Recognition and the Fleeting Glimpse of Intimacy: Tracing the Chaplain’s Response to Ungrieved Death

Richard Coble
Vanderbilt University, USA

Abstract
The article traces the response of the hospital chaplain witnessing ungrieved death. Linking grief with cultural recognition, the article analyzes the absence of grief on the occasion of death within outcast social spheres. It then outlines the ways chaplains both participate in the cultural norms that render lives ungrievable and, conversely, in the solidarity of God, who cares for every life and death. The article closes by situating the chaplain as a liminal figure and proposing liminality itself as an opportunity for solidarity.

Keywords
Judith Butler, chaplaincy, death and dying, Robert Dykstra, grief, pastoral care

Every day people die in our hospitals without family or friends ever coming to the bedside, without anyone to notify, without tears or anguish or sighs, without grief. We chaplains have witnessed these ungrieved deaths. We have been called to these bedsides, often in the middle of the night, to stand and watch death approach, perhaps that of a person without a home found unresponsive on the sidewalk, of an elderly woman who outlived either the lives or the love of her family, of a young man caught in the throes of poverty and violence. As these examples illustrate, ungrieved death is often the effect of wider social structures that marginalize and render unrecognizable certain lives and deaths. In other words, these structures enable cultural frames of vision that fail to perceive certain lives as life and thus certain deaths as death, therefore rendering both invisible, unintelligible, and ungrievable. Hospital chaplains, however, are the members of the clergy who meet these lives and these deaths that few outside our institutions’ walls ever see. In the trauma bay and the hospital room, these ungrievable deaths suddenly and fleetingly appear before us.

Before beginning graduate studies, I worked as a hospital chaplain in a large, urban research hospital in a major American city, where ungrieved death was pervasive. Today, I hold checkered memories of these deaths, faces and bodies of the dying that flash before my mind. I cannot recall their names or many specific circumstances outside of a few gory details, but with scarce specific impressions left by particular deaths, I am rather haunted by the memory of multiple deaths, of death after death that I stood by and witnessed before going back to the office. There was little for me to do in these moments. There was no one to wait for, no one to call, no long hours afterward spent with family. My time with these dying people happened only in the moments I stood by and death approached.

This article examines the person of the chaplain in these moments of standing by and watching ungrieved death as a starting point for pastoral theological reflection. I frame the response of the chaplain in these moments as caught up in the tension between two distinct avenues of participation. Utilizing sources that describe the social nature of grief and the recognition of death in America, I characterize the first avenue as participation in a culture in which death broadly, and particularly ungrieved death, is hidden, unrecognized, and unmarked. I argue that the chaplain works in a culture that denies death, and that this denial produces a climate in which certain outcast lives then cease without the...
possibility of grief. As the chaplain experiences these situations, she or he participates in these denials that render certain deaths invisible. The chaplain here is thus absent despite her presence at the moment of ungrieved death, observing but not recognizing the death, standing beside but not communing with the dying who die alone. Then, in conversation with theological resources of pastoral practice in the midst of death, I frame the second avenue as a way of being addressed by an alternative, called by a culture of recognition resting in solidarity with the God who is intimately present in each life and death. I characterize this second avenue as a subtle and fleeting movement toward recognition of the dying as a child of God, approaching communion and intercession with and for the dying through brief moments of intimacy and prayer. Finally, after this dichotomy has been outlined starkly for the purposes of analysis, the conclusion notes that the chaplain is finally caught not on either side of this contrast but rather in its tension, existing as a liminal figure at once implicated in a culture that does not recognize the vast injustices that make life ungrievable but also one reaching toward and relying on the God who recognizes and grieves every life lost, especially those no one else recognizes.

