

Five Smooth Stones



Pastoral Leadership for Emotional Systems

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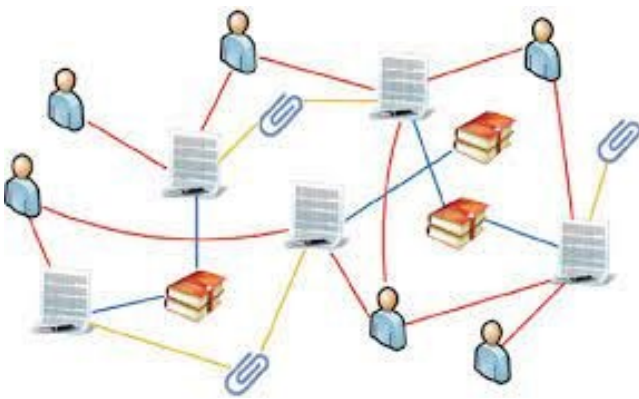
Congregations as Emotional Systems

One thing that all congregations have in common is that they are made up of human beings. While we human beings can seem rather unpredictable, there is a lot of research that suggests that our behavior follows certain patterns. Once these patterns are understood in theory, they can be observed, provided one puts in time and consistent effort to try to see objectively. The following image is a visual depiction of such a pattern that we have observed in groups. We present them as four images in a circle and call them “the Four Quadrants” to emphasize that they are cyclical. First we invite the reader to consider the images visually and will describe them in words later.

As you look at the images in each of the quadrants, what words come to mind? Can you see a relationship among them? How would you describe them? It might be helpful to consider these questions before continuing to read.



Emotional Systems: an intricate web



As people come together in close communities, whether it is a family, a group of friends, a work environment, or a church, they form an emotional system. That is to say, people are generally aware of each other’s emotional reactions and, to some degree or another, react emotionally in response. For example, a pastor is withdrawn and distracted after finding out that the choir director criticized her at rehearsal. When she joins a committee meeting in that emotional state the committee chair might become overly solicitous or complimentary in an attempt to draw her out of her mood. The committee chair is not necessarily concerned with the pastor’s state of mind (although he may believe that his motive is

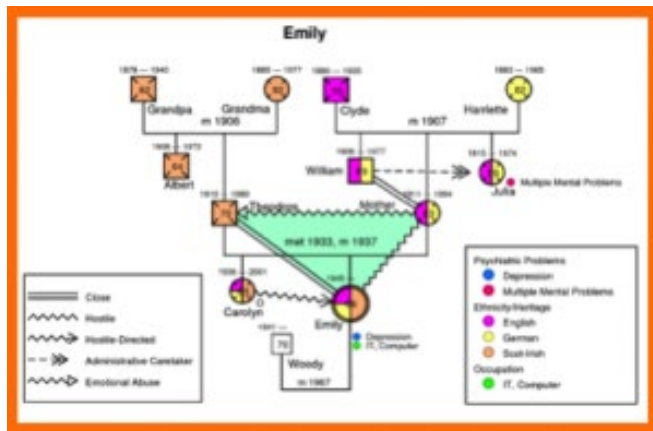
pure curiosity and compassion). Rather, her distress makes him uncomfortable to such a degree that he is compelled to try to change her mood so that he can be relieved of his discomfort. Having failed to accomplish his goal of alleviating his own emotional distress at the pastor’s distance he goes to the office and complains that the pastor is “in a mood” to the secretary who shakes her head in sympathetic agreement. The secretary’s sympathy provides the emotional closeness he is looking for and relieves his distress temporarily. The encounter with the committee chair leaves the secretary feeling claustrophobic because whenever congregants complain about the pastor she feels an anxious need to try to calm them down by listening and consoling them.

Considering a social group’s interactions from the perspective of their emotional reactions to each other we can see how complex the system becomes. If we were to imagine two people’s tendency to monitor and respond to each other’s emotional reactions as a string that connects them, then we can expand that to imagine that a close-knit group of people who monitor and respond to each other looks like an intricate web. There may be some within the group who do not experience any awareness of other people’s emotional experiences and who would therefore think that they are exceptions

to the rule or consciously in control of how they respond to the people around them. However, being emotionally distant or disconnected from others is often an expression of emotional reactivity (one is so distressed that they block awareness of the person). In Bowen Family Systems these blocks are called “cutoffs.”

The web of reactions to one another is the framework of the emotional system. Just as with a spider’s web, activity in one area reverberates throughout the web. Likewise, when an event occurs in a community the emotional system reverberates and the community may collectively respond in an effort to stabilize the emotional system. Those who are leaders function as central nodes in the web, therefore, their reactivity has a greater effect on the system as a whole than a nominal member with few connections. As a result, if an important leader in a congregation dies, the whole congregation is disrupted. If the important leader was directive and commanding the congregation may flounder or regress into immaturity in order to pressure someone else to fill the vacated role. If the important leader was a source of comfort—a quiet, reassuring presence—the congregation may enter into a period of anxious uncertainty and doubt. Major disruptions may be followed by months of odd behavior that seem out of character for the congregation but are really efforts to try to reestablish equilibrium. The behavior that follows the disrupting event can create conflicts or undermine the community’s ability to function effectively. This behavior may continue until the community leaders take intentional action to calm the system down and re-establish clear channels of communication. If this effort at establishing equilibrium is successful, the emotional system is stabilized at a functional level and will remain so until another shock occurs.

Such shocks to the system are not always bad events. For example, periods of dramatic growth, major building projects, or a wonderful new pastor can also be experienced as a shock to an emotional system, which reacts (instinctively) by trying to re-establish equilibrium. Many pastors have been welcomed warmly into a new community only to be surprised by resistance and even resentment once they begin to enact some of the very changes the congregation said they wanted in the first place. Lay leaders who have worked hard to bring new families into the church are often shocked at how unwelcoming the “old timers” can become once their efforts bear real fruit and attendance starts to increase. Such reactions come across as self-destructive and irrational; and, in fact, they are. However, lots of human behavior can seem irrational, especially when it comes out of unconscious, emotional reactivity.



Nevertheless, this emotional reactivity makes perfect sense when seen as a system trying to re-establish equilibrium. When viewed through this different lens, not only can one make sense of what seems so nonsensical, but one can have compassion for the people who are acting out in seemingly irrational and self-destructive ways. Once one grasps the concept that the congregation is functioning as an emotional system, predictable patterns of behavior begin to come into focus. We have outlined certain patterns that we have observed into four quadrants. The first quadrant is a disrupting event that has an impact on the web of emotional connections. The second represents the reverberations from that event in the form of

specific behaviors. The third quadrant signifies an attempt by an individual or small group to slow the reverberations down and build resilience in the emotional system. Finally, the fourth quadrant is a resolution of the initial impact and a resumption of normal functioning, but (hopefully) at a higher level of functioning.

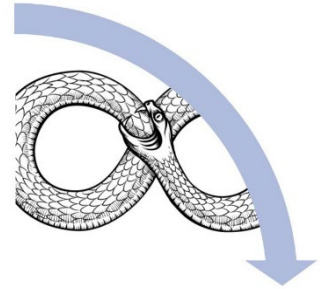
The Pattern: the four quadrants described

Let's take a closer look at each of the four quadrants.



The first quadrant we named “the bomb.” When a community experiences a significant change, it can be like a bomb exploding, disrupting well established connections within the system. These are often experienced as sudden changes, but they can be ignored, overlooked, or brushed off as “no big deal” only to be recognized in hindsight as a significant turning point in the life of the church.

The second quadrant is what we have called “the loop.” When an emotional system is disrupted, the people within it will act in ways (consciously or unconsciously) that try to reestablish what it senses is normal. For example, when a new leader enters into a community, relationships may go through a period of reshuffling. This can lead to a sense of losing closeness with each other or with important members of the community. This might cause people to reinforce closeness with each other by scapegoating someone (typically someone who holds the most vulnerable position [i.e., a youth director] or the strongest position [i.e., the pastor]). Alternatively, if a congregation finishes a building project the act of completion may give the members the sense that they are overly committed to each other and to the church. This could lead people to come up with any excuse to leave (“I can’t believe they chose that color carpet!”). The desire to leave is a reaction to a stifling sense of closeness. These kinds of behaviors are repetitive, and a congregation can get caught up in a cycle of needing either closeness or distance, thus the name for this stage, “the loop” because it is a solution that ends up perpetuating the problem.



