

A Lot Learned But Much to Discover

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As the deer longs for the water-brooks, So longs my soul for thee, oh God... .

My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God;

When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?

These opening lines from Psalm 42 leapt immediately to my mind as I prepared to write this address on the theme of our conference: "Desire: Spirituality and Sexuality." I have in my mind's eye the deer, perhaps having just escaped from some predator, standing alone, separated from her herd, exposed to the merciless desert sun. Her legs are splayed, her head is drooping, her sides heaving — every fiber of her being cries mutely for water — cool, clear, water, muddy water, any water. There is water somewhere, but where? Will she find it in time?

I love this psalm for many reasons, one of which is the visceral intensity of desire it portrays. Of such intensity often is the soul's cry for a vision of God, for evidence that God exists and cares about human beings. By no means is such a vision of God always the consciously identified end of such desire, but in a thousand ways, and at its root, a thirst for God permeates all human desire.

The Scriptures and many other great religious writings are as much as anything the multifaceted story of this universal human desire. They tell of the ups and downs of the search, of the joy of finding and being met by God. They also tell of the blind alleys, the mistakes, the egregious sins and the myriad of false gods along the highways of history, and the pathways of individual lives. The story of this desire working itself out in human life is the story of Scripture. It is also the story of many, perhaps most, of us.

Eager Longing

Warner White, an Episcopal priest and psychologist says that a synonym for desire is an "eager longing." Eager longing is also the source of human idealism and imagination. From eager longing springs hope, creativity, romance, visions of fame and glory, and a host of other feelings, both articulate and inchoate. In specifically religious imagery eager longing is a desire for the Kingdom of God — for absolute perfection, beauty, justice, love, union and communion, in the life beyond but also here on earth, in the midst of human living. Our eager longings constitute major evidence that we are indeed created in God's image and that in Augustine's

words: "You have created us for yourself O God, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

And the deep emotion of the measured words of Saint Paul fits very well also when he says: "The whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. We ourselves groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." Each one of us may have our own personal and familiar form of this eager longing from our own experience, faith tradition, and theological perspective. This sort of waiting in expectation for what the Kingdom God brings is without doubt fundamental in all religious thought and experience.

Furthermore, desire is perhaps the most important motivator in all human behavior. Desire springs from belief and it gives form to belief. It springs from conscious, unconscious, and emotional sources. It can be rational and intended, or it can be irrational, unintended, and uncontrolled. Our desires are shaped by our upbringing and nurture, by our life experiences, by genetic makeup and heredity and a host of other influences, many unknown or barely known. Desire is a source of vision and hope and a sign of our humanity. And when desire is not adequately present in our lives it is a clear symptom that we are ill in one or a number of ways.

Bits of Personal Journey

I will return to the subject of desire and specifically sexuality shortly, but I first want to share with you a few bits and pieces of my own journey in this area of concern that is also our reason for being together for these days — the troubling, tragic, and complex issue of clergy sexual abuse and exploitation. If ever two subjects were connected intimately with one other, it is this painful subject and the issue of desire. I want to talk specifically about victim and offender in the context of desire and spirituality.

For ten years, beginning in about 1989, I was senior pastoral assistant to the then-presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Edmond Browning. We Episcopalians number about 2.4 million members in the United States, and have about 13,000 full- and part-time clergy in 113 dioceses across the country, in Central and northern South America. The late '80s and early '90s period was a time when we, along with many other denominations, were beginning to realize we were going to have to get our arms around this phenomenon of clergy sexual exploitation, whether we liked it or not. In those early days — they seem much longer than ten years ago — we were not even clear about the parameters of the problem, let alone the remedies for it. Along with a number of other responsibilities, I was at the center of this activity of building systemic Episcopal response to clergy sexual exploitation, and I came to think of myself as a sort of general practitioner in the field — though a practitioner who had as much to learn about the issues as any patient! And my learning curve is still straight up, I might add!

We were struggling to understand and define issues that now seem considerably clearer, in some ways anyway. We were writing and then attempting to administer and manage processes and protocols for everything from prevention and clergy wellness to working with, learning

from, and ministering as helpfully as possible directly to complainants and offenders. We were deeply concerned about church leaders, health and legal professionals, the media (who were also — with poorly concealed glee — just discovering the subject), and about the community at large. And so were many of you here today.

