Claiming a Substantive View of Presence: The Significance of the Pastor's Self

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The disciplines of pastoral care and counseling have witnessed growing attention to "presence" or a "ministry of presence."[1] Certainly prayerful being, or presence, ought to be the starting point for all pastoral ministry. However, the emphasis on presence has the potential to minimize the significance of active pastoral caregiving, especially when one *only* defers to being a supportive presence. In this paper we argue for an expanded view of pastoral presence that calls pastoral caregivers to exercise their agency and assume a more active, engaged posture when providing care. Such an expanded notion of presence requires the caregiver's ongoing development of self-awareness and development of capacities to elicit narrative and facilitate mutual attunement to the Holy Spirit. These capacities enable the caregiver to co-create transformative moments that may provide strength in weakness, hope in despair, and peace in unrest.

Claiming Presence: The Use of Self in Pastoral Care

While the notion of presence has received much attention in theologies of pastoral care, it is important to recognize this as a twentieth-century

1. Rob O'Lynn, *Practicing Presence: Theory and Practice of Pastoral Care* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2015); Steve Nolan, *Spiritual Care at the End of Life: The Chaplain as a "Hopeful Presence"* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011); Ewan Kelly, *Personhood and Presence: Self as a Resource of Spiritual and Pastoral Care* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

trend. This is significant. Even a brief survey of the history of pastoral care and counseling reveals that active, engaged presence characterized by authority and expertise has been at the core of pastoral care for centuries. For example, William Clebsh and Charles Jaekle's *Pastoral Care in a Historical Perspective*[2] convincingly demonstrates that prior to the twentieth century, the key qualities of the pastor in caring relationships were an authoritative sense of purpose, theological expertise, and clarity of vision. To draw a single example from the early church, Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390) famously conceptualized the pastor as a "physician of souls" and as a "ruler" who engages in the "guidance of souls."[3] According to Gregory, "In the same way the soul perfects the body, so does the pastor perfect the church."[4] Influenced by Nazianzus, Gregory the Great (d. 604) expanded the metaphor, attributing to pastor-as-physician the responsibility of curing not only soul but body as well. These two towering figures influenced pastoral practice for nearly a millennium.

Whereas prior eras generally esteemed the pastoral role, taking for granted the pastor's expertise, today's post-Christian culture often places on pastors the added burden of demonstrating the need for and benefits of pastoral care. This is particularly true of chaplains serving within institutional contexts.[5] For this reason, pastors must demonstrate a strong sense of pastoral authority and expertise in relationally connected ways.

Authority and expertise can be difficult concepts to grasp within the context of pastoral ministry. Our CPE (clinical pastoral education) students often struggle to name and own their expertise, as many assume such authority creates power imbalances that prevent pastoral relationships from flourishing. However, amid the diversity of contemporary life, it is essential to extend one's pastoral identity beyond being an expert in *content*, toward being a specialist in the *process* of facilitating meaning-making and healing conversations. This is a shift from the *objective* treatment of particular issues to facilitating a healing process for the *subjects*

2. William A. Clebsh and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in a Historical Perspective* (New York: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994). See also, Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

3. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Orations," in *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory of Nazianzus Select Orations* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003). See also, Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, 17–20.

4. Ibid., 18.

5. This is best evidenced by a recent study demonstrating the relationship between chaplains' care to patient satisfaction scores in health-care settings. See Deborah B. Marin et al., "Relationship between Chaplain Visits and Patient Satisfaction," *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy,* vol. 21, no. 1 (2015): 14–24.

of our care. Our students can often assent to this vision in good faith, as it calls forth their training and resources while honoring the agency and expertise of the subject in an I-Thou relationship.[6] Reframing expertise allows pastoral caregivers to build on a history of expertise in ways that resonate with the current context.

Honoring the agency of the pastor is foundational to pastoral care characterized by authority and expertise. The incarnation provides a helpful analogy for conceptualizing the interplay of divine and human agency in pastoral care. The Third Council of Constantinople (680/681 CE) stated that Christ had two wills corresponding to his divine and human natures, his human will always in obedient submission to the divine will. While pastoral caregivers do not embody divine agency as Jesus does, a substantive view of presence recognizes a dynamic relationship between divine and human action. Effective pastoral care requires that the caregiver recognize not *only* the priority of divine agency but also one's own agency, seeking to align oneself with God's work. The task of reimagining a ministry of active presence is not necessarily concerned with the "what" of incarnational ministry[7] but with the "how," specifically the ways in which the pastor's agency can be best aligned with God. Charles Gerkin has alluded to this by framing pastoral care as an incarnational style of tending to present life experiences.[8] In other words, the pastor's identity is undergirded by the presence of God, yet style and approach are dependent upon the individual. If the pastor is without a sense of agency, self-awareness, and capacities for ministry, his or her potential will not be fully actualized. Pastors may better partner with the ministry of the Triune God through increased awareness of the self in ministry.