The third quadrant is called “the pause.” This quadrant represents an intentional effort by a congregational leader or leaders to step back from the loop (in other words, get out of the emotional reactivity enough to see what is happening from an objective standpoint). Once someone finds him or herself in a more objective position, one can engage others in the system from a place of calm, clear thinking. Some people may move into this quadrant naturally without effort. Most people enter into it after a long struggle in “the loop” that leads to frustration and exhaustion, which eventually leads to spiritual and emotional growth.



The fourth quadrant is called “the new normal.” The new normal is a phase in which “the loop” has been overcome through the clarity that has emerged from “the pause” and that enabled a resolution of the effects of “the bomb.” The result is a renewed sense of intimacy and trust in the community which results in a higher level of functioning that will last until the next bomb explodes and rattles the community.

Write out your own experience

Have you ever experienced these stages in a church system? Have you ever experienced a change (positive or negative) that disrupted the emotional system? Have you ever been confused by persistent, irrational, and destructive behavior by people in groups and wondered what caused it? Have you ever been exhausted by the stress of trying to make sense of irrational behavior, or trying to control people’s destructive tendencies, or trying to change people? How have

you dealt with that stress? Did you leave in anger, or did you retreat for self-care and return with a calmer, more objective perspective? Were you able to model that sense of calm to others or did you find yourself continually engaged in a persistent conflict? If so, take some time to write about your experience. As you write out your story, avoid assigning motives to others and stick to describing the events that happened. If you write about your own emotional experience, try to phrase it with “I statements” (i.e., “I became angry,” “I needed to get distance,” “I felt isolated” as opposed to “he made me angry,” “she drove me away,” “they isolated me.”).

The Emotionally Mature System

As Christians we often talk about spiritual maturity, by which we mean to indicate a measure of our understanding of our faith and our commitment to living it out. A spiritually mature person is someone whose faith is strong enough to endure the ups and downs of life without throwing in the towel on following Jesus.

In comparison, how do we understand emotional maturity? Perhaps it can be understood as a measure of our ability to recognize and manage our own emotional responses to life and our commitment to contribute to the emotional well-being of our community. In “Emotional Systems: an intricate web,” we considered the emotional pressures a community can put on its members in order to ensure they stick together. To declare such pressures are bad and therefore should be resisted and/ or thrown out altogether is to misunderstand the nature and purpose of human community and fellowship. Community is intrinsically difficult.



There are plenty of examples of communities in which the emotional pressure to conform and the rejection of all resistance to conformity is so great all reason is lost. Such communities can harm their members and their neighbors, even to the point of committing atrocities. Can you think of some examples?

Therefore, we can say that an emotionally mature community is characterized as having bonds that allow for the connection we need while also allowing members the freedom to express their individuality without overreacting. Such a community is marked by a quiet confidence. Difficult and sensitive issues can be discussed openly yet not dominate all gatherings. Emotionally mature communities have a sense of humor and yet also have the ability to shift gears and support one another when difficulties arise. Tears, laughter, a willingness to confront inappropriate behavior, confession of wrongdoing and acts of restitution are all welcome. Boundaries around the emotionally mature community are neither porous nor impermeable. The community has standards for entry and yet people have agency to come and go as they need.

But what about conflict? Yes, like all other communities, so also the emotionally mature community has conflict. But there are certain characteristics regarding how conflict emerges and plays out that would help us to understand more about the health and well-being of the community. In groups that have a high level of anxiety, conflict dominates, even when it is not expressed openly.

When the cost of saying what one really thinks is very high for the individual, people often remain silent and rarely take their concerns directly to the person it involves. Such communities can experience a sort of uneasy peace for years; however, when disagreement comes it is expressed with a disproportionate amount of intensity (such as having members leave over the color of the carpet). Conflict in anxious communities is typically polarized. Tensions build in one group as a response to another group, and sides are taken, creating a split in the community.

In contrast, conflict in emotionally mature communities is a constant and well managed presence. People regularly disagree; however, the disagreements cross along several different axes. For example, Carol and Jaime think that Tom and Bill made a huge mistake picking the brown carpet, whereas Bill and Jaime wish Carol would pick more modern hymns. Tom and Carol believe that substitutionary atonement is a theological position that should be openly questioned even though Bill gets a little hot under the collar when the topic is brought up.

Principle of staying connected

- Maintaining relationships while avoiding fusion
- Employing humor appropriately
- Listening without alignment
- Speaking from a self-differentiated position

Principles of objective observation

Stepping back

It is hard to have a clear perspective when we feel anxious or are caught up in the emotional storm of the moment. To “step back” is to temporarily detach on an emotional and psychological level in order to assess one’s own functioning. Most people understand the advantage of taking time to be alone or to talk with a trusted advisor who is unaffected by the situation. The goal is to regain the capacity to think about the situation rather than to react to it. It is reasonable to say to someone “I would like to take some time to consider what you have said before I respond.” That lets them know that you are still connected, but that your engagement will be calm and thoughtful.

Identifying personal interests

Once we gain a little emotional and/ or psychological distance from the problem, the first step is to recognize the personal interests that we instinctively want to protect. Do I feel my reputation is threatened? Do I think an unfair burden is being placed on me? Or maybe I’m afraid my job is on the line? If we don’t acknowledge those interests we might not realize how much they color our perspective. Once identified and calmly evaluated, we might realize that those interests are not threatened at all. Or we might decide that we should openly discuss our interests so that others can be more aware of what is at stake for us.

Bracketing hurts (temporarily)

Stressed and anxious people often say hurtful things. Stressed and anxious people often hear hurtful things that were not said. Most of the time such comments, real or imagined, are not personal. People who feel powerless can lash out at others out of their own fear. When we gain emotional and/ or psychological distance and feel secure in our interests, then we are less likely to be affected by hurtful comments. If we can’t gain that kind of neutrality, we can still acknowledge our feelings and set them aside to deal with them later as a separate issue. Removing the hurt feelings from our dealings with others will help us make progress.

Identifying who, what, where, and how but not why

When stepping back to assess a situation, it is helpful to identify the elements at play. Who is active in this situation (and who may not be present but still have an influence). What actually happened? Where did it occur and how did it unfold? Some find it helpful to write this out on a white board or a sheet of paper. But it is very important to refrain from assessing the “why” of the event. Why questions usually delve into people’s motives and involve speculation, which can lead to blame, accusation, or even character assassination. Why questions can increase our anxiety because it builds a narrative bigger than the actual problem we are dealing with. It is not necessary to know why someone does something anyway, especially if we are focusing on our own responsibilities as we will outline next.

Principle of personal responsibility

Key to emotional maturity

Emotional maturity simply means that we are able to manage our own emotions. We take responsibility for our role, our reactions, and our behavior. We know our values and work to live them out, keeping the focus on ourselves rather than on others. When we do this, especially as a leader in a group, others will be more inclined to move in that direction as well.

One's major contribution to the group

We can't control what others do. We can control what we do. That might seem very limiting. In fact, often leaders exhaust themselves trying to "influence" people to do things that they are not motivated to do. This approach usually doesn't work for very long and it takes a lot of energy. What takes a lot less energy is to be clear on what we will do, what others can expect from us. When we are clear and consistent with those things, it has a big influence on the group.

Requires that one recognizes others' personal responsibilities

Responsible leaders influence the maturity level of the group. That is, they do as long as they don't take responsibility for others. One helpful exercise is to write out the responsibilities of the role that you have taken on. Put thought into it so that you won't be tempted to expand it when the stress gets high. Then stick with the list. Don't take on others' responsibilities. Let people know that you expect that they are capable of handling their own responsibilities and that you will be putting your energy into your own.