More recently, the vital issues of the local congregation impacted by clergy sexual exploitation and its unique dimensions has, happily, received the greater attention it deserves. But interestingly, not much heed was paid to this important subject early on. It was a circumstance of "building a plane while we were flying it," and the significance of that piece of the airplane had not yet been realized.

Early Resources

I think back now with gratitude over just a bare list of some of the early resources and people who helped us all so significantly with our task. One cannot overestimate the value of the contributions of some early pioneers that helped conceptualize, analyze, define, and understand the problem, and the task of remediation. I think particularly of people like Peter Rutter, Marie Fortune, Gary Schoener, and John Gonsiorek, Gil Gustafson, Maralyn Peterson, Mark Laser, Patrick Carnes, Karen LaBaque and, of course, James Poling and James Nelson. I would now also include, from the perspective of the congregation, women like Chilton Knudsen and my own wife, Nancy Myer Hopkins. And I must also add all those writing and speaking from the perspectives of the broad "women's movement" whose work has been so important to both women and men in Church and society, in so many ways. There are many more...a number of whom are or were in fact board members of ISTI.

Personal Learning

But the necessary "gut-level" learning, at least for me, came from those individuals who risked telling their stories of sexual abuse by clergy and of the spiritual and emotional injury they suffered as a result. As adults, they were mostly women, and as children they were usually represented by supportive adults. In various ways they charged the Church with responsibility for clergy misbehavior and would not be turned away from being heard.

Initially they were met with massive disbelief and denial. "I will never believe that Father Smith would do that sort of thing!" "And anyway, even if he did it's at least partly (they meant totally!) her fault!" "And what's the big deal, anyway; this is the '80s, and while it may not be a great idea for clergy to have sex with their congregants, these things do happen!" "Clergy are human, too, you know."

You probably remember the excuses as well as I. And many of them — early on anyway — had some ring of truth to them — if you wanted to believe them...as part of me, for one, did.

Slowly, the tide began to turn. Sometimes the religious communities began to hear the truth of their own accord, but often it was primarily the victim's persistence that broke the barriers.

Certainly what transformed me ("converted" is perhaps a better term) was the victims themselves and their stories, many of which I was able to hear firsthand. I remember as if it were yesterday one typical incident in which I agreed to "be the Church" for a victim whose offender would not make himself available to her. I agreed to let her speak to me as if I were the one who had offended her, on behalf of the Church. She had her own therapist and advocate, of course, and she was well prepared, as a step in her healing, to express her anger... "outrage" is a more accurate term. Expecting a tense but civil meeting, I was taken aback as she screamed and raged at me from the depths of her being. By turns she was also cold and articulate and incisive, her words cutting and penetrating like sharpest razor steel. She accused her offender of stealing and destroying her belief in God, her ability to pray, her community of support, her relationship to her family, her ability to trust anyone, her confidence in herself. She hissed, "You have stolen my very life — at least all the important parts of it!"

She told me how the Church — that had been the center of her life — now appeared to her. Terms like "fortress, callous, uncaring, hypocritical, arrogant, cowardly" are among those that still stand out, certainly not terms I associated with the institution I knew and loved.

Can the Church be the Church?

All of her words cut me to the core, but I am now, at this remove, eternally grateful to her for them. As painful as they were, they were a gift of great price. Since that early experience I have heard and read many more similar such stories, for she is by no means an exception in her feelings of outrage and expressions of pain. And in hearing such stories repeatedly over the years, I have come to realize that what such victims are doing, in voicing their protest and making their demands, is calling from the depths of the soul's center for the communities of faith to be what they claim to be.

Again and again victims also tell of their own long and exciting but circuitous journeys of eager longing to find themselves and to find God, journeys that they have been robbed of by unscrupulous or troubled religious professionals to whom they had turned in trust for help along the way. And in their pain they are struggling to get back on that road in their search for recovery, for finding self and God again. Sometimes the institutional church seems dead to them forever, but not infrequently they are still demanding that the church stand with them in their suffering search. And even if the institutional Church is repellant to them they are still demanding that it act like the Church for its own sake and to assist the soul on quest for God — a God whose image has been in large part corrupted for them by what feels to them like the Church itself.

