

Leading An Interesting Private Life (When Your Public Life is Ministry)

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Many years ago, when I was still a doctoral student in counseling psychology, I attended a workshop led by a woman who was then chair of the ethics committee of the Minnesota Psychological Association. A wise elder, she told us that, in her experience, the best way for each of us to stay out of ethical trouble in our future careers as psychologists was to lead an interesting private life. She had found that the helping professionals who stepped over ethical lines often did not have lives apart from their clinical practice. This bit of common sense wisdom has always rung true for me, and now that my psychological practice includes clergy and church professionals, it seems to ring out an even deeper truth for those involved in the complex vocation of ministry. When I mention the notion of having an interesting private life to clergy from a broad spectrum of denominations and traditions, their typical response is “Interesting? How about any private life at all?” In my own experience as the spouse of a minister, I know that carving out space for activities and relationships outside of the parish is essential in sustaining a healthy ministry. But I also know that it is challenging, both in terms of external expectations as well as our own internal obstacles. After much reading, reflection, prayer and conversation, here are some thoughts on the topic.

What blocks us externally?

We live in a culture that is rooted in the Protestant work ethic that promotes the idea that hard work and worthiness go hand in hand. Even though we know that this is a distortion of the Protestant movement, which actually emphasized the idea of God’s grace freely given, those of us in pastoral roles can get easily caught up in proving ourselves through hard work. In a recent column, Ellen Goodman writes that Americans “have notoriously fewer vacation days than workers in any other industrialized country” and even so, American workers often take fewer vacation days than they have accrued. She reports that according to an Expedia poll, “one out of five workers said they feel guilty taking vacations.”

Within this context, religious leaders are trying to navigate their way in a role that could be described as the last of the generalist professions in our society. Although this allows for a tremendous variety of roles and activities, it also creates confusion and ambiguity about how much the role encompasses. Add to this, the expectations of some parishioners that the pastor will be available at all times and be “all things to all people,” and you easily have the recipe for a twenty-four/seven job, which ultimately, almost inevitably, leads to burnout.

According to a report by Pulpit and Pew, a research group from Duke University with a focus on pastoral leadership, research shows that critical health issues for clergy focus on “areas of weight, mental health, heart disease and stress.” As noted by Dr. Gwen Halaas, a family physician who is the project director of the Ministerial Health and

Wellness Program, a new initiative with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the role of pastor has “become a more difficult job with fewer rewards, and all those things add to stress and take a toll on health.” Researchers in this area agree that the external hazards of ministry are real and complex. How to confront and manage the challenges brings us face to face with some of our own internal dynamics, and it is here that we find the possibility for change and transformation in our lives.

What blocks us internally?

As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it in “Serenity Prayer” now widely used by Twelve Step Programs:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things
I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

Sorting out what is in our power to change versus what is outside of our control is an essential part of developing a healthy ministry that includes an interesting private life. Psychologist, Harriet Goldhor Lerner, in her many books focusing on the systemic nature of relationships, repeatedly uses the image of the dance as a metaphor. We often pour our energy into trying to change our partner’s steps resulting only in frustration. However, if we focus on changing our own steps, the dance will have to change, and if we maintain it over time, we will be in a transformed relationship. As we look at our own dance steps, our focus will be on the roles and internal messages that block us from a healthy balance.

In their work as facilitators of a treatment program for clergy in crisis who are suffering from various disorders including addiction, compulsive behavior, depression and burnout, Donald Hands and Wayne Fehr have discovered that many clergy tend to fall into a couple of different roles that have their roots in their family of origin. In the language of the recovery literature, these roles are identified as the “hero” and the “clown.” These roles are easily recognizable even among clergy that are not suffering from any serious disorder. The hero is the responsible, over-functioning minister who perceives that the success or failure of an enterprise rests entirely on his or her shoulders. The clown is the “mascot” or “entertainer,” a role that easily becomes the minister that is a “people-pleaser” or a “peace-keeper.”

At North Central Ministry Development Center, we have the opportunity to work with candidates for ordination within various denominations. When we talk with them about family roles, it is very common to hear variations on the theme of “Responsible one” or Peace-keeper/Mediator.” When we bring these familiar roles with us into ministry, the church “family” can provide fertile ground for maintaining them and even allowing them to grow into more pronounced forms. Hands and Fehr describe “the familiar pattern among clergy of compulsive overwork and a ‘driven’ way of ministering to the needs of others. They are trying to win unqualified admiration and love of others

by being almost superhumanly ‘wonderful’ in their ministry role---to fill the aching void within themselves” (p. 55).

