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Kate Johnson

Inter-Faith Chaplain at Queen's University since 2013. Her current ministry is focused on food security, post-traumatic growth, issues of equity and the joy of meaningful living. She holds a Master of Divinity from Queen's University with a concentration in Restorative Justice and subsequently worked as a hospital chaplain, a bank custodian and a counsellor at the Canadian Hearing Society before becoming a full-time prison chaplain at Joyceville minimum security institution for five years. Previously Kate studied Social Work and Sociology, specializing in youth corrections, at Lakehead University and worked as a tree planter and homecare provider. She has also worked in youth corrections, supported adults with developmental delay who need a sign language environment and provided case management for post-adoption reunions.

Orientation week, homecoming and St Patrick's Day are a few of the times when I hear a lot about what a challenge it is to fulfil the commandment to love your student neighbours. I am very glad this morning to be speaking to a congregation that includes so many current and retired university-affiliates who know there is more to the story than the headlines and the broken glass suggest.

Still, I would like to start with the negative and work our way to the positive. It is my belief that the kinds of egregious behaviours are not just signs of immaturity and entitlement but symptoms of spiritual poverty. In her depressingly insightful book "The Price of Privilege", psychologist Madeline Levine speaks of the cost to a child's development when their families rarely have a chance to eat together but their parents never miss a soccer game or gymnastics meet. It communicates to kids that they are only valued for their achievements and not for their personhood. A culture that limits family interaction to the realm of achievement tells children that they are not so much someone for their parents to know and be in relationship with as they are trophies for their parents to trot out and brag about. Accomplished children can be treated as objects and status symbols rather than acknowledged for their value as human beings. This is not universally true of all students from wealthy backgrounds but we do see some of these repercussions. For a while I had an office promotional poster that asked the question "full wallet, empty heart?" The response was painful to observe as a few students arrived in office having been pierced by the question.

I am frequently questioned about the emphasis the current student demographic puts on their own mental health. We do know that they have much higher rates of anxiety and depression than previous generations, despite the fact that they live in relative safety compared to their forebearers. While they are far more willing to speak about their mental health and this creates an impression of a larger problem, the research says that mental health for 20 somethings is in fact a larger problem than it was for previous generations.

I think that much of what we are labelling a mental health crisis is also a spiritual health crisis. I will tell you why after I outline the contributors which are:

- nature deficits
- life skills missing from parental and public education
- hyperawareness of the ways in which the world is dangerous without the complementary facts of relative safety
- lack of inter-generational contact outside of the family and a compounding cultural divide between

so-called "digital natives" raised in a pluralistic society and their elders who remember life before digitization and monoethnic societies

- a sense of overwhelm and powerlessness in the face of environmental degradation and immense public and private debt.
- Finally, while it is said that this is the least religious generation in history, there are some nuances to look at in that picture. First, those who do identify as religious are most likely to be very conservative in their religiosity. The only Catholic orders that are receiving new members are those wearing habits and living a strict religious life- it is like that across the religious spectrum. Second, humans can turn anything into a religion. It is certainly easy to argue that our society worships the market idol like it once worshipped God. Our altars and rituals to that market idol are creating the environmental destruction that seems likely to be our undoing. The emphasis on newer, bigger, better is leading us into stressful debt and dissatisfaction with our relationships. We also see fundamentalist expressions of dietary practices and political ideologies.

-Many old and young alike have replaced the idea of a permanent God with the temporary comforts granted by the market idol or the structure provided by absolute belief in a political system. All of this of course will ultimately be found wanting in the face of life's complexity and our need as human beings for deep and substantial relationships.

It is important before I go on here to distinguish between poor mental health and acute mental illness. While mental illness may have spiritual features, I am not talking here about schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder or that degree of distress which clearly requires medical model interventions.

When I say there is a mislabelling of spiritual struggles as mental health struggles, I am speaking of the high rates of anxiety and the kind of depression that is more existential than clinical. I am speaking of the kind of insecurity and questioning that is common developmentally appropriate for young adults but needs to be answered with something deeper than Netflix binging and keggers.

