

Experiencing Care Within: Introducing a Pedagogy of Sacred Connection for Teaching Pastoral Theology & Spiritual Care

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ABSTRACT

While recent attention has been given to better understand how spiritual caregivers might be sustained in their efforts, little time has been given to consider what pedagogies might be most helpful to develop both critical consciousness and spiritual resilience. In this essay, I attempt to offer a new pedagogy for pastoral theology and spiritual care, rooted in sacred connection. This approach is grounded in embodied knowledge and seeks to foster critical and spiritual capacities within all who are seeking to become compassionate spiritual care providers.

INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of the contemplative life can often be summarized in paradoxes such as: open-heartedness while also protecting boundaries, clarity in confronting injustice while remaining open to surprise, and acts of radical hope even amidst realities of suffering. Hence, I would like to suggest a pedagogy rooted in contemplative practice, or what I call a *pedagogy of sacred connection*, which I hope will offer invaluable resources to the field of pastoral theology and spiritual care by providing an experientially grounded foundation of spaciousness within the interiority of a spiritual care provider to enable the care process to be sustained and continually transformed for the long haul.

The pastoral vocation to acts of care has a long history within the Christian tradition and was re-introduced in the 20th century through the formation of the field of clinical pastoral education or CPE. CPE

emerged from the peculiar experiences (and sufferings) of Anton Boisen, a Christian minister who found himself undergoing what was then clinically diagnosed as schizophrenia elucidated by hallucinations and delirium. After a three-week period, Boisen regained a basic orientation to the world and devoted the rest of his life and ministry investigating how suffering and the spiritual life are intertwined.¹ The field of CPE has since focused on two central issues: 1) how to best attend to suffering in the world and 2) to re-interpret theology in light of lived experiences of suffering (giving such experiences privilege and authority in theological methods). It is from this unusual launching point that pastoral theology and care (what is now often referred to as spiritual care to overcome Christian supremacy) continues to re-imagine what the practice of care looks like in contemporary settings.

In recent years, pastoral theologians have begun to insist that for spiritual care to be administered helpfully, it cannot be solely at the individual level but must advocate for transformation of the entire human web that human life is tethered to. This includes interpersonal relationships, communal groups, social structures, and global systems that create and perpetuate conditions of privilege and oppression. This is summarized by Bonnie Miller McLemore's metaphor of regarding spiritual care as attending to the living human web; she writes, "In a word, never again will a clinical moment, whether of caring for a woman recovering from hysterectomy or attending to a woman's spiritual life, be understood on intrapsychic grounds alone."² In this metaphor, it is the interdependence of life at all levels (personal, interpersonal, and social) that spiritual care providers are to consider and address. This insight has given way for pastoral theologians to embrace critical theories (from sociology and anthropology) such as critical race theory, intersectional theories, as well as postcolonial/decolonial theories to inform effective pastoral care praxis that seeks to transform systems and structures within society.³

However, is it possible for pastoral theology to critique the systems of oppression while inside of it? That is, pastoral theology has long existed within Christian higher education, wherein every layer of that reality ("Christian," "Higher" and "Education") in the context of the United States (US) has a history rife with Eurocentric and rationalistic bias. Pastoral theologian Phillis Sheppard recently presented on the topic of "Decolonizing Pastoral Theology and Care" and argued that "if spiritual care providers are going to participate in the decolonization of US society, spiritual care educators must first decolonize the classroom," pointing out that the field of pastoral theology and spiritual care still maintains blind spots and biases that exclude non-Christian faith traditions, and the LGBTQIAA community, among others.⁴ And so critical questions remain such as how does pastoral theology and spiritual care disentangle from systems and structures of oppressions of all kinds, beginning in the classroom itself? I suggest that reflections on pedagogy is a good starting place. For if, a spiritual care provider is to be sustained in the long haul, it will require for the continual attention to the spiritual well-being of the care provider. Recently, pastoral theologians such as Carrie Doehring and Ruben Arjona have made the call for pedagogies within spiritual care to cultivate competencies of "spiritual integration" and that the foundation of this pedagogy is to assist spiritual care providers to "walk the talk by continually engaging in their own processes of integration."⁵ Yet, the work of spiritual integration is not easy and so my interests lie in how our pedagogies can facilitate a spaciousness wherein the process of spiritual integration can be welcomed instead of resisted.

