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### Abuse of Power, Part 1: Boundaries and Narcissism

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Clergy sexual misconduct hurts. When we listen to the stories of victims we hear pain, anger, confusion, and shame. When we look at congregations in which misconduct has happened, we see controversy, rumors flying, factions forming, people leaving, and, later on, the pattern repeating itself with a different set of players. The community which was founded to support the spiritual growth of its members has instead found itself in a situation of spiritual crisis. Faith communities that try to ignore issues of sexual misconduct impede their own ability to function well. A community in which sexual boundaries are not respected will not pass on healthy faith.

Every violation of sexual boundaries by a member of the clergy is an abuse of power. Sexual misconduct happens when someone takes away the right to sexual self-determination from another person. By virtue of their position, members of the clergy hold enough power to take advantage of those in their care, and often can get away with it when they do. But not everyone who has the power to violate another person does so. Many, perhaps most, handle their power carefully, and learn to use it as intended, in the service of others and with regard for their welfare. Power abuse is the essence of boundary violation, but power is not in itself sufficient to explain sexual misconduct. Power does not in fact corrupt everyone who holds it.

Since the option of radically equalizing power in all human interactions does not exist, we need to ask how it happens that leaders come to abuse, or not abuse, their power. A system of checks and balances provides a baseline norm for appropriate behavior and rudimentary means to enforce it. Rules and policies regulate the ways power can be used, and structure, in the form of denominational hierarchy and congregational polity, ultimately limits the power of one cleric. But we can't legislate against every possible kind of offense, and the worst offenders are the ones who think (and are often able to convince others, at least long enough to do some real damage) that they are above the law. Those higher up the power chain don't always understand the issues, and congregations who have the power to vote an offender out may themselves be caught in the spell of the offender's influence. Once the policies are in place, prevention has to do more with education and character development than with further legislation. Designing effective responses to the problem of clergy sexual misconduct requires a sophisticated understanding of the psychological dynamics at work in the process. If power imbalance is the non-level playing field, then the psychology of interpersonal relationships is the game played. Referees can do their job, but the spirit of fair play finally depends on the intentions of the players.

There are many angles from which one could examine the phenomenon of clergy sexual misconduct. I will be focusing here on two dimensions of the psychology involved: the concept of interpersonal boundaries and the narcissism fostered by positions of leadership. Both of these dimensions highlights particular features of the interactions surrounding misconduct cases. Each helps us to understand better why people behave the way they do, and suggests areas of focus for efforts at prevention. This is by no means an exhaustive list, even of the psychological dimensions of the problem. But if it is not the final word, it is at least a solid beginning. If we want to change behavior, then we need to understand better why people behave badly in the first place.

### Interpersonal Boundaries

We tend to use the term "boundary violation" as if it were synonymous with rule-breaking, that is, as if "boundary" referred to a guideline defining the limits of appropriate behavior. Actually, in the context of the discussion of sexual misconduct, the term originally referred to interpersonal boundaries, not behavioral limits. A boundary violation is an action by one person that violates, crosses over without permission, the limits, the rightful territory, of another person. It is a physical and/or psychological trespass of interpersonal space. A boundary violation may be as gross as physical injury or property theft, or as subtle as speaking for someone when they are able to speak for themselves. Either way, the personhood of the other has been disrespected.

It's important to get the definition right because we can't understand what's wrong with boundary violations until we understand that the object of the violation is a person, not a rule, not an abstract principle. Rules for correct behavior change with the context. Different times, different cultures, even different settings within the same person's day will have different codes of appropriate conduct. However, human beings react in consistent, predictable ways when their personal boundaries are violated, regardless of cultural context. Clergy sexual misconduct is not wrong because it violates norms, but because it violates people.

The job of the clergy is to facilitate the spiritual growth of those in their care, independent of the sexual norms of the culture — whether the larger culture, the religious culture, or the culture of the particular congregation. It would be harmful for clergy to become sexually involved with congregants even if the cultural norms supported that kind of behavior. Clergy sexual misconduct produced the same symptoms in victims even before it was widely understood that the victim was not to blame. Any time there is a power imbalance one person has less opportunity and inclination to say no. Sexual contact without the full and free consent of both people easily becomes the sexual use of one person by another. Sex across a difference in power is wrong for the same reason slavery is wrong. People are not property. Treating them as objects to be manipulated rather than sentient beings with a right to self-determination violates their basic humanity.

