

Thoughts on *Thought from the Bedside: From Medicine to Chaplaincy and Beyond*

Thank God for the entwined, challenging paths that brought Bill Holmes to scribble his thoughts and then do the tough work to organize, clarify, and edit them. Three unique perspectives mesh together over decades of personal and professional struggle to reflect upon the essence of life's fundamental concerns. Dr. Holmes gathers thoughts from medicine, ministry and personal crises on a wide range of crucial topics. His raw, vulnerable sharing allows us to peer beyond his thought into his heart throughout his painful personal search for balance, identity, mission, healing, and meaning. As he "leans in" to experience the patient as a whole person, he honors the worth of the "least of these" and elevates the marginalized to near sainthood.

He looks at life, death, cancer, community, racism, and poverty as a pediatric neurologist, a healthcare chaplain, and four time cancer survivor. Scripture, theology, and spiritual formation support his thoughts across the pages. With courage Bill introduces us to suffering patients as he reflects upon heaven, hope, faith struggles, miracles, and prayer. His compelling story is worth the investment, but his vision, assessments, commitments, wisdom and call for justice make it a must read for reflective health care providers, clinical clergy, struggling patients, and anxious families. This piece is not intended to be a textbook on any subject; nevertheless, students of many disciplines will find this writing informative, inspiring, and troubling. I know I did!

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Thoughts
from
the
Bedside

FROM MEDICINE
TO CHAPLAINCY
AND BEYOND

Bill Holmes, M.D., M.Div.
Foreword by Walter Brueggemann

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This book is dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Dean K. Thompson, President Emeritus and Professor of Ministry Emeritus, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He saw where I was heading before I did.

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Foreword

Bill Holmes has strong professional credentials and a drawer full of degrees. It is clear in this manuscript, however, that what is interesting and compelling about Holmes is not his credentials or his degrees. What is compelling is the unmistakable fact that he is “all in.” He is all in as a pediatric neurologist who has brought his expertise to children for whom he has cared. He is all in as a pastoral chaplain who sees persons whole, and who listens them to wellbeing. He is all in in his passion for justice and the urgency of compassion as he ponders the forces of racism and inequality that are so visible among us. He is all in with his illness, carrier of four different cancers. He is all in with his life that is a living testimony the way in which he has been a “man for others.”

This statement by Holmes is an unguarded journal of his reflective life. It comes with deep personal honesty, with whimsical reflectiveness, and without sentimentality. Holmes understands so well that a transparent life is a life with transformative energy. Other readers will find, as I have found, that as Holmes lets us see his internal workings we become more self-aware and see ourselves more clearly. As he offers us a window to his self, so he is also a mirror for our selves.

The themes that Holmes takes up seem almost random, whatever is on his mind at the time. But when he gets to a theme he stays with it, drills down into it so that it yields some new awareness for him. Thus for example, he revisits his old home place on Brook Street and is aware that urban planning ravished his neighborhood. He sees beyond his own experience, that the fierce force of racism has been at work so that many others have suffered displacement and a savaging of the environment as well as safe living space. As elsewhere he moves beyond his own pathos about such loss to see the wider implications for those more vulnerable than he is.

Alongside his passion for justice and alertness to the viciousness of injustice is a bed-side availability that permits him to tell stories about specific persons

with whom he has ministered. I am moved by the way he mobilized scripture to put together a prayer for the Emergency Department that moves in and out of the majestic Psalm 139. Holmes offers an extended riff on prayer, on the God to whom we pray, when to pray, and what to say. He shares memories of his growing up when he was nurtured in prayer, though he was drawn to a religious dimension of life by the prospect of being on the church basketball team. And for all of his intellectual sophistication he does not lose sight of the concrete reality of actual human persons in actual crisis situations who need and want to pray. He tells of praying with and being prayed for by a woman who faced imminent death by ovarian cancer. Given her own crisis, she nonetheless prayed for him as he faced a bone marrow procedure. Holmes has the grace to wonder how she was able to do that in the face of her own demise.

