

Accumulated faith

Faith is a way of life that acquires its layers and contours incrementally, often imperceptibly.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

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(Photo by Montes-Bradley / iStock / Getty)

Jason and I retreated to the ICU waiting room to talk about his mother's precipitous decline. Moments earlier the attending physician had spoken of her imminent death. "Six to 12 hours—maybe," he said. I wanted to chat with Jason.

Marie is very familiar to me from our congregation; her son far less so. A well-employed 44-year-old techie, he doesn't take to religion. Best I can tell, it feels

superfluous to his larger contentment in life. Because he looked uncomfortable with what was going on that day, I asked him if he was. “Yeah, I am. I don’t wanna be here.”

“Why’s that?” I asked. “Are you uncomfortable because we’re in a hospital, or is it the struggle to let Mom go?”

“Both,” he said. “I’ve never been in a hospital, believe it or not, and I don’t like it here. And, yeah, I don’t have any idea what to do with her death. It’s gonna be a huge . . . I don’t know what.” His voice trailed off.

As I looked into Jason’s eyes, it felt like I was peering into a lost soul: a grown man with no idea of where to turn next or what to do with the death of the one who brought him into this world. The widely divergent trajectories of our two lives suddenly struck me. To someone of unbelief sitting beside you in a hospital waiting room, how do you describe the power of faith, the significance of hope, or the meaning of life? How do you realistically acquaint them with the riches or comfort of faith during a 20-minute sit-down?

You can’t. Faith is a deeply ingrained condition formed through steady habits, disciplined practices, and reliable instincts that take shape over long stretches of time. It’s a way of life that acquires its layers and contours incrementally, developing ever so gradually and often imperceptibly. Somewhat like the parent who doesn’t notice her infant’s changing appearance until she comes home from a weeklong trip and can’t believe how much her child has matured in her absence. The Christian life doesn’t emerge overnight any more than friendship does. The internal dispositions that form our character establish themselves often unselfconsciously and over the course of many uneventful days.

There have been times in my life when I’ve found it a valuable exercise to imagine myself held captive in deplorable conditions abroad. A damp and windowless cell. Foul air. Meager food. No companionship. Poor sanitation. Days indistinguishable from nights. Zero connection with the outside world. What might spare me from total despair or insanity?

My hope is that God’s grace would buoy the faith accumulated within me. The countless hymn texts, song lyrics, and musical tunes I know by heart; the numerous Bible stories and passages I’ve absorbed and committed to memory over a lifetime; the human experiences of a faith community that remind me of all of this—I know of

nothing that comes close to this sustenance of the heart. It's vast and deep. Encyclopedic. I'd have to retrieve it quite deliberately, of course, but it's all in there.

Jason appears to me to lead a contented and happy life, at least on days when his mother isn't dying. But does he live a good life—by which I mean one with transcendent meaning and purpose? To be clear, it's not that what I think of as a good life requires one to be Christian, or that it magically fashions a person into a good Christian, whatever that is. I'm just convinced that what Hans Küng wrote decades ago remains true: that "being a Christian is a particularly good thing." However gradually and unceremoniously faith may evolve within us, it provides a life that can hold and carry us through all kinds of circumstances.