Furthermore, one kind of boundary violation within a particular system (a family or a congregation, for instance) leads to others. If you treat a human being, a center of will,

perception, feeling, and opinion, as if its feelings are irrelevant and its wishes are not important, then that person tends to continue the pattern. People who have been victimized tend to become abusers of themselves and/or of other people. The essence of spiritual growth in many traditions is self-giving, but the self must be given freely. Those from whom selfhood has been taken learn to destroy, not build up, the humanity of others and of themselves.

One place we can see this dynamic in action is in the biblical story of Lot (Gen 18:16 – 19:38). The interactions between the members of Lot's family illustrate the way a pattern of boundary violation tends to repeat across generations. They also show us the difference between breaking rules and violating personal boundaries.

Several angels, appearing in the form of young men, arrive as strangers in the city of Sodom. In the public square they meet Lot, who persuades them to stay at his house and accept his hospitality. Hospitality to strangers is a sacred duty and a blessing to the giver, and Lot treats his guests well. The men of the city, however, come and surround the house, demanding that they be allowed to rape the strangers. Lot begs them not to violate the guests, and offers in their stead his two daughters, virgins both of them. The angels intervene with a miracle, Lot and his wife and daughters are allowed to leave town, and God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt, so Lot and his daughters end up living together in a cave in the hills. The family is now afraid of strangers in strange towns, and the daughters are afraid there will be no husbands for them and they will die childless. So they get their father drunk and sleep with him, and from this incestuous union come the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammon-ites, tribes living in the vicinity of the Israelites in later years.

The text makes it clear that Lot's life was spared because he behaved righteously. Unlike the rest of the inhabitants of the city, his behavior was acceptable to Yahweh. Lot didn't break the rules; he didn't dishonor the strangers. But the behavior within his family tells us something else. His behavior, although righteous, forever altered the relationship between himself and his daughters.

In biblical times, women were treated as if they were property – first of their fathers, and then, after financial negotiation between the men involved, of their husbands. A daughter who was not a virgin had lost substantial value in the marriage market, putting her father at financial risk and threatening her own future survival. When Lot offers his virgin daughters to the angry mob, he is in effect saying, "Here, damage my property but don't hurt my guests." The custom of the time gave Lot the right to dispose of his daughters as he wished, and righteousness demanded that he protect strangers who came under his roof. In helping Lot to escape, the angels signal God's approval of Lot's priorities.

Lot's daughters, however, have a different perspective on the situation. God rewards Lot by sparing his life, but his daughters repay him by treating his sexuality as a commodity and bending it to their own use. If we feel horror and disgust at their behavior toward their father, then we need to look again at their father's behavior toward them. The law says that Lot behaved well and the daughters behaved badly, but in terms of interpersonal boundaries the

three of them are on equal ground. No matter what the law says, people are not property. In offering his daughters to be raped by the mob, Lot offers something that does not and cannot belong to him. His daughters' bodies and his daughters' futures are not his to give away. The right to sexual self-determination does not transfer; it remains the responsibility and the privilege of the body to which it belongs. Whether or not Lot's daughters would have argued that they deserved the same rights as men, whether or not the men in authority would have listened to them, they behave as if they were equally human – or, unfortunately, as if they had an equal right to dehumanize. The roots of the bad behavior of the daughters lie deep in the soil of the socially approved behavior of their father.

I would not want to suggest that the daughters are not responsible for their behavior. What they did to their father is no more justifiable than what he did to them. But it is worth taking the time to notice that one kind of boundary violation leads to another, no matter how we feel about the particular behavior. Once you behave as if it's okay to use other people, then people will be used in all sorts of unforeseen ways.

