

The Teacher Appears

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When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. —Tibetan Buddhist Saying

Ancient Witness: 1 Kings 19:1-13a

It's good to be back from my sabbatical. Many people have asked me, "So how did it go?" In my 37 years as a pastor, this was my first one, and it was much needed, especially after the two pandemic years. So I was really looking forward to some rest, rejuvenation and study. I had all these things that I wanted to do and learn. I had a stack of books I wanted to read and a list of things I wanted to write about. I pulled together a draft of a 150-page book that I titled, *Justice from the Pulpit: Sermons for Social Transformation*. Those who know me would not be surprised by this. But, as the saying goes, if you want to make God laugh, just tell God your plans.

Just before my sabbatical was going to start, I had a physical exam. And when my routine blood work came back, my doctor called me immediately and she said, "Steve, we have a problem." The diagnosis was polycythemia vera, which is a type of blood cancer. It's when the cells in my bone marrow, due to a genetic mutation, start producing too many red blood cells. This leads to a thickening of the blood and clotting that can lead to some very serious complications like a stroke, organ failure, pulmonary embolism, heart attack or a thrombosis. Urgent stuff, she stressed to me. So I immediately started this regime of phlebotomies, drawing off one and a half units of blood each week. My blood was so thick that the typical I.V. needle was too narrow, and they resorted to pulling it out using a giant syringe. We later went to a larger gauge needle so the blood could flow more freely. I had about 10 of those phlebotomies.

I also started making visits to a cancer center in Spokane to see a hematologist/oncologist, who prescribed hydroxyurea, a chemo drug that inhibits blood cell production that I'll probably take for the rest of my life. I've been up there seven times so far and also went up for a bone marrow biopsy. I've done a lot of reading, and while there is no cure and life expectancy for polycythemia patients is reduced compared with the general population, it is a very treatable disease and people can live for many years with it. And I'm extremely grateful for that. Right now, all my numbers have stabilized, and things looks good.

So, needless to say, this was not the way I imagined I would spend my sabbatical. This was to be a time of re-centering, growing and learning. Instead, it resembled more of a medical leave. I was consumed with medical appointments and thoughts about my own mortality. So much for professional development!

On the other hand, the life of faith, it seems to me, is to let go and embrace the unknowable, unnameable Mystery, to trust this Mystery, to let yourself fall into what Christian Wyman called, "the bright abyss." Isn't this my truest and deepest vocation? And don't I need to develop *this*?

Then it occurred to me that this blood cancer wasn't just a health threat to contend with. It is a teacher, encouraging me to let go, to embrace and surrender to the Mystery, and to trust this unknowable future.

There is a Buddhist saying: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." That is, in our lives we all will encounter those things that will challenge us, things that will encourage us to grow, things that can help us become more aware, more enlightened. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun, once said, "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."

And often, these teachers that appear are not the ones we expect or would choose. Many spiritual teachers in each of the traditions say that sometimes the most important teacher we encounter is our enemy. The enemy is someone or something that pushes our buttons and causes us to examine ourselves on a deep level.

The ultimate enemy, of course, is death. Dealing with the specter of our death is not something we ordinarily want to do. We usually venture into that territory against our will. The harsh enemy of suffering and anxiety is the great spiritual teacher. As the ancient Greek writer, Aeschylus, famously wrote,

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

When we face suffering and despair, the teacher appears, and we can truly learn a deep wisdom. Many spiritual masters knew this. In the 6th Century, St. Benedict wrote to those who would follow his order, "Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die." He knew that doing so, the teacher will appear.

For me, my diagnosis, my teacher, asked me questions. Like the question from the poet, Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you do plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" How do I want to spend my remaining years? Like the question from the Heidelberg Catechism, "What is your only comfort in life and death?" Or the question, "How shall I serve God?" Or like the question Thoreau asked, what does it mean to live deliberately, deeply and with simplicity?

In the biblical story we read this morning, the prophet Elijah had tried all his life to be a faithful proclaimer of God's justice and challenged cruel, violent regimes. And now, he was being chased down by Ahab and Jezebel, that unjust king of Israel and his wife. He made his way into the desert where he wishes that he would die. And then later, he took refuge in a cave where he yearned to hear the voice of God for comfort and guidance. He looked in the typical places, the impressive and mighty forces of nature of a hurricane, a wildfire and an earthquake.

But the real teacher was his fear and darkness within himself, symbolized by the cave. And out of that silence and stillness of anxiety, the teacher appears in a barely audible whisper. An imperceptible voice giving Elijah some comfort, some guidance, some peace, and some strength that came beyond himself.

Friends, the teacher appears to us all. As the theologian Paula D'Arcy says, "God comes to us disguised as our life." Not just in power and beauty, but in stillness and darkness. Not just in love and tenderness, but in fear and doubt. Our life can teach us deep and profound truth. And I pray, may we be ready.