DEALING WITH LOSS IN MINISTRY[1]

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. I am grateful for the confidence of the search committee. They believe that there is a good possibility that my being here at this school could help strengthen the seminary's mission of training leaders for the church. I am coming to believe that some of my gifts and experiences can be combined with the significant strengths of CTS to enrich the preparation of leaders for the future of the church. The purpose of the next two days is to give us a chance to explore the feasibility of coming together. The purpose of this lecture is to share with you some of my ideas about ministry and the church in such a way that you will not only know what I think, but how I go about teaching what I think.

The position for which I am being considered is the Herald B. Monroe Chair for Practical Parish Ministry. As I understand it, this chair was established to honor the long and faithful ministry of Herald B. Monroe, who spent the last part of his service to the church as Regional Minister of Ohio in the Christian Church (Disciples of

[1]This article was originally a Knothole Lecture given by the author at Christian Theological Seminary in academic year 1999-2000. For more information on the Knothole Lecture Series, see Ronald J. Allen, "Introduction to Issue," *Encounter* 61, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 397.

Christ). This chair is designed to provide a seminary faculty position for a person with a significant number of years in the professional ministry of congregations. It is hoped that the person in this position will bring fresh and relevant insight to the community from the practice of ministry in the congregation.

Now, I come to you from the parish. I have had thirty years of parish ministry in Tennessee, Kentucky, Kansas, and Oklahoma. I have served a small rural church, a large urban church, a large suburban church, and a mid-sized urban congregation. I have worked with farmers, blue-collar workers, professional people, and homemakers. I spent the last fifteen years of my ministry in a city congregation in Nashville, Tennessee, and was a part of helping the congregation develop a major ecumenical pastoral counseling ministry for Tennessee.

I share this to let you know that I believe that preparation for pastoral ministry in our time requires the skills of self-analysis, congregational analysis, community analysis, and situational analysis. The training of leaders for congregation isn't like training managers for McDonalds. Each congregation and each historical context is different. The goal is not to produce managers who can create products which taste the same in Maine or Minnesota; it is to help leaders develop the skills and insights which help them lead a congregation in developing its own unique gifts for ministry to the world.

To help you understand how I think, I have decided to share a case study. This will also give you some idea of how I teach as well. This will be a sketch of a process of reflection. It is a topic that is alive for me and therefore does not presume to be definitive. This case study will look at one person, dealing with one situation in life, and reflect understandings that have been gained from that situation. I believe that ministry is grounded in the integrating of our experience with God in the self, in the community, and in the tradition. It is shared with the hope that this knothole glimpse into how I am handling a situation will help you reflect on your ministry. I do this with full recognition that each of us handles things differently and that this case study can only point in directions for another.

LOSS AND ITS LEGACY IN MINISTRY

Sometimes, it takes a 2 x 4 to get our attention.

In April 1991, my wife, Cindy, went into the hospital for a routine hysterectomy (that sounds like a typically male way of putting such surgery). She had put off the surgery until after our daughter's wedding. Cindy's children were her life and delight.

The Monday after she returned home from the hospital, her gynecologist telephoned informing her that the some of the fibroid tumors were malignant.

This call began a long, losing battle to defeat the cancer that had spread to her spine and to her lungs. Three years of a reasonably productive and full life quickly descended into weeks of unbearable pain, and then she was swallowed in a coma of silence. Finally, death drank deep from her spirit and it was over.

On that day, my life ended and began again. I didn't know just how radical it would be. My job was now to finish our unfinished symphony. For thirty-three years we had written movements together – movements of pensive pleasure, agony of conflict and struggle, deep joy and pain of birthing and parenting, and mundane daily notes of scarcity of money and wealth of creativity. But now it was time for me to write the last movement alone. To do this, I needed to listen to the other movements of our life. I needed to play them back in agonizing detail, to feel them as they were lived and to see how they might be resolved in the last movement.

A strange, but, as I have discovered, not so uncommon thing happened. I didn't have time to listen. Or rather, it was too painful, and so I refused to listen. I kept myself busy. After all, I had a daughter living at home and I had a congregation of 800 people to take care of. I had bouts of anger and screaming. I drove thousands of miles in search of nothing, in hope of peace.

