

# *WHENCE WE COME AND HOW, AND WHITHER*

an essay delivered by The Reverend Doctor Deborah J. Pope-Lance  
at the 191st Annual Ministerial Conference at Berry Street  
Charlotte, North Carolina, Wednesday, June 22, 2011

Thank you, Elinor [Artman], for your introduction and, dear colleagues, for the honor of offering this year's Berry Street essay. I stand here in your bright light no less than under these dazzling video spots.

You know the words to the hymn from which I draw this essay's title, *Whence We Come And How, And Whither*.

Rank by rank again we stand, [singing, joined by all]  
from the four winds gathered hither.  
Loud the hallowed walls demand  
whence we come and how, and whither.<sup>1</sup>

This hymn we know by heart summons the best in us for ministry. Not a few of us, licking the wounds of a church year past, are healed by its chords; not a few by its cadences called again to ministry. This hymn's warring metaphor was employed first in a 19th century English boy's school to rally the young masters to the rigors of the academic term as if to battle. We change the words to suit gentler purposes. Yet this church year ends and not a few know the metaphor is not too far off the mark.

Ours is a changed and challenging profession.

*Rank by Rank* was not sung at the first General Assembly I attended. Back then, I didn't know who William Ellery Channing was or why I should care. The 1969 GA gathered entirely in a single hotel in Boston's Back Bay, a short walk to 25 Beacon and Channing's statue at Arlington Street.

How many of you were there? [Less than twenty of the more than six hundred gathered for 2011 Conference at Berry Street rose to be counted.] We are not in Back Bay anymore.

The 1969 GA was historic: The first contested presidential election of the young UUA saw seven colleague candidates vie for Greeley's tall office. That year, too, our early work for racial justice continued as the BAWA and BUUC controversies, begun the year before, intensified. Opposition to the Vietnam War

had grown. The assembly adjourned to the steps of Arlington Street Church to demonstrate. I climbed onto the shoulders of Channing's statue to see boys, not a year older than I, burn their draft cards.

In the business of the assembly, I and other teenaged children of the church fully participated. Or so I thought. We slept in hotel hallways like puppies in a pile, ready to do whatever was asked of us, thinking ourselves part of a great movement that one day, yet, would surely change the world.

One evening, late, my home church minister was paged. I knew he'd gone home. So I answered the page. But another minister with the same name was sought. I now had to re-page him, a task accomplished back then by speaking into a lobby phone that broadcast one's voice throughout the lobby. On a lobby couch, sitting together, drinks in hand, were three ministers, among them a man with whom I had spoken earlier in the day about my first faint call to ministry. The three asked if I might be willing to page someone for them. "Yes, of course, I would."

And so I found myself, innocent and hopeful, a child really, but called to some small service for our movement, standing, phone in hand, in a lobby full of Unitarian Universalist---these were my people---and announcing in my best public address voice, and with great conviction, "Paging Mr Bill Channing. Please come to the main lobby, Mr. Bill Channing."

From every corner of the lobby, a wave of laughter roared toward me, a surge of jeers and guffaws that threatened to knock me over and drown me in its flood. How stupid I am! The ministers were doubled over in laughter. How foolish of me! One of the ministers came over, laughing and smiling, to tell it now, leering, and said to me, "Come on, Honey. Let me buy you a drink. I'll tell you everything you need to know." I couldn't move. Buy me a what? I couldn't speak. Tell me what? I couldn't breath. Know what? No?!

Here, these 40 or more years later, I can reflect with you now on that moment. I can look at it from both perspectives: from the perspective of the grown woman, the minister and essayist I have become and from the perspective of that girl-child, that 17 year old aspirant I was then.

The minister I am knows they were just having a little fun, kicking back, after a long church year, after too many fruitless meetings, too many irksome congregants. They were relaxing after many Sundays preaching finely crafted sermons like so many pearls before swine. The minister I have become knows the burden of the role, knows the strain of playing the part of the cleric in tonight's performance of every body else's play, night after night.

But the girl I was felt humiliated and hurt. The girl I was felt safe at church. She trusted ministers. She wondered if she was called to be one. She could not have known what led them to toy with her? Why they preyed upon her innocence? Why they stripped her of her earnest optimism and bared her ignorance? The girl I was did not understand how they could behave so badly.

The minister I am understands their cynicism; understands the affront it must have been to three, who had given their lives to wisdom's service, to see me, a 17 year old girl, skipping around GA as if someday, when their honored days and names were no more reckoned, the likes of me and mine would be running the place.

But the minister I am from this distance sees their attitude: their arrogance, their self importance, their sense of entitlement, their exercise of patriarchal privilege, their self-absorbed grandiosity, their narcissism. The minister I am now has, from time to time, felt this in herself. I know these men 'tho time has drawn across their faces a merciful curtain. But the girl I was testifies to the power of their narcissism to humiliate and hurt and I am chastened.