Foundation of change

The leader of an organization (like the parents in a nuclear family) is the primary generator of anxiety or the primary generator of clear thinking. That might not seem intuitive, especially when there is a member of the group who is acting out and creating difficulties. Nevertheless, if the leader is able to maintain emotional maturity, then others will pick up cues from her and respond appropriately to the reactive one, limiting the bad actor's influence. If, on the other hand, the leader responds to dysfunction with immaturity, then there will be no resistance or boundaries on the bad actor's behavior and it will spread through the system in anxious reactivity. So the leader has the capacity to increase the functioning of the group overall by focusing on her own emotional maturity.

Principle of staying connected

Maintaining relationships while avoiding fusion

In anxious systems, staying connected with people often translates into sacrificing one's self in order to lower anxiety. This looks like agreeing with the group even when you don't or overfunctioning to solve problems reactively rather than letting the group take responsibility for the problem. This kind of reactivity is often referred to as fusion, since one person tries to "fuse" into the self of another. While a temporary sense of calm may result, in the long run fusion increases anxiety because two people cannot each be responsible for themselves when they have fused into one. The result is usually that one begins to overfunction while the other underfunctions. In a healthy system, one stays connected but is conscious not to lose self to the other. That means intentionally defining the following: this is who I am, this is what I think, and this is what you can expect of me. Sometimes, this refusal to sacrifice self feels like a rejection to others and they may respond with hostility until the person gives in and gives up self for the sake of fusion. But if the person who defines self is firm in their self-differentiation and does not cut off contact from the hostile group, eventually the system will calm down and possibly even increase their own maturity level.

Employing humor appropriately

A calm, emotionally mature person has a sense of humor. While anxious people can tell jokes, usually those jokes cause upset within the group because they are motivated by anxiety. However, when one is calm, a joke will be met with slight surprise and will lighten the mood in the room. Humor can enable everyone to get a glimpse of the absurd thinking that our anxiety gets us into. There is a fine line between humor that scapegoats someone and humor that gently pokes at our group thinking. The line is drawn by the emotional maturity and anxiety level of the one telling the joke. The nature of one's humor is a good way to measure one's inner state.

Listening without alignment

Often when an anxious person begins to share some personal impressions, they are looking for the listener to confirm their perceptions. Remember, an anxious person is asking the question "what do you think of me, do you accept me, what do you want me to do." The anxious person is generating a lot of emotional pressure on the listener to side with them, even though they are often not aware of this effort. If the listener aligns himself with the anxious speaker, the speaker's mood may improve temporarily, but the anxiety level remains. But when the listener is aware of the pressure to align and yet does not, he can encourage the speaker to work through the source of anxiety on her own until she has resolved it. That kind of listening is conveyed through body language, subtle eye contact, and well measured emotional distance (not too close and not too far).

Speaking from a self-differentiated position

As stated earlier, self-differentiation is a term that comes out of Bowen Family Systems Theory and refers to the capacity to balance a sense of self in relationships. It is a remedy for fusion (which is sacrificing self for the sake of lowering anxiety in the group) as well as for cut off (which is to distance oneself in response to anxiety because one doesn't possess the capacity to manage self). Self-differentiation exists on a continuum; that is, some people have a high level of self-differentiation while others have a low level of it. Family Systems Theory posits that the level of self-differentiation doesn't change a great deal after adolescence, but that slight changes in self-differentiation, after a long period of work on self, can have a significant effect on relationships. When a person has a high level of self-differentiation, his language, physical presence, facial expressions and other subtle forms of unconscious communication express calm maturity naturally. One doesn't have to think too much about it. But what about those of us who do not possess a high level of self-differentiation? We believe that certain communication strategies can have an impact on the anxiety level of the group provided that the person employing them is sincere and is also working toward emotional maturity in all aspects of their life and work. Here are a few examples of speaking from a self-differentiated position:

- Using "I" language, or avoiding "you" statements
- Clarifying one's position without referencing others' statements or positions
- Presenting clearly what people can expect from you
- Letting people know that you will be taking time to think through your response but that you will respond in time

Nurturing Habits and Practices

Practices and habits can influence a leader toward incarnating the above three principles. In turn, when a leader lives into the principles and has the principles live in them, they move toward greater emotional maturity. Cultivating the intentional practices that become leadership habits is the focus of the sections that follow. These habits will influence a leader's ability to nurture congregational health. Emotionally mature systems do not happen by accident but by cultivating habits of behavior that lend themselves toward healthy formation, development, and skill building. Like a youth who transitions toward young adulthood, or like a young adult who transitions into a career, or like that same young adult who becomes a parent, communities grow into maturity and sustain maturity through cultivating new ways of being: habits and practices that nurture health.

Aristotle is alleged to have said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." That Aristotle never actually said this is immaterial to this essay: the point is that organizations are shaped and formed, nourished and sustained, molded into who they are by their habits and practices.

The power of habits and practices to create is the basis of another well-known saying, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results." This saying points organizations toward the truth that to move from where we are to where we want to go, habits and practices must change. At an even deeper level we can say that to move from who we are to who we want to become requires transformation brought about by implementation of new habits reinforced by new practices. To become a new "us" we must adopt new practices. Sanity is beginning to practice something different and expecting, over the course of time, different results. Likewise, to allow ourselves to be shaped and formed in the direction of health requires the adoption of new habits which, when repeated, move us from who we are to who we want to become.

In *Five Smooth Stones: Emotional Systems and Congregational Health*, we describe five habits for the pastoral leader.¹ Notice our target audience: the pastoral leader. This essay does not describe "bad churches" or "clergy killers," and in fact we reject these monikers as counter-productive toward nurturing congregational health. Rather than look out the window at other people to imagine their sins, we urge pastoral leaders to look into the mirror to ask themselves, "What can I do to function at my highest level?" Toward this purpose, the five habits described below are,

Smooth Stone # 1: The Habit of Self-Calming,

Smooth Stone # 2: The Habit of Managing Oneself,

Smooth Stone # 3: The Habit of Observing the System,

Smooth Stone # 4: The Habit of Defining Self,

Smooth Stone # 5: The Habit of Staying Connected.

Leadership is not simply an action or skill performed by an individual but an outcome of a complex relationship dynamic between the leader and the body.

Nurturing the Habit of Self-Calming

The authors have a recurring debate: Is the Family Systems Theory concept of self-differentiation (the ability to be self-defined while remaining connected to others) a state of being or a tool? That is, does self-differentiation refer to one's foundational emotional maturity or is self-differentiation a skill that can be learned? After years of robust yet friendly debate, the authors have settled on an answer to this either/ or question: Yes.

Murray Bowen, the founder of Family Systems Theory, and his students, Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke, who have been key practitioners who applied Bowen's theory to synagogues and churches, are unanimous in their agreement that self-differentiation is a reflection of emotional maturity that does not change much after adolescence. Indeed, in the previous section we wrote: Family Systems Theory posits that the level of self-differentiation doesn't change a great deal after adolescence. . . . The sentence above concluded by saying, but that slight changes in self-differentiation, after a long period of work on self, can have a significant effect on relationships. Here we see the inherent contradiction baked into Family Systems Theory: who we are doesn't change over time and yet what we do can change everything!

Using an ecosystem as a metaphor might provide a helpful analogy that helps one understand the both/ and nature of self-differentiation being a rather stable representation of one's emotional maturity and a skill that can be developed and utilized to create health. Ecosystems tend to be stable from year to year. Unless one is thinking about geological time, ecosystems don't tend to change much—deserts are not wetlands, mountains are not plains. However, introducing certain behaviors into an ecosystem can cause havoc or create health. For example, building the Hoover Dam flooded some wildlife habitats and changed the ecosystem in parts of the southwest. Conversely, the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone Park led to a cascade of environmental reactions that helped restore the original ecosystem.

