LONELINESS AND CREATIVITY
COMMUNITAS
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COMMUNITAS is a term anthropologist Victor Turner uses to describe the temporary but intense community that develops among pilgrims for the duration of the journey (remember the pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales). For us in the church, it might describe the community we develop with the successive churches we serve, or the community of cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders, gathering to study together for a brief period of years.

Turner also employs the concept of liminality to describe that pilgrim experience of leaving the domain of the familiar to travel and to experience new potentialities and powers that lie afield. We leave home, travel light, expose ourselves both to the unknowns in the world of the horizon and the unknowns within our own souls, now freed to be heard in the silence of the road. Again, the cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders leave the parish momentarily to hear the experiences of colleagues and to contemplate the ministries seeking to emerge from their own souls. So we are pilgrims in the College, our experience shaped by communitas and liminalities.
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The Cover Art
Jim Janknegt, “Crucifixion at Barton Creek Mall,” 1985; acrylic on panel, 96 x 48; from the collection of Mark Smith; used with permission.
Consider the front cover of this issue of *Communitas*. It is folk-artist Jim Jangknet’s “Crucifixion at Barton Creek Mall.” It was inspired by the construction some twenty years ago of a large upscale shopping mall over an aquifer on the west side of Austin, a city famous for its environmental consciousness. The painting proved to be almost as controversial as the construction project itself. A bank that was to have exhibited it in its large downtown lobby caved to public pressure and pulled this painting from the exhibition, and the piece came to dwell for a time in Austin Seminary’s Stitt Library. Now the painting is again on exhibit in the western transept of Shelton Chapel. Once in a while I go in to be with the painting. I find that it is in the main offensive, which is why I like it so much and am continually drawn to it. A cross that is merely pretty, that doesn’t offend, has failed in its most important function.

But beyond just its offense, I am drawn to the painting as a profound meditation upon the theme of loneliness. “Jesus walked this lonesome valley,” we sing, “He had to walk it by Himself…” On that cross in the parking lot of a tony suburban shopping mall, Jesus is alone. Practically every eye is averted somewhere else—toward the siren song of commerce, the shiny features of a new car, whatever is happening beyond the bounds of Jangknet’s painting. No one is much paying attention to the ultimate revelation of God’s redemptive presence in our midst.

Ministers know more than most about the loneliness at the heart of a sense of call, so it is fitting that we devote this issue to this prevailing theme. May we conclude that, in contributor Rod Hunter’s own words, “God is faithfully present even in our perverse loneliness, for even there we may find the germinating seed of redemption.” In this sense, the old hymn is emotionally powerful but theologically flawed, for it is never finally true that “We must walk this lonesome valley, We have to walk it by ourselves…” No, our loneliness finally reminds us of our hunger for a relationship with One Who even now—more often than not unseen—companions us and prepares us for our vocation.

Faithfully yours,
Theodore J. Wardlaw
*President, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary*
This has been an exciting year for the College of Pastoral Leaders. We have awarded seven grants to fifty-seven people. We have been surprised by the diversity of projects presented to us. We are equally impressed by the dedication and excitement that ministers have exhibited toward their groups and their endeavors.

None of the groups are “support groups” per se, yet all are supportive. The pastors in the College of Pastoral Leaders desire deep invigorating conversation, refreshing retreats, intellectual stimulation, but most of all they seem to desire friendship and creative expression.

If the statistics of clergy burnout are accurate, if loneliness is a dulling force in the pastorate, if conflict and anger tear at the cloth of the church, and if our society as a whole is facing the crisis of a lack of personal integration and intimacy, then we in the United States are having a difficult time living into the fullness of our humanity.

The pastors in the College cohort groups may address their weaknesses and sadness, but that is not where they dwell. They focus on their strengths or look toward ways to fortify themselves. They want others in their groups to know about their lives, their families, their favorite books, foods, and art. They look for ways to become fully human.

People called to ministry are creative. When in seminary or engaged in ministry training in congregations, those called to ministry are surround by others who are inspired and excited by the thought of people living into their calls. They are determined to be seekers of justice, voices of truth who will help lead others to a fullness of life; noble endeavors that require nimble minds and fertile imaginations. The day to day world of the pastorate (or work in an institution such as a hospital) dulls the gleaming edge these people worked hard to hone.

Work within the cohort group is different than work with a community clergy group or an assigned group from a judicatory. The focus of these other groups is on service to the community and service to the denomination. The work of our cohort groups

The Reverend Janet Maykus is principal of the College of Pastoral Leaders, funded by the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program of Lilly Endowment Inc.
affects the community and the denomination, but the primary task is to focus on the work of the person who is the minister.

The work of most ministers is done in isolation. One pastor reported how tired her imagination was. She said she planned her worship alone, prints the bulletins alone, decides whom to visit alone, teaches her vestry alone, and that she has run out of creative ideas. She reports that time spent with her group re-ignited her creative passions, has helped her find a rhythm of daily prayer, and has reminded her to be a better steward of the body God gave her.

Loneliness is inherent in some parts of ministry. Prophetic voices are usually heard solo, the confidential burdens of a congregation must be held close to the heart, and conversation partners who hold similar interests may be difficult for pastors to find where they serve. Creative resources for living with this loneliness can be sapped if careful attention is not given to renewal.

This issue of *Communitas* addresses the issue of living with loneliness in search of creativity. Loneliness and creativity were common themes of the work in many of our cohort groups. We wondered what would a theologian say about loneliness and how do artists seek inspiration. Therefore, we invited Dr. Rodney Hunter from Candler School of Theology to tackle the task of a theological interpretation of loneliness and Drs. Valerie Bridgeman Davis and Mark Smith to help us with the invigoration of creativity at our annual conference. Bridgeman Davis is a poet/performance artist and professor of homiletics at Memphis Theological School. Since most ministers spend some of their time writing we asked her to lead an expressive writing workshop. Smith is a visual artist who works primarily in collage. We hoped a collage workshop would prove to be a less threatening creative endeavor for those who might not consider themselves visual artists.

At the end of the conference, one pastor said she felt like she was a part of a mini-revolution in ministry. We hope her words ring true for the College of Pastoral Leaders. We want to encourage people in their calls. We hope they find inspiration to do the demanding work of ministry. We hope to revolutionize the world of the minister, so that it may more often be a place of hopeful inspiration rather than a barren place of inhospitality. I am inspired by the work of the cohorts in the College of Pastoral Leaders, they are pilgrims on spiritual journeys with much to tell us.

Janet Maykus
Principal, College of Pastoral Leaders
loneliness in ministry is a troublesome issue for many pastors, if not for all. It is, I think, a painful topic because to admit loneliness is to feel shamed. No one wants to be thought of as lonely in our gregarious, American society, especially religious leaders who identify themselves with the virtues of love and community. To admit loneliness is tantamount to admitting a kind of failure, an inability to live out what we preach.

American society, and the church as well, stigmatizes the lonely as socially aberrant and deficient. Though we recognize that loneliness can occur by circumstance such as the lonely soldier far from home, for the most part we assume that lonely people are lonely because there is something wrong with them. We are inclined to blame them.

DEFINING LONELINESS

The nature of loneliness may seem obvious, but defining the obvious, though difficult, is sometimes enlightening. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines loneliness as “dejection arising from want of companionship or society.” An earlier edition of Webster’s says it is a quality or state of being “sad from being alone … a feeling of bleakness or desolation.” Pastoral Counselor Paul Fulks, in a fine Th.D. dissertation on this subject, probes more deeply. He writes that “Loneliness is a capacity to feel longing, a capacity to experience relational hunger, a capacity to feel and know at least something of what it is to be a limited, needy, and contingent creature.” Fulks also makes an interesting, and I believe important, observation:

In general, loneliness is defined and explored in the loneliness literature as a ‘something’ which develops as a deficit in the lonely person … an aberration from what is normal or healthy … [Researchers] seem unable to conceptualize loneliness as a capacity rather than a deficit or pathology. Further, this

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Dr. Rodney J. Hunter has been on the faculty of Candler School of Theology, Emory University, teaching pastoral theology and pastoral care, since 1971. He is general editor of the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling and is working on a book tentatively titled Personal Commitment: A Practical Theology. He led the plenary sessions for the 2005 College of Pastoral Leaders Conference, “Living with Loneliness; in search of Creativity.”
deficit assumption … prevents loneliness from being seen as a positive or healthy part of being human.¹

We will return to this important distinction between loneliness as deprivation and loneliness as a positive capacity.

**TYPES OF LONELINESS**

Beyond definition, it is sometimes also helpful to differentiate the major types of something we wish to understand more fully, and, in the case of loneliness as a general human experience, I believe we can do so in some important ways. Since our topic is loneliness in ministry, we can only glance at these more general kinds of loneliness, but it is nonetheless helpful to do so.