Postcolonialcriticaltheorieshavehelpedtohighlighttheproblematicassumptionsofanthropocentrism

within higher education and the unhelpful reliance upon the supremacy of the rationalistic, discursive mind within certain strands of Christianity. So, the question for relation here is what happens when those long relied upon systems become contested? What pedagogical practices can best help students to find courage to explore these challenges without resorting back to old ways of being? Although, the problems tied to oppression are increasingly named with precision and detail, what are the remedies that allow for a person to become aware of the problems and transform them? At the current moment, even when injustice is named and identified, our current models of pedagogy might still assume that students can catch what we are talking about, but I would contend that these postures need to be practiced.

While these questions are large and challenging, there has yet to be literature devoted to investigating what might be the most effective pedagogical methods that help hold and transform the *tensions of learning and doing justice*. This is of utmost significance for those persons who seek to offer spiritual care for a person who is suffering from a social oppression that is foreign to the care provider. It seems the person will only be able to do so effectively if they themselves have been provided moments and opportunities of practice that can keep the care provider open and curious when personal and systemic privilege, oppression, and blind spots emerge.

Because, we live a world where domination is often celebrated or justified, it is strenuous work to destabilize dominant narratives, assumptions, and problematic ways of being within the life of a care provider but yet this is imperative to the success of spiritual care. Spiritual care in a time of systemic injustice ought to re-affirm acts of healing, guidance, sustenance, reconciliation, nurturing, empowerment, and liberation and yet this will require a renewal of these courageous capacities as well as an enduring resilience that weathers institutional and structural forces seeking to silence, erase, and diminish the work.⁶ I suggest that a potential response is to implement a *pedagogy of sacred connection* where the intention is to invite each participant in the learning environment to experience a contemplative practice. This practice serves to (re)connect with the sacred in a way that will gift the participant with capacities of trust, intimacy, and the ability to be present to themselves and one another amidst difficult conversations of suffering and oppression.⁷

TEACHING SPIRITUAL CARE WITH A PEDAGOGY OF SACRED CONNECTION

In light of the vast diversity of the 21st century classroom and consciousness, pedagogies of connection must not be reducible to any one religious tradition but informed by and accessible to people from various spiritual backgrounds. There are a few contemporary spiritual teachers who are helpful in this endeavor because they have recently offered unique and novel contemplative practices that are informed by multiple spiritual traditions and also uniquely creative in their approach. Two specific teachers fit this kind of orientation and highlight how their practices were created with inclusion of people across diverse cultural and spiritual traditions. It is also important to note that I have chosen these particular practices because each of them is not just concerned with being inclusive so that all might have inner experience, but they make explicit connections to the ways that these practices also promote engagement in socially restorative

actions and non-violent approaches to societal structures and systems.

The first practice is by psychotherapist, spiritual teacher, and former monk, James Finley, called *Transforming Trauma*, which is a seven-step contemplative practice primarily directed to therapists but also written to anyone interested in a more integrated and interdependent life that supports the healing and flourishing of all life. While each step of his practice builds on one another, one of the most helpful steps in my estimation is step two because of the way it helps people find the sacred amidst ordinary life. In step two of his practice, he identifies something called “spontaneous spiritual experience or SSE.” In the words of Finley, “SSE helps us to recognize the beauty of life as it is happening right in front of us like in the example of the setting of the sun,” which helps humanity to avoid “thinking all that we are is ego” and produces the sense that life is a gift. This fills us with gratitude.”⁸ Finley refers to the egoic mind as the thinking, choosing, desiring, and feeling energies that we spend most of our day-to-day life succumbed to. In other words, the invitation of SSE is simply to identify certain moments in ordinary life that overwhelm us with joy, love, or tenderness and to imagine what it would feel like to root ourselves more deeply in the truth of them as we live our lives, open to the inevitable spontaneity and adventure that unfolds. This practice can help us to be more grounded in the truth and mysterious wonder of life as a gift, and if we can realize this, we find our deepest identity to be immovable, indestructible, and always available to us if we are open. If a person gives themselves to the practice of contemplating SSE, Finley attests that it will produce qualities within a person to “touch the hurting places with love until only love is left.”⁹ Finley’s work integrates Christianity and Buddhism by discussing healing as a combination of incarnational embodiment and mindful awareness of the interconnectedness of life.