Continuing to think about systems but changing the metaphor slightly, one's adult body has a fundamental stability—one's body type (i.e. ectomorph, endomorph, or mesomorph) does not change, nor does one's family medical history. However, the practices of observing a healthy diet, exercise, and mindfulness facilitate well-being while unhealthy practices usually lead to physical degradation over time.

On a pragmatic level, what the both/ and nature of self-differentiation means is that leaders of emotional systems (be they parents, pastors, or school principals) don't really change too much as they age. That is, their default reactions to situations and relationships are stable, for their self-differentiation does not change much over time. (An example of this phenomenon is the way people tend to regress when visiting family during the holidays and instead of relating to our siblings as adults we fall into the ways we related toward one another as teenagers.) However, on a pragmatic level, what this also means is that leaders can, through learning, skill development, and intentionality, begin to function differently—to relate in ways that are contrary to our “default” reactions.

Here is the dilemma: while we can learn the skills of relating to others with self-differentiation (self-differentiation as a tool), these tools are meaningless when we are emotionally triggered and default to our baseline emotional maturity (the ways we have learned to relate from interacting with our nuclear family). When emotionally triggered, we are not our best self. When emotionally triggered, we revert to childhood and adolescent ways of relating to others. What this suggests is that, if we are to be our best, true self as leaders of emotional systems, it is vital that we learn to calm ourselves when confronted with situations, circumstances, and people who trigger emotional storm within us.

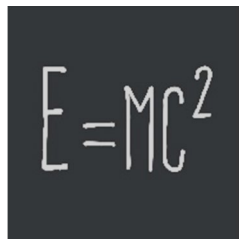
The Triune Brain

Calm begins in the neural activity of our triune brains. (As a matter of full disclosure, both authors are pastors and neither is a neurological specialist, so what is written here is a layperson's overview of the subject.) What is common knowledge, however, is that the human brain developed in stages. The technical terms for these different parts of the brain are the limbic system, the amygdala, and the neocortex. While the term triune brain is an over-simplification of the brain's vast complexity, it is a helpful shorthand to describe broad tendencies in how the brain functions. From a layperson's perspective, these three portions of the brain can be called the frog, dog and human brain. Each of the three parts of the brain have a dominant reaction to stress in one's environment.



The limbic system, or frog brain (also sometimes called the reptilian brain), is the oldest evolutionary portion of the brain and stimulates the survival instinct. The default behavior of the frog brain is fight, flight, or freeze. When the frog brain (limbic system) is triggered, the default reactivity is fight, flight, or freeze. Because this instinctual response is connected in evolutionary terms to our physical survival as a species, calming ourselves will take longer than when the dog brain or human brain are triggered. It can take up to 24 hours to de-escalate completely when the frog brain has been triggered. The best practices for calming ourselves are physical: slowing our breathing with deep, cleansing breaths to lower our heart rate; and walking, especially walking away from the situation and literally moving to a new location (new chair, new room). If a particular person or situation has triggered a frog brain reaction within you, it may be wise to reschedule any conversation that is to take place.

The amygdala, or dog brain, evolved in our earliest stages as mammals. The dog brain is responsible for memory, emotion, and connection. The default behavior of the dog brain under stress relates to human connection: to either draw closer to or more distant from those in our community. Family systems theory uses the term "fusion" to describe the instinct to draw closer to others and the term "cut-off" to describe the instinct to move away from others. When the dog brain (amygdala) is triggered, the default reactivity is communal in nature: either to draw closer to (fusion) or farther away from (cut-off) our community (spouse, family, church). As with any triggering event, the best response is to pause. Pausing leads to the freedom to choose. Because the dog brain is connected both to emotional connection and memory, another best practice is to use our mind and imagination to self-calm. Go to your "happy place" (e.g. a beach, the forest) and tell yourself you will be okay.



The neocortex, or human brain, evolved last in humankind. The human brain is responsible for complex thought, especially rational thought. The default behavior of the neocortex under stress is to justify ourselves. That is, the neocortex is an expert at creating reasons why our actions, feelings, or ideas are acceptable in the community. When the human brain (neocortex) is triggered, the default reactivity is rational justification of our ideas, feelings, or behavior. Jonathon Haidt demonstrates in *The Righteous Mind* that research participants who waited two minutes before responding to a question were significantly less reactive in their responses and more likely to respond with a variety of opinion rather than their initial opinion.²

When triggered, the default reactions that occur are neither conscious nor intentional but occur at the level of instinct. Becoming aware of when we are triggered, what situations tend to trigger unconscious reactions, and how we tend to respond to being triggered is helpful in our day-to-day relationships and essential for leadership. By becoming aware of how we express being triggered, we can learn how to respond thoughtfully, consciously, and intentionally, choosing our behavior toward others, even under stress.

Our Reactive Pattern(s)

Listed below are some of the more common patterns for how we express being triggered. Which of these patterns do you notice in yourself?

1. Thought patterns
 - a. Ruminating
 - b. “Awful-izing” – (everything seems worse than it is; self-talk is excessively negative)
 - c. Fantasizing revenge (or at least the snappy comeback)
2. Physical patterns
 - a. Blushing
 - b. Shallow breathing
 - c. Sweating (palms or pits)
 - d. Shaking
3. Behavioral patterns
 - a. Over/ Under eating
 - b. Over/ Under sleeping
 - c. “Numbing”
4. J.A.D.E. (Al-Anon acronym describes what tends to happen when one is triggered):
 - a. Justify
 - b. Argue
 - c. Defend
 - d. Explain



In addition to the above descriptions of common responses, psychologists talk about the “primary colors of emotion.” The primary colors are mad, sad, glad and afraid. Like the primary colors of a rainbow that create all the different colors, shades and nuances of our vivid world, so the primary colors of emotion, when blended together, create the variety of our emotional experiences. In regard to being triggered, these primary colors of emotion create tendencies in our default responses:

1. Mad – often leads to cut-off as an active response.
2. Sad – often leads to cut-off as a passive response.
3. Glad – often leads to fusion.
4. Afraid – leads to either cut-off or fusion depending on the circumstance.

As an unconscious behavior, our default responses to being triggered cause us to function NOT according to our best beliefs, desires or principles but in a manner less helpful and less healthy for our relationships. Therefore, it is necessary for us to identify our default responses so that we can bring to consciousness that which is unconscious. Only by identifying our default response when calm and then recognizing our default response when triggered will we be likely to exit the loop of our own stress and anxiety. Then we can move toward a more thoughtful and reflective state of being.

Practicing the Pause

A quote often attributed to Victor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor, psychiatrist, and author of *Man's Will to Meaning*³ says, "Freedom is the ability to pause between stimulus and response, and, in the pause, to choose." When an emotional trigger has occurred, pausing before reacting is the path to freedom. In the face of a triggering event, our default response is unconscious, immediate, and pervasive—that is, we don't think about our response; it just happens, always. Therefore, practicing the pause is essential.

As you are able to name in the calm, right now as you read this sentence, your own, personal tendencies when triggered, you may be better equipped to recognize later, in the triggered moment, how to pause. In the pause, you may choose how you will respond. This choice is the first step on the path to freedom when leading emotional systems.

Write about What Helps You Pause

1. How do you become aware that you have been triggered?
2. What clues, signs, or symptoms do you tend to express when triggered?
3. What helps you in the **moment** to notice that you are triggered?
4. Which of the four primary emotions do you tend to move toward when triggered: mad, sad, glad or afraid?
5. What in the **moment** practices help you to pause?
6. What habitual practices help you to be able to pause when the **moment** comes that pausing is needed?

Nurturing the Habit of Managing Oneself

Rabbi Edwin Friedman built upon Dr. Murray Bowen's eight concepts of Family Systems Theory and applied it to the congregational life of synagogues and churches. While providing a thorough summary of Family Systems in *Generation to Generation*, Friedman advanced his thinking in *A Failure of Nerve* (published posthumously) to apply Family Systems to the problem of leadership. For Friedman, managing one's Self is a leader's primary responsibility, especially given that leaders will be confronted by resistance and sabotage due to widespread anxiety in our culture and congregations.

