

Rodney's Story

I used to work full-time as a chaplain at an institution for people with physical and/or intellectual impairments. My office was located off the back of the chapel which is used regularly for mid-week and Sunday worship by the residents who live there. It is a beautiful place of worship, with windows on three sides accommodating the sunshine, and a view of the beautiful grounds that surround the chapel.

Occasionally, whilst working in my office, I would hear residents and staff come into the chapel. There were residents who wanted to play the piano, another who just wanted you to get him a drink of water, staff who wanted to talk with the chaplain or with colleagues and then there was Rodney.

Rodney was in his 40's, had a profound hearing impairment as well as an intellectual impairment, and would wheel his chair around the institution's grounds with the considerable strength contained in his upper body.

Rodney occasionally came to the chapel during the day and would spend time silently observing up close the chapel's liturgical furnishings, pictures and symbols. The banners, the mock stain glass windows, the cross that stood on the communion table, the picture of Jesus on the back wall of the chapel – they all might become the focus of his reverent reflection.

If you entered the chapel whilst he was there he would, with his exaggerated and graphic hand movements, motion for you to join him in this act of reflection. He might point to the Jesus of the mock stain glass windows, and then with a grunt – the only sound he made – look you in the eye and raise his hand upwards, as if to heaven. He might wheel himself up close to the cross, and then bring his hands together in a prayerful clasp. It seemed clear to me that what occupied Rodney's attention in the church was of sacred significance.

I no longer work full-time at that institution, though I still have weekly contact with a number of the residents, and I still lead an ecumenical Sunday morning worship at the chapel for the 40 or so residents who wish to attend. The worship is informal with much room for interaction between worship leader and congregation. There is singing of familiar hymns and choruses, readings and prayers, an interactive style of message, and the celebration of the Eucharist.

Rodney used to come to these services occasionally but in the last year or so he has been coming regularly. He will usually wheel himself to the front of the worship, pay close attention during the service, and sometimes linger for a while in the chapel after the service has concluded.

I have often found myself reflecting upon what it is that the act of worship means to Rodney, after all he can't hear a thing!

Perhaps it's the action of receiving the communion elements.

Perhaps it's the movement that takes place during the delivery of the message.

Perhaps it's the idea of being together with others amidst the chapel's liturgical furnishings and pictures.

Perhaps it's all the above, perhaps it's something else altogether simpler or more profound.

I don't know and never will. And perhaps if Rodney could talk he may not be able to tell me because his experience is beyond his words or too personal.

But, through Rodney I've been compelled to understand more than ever that there is more to be "heard" in worship than can be absorbed through my ears. That God and worship can be experienced through my other senses, and in ways that are beyond my rational understanding. Ways that draw me deeper into the profound significance and mystery of sacred spaces such as that chapel, amidst the act of worship, or amidst the beauty of creation, or the comings and goings of daily living.

Rodney invites me to live with such mystery.



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