The minister I am now has studied this attitude, observed its expression in ministers, and witnessed its impact on opportunities for ministry. Over the next hour, in this essay, I outline what I have come to appreciate is this attitude's challenge to our profession. You, my colleagues, alone will be my respondents.

Since that GA, we have had many opportunities to witness ministers behaving quite very much more badly than those three. Many more opportunities for humiliation and hurt. I offer you these few examples. You likely have your own.

General Assemblies in the 1970's could feel like carnival or a Roman bacchanal. Hospitality suites doubled as hook up bars. Some ministers openly engaged in intimate same-time-next-year relationships without, shall I say, benefit of clergy.

Some brazenly: One colleague, a minister I had known when a child in the church, expressed delight that: now that I was an adult and ordained, he could pursue his long interest in seducing me. Another, on the walk over to the Service of the Living Tradition, pointed to a woman colleague walking ahead and remarked, "I wonder what she's like in bed." Years later he told me of his sexual misconducts with congregants, his terrible recklessness, and his relief not ever to have been caught.

In the 1980's a cable TV show profiled an admired colleague, calling him the Brother of Love and reporting on his sexual relations with women in his church.

In the 1990's a respected colleague's misconduct was reported in a major magazine and by a caller on a national radio show given chapter and verse. Media coverage of his indiscretion led three men in my New England parish at the time to ask, as each came through the receiving line one Sunday, "Hey, that colleague of yours is having a good time." Will you be offering the same pastoral services here for us?

From one of our pulpits, another preached about finding love across a crowded chancel. He said all love was holy and of God. Even his love for a married member, which, yes, he admitted, did violate guidelines, a detail he prayed they'd look beyond. Months of congregational upset led to a negotiated resignation, and for a time, suspension from fellowship. He holds an office now in one of our UUMA chapters.

Another colleague, talented and charismatic, so eroticized the culture of congregations she served that in less than a year at each in succession she managed to divide them into two factions---those who loved and supported her ministry and those who hated her and wanted her out. Her misconducts may not have been physical but they were sexual and abusive.

Another colleague appealed his removal from fellowship for what the Unitarian Universalist Association Ministerial Fellowship Committee calls "conduct unbecoming." In his case conduct unbecoming meant proven sexual relations with multiple female congregants. He argued that the moral standards in Boston were different than where he served and therefore should not apply to him. His appeal was denied and his removal upheld. But he has served ever since with another of our congregations.

In 2005 Oprah hosted victims of another colleague on a show whose theme was children sold into sexual slavery. Our colleague brought teenage girls from the third world to live in his home under the pretense of saving them from poverty, educating them and introducing them to a new life. Instead, he molested and raped them, was convicted, and served time in prison.

Sometime later, a colleague told me he had once been in this man's home and seen the young girls obviously living there. "I don't know," he said, "I don't know why I didn't ask him what now seems the obvious question, "What's going on here?"

Witnessing these and other events, in the 1980's we, the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association, drafted sexual ethics into our guidelines and code. And now, we revisit these, as well we should from time to time, in search of clearer expression of our convictions. We find we are not easily of one mind.

The ethics of ministerial practice is a field still in infancy. Among the earliest works is Nolan Harmon's *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette*. First published in 1928 and reissued in each generation since, his was well into the 1990's one of few books on the subject. Seemingly heavy on etiquette and light on ethics, with lengthy discussions of home life, personal finances, collegial relations and appropriate dress, the book remains worth a look. "It should go without saying," Harmon noted, "that the minister...must always be a gentleman; if a woman, always a lady." "A minister will know instinctively how to behave almost everywhere."<sup>2</sup>

Apparently not. Our dear colleagues and friends do make errors of judgement. All ministers, even me and thee, are sometimes unsure of what in practice is not bad and best.

When we consider the nature of our work, its material, its conditions, and complexity, the occurrence of errors becomes easy to understand. Like the driver of a car whose driving is challenged by dangerous conditions ---an icy road, a narrow street, an obscured stop sign--- ministry is challenged by its conditions.

We ministers work with the personal, intimate, complex and changing material of other people's lives and spirits. We navigate a vast sea of feelings---worth and dignity, guilt and shame, disappointment and hope, grief and longing. We are often alone and inadequately supported. What we produce---our sermons and programs, our speaking and listening, our acts of grace or judgement---these bear the marks of our frail, feeble, and failed human selves.

Knowing the conditions are challenging, knowing the material is mutable and complex, knowing we all can err, knowing ministry's hazards are great, our vows must have our clearest resolve.

But we have found it hard to talk openly about our colleagues mis-steps, about what in specific renders their actions rude or wrong, risky or injurious, unethical or unlawful. We whisper lest we violate the guidelines' prohibition against speaking ill of a colleague, lest we say out loud what everyone already knows to be true. We minimize.