With minimal elaboration, we can note, first, that some loneliness seems to be simply the natural response to circumstance: the homesickness of the student far from home, for example. (It is an interesting question to ask, however, why some people feel lonely in such circumstances while others do not. There is obviously more going on psychologically than circumstance alone.) But we can also identify other kinds of loneliness, for instance, an existential loneliness—a certain sense of being in but not entirely of the world due to our nature-transcending consciousness—that comes with the territory of being human creatures who question themselves and know they must one day die. Then there is a subtle social loneliness spun out of the character of a technologically advanced, highly differentiated society in which the individual can easily feel unrecognized, unloved, lost, and lonely. Or the more particular and painful loneliness precipitated by the experience of social exclusion from society’s mainstream as a minority person for reasons of race, gender, sexual orientation, or other features accidental to one’s birth. At a more individual level, we can identify the piercing loneliness of grief, in both its acute, short-term expression and its longer, quiet pain over months and even years. The loneliness of grief can take subtle forms. When not healed emotionally, grief can disappear within and generate ongoing emotional and behavioral problems, even pathologies. There are, indeed, forms of loneliness that must be considered pathological (as in neurotic shame reactions) or the result of deficient learning of social skills (as with the pathetic social “misfit”).

While we must keep these possibilities in mind as we look more specifically at loneliness in ministry, because they occur in ministers as easily as in anyone else, I will turn to a couple of kinds of loneliness that I believe are more generally and directly germane to the loneliness of ministry. We can begin with issues related to professionalism and leadership in general, then move to issues specifically related to religious vocations and ordination.

**PROFESSIONAL AND LEADERSHIP LONELINESS**

By this term I mean a subtle type of loneliness known only or primarily by people whose work it is to relate in some intimately yet technically specialized fashion, or in some authority relationship, to other people—service professionals and the leaders and administrators of organizations. I put professionals and leaders in a single category not
because there are no important differences but because there are, for our purposes, important similarities. Basically, in both the practice of a profession and the exercise of leadership, the leader or professional must establish a certain distance within closeness, must set him- or herself apart from the ones she or he leads or cares for, while maintaining fundamental connection and trust. This element of distance lies at the root of the loneliness of professional life and leadership careers.

In all of these situations, there is a sense of “so close but so far.” The physician who examines the most intimate parts of my body is at once physically and personally close yet fundamentally distant, maintaining a proper professional distance and impersonality. Effective administrators and leaders work to maintain a fine balance between intimacy with their followers and subordinates, on the basis of which they build trust and support, and distance in the form of the necessary exercise of authority and control over them. Leaders, as Machiavelli rightly observed, may be loved but must—in a certain sense—be feared, and be able to say “no.” For both service professionals and leaders, the authority of office or role creates a distance between them and their people no matter how intimate their relationships might be. This fact sets them apart, and anything that sets one apart creates a certain kind of loneliness. It is, in this sense, not only lonely at the top, but in all professional and leadership positions.

A certain confusion and danger are ever present in such relationships insofar as one may be tempted to overcome this loneliness inappropriately. One thinks of sexual affairs in the office or church study, or teachers who seek inordinate personal affirmation from their students—acts that inevitably violate the nature and integrity of the relationship. Such “boundary violations” seek to overcome the loneliness inherent in these specialized authority relationships, and often grow out of deficiencies in the professional or public person’s personal life—the empty marriage or the loneliness of a life devoted totally to work. However, professional and leadership loneliness is also generated within the work itself. The fact that one is “so close but so far” may easily stimulate “relational hunger.” A certain degree of loneliness simply goes with the territory of professional practice and corporate responsibility, even if it is partially overcome by socializing with one’s colleagues and peers who share similar burdens.

MINISTERIAL LONELINESS

This brings us directly to the loneliness of ministry. I propose this term as a succinct way of identifying the specialized and unique kind of loneliness that lies embedded in the set-apartness of ordination to ministerial or priestly office. While one can identify various practical sources of ministerial loneliness, and these are important and often difficult to negotiate, I want to consider a deeper, taproot sort of issue that I believe goes to the real heart of the matter.2

Whenever social circumstances set us apart from others, loneliness appears. This is quintessentially true of ordination to ministry which is by definition a setting-apart. However, it is no ordinary setting apart; it is a sacred setting apart. Ordination is an act in which the church invests in an individual a profound trust, not only to perform designated sacred functions, but to represent or symbolize its deepest, most sacred mean-
ings and values through the minister or priest’s personal identity.

Theologically, the more liturgically based traditions articulate an ontological distinction between lay and clergy; Reformed traditions stress the practical and functional differences. However, from a sociological and psychological perspective, there can be little doubt that ordination carries profound associations of sacredness and evokes correspondingly deep feelings of ambivalent awe in the public’s general perception of ordained clergy, even in those traditions that reject ontological definitions of ordination or the institution of ordination itself.

Psychologically, there is therefore no escaping a certain loneliness in the vocation of ministry. Whether the minister or priest is proclaiming the Word and enacting the sacred drama of the Eucharist, conducting everyday church business, or providing pastoral care, the aura and perception of sacred set-apartness is there. Clergy who strive to escape this loneliness and even the stigma associated with ordination by (for example) dressing down or trying to be “an ordinary guy” (or woman) may initially win favor and enjoy a sense of closeness with their people. Such intimacy may prove deceptive in the end, however, as folks feel oddly cheated and disappointed in a pastor who cannot or will not honestly affirm the sacredness of the office.

We might consider the loneliness of ordination as a subspecies of professional and leadership loneliness. There are deep differences, however. Ministerial identity is inseparable from if not grounded in the sacred-secular distinction, the boundary between what is ordinary and that which transcends the ordinary in mystery and power and thus a boundary like no other. The sacred/profane boundary is, one might say, the boundary of all boundaries, the boundary that encompasses and unites in one category every other social demarcation. In this respect religion is not simply one human activity among others; religion concerns sacred things, The Holy, that which is not familiar or ordinary. And persons ordained to religious leadership in any tradition are identified with a unique social and existential marker, a marker distinguished from all other institutional forms and professional roles taken together. This means, inevitably, that ordination imposes a unique form of social distance and a unique and inescapable experience of loneliness on all on whom it is conferred.

The classic symbols of ordained ministry—the clerical collar and the stole—symbolize the yoke or burden of ministry. One important aspect of this burden is the loneliness of the pastoral office, which I mean not as an all-defining experiential feature, but as an inescapable dimension of pastoral identity. The one who is privileged to hear confessions, to walk with persons in the most trying or sacred moments of their lives, to preach the Word and celebrate the Sacrament, and thus to symbolize for them the very grace and life of God, is also the one who cannot divulge sacred confidences and must forever honor the unique nature of the pastoral bond. They must, that is, accept a deep sense of their difference, while equally knowing and affirming their common humanity.

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF LONELINESS IN MINISTRY

How shall we understand this inescapable and unique loneliness in ordained ministry theologically, the loneliness that is rooted in the sacred/profane distinction to which
ordination points?

We first need to get the theological context right, for ordination is not the fundamental set-apartness in Christian life: baptism is. In baptism every Christian is set apart into a special identification with Christ, over against “the world.” Specifically, baptism is an identification with the transformative and redemptive power of enduring, merciful, nonviolent love—the love of God known in Jesus Christ. Within this frame, all Christians experience a certain estrangement from the world, to the extent to which the world operates on a different set of beliefs, values, and principles, while simultaneously experiencing a profound intimacy and presence with Christ and those who follow him, and a passionate love of the world in its essential goodness and redemptive hope. There is therefore a kind of loneliness with respect to “the world” for every Christian.4

Ordination occurs as a specialized role within baptism, within the Christian community, for both functional and symbolic reasons: functionally, for the sake of order; symbolically, because all groups require institutionalized representation of their unifying, transcending meanings and values. Institutionalization in all of its forms is an inevitable human process for any coherent, committed group over time, and one aspect of institutionalization in religious groups is the institutionalizing of symbolic meanings in the form of symbolic actions, roles, and persons. Sociologically, there is bound to be ordination or something like it within Christian communities because Christian communities are human communities, whatever other meanings they have theologically.

But here an important problem arises. Ordination can be interpreted (or rather, misinterpreted) in such a way as to make the ordained person a vicarious, representative Christian whose set-apartness gets confused with the set-apartness of baptism itself. The ordained person becomes an ideal or model, and thus a substitute or vicarious Christian. When this happens, the ministry becomes an elite, privileged social class within the church. It was precisely to refute such tendencies that the Reformers emphasized the priesthood of all believers and a diaconal or service model of church leadership. When the sacred set-apartness of ordination gets confused with the more fundamental and universal set-apartness of all Christians through baptism, it creates an oppressive class within the church that mirrors the oppressive power structures of “the world.” And the true and necessary loneliness of the Christian “in the world”—the Christian’s essential estrangement from all that is dominated by evil—gets perverted into the loneliness of a privileged and oppressing class over those whom it oppresses. Ministry gets hijacked by the very powers of oppression and evil it seeks to witness against and transform.

It might seem that the answer to this problem, a way of averting it, would be to regard the institutionalizing process itself that creates ordination as evil and thus to abolish it, as some traditions have attempted. When this road is taken, however, some equivalent to ordination sooner or later rises up to take its place, even if not formally acknowledged. Even Quaker meetings have their revered leaders. It seems that religious groups need leaders who embody and symbolize their sacred meanings and values, however formally or informally this is accomplished.