**Participating in the Culture of Non-recognition**

I get the page. A loud monotone from my jacket hanging on the wall wakes me from a light sleep. It is 3:00 am, and I have just returned an hour ago from sitting with two distraught parents in the surgical intensive care unit. Together, we had waited for four hours while their daughter underwent emergency surgery after being thrown from her car in a head-on collision. She was supposed to take an early flight the next day for a vacation with friends and had just stepped out to pick up some toiletries. Throughout my time with these two people, there had been a dense silence in the room. Any questions or reflections I posed were returned in straight, monosyllabic responses, yet the parents had asked me to stay. We had waited in prolonged anticipation for a doctor who finally came and said that their daughter had survived surgery. An hour after I left them, I am exhausted but the pager is still beeping: “Code Blue: H8,” another ICU. Fifteen minutes later, I stand outside the room of an unidentified, middle aged man without a permanent address who had stepped out in front of traffic earlier that night, perhaps purposefully. I watch as the attending doctor violently pushes against his chest; his abdomen flops up and down like waves on the ocean, like there is not a ribcage underneath. I stop only to take in what is happening and silently repeat a prayer outside the door, “God in your mercy, please attend to this man.” After some time, the staff stops the code. It has been unsuccessful. John Doe is dead. “Please page me if someone comes to see the body,” I say briskly before leaving and going back to bed. I suspect no one will come.

In the clarity of hindsight, I offer this memory as an example of my participation in the culture that fails to recognize or grieve the loss of lives that are outcast and abject. Outside of carrying out the responsibilities of my job in the room, this chaplain, in the moment, did not take note of this loss nor recognize its significance. In this section, I will trace the roots of such non-recognition, first situating it in a culture that does not recognize death as a part of life, and then specifying that as a part of this culture, certain deaths that reflect social injustice are not only denied but also hidden.

**The denial of death**

In order to understand fully the context in which certain lives are rendered ungrievable, I will first briefly review the modern cultural denial of death. To claim that ours is a culture that denies death is to claim that emotions such as grief are historically situated and culturally particular, a claim that has been gaining ground among both social scientists (Kleinman, 1980, pp. 140–178; Burkitt, 1992, pp. 200–204; Harre & Parrott, 1996) and pastoral theologians (Graham, 1992, pp. 91–96; Dunlap, 1997; McClure, 2010a, pp. 196–199; 2010b; cf. Cooper-White, 2007, pp. 114–117). This particularity of grief is reflected in historian Peter Stearns and social scientist Mark Knapp’s contrast between the way families expressed grief during the Victorian era and today’s cultural rejection of grief. During the Western Victorian era, with the advent of courtship, longer life spans, and lower child mortality, social mores emphasized the importance of romantic love and family ties. Stearns and Knapp (1996) argue that families of that era emphasized grief as an expression of great romantic and filial love (p. 134). To encourage rich and overt expressions of grief as this expression of love, Victorian music, literature, and ritual all portrayed the effusive expression of grief as the proper response to death. Children’s stories contained tragic death scenes and some children were given “funeral toys” to incorporate loss into their very play (p. 136). During this time, the funeral profession also grew in popularity as it shifted the responsibilities of caring for the body to professionals so that families could direct their attention “away from decaying flesh to the bittersweet grief at a loved one’s loss” (p. 137). The emotion of grief in the Victorian era was then encouraged and emphasized. The direct and fulsome expression of grief was particular to and thus also a product of these cultural trends.

Stearns and Knapp (1996) then argue that, in contrast to the Victorian emphasis, the modern era, with its stress on scientific and industrial efficacy, has shifted the norms governing grief away from effusive expression and towards
restraint. In contrast to the Victorians, the modern era understands grief as a loss of control and a pathological, fruitless effort to maintain contact with the departed. Liturgical theologian Bruce Morrill (2010) explains that this shift rests on our modern faith in reason and scientific progress: “The modern valorization of scientific reason as a total worldview has abetted rigid distinctions between body and mind, reason and emotion, as well as attributed near-magical power and authority to the doctor and medical technology” (p. 37). The valorization of medical knowledge and reason then marks death as the loss of health, an ill that must be continually fought back and overcome through the progress of science. Rooted in the body and the emotions, in contrast to the objective postures of reason, grief then becomes an unhealthy dwelling on death. Death is now a problem to be managed. The purpose and end of grief work is the removal of grief; final separation from the deceased is its therapeutic goal.