A colleague advised, “You have to understand, Deb, the standards have changed. It used to be okay.” Really? A young single minister might marry within the parish. But no, it was never okay to audition a succession of congregants for the role of minister’s spouse.

Another explains: “a lot of us, intoxicated by the sexual revolution, did some stupid things in the name of freedom and love.” Ya think? When a recent study by the Catholic Church offered a similar explanation for pedophile priests<sup>3</sup> --- “victims,” they were, “of the cultural upheavals of the 1960’s” many accused the church of making excuses, of not taking responsibility for the priests whose behavior was wrong and injurious whatever kind of stupid it also was.

A dear, accomplished woman colleague, commenting on our indiscretions, asked. “They do behave badly but do we really want to sacrifice our shiniest preachers and our brightest lights on this?” I’m just saying. Some imagine misconduct must be balanced against weightier accomplishments.

We debate due process and marital status. We assert a colleague’s right to a private life. We protest the injustice of enforced celibacy. We argue about confidentiality, by which is meant secrecy, and about consequences, by which is meant not so much.

We whisper. We minimize. We debate. But mostly I think we are, as I was at that GA long ago, humiliated and hurt. What is too much missing in our collegial conversations is an acknowledgement of our humiliation and hurt. Ours and the humiliation and hurt of those we serve.

The hurt endured by individuals who come to their ministers for religious counsel and are instead abused. The humiliation endured by spouses and partners, families, and friends of these harmed individuals. The bruising betrayal endured by coworkers and colleagues, unwittingly drawn in to a maelstrom of lies, manipulation, and self-indulgence.

The harm suffered by congregations and organizations: the months of upset and fierce disagreement, the hours of volunteer time, the expense of investigating and deliberating and of hiring conflict experts, the loss of members, damaged public image, and disruption to mission.

And the harm inflicted upon the profession of ministry itself: the public outrage; the withdrawal of trust; the loss of respect. The media borrows from Hawthorne, from Lewis, and from Updike to describe the most recent hypocrite, buffoon, or abuser whose fraud, bombast or deviance will sell their outlet’s news.<sup>4</sup> The public’s awareness may come from the media’s relentless coverage

of the sexual exploitation of children by priests and the systematic cover up by the Roman Catholic church. But the public's outrage extends to all clergy and all religion, including our rational religion with its healthy views on sexuality and our all loving God.<sup>5</sup>

Expression of their outrage can be seen in acts of violence against churches and clergy. In Britain physical assaults against the clergy have increased. The Anglican Church advises priests not to wear their dog collars in public.

Here, in the states, public distrust of clergy is evident in legislation aimed at protecting the public from predatory clergy. Twenty-seven States have statutes now variously making it unlawful for a minister to engage in sexualized behavior with those they serve. Anyone here from Texas or Minnesota? In Texas and Minnesota the statutes are at once broad and precise, making it a crime for ministers to have sexual relations with any person seeking or receiving from them religious or spiritual advice.<sup>6</sup> The National Organization for Women called in 2009 for laws to be enacted in every state to outlaw "clergy sex."<sup>7</sup>

The public is outraged because they see people are harmed and humiliated by misconduct. Let me walk you through some of how this harm and humiliation is evidenced and offer some insight into how injury is inflicted on congregations and on the ministry itself.

Blindsided by their minister's misconduct, congregation leaders initially close ranks, hoping to avoid scandal and public embarrassment. Not knowledgeable about clergy ethics and isolated from those who are, congregations may debate the mutable ethics of ministerial practice. Is the conduct wrong? Or just poorly timed? Can't a minister fall in love? What if the other person is technically married but nearly single again?

Without clarity and unanimity, debate churns into conflict. Disenchanted members leave. Pledge income drops. New people don't stay. In the surrounding community, people distance themselves from the unpleasantness. Grieving these losses can take years. Recouping these losses longer still.

Some congregations decide ministers are too much trouble and go with just pulpit supply. Some believe if they can just get a good new minister, the downturn will end. But often it doesn't. Some discover in search, candidates prefer congregations without misconduct histories

Congregations wounded by the misconduct of their clergy can be chronically dysfunctional, conducting their business in disturbingly ineffective

ways. They can lack the capacity to follow procedures, to do what they say they will do, to set appropriate boundaries, to establish lines of responsibility, to secure their building, to respond properly to unsafe behavior, to welcome new people, to run successful canvasses, to tolerate difference or to engage in productive disagreement without nasty conflict. The usual efforts---healthy congregation workshops, district staff interventions, a succession of able-enough clergy---bring no permanent fix. The least able, crankiest members remain in leadership while the mature more self-differentiated members, those immune cells needed for healthy congregations,<sup>8</sup> fed up with the craziness, bully tactics and resistance to change, withdraw.

You may wonder, as I have, how many of our congregations have been misconducted. No study has been done. Some interims in reviewing the list of interim positions for 2006-07 guesstimated that those that had been served by a minister who was known to have misconducted while there or while elsewhere was 67%. A group of staff and laity concerned about misconduct's impact stopped counting after identifying 400 of our congregations as possibly having misconduct histories.

You may ask: How many people in our congregations have been effected? A recent study at Baylor University<sup>9</sup> found that in the average American congregation one will find 7 women who have experienced clergy sexual misconduct themselves and at least 32 persons who have witnessed sexual misconduct by clergy in their community of faith. A 1991 survey of Unitarian Universalist women reported that 21% had experienced sexual harassment from a clergy or lay leader.<sup>10</sup> Unitarian Universalist men have never been surveyed.

Why some congregations suffer lasting effects and others do not remains unclear. Larger churches may fare better. More people may afford a protective cushion or provide for more immune cell leaders. A few misconducted congregations are galvanized by the experience of misconduct. These congregations, like grieving parents who start memorial foundations to aid others who have lost a child, muster a resolve that makes them stronger and healthier.

No where is the effect of clergy misconduct's harm more evident than in the ministerial relationships of those who serve as minister in its aftermath. These afterpastors, as they are sometimes called, commonly report that congregants relate to them in ways confounding and crazy, making their work unduly challenging. Afterpastors report their ministerial relationships lack the usual trust, respect, and interest accorded to clergy. Laity, whose trust is betrayed by a predecessor, appear reluctant or unable to trust subsequent clergy.



Afterpastors report feeling pushed and pulled. They describe leaders who manipulate and intrude, who expect too much or too little, who sometimes coerce and threaten. The boundaries of the minister's role in the aftermath of misconduct can be confused and unclear.

Afterpastors report being lied to and misled. Information is controlled. Secrets common. Interactions triangulated. In the aftermath of misconduct, secret keeping may provide an illusion of control over an escalating crisis.

Afterpastors report an unusual number of difficult people in congregations with misconduct histories, people whose functioning is impaired or inconsistent, who can be abusive, unreasonable, or divisive, who routinely generate upset and drama. Now, yes, we all have endured congregants who repeatedly strain the limits of our goodwill and grace. But afterpastors report that nearly every interaction contains some element of reactivity, coercion, disrespect, and boundary pushing. "There's this guy (or gal)" afterpastors report, "always complaining. He's nasty, a bully. And not just to me. No one confronts him or stops him."

In one stunning example, an afterpastor tells of a church treasurer who failed repeatedly, month after month, to pay her on time. When she finally complained to the board, they told her she was too demanding; "Remember: he's a volunteer." When some months later she complained again, they suggested she stop doing whatever she was doing to piss him off. "Then he'll send your checks on time." More months passed. This time when she complained, she told leaders she was prepared to take a leave of absence to put her affairs in order. Only then did they confront him and he resigned from the church. And only then did she learn the story: that his mother had been the second wife of a misconducting predecessor whose numerous indiscretions two decades earlier had ended their marriage and his ministry in scandal and had mortified his stepson.

Individuals and congregations in the aftermath of misconduct may behave much as those who have endured a trauma. Trauma survivors can be unable to trust. They may act unreasonably or be controlling. Ironically, they may act in ways that lead to their being re-traumatized. Understanding misconduct as a trauma helps explain the odd interactions afterpastors experience. This afterpastor did not imagine that she was playing the part of the betraying minister in the drama of this man's life. Understanding his behavior as detached from its traumatic origins and not about her would have suggested different strategies and these might have provided the play with a last act that healed and blessed.

Navigating these crazy-making relationships, day after day, is stressful and difficult. Afterpastors report a range of stress-related health concerns. Trouble sleeping, Gastrointestinal problems, headaches, depression and anxiety attacks, bouts of paranoia. They question their ability, their sanity, and their call.

Afterpastors can expect shorter tenures. Some become unintentional interims. Others may have negotiated departures. Of the twelve “unhappy partings” experienced by our colleagues just this last year, no less than nine were from congregations with misconduct histories.

We know relationships are important. We know from earliest infancy we are nurtured in relationship. The adults we are now were molded long ago by relating with our people and significant others.

In ministry, relationships are the basic tool of the trade. Through a minister’s relating pastoral care is extended, spiritual life nurtured, psychological health promoted, divinity experienced, and grace mediated. By virtue of our ordinations, because of our religious perspectives, and through calls extended to us, ministers have unique relationships with those we serve as minister. Regardless of our desires or our opinions about whether or not ministers should be allowed to form special relationships with those they serve, we ministers already have a special relationship---a ministerial relationship.