When we recommend that clergy not date within their congregations, we hear back that it's not breaking any rules. "Everybody does it, it's expected. You can't tell someone not to do something so normal." "It's okay, it's all above board. They told the bishop." "Her parents know, and they approve. They're members of the congregation, and they would be thrilled if those two got married." "Where else am I supposed to meet someone?" All perfectly reasonable statements, in light of current community standards. The problem is that the approval and expectations of the community do not cancel out the risks of interpersonal boundary violation. As in Lot's family, the effects may not show up right away. It might be the children of the marriage who feel the effects of the ongoing imbalance of power between their parents, and act them out in their own relational difficulties. It might be that no one ever sees the connection between the pastor dating a congregant and the youth leader molesting an underage adolescent. By that time, the harm has been done.

It's not that boundary invasion is contagious; it's just that we learn mostly by example and experience. Written rules don't stand a chance against behavioral norms. If a parent, pastor, teacher, or other leader invades the personal rights of the ones for whom they are responsible, then they are in effect teaching that we can treat others without regard for their inherent rights. They are teaching an ethic of unworthiness, of might makes right, of attention to outward appearance rather than human dignity.

If we want to protect the worth of each and every person, then we must create a norm of respecting and protecting the sexual self-determination of everyone. Sexuality is not a commodity to be coerced, spoken for, used as a bargaining chip, stolen, seduced, or exchanged for attention or status. Sex as an expression of divine goodness finds its natural home in a relationship between partners of equal and shared power. Preachers are good at speaking against the misuse of sexuality, but we all have a lot to learn about disentangling sex from differences in power. In our culture, women still tend to marry "up," that is, to marry a man who is older, taller, and earns more money. Apparently it seems normal and even desirable to

date across a power difference. History can provide plenty of examples of physical and psychological trespassing that seemed perfectly normal and quite legal at the time. Faith traditions have a lot to say about the relative value we ought to place on human dignity versus social convention. Respecting the boundaries of every human being is a primary good.

## Narcissism

In whatever form it takes – elected office, corporate promotion, ordained ministry – leadership tends to foster narcissism. Narcissism can be defined as the investment in image rather than true self, and often (though not always) takes the form of grandiosity. We look to our leaders to be larger than life, better and grander and somehow bigger than the average human. We elevate them because we want them to represent us, the best of us, and we grant them our loyalty and devotion because we expect that they will care for us. A leader is not only an individual, but in some sense stands for the entire body of those led. It is easy under these circumstances for everyone to forget that leaders are only human, easy to be fooled into confusing the privileges of the role with the rights of the person. It therefore becomes all too easy for anyone in a leadership position to take advantage of the power and privilege the position grants.

It is no surprise that leadership positions tend to be sought after by individuals with strong narcissistic tendencies, people who unconsciously try to use the admiration and devotion of others to bolster their false and therefore shaky self-image. It is interesting in light of this how often biblical texts emphasize the lowly origins and doubtful qualifications of the leaders chosen by God.

David, for instance, was the youngest and apparently the least promising of Jesse's sons; Samuel checked out all of David's brothers, and had to ask specifically if there weren't another, before he even got to see David. But God spoke, and Samuel anointed David (1Sam 16). David eventually becomes a great leader, but on his way up he refers to himself as "a poor man and of no repute," trusts Yahweh rather than armor in the fight against Goliath, and refuses to seize power by killing Saul even though he has more than enough provocation and opportunity. In other words, David generally seems to carry out his duties in awareness of his position, his abilities, and his responsibilities.

Once solidly established, however, even David loses track of who he really is and takes advantage of his position. The story is familiar (2 Sam 11-12). David sees Bathsheba bathing and asks who she is. Even though he is told she is the wife of one of his warriors, he has her brought to him. When she tells him she is pregnant as a result of their encounter, David tries to cover up the evidence by tricking her husband, Uriah, into breaking his military abstinence from marital relations. But Uriah maintains his discipline, and David gives instructions that ensure Uriah will be killed in battle. With Uriah out of the way, David marries Bathsheba. God sends Nathan the prophet, who tells David a story about a rich man stealing the property of a poor man. When David expresses outrage at the theft, Nathan points out that the crime is David's own – whereupon David openly confesses that he has sinned.

