



It Is Who We Become*

Katharine A. Callaghan, MD

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“The most important thing in our life is not what we do, it’s who we become. What God gets out of our life is the person we become” (Willard 2006).

One of my college roommates was the first person who introduced me to this idea, and one of my favorite Christian thinkers, Dallas Willard, brought it back into my mind last week when I was listening to one of his teachings (Willard 2006).

As medical school has come to a close, it is this idea of becoming that has consumed much of my reflections on this season of life. While parts of this prioritization of becoming are deeply comforting and encouraging to me, other aspects of it fundamentally challenge my default settings and the way I live and move in the day-to-day. When I look back over the last four years, I’m similarly both challenged and encouraged when I think about who I’ve become. It has by no means been a linear progression of becoming more and more like Jesus. However, I think the most heartening thing, when I look back on the undulating curve of my life as a disciple in medical school, is that often in the moments where I seemed to have plummeted, the moments where I was my worst self and felt so lost in the rat race of accomplishing, God moved.

There are so many stories I could tell about that, but the one I want to focus on here comes from my first year. A substantial part of our first-year curriculum was anatomy lab, and we spent the first half of the year with the same group of four or so students every time we went to lab. While my group always got our assignments done, I felt it was my responsibility to keep us on task; and, consequently, I was often short and impatient with my classmates. Sometimes I was flat out angry. I usually left the lab with a swirl of emotions raging inside me. Part of me was so frustrated with my colleagues as it seemed that no one else engaged with the kind of energy and rigor *I felt* was needed to address all the details of our work, and another part of me was infuriated with

myself for being so stuck on checking all the boxes of ridiculous minutia set before us that I couldn’t even engage in a civil, much less kind, manner with my classmates.

As the year wore on, I wish I could tell you that I learned how to approach the lab in a healthier manner, that I figured out how to be diligent but also patient. But, the truth is that I didn’t. I was really difficult to work with in the lab, and as much as I thought about and even tried to pray about that, I just never seemed to make any progress. However, one cool thing that did happen was that, despite being hard to work with in that context, I became friends with one of the women in my lab group, who I think would call herself an agnostic. We began to have conversations about all sorts of things, including faith. Probably half way through the school year, we were running together one day; and she said to me: “So, I’m sure I’ve got a lot of things wrong, but would you mind if I ran by you my understanding of Christianity? Then maybe you could fill in the spots that I don’t have quite right?” “Sure!” I replied, honored and grateful that she was initiating this kind of conversation.

She proceeded to paint a beautiful picture of her understanding of what the followers of Jesus claim to believe. She talked about Christ coming to earth to set an example of what it means to live a life of love,

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Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, TN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Katharine A. Callaghan, MD, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, Tennessee, USA.

and she noted that His death was, in many ways, the culmination of that love. Finally, she highlighted that being a Christian meant being called to live and love the way He did. When she finished, I thanked her for her willingness to share and noted that she was exactly right about the things she had said; I just would want to add some things in addition to flush out the picture. One key thing I emphasized in these additions was that while, indeed, as a follower of Jesus, I'm called to live and love the way He did, I can't actually do this on my own. It is only by the power of Jesus' Spirit alive and at work within me and because of a willingness to say yes to Him, that I even begin to be able to live and love the way He did.

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, she started pushing back against me: "Come on, Kate. . . . You're too hard on yourself. Don't try to make yourself out to be some awful person when I know you do great things for people all the time."

And, I turned to her and said: "Yea, maybe. . . , but I'm also that person in the lab who is impatient and critical and really difficult to work with."

And though I can't remember exactly what happened next, I know that there was a significant pause in the conversation, because she knew it was true. She had seen how awful I could be when left to my own devices, how over and over again I had failed to live Christ's Way of Love.

I tell that story because I can so clearly look back on it as a moment of redemption, a moment in which the Lord's Strength truly was made perfect in my weakness. And while, to my knowledge, it wasn't the beginning of this friend walking with the Lord, our exchange was an important conversion moment, if you will, for me. It was evidence to me that even in the moments when I so blatantly turn from Christ and His Loving Way, failing to follow Him and instead taking my own path, the Lord can and does powerfully work to use even those stumblings for good.

It is this character of redemptive transformation, of bringing Light out of darkness that, in my time at Vanderbilt, I've found to be a key component that distinguishes God's life and work (and thus the life and work of those who follow Him) from that of devoted secular humanists. Because, to be honest, I have had many friends at Vanderbilt who do not call themselves Christians who love better than I do. So, while I wish it was a superior kind of love—something I was able to do—that set me apart as a disciple, the truth is that it's not. Instead, what sets me apart, in my good moments, is a willingness to admit

that I'm desperately in need of a Savior, and I have One, who steps into the darkness of my life and brings Light and Love.

This posture of knowing dependence, again, when I have the grace to sit there, has allowed me to take to heart the wisdom of my college friend and the late Dr. Willard. It has allowed me to value becoming and to recognize that my unfolding will rarely, if ever, be a linear process of constant upward movement. Rather, there will be peaks and valleys and, mysteriously, the "low points," where it seems as though what *has* to be accomplished isn't, may be the moments most ripe for *becoming* more one with the Lord.

As I embark upon residency, a season in which there will be much to do and inevitably many "low points," I pray that I might be open to His Transformative Power present within and around me. I pray that I will make space to look back on His consistent record of provision for me over these past four years and before, especially in the moments when I have felt weak and was tempted to despair. I pray that His history with me will be a source of encouragement. And, I pray that I might say yes to Christ as He helps me become a person who lives with Him, particularly amid my smallest and largest deaths, allowing Him to bring forth from them Resurrection Life and thus to transform me ever more fully into His likeness.

Reference

Willard, Dallas. 2006. "Knowing What We Work With, and How It Takes 'The Pressure Off.'" Paper presented at Tyndale University Pastors and Leaders Conference in Toronto, ON, March 13–15.

Biographical Note

Katharine A. Callaghan, MD, is the 2017 Leonard Tow Humanism in Medicine Award recipient at Vanderbilt University. This award is voted on by the graduating class and given to the graduating student who demonstrates exemplary compassion, empathy, respect for patients, and excellence in the art of medicine, and who engenders trust and confidence in interactions with both patients and colleagues while adhering to professional ethical standards. While a medical student at Vanderbilt, Dr. Callaghan was the president of the Society of Saints Cosmas and Damian, the Catholic medical student group, and is now doing her residency in Family Medicine at Memorial Hospital in South Bend, Indiana.