In this special relationship, conscious and unconscious dimensions from congregant and minister play out. Congregants may imagine a minister, like God among the ancient Hebrews, as one who shepherds the people, who knows what they need better than they do. Or they may imagine them like their own god-like fathers who asked too much or showed them no mercy. A minister, too, may imagine a minister god-like, one to whom the sheep come for tending. Or like their own mother omnipotent and without whom nothing was ever allowed to happen. An infinite number of these dimensions enhance, distort and generally complicate minister-congregant interactions, though, I must say, another verb does come to mind.

Any minister, reasonably aware of his or her own distortions, who can remain non-reactive, non-anxious, and non-judgmental in the face of a congregants’ distorted reactions can provide unique opportunities for healing. The special relationship gives us as ministers a capacity, an opportunity, a power, to deeply influence, to profoundly change, and to potentially transform the lives of those we serve.

Because of this power, ministerial relationships are said to have boundaries.

These boundaries set limits on the sorts of activities that should occur in the congregant-minister relationship. They maintain the purpose of the special relationship, e.g. to serve the congregant. Boundaries provide for a safe, effective container for the exercise of ministry's power.

Crossing these boundaries is unethical because it violates the trust, misuses the power, and shifts the focus of the congregant-minister relationship. When boundaries are crossed, the special relationship loses its transformative potential but retains its influence, its privileged access, and its power.

As we seek to make sense of these dimensions and to work within ethical boundaries, the work of Henry Nelson Wieman and Martin Buber can offer some much needed theological support

Wieman reminds us that God and everything holy and of God is immanent in human relations. "The love of God," he insisted, "is precisely this forming of connections." In the connection between minister and congregant, the love of God is manifested, is experienced, is incarnated. Oh, how our language does fail us. In immanence, in creative interchange, Wieman sees an enlarging truth, a relation that can transform us, that saves us "like nothing else" can.<sup>11</sup>

Buber sees the locus of God's activity in the world in the human-God relation. In witness to this, he recast those first lines of John's Gospel: The Relation, "in the beginning is The Relation."<sup>12</sup> And the Relation is God. This Relation is not a duality, not the fingers of God stretching across Michelangelo's ceiling towards us but a sparking from human hand to human hand, the connection itself, the interaction in which God and all that is holy moves, through which we are saved and transformed, and by which the world, one day yet, will be what we pray and imagine.

When the trust accorded ministers is betrayed, when the power and authority bestowed on ministers is abused, when the boundaries of the role are violated, as does happen in misconduct, this relation can be lost and with it the possibility of transformation.

In this way, ethics is really about being effective. About doing ministry well. About competence. About making transformation possible. Ethics guidelines are not arbitrary or contrived. Not rules made up by people who have no idea what it is like, in real life, to do ministry. Ethics guidelines outline minimal standards of conduct and the least care necessary for competent, effective ministry.

In this way, we must understand that sexualizing a congregant-minister relationship is not merely unethical. A person comes to a minister for pastoring and instead is given sex. Unethical? Yes. But it is as well incompetent, substandard delivery of service, ministry not up to the minimal standards of practice, and elsewhere called malpractice.

Surely, effective ministry has other requirements. Indeed, numerous studies have been done on what makes for effective ministry.<sup>13</sup> The top responses for defining effective ministry are: “service without regard for acclaim,” “personal integrity,” and “a person people can respect.”<sup>14</sup> All of these reference a minister’s character or personality. Humility. Integrity. Respectability. Indeed of the top six responses in one study only one, “being a caring person who can appreciate and focus on another’s need” even references a specific skill.<sup>15</sup> All the rest reference a minister’s character.

What matters most for effective ministry is a minister’s character expressed in attitudes: humility, integrity, respectability and caring. These attitudes are a sort of *From Whence We Come And How*. Study after study confirms this, confirms Harmon’s conviction that the “person and performance” of the minister are linked.

I offer as proof only your own reflections. Think back to a time when you experienced yourself as being particularly effective in ministry. What was it in you that made you effective? Your knowledge? Your training? Your ability to think theologically? Your facility with the written or spoken word? Think about it? What was it that made you effective?

I’m guessing that you listened. You showed up. You had empathy. You inquired. You cared. You were respectful. You didn’t judge. You weren’t shocked. You didn’t outline a detailed action plan. You put aside yourself and focussed on someone else. You showed humility, integrity, respectability and appreciation for another’s needs, exactly those attitudes that make for effective ministry.

From my work with afterpastors I can tell you that these attitudes are in sharp contrast to the attitudes of those who engage in misconduct.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the type of misconduct, whether sexual or financial or emotional or other, woven into the fabric of all misconduct is a common thread: a narcissistic attitude. <sup>17</sup>A self-attentive and self referential attitude. An obliviousness to others’ needs. A lack of empathy.

We see narcissism in politicians, in those who wield the power of their office to have what they want and to get what they need, without regard to others. Arrogant, entitled, and grandiose, narcissism clouds judgement,

leads to poor choices, and makes for bad behavior. Narcissism deludes some into thinking they won't get caught. Others to imagining the rules don't apply to them. Narcissism is expressed in behaviors that intrude, control, manipulate, and exploit; in interactions that are self serving, duplicitous, and secretive.

Narcissism may be no more common a clinical diagnosis among ministers than the general population. Still, among those engaged in ministerial practice, a narcissistic attitude is evident in interactive ways---as an expression and experience of the self in relation to others, as a self-ideation in ministerial relationships. At the extreme, self-ideation makes everything in relation to another person, everything that in reality is part of that other and not of the self, be experienced as all about me.

Theologically, self-ideation can be seen in the arrogant belief that all of creation, that all of earth's creatures great and small, were placed here by God for me and mine. Carly Simon sang it simply. *You're so vain*. The song, I know you know it. [All singing:] "You're so vain. You probably think this song is about you, You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you, about you. Don't you?" <sup>18</sup>

Ministers must learn to amend their self ideation and to moderate their self's expression. The other's needs are the focus in a ministerial relationship. The greater the minister's expression of self, the less room for the other self. The more focus on the self of the minister, the less focus on the self of the congregant. Of course, removing the self of the minister entirely from the interaction is impossible. But the question remains--How is the self of the minister experienced in relation to others? How is the self of the minister expressed in ministerial relationships?

We can see how complex and challenging self regulation in ministry can be by looking at a common pastoral situation. Some expressions of self are unavoidable. A congregant comes to a minister for counsel after their child is diagnosed with a serious illness. The congregant may already know that the minister also has a child who is seriously ill.

Some expressions of self are intentional. A minister may choose to speak of his or her child's illness. This self expression, intended to show that the minister appreciates what the congregant is going through, can come to dominate the interaction and manipulate the other. "I know a lot about serious illnesses in children," a minister offers. "My child recovered. With my help, yours will too. We'll start a prayer circle and a fund." A minister, in this way, may gain access, engender loyalty, and become indispensable in the life of a vulnerable congregant.

Other expressions of self can be extreme. Perhaps anxious ministering to parents who express fear their young child will die, a minister may embellish their self's expression. A story is made up. This deceit may be small at first, about a child's illness in remission, something the minister says, "I don't tell everyone." This deceit conflates the separate selves of congregant and minister and mistakes the minister's needs for the congregant's.

The narcissistic expression of self in relation to others is subtle, insidious, and incremental. Arrogant and grandiose, narcissism belies any kind of spiritual honesty. Elsewhere a minister may give evidence of sufficient attention to others' needs, of competent enough self-knowledge, of adequate self-management and be much admired. But narcissism in varying degrees is a constant attitude in all the ministerial relationships of those who misconduct.

Regardless of intensity, this attitude progressively encourages a breakdown in ministerial relationships. "This breakdown occurs," because, "certain elements necessary for the success" of the ministerial relationship" e.g. respect and integrity, "get lost and certain new elements," e.g., manipulation, sexual exploitation and abuse of power "get injected." <sup>19</sup> When a sexual misconduct event occurs, this breakdown has already been progressing for some time.

From this perspective, misconduct is best understood not as an event but as a process. A relational attitude given expression in an escalating continuum of behaviors, ranging from not listening well to yelling obscenities, from over managing to cruelly manipulating, from being rude to abusing rape. This process of breakdown adversely effects the dynamics of ministerial relationships and changes the culture of a congregation even in the absence of a specific misconduct event.

Indeed, the significant harm inflicted by ministerial misconduct on individuals and groups derives not only from a misconduct event, sexual or not, but from this constant, incremental breakdown. Over time, this breakdown inflicts "relational wounds that damage the trust,"<sup>20</sup> that trust essential to all ministerial relationships. Ministers, serving in the aftermath of misconduct, are met with suspicion and cynicism, with odd reactions and skewed expectations, rooted in this relational wound.

Systems thinkers caution that in relational fields, whether in families or congregations, the attitudes and behaviors of leaders, whether fathers or mothers, ministers or laity, deeply, powerfully structure and restructure the system. Leaders interactions are "patterned and repeated" and thereafter come

to regulate the system's interaction.<sup>21</sup> For example, in congregations where the boundaries of the ministerial relationship have been obfuscated or violated by misconduct, a pattern of ignoring or confusing other boundaries will be evident. Where secrecy and duplicity have been used to occasion or conceal misconduct events, a pattern of secretiveness may develop. In congregational cultures where a minister's expression of self has been divisive, distorting congregants into factions of those who like me and those who don't, patterns of triangulation and quick conflict may become relational norms. Long after a misconducting minister has departed, these patterned interactions persist, pervading the culture of the congregation and regulating the dynamics of the congregant-minister relationship.