In his behavior toward Bathsheba and Uriah, David has taken advantage of his position. If he were not king, he would not be able to command. People obey him because he is their leader. Surely he knows what office he holds; surely he can observe that he commands his servants and not the other way around. Yet when confronted with Nathan's story, he is outraged at someone who would behave the way he did, and doesn't understand until it is pointed out to him that he is the one who has behaved badly. We can't say anything for sure about what was going on inside David's mind, but we can deduce, by his lack of awareness of the quality of his own actions, that he got tangled up in the narcissism of his office. He got fooled into forgetting that the normal rules still apply to him.

The part that is hardest to believe until you actually see it in action is that a person in the grip of narcissism really believes in his or her own entitlement. David certainly had all the information he needed to conclude that his actions were wrong: he knew Bathsheba was married, he knew how people get pregnant, he knew what would happen to a woman who got pregnant while her husband was away. He knew his instructions would mean Uriah's death, and he knew it was wrong to steal someone else's wife. How could he fail to draw the over-obvious conclusion that he had done something wrong?

It is narcissism, our insistent belief in our preferred self-image, that blinds us to the evidence that tells us we aren't living up to our own standards. Observing our world through a narcissistic frame of reference, we forget who we really are. Some people who misuse power forget themselves by puffing themselves up, by believing that they truly are as great as everyone makes them out to be, by confusing the privileges of leadership with the human worth of the one holding the office. These people fall for the trappings and the perks. They believe that they are somehow set apart and special, destined to sit above the law and outside the restraints necessary for ordinary mortals. They forget that they are only human.

Others who misuse the power of office come from the opposite perspective. They value their own humility, and believe that they would never put themselves above others. They think of themselves as regular folks, and may even be surprised by the deference and loyalty they seem to inspire. Because they do not fully own the power that goes with their leadership position, they can fool themselves into not seeing it for what it is. They assume that people obey them because of their personal qualities, not because of the rank they hold. Longing to be loved for themselves, they come to confuse the privileges of leadership with affirmations of their own worth. The grandiose version of narcissism fools us into thinking we are more than human; the falsely humble version of narcissism fools us into believing we have less responsibility than our role gives us.

Whether he confused his role with himself or himself with his role, David allowed his distorted perspective to blind him to the fact that he was overstepping the limits of his authority. It's not that he had no sense of right and wrong; he just didn't stop to think about the full implications of his own actions. The human mind has an amazing capacity to refrain from drawing conclusions it doesn't like even in the face of overwhelming evidence. What David could easily

see in someone else, he could not see in himself. It's an easy mistake to make when no one says no or raises an objection. Easy, but with devastating consequences: because David just reached out and took what he wanted, a woman is dishonored and a man is dead.

The fact is that clergy who offend sexually often believe so firmly in their own good character that they are able to fool their victims, congregants, and superiors as well as themselves into thinking they haven't really done any harm. This makes it terribly difficult to recognize offending behavior in the first place, let alone hold offenders accountable for it over the long run. Most of us confuse the ability to express moral outrage with the ability to identify moral transgression in oneself. When we see someone say one thing and do another, we may fall for the words even though the actions belie them.

Narcissism can be a temporary disorder of perception, or it can become such a habit that it is the defining feature of an entire personality. All of us behave narcissistically at one time or another. Many repeat offenders are entrenched in narcissistic personality patterns. David may have been caught up in narcissistic behavior temporarily, but his response to Nathan shows a healthy humility. His character has clearly been formed more by the habit of listening to God than by the need to defend himself. In his better moments David is aware of his place in relation to God and in relation to the people he leads; he has the capacity for and the habit of humility. If this were not the case, he could not so easily admit his own guilt.