The second contemplative practice is one offered by practical theologian Frank Rogers Jr. which he calls the compassion practice (CP). For Rogers, CP is completely based on the foundational understanding that all of life is inherently compassionate and involves four-steps that can be taken by any individual. CP includes the steps of 1) catching one’s breath, 2) taking your PULSE, 3) taking the PULSE of another, and 4) deciding what to do. PULSE is an acronym that stands for paying attention, understanding empathetically, loving with connection, sensing the sacred, and embodying new life. For Rogers, taking the PULSE of oneself and the others is the exercise of learning to practice compassion. The goal of CP is for the practitioner to become aware of all that is coming up in one’s personal experience and to touch those energies with compassionate presence. For many, this supports the cultivation of what Rogers calls *capacities of compassion-based activism* such as: curiosity, compassion, calmness, connection, clarity, confidence, creativity, and courage.¹⁰ In Rogers’ teachings of CP, he highlights the ways wisdom teachers from across spiritual traditions were grounded in compassion, and in this way, Rogers also models the ways in which contemplative practice creates spaciousness and receptivity in a person to embrace difference.

What is beautiful and helpful about both of these contemplative practices is that neither prescribes one definition of compassion or SSE. In so doing, this leaves enough flexibility for people across cultures and traditions to experience the practice in a way most helpful and meaningful to them. Neither practice necessitates prior belief in a deity or requires that a person have any religious affiliation and again their practices are malleable to the context needed for the person practicing. Each of these practices, however,

invite for a deepened presence to one's own personal experience grounded in the resources of care and compassion. Finally, there are plentiful stories of people who have experienced these contemplative practices that attest to increased capabilities to be compassionately present to suffering in the world resourced by the goodness of life itself, which is of crucial importance for social engagement and healing. I contend that these practices are not only relevant to people's everyday lives but even more so for those who are placed in positions of providing spiritual care. In the following section, I share my own contemplative practice that has been shaped in the spirit of the aforementioned practices. I, therefore, suggest that these practices can be used as a pedagogical tool in teaching pastoral theology and spiritual care.

A PEDAGOGY OF SACRED CONNECTION, PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

The following pedagogical tool is an attempt to envision an example of how a pedagogy of sacred connection might be practiced when teaching Pastoral Theology and Spiritual Care. This pedagogy seeks to promote an inner excavation for all those seeking to be actively involved in caring for others by first inviting participants to ground (and re-ground) themselves in sacred connection. The learning outcome is to help students remember and contemplate an occasion from the past where they were recipients of compassionate and generous spiritual care. The ability for pastoral theologians and spiritual care providers to extend compassion to others is directly connected to their own firsthand experiences of being cared for compassionately. It is by reflection on the spiritual reservoirs that ground them that caregivers will find the limitless flow of life that can also sustain them in acts of justice and solidarity with the world amidst suffering.

A pedagogy of sacred connection consists in three movements that assist the instructor in fostering the kind of spiritual presence needed in the process of care. The first movement is slowing down. The second movement is settling in. The third movement is spreading out. I will illustrate these three movements by first summarizing what each entail and then providing a sample of how the approach might be taken in a classroom. It should be noted that while I separate each movement for descriptive purposes, all three movements happen simultaneously and should be viewed as one holistic pedagogical approach. Depending on the level of experience that participants have with contemplative practice, this exercise could take anywhere from five to thirty minutes. I would also recommend for those wanting to use this practice for the first time, the entire experience should be no longer than five minutes and be strictly invitational for students as to not assume willing participation.

MOVEMENT 1: SLOWING DOWN

Slowing down is the first and necessary movement of a pedagogy of sacred connection because it allows for a more holistic awareness of oneself. Slowing down invites awareness of our body, mind, emotions, sensations, and feelings. We are often living at such a fast pace and are preoccupied with our plans, daily agenda, and pressing deadlines that we rarely remember the depth of our own lives and the beauty of it.

