

A Rose with Thorns

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Religious institutions, be they churches, synagogues, or monastic communities, are both a beautiful and a terrible thing. They are beautiful as a rose is beautiful - beautiful as the boys choir who sang the second night of the conference, beautiful as the art displayed in the buildings of St. John's Abbey, beautiful as the great traditions of the Church, including the richness of the rituals, the chanting of the monks, and the daily office that has sustained me on my own journey.

But all religious organizations, like roses, have thorns, and thorns can be very cruel. These thorns manifest as the scapegoating, secrecy, and abuse of power that we have been talking about in the last couple of days. We often think of and refer to the congregation as a family. And the great beauty and the great tragedy of the family system is that every element effects every other element, much like the interconnected components of a kinetic mobile. The great beauty is that if one person in the system grows, the system must also grow - perhaps just a little bit, but the system must change. But the great tragedy is that if one person acts in a destructive way, the whole system dies a little. So one person can begin the healing of the system, and one person can begin the destruction of the system. And that is the big responsibility that hangs heavily on all of us: to be that part of the system that begins its healing, rather than that part of the system that begins its destruction.

Faith communities are products of their histories. The persons in the community and the events which have impacted the community within the context of its history, make the community what it is. Truly, we are the product of our history both as individuals and as families, and as communities of faith. Every event that happens in the family system helps shape the system; it shapes the patterns of behavior and the perceptions of the persons in the system.

When persons enter a religious community, church, or synagogue, they bring with them the sum total of their own families of origin and, as such, they begin to interact with, mold, change the community which they enter. To begin with, we develop rules - formal rules, informal rules, and tacit rules - many of which we import from our families of origin. Formal rules are written down and may be changed through a legislative process. They are embodied in our constitutions or the rules of life of religious communities. Informal rules are not written down anywhere, but they are consciously accepted modes of behavior such as not wearing bathing suits to church. Informal rules are more difficult to change because there is no stated, mutually agreed upon process for changing them.

Then there are tacit or implicit rules. Tacit or implicit rules are frequently unconscious - and if brought into consciousness would frequently not seem to be rational. They protect various patterns of community behavior that are perhaps not so wonderful such as, "keep the secret," "don't rock the boat," or "deny reality." The secrets in question are not matters of appropriate confidentiality, but usually have to do with an issue of shame or power that is being protected. Something that we don't want people to find out, because if they did they would require change. And "don't rock the boat" has to do with a desire to avoid conflict and maintain the illusion of the warm fuzzy family that perhaps we never really had. "Deny reality" mandates that even if there is an elephant in the middle of the living room, we are to walk around it and pretend it is not there. We deny that certain experiences have occurred. We deny that certain persons have acted in ways that are inappropriate. "Oh, he was just flirtatious." "Oh, she was just very lonely." Denial is a way to walk through our churches, synagogues, and religious life pretending that what is an abomination is all right.

Of course there is no point in having a rule if it cannot be enforced. Faith communities most frequently use "shunning," or emotional withdrawal, a form of enforcement that is common in families, and particularly powerful. A shunned person is treated as if he or she were invisible or even no longer alive. It is the ultimate abandonment and incredibly painful. Shunning is a social death because we need relationships to survive. And to the part in us that is still a vulnerable child, shunning feels like the threat of a physical death, that which would result should we, as totally dependent beings, be abandoned by our parents when too young to feed, clothe, or shelter ourselves. In many cases families of faith have institutionalized shunning as a way of coercing members to tow the line. We even have a word for shunning members of our community, for cutting them out - we call it "excommunication." We literally

stop communicating with the rule-breaker. We shut them out, and it is incredibly painful. Excommunication has nothing to do with love and has everything to do with enforcement.

One of the great fears of all victims of clergy sexual misconduct, the fear that keeps persons from disclosing, is the fear that they will be shut out of their communities of faith, and indeed that does happen. Even in the best of circumstances there is almost always a portion of the religious community, the church, the synagogue, that shuts out the victim once clergy sexual misconduct has been disclosed. Shunning, emotional withdrawal, excommunication, and abandonment are all words for the way in which tacit family rules are enforced in our families of faith, thereby enabling patterns of dysfunctional behavior to be maintained.

I've come to understand that most persons join religious organizations and worship communities because they are looking for the perfect family they never had. We want that warm fuzzy place where we are going to be secure, where we are going to be happy, where we are going to be loved, where there is going to be beautiful music, and where nothing bad is going to happen. Particularly if we come from families in which we did not get these things. We seek to find a family that reaches out with these promises, and we want to believe that indeed, here the promise will be fulfilled. We want to believe that the religious community of which we are a part is the Eden we stepped out of in the book of Genesis. Faith communities come together to create and protect this illusion of Eden.

In the context of the congregation we unconsciously choose other persons with whom to finish the work of becoming whole. We unconsciously pick stand-ins for our family members so that we can play the scene again until we get it right. Just as in our marriages, so also in our faith communities, we attempt to work out those things that we did not get worked out at home with our parents. We try to get from our husbands or wives what we did not get from our mother or our father. We try to get our partner or our faith communities to fill in our holes rather than filling them in ourselves. And most of us do that rather unconsciously, at least until we have been in therapy. When, at the same time, we have family rules that say "keep the secret," "don't rock the boat," and "deny reality," we get ourselves into a lot of trouble because there is a lot of stuff going on underneath that cannot be talked about.