I have a staff and a congregation to nurture. Three months after my wife's death, the organist of sixteen years went out to the garage behind her parents house and found her father with a gunshot wound through the roof of his mouth and out the back of his head.

She had suffered the death of her husband twenty years earlier by suicide.

Eighteen months after Cindy died, my second-born daughter was married and moved out of my home. The same family who had gathered for my wife's funeral gathered to celebrate with us. Two weeks after my daughter left home, I went to Florida to fish. I received a call on the car phone that the custodian of the church who had been with us for six years had taken his lover and her children hostage. I turned the car around and five hours later was at the scene of the stand-off. The children had been released. The place looked like a war zone. I stood silent vigil with friends and family – and at about midnight the police stormed the house. Tony and his lover were found dead – murder/suicide.

The congregation and staff were in shock. Anger and confusion was the order of the day. We pulled ourselves together and took care of youth, children, and adults, all of whom had loved and trusted Tony. How did we miss this coming? Who can we trust? We hosted the service of memorial and shared leadership with his congregation. We gave thanks for his life and prayed mercy on his soul.

On a Saturday night two weeks after Tony's death, I received a call that my dad was dying in Kansas City. An hour later the call came that he was dead. I called my associate – who had been caring for everyone else – and again she stepped up and covered for me. I flew off to be with my family who had gathered to help me grieve my wife's death and to celebrate my daughter's marriage. I put on my best professional demeanor and worked with the funeral home and the church. After all, I knew how to do this.

A couple of months later, my first-born daughter and her two-year-old son left her husband and divorced. She struggled with her life and making it alone.

I returned to my work at my church the week after my dad died. But it had gotten harder to do. I found that hospital visits would literally make me sick to my stomach. I discovered normal conflict and negotiation at the church more than I could deal with. I had little energy to preach – something that I have loved to do throughout my ministry. I began to struggle – what shall I do with

my life? I don't feel like I am doing a good job at the church. They need more leadership than I am offering. I struggled to speak words and doubted the ones I came up with.

Three months later I engaged in conversation with Newell Williams, Dean of CTS. President Dickinson decided that I would be called to be the Herald B. Monroe Visiting Professor. I moved to Indianapolis in June of 1997, after finishing more than twenty-three years of service with my congregation in Nashville.

There is one more piece to this story before I begin reflecting on what I have begun to discover about ministry. When I arrived here, I maintained friendships with those in Nashville and other places. I have siblings on both coasts, and my mother still lives in Kansas City. My children live in Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee. So, with all the heady energy of a new job, and with all the free places to visit, I was on the move. I spent my first year here working in my office and classroom during the week and traveling on weekends.

I dated for the first time in thirty-three years and discovered how inexperienced I was in understanding that process of connecting. I discovered myself drawn to more physical activities. I began camping for the first time in my life, skiing for the first time in my life, training for and participating in a mini-marathon, hiking, and reveling in the outdoors. I discovered a joy in living day to day that came from the experience of freedom for which I longed. I discovered the secret that laity had hidden from me – the delight of a weekend.

But my Nashville friendships began to reconfigure themselves this summer, and on August the first, my congregation in Nashville began a new era with a new senior minister.

Suddenly, I was overwhelmed. I seemed to crash. It was if my world came apart. Somehow the shades were drawn on the dawning of a new day in my life. I experienced an intensity of pain and loneliness that I had never experienced before. I felt a fear that I had not known before. When my wife died, I had been numbed by the natural defenses one has when intense loss occurs. I had been surrounded with memories in the woodwork of my home, children I could still take care of, a congregation who cared deeply for my

family and me and who needed my every waking hour. But now that was all gone. I was confronted not only with my loss, but also the consequences.

Or, as Dante said in *Commedia*, "In the middle of the road of my life I awoke in a dark wood where the true way was wholly lost."

ANALYSIS

Now, anyone looking at this life from the outside can easily tell that it is one of loss and response. In the middle of it, it is hard to assess what is happening. But, standing back and looking at it from the outside, it is one in which a series of losses occur. Those losses were intense and resulted in not only a loss of the object of affection, but in the loss of my self-defining roles. I was no longer a husband, a father of children at home, or a minister of a congregation. I was lost, and didn't know where to find myself.