The alternative is therefore not to abolish ordination, but to redeem it from its elitist, oppressive, and authoritarian tendencies and allow it to serve as a specialized win-
dow into the meaning of baptism itself—a specialized symbolic summary of what every Christian is called to be and do, though expressed through the specific sacred duties of the office related to the necessary institutional form of the church. In this modality ordination is not preoccupied with its own powers and privileges but with “servant leadership” and facilitating, encouraging, and supporting the priesthood of all believers. The loneliness within such an understanding of ordination is essentially no different from the loneliness of all Christians in “the world,” that is, the loneliness of trying to live out the Christian gospel of mercy, the pursuit of justice and peace, and the unworldly, nonviolent resistance to and transformation of evil into good in a world that resists and rejects these claims. The difference between lay and ordained loneliness lies only in the way in which the ordained leader explicitly and formally symbolizes the deepest beliefs, meanings, values, and commitments of the community as a whole, as laypersons do not. This “clerical loneliness” does not disappear, but it is set within the transfiguring context of the true loneliness of every Christian through baptism, in which its elitist and oppressive qualities are repudiated and transformed into Christian meanings.

Another way to look at the question is to say, not that ordination and the whole process of institutionalization are evil and to be done away with, but that the tendency of all groups to create “institutionalized awe” in the form of sacred leadership (and in other ways) is a natural human process, part of God’s created order. It is a process that can become distorted and oppressive, but which the Incarnate God in Christ is at work redeeming and restoring to its true nature and function. Indeed, the Incarnation means the affirmation of the world through redemption and new life, not its condemnation and destruction. The answer to the loneliness of ordination is not to abolish ordination and the entire social-institutional process of which it is a part, but to redeem it.

Therefore, while we must accept the loneliness of ordination as sociologically and psychologically inevitable, we may also see it as what Paul Fulks calls a “positive capacity,” a means of expressing and fulfilling “relational hunger,” and therefore as an incentive to nourish true community and a mandate for challenging all social distinctions that perpetuate alienation, oppression, and the violation of relationality and mutuality. Thus we must distinguish the true form of ordained loneliness from its distorted form. To be lonely “in the good sense” means to experience the loneliness of identification with the nonviolent Christ in a violent world through the specific duties of ordained ministry—preaching, sacraments, administration and governance, personal care, education, and the rest. There is a certain “holy loneliness” in preaching and in pastoral care (for instance) that derives from the struggle to follow the merciful, compassionate, nonviolent Christ faithfully amid all the temptations to indulge in domination from pulpit or bedside. Each context of ministry presents such temptations and opportunities to follow faithfully, just as do secular business and professional contexts, political assemblies and academic institutions, and every other “context” of human life.

Christian witness in every such context entails a certain loneliness no less than in ordained ministry, though the content and experience of the loneliness is no doubt shaded differently in each situation. In all of these contexts our loneliness relative to “the world” is offset by our fellowship with one another and Christ—the ineffable fel-
lowship of those who follow him. This formula need not imply a narrow, withdrawn sectarianism, or a smug, insider sense of elitism, much less perfectionism. It is a pilgrim church ’til the end of time; we are all a work in progress; no one is yet fully transformed into the image and likeness of Christ. And Christ, for his part, is fully “in the world” both within and beyond church walls. Our boundaries are not God’s boundaries, and we can embrace a certain joyful openness to live in and for the world, in the midst of its fallenness, in the hope of its redemption—and of our own—as the loneliness of our encounter with “the world” gets transfigured into the joy of its redemption.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From these theological principles and the various non-theological angles we have taken on this topic, several practical suggestions emerge:

Maintain a spiritual discipline.

For present purposes, I consider spiritual disciplines to be regular, frequent, repetitive practices that, at a minimum, immerse one devotionally in the language and substance of one’s religious tradition. In a time when ministry is easily and often defined by other traditions—organization and management theory, popular or therapeutic psychology, enneagrams, or even critical, academic biblical exegesis—it is vitally important that we speak and practice our “first language” regularly with existential seriousness. This does not preclude a possible role for the other languages, but it is a means of setting them all into a more comprehensive and fundamental perspective, and of helping us be clear about the fundamentally theological nature of our professional identity and calling. It is also important with regard to loneliness in ministry. Devotional practice is not simply a practical device for “coping” with problems like loneliness; it is a way of generating and sustaining a sense of a comprehensive, meaningful perspective on everything we experience and do. The greatest threat to the spiritual sustainability of ministry—or of life—is not the things that happen to us but losing a sense of their meaningfulness and of our meaningful role in them. Spiritual disciplines are the indispensable resource, just as the Lord’s Supper is the one essential nourishment—the bread of life, the cup of salvation.

Tend to self-care honestly and courageously.

Other forms of self care are also essential, though of course it is much easier to say this than to do it. There is a need to think carefully about what true self-care is, however, and about the range of things self-care entails. With respect to loneliness in ministry, self-care surely means engaging intentionally and regularly in practices that nurture primary relationships for their own sake, free of extrinsic distractions and ulterior motives. This requires temporarily letting go of other relationships and responsibilities—a discipline often difficult and costly. Yet in the background stands the great commandment, and principle, of Sabbath rest, the essential need to let go of everything on a regular basis, and to let God be God with us.

In addition, most pastors, like most people generally, carry a burden of therapeu-
tic agendas, large or small, and could profit from healing nurture and wise, compassionate companionship. Finding healing and wholeness is especially important for anyone who works with people, pastors included, and perhaps pastors especially. While the therapeutic and developmental needs vary from pastor to pastor, there are few individuals in any profession including ministry for whom occasional or periodic therapeutic involvement would not be helpful. Therapy can enhance one’s sense of effectiveness and fulfillment in ministry, and enable one’s social relationships, including one’s marriage and family, to be more mature, responsible, emotionally satisfying, and mutually rewarding. In view of the theological perspective I have sketched above, affirming our common humanity through the Incarnation, we can say that to have such needs is human, and seeking help with them is no betrayal of faith or vocation, even a “sacred” vocation. Opening ourselves to becoming fully and authentically human surely lies at the heart of our calling and identity as followers of Jesus.

Cultivate friendships wisely and realistically.

On the whole, effectiveness as a pastor is diminished to the extent one forms intimate, personal relationships for the purpose of self-gratification. This does not mean that one must be aloof, pretentious, or distant; pastors can and should be true friends of their people. But forming special relationships within the congregation that are primarily intimate, personal friendships risks compromising pastoral effectiveness and generating feelings of envy and resentment.

This is why, among other reasons, single ministers should not, as a rule, have dating relations with their parishioners. And it is why it is good for all pastors to cultivate friendships outside the congregation. It is also why it is good to develop deep, mutually meaningful long-term relationships with other clergy. It is easy to be idealistic about clergy relations, ignoring the difficulties like the competitiveness that so often exists among the clergy. But these difficulties only point to the importance of working at it. Finding a way through competitiveness to deep and authentic friendship with other pastors is one of the ordained ministry’s most important opportunities for spiritual growth and for experiencing the deeper meanings of Christian fellowship.

Recognize and maintain appropriate professional boundaries.

It is sometimes hard to know where the line is to be drawn between one’s professional responsibilities as clergy and one’s “relational hunger” for intimate friendship and relationship. This is not always so, however, especially in the realm of pastoral care and counseling where romantic or sexual involvements are always inappropriate and destructive. The basic rule is to find your primary personal gratifications elsewhere, even though there are real personal gratifications to be experienced from time to time in all professional relationships including ministry. But it is dangerous to oneself and others to depend on pastoral relationships to supply those needs.5

Moreover, the good pastor, like the good therapist, knows how to be deeply and personally engaged in situations of immediate need, then walk away from them and “get a life” elsewhere. It may seem cruel or insensitive to say, but professional work including all forms of ministry requires just such a “walking away from it” to avoid
“over functioning,” workaholism, and burnout, and to enable us to be truly and crea-
tively present when we are engaged. To recognize these limits is to honor our human-
ity and our finitude—and to reject temptations to see ourselves as saviors and gods. It
is also to discover a certain freedom and creativity. Theologically, this is one of the
meanings, I believe, of the command to honor the Sabbath. There is a need to let go of
everything, on a regular basis—to let God be God.

View ministerial loneliness as both a spiritual question and a spiritual opportunity.
The key question here is a diagnostic one: is your loneliness in any respect derived from
conceiving of yourself to be a member of a clerical elite having special spiritual power,
privilege, knowledge, or greater goodness or importance than your congregation? To
the extent your answer is “yes,” some spiritual stock-taking, repentance, and renewal are
in order.

It is spiritually dangerous being an authority. Ministers, leaders, professors, profes-
sionals, executives, and others in positions of authority over others are inclined to con-
sider themselves peculiarly unaffected by or immune from the problems they see and
seek to change or control in others: powerful executives and politicians who feel exempt
from scrutiny, physicians who fail to take care of their health, therapists who are better
tending to others’ problems than their own, professors who believe themselves wiser
than others, pastors who buy into the illusion that they are personally above the need
for repentance, renewal, and guidance in fundamental matters of Christian faith and
life. Authority and power easily breed self-importance and a dangerous sense of exemp-
tion from human frailties and failings.

Loneliness is intrinsic to all such egoistic delusion. We self-important people often
seek confirmation of our egos by striving for popularity, acclaim, and recognition or
other forms of distinction, and thereby isolate ourselves inwardly from true commu-
nion with others, even if we succeed at being engaging, popular, or otherwise success-
ful at our game. Sadly, the ministry in particular has never gone wanting for examples
of such self-inflation in which ordination is perverted into one form or another of elit-
ist privilege and domineering power, with the accompanying inward tragedy of isola-
tion and loneliness.