Underlying some of the rigid roles that lead to burnout are unrealistic thoughts, expectations and “stories,” what cognitive-behavioral psychologists have labeled our “self-talk.” For example, the over-responsible minister likely has some self-talk along the lines of: “It is my responsibility to make sure that everything is running smoothly;” “If something goes wrong, it is all my fault;” “I must make sure that membership increases or I am a failure as a minister.” In a similar fashion, the self-talk underlying the people-pleasing pastor might read like this: “Everyone must like me and appreciate my ministry or I am a failure;” “Conflict is bad, and so I must make sure that everyone is feeling okay.” The all or nothing quality of these messages is a sure sign that they are holding some rigid roles in place.

Another source for distorted inner messages comes from beliefs that are embedded in some parts of the Christian tradition, such as suffering is necessary to show commitment. As Wayne Muller notes in his book, How Then Shall We Live: “We assume that the hardest, most difficult path will always be the most fruitful in the end and that the more we bring suffering on ourselves, the more generously we will be rewarded” (p. 180). Yet Muller reminds us that Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest....My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Roy Oswald, in his book, Clergy Self-Care, suggests that it is important to re-evaluate one’s call to ministry in light of whatever roles or expectations might be blocking a “sound theology of self-care.” With great honesty, he admits that he entered the ordained ministry “mostly to please my father and mother and secondly, to assuage an angry God” along with “a strong need to be needed.” Understanding our own underlying motivations may allow us to accept our humanness and not attempt to be “the savior” but rather someone “who offers guidance and leadership through his/her own health and wholeness, and in turn is invited to greater wholeness through the health and wholeness of persons in the congregation” (Oswald, p. 15). In other words, accepting our humanness may allow us to more fully experience the Grace of God.

How do we overcome the obstacles?

As so often is the case in making changes, the first step is self-awareness, i.e., deepening our awareness of the roles and messages that keep us stuck in life-draining patterns. In Oswald’s words: “It may sound like a contradiction, but total health involves embracing our brokenness. Wholeness should never be seen as perfection, but rather as an acknowledgement and acceptance of weakness” (p. 19). Henry Nouwen wrote about the concept of the “wounded healer,” suggesting that understanding and healing our brokenness allows us to be compassionate healers for others. Becoming self-aware and working to heal our emotional wounds is a process that cannot effectively be done in isolation. Out of their experiences in working with clergy, Hands and Fehr perceive that it is essential that clergy have an individual or group with whom “they can speak

candidly about their own spiritual condition and needs. To be emotionally isolated and utterly private makes it all too easy to stay a stranger to one's actual state" (p. 58).

So reaching out for resources and help in the form of support systems, spiritual direction, psychotherapy, etc. that allow us to admit our vulnerabilities and receive in return a fuller sense of who we are is an important part of the process. It is perhaps especially important for spiritual leaders to have support systems where we can be "out of role" and allow others to manage things and to care for us. As I work with pastors, I find that often the ones who try to "go it alone" are the ones who are in the deepest trouble.

There are also some life management skills that are helpful to acquire if they don't come naturally (as is often the case for those of us in service professions). Two of the most important from my perspective are time management skills and assertiveness skills. In terms of time management, it is a truism that when we say yes to one thing, we are at the same time, saying no to something else. In the ministry, this often means that we are saying no to time spent with our own families and friends or time spent pursuing interests that bring joy to our lives. Learning how to set priorities, then, is essential. In the words of Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley (a clergy couple and the authors of The Spiritual Leader's Guide to Self-Care), "Your priorities are not what you say is most important or even what you think is most important—they are what you do with the time you have each day" (p. 25). In order to set priorities, we also have to be able to stand up for our own needs, so becoming comfortable and confident with assertive communication techniques is another necessary survival skill.

What would an interesting private life look like?

So, having acknowledged the external hazards and faced some of the internal obstacles, what exactly would an interesting private life encompass? At its most basic level, it needs to include some elements of physical self-care. Although pastors may talk about the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, many clergy ignore their physical needs. In a recent survey of religious leaders sponsored by *Pulpit and Pew*, results indicated that 76% of clergy are either overweight (46%) or obese (30%), a higher percentage than what is found in the general population (61% of Americans are overweight or obese according to the 1999 Surgeon General's report). Being able to take time for exercise and healthy meals obviously contribute to our overall well-being, our energy level and consequently, our ability to be whole and effective ministers to others.

Another important part of leading an interesting private life is discovering those things that bring us joy. Wayne Muller, in his book, How Then Shall We Live, reminds us that Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." In Muller's words, "Attention is a tangible measure of love. Whatever receives our time and attention becomes the center of gravity, the focus of our life" (p. 87). Discerning what deserves our attention requires that we find some space and time to feed our own souls. It is often difficult for pastors to experience Sabbath time for themselves in the midst of leading worship for others. Yet Jesus' life serves as an example for us, since he would pull away from the crowds either by himself or with his disciples so that he would have

time for contemplation and prayer. Sabbath, according to Muller, is “time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honoring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us” (from Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest, p. 8). Therefore, it is important that we take time for our own spiritual renewal on a regular basis apart from our professional role as religious leader.