The consequence of these modern attitudes toward death and grief is their constant denial in today’s culture. In contrast to the Victorian era, when death was emphasized in the images and words of the culture, today death is hidden away, locked in the cultural imagination as modernity’s losing opponent. In American society, the realities of death tend to appear only in the rooms of the hospital, the very institution meant to mark death’s perpetual defeat (see Evans, 2011, p. 22). In the hospital, a tension exists between the medical profession, whose technology rests on the removal of illness, and the fact that the hospital is one of the few places where people constantly die. The product of this tension is then the perpetual medicalization of death, with death not only hidden away in the hospital but also denied in this very epicenter. As pastoral theologians have noted, the health care system, caught between its mission to cure and the fact that cure is not possible for many of its patients, often obscures the inevitability of death as it perpetually searches for new remedies (Garrett, 2008, p. 45; Evans, 2011, p. 25). Medical doctor and author Sherwin Nuland (1995) writes of the doctor who, “rather than seeking ways to help his patient face the reality that life must soon come to an end” then “indulges a very sick person and himself in a form of medical ‘doing something’ to deny the hovering presence of death” (p. 224). Thus, modern culture is caught in a double denial. Even in the isolated units of the hospital where our culture hides death from the wider public’s imagination, the health care system must fight rather than acknowledge death.

There are many avenues in which the chaplain can participate in this cultural denial of death; however, for the purposes of this study, I only mention my own complicity in the vignette above. There is a certain desensitization that can happen to a chaplain who is constantly called to the bedside of the dying. Just as medical professionals may deny the reality of the death that is before them in their constant search for the cure, so too can chaplains become locked behind their tasks, employing the motions of the job as a distraction from the actual dying of the people before them (see Ekedahl, 2004). Such was the case in my performance outside the door as John Doe died. In my very presence, in my prayer, in my parting request to the staff, I moved through the motions of my work in a perfunctory manner; I did them because I was expected to do them. A chaplain can thus get stuck in the motions, accompanying death everywhere but never actually seeing it. Pastoral theologian James Ditties (1999) writes of a similar phenomenon for church pastors who become locked in tasks, “becoming resigned to a visionless, partnerless occupation . . . becoming jaded and ‘professional,’ mechanically going through the motions, like a zombie actor reciting long-memorized lines on a darkened and empty stage to an empty house” (p. 20; cf. Helsel, 2008). The chaplain too can become a zombie actor of professional motions. He or she can perform a professional task that is as much an unacknowledgement and thus denial of death as it is a ritual.

Ungrievable death

The denial of death is a broad cultural frame that makes for the possibility of ungrieved death. As reviewed above, there exists a general denial of death in American society, but nonetheless mourning continues to happen in our culture during acute circumstances of loss. In most cases, people do show up, friends and family stand by the bedside, and grief is played out through various levels of expression and restraint. Americans tend to deny death until we cannot, when the death of a friend or loved one breaks through this denial. And when we cannot deny death, we grieve. To speak only of this general denial of death then fails to capture fully the dynamics of ungrieved loss, for there are others who have no one, like the John Doe of the vignette above, who are ignored on a daily basis and seep through the cracks of society’s short attention span. However, the wider cultural denial of death and the particularity of ungrieved loss are related precisely because this general attitude toward death allows for the deaths of those without close ties, who exist in a society that discounts their humanity, who go unrecognized and therefore ungrieved. Because modern culture would rather not see death until it cannot be ignored, those lives that never grab our culture’s attention then become deaths that are never seen. Those in the outcast position in society, whose very lives are ignored, can die without any grief, in fact without any notice at all.

To understand what makes death ungrievable, one must recognize the social trends that render only certain lives visible. Feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler (2010) contends that lives lived in outcast social positions reflect realms of exclusion outside the boundaries of what counts as life in a social setting. These boundaries then reflect the norms in the culture of who is truly recognized as a person.
Lives outside of these boundaries are the ones excluded by cultural norms, falling into positions that do not neatly fit the portrayals and images of life in the cultural imagination. In other words, such lives are not recognizable as life because they do not fit tidily into social frames of what life is. Butler (2011 [1993]) describes these lives as those that come to inhabit cultural constructions of “the more and the less ‘human,’ the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable” (p. xvii). These are the lives of the outcast, those who are not just dehumanized, but the ones who never quite fit into social expectations of what is fully human to begin with.

