

Surviving dark nights of the soul

By **TIM O'TOOLE**

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Computer professionals are called on to deal with disaster plans affecting the security, accessibility, confidentiality and accuracy of data. Whether it's a fire, flood, swine flu, disgruntled employee sabotage, earthquake or over-zealous continental drift, we expect IT (Information Technology) pros to be prepared with contingency plans.

The AAA and Red Cross counsel us to keep emergency kits in our homes and cars -- to cope with tornadoes, blizzards, floods and power failures.

But what about an emergency kit when the disaster affecting you is not physical, but metaphysical? What should we put in such a kit to cope with unemployment, divorce, death of a loved one, financial ruin, failing grades or any of a host of evils leading to a dark night of the soul?

Power failures create challenges to keeping cool in summer or warm in winter. Fresh water and safe food can become scarce. When self-doubt leads to despair, there is a challenge to keeping your soul fed and watered and operating at the correct temperature.

How can you remind yourself in times of trouble of who you are? How can you judge a situation when you are in the middle of it? Where can you draw instruction or inspiration to lead you out of an emotional abyss? And how can you adapt to a situation without compromising your integrity and identity?

My wife's mother often intoned, "Remember who you are!" whenever her daughters ventured forth for social occasions. Can you remember who you are when you have defined yourself only by what you do? That's especially difficult if your employer has decided you no longer do it.

Through the centuries God has inspired every culture on Earth, and every faith tradition offers Scripture to counsel and console. You also need to rely on community, which can be family and friends, co-workers and neighbors, social connections and professional counselors. It can also include a faith community -- be it church, synagogue, mosque or temple -- with people who ponder important truths, care about the planet, its children and the

environment, people ready to roll up their sleeves to help those with acute or chronic problems.

Those same people are networked into the larger community -- with access to helpful resources, sane advice and perspective on life's dire situations.

Some of those faith communities mobilize when natural disaster strikes -- like the Salvation Army setting up a soup kitchen, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance helping tsunami victims and Catholic Charities mobilizing to fight poverty and restore human dignity.

Given the state of America's economy, a lot of people are experiencing dark nights of the soul these days. If you have been spared such a fate, you can aid those in need in tangible and intangible ways.

Yes, charitable giving can help, but I'm also talking about donations of time, caring and counsel. Remind your suffering friends that they are still intelligent and capable. Listen to their concerns with patience and compassion. Invite a struggling family to your home for a nutritious meal and stress-free conversation.

If you have marketable skills, share them with someone who requires retraining. Have you been putting off some odd jobs around the house? Hire a teenager to mow the lawn. Help the economy by calling in a pro for other tasks. Nothing flamboyant, mind you, but a fresh coat of paint will lift your spirits, and the spirits of those applying it. Leaky pipes are not part of God's plan.

You can assist a downtrodden friend in brushing up his/her resume, and printing out free copies on quality paper. Perhaps your work or social network can pair up an unemployed or underemployed friend with gainful work.

Soul-quenching worship on the weekend, and unselfish service during the week make a good combination. What's more, you are putting a plan in place to help yourself should you wind up in difficult circumstances.

Tim O'Toole, a member of First Presbyterian Church of Albany and a state worker for 41 years, writes about philosophy, ethics and accountability.