Providing incarnational pastoral care necessitates being a faithful presence who is actively attuned to one's own spirit, to the spirit of recipient of care, and, of course, to the Spirit of God. This type of listening—spirit-to-spirit-to-Spirit listening—allows the pastor to hear the messages embedded within the stories of the person they are caring for and to be aware of the state of the other's spirit. This happens when the pastor checks his or her own presuppositions and judgments. At its

6. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans., Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

7. I.e., the Spirit of Christ dwelling within the caregiver, re-presenting Christ to recipients of care, etc.

8. Charles V. Gerkin, "Incarnational Theology and Pastoral Care (Protestantism)," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed., Rodney J. Hunter, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 573.

best, spirit-to-spirit-to Spirit listening results in a dynamic, co-creative partnership between all three parties that reveals processes that can be replaced, revised, or blessed so that the individual being cared for may live into a narrative characterized by healing, sustenance, justice, and/or reconciliation. In this partnership, the pastor, subject(s) of care, and Spirit of God co-create a transforming narrative in the space within and between the pastor, God, and subject(s).[9]

Growing Pastoral Capacity

Constricted self-awareness and capacity limit pastoral effectiveness. "Capacity" is a helpful metaphor for the work of pastoral formation, including the CPE experience. A mechanically minded CPE student once likened pastoral capacity to a speed limiter (or governor) on a car. While an engine may have the capacity to reach great speeds, the governor caps its potential at a set point. Left unrestricted the needle may reach one hundred miles per hour; governed, it may only reach seventy-five miles per hour. The degree to which a pastor has unexplored and disintegrated soul material is the extent to which the pastor is limited or "governed" by it. The range between the pastor's ultimate capacity and current development level is the zone he or she may cease to provide patients or parishioners an effective pastoral presence.

Learning to facilitate meaning-making and healing conversations requires tremendous soul work. Parker Palmer speaks to the wild, tenacious, savvy, and yet shy qualities of the soul.[10] Like a wild animal the soul resides in the thickets, listening and looking for the conditions in which it will emerge. Acknowledging both the lively and wary realities of the soul can help the pastor create conditions that are safe enough for souls to come forward with curiosity, and perhaps even trust. These conditions apply to the pastor's soul no less than the patient's or parishioner's. The soul grows distrustful and wary if repeatedly forced from its safe place. Often parts of us are hyper-driven and a bit tyrannical. They are out of tune with our vulnerability, and so can rush into the forest and spook our soul into hiding. Part of the task of pastoral formation

9. Ruthelle Josselson, *The Space between Us: Exploring the Dimensions of Human Relationships* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996). See also the concept of "transition space" in Ann Belford Ulanov, *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Pscyhic Reality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

10. Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2004), 58–59.

is learning the subtle intentions and energy of our various parts so they can find new ways of relating with less polarity and antagonism. Thus, creating a safe and respectful inner space for ourselves is prerequisite to creating a safe place for others.

There is some truth to the adage, "We can't expect people to go where we haven't gone ourselves." The needs of those in our care are profound. In order to meet these needs the pastor must build the capacity to go toward and remain in the depths of the human encounter. It is precisely this capacity clinical pastoral education seeks to build. Palmer expresses this principle well:

> Why must we go in and down? Because as we do so, we will meet the darkness that we carry within ourselves—the ultimate source of the shadows that we project onto other people. . . . if we ride those monsters all the way down, we break through to something precious—to . . . the community we share beneath the broken surface of our lives. Good leadership comes from people who penetrated their own inner darkness and arrived at the place where we are at one with one another, people who can lead the rest of us to a place of "hidden wholeness" because they have been there and know the way.[11]

In this quote, Palmer illustrates the necessity of the type of soul work students and pastors ought to engage in on a regular basis. Doing so requires not only self-awareness, but also willingness to explore the depths of one's innermost being at various points of need.

The Use of Self in Pastoral Ministry: Tools for a Robust Presence

Translating self-knowledge into the use of self in pastoral ministry can be a complex challenge. For this reason we suggest two practical tools for growing pastoral capacity and using one's self in ministry. Both seek to expand the inner space of the caregiver—to create room for deep, abiding, and playful curiosity within and outside of one's self. Jaco Hamman's six capacities for pastoral leadership[12] explicitly address the developmental process of the pastor. Richard Schwartz's internal family systems (IFS)

11. Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 80–81.

12. Jaco J. Hamman, *Becoming a Pastor: Forming Self and Soul for Ministry* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007).

theory[13] is an integrative model used more broadly in therapy, self-supervision, and spiritual practices.