Core Concepts in Dialogue

One way to understand Friedman is to see him as engaging a conversation between two core concepts: homeostasis and differentiation of self.

1. Homeostasis (balance): "Homeostasis is the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence. The concept of homeostasis brings out the resistance families have to change. (*Generation to Generation*, p. 23)
2. Differentiation of Self: "Differentiation means the capacity of a family member to define his or her own life's goals and values apart from surrounding pressures, to say 'I' when others are demanding 'you' and 'we.' It includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one's own destiny and emotional being." (*Generation to Generation*, page 39)

For Friedman, a self-differentiated leader evokes resistance and sabotage simply by being self-differentiated. Therefore, the task of leadership is to remain true to one's core values, persevere in maintaining one's integrity, while remaining connected to one's flock (and therefore resisting the temptation to fuse with them, blame them, or cut them off).

The Self-Differentiated Leader has,

1. the capacity to separate oneself from surrounding emotional processes,
2. the capacity to obtain clarity about one's principles and vision,
3. the capacity to self-regulate one's emotions when confronted by reactive sabotage,
4. the willingness to be exposed and be vulnerable,
5. the willingness to emphasize strength, not pathology,
6. the willingness to emphasize challenge, not comfort,
7. the willingness to emphasize differentiation in self and invite it from others, not herding for togetherness,
8. the willingness to question the widespread triumphing of data over maturity, technique over stamina, and empathy over personal responsibility,
9. the persistence to face resistance or downright rejection.

The Undifferentiated Leader

1. is a highly anxious risk-avoider,
2. is more concerned with good feelings than with progress,
3. is one whose life revolves around the axis of consensus,
4. prefers peace to progress,
5. mistakes another's well-defined stand for coercion,
6. fails to see how in any family or institution a perpetual concern for consensus leverages power to the extremists,
7. lacks the nerve to venture out of the calm eye of good feelings and togetherness and weather the storm of protest that inevitably surrounds a leader's self-definition.

Write about your strengths and challenges

For both the Self-Differentiated Leader list and the Undifferentiated Leader list, rank the characteristics according to one of the following rubrics:

1. # 1 is the easiest for me vs. # 9 (# 7) is the most difficult for me.
2. # 1 is most like me vs. # 9 (# 7) is least like me.

Friedman Quotes: *A Failure of Nerve*

“Chronic anxiety is systemic; it is deeper and more embracing than community nervousness. Rather than something that resides within the psyche of each one, it is something that can envelope, if not actually connect, people. It is a regressive emotional process that is quite different from the more familiar, acute anxiety we experience over specific concerns. Its expression is not dependent on time or events, even though specific happenings could seem to trigger it, and it has a way of reinforcing its own momentum. Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes, where any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than trying to disperse the fumes. The issues over which chronically anxious systems become concerned, therefore, are more likely to be the focus of their anxiety rather than its cause.” (A Failure of Nerve, p. 58)

“Eventually I came to see that this ‘resistance,’ as it is usually called, is more than a reaction to novelty; it is part and parcel of the systemic process of leadership. Sabotage is not merely something to be avoided or wished away; instead, it comes with the territory of leading, whether the ‘territory’ is a family or an organization. And a leader’s capacity to recognize sabotage for what it is—that is, a systemic phenomenon connected to the shifting balances in the emotional processes of a relationship system and not to the institution’s specific issues, makeup, or goals—is the key to the kingdom. (A Failure of Nerve, p. 11)

“Those five characteristics are: 1. Reactivity: the vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another. 2. Herding: a process through which the forces for togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members. 3. Blame displacement: an emotional state in which family members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny. 4. A quick-fix mentality: a low threshold for pain that constantly seeks symptom relief rather than fundamental change. 5. Lack of well-differentiated leadership: a failure of nerve that both stems from and contributes to the first four.” (A Failure of Nerve, p. 60)

"Leadership through self-differentiation has a significantly different effect on the paradox of resistance than do the models of leadership through charisma or consensus. It eliminates the leverage of the dependent; it reduces conflict of wills; and it accomplishes these without increasing the potential for cloning." (A Failure of Nerve, p. 231)

"Leaders who keep on working on their own self-differentiation...automatically challenge their followers to do the same and, thus, maximize the process of self-differentiation throughout the entire family." (A Failure of Nerve, p. 233)

"Leadership through self-differentiation is not easy; learning techniques and imbibing data are far easier. Nor is striving or achieving success as a leader without pain: there is the pain of isolation, the pain of loneliness, the pain of personal attacks, the pain of losing friends. That's what leadership is all about." (A Failure of Nerve, p. 247)

Applying Friedman to Ministry

In Presbyterian churches, our polity disperses authority, but it cannot disperse leadership. Here are some helpful questions pastors can ask themselves regarding their own leadership:

1. What helps me focus on my responsibility for self—managing my own emotions and functioning rather than focus on others?
2. What helps me function as an emotional “dampener” (anxiety stops with me) rather than an emotional “transformer” (passing anxiety along)?
3. When I feel anxious, what helps me avoid the temptations to defend myself and blame others and/ or avoid others (cut-off)?
4. When I feel anxious, what helps me “speak the truth in love” rather than seek peace at all costs (fusion)?
5. What helps me have clarity about my values and goals before taking leadership action?
6. When encountering resistance or sabotage, what helps me express my core values?
7. What helps me have clarity about my responsibility (what “belongs” to me versus what “belongs” to others)?
8. What helps me maintain proper boundaries regarding my responsibility (not over or under functioning)?
9. What helps me lead (e.g., a Session meeting) toward encouraging healthy boundaries, accountability and self-differentiation?
10. What helps me notice not just what I am saying (the words I use) but my posture and tone as well?
11. What helps me see my role in an emotional issue in the congregation such that I can encourage health by changing my role in future situations?
12. What can I do to function at my highest level?

Write about your strengths and challenges

Answer each of the above questions in one or two sentences. If a question “stumps” you or presents a unique challenge, set it aside for later. Spend some time each day for the next week pondering why this question presents a unique challenge to you. Journal about what you notice and wonder?

Nurturing the Habit of Observing the System



Jane Goodall may be the patron saint of observational science. Goodall made a career and changed the hearts and minds of the world through her patient, humble, meticulous observing of primates. One of Goodall's gifts to the world was to demonstrate the transformative power of observation: intense, focused, perseverant, and curious. Goodall was present with the primates but not enmeshed with them; while being a part of their environment, Goodall remained sufficiently distinct. She was near the primates but not so close as to be unable to describe their family system with clarity and specificity. Goodall would have made an excellent pastoral leader.

In the spirit of Jane Goodall, Murray Bowen, the founder of family systems theory, taught that relational healing requires us to be connected yet distinct—to be our own person yet authentically and relationally connected to others. We need to be a Self even as we share our Self with others. Bowen famously instructed his students to “put your lab coat on” in order to observe what is actually happening rather than see a relationship, situation, or event through the lens of our biases, prejudice or pre-conceived expectations.

For church leaders, especially pastors, it is far too easy to become enmeshed with our flock: easy and understandable! We love our people. We desire good for them. We want to say yes to their requests for pastoral care, to bless their ministry ideas, and to cultivate an esprit d'corps that makes them (and us) feel like Church. Unfortunately, while the desire to connect is easy and understandable, it is not always healthy, especially if it prevents us from observing the emotional and relational dynamics of the congregation accurately.

Church leaders need a researcher's eye and ear suggests Bowen. And church leaders need to utilize the power of observation suggests Goodall's example. Thus, church leaders are at our best when we are our own Self even while authentically connected with our flock. This balance between being a Self while sharing a Self explains why it is so helpful to start a sentence, “I notice that...” or, “I wonder about...” These sentences put us in an observational posture when interacting with others. These sentences invite us to own our own clarity of perspective and values, yet also invite us to a deep curiosity about others.