These lives are not only ignored within our society; rather, their position as outcast is utilized as the defining contrast against which social norms of respectability and recognition are built. Visible, normal, or proper lives are set in contrast to these others, defining who is properly a person, who deserves our time and our recognition. Thus, Butler (2011 [1993]) writes of the social space of unrecognizable life as a “constitutive outside” of social norms of recognition, places deemed “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated” (p. xiii). The issue is not that these lives are not lived, but rather the lives set in outcast positions are not counted as life. The outcast are then employed by these social frames to define life precisely by pointing to what it is not. Their exclusion marks the inclusion of others.

Grief then is only reserved for those lives that are understood to have been lived. As Butler (2010) puts it, “Grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters” (p. 14). Thus, when life is not recognized as life, its end is not an occasion for grief. How can there be grief for a life that never was? Unrecognized and unrecognizable life is then the necessary condition of ungrieved death. I only grieve over life that I recognize to be life like my own. Grief is then a recognition of connection; it is an admission by the one who grieves that the life lost was fundamentally tied to oneself. Such connection admits vulnerability. The presence of grief admits that our lives are affected by each other, and not just on an emotional level, but grief also illustrates our bodily connection. The life lost and grieved was not just a mind but also a body that contacted and touched upon my own (Butler, 2004, p. 28). Grief thus implies multiple levels of connection, which means that lives that elicit grief are also lives that are seen as deserving of our care and attention.

However, again, not all deaths are occasions for grief. An unrecognized and ungrieved life fails to be seen as a life and body dependent upon others. It therefore does not prompt care or attention, because one only admits the vulnerability of another when that other is viewed as a life at all and therefore potentially grievable. The consequence of failing to recognize a life as interconnected and grievable is not only that the vulnerability of this other goes unrecognized, but also this non-recognition casts the other into a sphere of profound precariousness. The abject are cut adrift without the connections and supports that protect life recognized as life, making these unseen lives unbearably vulnerable. As Butler (2010) puts it, “those whose lives are not ‘regarded’ as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death” (p. 25). A life ungrieved holds no connection, or rather no one ever recognizes his or her connection to it. With no admitted connection, that life also fails to hold any obligation or establish any mutual dependency. The ungrieved life is rather cast out and forced to bear its profound vulnerability alone.

The life and death of John Doe described above was such an unrecognizable and unrecognizable death. Likely, he was a life cast out into the throes of poverty that grab hold of so many on the streets of that city. On a nightly basis, those dying acutely or in the prolonged cycles of slow death came through our trauma bay and emergency department—those lives that no one saw anywhere else, because the social structures that render only certain lives visible rendered these unrecognizable. The social trends of non-recognition take their toll on these lives. Cast out alone into the forces of profound vulnerability, they came to our hospital with the marks of overwhelming violence, neglect, and pain. But because we rarely ever stop for death in our culture unless it is right before our eyes, these deaths went ungrieved, unmarked, unnoticed.

The chaplain, even as these unrecognizable lives and deaths happen before her eyes, can continue to participate in the culture of non-recognition. Being caught in a culture that only recognizes some lives and deaths as grievable is to be caught in a cycle of trauma that repeatedly disfigures the avenues of compassion available for the chaplain. Pastoral theologian and former hospital chaplain Jaco Hamman (2004) contends that even as chaplains have profound opportunities to describe, expose, and address trauma and the avenues of social injustice that ungrieved death signifies, the chaplain’s own past, pain, and trauma can silence his ministry:

If chaplains cannot overcome the denial of the pervasiveness and significance of trauma in their own lives, they will not be able to lead the church in conversation beyond the church’s position of denial. A culture of silence about past and present pain and trauma is a common occurrence often among seminarians and theologians. Those who cannot overcome their denial will see and treat people as objects and not as subjects. (p. 9)