I have come to realize with all of you that clergy sexual exploitation is really not about sex. Sex is the instrument for spiritual and emotional abuse that is akin to familial abuse and incest. Frequently it is every bit as serious in its immediate and long-term impact. Clergy and religious professionals become "god-bearers," in Michael Dwinnel's term, for many congregants — as the Church prepares and intends them to be. And many offending clergy have an uncanny ability to prey on the emotional and religious intensity — the eager longings — of their victims

in order to satisfy their own actual or imagined, but in any case unbridled, eager longings. If anyone doubts that most clergy exert awesome spiritual power and influence in many people's lives, let them observe firsthand the individual and communal chaos that ensues when that power is abused. Until our faith communities in their various configurations become willing to stand with and share the pain and suffering of those whom their agents have injured there will be little real recovery for victims — or for our Churches. Or if there is recovery of some victims, the Church will not be a part of it, as it is not in many recovering victims that I know.

And is it not one of the most profound themes of the Scriptures that to enter into suffering with another is to enter into a mystery that is at the very heart of God?

I wish I could say that I thought complainants and their supporters no longer have to fight such battles and take such risks in order to heal from their wounds, but even in this undoubtedly changed and still changing present climate they are required to do so by weakly responsive, poorly informed and variously inept religious leaders, members and systems. I find myself torn between hope and despair as I work now almost exclusively in congregations with Nancy. We still see too many victims turned away with a deaf ear and hard heart; and we see too many congregants still in cult-like thrall to and protective of variously manipulative, self-referential clergy!

Troubled and Troubling Clergy

Moreover, as we've all undoubtedly gotten somewhat more effective in dealing with clergy power abuse, the "law of unintended consequences" is becoming operative. I observe that certain types of offending religious professionals are avoiding, in perhaps increasing number, any real accountability, sometimes even when formally disciplined. Their seeming inability to accept responsibility in any depth for their behaviors invariably badly impedes the healing process for both victims and the faith community, to say nothing about the offender himself (occasionally herself). This behavior inevitably gives rise to heightened and expanded community chaos and conflict that can last for years, even generations.

I observe, though I am no clinician, that this is particularly likely to be so with those clergy who have been identified as presenting some significant degree of personality disorder, particularly of the narcissistic type. In Marie Fortune's terminology, they are also likely to be predators whose offenses may very well be multiple and particularly egregious. Their behavior — sometimes even after formal discipline — often results in untold continuing havoc in their congregations and denominations through their seeming inability to understand the impact of their controlling tactics on others. A number of these professionals are often in other ways highly effective and attractive persons, complicating the situation even further. Though relatively few in number, they have negative impact on Churches far beyond their actual number.

It is important to note here that by no means all offending clergy are of this general type, and not all offenders continue their offensive behavior after having been found out. We do have

wonderful examples of recovering clergy, some of whom I know well and deeply appreciate and admire. In their recoveries they not only are able, always through some very hard work indeed, to get back on their own journeys toward wholeness. They also greatly assist and enable their victims and others around them to do the same. These clergy need our full support and encouragement.

Ordination Process Issues

However, one of the thorniest issues still needing in-depth attention is that of more careful screening and evaluation of individuals preparing for ordination, at the seminary or the judicatory authorizing level, and probably both. By screening I mean "screening out" albeit as fairly and humanely as possible those deemed at high risk for damaging vulnerable people, and with a low potential for gaining productive insight into their own liabilities. But I also mean "screening in" by helping to identify and to work in depth with clergy and aspirants for ordination who do show reasonable potential for learning from their own emotional and psychological issues. That we all learn from our failures and liabilities and from being repeatedly forgiven and restored goes without saying. These are absolute and universal ingredients in the religious journey, and Henri Nouwen's image of the "wounded healer" rightly holds much assurance and hope for many of us. But as some are rightly observing, some persons are too wounded to help others to heal, let alone heal themselves.