Two of family system's tools of the trade are a genogram and social map (see figures on the next page). A genogram diagrams the specific, distinct, and inter-connected relationships within a family. In a similar manner, a social map seeks to convey the relational connections (and disconnections) that exist in an organization. Both a genogram and a social map allow us to step back, get some emotional distance from a situation, and begin to channel our inner Jane Goodall. In seeing relational and emotional dynamics diagrammed, we are better able to respond to the situation with “I notice that...” or, “I wonder about...” statements that help us observe what actually is happening in our congregations rather than what we expect or hope to happen.

express a personal opinion and also see how others feel about a question. A continuum exercise focused on individual or congregational comfort with conflict can be enlightening. Here are the instructions:

Create a space in the room where people can line up on a continuum from 1 to 10. For example, place a chair on each end of a room and designate one side 1 and the other 10. If you are meeting electronically, have participants ready with a sharpie pen and paper. Next present the following questions to the group and have them line up on the continuum standing toward more toward one side of the room, the other side of the room, or somewhere in the middle based on how strongly they agree with a statement (or write a number between 1 – 10 on their paper if it is a virtual event).

Personal Preference Continuum:

1 represents “I got this, it's easy” and 10 “I avoid this whenever possible.”

1. Church disagreements that lead to emotional intensity.
2. Situations that lead to one or more people using raised voices.
3. Situations where there is a clear bully in the room and everyone else is silent.
4. Explicit criticism of your work.
5. Implicit criticism of your work.
6. Brainstorming situations where everyone seems to have a different idea and “knows” their idea is the best.
7. When there is strong disagreement between “The Traditionalists” and “The Entrepreneurs.”
8. When there is a high level of uncertainty and church leadership is at a loss for how to move forward.

Church Continuum:

1 represents strong agreement with the 1st statement and 10 strong agreement with the second.

1. Disagreement means a lack of respect or caring vs. Disagreement means engagement and involvement.
2. Leaders should discourage differences vs. Leaders should encourage differences.
3. In stress created by change, only a few voices are heard vs. In stress created by change, many voices are heard.
4. In stress created by change, direct dialogue decreases and indirect dialogue (triangling) increases vs. In stress created by change, direct dialogue increases.
5. It is common for individuals to react defensively or explosively toward the views of others vs. It is common for individuals to react calmly and thoughtfully toward the views of others.
6. It is common for individuals to speak for others: “Everyone thinks...” vs. It is common for individuals to speak for themselves only.
7. It is common for groups to focus primarily on solutions or positions vs. It is common for groups to focus on the process: “What are our needs?” “How can we creatively fulfill multiple interests...?”
8. In my congregation, timing is uneven – delay, delay, then rush at the end vs. In my congregation, timing is steady – plan, discuss, and decide in due course.
9. Past conflicts are either never discussed or are talked about in black/ white terms vs. Individuals are aware of past hurts, own their role in past conflicts, and take responsibility not to project the past into the present.

Nurturing the Habit of Defining Oneself

Self-differentiation as pastoral superpower?



Practicing self-differentiation can be defined as having the ability to articulate and communicate what you think, what you value and what others can expect from you. The self-differentiated leader will express this while calm and while seeking to remain connected to others. The math of self-differentiation is simple:

Self-Definition + Connection = Self-Differentiation.

Self-differentiation is a term that comes out of family systems theory and presumes a number of truths:

- You have to be a self to share a self.
- The greatest gift you can give another is to be who you are.
- I am not you, you are not me, and that's okay, we can still be friends.

For church leaders, especially clergy, self-differentiation is a pastoral superpower. Ministers, often people-pleasers both by personality and job necessity, can lose their own sense of conviction in their efforts to please—at the cost of their self-definition. Other ministers react to the inevitable congregational pressure to conform by ardently asserting their own convictions—often at the cost of being connected to their congregants. The practice of self-differentiation, if it becomes a habit, will prove empowering for clergy, allowing them to both express their convictions and remain connected to their congregants.



A helpful practice to aid church leaders toward developing the habit of self-differentiation is to make I-statements. These I-statements should be rooted in your perceptions, grounded in your values, and expressed as your commitments to act in a certain way. To nurture your habit of self-differentiation, you would do well to replace your False Self with your True Self:

False Self Questions⁴

- What do you think of me?
- Do you accept me?
- What do you want me to do?

True Self Statements

- I think... (guided by your perception of the situation).
- I value... (guided by your core beliefs).
- What you can expect from me is... (your commitment to act).

The false self versus the true self dichotomy suggested above lives within everyone. All of us are both our false and true selves depending upon the day, the hour, and the circumstance in which we find ourselves. The work of pastoral self-differentiation is the progress toward acting more often from the place of our true self and less often from the place of our false self. How can we know the difference? The difference is discovered not in the FOG but in WHO we are.

False Self Statements

- Motivated by Fear
- Motivated by Obligation
- Motivated by Guilt

True Self Statements

- Made Willingly
- Made Honestly
- Made Openly

Core Convictions: the path to self-definition

Renee Descartes wrote, “*Cogito ergo sum*” – I think, therefore, I am. This cornerstone of modern philosophy seeks to emphasize the primacy of reason for understanding. With all due respect to the significance of reason, the authors want to posit a second, pivotal skill: *credo ergo sum*—I believe, therefore, I am.

What do we mean by “believe”? We are not seeking a particular doctrinal purity nor confessional standard but rather the kind of conviction that grows from the roots of one’s core values. A leader’s beliefs, as values-based convictions, when expressed as self-differentiation, guide the leader and express themselves within an organization. What are your beliefs? How do you live according to the dictum *credo ergo sum*?



A few years ago National Public Radio (NPR) had a series entitled “This I Believe,” which invited individuals to express their own sense of *credo*. Here are some of the responses.⁵

1. John Fountain, a Chicago journalist, talked about how the formative experience of his childhood, seeing his father arrested for domestic violence, was transformed when he came to know his true Father, the God of Jesus Christ, the one he now calls Abba.
2. Penn Gillette, of Penn and Teller magician fame, spoke eloquently about how his belief that there is no god drives him to seek goodness, beauty, truth and love in this world, for, according to his belief, this world is all we have.
3. Kathleen Dahlen, a freelance writer from Washington state, spoke poignantly about her experience of witnessing an autopsy in a college anatomy class and her revelation that the beauty of human life must consist of more than “only one’s biology” and that there was a “holy core that whispers to me of God.”

Finally, Brene Brown reminds us: if you have more than two or three core values you have no values at all.⁶ Diffusion is the enemy of focus and only focus is the path to identifying and living according to our values. What are your core values? What makes you WHO you are as a pastoral leader? Write out your responses to these questions and share the responses with a trusted colleague.

Nurturing the Habit of Staying Connected

Unlocking Your Superpower

In the previous section we called self-differentiation a pastoral superpower and suggested the habit of self-differentiation can be empowering to pastors. As a practice, self-differentiation blesses a church leader with the ability both to be true to one's personal convictions and respectful of others' convictions while remaining in a mutually supportive, connective relationship. Self-definition alone does not equal self-differentiation. The math of self-differentiation remains the same:

$$\text{Self-Definition} + \text{Connection} = \text{Self-Differentiation.}$$

So how does one unlock this superpower?

The previous section focused on the first half of the above equation: self-definition. However, equally vital is the second half of the equation: connection. The rule of thumb for pastoral leaders is to move toward conflict rather than away from it. More specifically, move toward the person with whom the waters are troubled, whose feathers are ruffled, who pushes your buttons, rather than keep them at arm's length distance. This need to move toward another rather than away from them becomes critical when a pastoral leader encounters resistance or sabotage.