And here is part of how I know this is spiritual illness:

The research tells us consistently that young people who have a spiritual or religious framework that they apply to their time in post-secondary education do better than those who don't. Religious students have higher grades, better identity development, less anxiety and depression **and** better coping when they have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression. Spiritual disciplines encourage the student to take breaks from study. Religious community can provide genuine connection and a deeper level of support. At the very least, it provides a clear place to affiliate and a nucleus of entry level friendships. Religious students are more likely to say they feel a genuine connection to something outside of themselves and to see the purpose of their education.

Religious students are less likely to engage in substance abuse, less likely to make negative headlines and more likely to engage in community service as an aspect of their education.

So what can the adult neighbours of these sometimes unlovely creatures do to meet their spiritual needs?

Above all, remember that the current difficulties are a shared responsibility. Human beings learn what we lived. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the incoming generation, they are the sum of their experiences and any encouragement to take responsibility for themselves must not be couched in blame.

The main needs of all students are always food and sleep. Your monthly meals here are very important. Supporting the campus food bank or the chaplain's trust are other ways that you can be very helpful to hungry students who will not be considering their spiritual needs until their physical needs are met. Following issues with occupancy permits on new (privately developed) buildings, we also have a number of students who are couch surfing and unable to find safe housing. If you are in a position to offer temporary or long-term accommodation, you would be providing a great ministry to those in need.

Returning to your student dinners, the best thing you can offer is inter-generational community through events like meals or even perhaps a repair cafe. Many young people need life skills like batch cooking, sewing on a button or patching a sweater. Consider hosting a regular games night or allowing your hall to be used by students of other faith identities.

Our introverted, lower-income and international students are eager for low key social opportunities. A ministry of focused attention and deep listening could be the most powerful gift you can give a student. All the better when it is accompanied by a bowl of soup.

Remember that everyone likes to feel they are contributing. Ask the students to minister to you as well- through cultural exchange (intergenerational or ethnic), by helping with the dishes after a meal, by sharing with you about what they are learning. There is a media-fed inter generational cultural divide pitting elders against their so-called "Snowflake" grandchildren. Reject that narrative. Listen deeply so that they can also listen to you. Notice their strengths: deep concern for each other, ability to be welcoming across differences, their principled stances, their exuberance and energy.

One of the interesting pieces of health research says that the young people known as the Tinder generation (do you know what Tinder is?) share an overwhelming preference for deep long lasting romantic relationships but they feel they don't have the skills. If you have a successful, long term relationship OR you know what you could have done differently, create opportunities to share your wisdom- young people are craving it.

All of this ties back to the scriptures we read this morning in that we are not to judge by appearances or to decide for ourselves who is deserving of our help. We are to love our neighbour even when they are unlovable. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves meaning we have an obligation to minister and an obligation to respect our own limits and practice self-care. Discernment about what one can reasonably take on is essential to any loving exercise.

Prayers of the people:

We know that many in our neighbourhood are hungry for friendship and connection. May every house of worship in our community see how it can minister. Guide us in our discernment of what is ours to do and what is best left to you.

This time in history is filled with difficulty and the illusion that it is more troubled than other times. prompt us please to turn off the devices and distractions. Remind us to focus on your light, which is ever shining in the darkness.

Help us to appreciate the beauty of the autumn, the acceptance of the seasons and observance of the rhythms of nature. Whatever season of life we are in, show us timely ways to both give and receive your love.

Help us to remember that while symptoms of distress and signs may differ, each generation has had its challenges and triumphs. Open our hearts to love without judgment and to learn with the curiosity of a well-loved child.

We do not ask for patience or endurance or any other virtue that will put us to the test. We ask merely to be an open channel of your love- from moment to moment, to ourselves and to others so that we may know your joy and the grace with which you mean us to live.

Amen