

## CLERGY BURNOUT: A SELF PSYCHOLOGY AND SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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Examines the underlying causes of clergy burnout and suggests that burnout may be an interaction of three factors: a narcissistic personality style on the part of clergy craving admiration and appreciation, the demands of parish life, and the developmental needs of the clergy's own family. Attempts to understand the interaction of these three factors from the vantage points of self psychology and systems theory. Uses Kohut's description of narcissism to show how a narcissistic style interacts with issues in both the family system and in the congregational system of the pastor. Offers suggestions regarding prevention, including group work.

Clergy burnout is a concern of all religious denominations. Meeting the constant demands of visitation, pastoral counseling, administration, preaching, teaching, facilitating church growth, as well as being expected to be an expert in crisis intervention, leaves many clergy feeling inadequate, exhausted, frustrated, and frequently questioning their call to ministry. Too often burnout is approached simplistically with seminars on better time management, or advice on relaxing more, or the need for hobbies. While these suggestions may be helpful, they fail to deal with the underlying issues that produce burnout, which are far more complex. These include the intrapsychic issues of the pastor as they interact with the systemic issues of the congregation and the pastor's family. Burnout then can be understood as the consequence of three factors: a particular clergy personality style that craves admiring appreciation, the demands and pressures of congregational life, and the developmental needs of the clergy's own family. These three factors may interact to produce burnout. In this regard the contributions of self psychology and systems theory are helpful.

### Clergy and Narcissism

In a recent article in *Atlantic Monthly* Thomas Maeder suggests that the professions of psychotherapy and ministry attract more than their share of the emotionally unstable.<sup>1</sup> While not necessarily agreeing with that hypothesis, psy-

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Maeder, "Wounded Healer," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1989 (January), pp. 37-47.

father was demanding and impossible to please. In childhood, even when he would bring home a good report card, his father would point out how it could have been better. He felt pressured from both mother and father to be the one who excelled in the family, and had a sense that his mother lived vicariously through him. He did not ever remember being able to relax, but was always striving to do better. Now he sees his parents infrequently, and reports feeling like a teenager when he is with them, and acknowledges that he is still trying to earn his father's approval.

He also feels estranged from his wife and two adolescent children and reports that his wife does not understand him and is constantly critical of him. He feels distant from his kids.

On the other hand, he reports that for at least the first ten years he has been with his current parish, he loved it and worked at least 60 hours per week. He said it gave him a sense of meaning and purpose to be of help to people, and admits that he is a people pleaser and enjoys getting people to like him. Lately, however, the congregation has become more demanding and less supportive. When he turned to his family for support, he found them cold and critical. This left him hurt and frustrated, but he was unable to realize how he contributed to their detached attitude. In his zeal for church growth and for helping parishioners, his long hours had left his family bitter and distant, while the congregation became more and more demanding of his time. He reports that the more he gave to the congregation the more it expected. His current fantasies are to meet another woman who would understand and give him the affection he "deserves," and to find a new church which would "appreciate him." At the same time he realizes that this will not work and suspects that the problem is internal and that changing the environment will not be the answer. As a result he has sought counseling, saying that he feels lifeless, depressed, and spiritually dead.

### Prevention

How is this type of burnout, as illustrated in the case study, to be remedied? While one can talk about how to resolve the problem, it is easier to attempt to deal with a situation early, than to attempt to put the pieces back together. Prevention includes several things. First, there has to be more public conscious acceptance of the reality and existence of infantile grandiosity, which in turn needs to be met by an atmosphere or climate of recognition and acceptance. Since the normal narcissism, however exhibitionistic, was initially met (in childhood) with indifference or competitive antagonism (aggression), growth was thwarted. The adult with injured (low) self-esteem still needs this recognition from a selfobject that would encourage his or her ambition based on the grandiose self's demands, but hopefully now to be modified by empathic (non-traumatic) experiences with reality which will lead to transmuting internalization.

However, it is often difficult to find empathic experiences that lead to transmuting internalization outside of therapy. Two ways of helping this process

would include working with clergy couples, and building clergy support groups.