I would even argue that we are prone to take our very life and its profound wisdom for granted and are caught in mental patterns of self-judgment, loathing, complaining, and blaming. We are then caught up in a vicious cycle of reactivity enslaved to our own past experiences and judgments which diminishes our ability to be present to the larger life and/or purpose that is unfolding as the gift of compassion all around us. In slowing down, one is invited to bring intention and openness to the mystery of life as a gift. It should be stated that slowing down in this sense is not an invitation to mindful awareness but to concentrate specific attention on the ways in which life is given to the person. Examples of this include, noticing the beating heart, the ways in which oxygen is granted to us moment by moment, or the experience of care from a friend, family member, or nature. In this movement, one begins to identify moments where life is brimming with generous and compassionate love. This posture echoes what the mystic Thérèse of Lisieux testifies, “The little act done with great love touches the whole world in ways we do not understand. The love with which we do each little thing has divine proportions to it. It is this infinite love incarnate in the wholehearted sincerity of each moment of our life. Like living our whole life with our whole heart.”¹¹

I invite you now to take a moment and find a comfortable position. Allow yourself to assume a posture where your back is upright and your feet are planted on the ground beneath you. Find that position where you can be both relaxed and attentive. If you are so inclined, it can be helpful to close your eyes or to allow them to be softly open. I want to again invite you to take a deep breath and experience the support of the chair you are sitting on, the ground beneath you. Allow yourself to rest in the great silence and the compassionate presence of life. You might notice within yourself various thoughts, concerns, sensations, and feelings arising. Things to do, plans for later on. It is okay and normal, give yourself the gift of honoring their presence with warmth and gently allow them to float away. Right now, there is no problem to solve or place to go. I invite you now to receive and become more deeply aware of the presence of compassion permeating life. Notice the beating of your heart and the ways in which oxygen is granted to you freely. Consider how the earth supports your ability to stand or sit. Life is extending compassionate care to us always.

MOVEMENT 2: SETTLING IN

This movement accentuates the importance of paying more close attention to the life that is happening within and around us. It involves grounding oneself in the revelatory experience of life as pure gift being offered to humanity with compassion. The experience of this movement can be characterized by moments of openness and depth and in qualities such as gratitude, playfulness, joy, peace, love, and compassion. The class will begin to bring greater non-judgmental and curious attention to the times in which they received compassionate care. It is in observing this moment in qualitative depth that could give rise to trust in life itself as inherently full of goodness, beauty, and mercy.

Now I want to invite you to turn your attention to a recent experience where you found yourself overjoyed by life. Characteristics of this moment might include gratitude, spontaneity, laughter, love, and/or compassion. This moment might be when you were in the presence of a friend, a lover, a child, a relative or it could be a moment you were simply in awe and astounded by nature around you. Perhaps it is a moment where you felt comforted by the presence of the sacred as you understand it. Maybe it is a moment of prayer, meditation, or during an act of solidarity promoting justice and peace. This should be a moment in which you were overcome with the realization that this experience is truly a gift. It was not given based on your efforts, accomplishment, planning, or strategy but it was granted freely. Many moments might come up for you but try to settle in to one that you would like to spend more time with today. Take a moment now to more deeply contemplate this moment. Where were you in this moment? What were the surroundings? What was the weather like? Turn your attention now to your senses in this moment. What did you see in this moment? What were the sounds of this moment? What were the smells in this moment? Were there other people present? What were the emotions of this moment? What did it feel like? Allow yourself to be intimately present in this experience. What do you notice about yourself in this moment? What qualities and capacities are present with you? Notice how open you are to the adventure of life and how your heart is moved in this moment. Simply savor this moment and extend gratitude towards it.

MOVEMENT 3: SPREADING OUT

This final movement is the full integration of the practice which leads us to great courage as we reach out to attend to the suffering in the world. This extends beyond our own personal lives and seeks to make peace with all things. Rather than only seeking spiritual experience for personal satisfaction, the practice involves grounding oneself in the reality of compassion so that the person might become an agent or portal to peace and harmony in the world.