One can also see that there were responses to this loss that were both healthy and not so healthy. I was surrounded by loving and caring people. I was giving love and sustaining patterns of behavior that had nurtured me for all my life. But there was a good deal of avoidance going. While I wept agonizingly early on, I was not faced with the full impact of my losses. I kept busy and on the run, exploring the newly discovered terrain of single life. Literally and figuratively, I postponed cleaning out the basement, the storage bin of our thirty-one years of marriage.

So it is only recently that I have begun to face the consequences of the losses that I incurred. Someone has said that to lose one's parents is to lose one's past, to lose one's spouse is to lose one's present, and to lose one's children is to lose one's future. While that may be an exaggeration, I can testify to the feelings that accompany such a series of losses.

Learnings about Ministry and Loss

I share this case study to help you understand why I believe that there may be a subtle and under-explored area of living and losing that has a profound impact on the work of ministry. I have done various ministers' workshops all over the country. In many conferences, I discovered tired and exhausted people. I have seen discouragement and despair. There is a lack of vitality and energy.

There has been a great deal of work on clergy burnout and the difficulty of doing a job where there is a lack of clear job-expectations. There has been work on the kind of personalities who try to please the unpleasable parent. There have been studies on the pressures of low pay and low esteem on the psyche of the clergy.

But I am beginning to wonder if our responses to loss may have a significant impact on the loss of vitality and energy in ministry. I have begun to believe that ungrieved losses may very well drag us down.

You see, as humans, I believe that we have within us a lake. Each loss dumps tears of sadness in the pool. Loss after loss, the lake fills. There is some evaporation, which bathes us in the moisture of sadness. For the most part, the lake holds what loss we accumulate. But at times the lake overflows in leaky tears. Sometimes we get tired and weary from trying to hold the sadness in. The dam becomes weak, and when a crisis occurs, the dam breaks. It overflows, and rather than the water running out into the rivers to nourish the land around the lake, it cascades down the mountain and drowns life in its way. Major loss often destroys many of the structures in its path.

As I have tried to discover the cause of my dam break this past summer, I have discovered some things about grief that I believe might contribute to clergy malaise.

First of all, clergy are in the business of loss. We are frequently invited to share with others their loss. We spend a great deal of our time accompanying people in the endings of life: baptisms, weddings, graduations, retirements, and funerals. All of these are endings. All of these celebrations are ones of both hope and expectations, but also of death and loss.

And we are those called in to help build communities that sustain people during those times of wandering when they are between major or minor losses and the new beginnings that have to occur. There is, following every loss, a time of wandering and re-definition. We have to reconstruct our own self-understanding. We have known ourselves relative to the object of our love, and now we don't know who we are. This liminal time is one of great intensity, when people decide what they will leave behind and what they will take with them.

We are then there to help people make new beginnings – which always means that they are in the middle of another loss that they have not yet recognized.

And we clergy know that loss isn't only the loss of meaningful persons. We know that there is also grief when people lose their dreams. Some dreams die of old age – they hang around for a long time but never find fulfillment. "We never will become a minister of a large church." "We never will be as good a preacher as we want to be."

And other dreams die because they are fulfilled. We know that the finishing of a dissertation can be a very painful time. There is certainly relief and joy in getting the degree and being finished, but that dissertation or those dreams to complete your education are no longer there to drive you. Only when one has grieved the losses of fulfilled dreams is one free to dream more.

And we clergy do not simply deal with *personal* losses with people; we deal with *communal* loss. Congregations are bodies who are defined by who are a part of them. But every time someone leaves the church by transfer, death, or anger, or every time someone enters the church by transfer or birth, there is a loss. The community isn't what it used to be. It is different. The community lost what it was and it has to become something new.

Along with accompanying the parishioners through losses, the clergy experiences loss as well. We can't help but become somewhat attached to those people with whom we work if we are with them over years. Even with the professional distance that is required to be effective pastors, the nature of human contact is such to create

connections. When you bury someone on whom you have depended for counsel and advice, there is loss. When you marry a young person you baptized as an infant, there is loss. When the chair of your board takes a job in another city and moves away, you miss her.