However, God is faithfully present even in our perverse loneliness, for even there
we may find the germinating seed of redemption. Pastoral counselor Paul Fulks, noted
earlier, argues that all loneliness functions like a stimulus to motivate us for developing
deeply meaningful social relations, the kind that work a deep level of change in us.

Putting his point in Tillichian terms, he says:

I believe loneliness, or our hunger for participation in the ground of being, is
the only sufficient motivation to draw us out of self-identity to risk self-alter-
atation … Loneliness becomes the Abyss … God as luring absence beckoning
us to move outside self-identity to seek reconnection with the Ground of
Being …(p. 136).

Now you may have different theological language for this than I do, but the idea is, in
my view, eye-opening, profound, and powerful. Our loneliness, even our perverse lone-
liness, may be interpreted as the voice of God calling us forward out of our self-imposed ghettos of privilege and power into significant relationship and community. It is, as it were, the Hound of Heaven, the voice of a God who will not let us go, reminding us that we are neither self-contained nor self-sufficient, made for each other in the life of God.

We may therefore see our loneliness in ministry as always an opportunity for spiritual growth understood as the search for our own true humanity in relationship with others through Christ. Loneliness, the Abyss of God in our lives, reminds us of who and whose we are. It reminds us of a divine “relational hunger” within us, not of our own making, that will not let us go.

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I ascent to heaven, thou art there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!  
… for darkness is as light to thee.  
(Ps. 139:7)

NOTES
2 In a helpful article, Arthur P. Boers, in Leadership (12: Winter 1991, 130-134), identifies five practical sources of ministerial loneliness: (1) Working alone (“We function as extroverts, but at our center we tend to be introverts.” (2) Lack of reciprocation. (3) Playing the role of pastor. (4) Isolation from extended family. (5) Pastoring isolates us socially (“little time to meet ‘outsiders’”).
3 In this I follow the spirit if not the letter of Emile Durkheim’s classic definition of religion: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [1915]), p. 62. Whether all religion is rooted in the sacred/secular distinction, and whether that categorical distinction is overdrawn or culturally relative, are matters open to dispute. I am obviously assuming at least a limited practical usefulness of the idea in Western cultural contexts here.
4 “World” here is a theological term denoting the aggregate power and richness of human civilization and history insofar as they function oppressively rather than in life-giving and life-affirming ways. God’s creation is and remains fundamentally good, and there is much good in human civilization; but much of it is always under the sway of evil, functioning oppressively and violently publicly in human society as a whole and privately in the lives of individuals and personal relationships. The Christian is theologically estranged from “the world” insofar as “the world” is human civilization and history under the power and sway of evil.
5 For a superb analysis of this whole issue see Pamela Cooper-White, Shared Wisdom: Use of Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2004).
On Creativity, Loneliness, and Community

Mark L. Smith

If our collage workshops were attempts to find creativity within loneliness, we both failed and succeeded. We failed at getting in touch with loneliness. We tried hard. We isolated ourselves in a windowless classroom, with no distractions from the outside world. Each of us was on our own, focused intensely on a new art form that required highly individualized solutions. Even so, the deck was stacked against loneliness.

This was because there was a built-in sense of community. Every individual in the makeshift studio was present with members of their pastoral leadership cohort group. And these are not ordinary groups, but deeply bonded clusters of people who share a profession, a culture, a faith, and an experience of service. In addition, the various groups had been glued together even more by their corporate experience at the conference.

The overriding factor that ultimately made loneliness elusive in that setting, however, was the participants’ consciousness of their families, the nuclear communities that trump all others. As the workshop leader, I had requested that the attendees bring with them bits and pieces of their daily lives—at work and at home—for use as collage material. Elements from the workplaces—i.e., the churches—were vastly outnumbered by personal material from the families.

And it was not just the form of the collages that emphasized family, but the content, as well. There were lots of snapshots of—and ephemera related to—wives and husbands and children and siblings. One woman’s collection of her family’s buttons and ribbons and ticket stubs and tiny fetishes comprised a complete family history, just lying there on the table.

But many went far beyond simple symbolism of family members. They composed elaborate narratives of their personal communities. These often included their own professional career tracks and individual stories, but it was their feeling for being a part of a whole that dominated their compositions.

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So, community, not loneliness, was the context of our collage workshops. That sense of camaraderie seemed to empower some to overcome their innate discomfort with the challenge of making art. For example, one young pastor entered the workshop initially with a confessed fear of making art. By the end of his sessions, he had created some of the most accomplished works in the room.

Another index of the power of community—or the hunger for it—in the lives of these pastors was visible in the actual forms of their compositions. For their first collage, I urged them to limit themselves to only three items. “But I have an image for each of my four children!” one father said. Very few of the collagists succeeded—even briefly—in the discipline of minimalism. Most stuffed each of their designs with an overabundance of elements. Was this an unconscious attempt to compensate for the loneliness of pastoral work? Or, was it further evidence that community is a dominant paradigm for this population, and perhaps, for all of us? Or both?

We did succeed in tapping the creativity within us. As in any group of thirty people, a few had natural talent and effortlessly went about the business of creating very handsomely designed and well-conceived collages. On the other end of the scale were a very few who had difficulty with the enterprise. But the vast majority of the participants seemed to discover artistic abilities they did not know they had. One pastor was so inspired to paint that—in spite of the absence of paint—he managed to make his own from some blue ink and glue, and proceeded to paint expressive images full of much feeling and vitality.

The way that most of the erstwhile collagists dealt with the interface of form and content was revealing. I had intended to make paramount for them the aesthetic dimension of their collage experience—that is, the form. The content was a given, I thought, since I had asked them to bring items of personal interest to them, and they had complied fully. But no matter how much I encouraged them to see and think formally—how the parts related in pictorial space, how the colors interacted, how the composition was balanced, etc.—they remained focused on the content of their collage elements. Each item was invested with personal meaning relating to a family member or to some aspect of their work or life history, and that clearly took precedence over how it looked visually. To whatever extent they had looked in advance at the web sites and my books in the room about Robert Motherwell’s or Kurt Schwitters’s collages, it did not sway their attention from the personal meaning attached to their objects.

Among the hundreds of bits and pieces of potential collage elements, almost none of it consisted of “found objects” that were valued primarily for their intrinsic aesthetic qualities. This was true in spite of my advance instructions that encouraged them to seek out such items. Clearly, the poetic found object had little appeal to this population; it was the personally meaningful symbol that attracted them. Perhaps this determined focus on content, as opposed to form, is a welcome sign of a healthy personal theology. After all, Jesus did make it very plain that it is one’s heart that matters, not one’s appearance. In the collage workshops, it was immediately obvious that mere visual appearance ranked low in the criteria for collecting material.
There is something very admirable about this devotion to content. It does raise, however, a question related to a key ingredient in the exercise of creativity. It is an aspect not widely known by non-artists, yet it is central to the artistic enterprise. It is the removal of the ego. Modern artists especially have championed this approach to creativity. In it, the artist tries to get her ego out of the way in order to tap into some deeper and more universal resource. Call it the Collective Unconscious, or call it the World Soul, but by whatever name, it is the same vein of gold, a universally available resource that lies beyond the personal. In this approach to creativity, artists are really only doing what shamans did long before there was such a thing as “art.” Thus, in creative endeavors, the setting aside of one’s ego in favor of a higher reality is really a spiritual enterprise.

Were the pastors in this conference feeling their loneliness, and therefore anxious to express their deep connections to their families and their career histories? The answer must be “yes.” Yet, this means only that they may not have been able to free themselves to create ego-less art. This would be a problem only if they intended to become professional artists. In this context, this strong bond to—or hunger for—the personal community simply illustrates that they value one of the resources that empowers a pastor to survive the rigors of the calling.

Could it be that many pastors live in such a spiritual zone that they lose touch with the concreteness of life on planet Earth? Could it be that the loneliness experienced by many pastors at one time or another is the result of this disconnection? We are both spiritual and physical creatures, and if we become too ethereal in nature, we lose our contact with the sensory aspects of being a human being. Could it be that the collage experience illustrates that too much heaven and too little earth makes us feel lonely for our native planet, and for our mammalian needs?

Creative activity is one time-honored way to reconnect with what theologian David Bailey Harned, in *Theology and the Arts* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1966), called “the stubborn but ingratiating whatness of things.” It involves us directly in touching, hearing, tasting, and feeling. It brings us back to earth. It grounds us. And, do we not know by now that what parishioners need from their ministers more than anything is a person who is fully human, like them?

The collage workshop was an exercise in balancing the divine and the human, the spiritual and the sensual, the ethereal and the concrete. The participants’ focus on their families may have illustrated their need to reconnect with the human family in a very personal and down-to-earth way. Their lack of interest in the formal aspects of art may demonstrate how very much they need balance in this regard. And, perhaps, it is this kind of imbalance that generates a sense of loneliness. The heavens are a very lonely place for a human being; it is not the place we were planted. Perhaps proactive, creative endeavors can help keep us tethered, useful, and fulfilled.
When I returned to my alma mater as a guest consultant for the College of Pastoral Leaders, it was first and foremost a trip into my native space. Although I did not grow up in Austin, Austin is my home. My DNA, literally and figuratively, is in that city. Coming home was easy. And Austin always brings the poet out in me. I wanted to be there. I wanted to work with pastors. I wanted to pull the divine creative energy out of people who often are too busy to acknowledge, affirm, or strengthen their own creative parts. I wanted to be sign and symbol that the prophetic and the pastoral arise out of the heart, and out of the art of a person’s life.