In our experience with clergy support groups, the most relevant therapeutic factors of groups as classified by Ervin Yalom include universality (the healing power of discovering that one is not alone and the ability to see oneself in others), interpersonal learning (the gaining of insight into what one's behavior is, how it affects others, and what the motivation for the behavior is), and group cohesiveness (the sense of belonging, acceptance, and validation).<sup>8</sup> In conditions of acceptance and understanding, group members will be more inclined to express and explore themselves, and to become aware of and integrate hitherto unacceptable aspects of self and to relate more deeply to others. According to Yalom, self-esteem is greatly influenced by the group members role in a cohesive group.<sup>9</sup>

In these groups some educational material could be dealt with on the meaning of transference, especially as manifested by congregations. This would help clergy understand transference dynamics and hopefully help them not get caught up in it as much.

In addition, small groups could be structured to be safe places where the clergy could explore different facets of themselves and hopefully explore their vulnerable selves as well as their grandiosity. The goal of these groups would be to help clergy avoid overinvestment in work and the utilization of the congregation as the sole source of affirmation, and help clergy to seek and obtain alternative outlets, such as hobbies and recreational activities, as sources of affirmation. At the same time, the groups (peer clergy group and clergy and spouse groups) would be supportive and accepting so that the self could be experienced in all its vulnerabilities and limitations. The group experience would enable the clergy to see themselves as wounded healers, as opposed to grandiose saviors. Finally, the group would focus on helping the family be a source of empathic experiences so that both family needs could be met as well as the needs of the pastor. Working together, pastors and parishes can make a church schedule that includes time for a clergyperson's personal life. The key is for pastors to intentionally schedule in time for their marriage, family, and friends; and honor it just as one would a promise to a parishioner.

Obviously, these concepts need refinement and development. However, if one of the factors that causes burnout is the desperate need for mirroring and affirmation on the part of clergy, then it seems important that more research by those who counsel clergy and by denominational hierarchies be done as to how to utilize support groups to help clergy and their spouses better understand what motivates them, and to move towards greater integration of self.

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<sup>8</sup>Ervin D. Yalom, *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1985).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

infected by transference projections . . . when the patient assumes that his analyst is the fulfillment of his dreams, that is not an ordinary doctor but a spiritual hero . . . he begins to feel that if there are saviors perhaps it is possible I am one.'<sup>6</sup>

If Jung is correct that this is a danger for psychoanalysts, then how much more is it a danger for clergy who speak on some level for God, and are "called" to their vocation? If they already are fulfilling grandiose ambitions by trying to please everyone in the parish and using parishioners as archaic mirroring self-objects, then there is even more pressure in feeling that they speak for God.

Clergy frequently feel that not only must they please everyone in the congregation, but that they must also satisfy the high expectations of God. If they had parents who were difficult to satisfy, they may feel that it is equally difficult to satisfy God which adds to the pressure they feel. At the same time, the very difficulty of doing God's work adds to the sense of grandiosity.

### Competing Systems

If the pastor struggles with accepting his or her own limitations, and is overly invested in the grandiose self which is reinforced and complicated by the God complex, then the situation is further exacerbated by the variety of competing systems that the pastor is a part of. As Paul Watzlawick points out, systems regulate themselves by a variety of feed back loops.<sup>7</sup> The pastor is frequently caught in these competing feedback loops that work in opposition to each other, thereby contributing to burnout. Two obvious competing systems would be the congregation and the family.

*The Congregational System.* Frequently the congregational system further reinforces the grandiose self of the pastor through "congregational transference." Transference is described in psychoanalytic theory as the way in which primitive feelings towards parents and significant others are projected onto the analyst. One of the ways this occurs in analysis is as an idealizing transference where the therapist is seen as the ideal man or woman, lover, or parent, and an ideal figure to merge with. As therapy progresses and the therapist handles his or her own countertransference reaction to the idealization, this is worked through as the client withdraws some of the idealization.

In a similar way an idealizing transference occurs in congregational life when the pastor functions as an idealized selfobject for parishioners with whom they can merge as an image of calmness, infallibility, and perfection. He or she is sought after for advice, spiritual counsel, utilized in times of joy and crisis, and expected on Sundays to deliver a word from God. While intellectually the pastor may know that these are idealizations, they are still so flattering that the pastor works even harder to gain more idealization. Sermons are measured by

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<sup>6</sup>Maeder, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, Don Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967).

the amount of flattering comments at the door, and late night emergency visits are made worthwhile by flattering comments such as "we could never have come through this crisis without your help."