How We Respond to Loss

Grief is the natural human response to perceived loss. According to Theresa Rando, in her book, *Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers*, there are three main agendas for the grief process: "Emancipation from Bondage of the Deceased, Readjustment to the Environment in which the Deceased is Missing, and Formation of New Relationships."[2] The process of grieving varies with each person depending on psychological, social, and environmental factors.

But sometimes we clergy do what I think I did. We avoid it by staying active. We stay busy. We have to. We have no choice. The first thing we do when we hear that our worship chair is moving is swear and the second thing we do is begin thinking about who can take his place. The claims of the institutional life drag us into the future. Within the institutional system, the leader is the one who keeps articulating the vision. The leader is the one who helps people move ahead. The leader is the one who leans into tomorrow before today is over.

And we are frequently caregivers by nature, so again we respond as I did. We busy ourselves by taking care of and holding others while they mourn and not allowing anyone to hold us so *we* can mourn. We gain such energy from being strength for others that we don't even notice our own strength seeping away in our loss.

So the pastor is not only responsible for helping the community name and mourn its loss, but is leaning forward past the grave toward the claims of life ahead.

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[2]Theresa A. Rando, *Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1994), pp. 18-19.

I believe that it is this dual responsibility for the life of the community that frequently moves us ahead before we have grieved the end of what has died. Unless we grieve the ending, unless we wander in the wilderness of confusion, it is very difficult to gain energy to move ahead into the future. Therefore, I suspect this contributes to the lethargy of many who have been in the ministry for some time.

Emotional Symptoms

When we don't take the time to process our grief, we can frequently experience some of the same symptoms as those who go through major loss experiences. Some of the emotional symptoms of grief are anger, guilt, depression, despair, and preoccupation with the one who is lost.

Guilt is not an absent component of the life of most ministers. Not simply guilt that is directly related to particular mistakes, but a free-floating guilt, which seems to be more attached to one's sense of being acceptable as a human being. When there is a loss, the mourner is frequently haunted by a sense that there is something she should or could have done to prevent the death. Guilt accompanies such thoughts. Many clergy I know take upon themselves far too much responsibility for the lack of growth or the inability of a congregation to make changes. When we lose our sense of power to make people do what we want them to do, we feel guilty.

And anger then follows. When we lose someone we love, we are angry. Theresa Rando says, "Anger is always to be expected to some degree following a significant loss, as a natural consequence of being deprived of something desired."[3] Unnamed loss, year after year, can sometimes produce angry ministers. And the anger is then sometimes taken out on the congregation. I run into many ministers who have nothing good to say about their congregations. There is no sense of love and devotion. They seem angry that they have to deal

[3]Rando, p. 30.

with such people. Unfortunately, much unacknowledged anger is justified in the guise of being prophetic preaching, when in reality it is nothing but hostility.

Depression and despair are also common reactions to important losses. Again, from Rando:

> Many writers feel that it is precisely an important loss that gives rise to any psychological depression. Whether or not this is true, there are numerous symptoms of depression that also are usual manifestations of grief: withdrawal, anhedonia, apathy, feelings of meaninglessness, decreased energy, decreased sexual desire; regression, dependency, feelings of helplessness; loneliness, sadness, feelings of hopelessness or abandonment; ambivalence, shame; feelings of being out of control, depersonalization; disorganization, lack of concentration; somatic problems.[4]

I have discovered that many clergy have these symptoms. Clergy who start out engaged and excited in congregations sometimes find themselves withdrawn and apathetic. We develop ambivalence and find it difficult to take stands and make decisions. We lose our ability to concentrate, and many clergy I know express a feeling of meaninglessness. Sexual desire is often suppressed, and feelings of sadness and loneliness are expressed by clergy. "It is the loneliest job on the planet," someone once said to me. I wonder if these feelings are related to the inability to grieve the losses we have encountered in our personal and professional lives.