The interior reasons for my agreeing to participate are many; but I will just elaborate on two. The topics of creativity and loneliness in the same sentence intrigued me. What do these states of being have in common? As a performance artist (actor/spoken word/poet/storyteller), I know how often the creative moment feels utterly alone, almost banished from all other human contact. I know how the stage or the creating moments can feel alienating. And yet, for the artist, those alienating moments are paradoxically the most connective moments of our lives. When artists least expect it, a moment of “yes!” and “that’s it” comes up when there is no one but us, and yet there is the entire world with us. If we are willing, the creative spirit calls the artist to peer into ultimate concerns and to come out of the gazing with a vision to share. I understand the connections between loneliness and creativity for the artist. I understand the fierceness with which “truth” demands these times. I also understand how excruciating, how dehumanizing these very human experiences can be.

For the preacher, the alienation may be even more acute than for the artist. Artists often have communities in ways that ministers often do not. Assignment to a congregation often means no time for just being with other people. And, when we are with other preachers, we often fall quickly into the trap of “my church is more ________ than
your church,” whether positively or negatively described. We feel the artist’s banishment. We feel the aloneness and often go into “work” mode—write the sermon, plan the visits, make the calls. We ministers often don’t know what to do with times of alienation and aloneness except to work. Sometimes, we come up from these times with creative expressions—our sermons are thick with rich metaphor, our voices are prepared to sing, our touch at the bedside a prayer. Sometimes we arise to the mundane in creative ways, renewed with our reservoirs replenished. Sometimes. But more often, we suck in our breath and pat the feelings of alienation down and drown them with busyness. We treadmill our way to nowhere and feel stuck and suffocated. We tamp down the creative voice because we have no time for it.

But the very things we resist are to what we need to attend. We are challenged to know what it means to be human in this isolation and alienation. We are challenged to be there; not to “do” there. We are challenged to connect to our loneliness. To sit with it as a friend, or enemy. To stare it in the face; to ask it why it has come to visit. To give it a real room and a place to breathe. We are challenged to give voice to our loneliness with creative expression. This charge to sit with alienation and loneliness is hard on preachers. We view such visits as intrusions and distractions. We do not see them as opportunities to bear witness.

Bearing witness takes courage. And what I discovered as a clergy woman is that the church or our relationship to it often saps our courage gene. We succumb to the pressures of conformity. We yield to “busy” as the benchmark of our success. We resist the prophetic role for the pastoral role, as if they are two different things. We give in to the system and are grafted into it like the Cyborgs of Star Trek—“resistance is futile.”

I brought my gifts of the siren—the ability to sing the truth out of people—to the process because I wanted to help my colleagues rediscover their courage gene. I wanted to challenge the notion that if we were not working on our sermons or our plans for the week then we were being frivolous with our time. And, the process that we used, as many, many people told me that week, did exactly that.

The second reason is that when I am called on to lead others into this work of courage and creativity, I am forced to confront my own tendencies to run into “normal,” “acceptable,” or “sensible.” I hear people describe me as “unconventional,” “wild,” “free,” “real.” I say they experience me as brave. But I am just as prone to crawl into the conformity cave as the next person. The artist in me is easily overwhelmed by my sense of “obligation” and commitment to the church. I am just as prone to ignore my own creativity as the next person. I do so to my own detriment. It took me many, many years to understand that my call as minister and my call as artist were the same. I am not bifurcated, or compartmentalized into separate people for separate occasions. It is right that I, the preacher, should come to the College and lead ministers in the artistic process of creative expression.

Using my variation of Natalie Goldberg’s process in Writing Down the Bones, I led us into “first mind,” timed writing to get past our defenses. It was wonderful to watch my colleagues let the pen fly across the page and to watch their faces as their truths came arising from within with an exhale of “it’s about time.” You may know that exhale.
When some creative process releases all the pent up “properness” and allows you, no demands of you, to be free enough to at least dance with the truth you know. Those same demands were made of me in preparation and in the process. I could not lead where I refuse to go. So, I took the gig, as they say, to sing the truth out of myself among my peers. I needed to grapple with my own demons of alienation and isolation; I needed to embrace my alone time, my loneliness as a gift from the Spirit in which I could and would create, give voice to, for all humanity. Embracing the loneliness gives permission to the creativity in us. That creativity is in all of us—because we are made in the image of a creating divine. For preachers, connecting with the creativity helps us discover ourselves—not for the sake of the sermon, or the ministry—but so that we can be fully us. What I know is that when we are us, all of our work reflects it. Connecting creatively is why I keep writing and performing away from the church and the pulpit. I know that all of who I am brought fully to the surface in creativity and in loneliness makes me “useful” for the reign of God. I not only believe what I’ve just said. I know it. Peace.

A Decision Not to

Sometimes, in the midst of bleeding revelation seeps through open wounds and we are reminded that we should not have to die to know we were alive …

And, if we embrace life with all its ambiguities and the people we love to hate and hate to love pain is inevitable, but not a fatal flaw pain can be dismissed with a willing heart to heal and accept what cannot easily be healed, but what with grace and forgiveness will eventually succumb to a decision not to bleed …

© Valerie Bridgeman Davis
When I read about the topic for the first annual meeting of The College of Pastoral Leaders that I would attend, I was relieved and excited. Too many conferences I attend promise to leave me feeling as though I should be working harder and longer. This topic held the prospect of speaking to the parched reaches of my soul.

The conference also offered the delicious prospect of exploring these topics with my wonderful and inspiring group of fellow cohort members—the inimitable “Sisters of Shalom.” Simply being in their presence relieves my loneliness and sparks my own creative embers. In fact, I so enjoy my time with these women that I didn’t give much prior thought to the opportunity to be with all of the members of the College. But their energy, deep thoughtfulness, and creativity proved to be among the best gifts of this conference.

Finally, the conference held the promise of time—four full days away from the pressures of my everyday life as the director of Pastoral Care and CPE Supervisor in a large urban hospital. Time to let my mind both wander and be engaged in new pursuits is often what I find myself craving most.

I was not disappointed. The fellowship was rich, the activities engaging, the discussions enlivened my thinking. I returned feeling refreshed.

But my Baptist, conversion-oriented heritage has taught me to be suspicious of experiences that, disconnected from my daily life, might quickly fade into obscurity as they are overshadowed by the press of my normal commitments. So I have, these six months hence, been interested in what remains for me after the “high” of my time in Austin.

What emerges most for me is the persistent knowledge that solitude is, for me, the most necessary condition for creativity. The time I was so delighted to have been given in Austin, did remind me that when I am feeling my creative impulses fade and my imagination desert me, my soul is telling me that I have become too busy. On the Myers-Briggs, I am an INFJ. I like order, closure. As a first-born, I am terribly responsible. Put those together and I can be consumed by completing all of the tasks, minute and Herculean, that come my way. I do accomplish a lot. But the zest of new thinking, the color that comes with being connected to life’s creative rhythms, can take a back-
Cohort Reflections

seat to the busy-ness of multi-tasking, leaving me depleted and, frankly, bored. So I am paying closer attention to what my times of anomie are telling me. I try to let the filing or the dishes or even the writing of final evaluations go long enough to gain space and time for brainstorming or reading something new that has caught me eye. Sometimes, I opt for brain downtime—time when nothing has to be considered, so that my whole being can simply be in repose. I have been amazed at the creative energy that emerges when I am not trying to accomplish anything.

I have also learned that while days on end feed my soul like nothing else, these times of creative solitude can be found in smaller chunks and are often available in the midst of my day. Like the power naps of old, I find that thirty minutes by the pond in the small garden near my office can refresh me and spark my creative impulses. In a curious way, leaving my administrative duties and making a pastoral call on a patient, because this is no longer the way I get to spend my day, often has the same effect—sparking my excitement and creativity over how to teach better the art of pastoral caregiving to my students.

The collage-making activity was a terrific idea. I have always loved art and color. I didn’t return to Dallas inspired to put together collages, but I was reminded that less is more—in collage making, and often, in creative endeavors. Waiting until the right time, with the right materials at hand, and loads of ideas, might leave me waiting forever. Sometimes, I have to begin with what is on hand—a scrap of time, a whiff of thought, the stray feeling. The story of the loaves and fishes comes to mind—beginning with what I have and trusting that the God who continually creates will partner with me, refreshing my world, soaking my ground, reminding me of what really matters.
Your Most Precious Possession

“My enemy was using my tender heart against me...”