Now I want to invite you to imagine grounding yourself in the energy and experience of this moment. How would you treat yourself in light of this? How would you treat others? How would you go about life in society? How about your relationship with nature? The next time you find yourself carried away in stress, worries, or concerns, what is a simple act you can take to remind yourself of the qualitative experience of this moment? Perhaps there is a symbol that can represent this moment and you can take a screenshot in your phone. Perhaps there is a phrase that captures the sweetness of this moment that you can repeat to yourself. Whatever the action is, it should be one that re-grounds you in the experience of this moment and invites you to return to a way of being that flows from the qualities and capacities present in this moment. I invite you now to take a deep breath and extend gratitude to yourself for the opportunity to do this practice and when it feels right,

allow yourself to gently return more fully present to this moment here and now

CONCLUSION

In my personal experience of teaching pastoral theology and care, using a *pedagogy of sacred connection* has proved to be invaluable to facilitate difficult conversations centered on suffering and marginalization within larger society. This pedagogy helps to create a class environment grounded in sacred connection, which are some of the necessary building blocks for intimacy and restored human relations. This pedagogy of sacred connection also cultivates and replenishes inner resources within a person such as a sense of expansiveness and connection with all of life which are so desperately needed to stay present to the suffering at hand. I find that in grounding the class with spiritual practice it also fosters the understanding that life is inherently compassionate, which results in greater creativity and empathy which aid in imagining innovative restorative social actions from a place of spaciousness rather than scarcity.

It is only through the recovery of interdependence by way of contemplative practice (and experience) that bridges to empathic understanding can be built, and it is the first step towards transforming relationships at every level of human interaction. A pedagogy of sacred connection could also help to foster the spiritual and energetic momentum needed to create and innovate non-violent postures of engagement that winsomely and lovingly unearth previously hidden pathways to social healing together. Finally, a pedagogy of sacred connection might offer the sustenance to keep going despite difficulty, challenge, and/or despair. It is common in the lives of activists and pastoral care-providers to experience exhaustion, depletion, and frustration, and so it is imperative for those who are committed to this work for the long run to have spiritual resources to return to in order for revitalization to occur. It is my sincere hope that the field of pastoral theology and spiritual care can continue to integrate practices and capacities of sacred connection that flow from across spiritual traditions in order that care providers might be better resourced for the important tasks of healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, nurturing, empowering, and liberating.

NOTES

1 Robert C. Dykstra, "Introduction", in Robert C. Dykstra, ed., Introduction, *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings*. (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2005), 1.

2 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century", in Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, ed., *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 18.

3 See pastoral care paradigms offered by Emmanuel Lartey, Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp, and Jay E. Johnson.

4 Phillis Sheppard, "Scholarly Workers in Public Places: The Long Road Toward De-colonizing Psychology, Culture, and Religion," American Academy of Religion, Psychology, Culture, and Religion Unit. 2019. San Diego, CA, USA.

5 Carrie Doehring and Ruben Arjona, "A Spiritually Integrative Digital Pedagogy" in Darryl W. Stephens and Kate Ott, eds. *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy and Perspective Transformation*. (Routledge: NY, 2020, 129)

6 Carroll A. Watkins Ali. *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*. (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 1999).

7 For this work, I have specifically chosen to use the term contemplative practice rather than the broader 'spirituality' because what I am referring to is the very specific and it is those practices wherein the person becomes more profoundly conscious of the interconnectedness of all of life at a visceral level. This then inclines one to move towards more authentic relationships with the margins of life in a spirit of openness, empathy, and compassion. This definition has roots within the Christian tradition, but is not exclusively found in any one specific religious tradition, and so my hope is that this practice can be a more inclusive formational tool for the diversity that is present in the spiritual care classroom. The practice I offer in this article is my own created contemplative practice intended to guide students of spiritual care into their own (re)connection with the sacred, however they understand it. My practice can be adapted to suit various wisdom traditions if needed or can be taken as is for those who have no tradition at all. For further discussion on the practice I created, that is informed by but not limited to any one religious tradition, see *Mysticism and Spirituality Part 1: Mysticism, Fullness of Life* (2014) by Raimon Panikkar.

8 Finley, James. "Transforming Trauma Audio Recordings." *James Finley* (blog). Accessed May 8, 2019. Available online at: <https://jamesfinley.org/ish/>.

9 Finley, Transforming Trauma Audio Recordings.

10 See Rogers article entitled "Warriors of Compassion: Coordinates on the Compass of Compassion-Based Activism"

11 As heard in the song "Little Flower" on the album Point Vierge: Thomas Merton's Journey in Song by Alana Levandoski and Jim Finley.