Six Capacities. Hamman's concept of "capacity" speaks both to the need for inner spaciousness (being) as well as the ability to engage in effective pastoral relationships (doing). Hamman likens pastoral formation to human development, drawing from twentieth-century pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. Hamman understands development as a "gradual formation of the self, capable of an experience that is real," and connects a life in pursuit of such reality with the abundant life described in John 10:10.[14] Hamman adopts Winnicott's "true self" and "false self," identifying the true self as the innate, spontaneous self that holds the uniqueness and vital energy of the person. The false self is the self that develops to manage the outside world.

The six capacities Hamman advocates are capacities (1) to believe, (2) to imagine, (3) for concern, (4) to be alone, (5) to use others and be used, and (6) to play. These capacities unfold in the process of becoming. By contrast he argues that pastors are "un-becoming" when they stagnate or operate with diminished capacity. Hamman's description of the "un-becoming" leader offers a helpful guide for self-appraisal. The notion of developing capacity, therefore, pertains to an exploration of one's own soul in order to experience relating to self and others with a growing sense of freedom, characterized by each of Hamman's six capacities.

Each of Hamman's six capacities calls the pastor to ever-deepening engagement with self, others, and God. This deepening requires an expansion of the true self that, to varying degrees, has been obscured by the "socially compliant" false self. This true self serves as the secure base to which other capacities are held and from which we can provide a holding space in the pastoral moment. The true self is in touch with soul, God, and reality, and is therefore the starting point for attuned, courageous ministry. Hamman calls this foundational capacity the capacity to believe. He summarizes, "To become a pastor is to be someone. . . . If the only relationship parishioners have with you is with the pastor-as-actor. . . in the absence of a real self to engage, spiritual growth and maturity will remain elusive."[15] Without a critical mass of selfhood in place, the pastor will struggle to access imagination, care deeply, tolerate solitude (even in

13. Richard C. Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995). See also Jay Earley, *Self-Therapy* (Larkspur, CA: Pattern System Books, 2009).

14. Hamman, *Becoming a Pastor*, 8–9.

15. Ibid., 39.

the midst of others), use and be used well, or be playful.

Hamman's capacities are a useful tool in exploring the roominess of our pastoral soul. The qualities of Jesus's deep-seeded security, even while carrying such a heavy cup, are a model of deep dependence on the ultimate secure Self, the "I Am" who is God.[16] Walking with people into their pain, despair, and ultimately death is profoundly challenging. Along the way we encounter our own mortality, disappointment, longing, agnosticism, and shame from our perceived inadequacy. If we listen closely, the self is there, and it is a great resource as we seek to meet others in the depth of their experience. Holding others' pain and our own, not knowing exactly what to do or what lies ahead, requires great capacity.

Internal Family Systems. In the work of pastoral development we sometimes experience our soul as a cacophony of competing voices, emotions, and desires. We can employ a variety of "strategies of disconnection" to keep pain at bay.[17] The model of internal family systems (IFS) provides new ways to relate to our complex inner world, fostering peace and embrace rather than hostility and exclusion.[18] IFS emerged from the language of eating disorder therapy clients that referenced disparate internal experiences. They spoke of "part of me" on the one hand, "while part of me" on the other.[19] IFS takes for granted the notion that human beings exist with internal multiplicity. For instance, one can hold seemingly opposite points of view, such as a tremendous depth of grace and compassion for others while being highly critical and negative towards oneself. IFS contends that we are not unified selves, but that in fact we experience life from a variety of perspectives.

The pastor too lives with multiplicity. Part of us is moved to compassion as we hear grief borne by a parishioner, while another part may feel fatigued and caught up in our own losses. Some parts of us are more "popular" with other parts. For example, the people pleasing high functioning parts do a lot of good for advancing our ministry and getting us

16. Ibid., 31.

17. Linda M. Hartling et al., "Shame and Humiliation: From Isolation," in *The Complexity of Connection: Writings from the Stone Center's Jean Baker Miller Training Institute*, ed. Judith V. Jordan, Maureen Walker, and Linda M. Hartling (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 109–10. Here the authors describe three strategies of disconnection people employ when they are caught in shame and struggling to feel worthy of community or to trust the intentions of another. The strategies are moving away, moving toward, and moving against. Each strategy has its own logic and intention, but all limit the person's ability to be in genuine relationship with others. The authors are writing primarily about interpersonal relationships, but IFS applies these types of external relational dynamics to

through hard days. Other parts are less popular and can even be abused and exiled by parts with more access to power.[20] According to IFS theory, the parts that connect us to our vulnerability and complexity are often seen as trouble-makers and unqualified for leadership or presentation to the world—thus they are sidelined and replaced with more elaborate personas. To the extent to which we collude with this prejudice, we are cut off from important wisdom from our humanity. Instead of quarantining and splitting off parts that are perceived to be problematic, the work of IFS brings parts out into a spacious common space where they can all relate in the light of the self and the Spirit.