Holmes compromises none of his professional competence, either medical or pastoral. What comes through, however, is this authentic human being who has a sense of the ineffable in his own life, who is dazzled by the way that holiness shows up in quotidian ways, and that the ineffable is a crucial match for his own vulnerability. Holmes remembers in eloquent ways where he came from, knows some of his vulnerabilities, and in a more-or-less innocent way is able to trust the claims of faith and witness of scripture. When he comes to his own bouts with cancer, he has the good mature sense to reflect on the fact that he is “white, wealthy, and well insured” and so receives good care. Pushing promptly beyond himself, he wonders how it is for those who do not have such privilege and advantage as has he.

There are many matters to cherish in this honest book. One in particular has compelling force for me. When he received his diagnosis of multiple myeloma he replied with a poem as he sat on his deck watching rabbits and squirrels. The poem reports on the permission he gave to deer, wild rabbits, raccoons, a robin, some chipmunks, squirrels and bees to help themselves to the bounty of nature. The poem exudes generosity that permeates Bill’s life and self-understanding.

It is worth reflecting, given this moving manuscript, how it is that in our society of busy, demanding technological reductionism, there can be an authentic human self who can be effectively present to others and flourish. I do not suggest that Bill is a model for anyone else. But he is a witness. He is a witness to the reality of humanity when it is refracted through the truth of the gospel. I anticipate that readers will relish this book in the way I have come to relish my

times with Bill, a witty, generous human person among us who makes a difference under the cover of his several degrees.

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary

Acknowledgments

My first attempts at expressing my spiritual concerns and thoughts on paper were in the form of sermons written as pastor of Mount Lebanon Presbyterian Church (MLP) in north Clark County, Indiana. I am forever indebted to the membership of MLP for their faith and trust in me; they were my teachers for two years and beyond.

I am grateful to Dr. J. Brad Wigger, the Louisville Seminary, and the Collegeville Institute for inviting me to participate in the Writing Workshop for Pastors.

For reading and critiquing my manuscript, I am grateful to Dr. Wade Rowatt, professor of pastoral care at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky; and Rev. Kerry Wentworth, my fellow chaplain and mentor at Norton Brownsboro Hospital in Louisville.

I am indebted to Rev. Dr. Ronald Oliver, system vice president for mission and outreach at Norton Healthcare, for inviting me to share in the ministry of chaplaincy. I am forever grateful to Rev. Kelley Woggon, who by her example taught me to remove obstructions to listening and then lean in so as to hear the voices of the suffering.

My life has been deeply affected by the ministry of Rev. Dr. Joe Phelps, pastor of Highland Baptist Church (HBC) of Louisville. He not only led the church to ordain me to the ministry of Jesus Christ but also challenged me to speak out against injustice. He also introduced me to Walter Brueggemann, who by his words, his many books and articles, and his actions has been a constant inspiration in all that I have done over the last decade.

Some of my essays, reflections, and ideas in this book are reproduced in whole or in part, with permission, from articles that were first published in the following publications:

- *Church Health Reader*, a publication of the Church Health Center, Memphis, Tennessee. Both the *Reader* and the center, founded by Dr. G. Scott Morris,

have a unique ministry that reaches well beyond Memphis.

- *Word and World*, a publication of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. Thanks also to Dr. Fred Gaiser, the immediate past editor, who invited me to contribute.
- *EthicsDaily.com*, a division of the Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tennessee. I am grateful to Zach Dawes and to the late Robert Parham, who founded and directed the center.
- *The Oates Journal* (online), a publication of the Wayne E. Oates Foundation, Louisville, Kentucky. Please read my tribute in this book to the late Christopher A. Hammond, past director of the foundation.

I am more than grateful to my wife of forty-nine years, Joyce Lynn Yates Holmes, for giving me space and encouraging me during long hours in my study. My gratitude extends to my daughters, Suzanne Bowman and Emily Brown, who even as children gave me space to read and write. When I was doing postgraduate work in neurology, Emily's teacher asked her what her daddy did for a living. Emily replied, "He reads books." Well, now he has written one.

