

Senior Chaplain Merle Meyers: When Doing the Right Thing Costs

September 12, 2026



When I watched *FREEFALL: A Reckoning for Boeing*, I was not watching a stranger tell his story.

I was watching my friend.

Merle Meyers and his wife, Cindy, are ours, they are IA OCC Senior Chaplains and they minister to the many affected by trauma, grief and loss. They are worthy servants of the Lord and I am honored to have them as my friends. That made this documentary very personal for me. I was not hearing about everything for the first time when the documentary came out. Merle and I had been texting back and forth while he was going through much of this.

I knew there was a real person behind the headlines.

I knew there was a family behind the story.

And I knew that what the public would eventually see in interviews, news reports, and a documentary represented only part of what it is like for a person to actually live through something like this.

There was also grief woven through all of it.

The loss of fellow Boeing whistleblower John Barnett affected Merle deeply, and his death became an important part of what eventually moved Merle to participate in documentaries.

That is why, for me, Merle's story is about much more than Boeing.

It is about conscience.

It is about integrity.

It is about grief.

It is about friendship.

And it is about what happens when doing what you believe is right comes with a cost.

When You Know Something You Cannot Ignore

Merle spent decades with Boeing. This was not some outside organization he had no connection to. Boeing was a major part of his working life and part of his family history.

He began as an inspector and later helped struggling suppliers, then served in quality management. He knew the company, its people, its systems, and the responsibility that comes with building aircraft that carry human lives.

When he began raising concerns about quality control practices and what he believed were serious safety issues, this was not simply a man criticizing a corporation from the outside.

This was someone speaking about an organization that had been part of his life for many years.

Boeing has said they have addressed aspects of allegations made by other whistleblowers, and I think it is important to acknowledge that. They have issued a statement stating specifically that they do not dispute Merle's claims. But there is another part of this story that should not get lost in the arguments over corporations, investigations, and headlines.

A human being had to make a decision.

Do I speak?

Do I remain quiet?

What happens if I say what I believe needs to be said?

What might this cost me?

Those are very different questions when you are the person actually facing them.

The Loss of John Barnett

One part of this story that cannot be separated from Merle's decision to come forward publicly is the loss of John Barnett.

Like Merle, John had worked for Boeing for more than three decades and had served in quality management. He became publicly known for raising concerns about Boeing's manufacturing and quality practices.

Merle had worked with John, and unknown to each of them, they were raising similar alarms on both coasts. Merle raised flags within the system, as did others at various Seattle locations. John had moved through those in South Carolina and begun legal proceedings to get important corrections addressed.

In March 2024, while John was in South Carolina giving testimony in his whistleblower case, he died by suicide.

His death was a tremendous loss.

For Merle, it was not simply another news story involving Boeing. This was someone he knew. Someone who had also tried to raise concerns. Someone whose experience caused Merle to look again at what he himself knew and what he was going to do with that knowledge.

Merle had been approached by the New York Times and provided documentation for the issues he raised but kept his name undisclosed to the public. Before publication he learned of John's death and immediately gave permission to the NYT to use his name. He then spoke publicly about learning how John had been treated and how angry it made him. I think grief sometimes has a way of forcing us to look at things differently.

There are moments when the loss of someone causes us to ask ourselves questions we might otherwise continue putting off.

What am I supposed to do now?

What responsibility do I have?

If I remain anonymous, who speaks next?

John's death did not create Merle's concerns. Those concerns had existed for years. But the loss of John helped bring Merle to a point where remaining a confidential source was no longer something he believed he could do.

That distinction matters.

And knowing Merle while he was walking through this made it impossible for me to see the story simply as a corporate controversy.

There was grief behind it.

There was anger.

There were betrayals, both inside the company and outside people he had always trusted and respected.

There was a sense of responsibility.

And there was a friend trying to decide what faithfulness to his conscience required of him.

I Was Hearing From My Friend While He Was Living It

There is a difference between reading a story about someone and knowing the person inside the story. As Merle and I texted back and forth, I was reminded of that over and over again.

The public tends to see a whistleblower when the story becomes newsworthy.

We see the interview.

We see the congressional testimony.

We see the documentary.

We see a name on the screen.

But friends and family see something else.

They see the person carrying the weight of the decision.

They see the grief.

They see what happens when relationships become complicated.

They see the uncertainty.

They see the stress that comes with speaking publicly about something you believe matters.

They see the days when there are no television cameras around.

That is the part people can easily forget.

For me, Merle never became simply "the Boeing whistleblower."

He was still Merle.

And while the story around him was becoming larger, we were still communicating heart to heart, and my heart broke for the loss he and Cindy were experiencing.

At the same time, my heart would soar when I heard about their chaplain ministry.

There was something very powerful to me about that contrast.

They were hurting.

They were grieving.

They were carrying their own burdens.

And yet they were still pouring healing into other people.

That is chaplaincy. That is the higher calling. That is the ministry of our Lord.

It does not mean we never hurt. It does not mean we somehow become immune to grief because we are the ones who help other people through theirs.

Sometimes we are ministering to someone else while carrying our own pain. Sometimes we sit beside another person's suffering while our own heart is hurting too. We experience injustices, loss of family and friends, change of living circumstances.

