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Cultivating Empowerment Through Ecologies of Care

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Case Study Analysis

I am a Young Adult and Youth Lay Leader at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena, CA. I am a UU convert who has a history with Catholicism, Episcopalianism, Quaker meetings, Buddhism, and Wicca. In addition to being a floater for the Director of Religious Education to place wherever and whenever she needs me, I am one of the teachers of our 8<sup>th</sup> grade Rites of Passage program. The senior minister has previously asked me to fill his pulpit, trusting me with the congregation from a liturgical standpoint, and I serve on the Young Adult advisory committee he formed to help him both preserve and renew the church's vitality for the future as he moves into retirement and we seek new leadership. We are a large church by UU standards (approximately 800 members) and are considered to be quite healthy as a church community. The campus is in an urban location that is difficult to reach by public transportation. Despite our strength of community and high membership, the American economic troubles of the last several years have hit our congregation pretty hard and our budget is a struggle to maintain. Without the income from renting our space to a school during the week and to special events nights and weekends, we would not survive in our current state. We have an ongoing support relationship with the Alliance for the Care of Abused Children and have several social workers in our membership.

Carol and Ryan are a native-English-speaking, middle-aged, white, cisgender, upper-middle class, opposite-sex couple who have been members in our congregation for many years. They have two children, Amelia (8) and James (5), who attend a private school in Pasadena. They would like to move to South Pasadena in order to have access to a better public school system, but bad loans made by other residents in their neighborhood have crashed their housing market and they are trying to wait out the cycle until they can get back a larger portion of the

value they paid. Ryan was, until last year, a very successful television writer for a major network show. Carol was a part-time researcher at JPL and has moved up into full-time work and being the primary breadwinner since her husband's show was cancelled. Ryan was reared without a religious affiliation and identifies as a Humanist. Carol was reared as Episcopalian and enjoys the progressive theology of UUism, but misses the "smells and bells" of a high church setting and still holds aspects of her Christian identity from a religious and cultural perspective. They chose a UU church because it was a community that would support their mixed-faith marriage. Carol is one of my co-teachers for the Rites of Passage program in addition to serving on the Youth Religious Education committee. Ryan's unemployment has allowed him to devote more time to volunteering, and the Nominating Committee took advantage of this hole in his commitments and asked him to serve as President of the Board of Trustees (a two-year term).

When Carol came to see me about what she and her family had been going through, I had many reactions all at once that needed to be processed and organized. The very first item was to remember that Carol was the one in front of me, right here and right now, and that above all else I needed to make sure she was the center of my attention. Al Miles says that one of practical steps to remember in a possible domestic violence situation is not just listening to the victim, but believing them as well.<sup>1</sup> This was the starting point for me during our holy encounter that night, when my fellow congregant came to me with incredible vulnerability: to hear her story and to validate her experience as someone whose judgement she has chosen to trust.

From there, I needed to immediately assess which parts of my lived experience were going to be relevant to this situation, in both positive and negative ways. I can relate to Carol as a

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<sup>1</sup> Al Miles, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 41.

theist who turns to God in times of difficulty; this is a hard theology to share with others in a congregation that is 60% or more Atheist of some kind. Our time co-teaching has allowed Carol and me to bond through our love for God, and I am one of the few congregants who would understand what it feels like to believe in a God and worry about what silence in response to prayer might mean. I am also a survivor of an emotionally and mentally abusive marriage, which could be both a positive and a negative at the same time: While I know exactly how it feels to question one's relationship ("Was I wrong to choose this person to share my life and parent children?"), identity ("Am I bad person who is causing this behavior in the one I love?"), and ability to make good decisions ("How did I not see this pattern earlier?"), I also have to be aware of the risk of projecting my experiences onto Carol's. All that she revealed were two incidents of physical violence, with no other indications of previous abuse, either emotional or physical. It is my obligation to find a way to care for her, be present for her, without making assumptions regarding her situation or attempting to solve it based on how I survived mine.