We tend to think of narcissism as characterized by overwhelming self-centeredness, but it is even more about hollowness and the need to build up a shaky self-image than about grandiosity and the belief in one's own special status. Narcissism is a failure to be truthful about oneself to oneself, a failure to accept the limitations of one's humanity and also to accept the extent of one's capacity to influence and harm others. It is just as narcissistic to claim that I am the worst of the worst, that my story is especially bad, that I am the most sorry and deserving of the most sympathy and in need of the greatest amount of forgiveness, as it is to insist on my own greatness. The opposite of narcissism is not self-deprecation but humility, the willingness to tell the truth about oneself, to oneself, to see oneself from God's perspective and not one's own. Leaders who are not narcissistic understand that leadership is a job, not a reward, and that humility is about doing the job well, not refusing to take it on. Healthy leaders may think well of their own talents, but they are not afraid to take their own mistakes seriously. In listening to Nathan, David acknowledges a power higher than his own. In looking willingly into the mirror that Nathan holds up to him, David remembers who he is: a flawed man with the responsibilities of leadership.

When we are dealing with clergy sexual misconduct, we need to take seriously the role that narcissism plays. We need to assess those who seek ordination for evidence of genuine, not false, humility. We need to investigate allegations with a full understanding of the ability of a leader with a narcissistic personality structure to deceive, and we need to educate faith communities about the risks of being charmed and manipulated by self-promoting leaders. We need to trust ourselves to name problems in leadership when we recognize them instead of just going along because we want to trust our clergy. We need to encourage and support clergy

accountability. We need to remember that good people can behave badly, that sin is real, that idealization is not a form of respect. We need to learn, all of us, to separate the role from the person who holds it.

## Conclusions

Explaining boundary violations in terms of an analysis of power dynamics gives us a way to identify what's wrong and who's responsible. A power analysis suggests that the offender is motivated (consciously or unconsciously) by a desire to control and dominate, and that a victim, predisposed to comply with authority, responds primarily out of fear and vulnerability, respect for leadership, and a diminished sense that any other options exist. This captures the basic moral elements of the situation and helps us put to rest for good the old blame-the-victim mentality that allowed those in power to disown their responsibility. Power analysis is the only way to understand issues of responsibility and redress and thus is key in the work of healing and prevention.

But power analysis alone does not account for many of the dynamics we observe in situations of sexual misconduct. Power difference is only one dimension of problematic interactions. We need other ways of describing human relationship dynamics if we are going to understand more fully the nuances and complexities of misconduct cases.

When we recover the original meaning of the term "boundaries" as a description of interpersonal relational patterns, we can recognize boundary violations as trespasses on the inherent rights of the person. This gives us a framework for explaining how something that doesn't break the rules can nonetheless cause long-term damage. It allows us to see that cultural blind spots exist, and reminds us that we need to take seriously claims of injury, even when we can't immediately understand what went wrong.

Recognizing and naming narcissistic behavior patterns helps us see how offenders can also be charming and how people who have been victimized don't always feel the hurt right away. The fact that narcissism is such a common trait among leaders helps us comprehend the grandiosity and lack of awareness or remorse in the offender. It also helps explain the enormous amount of admiration and affection offenders are able to generate, and the degree to which primary and secondary victims, along with offenders themselves, can be fooled into confusing boundary violations with the privileges of leadership.

Human behavior is always the product of multiple causes, and we can't say for sure who will misbehave and when. But when we begin to name the various interpersonal dynamics and personality features that relate to clergy sexual misconduct, we can see that prevention is as much about the development of character as it is about the development of rules and protocols. It is sobering to reflect on the substantial overlap between personal qualities related to sexual misconduct and personal qualities our culture values and promotes in our leaders. Corporate CEOs, politicians, television personalities, and perhaps congregational leaders as well, are rewarded for expanding their personal boundaries past normal human



limits. We elevate people who are experts at projecting idealized images of themselves, and we are drawn to people who generate strong feelings of attachment and loyalty. There is nothing wrong with encouraging the leadership of individuals who are confident, attractive, and visionary, but we need to be careful to distinguish appearance from reality. The stories considered here suggest that we also need to look for leaders who have the capacity to listen, who demonstrate genuine humility, and who are able to exercise prudence in personal behavior and discernment in dealing with those in their care. Prevention of the misuse of power begins with awareness and behavioral guidelines but finally depends on the good character of the leader.

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