Denial of the trauma of being caught in the culture of non-recognition then leads to the perpetual rewounding of the self and others by continuing to regard only some as
wothy of recognition and grief and thus, in Hamman’s terms, to treating others as objects rather than subjects. The chaplain who does not recognize the ways in which social trends mark his or her own way of seeing and not seeing certain lives and deaths will continue to participate in this culture of non-recognition, will continue to stand silent and therefore perpetuate the social injustices that make life unrecognizable and ungrievable. I confess my own participation when I stood outside the room of John Doe and said the needed and expected prayers while my mind was elsewhere. His was an ungrieved death, unrecognised and unmarked by his chaplain; it was a death that I saw but did not recognize, a life disappearing before my eyes that I did not truly see as life.

These are the conditions that make for ungrievable life and the possibility for the chaplain to fail to recognize and see the significance of ungrieved death, even deaths as they happen before the chaplain’s own eyes. These are the practices of the culture that forms us, that makes us who we are. 

Addressed by the Culture of Intimacy

The trauma team and I receive the page around 11:00 at night, “GSW, in route: 10 minutes.” It is a Friday night when violent trauma victims are more the norm than the exception, and so I walk to the bay and stand in my usual corner with a sense of casualness. Yet when the man is brought into the room, lying prostrate and lifeless, blood smeared across his exposed stomach, I jolt to attention. Perhaps it is the EMT, straddling the man across his ribs atop the gurney, pumping his chest and yelling to the team, “Avoid his feet, he has a weapon under him,” that catches my attention. Did he just say that man is armed? Hospital security moves swiftly. Somehow the man is stripped and disarmed while CPR continues. An oversized pistol is taken to a side room from the bay. Apparently the man had been gunned down on a nearby street, targeted swiftly before he had a chance to return the fire.

I look at this man as CPR fails. My frames of non-recognition begin to engage. In the moment, he comes to represent so much of what I fear, both for me and my family, a victim but also perpetrator of the almost nightly violence that happens just blocks away from my apartment. Yet here he is, dying, unarmed both literally and figuratively. I see his face, watch, like a voyeur yes, yet also aware of a feeling, a deep yearning that seems caught in my throat. I realize that I am more than another pair of eyes watching this death; I am also this man’s chaplain. Perhaps it is the contrast of a body once threatening, threatened, and now coming undone before me that draws my attention. Afterward, all I can recall is that I stood and watched and recognized this body to be a fellow human being, a child of God. As I look into this face, I pray.

The subtlety of the differences between this memory and the one that opened the first section of the article is striking. Their contrast rests far more in the ineffable than the tangible, in attitude and perception rather than action. In fact, the prayer said here may have had the same wording as the one in the first vignette, yet the content and the words grasped toward something immediately more imminent as well as transcendent than the rote tasks of the profession. Here again was a case of ungrieved death, a man who it turned out had no one to contact, no family that claimed him and no friends who would follow him to the hospital. His was a life like so many on the violent streets of our city, lost in structures of oppression that produce untold culprits and victims of violence on certain streets and neighborhoods all across American cities today. Though these structures and our response to them warrant their own theological reflection, this section will attend solely to the moment when the chaplain has the fleeting opportunity to peer through the structures of invisibility that blanket these deaths with the aura of ungrievability, to gain a glimpse of these lives and these deaths as those that matter through the lens granted by faith. It will describe the work of the chaplain in the moment as a recognition of the God who is intimately present in each life and as a participant in God’s care of the dying, especially in the care of those who die ungrieved deaths. This participation is then characterized as a movement with three dimensions: recognition, intimacy, and prayer.