IFS calls us to access what it terms the "self" as the compassionate, curious, secure mediator of all the parts' concerns, burdens, and extreme beliefs. The self is the place where we commune most purely with God, the centered location of wisdom and leadership. We can imagine Jesus's self, the still center that was most attuned to God, pastoring his hurting and confused parts in the garden, so they could find authentic expression. Jesus's ministry was one of inclusion and breaking down of walls; we can only imagine how he practiced this peace-making within himself. Voices of perfectionism, shame, and despair linger in us all—how might Jesus have related to these experiences in himself? How might we take on Jesus's easy yoke as we seek peace within ourselves and hope to facilitate similar wholeness in others?

Employing the Use of Self: A Vignette

There is perhaps no better way to integrate the concepts of pastoral presence, use of self in ministry, growing pastoral capacity, and internal family systems than by concluding with a brief vignette. Drawn from Joel's ministry, it illustrates how his pastoral formation and internal processes were used to support the process of others.

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the internal world of the individual, where parts (or sub-personalities) struggle to relate with harmony and trust.

18. For meta-discussions of the theological concepts we see as undergirding IFS, specifically "exclusion and embrace," and rivalry and scapegoating, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). See also, René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 11–17, 31–32.

19. See discussions on multiplicity in Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 11–17, 31–32.

20. Ibid., 17–21. Here, a key assumption about IFS is explained well. The assumption is that the dynamics that play out between internal "parts" in IFS mirror the long established dynamics in traditional family systems theory. For example, power differen-

After several days in the pediatric intensive care unit, Jill, Greg, and Andrea's physician made the difficult decision to stop providing aggressive, life-sustaining care, as Andrea had experienced brain death secondary to meningitis.[21] A normally healthy seven-year-old, Andrea had contracted a very rare virus from lake water at her family's cabin. No one expected something so routine and benign to the naked eye would lead to death, especially over the course of a few short days. Jill and Greg's worst nightmare was a reality.

As a chaplain I was present to support Andrea's family in the final moments of her life, and my heart broke with theirs. Prior to the extubation, however, it became abundantly clear that this large family—parents, siblings, and a host of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins—needed something more, as this was the onset of a very unique kind of grief. Rather than attempting to treat the family's grief from a distant, objective point of view by mustering up words to appease my own anxiety, I dove into the depths of my soul and experienced several parts of myself that were seemingly at odds with each other.

My internal processes were characterized by multiplicity. One part of me was acutely aware of the magnitude of the situation and my own assumption that I would not be able to support the family in meaningful ways. "What do I know about the death of a child?" I asked myself, calling into question my pastoral authority and expertise. Simultaneously, I noticed a confidence and peace about my *being* with the family in a difficult moment while yet another part of me was attuned to the ways in which the family's grief was generating an anxious uncertainty about what to *do* next. In moments like these, a natural tendency for me is to perform by sharing my theological knowledge of suffering and grief and then pray for the family. However, an honest part of me recognized this as an attempt to seek relief from the anxiety of uncertainty. In each of these ways I explored a variety of difficult feelings. The processes of becoming self-aware in the moment gave me insight into how to be present, use myself as a resource for ministry, and generate a pragmatic way to proceed.

The definitive moment arrived when I recognized once again that ministry is not about me and that I should refrain from taking myself too seriously. I then shifted internally and presented the family with an

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tials, triangulation, valuing of homeostasis, and pathologizing of those who challenge it.

21. All names are pseudonymous.

opportunity to be active participants in the meaning-making process by sharing a memory of Andrea. By inviting the family to engage actively, I was fully immersed in spirit-to-spirit-to-Spirit listening and attuned to the parts of myself and to the moment at hand. In trusting my authority and expertise I was freeing myself from a need to control the outcome of the dialogue. Grandpa started the dialogue without hesitation, and everyone followed his lead, even the young children. They spoke beautifully of Andrea's joyful smile, generous heart, love, and care for others and the many fun times they shared together. The family shed tears, released bursts of laughter, and everything in between.

This experience was deeply painful for all, including the parts of me that grieved with the family and remained acutely aware of the fragility of life. Yet this opportunity to gather at the bedside and remember Andrea is one I will never forget. Andrea was remembered well that night, and the memories shared validated Jill and Greg's inklings that Andrea would not be forgotten and the family would manage to continue living well despite tragedy. This outcome emerged from the stories the family shared and the collective process of meaning-making.