Another part of leading an interesting private life is the pursuit of interests and activities that bring us joy, yet may not contribute in any direct way to the life of the church. By engaging in hobbies, sports, the arts, expressive/reflective work, to name a few, we may be able to cultivate a sense of play and delight in life’s small pleasures. After all, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22). These pursuits also allow us to get in touch with different gifts and qualities within ourselves and this in turn, may enhance our sense of self as a multi-faceted human-being, which will ultimately enhance our ministry to others. Ornstein and Sobel, in their book, Healthy Pleasures, describe this as diversifying our investments in ourselves so that we have other parts of ourselves to draw from when one part is experiencing a setback.

And let us not forget vacations! Ornstein and Sobel tout the physical benefits of vacations, citing research that indicates a drop in physical symptoms after a few days of R and R. It is our experience at North Central Ministry Development Center that clergy often have a difficult time taking one or two days off per week, and further struggle to take time off for vacations. Sometimes the church environment encourages this pattern of overwork, but it also seems to come from the clergy person’s view that they are somehow indispensable to the functioning of the church. However, taking some prolonged time away from the stresses of a ministry setting will promote well-being as well as a sense of perspective for the pastor. This perspective might even include “the importance of not being earnest” (Ornstein and Sobel) and the usefulness of being able to laugh at ourselves and enjoy life.

Finally, an interesting private life contains reciprocal relationships, which means relationships and support systems where the pastor can both give and receive care from others. Being a pastor is often described as “a lonely job.” Melander and Eppley cite studies that indicate that “a sizeable majority of clergy feel that they do not have a close friend” (p. 87). It is important to have friendships with people that allow us to be “out of role,” and these friendships usually don’t happen by accident, but require our intentionality in maintaining the supports we already have and reaching out for new ones.

What are the benefits of an interesting private life?

First, at the most basic level, leading an interesting private life as a pastor lends stability to one’s life overall. When we travel on an airplane, the attendant reminds us to attach our own oxygen mask before attempting to help others. Melander and Eppley state, “Caring for yourself is like attaching an oxygen mask. You are able to minister to others because your own needs are being met” (p. xiv). Taking care of ourselves by

maintaining a life separate from our ministry gives us a stable base from which to serve others.

Second, maintaining a private life encourages us to keep clearer interpersonal boundaries. Because we are meeting many of our needs outside of our ministry setting, we are less likely to live vicariously through the lives of our parishioners and possibly overstep ethical lines in the process. We are also less likely to become emotionally “hooked” by alliances, conflicts and emotional dynamics generally within the church because we can step back and seek support and perspective elsewhere.

Third, leading an interesting private life allows us to have a deeper sense of our own identity, which means that we can bring a more integrated approach to our ministry. Just as we need a sense of identity in order to fully enter into an intimate relationship, so we need an “authentic self” to be in genuine partnership with a church or ministry setting. Hands and Fehr perceive that many clergy are “suffering from a lack of integration in their lives,” which leads to a “split-off ‘public self’” and a lifestyle that is “one of control and.....image management” (p. 71). Gaining access to our deepest needs and feelings and honoring those parts of ourselves allows us to bring a more fully human and balanced presence to our ministry.

Finally, an interesting private life can free us up to enjoy the present moment, and therefore, bring a sense of joy and grace to our ministry rather than one of duty and underlying resentment. We might be able to remember, as Hands and Fehr suggest that our “first vocation is to be a human being....a child of God.” Likewise, we might recall that after Jesus emphasized the importance of abiding in God’s love at his last meal with his disciples, he explained, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

In conclusion, it might be instructive to consider the story of the woman who anointed Jesus’ head with expensive oil while he was sharing a meal with friends shortly before his death (Matthew 26: 6-13, Mark 14: 3-9). The disciples were alarmed at what they considered the waste, considering that the oil could have been sold and the sum given to the poor. But Jesus understood that she was doing a beautiful thing by anointing his body before burial, and he, as a giver of compassion, was able to also accept this gift of compassion from her. In response to this story, Wayne Muller writes:

Our reluctance to rest—our belief that our joy and delight may somehow steal from the poor, or add to the sorrows of those who suffer—is a dangerous and corrosive myth, because it creates the illusion that service to others is a painful and dreary thing. Jesus says there will always be opportunities to be kind and generous. Just as there is a time for every purpose under heaven, so is there a time for nourishment and joy, especially among those who would serve (p.49).

Leading an interesting private life is about discovering and spending time with such sources of nourishment and joy. These moments in turn will sustain us and allow us to bring a greater ease and wholeness to our ministry.

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Web Sites:

www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu