Come to the Water

Right out of my right eye, down my right cheek, as I turn right, and wiggle my way out of the crowded Taylor's and into the cold night of mad March Milwaukee. The night is cold, but not those tears. I want to say rivulet of tears, which are warm, maybe even hot.

My dear friend and mentor, Gerry Wyrwas used to tell me that whenever he was in the presence of "the Host," he would feel hot tears come to his eyes, and that the temperature of these tears was different than that of his tears shed at other times—a witness to "real presence" from a wonderful Presbyterian minister who directed a department of pastoral care and clinical pastoral education at a Catholic hospital for 25 years.

But back to last Friday night at Taylor's.

Taylor's would be described by my late father (in his vernacular, of course) as a "watering hole," though it really is an upscale, contemporary bar bordering Cathedral Square in Milwaukee. On the rare occasion that I am in Milwaukee on a weekend, I love to go to Taylor's on Friday night where I meet some wonderful friends for a few drinks, conversation, and eventually a group decision on where we will go for dinner that evening. You can always count on Michael to push for the traditional Midwest "fish fry," which by the way, in Milwaukee, is not just the tradition for the six weeks of Lent, but rather a tradition that spans the whole 52 weeks of both the calendar and liturgical year.

So at Taylor's my friend David introduced me to two of his friends, Jeff and Tom. We were enjoying the hilarity of TGIF (Thank God It's Friday)—a concept completely foreign to me in another life. The conversation moved to dinner choices for the evening. With that, Tom, a school principal, began telling us that he was so hungry this afternoon that at the end of school he "broke into" the home economics classroom to find something to eat. Rummaging through the room, the best he could come up with was a box of graham crackers. The laughter continued as we teased him about how bad it would look on his resume that he was dismissed on larceny charges for those graham crackers.

Eventually he and I engaged in conversation, and when he asked what I did, I talked about the NACC and chaplaincy. "Oh, I met a chaplain last week . . . . My brother died in Florida, and this chaplain
came and prayed with the family.” “I’m really sorry,” I said, obviously taken aback. “Thanks,” he said. “Was it sudden?” I gently inquired. “Yes,” Tom said, “he was hit by a car.”

And the story flowed like a river.

His 48-year-old brother, married with two grown daughters (18 and 20), was walking across a street and a 16-year-old girl took the turn and was blinded by the late afternoon sunlight and didn’t even see him.

Tom went on. “You know my brother was a wonderful human being. Everybody loved him. But when he was growing up, it was not always easy. He was really into music and would spend hours holed up in his room listening to music. After the accident, his two daughters went to this girl’s house to tell her that it wasn’t her fault, that it was truly an accident, and that their Dad would not want her to blame herself. When they arrived at the house, they found out that the 16-year-old was up in her room and hadn’t come out. Interestingly, she was holed up there listening to music.”

Tom went on to share that he did the eulogy and how powerful it was for him to tie in these two lives even in the midst of the tragic suffering that comes in the life journey. His brother and this young woman both teenagers lost in the solitude of a closed room and an open life to music.

I felt those tears of mine trickle down my right cheek at the sadness of this story, and yet also the mysterious beauty that rose in the mourning of this man, his sister-in-law, his nieces, other family members, a 16-year-old girl and her family, and a congregation of people gathered in a church.

And a question surfaced from the depths of my own theological reflection on this experience of what I felt in this my rivulet of tears. Who is the healer in this story? And who is healed, or rather more true to all of life’s journeying, who is healing?

Was the 48-year-old man in his dying the healer? Was he in his death healed?

Were his two daughters reaching out to the young woman healers? Were they in their drive to this young person’s house being healed/healing?

Was the 16-year-old girl listening to her music a healer in the coincident lifting a memory of an earlier 16-year-old? Was she healed/
healing as she heard a man eulogize his brother by bringing his life into 
communion with hers?

Was Tom the healer in this story as he stood before a congregation 
and spoke the stories of love in the midst of deep suffering? Or was 
Tom being healed in his reflecting, writing, and narrating these stories 
at the celebration of his brother’s life at this Liturgy of Resurrection?

Or was the congregation the healer in their gathering, praying, crying, 
holding, exchanging peace, communion, love and real presence in it 
all? Or was the congregation healed/ healing as they looked on, 
listened, and felt the pain and the joy of an hour in this space in their 
pew and its place in this family’s church?

Or was I part of the healing of Tom as I bumped into his life and his 
story at Taylor’s on a Friday evening? Or was I being healed/ healing 
as I listened to a powerful story of such proportion as is life and 
death?

In this issue of Vision, we are examining a concept known as 
integrative health care. Integrative health care, it seems to me, is 
integrative healing. The tools of medicine are used by the persons 
whose spirit—energy—constitutes the healing. A scalp is does not 
remove diseased tissue; a surgeon removes dis-eased tissue. A 
pharmaceutical is not the healing agent alone; the physician 
prescribing the pharmaceutical is the healing agent.

As is often the case, healing comes about through a surgery, some 
medication, a hand held on the way down to the operating room, a 
social worker’s advocacy with an insurer, a chaplain’s prayer, a 
nurse’s reassuring smile when checking a blood pressure, a 
respiratory therapist’s touch, a dietician’s offer to change a menu, an 
administrator’s decision to authorize the building of a dayroom with 
skylights outside the intensive care unit.

And then there is a patient for everyone of these people. Ask any 
person on the health care team and she or he will speak of at least 
one patient’s story and its effect upon the “healer.” And then 
confusion enters the equation as the question of who is the healer and 
who are those healed/ healing?

Remember the song, “Peace is flowing like a river, flowing out of you 
and me, flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.”
Remember too the second or third verse, “His healing is flowing like 
a river, flowing out of you and me, flowing out into the desert, setting 
all the captives free.”
Something happened to me on a Friday night in Taylor's in Milwaukee. Its source was a tragedy far away in Florida among people I never saw, only a story related to me by a school principal who steals graham crackers from the home ec room of his school on a late Friday afternoon. I know something happened to me because I felt what I found myself calling a rivulet of tears flow down out of my right eye onto my right cheek.

So, Tom, I say to you, to your brother in heaven, to your two bereaved nieces, to a 16-year-old girl, and to a congregation in Florida: yes, healing is flowing like a river, flowing out of you and me, flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

And the water is warm, maybe even hot, flowing from a source that some of us call grace. ☁