Our job as members of ISTI is to teach others ways to talk about the difficult subject of clergy sexual misconduct. We need to find methods that do not overface our families of faith, so that they can endure the truth. Sometimes we

will have to say hard things. But to the degree that we can address our faith communities in a loving way, rather than an adversarial way, we will be more successful. From learning theory, we know that in order for a system to change, one must dis-equilibrate that system. Then, if the system is not overfaced, it will be able to incorporate the learning, and re-equilibrate at a new level. But, if what one puts into the system is too much for the system to handle, rather than metabolizing the information, changing and evolving, it will return to its former state. Our job is to discover ways of feeding our dysfunctional religious institutions little pieces of truth that they can digest and incorporate into change, while at the same time requiring at least approximate justice.

Our tendency to idolize ministers contributes to the difficulty. The theory of object relations tells us that not only do we want to have a good family, but we want to have the especially good daddy and good mommy that we never had. And even if some of us had wonderful daddies and mommies, because they are human beings, there are always parts of them that are somewhat frustrating and anxiety producing. Every infant in its development begins to create a good object that is the internal representation of the nurturing, warm, fuzzy stuff, as well as a bad object that is the internal representation of the anxiety producing and punishing aspects of the caretaker. In normal development, these two objects, the good and the bad inner impressions of the caretaker, gradually integrate and become one. This results in a healthy adult that regards other individuals as a combination of light and darkness. However, when a child is traumatized around the age of two, two and a half, that integration does not take place at all, and the individual becomes what we call developmentally stuck and severely neurotic. Healthy adults are those who can see their family of faith as a combination of light and darkness, as a fragrant rose, albeit with thorns.

Those of us that really did not have good daddies and mommies, but instead had parents whose frustrating, anxiety producing, and even punishing aspects were much more prominent than the nurturing, caring, loving aspects, go out into world trying to find that part which we missed. Our inner child keeps longing to fill its emotional hole. Because clergy persons have the name "holy" written all over them, they are a wonderful stand-in for the illusory good object. As hungry adult children we want to fervently believe that our minister or rabbi really is the good object, which, of course, is a fantasy. We turn our religious leaders into the good object, a god that Isaiah did not know, a god who does not create weal and create woe. And we do not want to know anything about the possibility that we are grasping at air. It is for this reason that whistle blowers and victims of clergy sexual abuse are treated in such an

ill manner when they disclose and threaten to fracture the illusion of the clergy person as the good daddy/mommy god. In so doing they threaten to take away something that is very precious, and as punishment they are scapegoated and emotionally excommunicated.

Besides the burden of our anger at having our illusion of a tangible god tarnished, the other thing that is laid on the back of the scapegoat is our shame at the way we have behaved. It is a part of ourselves that we don't want to look at. We seem to believe that by driving the scapegoat out of the congregation we have expunged the irritant and solved our discomfort. Yet our relentless emotional hunger, our shame, our anger, our destructive communication patterns, our backbiting, our secrecy, our dysfunctional tacit family rules, and all our old business remain. And they will be with us until we confront the difficulties and work through them.

Real redemption comes not in the sacrifice of the scapegoat. It comes through love, ethical behavior, and courage. And for those of us that are sinners - I sense that is everyone here in this place - real redemption comes through forgiveness, not only of others, but of ourselves. Dr. Milton Erickson, the father of strategic family therapy, said, "Remember that every person makes the best possible choice at the time with what they have available." Often times individuals from empty families have few resources, and to get what they need and want, they make choices that are destructive to others. That is, they abuse. All of us make decisions at every moment of our lives. And we all strive to make the best decision. As each of you looks back at your lives, I am sure that you will discover that you made decisions that you felt were good as well as decisions that you regret. But you made those decisions to the best of your ability with the resources you had available at the time. Hindsight is 20/20 because when we walk down the road a little farther we have gained a greater perspective and more resources. We know what else was possible.

It is only through forgiveness of self and others for our past choices that we can begin to tolerate being honest with ourselves. And it is in this way that we can begin to develop personal awareness and become responsible for our actions and the actions of our communities. It is in this way that we can begin to move toward ethical community. There are three major systems of ethics. The deontological ethic asks, "What is the law?" and operates from an abstract a priori principle. The teleological ethic - the most common to families of faith - asks, "What is the goal?" "Where do I want to go?" and does not spend much time considering the cost of the path, particularly to others. But the ethic of responsibility asks, "What is happening? And, "What is the fitting response to

what is happening in the context of a continuing community?” This is the ethical system that Jesus taught.

We need to go about changing the system, not pointing a finger. We need to help our clergy develop their psychological and spiritual resources so that they do not choose to abuse. We need to keep clergy that cannot make healthy choices from being in situations where they will abuse. We need to work on ourselves as members of communities of faith, so that we do not need to preserve the illusion of Eden. We need to refrain from turning our clergy into gods and instead consider them as human mixtures of light and darkness. We need to be aware of our personal agendas. We need to be aware of our expectations. And we need to become faithful to an ethic of responsibility and followers of the one God. Only then will we be able to smell the fragrance of the rose, without being impaled on its thorns.