Recognition

The first step of participation in God’s care of the dying is recognition of the person as a child of God. As examined above, such recognition is challenged in the case of ungrieved death by broad social structures that block the recognition of life itself. Thus, even when the chaplain comes face to face with the abject and outcast of society, seeing the face can itself be an opportunity for non-recognition. Butler (2004) contends that media and other cultural presentations of the abject — whether they be combatants or victims of war, poverty, prejudice, or street violence — can utilize the face “to effect a dehumanization” (p. 141). Such pictures portray the face solely as that of an enemy or outcast rather than a human face. Precisely through representation, the identity of the unrecognised life is consigned into a figure of the ‘addict,’ ‘terrorist,’ ‘thug,’ or ‘street person,’ putting the face into the realm of the not human rather than the human. The viewer is not recalled to the face’s humanity but rather to the abjection the face comes to signify. In this way, as I first looked at the man with the multiple gunshot wounds, there were moments when I recognized him only as the perpetrator of violence and not as a human being caught up in wider social structures that provoke, produce, and conceal such violence. In these moments, I again took part in the
culture of non-recognition; my cultural lens consigned this man solely into an outcast identity, and thus failed to perceive his humanity and life, vanishing before me.

In contrast to these totalizing frames, recognition of ungrieved life itself is never total. We will always tend to filter the faces that we meet through cultural norms rather than grasping the basic humanity of someone. True recognition of one’s humanity and connection is thus a fleeting moment when such filters fail, when one’s humanity seeps outside an identity that hides it. This recognition is thus a peering through the consigning identities of outcast lives and therefore touching on the multifarious complications of life itself (see Butler, 2004, pp. 144–151). To recognize life and death is thus not to take it over, not to place it easily in our taxonomies, because these categories themselves originate in the cultural structures of visibility and invisibility. Rather, recognition of life and death is a recognition of humanity’s sheer complexity, a recognition that no one can be captured totally by any frame. This recognition admits that the totalizing cultural frames never fully grasp hold of life (see Butler, 1990, ch. 3).

Acknowledgement that life exceeds our frames is a way of breaking through these frames, admitting that ungrieved life and death are more than their outcast position, that they actually exist as life and are worthy of our attention. It is in this seepage and breakage that the chaplain may then catch fleeting glimpses of life not counted as life, death not counted as death. Thus, when I looked upon the face of this man and saw more than a perpetrator of street violence, when I saw him as more than the cultural frames that consign him into an abject identity, I glimpsed his humanity. This does not mean that at the moment I saw him as a human and as a perpetrator, because the frame that forms the latter into an outcast identity would then collapse the former. No, if only for a brief moment, I saw him solely as a life disappearing before my eyes, as something so much more than any consigning identity. And in that fleeting glimpse, through the eyes of faith I also saw him as a child of God.

The trauma room presents an opportunity for the chaplain to catch a glimpse that breaks through our normal frames. As former chaplain Greg Garrett writes, “A hospital . . . is a setting that can be hyper-realistic, dramatic, life with most of the boring parts taken out and more dramatic moments inserted” (2008, p. xiii; cf. Nolan, 2011, p. 178). Thus, the hospital presents an opportunity to attend to persons and dying bodies in ways that exceed our cultural frames. Pastoral theologian and former chaplain Robert Dykstra (1990) emphasizes the strangeness of the trauma room as a theological prospect. The chaplain is a stranger to this sphere, to the worlds of the hospital, the staff, the patients, the families. Dykstra warns against denying this strangeness and imposing our own categories of recognition. Rather, it is precisely in this strangeness that the presence of God is made manifest; precisely when we do not impose our theological and cultural fields of imagination and visibility, we find room to be addressed by both the dying patient and the active God present in the room.

Standing in the strange places, where a life that is all but invisible on the street is suddenly dying before us, we find ourselves addressed, taken in the moment with a life eclipsing before us. Suddenly our cultural lens is disrupted. The forces in which we participate that render this life ungrieved dissipate before the naked reality of a human body torn apart before us, and in our very inability to grasp it, to place it within our orienting frames, we see this moment as a fleeting, God-bearing instance that calls for a different recognition, for a glimpse of one so often invisible. Though this recognition is always partial, always transitory, never complete and totalizing, in these fleeting moments we catch a glimpse of lives that do not often count as life before us and find the presence of God in their midst—such are the moments of the chaplain’s recognition of lives eclipsed by the aura of ungrievability.