One other emotional symptom that I discovered with a vengeance: fear is a component of grief. When we lose someone meaningful to us, someone who has helped us know who we are, fear discovers us. We may be afraid that we *won't* love again. We may be afraid that we *will* love again. We may be afraid of the pain of future loss. We may be afraid that we don't know who we are if those people who were around us aren't there. Heart palpitating fear is a part of loss and grief.

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[4]Rando, p. 32.

Physical Responses to Loss

Grief has more than just emotional and psychological consequences. There are also many physiological manifestations of grief that become apparent in our lives. Here is Rando's list of the physiological reactions that accompany the emotional reactions to loss:

Anorexia and other gastrointestinal disturbances
Loss of weight
Inability to Sleep
Crying
Tendency to sigh
Lack of strength
Physical exhaustion
Feelings of emptiness and heaviness
Feelings of "something stuck in the throat"
Heart palpitations and other indications of anxiety
Nervousness and tension
Loss of sexual desire or hypersexuality
Lack of energy and psychomotor retardation
Shortness of breath[5]

These are frequently the symptoms exhibited by clergy who have been doing ministry for some time. I have discovered clergy who sigh frequently and who express concern about possible heart problems. There is a physical tiredness that sometimes results in the inability to rest and sleep. For months following the death of my wife, I discovered that I was so physically exhausted that I could not sing. I would stand in the worship service and simply not have the physical breath to sing. (I took comfort in the words of Fred Craddock, who said somewhere, "When you cannot sing, let the congregation sing for you." I had to let the congregation sing for me, and they did.) Some clergy develop gastrointestinal problems. Some

[5]Rando, p. 36.

become obsessive about sexuality. These are all physical symptoms of grief. I wonder if clergy could deal with some of these symptoms if we were better at doing our own grief work.

Spiritual Responses to Loss

Loss also has spiritual consequences. I have discovered that I have worked to create my world on which I could depend. I built a world around certain people and their responses to me. I knew how to do ministry well. I knew how to be a good husband and a good father. Within the covenants and their boundaries, I lived life well. That doesn't mean that I lived life perfectly. There was something incomplete about everything that I had built. None of these worlds was fully formed, but I had learned to live within them and find satisfaction. I knew where the landmines were and was able to keep from blowing my leg off.

I have discovered the truth that we create our worlds with language. I had a language construct that helped me see myself in relation to the created order as well as the creator. I believed in God who worked in human relationships. I felt a sense of stability and security. Fear underlay some of what I did, but it was so subtle and I was so good at running from it that I didn't feel its agonizing, stomach-destroying pain.

But when my world was dismantled, so was my language construct of the world. When the words "father," "husband," and "minister" no longer applied to me, I discovered that the way I saw God and the mythic realm of faith disappeared too.

I discovered a metaphor that was big enough to describe the sound and color of what happened to me. I was driving up the Pacific Coast of North America a couple of summers ago. I drove, camped, explored, and reveled in the powerful beauty of creation. As I moved up the state of Washington, I passed signs for Mt. St. Helens. I didn't have any idea that I wanted to go there, but I had time before I was due in Seattle to visit friends so I turned off the interstate and headed for the mountain.

As I grew closer, I was overcome with the color. The evergreens began to fade into gray sameness. The further I went, the more devastation I saw. The landscape looked like a moonscape. I saw the crippled mountain up ahead. I saw valleys of barren brown. I got out at the visitor center and began to walk around. I read of the event – how the explosion had blown the side of the mountain away – the ash had ascended and drifted over thousands of miles, covering the sun. I read of how the lava and fire washed into the valleys and recreated the landscape. Lakes were filled and new ones formed. I read how all forms of surface life – trees, animals, insects, humans, and houses – all forms of life were vaporized.

As I stood there, I felt at home. I felt that heavy silence on my body. I knew that destruction. The landscape of my soul had been forever changed by the explosion of my life. The explosion of grief grayed the heart and I knew why it was so difficult to preach. Somehow, the words that had served to color the landscape of my life, the words of faith that had effectively described my place in the world as I knew it were no longer adequate.

And I knew why I was discovering parts of myself that I had never acknowledged before. For I read how the only life that survived around the mountain was the life that was underground. And as I walked over the landscape, I saw alongside the burned and stripped stumps the sprouting of little yellow flowers. The animals that had been underground survived. The seeds survived.