For Frank

As tempting as it is,
you may not shut down, shut off
shout down the compassion
that is native to your heart

no matter what has happened
you cannot quit, walk away
plug the leak in your eyes,
tears that belong to you

your tender heart is your
most precious possession,
the one treasure your enemy
longs to steal, to turn
against you and make
you wish you could not
breathe, the pain in your
chest so consequential

you could die
your bruises so particular
they take a pattern’s shape
as your enemies laugh
believing they have
crushed you to the core

but you are not dead,
not dying, and your faith,
your tender heart
still beats the lover’s
song, you who love
those so damaged
they cannot love
in return

as tempting as it is,
you must not lay down,
stop, stand in this treacherous spot,
give ear to their threats
for you are chosen to
wear with princely port
your tender heart

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listening to the radio on my way into Houston the other day, I had the dial set on the station that plays “all the hits from the 60s, 70s, and 80s.” It is nice to reflect on those things that were, and if I had my way, would be again. Of course, not all songs bring back cherished memories. On this particular day, the deejay got into my head playing the 1966 Beatles’ song “Eleanor Rigby”:

Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been; lives in a dream; Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door. Who is it for?

All the lonely people, Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, Where do they all belong?

Father McKenzie writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear; No one comes near; Look at him working, darning his socks in the night when there’s nobody there. What does he care?

All the lonely people, Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, Where do they all belong?

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name; Nobody came. Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave. No one was saved.

All the lonely people, Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, Where do they all belong?

I have been in the ministry for over thirty years, and have experienced the highs and the lows which come with any career path. And there have been times when I thought, like Father MacKenzie, that I was just going through the motions. Where are the changed lives? Where are the ones who want to give their life in the service to their Lord? Where are the ones who have some grasp of the atonement? I am reminded of that rumination: if a tree falls in a forest, and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? As a Minister of Word and Sacrament, and the Word falls in the midst of my congregation, and if no one hears it, have I fulfilled my calling? Sometimes the pulpit and the parish can be “lonely places.”

There was a lonely servant of the Lord called Elijah who had similar feelings.

The Reverend Jerry Hurst, pastor of Southminster Presbyterian Church in Missouri City, Texas, is a member of SPECTRUM cohort group.
There he was running away from Jezebel, but even more significantly, running away from God. When God asks Elijah why he was out here in the wilderness, Elijah replied. “[T]he Israelites have forsaken your covenant; they have ruined your altars, and they have slain the prophets with the sword, and I alone am left, and even now they seek to take my life away” (I Kings 19:10). In other words, I sought to do your will, but I do not see anyone listening; and if not, why keep on trying? Some scholars have looked at this episode in the life of the prophet Elijah and noted the markers for clinical depression, which is another form of loneliness. This burned-out prophet can see only the darkest side of his situation as he voices his ego-centered complaint to God. His despair, even after a great victory, his talk of suicide; the deep sleep from which he had to be aroused and made to eat and drink, avoiding responsibility, all reflect Elijah’s depression.

So often the loneliness which grips us comes when we feel that our lives have become disconnected from any sense of call or purpose. Like Elijah, we feel, “what’s the use? Who cares about what I do? Is it making any difference to anyone?” Depressed persons usually cannot be reasoned out of their gloom. Given a sense of purpose, a goal, often helps get a lonely person off the dime. Despite how Elijah might feel about himself, God has a different feeling about this prophet whom he has called into his service. God’s therapy for prophetic burnout, or read it as clergy burnout, includes both the assignment of new tasks and the certain promise of a future that does not depend on the success or failure of any one individual. In the light of such a reassurance, life in relationship with this God is worth putting some effort into. Remember: what drew Elijah out of his cave was not the dramatic demonstrations of God’s power; rather it was “the quiet whisper” which pulled him to the position where God could overshadow his loneliness, redirect his energies, and send him back to where he was most needed.

The late Henri Nouwen, in his book Reaching Out, makes this observation:

Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude. To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. This requires not only courage but also a strong faith. As hard as it is to believe that the dry desolate desert can yield endless varieties of flowers, it is equally hard to imagine that our loneliness is hiding unknown beauty. The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching craving to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.

Ah, all the lonely people: the Eleanor Rigbys in the pews; the Father MacKenzies in the pulpits. If you find that you are indeed living with loneliness, you might want to listen for that quiet whisper of God which can pull you into a position of listening for ways to transform those feelings into a fresh perspective on yourself, on your ministry, and on the God who has called you into his service.
Child development gurus are encouraging parents and teachers to provide time for (and even teach) children to engage in pretend play. From make-believing that a coffee can is a drum to playing “cowboys and Indians”—learning to imagine opens up the world to young children. It is through pretend play that children learn to think abstractly and be creative adults.

Last spring, in our College of Pastoral Leaders conference, we were asked to bring little bits of “this and that” to make a collage. I really, really wanted to produce something magnificent. My mother is an accomplished artist … and, well, the pressure was on to be creative! Unfortunately my self-consciousness prevented me from enjoying myself. So, collage didn’t come easily. I had forgotten that, when I was a child, I painted, drew, and wrote crazy short stories purely for the fun of it.

In the process of play, images and ideas come to us so very naturally. When we are at play we become open to inspiration. Webster’s various definitions of the word inspire include “to inhale” “to breathe upon or into” and “to infuse an animating, quickening … influence.”

The Spirit-Breath-Wind not only gives us life but also provides the oxygen for our imaginations. The words of the prophets remind us that God happens in inspiring events:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. (Joel 2:28-30)

We all have the capacity for clarity of vision and vivid imagination. When we don’t allow a place for creativity in our lives we become impoverished: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Yes, there are those “desert times” and “dark nights” of the soul. However, the last thing we need is to experience a sense of dullness and be “blocked” for no good reason. I think our friends, families, and the congregations we serve would enthusiastically agree—especially if they’ve ever watched The Shining!

In our summer retreat, the Abiding Presence experimented with a creative technique called Interplay. We were given the opportunity to imagine and pretend in a safe

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The Reverend Beth Waldon-Fisher, pastor of Nabb Presbyterian Church in Nabb, Indiana, is a member of the Abiding Presence cohort group.
and fun-filled atmosphere. We experimented with hilarious ways to communicate via extemporaneous speech and movement. Then, we moved into longer “play periods” that included prayer through movement. As individuals and, finally, as a group, we interpreted scripture through dance and storytelling.

In Interplay our cohort group was gifted with the necessary time and space to explore and create. In this process we rediscovered our wells of living water. Beautiful (and terrible) images, movement, and thought gradually surfaced. Our flesh was re-hydrated with hope and newness. Inspiration tossed us “back into the dancing blaze of life”!
I think that Emerson was wrong. It is not that men lead lives of “quiet desperation;” it is that men have no awareness of what loneliness is. I have this anecdotal theory, which means it seems true to me, that men tend to discover loneliness only when they lose an intimate relationship. Most men have so few intimate relationships they have few occasions to stumble into the reality of their own loneliness.

As a man, long before I was an ordained minister, I happily marched through most of my life with relative ease and comfort. There were the routine pains and crises of life: developing acne as a teenager, leaving home for college, and feeling the heartbreak of relationships that ended. However, I was a twenty-two-year-old seminarian before I had my first real encounter with loneliness. At the beginning of the Fall term, I received the news from home that my father was terminally ill. I dropped out of school, flew home, and spent two months with my father as he was dying in the hospital. His death and my grief were overwhelming. Ms. Kubler-Ross’ stages of grief was descriptive of the journey after my father’s death. However, loneliness persisted as the unnamed but powerful reality of my life. My father’s death confronted me with the existential reality of my loneliness. There were also other relational casualties of his death. My relationship with my mother became emotionally distanced and a long-term relationship with a girlfriend ended. And yet, I thought of my pain as primarily grief not loneliness. I had no idea of how lonely the world would be without my father.

Fast forward nine years. As a thirty-two-year-old, my life was more settled—a marriage, an MDiv, a pastoral office, a mortgage, and two children. In order to maintain my sanity as a youth minister, I enrolled in a DMin program. One day in a seminar titled “Pastoral Care and Human Sexuality,” the professor was giving a lecture on friendship and intimacy as described in the so-called “men’s literature.” She ran through a checklist for men to evaluate whether they had any intimate male friendships. It started off harmlessly enough. She said, “An intimate friendship is someone who lives less than fifty miles from your home.” Hmmmm … well, that knocks out my college roommates (one in Maine, the other in Missouri). “An intimate friend is someone that you talk with on a weekly basis.” Okay, well, that leaves: 1) James, a friend from school; 2) Bill, the guy across the street (I don’t really like him, but we run and bike together), and 3) Steve, who is the dad of my four-year-old daughter’s best friend. “The last criteria of
an intimate friend is someone you call on a regular basis simply to talk with them. You don’t have a specific question or an agenda, but you simply want to talk with them. For you men, what I mean is that you call someone without a good reason.” I had a strange convergence of emotions: shock, fear, and then desperation (okay, maybe Emerson is right). My immediate response was to march back to my office and call a seminary classmate of mine. Not someone I knew well, but the first man who came to mind who projected a sense of knowing his emotional self. I called Mark and over the phone I heard my voice, “Mark, I wonder if you are free for lunch next week … because I don’t think I have any friends?”

I think my instincts have always been stronger than my self-awareness. Out of that lunch meeting would come the vision to put together a weekly gathering of men. A year and a half later I received a call to a congregation in a faraway state. On the farewell Tuesday morning, I painfully said goodbye. This time I recognized that this feeling was more than grief; it was also the emotional knowledge that I would be lonely again. Within a year of arriving at my new parish, neighborhood, and community; I put together a new men’s group. Perhaps, this was a providential thing. A year and half later my wife abruptly filed for divorce. Six months later in a total state of shock and denial, I loaded up a U-Haul and moved into a crummy apartment. There were only two things in my life that did not collapse during my separation and divorce. One, thankfully I serve in a denomination that does not fire its clergy when divorce occurs. Two, I had a weekly men’s group to share my new and profound loneliness.