We know of course that many other factors influence congregational culture, that other dimensions effect congregant-minister relationships. We recognize that clergy misconduct is nested in an ecology that either promotes or inhibits breakdowns in the ministerial relationships.<sup>22</sup>

A congregation, for example, may muster sufficient immune cell leaders to ward off further progression, calling their cleric back to right relations or swiftly removing him or her from their ministry. A mature well-differentiated congregant, who has experienced a death in the family, may dissuade an intrusive, self-important minister who offers to come by the house later after a meeting, by saying, "thanks but I think we're fine for now." But another congregant, fragile, needy, vulnerable, will encourage the attention, offering, "Pastor, I know it may be after midnight when you get here but I have no one else to talk to and you are such a comfort. Please come and stay as long as you can." This latter congregant's encouragement may lead to abuse.

Clear expectations, written job descriptions and regular, useful reviews may encourage a minister to stay within the boundaries and purposes of their special relationship with congregants. Clear ethical guidelines and codes, colleagues who speak up, who ask the obvious questions, who call one another to account, these may also curtail the progressive breakdown of the ministerial relationships and prevent misconduct. Without these immune cells or these and other clarities, the progressive breakdown continues. People and profession are humiliated and harmed.

But in an ecology that inhibits, the process can reverse the breakdown. Such an ecology restores utility to the ministerial relationship by injecting the qualities required for success in ministerial relationships---integrity, humility, respect, and self-less care.

Indeed this is the task of the afterpastor---to reverse the breakdown.

and by doing so, restore trust to the office of ministry. This is hard work and painstaking and must be executed in every relationship. Afterpastors must exercise respect in the face of disrespect, humility in the face of derision, integrity amid boundary pushing chaos, and care for another even as that care is met with suspicion. And most importantly, afterpastors must try to have it not go badly. Again. Afterpastors must both serve well and survive well. And move on when they no more can.

In my work with afterpastors I have seen this work begun; I have seen it done ably and at considerable cost; I have seen it done well to wondrous result. But I have never seen it finished.

Whither then? This harm, this relational wound, is healed, as all life's wounds are healed, if they are to be healed---in relation. The distrust and cynicism will be healed when they are met with integrity and respect; the outrage and attempts to control, when they are met with humility and appreciation. The disregard and violence, when they are met with non-anxious judgement and boundaried grace. This harm to the ministry, this injury to ministry's capacity to give expression to The Relation, will be reversed when an attitude of humility, integrity, respect and appreciation is our *From Whence We Come, And How*.

Two centuries after Channing imagined we might do well to speak annually with one another on the state of our ministry, we colleagues find our selves in a profession challenging and much changed. Looking back at past essays which, I have to tell you, is what one must do to manage the long periods of procrastination over the whole of the year one is given to ponder and craft one's essay. Looking over past essays one finds, in the middle 19th century, the word *defect* numerously evident in title and text. An essay on *Defects of Unitarian Preaching* followed some years hence by another on *Real and Alleged Defects in Unitarian Preaching* and, more pointedly, by one entitled *The Prevalent Defects of Liberal Ministers*. "This state of things is dangerous," essayed the Reverend Abiel Abbott in 1821, and for some "has been fatal."<sup>23</sup>

What our collegial conversation needs is not consideration of our profession's defects. Nor of our own. Please know that *defect* has not been my essay's subject. Yes, certainly, we would be well served if we could find our way clear to be of one mind about ethical standards of practice. We would support one another better if *we would be one* behind some language that made our guidelines clear and our resolve firm.

What our collegial conversation needs is a stunning reminder of our power, a power we wield to good result or poor, whose complex interpersonal



dynamics we can oftentimes neither observe nor command though it be ever our responsibility to do so. What is needed is greater understanding of the dynamics of our power, our power to humiliate or to bless, to harm or to heal, our power to influence the success of our ministries, the health of our congregations and indeed the future of our religious heritage. What is needed is a recognition of ministry's power and a stirring re-conviction, by and with that power, to our call as ministers to transform. Then might clarity come, then might unity be found, and yet the world be changed.

If that re-conviction comes to you not this day, then tomorrow, at evening service, when organ cadences shall push again your heart into your throat and bring beloved lyrics to your lips. Then may you be convicted again of your great calling's power. True and blessed may it be.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lyrics by John Huntley Skrine (1896) augmented by Carl G. Seaburg (1990) in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1993, no. 358.