As noted in the section on Nurturing the Habit of Managing Oneself, Rabbi Edwin Friedman argues that resistance and sabotage are symptoms of healthy leadership and necessary for growth in an organization's health:



“Eventually I came to see that this ‘resistance,’ as it is usually called, is more than a reaction to novelty; it is part and parcel of the systemic process of leadership. Sabotage is not merely something to be avoided or wished away; instead, it comes with the territory of leading, whether the ‘territory’ is a family or an organization. And a leader’s capacity to recognize sabotage for what it is—that is, a systemic phenomenon connected to the shifting balances in the emotional processes of a relationship system and not to the institution’s specific issues, makeup, or goals—is the key to the kingdom.” (A Failure of Nerve, p. 11)

“Leadership through self-differentiation has a significantly different effect on the paradox of resistance than do the models of leadership through charisma or consensus. It eliminates the leverage of the dependent; it reduces conflict of wills; and it accomplishes these without increasing the potential for cloning.” (A Failure of Nerve, p. 231)

“Leaders who keep on working on their own self-differentiation, “...automatically challenge their followers to do the same and, thus, maximize the process of self-differentiation throughout the entire family.” (A Failure of Nerve, p. 233)

“Leadership through self-differentiation is not easy; learning techniques and imbibing data are far easier. Nor is striving or achieving success as a leader without pain: there is the pain of isolation, the pain of loneliness, the pain of personal attacks, the pain of losing friends. That’s what leadership is all about.” (A Failure of Nerve, p. 247)

One way to imagine unlocking the superpower of self-differentiation is through the metaphor of space. Self-differentiation creates enough space between I and Thou⁷ that I can be me and you can be you. It creates just enough space that we are not suffocated but not too much space that we are unable to reach out and connect. When self-differentiation is absent, it can feel like someone is trying to control us. Richard Blackburn from the Lombard-Mennonite Peace Center suggests this is not the healthiest means of communication: “Whenever we are trying to direct the self of the other, it will become a battle of wills.”⁸

A helpful practice for moving toward the habit of self-differentiation is to use sentences that create space.

- “I notice that...”
- “I wonder about...”

Sentences that begin with “I notice” and “I wonder” are fairly neutral statements that invite mutual exploration rather than defensiveness. Any statement that invites a non-defensive, non-reactive response tends to create a conversational and relational environment. The use of these statements makes it easier for both oneself and the other person to speak from the place of self-differentiation.

Contrast the feel of “I notice...” and “I wonder...” with the feel of starting a response with “Why?” or “How come?” Starting a sentence with “Why?” or “How come?” invites defensiveness. The sub-text of a why or how come statement is that something was done wrong for which an explanation or justification is required. It often feels like an attack.

A similar practice to avoid, if possible, is to start a response with “You...” Starting a sentence with “You...” (which is known as “You-Language” and is the opposite of “I-Language”), puts the focus on the other person rather than yourself and is generally experienced as accusatory, putting the other person on the defensive.

Practicing Empathy



Empathy nurtures connection. Brene Brown says, “Empathy is a vulnerable choice that connects with something in myself that is also painful...Empathy supports connection. Sympathy drives disconnection,”⁹ and without connection all pastoral leadership suffers. One might define empathy as,

Vulnerability + Compassion = Empathy.

Personal connection created by empathy allows for bridges of understanding to be built between people, knocks down barriers to honest sharing, and supports curious, respectful engagement with those around us, especially if we disagree with each other. Empathy is required if we are to form the kind of interpersonal connections that allow for us to receive influence from each other: remaining open, kind, inquisitive, and respectful in the face of differences. As Alan Alda notes, “We are not really listening until we become willing to be changed by what we hear.”

Personal connection created by empathy invites the courage to speak the truth in love to one another. As stated above in the section on the habit of core and consistent, self-differentiation is a kind of pastoral superpower. Not noted above but affirmed here is that self-differentiation is rooted in personal honesty, sprouting from seeds of compassion, bearing fruit as one risks vulnerability yet invites connection. In other words, self-differentiation—the ability to express our core values in a calm manner and remain connected with others with whom we disagree—is predicated on empathy.



Personal connection created by empathy fuels the ability to practice foundational, Christian spirituality. Pastoral leadership is difficult. It is difficult and pastoral leaders will fail and lead people who will fail. Therefore, regret, confession, and forgiveness are cornerstones of ministry both from the pastoral leader and from those whom she or he serves. Without empathy (vulnerability + compassion), the vulnerability of regret and confession, as well as the compassion of forgiveness, are absent, and both the pastoral leader and the community suffer as a result.

Empathy Continuum

Listed below are four continuum exercises. For each exercise, where do you stand along the continuum?

Continuum exercise topic: empathy

1. I find it easy and natural to express empathy toward others or...
2. I struggle and must be intentional to express empathy toward others.

Continuum exercise topic: receiving influence

1. I welcome and enjoy receiving influence from others or...
2. I resist allowing others to influence me.

Continuum exercise topic: self-differentiation

1. I am comfortable speaking my opinions even when I know others disagree or...
2. I modify my opinions when I know others disagree.

Continuum exercise topic: foundational Christian practices

1. I often express regret and confession to others when I have wronged them or...
2. I usually argue I did nothing wrong, and resist admitting mistakes.

Appendix A:

Overview of Family Systems Theory

Bowen's Eight Concepts of Family Systems Theory¹⁰

Concept #1 – Nuclear Family Emotional System (pp. 5-26)

1. Two types of anxiety:
 - a. Acute – limited, situational, triggers physiological reaction
 - b. Chronic – “additive” anxiety that builds up over time as patterned behavior
2. Anxiety in families tends toward one of two responses:
 - a. Individuality – we want to be separate, be distinct, our own person
 - b. Togetherness – we allow ourselves to be defined by the group
 - i. Fusion – too much togetherness is described as “fusion,” which is the sense that one’s thinking, feeling and behaving is directed by the group dynamic more than one’s core principles, values and beliefs
3. Families togetherness tends toward fusion, which is expressed as:
 - a. Triangling
 - b. Conflict
 - c. Distancing
 - d. Over/ Underfunctioning

Coaching Pointer

Notice and interrupt the unhealthy patterns within the system.

Concept #2 – Differentiation of Self Scale (pp. 27-46)

1. Lower differentiation of self is expressed as:
 - a. Fused togetherness in relationship
 - b. Fused thinking and feeling dynamic
 - c. Definition of self through lens of group
 - d. Definition of beliefs through lens of group
 - e. Tends to transmit anxiety reflexively, automatically, instinctually
2. Higher differentiation of self is expressed as:
 - a. Definition of self as core convictions, values and beliefs
 - b. Tends to tolerate and express individuality yet remain in relationship
 - c. Tends to clarify one’s own thinking and feeling
3. Distinction between higher and lower differentiation of self a function of:

- a. Basic Self:
 - i. Higher on scale
 - ii. Private identity
 - iii. Strong boundaries
 - iv. Led by principle
- b. Pseudo Self:
 - i. Lower on scale
 - ii. Public face/ persona
 - iii. Porous boundaries
 - iv. Blurs feelings and facts

Coaching Pointer

Work on Self-definition and connection in relationships (also called self-differentiation)

Concept #3 – Triangles (pp. 47-56)

1. Triangles are the basic building block of relationship – like a molecule
 - a. Two person relationships are fundamentally unstable
 - b. Three person relationships are sought instinctively, unintentionally, inevitably
 - c. Uncomfortable person in the two person relationship is often the one who initiates the triangle in order to bring in a third party, thereby making the third party the new uncomfortable one in the triangle.
2. Nature of Triangles:
 - a. Automatic, learned in family
 - b. Constantly in motion
3. Well-known moves to create a triangle:
 - a. Gossip
 - b. Rumor mongering
 - c. Insinuations
4. Triangling and group-think:
 - a. Often when a large group is “triggered” by an issue, the group triangles with the issue only to discover the issue is not the source of anxiety.
 - b. It’s about our relationships!
5. De-triangling?
 - a. There is no such thing as “detriangling,” only moving to an outside position in which one is self-defined and living from one’s “basic self.”