Over the next two years I had a place to talk about the loneliness of what was lost: the relationship and identity of being a married person and sharing life on a daily basis; the wrenching loneliness of missing my children and the coming to terms with the loss of half of their childhood, and the surprising loss of a new home and casual acquaintances with neighbors. The loneliness of divorce was something I had observed as a pastor from a considerable distance, but distance learning is not all that it is cracked up to be. Loneliness is screaming in your living room when no one can hear you. Loneliness is crying in the dark when no one can see you. Loneliness is aching for any kind of relationship, and a whole day goes by when no one touches you.

Loneliness in life and loneliness in ministry has impacted my hermeneutical perspective and homiletical content. As I read the Gospels these days, I am drawn to the texts of Jesus healing people and communities. What I appreciate about Christ is that he is the One who reminds us to see, to hear, and to touch. Jesus reveals the God to whom no one is invisible, no one’s story is trivial, and no one is beyond God’s intimate embrace.
I found myself looking forward to the workshop on creativity and loneliness. I long to be creative at something every day. On my more desperate days, I sign up for any class that smacks of craftiness! But it takes more than attending a class to cultivate true creativity. The workshop helped remind me that creativity takes focus and reflection.

The daily grind of ministry—with its joys and sorrows—wears on me as I work in a healthcare institution, where complicated processes, sometimes excruciatingly slow and tedious, can stifle my freedom to create. The collage experience reminded me that so much of ministry is taking bits of life and experience and, when most satisfying, assisting to create a “masterpiece” of meaning in the midst of crisis.

One part of the collage exercise I enjoyed was bringing together those bits and pieces that we collected and came upon during our time in Austin. I found a couple of things on the street that I thought would be splendid in my collage. Then, as I tried to incorporate them into my work, I felt disappointed, because my collage was not going to be one of the striking, powerful artworks I admired. Still, I stayed with it, and I soon saw that portions of my “shadow” that didn’t quite seem to fit at first provided depth and meaning in the overall work. Likewise, I was struck by a recurring theme in the time we spent together during the annual meeting: how art, conversation, discussion, learning, and healing may indeed come from the well of loneliness, a shadowy part of our humanity that is often ostracized, not unlike the lepers of old.

Perhaps some of the loneliest, most fearful times in my life have been those in the past five years—years in which I have also known the most happiness. I was not prepared for the loneliness I felt when I became director of pastoral care at a large metropolitan hospital. As an institutional director of pastoral care, I attend to many others—patients, families, administrators, and community leaders—and am often not attended to myself, unless I arrange it intentionally. Thus, my paradox: the joy of being a minister is profoundly joyful and lonely.

As a member of a cohort group, I have found a circle of women who share an understanding of this paradox. We understand the complexity of forging on in what seems to be a “solo” act at times, while, concurrently, working closely with each other

The Reverend Karrie Oertli, director of pastoral care and administrative director of the Hames L. Hall Center for Mind, Body, Spirit at Integris Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City, is a member of the Circle of Shalom cohort group.
to create true community. I’ve been amazed to know how much we are alike and how helpful our community has been and is, as we return to our areas of solitude. When I’m back at my job, I’ve been emboldened to be creative in my work at the hospital, hearing my Sisters, urge me on with their shouts of “Courage! Strength! Community! Hope!” With this hymn in my ears, I find new energy for the art of pastoral care.

When the members of the College gathered to share our art as a benediction, I was astonished: the room was filled with brilliant color and profound meaning from the well of loneliness! My ideas about loneliness transformed in that moment. I felt drawn anew to Jesus’ experiences of being misunderstood and isolated in the midst of his community. When he gave up the struggle to get “them” to understand and drew away to companion his loneliness, he found solitude, and returned again to these folks—and to us—with energy for creativity and miracles.

I pray for that revolutionizing energy for myself, for my constant Circle of Shalom sisters, for all of us as we minister with loneliness and solitude and creativity. May our living be burnished with radiant, dazzling color from the sparkling deep.
We all may experience loneliness at one time or another. We can even experience loneliness in the midst of company. Loneliness is a feeling that transcends the experience of being alone, since we may choose to be alone in order to find solace or to re-energize ourselves. But loneliness is not a choice. It is an emotional experience. For me, loneliness is feeling alienated, misunderstood, abandoned, and rejected. This can happen to anyone and often happens to women and men in pastoral ministry. We may try to deny it or suppress it, but it is healthier to acknowledge it, name it, and deal with it.

At one point in my ministry I was elected vice-president of the North American Ministerial Council and then became first vice president of the International Ministerial Congress as well, an executive board position of the General Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day). In the midst of these ministerial promotions, words to a familiar song caught my attention: “look at all the lonely people.” I knew that these words echoed my hidden feelings despite my outer appearance of well-being. Much of the time I was with many people, and yet I felt lonely. My busy work with ministry made me blind and deaf to my personal and emotional needs. I was giving without receiving. I knew it was politically expedient not to open my soul and thus I portrayed myself as a strong and happy person. In reality, I was lonely inside. Eventually my busyness affected my marriage which ended in divorce.

Divorce led me to further rejections. Due to my divorce I could no longer continue to serve as director of a Bible college in Denver, Colorado. I tried to find a pastorate but I experienced more rejections. I was alienated from others, myself, and at times from God. I remembered reading how the Prophet Elijah wished he were dead. I, too, wished I were dead. I withdrew to a mountain retreat in Colorado in search of God’s presence in my life. In Elijah’s story I found hope and courage to become a new person. My old self had died, but as a Christian I claimed my belief in newness of life in the resurrection in the here and now.

Being at the very top of a ministerial job did not mean that I was invulnerable to loneliness and sadness. I suspect that other leaders in the Bible experienced loneliness at the top. I wonder about Moses when he was overwhelmed with so many people mak-

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The Reverend Daniel Davila, chaplain at Austin State Hospital, is a member of the Austin Latin Ministerial Alliance cohort group.
ing demands on him. Did he have someone with whom he could be open and feel safe? We can go to God, but we need to sense God’s presence through other human beings. I experienced God’s love and presence through people who never abandoned me, accepted me, loved me, and cared for me.

Members of my cohort group, Austin Latin Ministerial Alliance (ALMA), all acknowledge that at some time in their lives they have also experienced loneliness. Feelings of loneliness surged when they experienced insecurity in their ministerial work, or when they could not be transparent about issues and emotions with their congregations, local boards, or denominational leaders. Some felt lonely when they sensed their work or ideas were invalidated.

Loneliness is a reminder that we are human, and no human, not even the Son of God, is exempt from this feeling. The challenge and invitation is, What will we do with it? We can acknowledge it, recognize it, give it a name, and process and pray about it with people with whom we can be transparent and feel safe.

I thank God for ALMA. Out of our diverse backgrounds we have found a cohesiveness where we accept, respect, and support each other. We have made strides to learn more about ourselves and each other. In one another’s presence we have found a place where we can safely share our loneliness and find understanding, support, and encouragement.
After much reflection, I would like to challenge the idea that was put forward at the College of Pastoral Leaders Conference. Dr. Rod Hunter, in talking about loneliness in ministry, proposed that loneliness is part of God. Our loneliness, he said, is rooted in God’s loneliness, which is a relational hunger. God hungers to be in relationship with us, and that hunger is loneliness in God, existing within God but not consuming God.

This idea has a seductive appeal to us as pastors. If God is, at heart, lonely and hungry for relationship, then we are able to more easily justify the loneliness that we experience. If it’s okay for God, it’s okay for us, too.

I think it’s possible that our comfort with God’s loneliness comes from our comfort, or at least our familiarity, with the traditional language and imagery of the Trinity. When we talk of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and image that relationship as a triangle, then we begin to slip into the trap of thinking of God in a hierarchical way.

In our world, fathers have authority over sons, and the point on the triangle naturally points up. Even when we stress in our language and in our theology that there is no hierarchy within the Trinity, the words “Father and Son” and the image of God the Father at the uppermost point of the triangle reinforce a practice of hierarchy in our faith and communities.

I came across this passage in Shirley Guthrie’s revised edition of *Christian Doctrine* in his conversation about the Trinity:

> God the Father, the “main” God, is an isolated individual who exists in solitary loneliness “at the top of the heap,” first above the Son and the Spirit, then above everything and everyone else in all creation … If God is the supreme Individual whose selfhood is maintained and defended by “his” lonely self-sufficiency above everyone and everything that limits “him” in any way, then that is what it means to be a human being in the image of God. (p. 90)

This sounds a lot like the conversation about God’s loneliness and how that is reflected in our own lives.

I would like to propose a different understanding of relational hunger and loneliness.
ness. God exists within relationship, a relationship that is eternal and that defines love. God is not static within this relationship, as the lines of the triangle suggest, but instead moving, flowing, and, to use the words of John of Damascus, dancing.

How can we speak of God as lonely, or of loneliness as being an essential quality of God, when we use an image of the Trinity in an eternal round dance? Now relational hunger is not a need to reach out to someone for completion, but a desire to invite others into the dance.