<sup>2</sup> Nolan B. Harmon, Jr. *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Karen J. Terry et al, *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010: A Report Presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops by the John Jay College Research Team, May 2011.*

<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Tichnor, Reed, and Fields, Boston MA, 1850; Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, NY, 1927; John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, Random House, New York, NY, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on ministry's recent loss of esteem and status reminded me of the historian Ann Douglas' discussion of the loss of esteem and status experienced by 19th century Congregational and Unitarian clergy in the years following disestablishment. No longer enjoying the security of tax funded salaries or the life tenure these afforded, most ministers were left to pander for a living amid a market driven economy. By mid-century clergy were, to put it harshly, "hired hands;" earning no more than \$400 a year, about the same as manual laborers. Without the lifestyle, status and authority establishment accorded, ministers no longer were valued in the spheres of politics and business. This change in circumstances drove them into the arms of supporters, mostly women, themselves absent from the seats of power; indeed it often drove clergy literally into their arms, as numerous mid-19th century clergy sex scandals attest. Douglas, mixing a metaphor of sex, gender and power, called this process feminization but emasculation would have been more to the point. In this same period, Channing, because of low status' burden, came so to detest being called "reverend" that when a friend reminded him that he was after all a clergyman, he retorted, "Yes, I know it and [ I ] always remember the disadvantage." Ann Douglas *The Feminization of American Culture, Alfred A Knopf, Inc. New York, NY, 1977, p. 31-35 and p. 22.*

<sup>6</sup> Many State statutes include clergy by virtue of their role as counselors and require that clergy must be engaged in counseling or what the state defines as psychotherapy for sexual contact between clergy and a counselee to be criminal. Some, however, make it criminal specifically for clergy engaged in ministry's broader tasks to have sexual contact with those they serve as minister.

<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.now.org/issues/violence/clergyabuse\\_statement.html](http://www.now.org/issues/violence/clergyabuse_statement.html)

- <sup>8</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 1996, 91.
- <sup>9</sup> Diana R. Garland and Mark Chaves, "The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults: A Research Study (2008)" to be published in *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*.
- <sup>10</sup> Barbara Davenport, "Sexual Victimization Among Unitarian Universalist Women," study funded by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, 1991.
- <sup>11</sup> Henry Nelson Wieman, *Seeking Faith for a New Age: Essays on the Interdependence of Religion, Science and Philosophy*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, p. 72.
- <sup>12</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Scribners Inc, New York, NY, 1958, p. 11.
- <sup>13</sup> *Readiness for Ministry, Volume I & II*, Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Pittsburgh, PA, 1975 & 1976; Ronald D. Sisk, *The Competent Pastor: Skills and Self-Knowledge For Serving Well*, Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 2005. Donald P. Smith, *Empowering Ministry: Ways To Grow In Effectiveness*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1996.
- <sup>14</sup> David S. Schuller et al., *Ministry in America: A Report and Analysis, Based on an In-Depth Survey of Forty-Seven Denominations in the United States and Canada, with Interpretation by Eighteen Experts*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1980, p. 19.
- <sup>15</sup> Louis W. Bloede, *The Effective Pastor: A Guide To Successful Ministry*, Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1996, p. 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Deborah J. Pope-Lance, *Afterpastors: Relational Harm and Healing in the Aftermath of Clergy Misconduct, 2007*, publication pending, pp. 57-80.
- <sup>17</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN, 2004, pp. 137-38.
- <sup>18</sup> Carly Simon, *You're So Vain, 1972*; The song is listed at number 72 on Billboard's definitive list of the Hot 100's top 100 songs from the chart's first 50 years, August 1958 through July 2008. For a chronological list of efforts to determine who she was singing about see <http://www.carlysimon.com/vain/vain.html>
- <sup>19</sup> White, William L. "A Systems Perspective on Sexual Exploitation of Clients by Professional Helpers" in *Breach of Trust: Sexual Exploitation by Health Care Professionals and Clergy*, edited by John C. Gonsiorek, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995, pp. 176-192.
- <sup>20</sup> Peterson, Marilyn R. *At Personal Risk: Boundary Violations in Profession- Client Relationships*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1992. p. 103.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter L. Steinke in *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional System*, p. 79 and *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, p. 6, Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 1993 and 1996. See also Edwin Friedman in *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Guilford Press, New York, NY, 1985.

<sup>22</sup> White, p. 180. See also Candace R. Benyei, *Understanding Misconduct in Religious Systems: Scapegoating, Family Secrets, and the Abuse of Power*, The Haworth Pastoral Press Binghamton, NY, 1998, p. xiii, and Conrad W. Weiser, *Healers: Harmed and Harmful*, Augsburg Fortress Press, . Minneapolis, MN, 1994, pp 115-134.

<sup>23</sup> The text of the 1821 Berry Street Essay delivered by the Rev. Abiel Abbot has not yet been recovered; this fragment is taken from a memoir by the Rev. Everett Stevens which prefaces a collection of Abbot's *Sermons*, pp. lix-lx. See <http://www.uuma.org/Page/BSE1821>