Preface

Most of this book was not written with a book in mind. I made notes during the quiet of the evening or early morning hours while reflecting on the encounters of the day. Over the years I have kept my notes in a loose-leaf binder labeled “Scribblings,” my thoughts from the bedside of those struggling to find meaning in the midst of suffering.

I intend “bedside” to be a metaphor for that place where we are called to engage all that we are on behalf of the one who is in a place of disorientation, where things are not as they were and likely never will be again. In some cases things have never been as they should be, for injustice has made its mark on the one who sits in front of me. In all such places hope struggles to be redefined. It is at such times that questions arise concerning death, dying, afterlife, miracles, and prayer.

What ultimately generated my desire to write this book was an emerging awareness of the intertwining of my life with all who take this journey. Sharing in the suffering of others has given my life a deeper meaning than it might have otherwise attained. The nature of the suffering might be a physical or medical condition such as cancer or disabilities, coping with loss, depression, social injustice (including racism), as well as living in isolation or in a void created out of collusion between humankind and technology.

I have drawn on a variety of experiences from seven years in general pediatrics and thirty years in child and adult neurology followed by six years in hospital chaplaincy. I am amazed by the way my fellow travelers keep going in the face of the unspeakable, including cancer, chronic neurological diseases, and a litany of conditions and diseases.

Over the years I have been deeply moved by the exemplary lives of parents, nurses, and my fellow chaplains and physicians. In addition, the inspiration to write arose out of my encounters with social injustice and suffering that first barged into my awareness in my preadolescent and adolescent years.

Sometimes it is just the unwanted stuff of everyday life that comes without invitation to threaten us on the one hand but with the potential to make us better servants and caregivers on the other.

Along the way I have stacked stones here and there to mark my encounters with stories that changed who I am and how I perceive life itself. One such marker came as a teenager when the powers-that-be destroyed the quiet beauty of our street and then built an interstate highway in front of our home and an off-ramp through our backyard within thirty feet of my bedroom window. Another stack of stones came years later when a young epileptic child fell to one side while sitting in front of me and unwittingly marked the beginning of my journey toward the practice and teaching of neurology. Still a decade later a gay man with headaches would come seeking my help. His journey into isolation and death secondary to HIV/AIDS reverberates still in my deepest memories.

I have also written with the cancer sufferer in mind not only because of my personal encounters with cancer but also due to an overwhelming image that hovers in and around me and will not let me go. A few days before his death I visited William T. (Bill) Applegate, my high school classmate and friend. Bill voiced no complaint even though he was most certainly in incredible pain. He reached out to me with his right hand and asked how I was doing. Bill Applegate was in dying as he was in living.

Soon after I started my work as a hospital chaplain, I stood at the bedside with the family of a brain-dead man as he was removed from life support. It was a moment of epiphany as I began to see life and death from the other side of the reflex hammer where most of my fellow travelers stand. What happens at the bedside is often more than we initially see. What is needed is a different lens, a different way of looking at human suffering, so that which we have beheld as a clinical observer becomes a divine encounter.

With each essay, reflection, and poetic writing I intend to speak of the need for our presence in community with the suffering. Even then there is more than a human presence, for in all such instances God is also present. This presence acting in the world is not dependent in any way on whether or not we see or acknowledge it. God spoke first; God will have the last word: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1).

I am accustomed to being awake at all hours of the night. I am well practiced due to my work in medicine and chaplaincy. Somewhere past midnight I often

reflect on my life as it has been, on the experiences that will never let me go and now have become the subject matter of my writing.

There is a lot going on at 4 a.m., most of it in my head. Nonetheless, there is a reality that speaks to the moment.

Four Past Midnight

Infants cry out
Mothers do what mothers do

The Spirit speaks
The soul hears silence

Prophets lament and wail
Deaf ears turn and sleep

Agonal breaths quicken
Vigils are kept

Reason takes its leave
Would-be poets scribble

Bill Holmes
4:24 a.m.
September 3, 2014