My lived experience of extended unemployment is also relevant to what Carol shared with me, because it allows me to relate to Ryan, his stressors, and his point of view in this system of relationships. As someone who also comes from a white, upper-middle class upbringing and a career in the capricious area of the arts, I understand how it feels to have one's identity and sense of security caught up in one's profession. When unemployment turns from a speed bump into a road block, the family's support system is at risk: lack of mortgage payments can turn into homelessness or moving in with relatives, something that we have already seen other congregants have to do; inability to pay private school tuition in their district that is notorious for its poor public schools means the future of the children is in question; even if Carol was willing

to switch from part to full time work, there is the possibility that Ryan feels his failure forced it upon her. And, since his professional identity is localized to the television industry, there is the very real reality that the longer he is unemployed, or even working without a significant franchise success, that he will get less and less work until no studio will hire him ever again. This escalating anxiety has developed, according to Peter Steinke, from being acute to chronic: "Even the slightest change or a trivial annoyance incites reactive behavior."<sup>2</sup> Having lived through chronic anxiety taking hold of my life and seeing what it did to my family system, my experience allows me to continue to see Ryan as a human being, not a villain. However, the counterpoint to this is that I also risk appearing to defend him and/or his actions to Carol without meaning to do so. Again, she is the one in front of me and is the one to whom I must be fully present, always remembering that "Arguably more than any other single quality, our memoirists say, being treated with respect makes the difference between helpful and harmful care."<sup>3</sup>

The other element that must not be forgotten in this equation is the children, in particular the one who was hit for dropping the milk--Amelia. She is old enough to remember the incident for the rest of her life, and since I consider youth to be full members of the congregation as deserving of its time and resources as the adults, I must hold her and her brother up in my considerations as well. My connection to the youth of the congregation is so powerful, in fact, that I must be careful about setting boundaries of space, and not invite Amelia (and therefore Carol and James as well) into my home as a safe haven while the situation is dealt with. Miles

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<sup>2</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Family Church Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1993), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen J. Greider, *Much Madness is Divinest Sense: Wisdom in Memoirs of Soul-Suffering* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 207.

points out that this is not a good idea for the family,<sup>4</sup> for Ryan would most likely be able to make an educated guess as to where they were, and keeping that boundary also allows me to care for their family while protecting my own. At every step of the way, it is essential for me to remember that I am not trained in matters of domestic violence and abuse, that untrained counselors can cause more damage than healing,<sup>5</sup> and that the "good enough" we discuss every week in class also means knowing when I must step back and hold hands with Carol while people with more training join the team.

So once I found both my human connection to those involved, and the presence of mind to distance myself from engaging those connections too deeply--what Doehring calls the "balancing act of empathy"<sup>6</sup>--I assessed the ethical and legal ramifications of what Carol told me. First of all, there were two incidents of physical violence, one directed at Carol and another at Amelia. They occurred close to together in time compared to the onset of Ryan's unemployment, and either there has not been any other incidents or Carol does not wish to reveal them at this time. Without even going any further, the violence inflicted on Amelia requires me as a teacher to make a report to Child Protective Services,<sup>7</sup> especially since Carol believes the physical violence is increasing. Not only am I required by law to report, but the UUA Youth and Young Adult Leadership Code of Ethics<sup>8</sup> also asks it of me as a representative of my congregation, my

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<sup>4</sup> Miles 98.

<sup>5</sup> Miles 24.

<sup>6</sup> Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ron Burke, "Recognizing Child Abuse" (lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA) 26 February 2013.

<sup>8</sup> "Code of Ethics for Peer Leaders in Young Adult and Campus Ministry," (Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed 3 May 2013). <<http://www.uua.org/documents/congservices/yacm/leadershipethics.pdf>>

denomination, and my position as a lay leader. In addition, in my position as a Rites of Passage teacher, I constantly hold in tension the needs of my students versus the demands of their parents. As much as I needed to be a presence for Carol, it is necessary to report what happened to Amelia and have a consultation with the trained personnel from CPS to determine what level of intervention is needed from now on. As Steinke reminds us, "Vicious circles can only be disabled through exposure. They are enabled by secrecy and avoidance."<sup>9</sup> I made it clear to Carol that before any other steps could be taken, someone had to call CPS; I then asked her if that was something she was willing to do at this point, or if she needed me to do it. This was the best compromise in my mind between meeting the ethical and legal responsibilities of reporting while following Miles's guidelines for asking about Carol's needs<sup>10</sup> and avoiding telling her what to do.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to remember that, per Judith Jordan, the violence was not just physical, but was also done to the family relationships, the family's soul as a system, and to Carol, Ryan, Amelia, and James's souls individually.<sup>12</sup>

It was also necessary to recognize my limits from a pastoral care perspective. I am not a minister in this setting, and have already mentioned Miles's insistence that untrained caregivers can cause more damage; he also says that a team, working together, is often the best way to give the people involved what they need.<sup>13</sup> By referring to CPS for a consultation and possible intervention, I felt that this would allow the congregation, and the senior minister, to continue to

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<sup>9</sup> Steinke 27.

<sup>10</sup> Miles 133.

<sup>11</sup> Miles 31.

<sup>12</sup> Judith V. Jordan, "Relational Development: Therapeutic Implications of Empathy and Shame," in *Work in Progress* 39 (1989): 12.

<sup>13</sup> Miles 39.

provide pastoral care to entire family in whatever form that might need to take to keep everyone safe. If CPS determines that Ryan must spend time separated from Carol and the kids, we have an excellent Pastoral Care committee and four ministers who could keep him in community without him violating the safe physical space Carol and the kids might require on the church campus.

Since both Carol and Ryan are both heavily involved in church governance, I also felt it was necessary to bring in the senior minister, as he is the touchpoint for providing spiritual care not only to individual members of the congregation but to the subsystems within (Board of Trustees, church staff) and to the congregation as an entity unto itself. John Patton says that true pastoral care is providing a community of care from both pastors and lay leaders<sup>14</sup> and that experiencing community, both as a "person-to-person response" and enabling "persons to give and receive care" is essential to that definition.<sup>15</sup> Our senior minister's position and breadth of experience with the congregation at all levels makes him the ideal team member to ensure that as the healing process, in whatever form it takes, progresses through its cycles of power exchange, that the most vulnerable members of the family and congregation do not suffer from lack of contact with the community of care.

Based on James Poling's argument that "The web of relationships determines the nature of power,"<sup>16</sup> The power dynamics involved, based solely on what Carol revealed to me, shift between the adults depending on perspective, with the children *always* overpowered by their

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<sup>14</sup> John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Patton 27.

<sup>16</sup> James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 24.



parents.<sup>17</sup> Ryan has the power of physical presence over his wife and children, with the ability to inflict physical pain on them, and has established that he is both willing to do so and that it seems to be triggered by what Carol has described as a "minor argument" and spilled milk. Carol appears to view these triggers as small compared to Ryan's reaction to them, which led me to infer that Ryan's actions have created an atmosphere of fear in the house regarding when or why he might next explode, and how badly someone might get hurt next time that happens. Ryan, on the other hand, possibly sees Carol as now having all the power because she is the breadwinner, and he feels helpless in the power dynamic of the family when physical presence is not considered. By having Carol take over as head of the financial household, Ryan has essentially given his power away, and according to Eric Law, this leads to "fear of chaos, being out of control, and even being hurt."<sup>18</sup> Without Ryan present for me to speak with him, it was impossible for me to learn any more about his location of power, but there is no indication from Carol's point of view that a previous history of lashing out exists. What must be done, then, is to interrupt the cycle of chronic anxiety before the explosions become a system in and of themselves, and the abuse turns into a homeostasis for their family that Steinke says is "loyal to its own reactivity."<sup>19</sup> He continues that "One of the most effective ways to introduce change is to redefine the problem--to see the whole pattern of interaction."<sup>20</sup> Since they are such an embedded part of our larger community, we must view ourselves as part of the larger web that could be affected by the potential homeostasis of abuse--yet another reason to refer the clinical counseling

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<sup>17</sup> Poling 23.

<sup>18</sup> Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993), 77.

<sup>19</sup> Steinke 47.

<sup>20</sup> Steinke 57.

and assessment to CPS for further review and to have an outside entity enabling the congregation to redefine the problem for systemic, long-term healing without serious detrimental effect on the congregation. Referral to an outside agency is necessary in order to provide a community of care to the entire family.