The spiritual life is profoundly pounded by the losses we experience. We are driven underground to preverbal, pre-symbolic life. We are driven to the moans and groans, the screams and the physical agony of emptiness. Our hope is that the tomb will become the womb for new life.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO DEAL WITH LOSS?

Remember

I would suggest that as ministers we take our loss seriously. I would encourage you to find ways to allow the pathos to live in you and you to live in the pathos. Don't live so fast that you can't stop to cry and remember. Find ways to let your congregation share remembrances with you. To remember digs canals from the lake of grief out into the whole self so that the tears can nourish our sense of ourselves. Grief can become integrated into the whole process of living rather than simply an explosion of agony and pain. Remembering what has been lost helps keep a perspective on the value of life and living. "Lord, teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom"(Psalm 90).

One idea that I have never tried, but would if I were in the parish again, is to have the board of elders or the appropriate group in the church sit after the death of a member and tell stories to each other. Do this after you have already done your ministry with the family and the church. Then just sit and listen and let their memories minister to you. Let someone else be in charge of holding your hand and take you through the exercise of remembering life.

Another practice I would recommend could be adapted from the practices of our Jewish brothers and sisters. They celebrate the memory of the deceased of the community five times a year. Four times a year on specific holy days (Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, Pesach, and Shavuot) they recite the Yizkor. It is a prayer in which the beloved is remembered in the company of those who have gone before. Once each year, on the anniversary of the beloved's death, the name of the person is remembered in the community Sabbath worship.[6]

Naming your loss corporately is a way of addressing the fear which is a part of grieving. When we lose someone, we lose a sense

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[6]Anne Brener, *Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path through Grief to Healing* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 216.

of cohesiveness in our world. Information swirls in upon us and we feel out of control. Congregations often feel unnamed anxiety related to loss. When we don't recognize and name it, we sometimes will find it coming back to subvert our future relationships.

David Whyte, in his book, *The Heart Aroused*, likens our burying our grief to the burying of nuclear waste with the naive assumption that somehow it we will be able to contain it for hundreds of thousands of years and it will not effect future generations. He says:

> Refusing to admit the more elemental energies of the human psyche because of narrow interpretations of what is professional, we construct, in effect, a kind of internal pressurized reactor, where poisonous leakage is simply a matter of time and human error. Sooner or later the trapped energies will emerge and run our lives in unconscious ways. But we live in a forlorn hope that we can keep it all trapped and contained forever.[7]

With all the events of transition you share, take time to grieve. Don't only celebrate baptisms and marriages – go into the inner part of your soul and grieve what was lost in that change. After funerals and miscarriages, take time to allow your soul to remember and weep. Feel your feelings. Cheryl Bridges Johns, lecturer for Focus on Ministry last week, suggested that sometimes Pentecostal services sound like a birthing room. I have discovered that the sounds of mourning are those same sounds. Let yourself feel and express the pain of loss that wells up when you take time to remember.

After a successful dream is fulfilled, take time to rest and let yourself grieve the loss of the dream. Let a congregation "rest on its laurels" from time to time before they are urged to move ahead. For it is not always easy for a dream to emerge out of the ashes of loss when another dream has just been fulfilled.

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[7]David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 34.

Physical Activity

Take care of your body. Grief is very physical. When it is intense it is agonizing in the gut. Handling grief has to have a physical component. Exercise. Not only because the exercising produces endorphins which will give your spirit a spark, but also because it takes physical energy to handle loss. If you are not in good shape, the sheer physical energy required to grieve will keep you exhausted.

One of the things I hear more than anything else when I am working with ministers is, "I do not have time to take care of myself." You do not have time *not* to take care of yourself if you want to survive. And you are a poor example to a congregation if all you do is work. One of the Protestant neuroses is the obsession with work as a way of justifying ourselves. We are so concerned about changing reality that we can't celebrate the *gift* of reality. The body is a gift from God to be received and celebrated. When we do that, and when we gain strength from its pleasure, then we are able to give it for the sake of others.

