

Around the Campfire

Margaret Grun Kibben

Margaret Grun Kibben is a U.S. Presbyterian minister who served as the 26th Chief of Chaplains of the United States Navy. Formerly the 18th Chaplain of the United States Marine Corps (CHMC) and the Deputy Chief of Chaplains of the United States Navy, Kibben was the first woman to hold each office. Kibben entered active duty in the U.S. Navy in 1986. She received both her Masters of Divinity and her Doctor of Ministry degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. She also holds a master's degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College.

It started around a campfire. I was on a church youth group retreat with my middle-school friends. That's the age when you become keenly aware of every feeling, hope, desire, and anxiety and sharing with somebody is still considered okay. As it turned out, I was the confidante with whom, throughout the day, many of my peers shared their personal trauma or their existential angst. After our conversations they often walked away with a lighter step, a burden lifted, and their sense of purpose and meaning at least momentarily restored. One evening, after a day of work projects and teambuilding, we were all gathered around a campfire with our youth pastor, a particularly gracious, welcoming, and truly pastoral soul. As I looked over at him on that starlit, fresh mountain-air evening, I said to myself, "I want to do what he's doing. I want to lead people who are on heart-wrenching life journeys and enable them to discover what it means to live as a person of hope, a person who knows where their purpose and meaning are found."

A couple years later, with my sense of calling to ministry still clear, I had the opportunity to do a student internship at my church. It was there that I was able to experience what takes place on the days other than Sunday: the administration, the pastoral calls to the sick and infirmed, and the committee meetings (by the way, the Presbyterian Church has *a lot* of committee meetings). About a month or two into this, it dawned on me that the pastors only saw members of the congregation once or maybe twice a week. No matter how good that week's sermon was, its impact rarely resonates the whole week, so hence my growing awareness that my calling to ministry should be something more integrated into people's lives. Even at the age of seventeen, I knew that people want to know that there's someone in whom, throughout the workday, they can easily confide. My vision at that point was to find a way to be with my parishioners every day: to eat, sleep, breathe, and endure the same things they were eating, sleeping, breathing, and enduring—so that no matter where they found themselves, I would be there with them to share their personal traumas and the existential angst and not have to wait until after the committee meeting next Wednesday.

Almost forty years after discerning my vocation, I am overwhelmed with the affirmation of that vision that I was graced to enjoy throughout my career and now. To have had the privilege as a Navy chaplain to enter into the lives of countless men and women, to come alongside them in the living of their daily lives, has been nothing short of a gift from God. Many of the people I've served would never even have darkened the door of a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, and yet the feelings, hopes, desires, and anxieties were very much a part of their everyday lives. When a chaplain stopped to chat, or when someone suggested (i.e., ordered them) that they "go see the chaplain," the spiritual questions, the life journeys the men and women I encountered found themselves on were more in need of a kind, pastoral presence than a just weekly dose of religious community. I've spent my professional life doing exactly what I felt called to do that night sitting around the campfire: leading people who are on heart-wrenching life journeys and enabling them to discover what it means to live as a person of hope, a person with purpose and meaning.

Few vocations afford this synergy between faith and work. In fact, many find themselves wrestling with striking the balance between "how do I use my skills and abilities to earn a paycheck?" with "how do I exercise my beliefs and live into my worth?". In my case it was fairly straightforward: my religion was my vocation (my sense of call,

my understanding of my value). Being religious was my *job*. I was paid *because* I was a religious person. As a chaplain I was expected to be a person of strength and confidence and to provide words of faith and wisdom and offer divinely inspired counsel. That the military makes room for this kind of holistic care and feeding of its people has served to build resilience and strength at the deepest level: in the souls of those who serve.

For most people, however, what they “do” isn’t as neatly tied to what they believe or isn’t an obvious testimony to what they believe they are called to do. Certainly, those who practice some professions such as education, medicine, law, seem particularly suited, even gifted, to serve. While not, perhaps, as obvious an expression of divine vocation as ministry, these fields provide for many a sense of their purpose and meaning, and the reasons they labor so assiduously are more profound than just ensuring a regular paycheck. But for most folks, work doesn’t have any connection to “what happens on Sunday” (Friday, Saturday, Holy Day) and the daily grind to earn a living leaves no room for understanding how what they do is a means of exercising their faith.

Or so it seems. Even without sharing an outspoken credo or symbolic demonstration, regardless of what job we do, we live our faith. We bring our beliefs, our mores, our values into the office and they, consciously or subconsciously, influence how we make decisions, address problems, tackle weighty issues, basically, how we approach life. The most profound challenges we face in daily living are when—how we live, what we do, or the environment in which we spend our time is in dissonance with our own foundational value system.

As a military chaplain, I often heard questions related to these difficulties, usually around the subject of war and how it relates to faith. For example, how can one participate in combat if he/she abides by a religion of peace? While that’s a fairly obvious illustration, other wrestlings I have been privileged to share have been more along the lines of:

- Superiors who are faced with daunting decisions which will severely impact the welfare of even just a few of their people;
- Leaders who have the responsibility to counsel individuals whose work is being negatively impacted by poor relationships and who have no moral compass by which to reconcile those differences, while the leaders themselves are itching to share the answers their faith has provided them in similar situations;
- Friends, family members, co-workers who have lost a loved one to an untimely, painful death rocking their foundations of belief in a loving deity;
- Commanders who find themselves torn between yielding to political pressure and acting on behalf of the immediate safety of and their visceral concern for the men and women they lead.

Individually and corporately, ethics, morals, and virtues matter. Critical to good leadership are both the priorities and values of its leader. And leaders who attend to their own individual moral, ethical, and spiritual wellness advance that same health upon the mission and vision of the organization. And good followership depends on a similar emphasis: ensuring that one’s faith is strong enough to influence how one does the job and contributes to the team. Ultimately, faith matters in how one lives life.

And this is why I became a chaplain. It wasn’t just that I wanted to integrate *my* faith and vocation, it was that I wanted to provide an opportunity for others to live into their own calling. It was to enable them to find a safe place, a sanctuary, for working through the vagaries of life, the vicissitudes of balancing the challenges that life presents; to find hope in the midst of the dilemmas the weekly dramas present. I deeply desired to meet folks where they were, and be with them and every feeling, hope, desire, and anxiety they encountered. My hope was that my fellow sojourners would know that there was a gracious, welcoming, truly pastoral soul sitting with them around their particular campfire enabling them to discover how they are called to live.

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Frankly this, I believe, is the value of faith at work. Our exact job description really doesn't matter. As we live our faith, we discover our vocation, and the source of our resilience and hope. In faith, we can open ourselves to those around us, sharing this common journey with all its trauma and angst. After these conversations, we are each strengthened to walk away with a lighter step, a burden lifted, and our own sense of purpose and meaning restored.