Thus congregational transference and idealization colludes with the grandiose self the pastor is invested in. This begins a vicious feedback loop. The more the pastor attempts to be all that the congregation expects him or her to be (thereby using the congregation as a selfobject), the more the congregation expects. One late night emergency visit sets up patterns of more and more late night visits until the congregation begins to expect this type of pastoral service. As a result the pastor must work even harder to keep up with their expectations so as to preserve the grandiose self.

*Family Systems.* As the pastor is drawn ever deeper into the congregation system, he or she is drawn away from the life of the family. This is true for any number of reasons. Initially it may be explained as "doing the lord's work," or handling yet another crisis. However, the deeper motivation is that the family may no longer be supporting the grandiose self of the pastor. While at church he or she is "Reverend" and seen as the spokesperson for God; at home he or she is just Daddy or Mommy who is never available to play. While counselees see the pastor as their ideal mate, their spouse sees them as distant, and pre-occupied.

The family's frustration and anger at what is not being provided for their needs—since so much time is going to meet congregational needs—will result in them being unable to mirror the grandiose self. As opposed to mirroring the pastor's "God complex" they begin confronting the pastor with the needs that are not being met at home, particularly in times of family developmental transition. Thus the pastor who is admired as a hero at church may be seen as something considerably less at home, setting up a negative feedback loop. Obviously, the parish or needy persons within the parish will become much more attractive with its mirroring potential than the family which may be much more confrontive. This pushes the pastor to work even harder to support the grandiose self by being more involved with the congregation. Consistently working long hours because of feeling compelled to do more and more for the congregation, combined with tensions at home, as well as little or no recreation, leads to burnout. What is clearly lacking is a "safe place" where the pastor can be free to explore his or her vulnerable self without fear of criticism or attack.

#### Case Study—"What about my needs?"

Pastor Randolph came for therapy complaining of feeling tired, burned out, and depressed. He reported feeling spiritually dead, and was going through the motions of church work. He reported staring into space in the mornings at the office, and dreading visitation and counseling in the afternoon. He was not at all sure that counseling would help, but felt like he had to do something. He was beginning to question whether he was even called to the ministry.

He came from a perfectionistic family and was the oldest of four children.

choanalytic self psychology, based on the contributions of Heinz Kohut, is helpful in understanding the personality of some clergy who seem susceptible to burnout.

Kohut postulated that in early development, the child is frustrated by the inevitable failures of parental responsiveness. Unlike Freud, who thought of the human infant's needs as primarily physical, Kohut taught that babies need the affirmation of admiring attention and the security of confident idealizable parents. If the frustration is phase appropriate and non-traumatic, the child learns that while many needs are met, not all are met. Through his or her response to this frustration, the child begins to build an experience of the self and a sense of self. For example, as the child experiences the caregiver both leaving, but then returning, he or she feels both frustration and then relief and calm as the parent returns. If most partings are non-traumatic (not too abrupt, not too frequent, and not prolonged), and when most comings and goings are handled optimally, the child learns to trust that the caregiver will come back. This builds an internal structure (structuralization) that is self-regulating and self-soothing, which Kohut calls transmuting internalization.<sup>2</sup>

As the child grows, one of the poles of development is along the line of a natural grandiosity. Everyone knows how children love to show off. What they may not know is how important this is to the developing sense of self. Children show off who they are—"Look at me!"—and powerful people they wish they were—"I'm Darth Vader." Here the child displays his or her emerging capacities and gleefully exhibits an expanding self. Children pridefully take pleasure in self expression. Ideally this results in a consolidated sense of self with healthy self-assertion and initiative. If parents do not provide sufficient attunement, acceptance, affirmation, and admiration of the self in its uniqueness and particularity, the normal but still infantile and unmodified (by the limits and limitations of reality) narcissism, is buried and sequestered. A narcissistic disturbance develops based on the failure of archaic narcissism to be transformed into a more mature form. A primitive (largely unconscious) omnipotent grandiosity is perpetuated and any threat to this sense of self becomes experienced as a threat to one's very existence. Actually, we have observed a common masochistic defense among clergy, against the omnipotent grandiosity: "I shouldn't demand for myself, but rather I must be all powerful to make them love me by fulfilling their needs." The demands of the unconscious grandiose self drain off the energy needed for normal maturation and development. Thus, when the clergyperson is unable to make the congregation love him or her, their self is threatened.