Emotional Self Care

Ministers are also emotionally drained by each loss. To be present with others in grief is very exhausting. To sit in silence and simply hold another in the spirit drains the heart of energy. We do this so much that we don't know its cost. As I discovered in the accumulation of major losses in my life, I was emotionally exhausted. We are given the mercy to keep going and we can keep doing our job, but as the ashes of loss descend more and move over your soul, you will not see as clearly and it will take more emotional energy to do what you need to do.

So, get friends. Friends who do not depend on you to be their minister can hold you and accept you for who you are. They are the ones who can let you bitch and complain and fuss and not feel you have somehow violated your ordination vows. Those vows didn't bind you to life without passion and feeling. You have to find a place

where you are free to be who your gut calls you to be and not be judged by those who need to you to live up to their image of what a minister ought to be.

If you are married or have a partner, give that relationship serious and primary attention. Giving ourselves to one with whom we share life not only brings us energy, it can also open us to receiving strength when we need to be held in our pain. Let your partner hold you. Know that you are receiving care as well as giving it.

Part of my grief therapy is to go back and look at old pictures. I found one the other day of my wife and myself. She is leaning on me and my arms are around her shoulders. Her hair is fuzzy, coming back in after some chemotherapy. She has a body brace on to keep her spine from snapping. Her epideral pump is strapped around her waste, continually pumping medicine into her spine to keep the pain under control. But I looked at that picture differently that day. All of a sudden, I saw that I was not only holding her, but she was holding me. She was holding me up. She was sustaining me. She was giving care to me. Caregivers need to be cared for.

And there may be time for your emotional life in which you need to receive professional counseling. I have discovered it as a resource at different points in my life. It is a space and a time in which the emotions might be opened up and looked at without fear of judgment or damage. Our emotions are powerful forces in our lives, and even those of us who feel like we are fairly self-aware deceive ourselves. Counselors can help us discover truth about ourselves, and when we can see that, our activities can reflect more integrity.

Spiritual Life

Nurture your spiritual life. I would recommend that you find a way to worship. We don't worship when we lead worship. We do get strength and insight, but worship is the liturgy in which we are held by divine tradition. Worship is where we not only speak words of peace *to* others, but we receive words of forgiveness and mercy

from others. Worship at an evening service if you do not have one. Go to a service on Saturday night if you do not have one. I have discovered since I have been at CTS that I have been held and nurtured in worship in ways that I had seldom known.

Develop centering prayer. Develop a personal devotional life that has significant periods of silence where you can listen for a presence that is deeper than words or images can comprehend. I discovered during the months after my wife slipped into that eternal silence that I could not find words or sounds or images that could express my needs or divine presence. But, in a strange way, silence connected me to something that was beyond me, something that nourished my emptiness, ever so slightly.

And draw upon the sacramental community – the community that is defined by baptism and the Lord's Supper. In baptism, we are stripped naked and buried in death – buried in a death with Jesus that we might live in hope of a new life and resurrection. We are crucified on a cross and feel the agony of empty abandonment with the hope that God is in that emptiness.

And join the sacramental community at the table of the Lord – where the life we have been given is brought broken and given back to God, with hope that we will be made whole. Let the remembrance of Jesus attach you in solidarity to your own broken heart and the broken lives of all who suffer. In your love for Jesus and for those who have died, allow that broken life to be held in the hand of God that you might know some new strength. Allow the blood of love and sacrifice poured out to commingle with the blood of Jesus and in so doing become nourishment for new life.

Allow the sacramental community who knows brokenness and suffering to accompany you into the world that cries for healing. Those who know darkness within, who know loss and who remember and grieve – those who know the cross become one with creation: one with the true agony of peasants in Honduras, one with the woman in the shelter for the abused, one with the lover watching his partner waste away with AIDS, one with the aching loneliness of the widow, one with the whole creation.

And when we become a part of that community, we cannot do anything but stand with them with the best that we are and have. We can't help but develop ministry as the art of caring and justice making. When we humble ourselves and become one with all other creatures, we are able to give ourselves to them in service and receive from them the gifts of grace that God has to offer us through them. We can hold and be held, love and be loved, grieve and help grieve. And in so doing, discover new life.