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"You cared enough to tell me the truth, and you said I was worth it, and that God loved me." (Unsplash/Nathan Sumlao)



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She sat in the middle of a tiered classroom of 75 students at St. Joseph University in Philadelphia. Late afternoon, Intro to Sociology. It was early in my years of college teaching, and I welcomed the challenge of trying to keep everyone awake.

Sophomore Megan was a helpful live wire. She had provocative insights and would disagree with me, and others, without being disagreeable. Topics like income inequality, race and racism, gender issues and religion sometimes reduce undergrads to a fearful silence, since many of them find disagreement difficult. Many feel unsure about what they think about our society and cultures.

Not Megan. She loved letting the class know what she was thinking, and she was willing to engage in real dialogue. She was a good listener, too.

Surprisingly, she was a lousy test taker. Or so I thought.

She scored a 43 on the first test, 40 points below the class average. What had happened?

I emailed her and asked that she chat with me during office hours.

She showed up on time. We spoke of this and that. Soon, I said I was surprised at her performance on the test.

She said, "I know. I didn't think I did very well. I've got a lot of stuff going on."

"Like what?" I inquired.

"I don't know. I'm not sure school is it for me. I probably should be doing something else," she said.

"Like what?" I asked.

We went around like that for a few minutes, but I sensed something going on beneath the surface of the discussion.

"Is there anything here making you unhappy?" I wondered.

"Oh, no, the parties here are great."

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Turns out a little too great. "Animal House" formatted the college expectations of a generation of students. Like too many, Megan was drinking and drugging up a storm. As she shared the quantity and depth of her partying and substance use, I became alarmed.

"Look, Megan, I really think you may want to consider getting some help. You're on the edge of getting into real trouble. Going out five or six nights a week isn't what everyone is doing."

"Oh, sure it is!" she replied.

"Maybe you could think about cutting back."

"Come on, I'm no different than anyone else."

"I don't know. Seems to me you are. Maybe you might want to think about a 12-step program," I suggested.

She didn't get defensive or angry. She thanked me for my concern. "I know you Jesuits care about us. But don't worry. I'm fine."

She left my office. I never saw her in class again.

I emailed her. No response. I alerted appropriate deans. It soon became apparent that Megan had checked out.

"Nice pastoral touch, Malloy," I rued as I reflected on the conversation. Did I scare her away? Make her feel unwelcome? Miss something I could have said or done to be of more help?

Three years later. Holy Week. I live in a parish in North Camden, New Jersey, and commute to St. Joe's. Drugs and violence are all too prevalent on the streets. But the Triduum is upon us, and there is much to do. Easter is coming. I'm working on a homily late one night. The phone rings.

"Is Fr. Rick Malloy there?" a women's voice asks.

"I'm him," I answer.

"You may not remember me. My name is Megan."

I remember all right. One of my pastoral failures. Images of her sitting in the middle of the class and in my office immediately presented themselves.

"Sure, I remember you, Megan. How are you?"

"I'm doing good. I just wanted to tell you that I'm at Temple University now and getting my life back together. I blew it at St. Joe's and really had a hard time of it. I almost ended up on the streets. I was doing a lot of drugs and drinking all the time. But my family never gave up on me," she said.

"Wow. That's great. I mean, not that you had all those troubles, but that you've gotten back on your feet," I told her.

Then the surprise. "I just wanted to call you and let you know that that talk in your office changed my life."

"Really?"

"Yeah! You cared enough to tell me the truth, and you said I was worth it, and that God loved me. In all the ways I messed up, I never forgot you saying that. Thank you."

That call is one of the great gifts of my life. Megan's simply reaching out and letting me know what had happened touched me deeply.

So often we don't know what we are doing, or what God is doing through us, or even if God is doing anything through our efforts. And then a voice from the past changes everything.

I often think of Megan and so many other students. So often it is more important to ask not what is wrong with a student, but what happened to her or him. The research on adverse childhood experiences calls us all to look behind and beneath the poor choices and ask what occurred that prompts the coping behaviors.

Still, Megan taught me to trust my efforts a bit more. Even though I may not always see "results," I am there. I make myself available. I tell kids that God loves them. And I hope and pray the Holy Spirit will multiply my meager efforts, the way the Eucharist multiplies the reality of Christ's transformative compassion and courage

among us, the way the church, on our better days, is light for the world.

[Jesuit Fr. Rick Malloy is university chaplain at the University of Scranton and the author of *A Faith that Frees: Catholic Matters for the 21st Century* and *Being on Fire: The Top Ten Essentials of Catholic Faith*. Find all Soul Seeing columns at NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

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