This image of God in relationship then challenges the ways we, as pastors, enter into relationship and leadership. If God is eternally dancing, trading places and steps so that no one Partner is always leading, then we as humans should learn to dance in the same way. Now, instead of one person who has to lead and be over others in a continual position of authority, we are able to move back and forth, letting the person with the best skills, most knowledge, richest gifts, lead the dance as is appropriate. This removes the terrible burden of being “at the top of the heap” from the pastor’s calling.

A dancing Triune God gives us new images for leadership styles, for relationships, for worship, for prayer, for every aspect of the Christian life and faith. There are dances that are very technical and require very precise footwork, just as there is work within the church that demands attention to details and meticulous planning. There are dances that spark with joy and energy, just as there are church seasons and moments in ministry that explode with life and possibility. There are dances that are slow and solemn, moving gently through the performance space, just as there is the sacred work of witnessing death and illness. If we begin to see ourselves as dance partners, instead of as parents to wayward children, or spiritual authorities for those less-knowing, or authoritarian figures who have to lead the way, ministry can become a sharing together in the dance of life, the dance of faith, and the dance of the divine.

I am not personally a dancer, although I’ve been known to skip around a room when a song I enjoy is playing. I would never claim to be exceptionally graceful or flexible; I dropped out of tap classes when I was four and only managed a year of ballet. But not being able to physically leap about in a starched pink tutu or severe black tights does not prevent me from being a dance partner for others, or from being invited into the eternal dance of God. If I have truly been created in the image of this dancing, glorious God, then I must have some capacity for joining in.

And when we accept God’s invitation to join in the dance, we find that our presence within the dance changes the movement and creates new patterns. We truly are “called as partners in Christ’s service,” as the hymn title proclaims, and our partnership within this dance expands the possibilities of what we can create. God “sets the stage” and we can sense the rhythm of the Spirit as we join hand in hand with Christ to do, not the work of ministry, but the dance of ministry.

This is the image of God I would like to proclaim, in my speaking and my living, as an alternative to the lonely God on “top of the heap” who validates my solitude and teaches me to live with relational hunger. I would much prefer to step into the dance of God and waltz, sashay, leap, skip, pirouette, stumble, stride, and jig my way through this calling and this life, arm in arm with partners from all over the world.
Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “he saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, and saying, “if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”


The Fullness of Silence

Janet Maykus

I was raised in a small cotton farming town southeast of Dallas. It’s a place that no longer exists. It once was long distance to the big city, it is older than Dallas, everyone knew everyone. If your mother didn’t know what you were doing, someone else’s mother did and she had the same rights to you as your own mom!

In the fall we had football. In the winter we had basketball. In the spring we had baseball and tennis. And in the summer we had revivals! We were not what you might call a “cultured” crowd.

Until I was in middle school, I never knew anyone who did not belong to a church. Without church, we would have been without a social life. As kids, especially adolescents, we regularly visited each other’s churches. Especially during the summer, during

The Reverend Janet Maykus, principal of the College of Pastoral Leaders, delivered this homily in worship during the annual conference in February 2005.
revival season, going to church was an acceptable way to get out of the house every night of the week!

In the world of revivals, there is a hierarchy. The Presbyterians and the Episcopalians never had revivals. The Episcopal church was too small. The Presbyterians just didn’t seem too interested in the concept. The Methodists’s had a folksy friendly feel and usually only lasted two nights. The Christian Church, mine, would last all week like the Baptists, but it was not ever scary. The Church of Christ revival lasted all week, but left those of us not in the Church of Christ wondering why our Church of Christ friends always cried for our salvation. Hands down, without any doubt, the Baptists had us all beat when it came to revivals.

They brought in the best speakers from exotic places like Atlanta or Houston. Their evangelists were people who tirelessly traveled the road spreading the good news to all who would listen.

But in the bevy of Baptist churches in my small town, there was one that rose above all the others when it came to revivals. This Baptist church hosted a revival every summer from my 8th grade year until the summer of my junior year that never failed to shock, awe, inspire, and leave me spellbound.

The “revivalist,” as we called him, who came to Lancaster each summer, was a one-trick pony with an act we couldn’t bear to miss.

At my church, scripture was read and a sermon was preached from that text. They didn’t do that at the revival. This man started speaking and praying and quoting scripture. Then he invited us to open our Bibles and read along. We all had our Bibles. We even had pens so we could underline certain passages and write important notes in the margins or in the back.

And as he spoke, he got louder and hotter. He’d always have to take off his suit jacket and tie. Eventually, he’d arrive at the crucifixion. And this is where we knew things would get awful and wonderful. The exhilaration was like that at the beginning of a terrible roller coaster or when you’re just about to step off a wall when rappelling.

He would open his Bible and invite us to read this passage in Luke. He told us to pinch our palms as hard as we could and imagine the nails going into Jesus’ hand. Then, the piece de resistance … he’d reach in under the pulpit and pull out a hammer and drop it on the pulpit. We’d gasp. (Now, remember, we did this every summer.)

He’d lower his voice, slow his cadence, fix us in his gaze, and begin the litany of sins. “Every time you lie,” he’d say, BAM the hammer came down, “every time you cheat,” BAM, “every time you commit adultery,” BAM “every time you fornicate” (he’d look at all the teens on the front two rows) BAM you drive the nails into Jesus’ hands.” “You make him suffer; you re-crucify Jesus for your selfish, godless, devil-inspired ways!” (Certain theological precepts of the denomination were obviously put aside for dramatic license.)

By the time he finished his litany he had everyone in tears (which the teenage girls liked because that meant the teenage boys would comfort us). Then he talked about the criminals. He pointed out the bad criminal and how horrible he was to taunt Jesus as Jesus hung there in so much pain. He praised the good criminal and showed how Jesus could offer salvation at any point in our lives if we only turn to him and accept him.
He then painted the picture of hell in which the revivalist knew, to that very day, the bad criminal was living. It was a picture downright pornographic in its cruelty.

Then the final question: “Who, who did we want to line up behind? The good criminal or the bad criminal?” By the end of those revivals we were all lined up behind the good criminal. Why we promised to be the best criminals we could possibly be. We wanted to avoid hell at all costs.

The depictions of the crucifixion are busy scenes in all the Gospels. There are people who taunt, government officials, loved ones, guards, wine, vinegar. It is a scene that is not hard to visualize. A chaotic mishmash of humanity, suffering, excitement, and horror.

It’s hard to know who wrote Luke. The gospel may be a collection of stories that were gathered and pieced together to create the book. The people telling these stories and editing this book were not schooled in history as we think of it, nor were they “scientific” as we think of science, but I venture to say they were artistic. Some even say that the ability to create, our artistic sides, may be the image of God within us.

In the design and visual art world there is a concept of negative space. Negative space is not something bad or something lacking. Negative space is space that is left empty. It is not waiting to be filled. It is complete in its emptiness and needs to be left alone. It is that which gives definition to the positive space. Positive and negative space not only co-exist, they must be integrated into the whole. If you took a black and white painting, but had no negative space, you would have just a black canvas.

In the world of music, a rest is just as important as a note. There must be room for silence to fill the ear when the vibrations of sound stop.

In retrospect, I’m pretty harsh on our favorite revivalist. His greatest downfall was not his theatrics. His greatest downfall was the same of all of us; he missed the art of Luke. He filled in the negative space.

In our wacky, dualistic world view we bought the concept of the “good criminal” and the “bad criminal” hook, line, and sinker. They were both criminals. Scholars tell us they were probably seditionists, just as Jesus was considered. They had behaved or spoke in ways that were threats to the status quo. They asked questions like, Why are we in a war to capture weapons of mass destruction when there aren’t any? or Where did all that money for children’s health care go? or Does the Holy Spirit just quit working if my pastor is a lesbian?

There they were the three, brutalized and dying. Jesus asks for forgiveness because the rabble doesn’t understand their actions and assures the one criminal that paradise is his today. That’s it. Nothing more. No condemnations of the other criminal. No descriptions of paradise no description of hell. Nothing. The art stands alone.

The archetype is complete. Are we not both criminals? Do we not ask seditionist questions: If you care so much about peace, God, then why do we care so much about power? If we are to love our neighbors, then why did you make them look so different from us?

In our society that is whipped into an entertainment frenzy, we seem to think that art should be pretty and pleasant. It often is not.

Luke’s description of the crucifixion is not simple and is not necessarily comfort-
ing. But it is a reflection of who we are.

I giggle when I think of all of us lining up behind the good criminal, as we unknowingly judged ourselves, condemned ourselves, desecrated the text, and ultimately left the Christ out of the picture.
Soul Source

“The soul is its own source of unfolding.” —Thomas Moore

You are looking for an answer,
she said, knowing I was looking
to her for an answer,
but she smiled that gentle
knowing that tells the student
the teacher will not bite

dthis is your test, she said
yours to discover
yours to unrobe, and know
it is your body to feel
your mind to ponder
your heart to dream
and you may not
pass the task along

that would be easy,
she said, knowing I was searching
for the easy way out,
but she smiled that gentle
knowing that tells the student
you’re on your own

look inside, she said
in your soul are answers
to questions you’ve never asked
and parts of you are in the open
in the closed regions of your
soul, if you would dare
to wander into the places
that you’ve closed off
labeled “no access”
you will discover
Thomas Moore is right:
“the soul is its own source of unfolding”

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