Conrad Weisner, in his very informative book entitled: *Healers Harmed and Harmful*, says the following: "For religious professionals, the need to confront and understand old wounds is usually not just an individual responsibility but a social one as well. A professional religious leader who is unaware of his or her past wounds and present defensive structures can influence a whole group or congregation and render it dysfunctional. Dysfunctional or at-risk people gather those around them who are like themselves and also help to create more people or even groups like themselves. Healthy professionals, on the other hand, tend to aid in the healing of those around them." It is unconscionable that such badly wounded persons should be released unfettered in our religious communities as teachers, pastors, and symbols of the holy. All of us who work in this field will have multiple examples of both of these circumstances.

My friend and mentor Bishop David Richards, a participant at this conference and a leader in this field, has alerted me to a very recent (1999) Roman Catholic study entitled *Seminaries, Theologates and the Future of Church Ministry*. This frank and penetrating study of these and other crucial issues in the Roman Catholic Church underlines this matter. Its author quotes one harried ordination advisor as saying: "In vain do we labor if the basic building blocks (in seminarians) do not exist. The (seminary) program must build upon what is there; it cannot make up for some inadequacies, and our screening has to be carefully done so that we do not overstep our competence."

By and large most seminaries that I have dealt with focus primarily on shaping the intellect of an aspirant for Holy Orders, as if that were somehow the only important ingredient in the effective conduct of ordained ministry. But most offending clergy in my experience have smarts

enough and to spare. What they frequently lack is adequate insight into their own emotional (especially sexual) formation and behavior. I understand that it is extremely difficult — perhaps even impossible presently — to predict which clergy are eventually going to offend, and that even attempting to do so raises all sorts of difficult issues. But is it not a serious matter that "life-core" issues are not more often directly addressed and assessed in depth during periods of preparation for ordination in many religious systems?

Having made these brief observations about the victim and certain offenders — the primary persons in this issue of clergy sexual exploitation — I now want to return to the subject of desire and spirituality.

The Relational Web

Fritjof Capra, James Nelson and others speak insightfully and powerfully about the "relational web" — the invisible but very real linkage that binds us all together in interdependence and mutual responsibility. Through this web we are all woven into the very fabric of society, and of creation itself.

This web of life is intricate, subtle, and all pervasive. It is also very fragile and highly prone to being damaged by any of us through ignorance, selfishness, life circumstances and a host of other complex factors. Furthermore, one simply cannot work in any depth in this field without developing a profound sense that issues and emotions we are working with in victim and offender, in self and others, are at the very core of this relational web, and therefore at the heart of faith, ministry, religious meaning in all its forms, and indeed all human relationships.

How do we relate supportively and responsibly to each other, how do we deeply understand each other, ethically influence each other, connect intimately with each other, share deepest meanings, creative energies, joys, and sorrows? What is in fact the essential nature of effective ministry to and with others as we try to assist each other with the delicate issues of faith and belief?

None of us has all the answers; all of us are at risk to offend at some level and to be offended against, though certainly not always sexually. (I am painfully aware, for example, that I, as a white, male Westerner am by my very being in an exploitative position relative to a large percentage of the world's population!) In the immortal words of POGO paraphrased, "We have met the problem and it is us!" There's no room at all for self-satisfaction or self-righteousness. And when this intricate and all-encompassing web is violated by religious professionals, especially deep indeed is the wounding that can be done, not only to individuals but to faith communities and society. That such damage should be done under the guise of religion and by those who are expected to be helpers, teachers, and role models is painfully ironic. And how does all of this relate to the subject of our conference — the spirituality of desire?

Desire

I ran unexpectedly across an aside comment in a rather unusual psychological mystery story by Charles Todd that expresses what I want to add now about desire. He writes: "Desire is in itself indefinable, it wears whatever passions people bring to it, like a mountebank, with no reality of its own." A "mountebank" (I had to look it up myself) is an unprincipled huckster, a manipulative snake-oil salesman, or even an "Elmer Gantryesque" preacher.

The Shadow Side

This comment serves as an unpleasant but necessary reminder that in addition to all of its positive dimensions in human life, desire also has a sinister shadow side that can often bring us face to face with human tragedy, indeed with evil itself. The sentiments of the familiar even if rather Victorian, hymn make the point, as we ask that God-the-Spirit will

Breathe through the hearts of our desire,

Thy coolness and thy balm;

Let flesh be dumb, let sense retire

Speak through the earthquake wind and fire,

O still, small voice of calm.

