

Abuse of Power, Part II

Beyond the Power Analysis: Boundaries and Attachment

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Human beings need other human beings as much as we need air and water. The attachments we form with family, friends, and trusted others like pastors, teachers, students, and colleagues are not imaginary and not ephemeral. The bond that forms between clergy and congregation can be genuinely loving. Power analysis points out that relationships contain elements of authority, conformity, and fear; an understanding of human attachment suggests that the same relationships also contain caring, comfort, security, and affection. When someone we love treats us badly, we want the behavior to stop, but we do not want the loved one to go away. It is an observable fact of human nature that this is true no matter how bad the behavior is. Loss of an abusive parent, partner, or pastor is still loss.

Children adapt to abusive or unavailable parents by developing patterns of anxious or ambivalent attachment. These children approach their parents with anxiety and caution or appear to avoid or ignore them, in an attempt to protect themselves psychologically and perhaps physically. The bond that forms in these troubled relationships is if anything stronger than in healthier relationships. Love is still there, mixed with anger, confusion, and fear, all of them made more intense and urgent by strong doses of anxiety and doubt.

Adults in a faith community are not children, but they do address their ordained leaders with deference and respect. Not everyone in a given faith community will have formed a strong attachment to the leadership, but usually many do. (If strong attachments do not form, the cleric usually does not stay around for long.) So when a cleric misbehaves sexually or otherwise, there are always those in the community who want to deny, minimize, or "forgive" as quickly as possible, so that they can hold on to the relationship. We know, by harsh experience, that this only encourages the misconduct to continue, but we also know that the removal of a leader, even when it is the right and best course of action, will lead to loss and grief in the community.

The story of Joseph and his family (Genesis, chapters 37 and following) illustrates the power of attachment and also has a lot to teach us about the wisdom of dealing with betrayal cautiously. Joseph, as most of us remember, literally dreams of his own greatness and then tells the whole family about it. His jealous elder brothers sell him into slavery, his new owner imprisons him on a false charge of sexual misconduct, but Joseph continues to behave himself and to interpret dreams accurately and on the strength of his talents rises to be second in command to the king of Egypt . When famine hits, Egypt , under Joseph's leadership, is well-stocked, but Canaan , where the rest of the family lives, is not. The clan patriarch, Jacob, sends the brothers to Egypt to buy food. None of them knows that the governor to whom they apply for help is Joseph. By this time some dozen years have elapsed, Joseph has his own family, and

he has chosen the name of his first-born son in commemoration of the fact that he has forgotten the house of his father.

But Joseph has not forgotten. His brothers, bowing before him as he dreamed they would, do not recognize him, but he knows for sure who they are. He speaks to them harshly, accusing them of being spies. Joseph insists on holding one of them hostage until they return with the youngest, his only full brother, Benjamin. As they discuss this, Joseph hears the brothers acknowledge to each other that this treatment is punishment for their earlier treatment of him. When they leave, he gives them food, but orders that their money be secretly packed in with it. The brothers return with Benjamin and all the money, Joseph again sends them on their way, again with their money secretly returned, and this time with his own silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack as well. When he has them hauled back again and accuses Benjamin of stealing, Judah offers himself as a slave in Benjamin's place.

Joseph speaks harshly to his brothers, hides his identity from them, tests their integrity, and threatens them with imprisonment and death. He also weeps: first when he hears them express regret over selling him, second when he sees Benjamin, and third when Judah pleads for Benjamin's life. At this point Joseph sends everyone else away to reveal himself to his brothers, and weeps so loudly that the entire household can hear him anyway. Joseph and his brothers are reconciled, and Joseph comes to a new understanding and acceptance of his own suffering. The entire family moves to Egypt, where Joseph makes sure they are given good land to settle on.

In the end, Joseph rescues his family because he loves them, and because despite his best efforts and his happy and successful new life he has not forgotten his attachment to them. The volume of his tears signifies the volume of his feelings. Loyalty and love have persisted through the worst kind of betrayal.