Intimacy

Such recognition is itself a moment of intimacy, not the intimacy between friends with shared visions of knowing, but rather an intimacy possible between strangers. Intimacy here is an acceptance of the situation for its strangeness, being lost together in the disruption of our usual avenues of sight. Intimacy with the dying means looking and finding that our normal frames of recognition fail to contain this life and thus, finally, fleetingly seeing this life as life. Dykstra (1990) contends that such a disjointing moment holds the possibility for holiness: “in the very strangeness of the situation itself we may find sanctuary” (p. 151). The disruption of the moment opens our eyes to see, and in this strange sanctuary, the chaplain and those who experience trauma become “intimate strangers” (p. 140; cf. Dykstra, 2009), seeing the situation anew along the jagged edges of unknowingness. Intimacy with the ungrieved dying then becomes a moment of revelation to the chaplain, a moment of reception. As the chaplain peers between the layers of cultural invisibility to see the ungrieved dying as
life and death before her eyes, that chaplain also glimpses the presence of God who walks in solidarity with the living and the dead.

The God revealed in such an intimate moment is thus, as Catholic political theologian Johann Baptiste Metz (2007) describes, “The God of the living and of the dead,” the “God of a universal justice that shatters the standards of our exchange society and saves those who died suffering unjustly, and who, therefore, call us to become subjects or unconditionally to support others becoming subjects in the face of hateful oppression” (p. 80). This is the God of solidarity, who stands beside and with all those who perish, especially those who come undone by the social structures that do not make room for their lives except for their places in the realm of the inhuman, abject object. As such, this God is revealed precisely at the point where the dehumanizing and consigning social structures break apart. At the point of breakage, when the chaplain, in the strange intimacy of the moment, peers though consigning cultural frames to see the humanity of the un grievable life dissipating before her, she also glimpses this God who exceeds the frame, who condemns the frame in God’s radical solidarity with the living and the dead. Such a sight then offers the possibility of a moment of solidarity for the chaplain as well.

Prayer

The moment of prayer that the chaplain offers on behalf of the dying, especially those dying ungrieved deaths, is simultaneously an invocation of and a response to the passing glimpse of the work of God in the moment. As one caught in the tension between the two avenues, the denial of death on the one hand and God’s solidarity in the moment of death on the other, the chaplain prays a prayer that both seeks to align the chaplain with God’s will as well as to remember the character and history of the God she seeks to follow (see Evans, 2009, p. 183; Verhey, 2009, p. 94). The chaplain’s prayer is then a search for as well as a confession of the presence of God. It both asks God to bring the chaplain into the realm of intimate encounter with the dying and also, in the act of such a request, responds to a glimpse of God present in the moment. In the midst of a death that few will mark or see its significance, the chaplain’s prayer is a reminder and a remembering of the God who is present, who creates significance, who stands in solidarity with the living and the dead, especially those torn asunder by the social structures that mark their invisibility.

As both invocation and response to the glimpse of God’s presence, the prayer of the chaplain takes on characteristics of both lament and intercession. A prayer of lament takes in the reality of the situation, not as our totalizing frames of non-recognition take it over, but rather in a sober glimpse into the brokenness of the situation as it seeps through such frames. Pastoral theologian Deborah Hunsinger (2006) contends that lament avoids distractions or denial, seeking the presence of God rather than resting comfortably in familiar systems that obscure suffering, especially the suffering of those rendered abject: “Lament risks everything on God. It refuses the shell of cynicism that would protect its vulnerable heart. Instead, it remains open, alive, desiring, and therefore suffering” (p. 139). Thus, as the frames of the chaplain break into a fleeting recognition of the life and death before her, the chaplain may pray a prayer of lamentation for the utter despondency of the moment. As the life of a human being, who was hardly ever acknowledged as one in life, now dies a death few if any in the culture will see, the chaplain cries out in recognition of the injustice that creates and obscures this death.

