the ticking of my heart.
Then why am I thinking something’s left behind?

I whistled round today, and skipped my footloose jig
To the hurdy-gurdy music of the street.
I looked up past the rooftops and saw my cloudless sky
But I keep on asking why
My life is passing by
And I’m left up high and dry
But it ain’t no use to cry
So I shrug the same old sigh
And trust to things that other days will meet.

The night has had its laughing when the streetlights
 blind the stars
So now it’s shedding rain to sing its sorrow.
It’s time for me to sleep and to rest these thoughts away
There’ll be another day
When things will go my way
And there’s other things to say
And other songs to play
And there’ll be time enough for thinking come tomorrow.

These are the words of a Harry Chapin song entitled *Any Old Kind of Day*. Chapin was an artist who addressed many human needs. He

was a singer and songwriter, poet and playwright, an activist and deep believer in a nonconventional sense. I performed his music in clubs and coffeehouses in my pre-ministerial days. I talked with him several times about music and storytelling. And my college roommate performed with him at a concert I was supposed to attend but could not because I had procrastinated on studying for an exam... This provoking song explores the kind of soul-searching reflection people often undertake in mid-life, many have undertaken during COVID-19, and all of us get to eventually.

We wonder at some point what our life means, whether we have left something behind, whether there is something more. This reflection may lead to feelings of emptiness, moods of depression, anger acted out upon others who do not fill our void, including God, or life in general. But the key is that we recognize our condition and move toward our fears and the God who can calm them. We can dismiss our feelings and postpone dealing with them or we can engage our questions and fears.

In the familiar story we have read from John 3, we encounter a man who is having an any old kind of day. His name is Nicodemus, and he is unwilling to live with the hope that there will be time enough for thinking come tomorrow. Nicodemus is a man of faith and a leader in his community. He is a Pharisee and thus not only a student but a teacher of faith. He knows all about God and God's ways. Yet he wakes up one day and wonders whether he is missing something. He feels empty. Then, along comes this wandering rabbi without formal training who seems to have something he does not. Jesus is his name. And Nicodemus decides to talk with him and see what he thinks.

It is not an easy thing for Nicodemus to do. It is hard enough for him to admit to himself that he is missing something. He has a good bit of pride, a lot of ego at risk. Yet the harder thing would be for others who respect him to know that he feels inadequate, so much so that he is willing to seek help from someone with less training, someone younger than him. But, as difficult as it is, Nicodemus is feeling the pain of emptiness and this pain motivates him to overcome his resistance.

He goes to see Jesus under the cover of darkness, a time when rabbis teach but also when no one else will see him. He is protecting

himself, but he is going, he is taking a risk. He is acting upon his need, his emptiness. He is searching for something more. It is a critical moment; he could easily turn around and decide he is not ready to talk. Jesus' response is crucial. Nicodemus is open but also vulnerable.

Where Nicodemus is many of us have been, others are now, and the rest of us will be some day. It is a place of struggle and searching, but the key is that we are honest with ourselves and willing to seek help. It is difficult to be honest because, like Nicodemus, we have much to risk. We are people of faith. We have been in church most, if not all, of our lives. Many of us are leaders. How can we just come out and say that we wonder whether there is a God or what difference God makes or what meaning life has? It is difficult to do, but it is essential to be honest, and we have plenty of company. Many of the greatest saints of the church have had questions; and being honest helped them to grow.

I have shared with some of you before a story Morton Kelsey relates in his book *Reaching*. Kelsey was serving as an Episcopal rector and had reached a place where he was deemed to be quite successful when just before he rose to preach one Sunday a voice seemed to whisper in his ear that he didn't really believe all the claptrap he was preaching. There are times when we ministers think we hear voices guiding us, but this was not the kind of message any of us wants to hear.