But Joseph is no fool. He wants to rescue them because he loves them, but he is able to rescue them because he is shrewd. The same shrewdness that allowed him to plan ahead for famine relief shows up again when he waits to declare himself until he has collected evidence that will speak to his brothers' character. Had the brothers not demonstrated their honesty and compassion during the long and complex negotiations, the story could have had any number of different outcomes. Would happy and peaceful reconciliation have taken place had the brothers kept the money or callously handed Benjamin over? If Joseph had reached out to them anyway, he could have set the whole family up for a repeat performance of betrayal, jealousy, and infighting. Rescues tend to backfire when the ones rescued misuse the gifts offered.

Attachment is an unnamed theme running through cases of clergy sexual misconduct. Behind both the denial that any harm was done and the intensity of anger and vilification when incidents come to light runs a current of attachment so strong that the threat of its disruption produces terror. Faith communities shun victims as eagerly as Joseph's brothers did away with him, partly to avoid having to deal with any evidence that the cleric isn't perfect, and partly

because a "more special child" threatens the status of all the rest. Victims are vulnerable to exploitation and then rageful when things finally come undone because they are attached to the offender in the same way a child is attached to a parent. And attachment is a two-way bond: the offender who protests that s/he loves the victim is in some sense telling the truth, about internal feelings at least. Terribly harmful behavior and feelings of tenderness and warmth can exist together in the same person.

The drama and intrigue that precede Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers have a lot to teach us about the possible restoration of trust when a boundary violation has occurred. The temptation, because of the strength of the feelings that go with attachment, is always either to shun completely or to reattach as quickly as possible. Sometimes both happen at once, as the cleric is embraced and the victim is shunned. Either option leaves the violation unresolved. A faith community in which an offense has occurred does not just forget the offender, the victim, or the injury, even if the matter is never publicly spoken of again. Closing the door to discussion shuts down the possibility of healing and growth. On the other hand, leaving an offender in a leadership position just invites the offending behavior to be repeated. Continuing contact between an offender and congregants is likewise usually not a good idea. What is needed is a process, a time in which the heat of the immediate feelings can cool and a slow and thorough reexamination of all the issues can take place. For Joseph and his brothers, this took more than a dozen years, a time frame that is not at all unrealistic if the goal is genuine change of heart.

Even after an extended period of time, there is no guarantee that anything will be different in either the offender or the injured community. Perhaps more often than not, true reconciliation between the offender and the injured will just never be possible. This is why Joseph was so wise to test his brothers before identifying himself. We aren't told what Joseph's intentions or thoughts are during this process; perhaps he's hoping his brothers have changed, or perhaps he expects they are exactly the same scoundrels he knew and hopes to create an opportunity for revenge. Either way, he waits for evidence rather than going on assumption. It is not until he knows beyond doubt that his brothers fully understand and regret the harm they did to him and their father, so much so that they are actually willing to risk their own lives rather than cause that kind of damage again, that he reveals himself and offers the possibility of reconciliation.

Note also that the brothers came to Joseph, and not the other way around. Congregants who instruct victims or other members of the community to forgive an offender, or who offer forgiveness before it is requested, are depriving the offender of the chance to demonstrate appropriate understanding, humility, and evidence of real change. Reconciliation is only real if it is accomplished in a way that establishes clearly who is responsible for what. Offering or demanding forgiveness on behalf of someone else, or rehiring (or failing to remove in the first place) an offender who has not submitted to treatment and monitoring, are moves that protect offenders from the consequences of their own actions and thus discourage healing and growth in all parties concerned.

Finally, it is important that we see that the reconstituted relationship between Joseph and his brothers is nothing at all like the relationship they had before. Structurally, the new relationship is the opposite of the old one. The victim has become the governor and the would-be murderers have come under his protection. The power has changed hands. Joseph may have forgiven his brothers, but he has not put himself at risk. An offender who seeks to return to the fellowship of those whom the offense injured will come not as a leader but as a penitent, a seeker.

In an earlier edition of the ISTI Sun (part I of this article, April 2001), I explored the relationship between boundaries, power, and narcissism. Attachment theory further develops our understanding of the ways power gets abused. We are puzzled as to how primary and secondary victims sometimes feel such affection and admiration toward offenders. Understanding the role of attachment gives us a way of accounting for the depth of the violation and the intensity of the feelings, good and bad, that misconduct situations generate. It helps us explain why victims sometimes have difficulty naming abuse, why congregations rush to hold on to offenders, why it is sometimes difficult for those who have been hurt to demand accountability from those who have hurt them. EH