The prayer of the chaplain also takes on an intercessory nature. Such intercession comes as a response to the chaplain’s fleeting recognition of the despondency of the moment as well as God’s presence in the midst of this void. As the moment tears at the normal frame, allowing the humanity of the ungrievable life to become fleetingly apparent, the chaplain prays for this human being living and dying before her. The prayer of intercession thus recognizes the chaplain’s fundamental connection to the one dying, recognizing and confessing the fundamental connection between all human beings, a connection denied to those in the outcast position. In this recognition, the chaplain also participates in the God who stands in solidarity with this vanishing life. Intercession thus begins and carries the chaplain’s recognition of the political commitment of God who cares for and marks every death, especially those dying unjust, ungrievable death. Such a beginning should not be the end to political solidarity (see Hunsinger, 2006, p. 128). However, in the hour of one dying an un grieved death, a prayer in participation with the God who stands in solidarity with the living and the dead confesses this person’s humanity, confesses that this one too is a child of God.

Recognition, intimacy, and prayer comprise distinct movements of the chaplain as he or she participates in God’s solidarity with the one dying an ungrieved death. However, as the vignette that opened this section illustrates, these movements are entangled and collapse into one another. Does prayer begin or follow recognition? Can recognition happen without prayer? Is intimacy a component or a separate movement of recognition and prayer? Though it is helpful for the purposes of analysis to separate and examine each of these movements, in practice the three weave in and out of one another, blur into one another, and also come to the mind and spirit of the chaplain in layers of emphasis and attention as he or she stands by one dying a death ungrieved and as the chaplain sees God in this midst of this dying. As one who has stood by these bedsides, I have felt these movements in their fusion. They came, as described above, often as fleeting moments,
as death happened before my eyes. In the compounded memory of these deaths, of death after death that I stood by and witnessed, I also am also struck by the memory of glimpse after glimpse of the God who stood by in solidarity with these living and these dying people. The glimpses have offered a picture of the God of solidarity, not with the cultural frame in which we organize our world into visible and invisible lives, but rather of the God of the invisible, of the abject, of the ones who die every day before us, yet we hardly ever notice.²

**Conclusion: Finding a Place In-Between**

As chaplains, we live in a tension, in a liminality between the cultural frames in which we organize our world and our recognition that the God we confess and in whose solidarity we participate works precisely where these frames break apart (cf. Helsel, 2009). As employees of the hospital, as recognized members of the dominant culture, as clergy, we are a part of the culture that would rather deny death, and that thus hardly ever sees the deaths of those constituting the realm of the social outcast. Our participation in this culture forms our very way of being in the world. To think and to perceive is to have a cultural frame, a frame built on the norms of life and recognition. As this article has illustrated, such norms are also built upon exclusions, upon a border that consigns death and the outcast into frames of invisibility, so that they do not come to mind or attention. These exclusions are a part of us. However, as chaplains, we also have an opportunity to peer into a realm where these frames break apart. As those who stand inside the trauma room and the hospital unit, we have the opportunity to catch a glimpse past these frames. Though calls to the bedside of ungrieved death can also be further opportunities of non-recognition and rote, perfunctory motions that consist toward something, even as it feels so much like a loss, a forfeiture of place, of professionalism, of identity. In stepping toward the in-between, we are called toward grief, our grief, the apt despondency of living in a world where some are deemed people and others are not. We are called toward trauma, to attend the trauma that folds us into subjectivities bought at the cost of invisible life and ungrievable death. Finally, we are called to and by God, the one who made and makes us, who calls and pushes us into these moments outside ourselves, into the in-between, where God attends the living and the dead, in ways we can never fully fathom.

**Notes**

1. Though the following section is theologically confessional, it is not meant as exclusionary. The particular lens of faith described here is perhaps an avenue through which this chaplain was able momentarily to break the cultural frames of non-recognition in which I am immersed, but I in no way mean to imply that it is the only avenue for such breakage.

2. Cf. examples of the poetic witness of other chaplains in Ciampa (1975); LaRocca-Pitts (2006); Allen (2008); Denley (2008); Coble (2011).

**References**


**Richard Coble** is a PhD candidate in Vanderbilt University’s Religion, Psychology and Culture program and a fellow in the Program in Theology and Practice. He is also working as a chaplain for the St. Thomas Health System in Nashville, TN on a PRN basis.