Coaching pointers

Stay calm

Stay connected to both sides of the triangle

Put the two, other sides of the triangle together

Best work is to help leaders stay calm, clear and connected

Concept #4 – Cut-off (pp. 57-64)

1. Cut-off is the process of separation, isolation, running away or denying the importance of one's nuclear family:
 - a. Includes all relationships but especially with one's family
 - b. Internal (psychic) or geographic (location)
 - i. May be a combination of emotional isolation and physical distance
 - c. Gradual or sudden
 - d. Mutual or unilateral
 - e. Chosen or forced
2. Cut-off is a reaction to fusion with parents and expresses discomfort with the fusion
3. Cut-off is likely to lead to more intense expressions of similar patterns found in parental marriage as well as lead one's children to do the same

Coaching Pointer

Stay connected with one's parents, children, colleagues, employees, etc.

Concept #5 – Family Projection Process (pp. 65-75)

1. The fundamental family projection of anxiety originates from the father-mother dynamic projecting anxiety on to their child to create a Father-Mother-Child triangle. Such fundamental triangles often have the following characteristics:
 - a. Automatic, not chosen
 - b. Varying levels of intensity
 - c. Universal – (everybody does it and has had it done to them!)
 - d. Off-loads Father-Mother anxiety on to the child
 - e. Negative or positive focus matters not; each is a projection of anxiety
 - i. Neglect or over-focus amount to a similar dynamic
2. The family projection process is different for different children
 - a. Other siblings experience less anxiety, less communication, less cut-off from the parents

3. Fusion between parents and child is both an expression of the parents' lower self-differentiation as well as leads to a lower self-differentiation in the child.
 - a. As parents' self-differentiate, the child often "drops symptoms and show better development" (72).
4. Factors that tend to lead toward family projection, (and the fusion that accompanies it), are:
 - a. Time of birth
 - b. Focus on youngest or oldest
 - c. Sibling with a problem
 - d. Child with a handicap

Coaching Pointers

Don't over-focus

Don't over-function

Don't react

Keep calm, calm, calm!

Concept #5 – Multi-Generational Transmission Process (pp. 75-84)

1. The multi-generational transmission process (MGTP) is "simply the family projection process writ large through the generations" (76).
 - a. The MGT process is diagrammed using a **genogram**, which is a kind of psycho-social family tree
2. As children move forward through the generations:
 - a. Greater fusion with one's parents leads to a lower level of self-differentiation
 - b. Equivalent fusion (as parents had with grandparents) leads to essentially the same self-differentiation
 - c. Lesser fusion with one's parents leads to a higher level of self-differentiation
 - i. Benefits include:
 1. Avoiding cut-off
 2. Feeling connected
 3. More grounded
 4. Better functioning
3. Key **FACTS** to look for in the multi-generational transmission process (genogram):
 - a. Longevity of family members
 - b. Health
 - c. Locations lived; dates moved
 - d. Professions and income
 - e. Reproductive histories, including births, deaths, abortions and miscarriages
4. Key **THEMES** to look for in the multi-generational transmission process (genogram):
 - a. Death
 - b. Survival
 - c. Reproduction

- d. Money
 - e. Religion
 - f. Separation and divorce
5. Key NODAL POINTS and WATERSHED EVENTS to look for in the multi-generational transmission process (genogram):
- a. Nodal Events:
 - i. Birth / loss of a child
 - ii. Grandparents becoming incapacitated or moving in
 - b. Watershed Events:
 - i. Immigration
 - ii. Severe suffering
 - iii. War, famine, holocaust

Coaching Pointers

Get the factual history of a family or organization

Pay close attention to nodal points and watershed events

Play the role of a researcher, “I wonder...”

Concept #7 – Sibling Position (pp. 85-100)

1. Sibling position recognizes it is not just parents who affect children but a child’s siblings also affect one another
 - a. The dynamics of sibling position are a matrix of ORDER (oldest to youngest) and MIX (male, female, male/ female, twin and only)
 - b. Characteristic descriptions – c.f. pages 88-92
2. Pairing possibilities in couples:
 - a. (Relationships move from easier – a, b and c – to more difficult – d, e and f)
 - b. Without rank or sex conflict (e.g. oldest brother of sisters, youngest sister of brothers)
 - c. Partial sex conflict (e.g. oldest brother of sisters, youngest sister of sisters)
 - d. Rank or sex conflict (e.g. oldest brother of sisters, oldest sister of brothers)
 - e. Rank or partial sex conflict (e.g. oldest brother of sisters, oldest sister of sisters)
 - f. Complete rank and sex conflict (e.g. oldest brother of brothers, oldest sister of sisters)
3. Key characteristics of sibling position:
 - a. Oldests: overfunctioning
 - b. Youngests: underfunctioning
 - c. Two oldests: conflict
 - d. Two youngests: flounder but no conflict
 - e. Onlys: more distant
 - f. Oldest and youngest: invites over/ underfunctioning

4. Benefits of understanding sibling position:
 - a. Invites tolerance, understanding and self-awareness
 - b. Invites taking glitches less personally
 - c. Helps folks get unstuck when in patterned conflict

Coaching Pointers

Be aware of your own sibling position

Become aware of how your sibling position interacts with others

Concept #8 – Emotional Process in Society (pp. 101-115)

1. During periods of societal anxiety families tend to follow the same cyclical pattern:
 - a. Anxiety leads to fusion, immaturity and emotional thinking
 - b. Calm, principled behavior leads to maturity and progression
 - c. Current societal timeline (1950 to present) indicates increased anxiety and patterns of increasingly destructive behavior (e.g. drug use, unmarried child bearing, etc.)

2. The helping professions have not helped!
 - a. Four symptoms have systematically disempowered parental leadership, cultivated immature relationships, and distorted the appropriate and healthy role parents have in healthy families:
 - i. Permissiveness in childbearing
 1. “Parents unsure or unable to take a leadership role in their own families” (105).
 - ii. Pleasure principle
 1. If main goal = avoid pain and increase pleasure, then integrity, commitment and other signs of maturity are compromised
 - iii. Sexual revolution
 1. Freud, Kinsey, et. al. legitimized emotionally immature expressions of sexuality
 - iv. Blaming of parents
 1. Leads away from self-awareness, responsibility and acting from core convictions

3. Societal regression – challenge and opportunity:
 - a. “When the anxiety in a system increases, people tend to do more of what they have always done...creating a vicious cycle” (110).
 - b. “A regression that began in a relationship system can be resolved in a relationship system” (110).

Coaching Pointers

Calm one’s emotions – learn the facts, focus on facts.

Start to think systems.

Step out of patterned positions.

Take positions based on principle.

Endnotes

¹ The LEST training (Leading Emotional Systems Training) is based on the work of Murray Bowen and other practitioners of Family Systems Theory (sometimes called emotional family systems or emotional systems). A review of Bowen's eight, core concepts, with coaching pointers included, is found in Appendix A. These coaching pointers serve as a reminder / refresher course on the basics of family system's leadership. Additional material outlining Bowen's concepts is found in the section on Nurturing the Habit of Managing Oneself and is based on Rabbi Edwin Friedman's application of Bowen's concepts for synagogue and congregational leadership.)

² Jonathon Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*. (Vintage: New York), 2013.

³ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon Press: Boston), 1959. The quote is also attributed to psychologist Rollo May, though it appears to have originated with Thomas Walton Galloway in *The Use of Motives in Teaching Morals and Religion* (1917). Our thanks to our friend Teri Conrad, professional librarian extraordinaire, for her literary archeological work in finding the true source of this oft-paraphrased quote.

⁴ Kerr, Michael, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families*. (W. W. Norton & Company: Kindle).

⁵ National Public Radio, *This I Believe*. (<https://www.npr.org/series/4538138/this-i-believe>), accessed in 2013.

⁶ Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Heart*. New York: Random House, 2018.

⁷ I and Thou refers to Rabbi Martin Buber's book by the same name and is short-hand for the kind of relationships in which persons are valued and treated with dignity, as opposed to I-It relationships in which persons are commodified and treated as objects.

⁸ Richard Blackburn, "Clergy Clinic." Lombard-Mennonite Peace Center, Chicago, 2016.

⁹ Brene Brown, *Brene Brown on Empathy*. (YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>), accessed May, 20, 2019.

¹⁰ Gilbert, *ibid.*.