I saw that in Merle and Cindy.

And it gave me a very different perspective on everything that was happening.

Doing the Right Thing Is Easy Until It Costs You Something

We use words like integrity, courage, ethics, and character all the time.

I use them in chaplain training.

We talk about doing the right thing.

We talk about being trustworthy. Remember..."Can I trust you with me?"

We talk about standing for what we believe.

But those words are easy when there is nothing to lose.

The real test comes when doing the right thing could affect your relationships.

The real test comes when people may question your motives.

The real test comes when staying silent or in the background would make life much easier.

And sometimes the real test comes when grief has already taken something from you, and you still have to decide whether you are willing to risk more.

That is when integrity stops being a word and becomes a decision.

Watching this unfold with someone I knew made that very real to me.

Chaplaincy Requires More Than Compassion

As a chaplain, this is one of the things that strikes me most about Merle's story.

I have always believed chaplaincy is a ministry of presence.

We show up. We sit beside people who are grieving. We stand with officers and first responders after critical incidents. We walk into hospitals, homes, disaster scenes, and situations most people would rather avoid.

Sometimes the greatest thing we can do is simply be there.

But sometimes presence requires something more.

Sometimes it requires a voice.

Sometimes we have to say something that is uncomfortable.

Sometimes we have to stand with a person who feels alone.

Sometimes we have to be willing to say, "This is not right."

Chaplaincy requires compassion, but it also requires courage.

Moral Courage Looks Different

Those of us who work around law enforcement and first responders understand physical courage.

We see people move toward situations other people are trying to escape.

Moral courage is different.

Sometimes nobody sees it.

Moral courage can mean standing when everyone else would prefer you sit down.

It can mean speaking when silence would protect you.

It can mean following your conscience even when you know people may be angry with you.

It can mean doing what you believe is right without knowing exactly what the consequences will be.

And sometimes the consequences do not disappear just because the public story moves on.

That is something I have thought about often while watching what Merle and Cindy have gone through.

Loyalty Does Not Require Silence

There is another lesson in all of this that I believe is important.

You can care deeply about an organization and still challenge it.

You can appreciate what an organization has meant to your life and still believe something inside that organization needs a course correction. You can care about the people involved and still tell the truth as you understand it. We sometimes confuse loyalty with silence. They are not the same thing.

Real loyalty should never require us to surrender our conscience.

That applies to corporations. It applies to churches. It applies to nonprofit organizations. It applies to law enforcement agencies. And it applies to chaplaincy.

If protecting the organization ever becomes more important than protecting people, we need to be willing to ask hard questions.

There Is Always a Person Behind the Headline

One thing this experience has reinforced for me is how quickly we reduce people to labels.

Whistleblower.

Executive.

Employee.

Chaplain.

Witness.

But behind every label is a human being.

There is a spouse.

There are friends.

There are conversations that never become public.

There are worries that never appear in an interview.

There is grief the public may never fully see.

And there are moments when somebody simply needs another person to listen.

I am thankful that Merle and I could have those conversations along the way.

Sometimes friendship is not about having an answer. Sometimes it is simply about staying in touch and letting someone know they are not walking through something alone. That, too, is part of the ministry of presence.

A Title Is Not Enough

A person can wear a chaplain badge.

A person can have certificates on the wall.

A person can complete training and carry impressive credentials.

Those things matter, but they are not enough.

Character shows itself when something is at stake.

Integrity shows itself when compromise would be easier.

Courage shows itself when the consequences become personal.

That is why Merle's story matters to me.

Not because he appeared in a documentary.

Not because his name became connected to a major national story.

It matters because I know the man behind the story.

I was talking with my friend while the story was unfolding.

I knew some of the grief behind what the public was seeing.

And I saw a reminder of something I have believed for a long time:

What we do when the decision is hard says far more about our character than what we say when everything is easy.

The Question I Keep Coming Back To

Watching *FREEFALL* brought me back to a question I think every chaplain, leader, and person of faith should ask:

What would I do if doing the right thing cost me something?

Not in theory.

Not when we are teaching a class.

Not when we are giving someone else advice.

What would we actually do?

Would we remain silent?

Would we stay in the background?

Would we convince ourselves someone else should deal with it?

Would we protect our own comfort?

Or would we be willing to stand?

Those are questions worth asking before the day comes when we have to answer them.

I am honored to call Merle and Cindy my friends.

And when I watch Merle in *FREEFALL*, I do not simply see a whistleblower.

I see my friend.

I see John Barnett's loss and the effect it had on those who knew him and understood what he had been trying to say.

I see Merle and Cindy continuing to pour themselves into chaplain ministry even while they were carrying grief of their own.

And I see a man who was willing to stand behind what he believed was right.

That reminds me that chaplaincy is not just about what title we carry or what words we say.

It is about how we live.

Sometimes ministry means sitting beside someone who is suffering.

Sometimes it means checking on a friend while they are walking through something difficult.

Sometimes it means grieving with people we care about.

Sometimes it means continuing to give hope to others while our own hearts hurt.

Sometimes it means standing beside someone who feels alone or betrayed.

And sometimes it means having enough courage to stand up and speak.

That is moral courage.

And that is a lesson I will not soon forget.

--

Dr. Tracy Elder

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