The voice troubled Kelsey, and to make matters worse, he started having a disturbing dream. In the dream, Kelsey walked into the church on a Sunday morning and couldn't find his vestments. Then, he couldn't find his sermon notes — a fearful thing for minister and congregation! Next, he couldn't find his place in the prayer book. Finally, he looked out upon the congregation and saw that a dead tree had fallen through the nave of the church. In panic, he began to wonder how the ushers could collect an offering through the limbs of the dead tree.

What was going on with Kelsey? Obviously he had doubts and questions about his faith. Whispering voices and disturbing dreams presented clues the minister needed to pay attention to, and he did. It was not easy for a professional caregiver to seek care, for a teacher of faith to own up to his questions, but like Nicodemus, he found the courage to overcome his resistance and seek help.

Kelsey talked with a Jungian analyst, Max Zeller, a German Jew who had escaped from a Nazi concentration camp and thus knew about anxiety. He convinced Kelsey that his dreams were telling him something significant and eventually he came to see in them a symbol of his faith. He knew about God but did not know God. So, his preaching and teaching were to an extent inauthentic, and the church would become an assortment of dying branches without more authenticity.

It was a critical insight, one that did not lead to an easy solution. For one cannot manufacture experiences with the Holy. They happen at God's initiative, as the prophet Isaiah discovered. But it was an insight that started him on a better path. It took some hutzpah to get that far, to be honest about his struggles, but his honesty was rewarded.

So it goes for us when we struggle. Paying attention to what is going on within us, being honest about it and seeking help may not be easy, but it will be one of the wisest things we ever do.

And yet, the biblical story does not end here, with Nicodemus being honest and asking questions. It ends with Nicodemus receiving help, getting answers, just not the ones he expects. When Nicodemus approaches Jesus, he doesn't ask a question. He simply says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from God." Yet, Jesus seems to know why Nicodemus has come. He realizes this is a crucial moment.

This is no time for small talk. So, Jesus gets right to the point and says that no one can see the reign of God without being born again or from above. Nicodemus doesn't understand. There is a memorable exchange about whether one can enter the womb again and be born a second time, and Jesus is astounded that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a teacher of faith, is dumbfounded. Jesus tries to explain that he is talking about spiritual birth, but the best we can tell, Nicodemus walks away scratching his head in confusion and amazement.

One might conclude that Jesus isn't much of a spiritual guide. If the definition of effectiveness is straightforward answers with easy steps to follow, he is an utter failure. But if the goal is to point people in the direction of an authentic encounter with the Holy, Jesus knows what he

is doing and is marvelous at it. For such an encounter is about mystery, wonder and awe. Ask Isaiah who says, “Woe is me!” when he realizes in Whose presence he stands! Such an encounter is as elusive as a spiritual birth. It is like the wind, Jesus says, which blows where it chooses, and we do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

An encounter with the God known to us in the great mystery of three persons cannot be manufactured but rather must happen naturally at God’s initiative and with our openness to it. Nicodemus is ready to open his life to God, to move from knowing about God to knowing God. He is in for the ride of his life, one that will lead to fulfillment.

So it goes for us. It is critical that we recognize our emptiness for what it is and be willing to seek help, but once we do, we are only halfway to where we need to go. The second half of the journey can be even more challenging because it involves letting go of control, setting aside cultural misconceptions about faith, losing ourselves in a genuine relationship with the God who made us. It involves things like change and transformation, a radical reorientation of life, a complete re-birth.

Morton Kelsey was willing to take these further risks. Once he recognized what he was missing, he developed an openness to God and found that his dream life presented a way to connect with God. He was quick to point out that there are other ways to connect with the Divine. His wife found an openness through journaling. But no matter how we sense God’s presence — through individual times of devotion or shared worship experiences, through acts of service or the majesty of creation, at the birth of a child or the marriage of a loved one or even at a death — the key is that we remain open and find a way to sense the Holy.

That’s what it takes to fill the emptiness, to engage the any old kind of day — the capacity to recognize what is going on within us and the courage to seek help; and a willingness to remain open and lose ourselves in the mystery of a transforming relationship with the triune God. St. Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. So they are, but the good news is rest is available to us all.