So, after the initial phone call to CPS, hopefully made by Carol herself with me by her side, and bringing the senior pastor either up to speed via phone or paging him if he's not answering, I would sit and devote myself to whatever Carol needed from me in that moment to begin her process of healing. Because her suffering is due directly to the manifestation of violence in a physical way, I would ask her before making any physical contact. The emotional reaction to overpowering physical presence also means that I would say as little as possible, limiting my presence in her safe space to occasional verbal acknowledgments of her statements and some head movements. If she desires more safe physical contact, I would give her whatever she asked for: hand holding, hugging, crying in my lap. This is the time when she needs to empty herself of her story, for it be heard and recognized. It is essential, given her self-described "embarrassment" at the situation, that her shame be recognized as what Jaco Hamman defines "is the result of experiencing the ruthlessness of someone, and the act of reparation never came."<sup>21</sup> She has not done anything wrong, but it is entirely possible, and highly likely, that some part of her feels she has--especially since she has the Christian background and has felt cut off from God for a significant period of time.

Since she specifically brought up God's silence in response to her prayers over the last several months, I would first ask her what prayer means to her for her personal context as a

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<sup>21</sup> Jaco J. Hamman, *Becoming a Pastor: Forming Self and Soul for Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 78.

Christian and a Unitarian Universalist. Rabbi Myriam Klotz says that encouraging sufferers to articulate the meaning or context of their experiences can help them move through a painful experience with greater strength and resiliency.<sup>22</sup> How has God spoken to Carol in the past? What does the silence now look, feel, sound like? I would even venture to ask her if it's at all possible that God has been silent because God is listening. Perhaps it's okay that God is quiet right now. Perhaps God thinks she has more to say, and is giving her the space to speak up, like she is doing right now. Perhaps God can be silent but still be present for her through me, if I allow myself to be good enough. This is my reimagining of Patton's "classical paradigm" of pastoral care<sup>23</sup>: to help Carol understand that God created us for relationship and that God cares for by hearing and remembering our stories, no matter how painful, through our relationships with those around us. I can present for her, and embody God, during this perceived silence. This reframing of Patton's model to emphasize immanence within humanity would also allow her theistic beliefs to deepen her emotional and pastoral connection to the predominantly atheistic congregation and fend off the tendency for isolation when theologies differ.

Hopefully, my presence will empower Carol to start an active healing process for herself, her children, and for Ryan--whatever form it might have to take based on the assessment provided by CPS and subsequent counseling. As Unitarian Universalists, it will be necessary to remind ourselves of our covenanted First Principle: "the inherent worth and dignity of every person"; and the Seventh Principle: "the interdependent web of which we are all a part."<sup>24</sup>

Kathleen Greider asserts that "We must affirm theologically that aggression is a given aspect of

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<sup>22</sup> Myriam Klotz, "Wresting Blessings: A Pastoral Response to Suffering," in *Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Patton 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993).

our createdness, and refusal to deal with the complexities of aggression is refusal to deal with the complexities of the holy.”<sup>25</sup> Ryan's actions do not automatically make him a bad or evil person, even if we could come to a consensus of what evil is in a Unitarian Universalist context, much less a worldwide or universal one. The First Principle also reminds us that it is all people, not just adults, who are entitled to have their worth and dignity affirmed, and so Amelia and James's experience of not just the violence, but of how their parents handled the aftermath along with the congregation, will have an enormous effect on their formation, both from a spiritual perspective and a sociological one. Knowing that their mother has come forward, and is hopefully taking the initiative of calling CPS, will be an important first step. And, if Carol cannot do it, hopefully by me making the report and initiating a consultation, they will see that their church community is a safe place that cares for them when suffering is too great for one person alone to handle. Ultimately, it is about Parker Palmer's vision of the community table: "We must affirm theologically that aggression is a given aspect of our createdness, and refusal to deal with the complexities of aggression is refusal to deal with the complexities of the holy."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kathleen J. Greider, "Reckoning with Aggression: Investigations in Violence and Vitality," in *Journal of Pastoral Theology* VI (1996): 49.

<sup>26</sup> Parker J. Palmer, "On Staying at the Table: A Spirituality of Community," in *Expressions* (May/June 1986): 1.

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