One way the grandiose self is maintained is through the experience of archaic selfobjects. Selfobjects, in Kohut's thinking, are "objects" which are experienced as a part of, and supportive of, the functioning of the self. Any experience that functions to evoke the structured self or to maintain the continuity of such selfhood is properly designated as a selfobject experience. For

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<sup>2</sup>Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of Self* (New York, NY: International Universities Press, 1971).

example, the active smiling and nodding from members in the congregation will bolster and sustain the preacher's self esteem and even reinforce more animated, effective preaching. The preacher's experience of his or her congregation is self-sustaining. Strictly speaking, selfobjects are neither selves— independent beings in their own right—nor objects—nothing but mental images—but the subjective aspect of a function performed by a relationship. As such, the selfobject relationship refers to an intrapsychic experience, needed for the sustenance of the self.<sup>3</sup> Mirroring selfobjects are those which respond to and confirm the self's innate sense of vitality, greatness, and perfection. The experience of the congregation's responsiveness would be an example of a mirroring self object function. Selfobjects are necessary throughout life to help maintain self-cohesion. When development is arrested, however, the self will seek objects that will help to protect and maintain whatever level of self-functioning has been achieved.

When the need for infantile selfobjects is chronic or revived by a crisis during adulthood, they are spoken of as archaic selfobjects.<sup>4</sup> Children who grow up hungry for appreciation become adults desperate for admiration; they become needy and dependent, perhaps even demanding personalities. For clergy, congregations can become selfobjects in that they can mirror the greatness of the pastor.

Stephen Johnson suggests that the family system of those with a narcissistic personality may have had a mother who needed the child to be special to live out her fantasies, along with a father who became jealous and frequently humiliated the child, especially when the child was exhibiting normal and healthy exhibitionism.<sup>5</sup> Thus the child felt used by the mother and not accepted by father. What was obviously lacking in the family system was empathic connecting, and appropriate mirroring of natural grandiosity.

The goal of this brief review of Kohut's theory is by no means to imply that all clergy suffer from narcissistic personality disorder. In fact, the hungering for attention and mirroring is a universal problem. However, understanding these themes and the way they are lived out in certain personalities may be helpful in understanding some clergy. It seems particularly helpful in explaining the need of clergy to "use" congregations to mirror their own grandiosity.

### The God Complex

For someone struggling with issues around grandiosity, a "divine calling" may further exacerbate the split between grandiosity and vulnerability. Maeder suggested that Jung's description of the God complex may well describe both clergy and psychotherapists. Jung, quoted by Maeder, noted, "Each profession carries its respective difficulties, and the danger of analysis is that of becoming

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<sup>3</sup>Ernest Wolf, *Treating the Self* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen M. Johnson, *Humanizing the Narcissistic Style* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987).

## Conclusion

We have attempted to suggest that principles from psychoanalytic self psychology and systems theory help to illuminate an understanding of the common phenomenon of burnout among clergy. Among the factors that contributed to depletion and loss of self esteem are personal (intrapsychic) variables, congregational pressures, and forces in the family.

Narcissistic grandiosity and infantile exhibitionistic strivings, complicated by the God complex, is often reinforced by an idealizing congregational transference. This frequently leads to escalating demands and expectations, especially in the context of declining family support and understanding. The pastor works harder to recruit and maintain a sustaining selfobject milieu, drifting even further away from his or her family. Family becomes increasingly angry and distant. In our case example of Pastor Randolph, he ends up a worn out and depressed man who ultimately seeks professional help.

Finally, we offer some principles of prevention, highlighting the necessity for clergy to take time for self, and to accept themselves as wounded healers, as opposed to grandiose saviors, and to understand the dynamics of congregational transference. ✠