Or even more pointedly some of us — in the Anglican tradition anyway — regularly pray that God will "grant us grace to love what you command, and to desire what you promise...that our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found."

Are there any among us who does not know through personal experience that desire is a marvelous and God-given servant and partner, but that it can also be a terrible destructive, deceitful, tyrannical master — a fact largely lost in our "just do it" environment? Can we read the newspaper even one day without seeing tragic evidence of distorted human desire in a hundred different forms? We are wise to treat desire with caution, and to wrestle with it in all its complex dimensions, not just the ones that nurture and delight us. Rightly do we connect to the very "desire" such qualifiers as "discern," "purge," "purify," "simplify," "focus" in religious thought, art, and poetry.

To desire is in a very real sense to be alive, and to be human, noble and ignoble and both at once. Our desires tell a lot about what we value, who we are, what we want to become. And, of course, some of our desires are sexual in nature. But putting it that way isn't quite right because our sexuality infuses and shapes most of our desire in often subtle and mysterious ways that we barely understand. Our sexuality is like the salt in a good stew — infusing and influencing just about every ingredient but often very difficult if not impossible to identify, let alone separate out. Our sexuality is truly the lens through which each of us looks at life, and the filter through which we experience life.

The theme of our conference is stated in a helpful manner in that it clearly implies that sexuality is a crucial element in the much deeper and broader issue of desire. Sexual desire is not a "stand alone" issue, though it permeates into every corner of our being. In fact, in situations of clergy sexual exploitation — or any other kind of sexual dysfunction — the inappropriate "sexual" part of the behavior is really the instrument for the misapprehension and misdirection of desire, a much more serious matter.

Let me note as an aside that I realize I am approaching the outer edges of our understanding of the causes for sexual dysfunction, and perhaps much human behavior. It is evident that at least some human behavior, including problematic sexual behavior, has its root in organic or chemical brain malfunction or some other physical source. How this important factor impacts the subject at hand I am not equipped to consider in depth, but I'm sure it does. And I know it is already and will continue to be a matter of major discussion and debate in many fields concerned with human behavior in years to come. Though it is the tip of a very large iceberg, it is not the subject of this paper or this conference.

I am reminded again here of James Nelson's important words as he speaks about what many have accurately termed our society's obsession with genital sex in all its forms. This is not a verbatim quote, but near enough. The real problem, Nelson says, "is not that we are too sexual; the problem is that we are not sexual enough in the right way!" That's exactly right.

For me, the spirituality of sexuality lies in the fact that it is one (perhaps the major) "sacramental" of our search for God, for meaning, for connection with and intimate knowledge of the "other." It is also an integral part of our search for self in all its forms, for we come to know ourselves primarily through connecting with others and "The Other."

This is why human sexuality is so important, so central in human living and being. It is also why the wounding that comes as a result of exploitive sexual behavior can be so devastating to all involved — for victim and exploiter — and for those who love them and interact with them.

Final Point, A Mystery

But the startling final point that must not be overlooked is that human desire is not only or primarily about us and who we are. It is about the nature and character of God, and who God is!

Another lovely old hymn says it well:

I sought the Lord, and afterwards I knew

God moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.

It was not I that found, O Savior true;

No! I was found of thee.

Our eager longing, our desire is our ontological "Yes!" to God's desire for us. And for Christians God's desire for us and all creation looks exactly like — in fact is — Jesus Christ. I speak here as a Christian because that is the journey that I am on, but I know that there are parallels in all the great religious traditions. The Good News is that Jesus is the human embodiment of God's desire, God's love for us. The story of Scriptures, the never-finished narrative of the Good News, is not primarily about the human search for God. It's about the "wanting-to-be" of God — God's wanting to become, incredibly, through our far-from-perfect humanity.

That is the core of the at-once simple and profound spirituality of desire of which human sexuality is an integral, inseparable, and vital element.

And this is also a major uniting hope of victim, of offender, and of all of us who work with them with eager longing for systemic healing and for better days in our communities and in our societies. HH