

The *Nerve* of that Pastor!
Rev. Dn. Stephen Muse, Ph.D.

“Failure of nerve” is the bane of pastoral leaders, according to Rabbi Edwin Friedman, whenever the church “family” is driven by anxiety. In the book he was working on when he died,¹ Friedman made the case for how poor leadership always caves in to the weakest link in a system, empowering “extremists” with the justification of trying to reach “consensus.” What is actually going on in such situations, he suggests, is that the leader is unable or unwilling to bear the tensions involved in making decisions for the ‘family’ that may not please the complainers and resistant ones who are going to be a problem regardless of what solution is proffered. Being dominated by those extreme voices and prevented from leading the larger community toward greater vitality and creative engagement with the world is what Friedman calls a ‘failure of nerve.’

I like Friedman’s analysis and believe he offers a strong case for why part of the job requirements of pastoral leaders includes on-going work on ourselves to improve our ability to identify how anxiety affects us. Without a kind of steady-state awareness of anxiety arising in the moment, we inevitably get anxiety contagion and reactively do the same thing we’ve always done. For conflict avoiders, this means avoiding conflict. For pleasers, it means exhausting ourselves trying to make everyone happy, including and especially those who will never be happy no matter what we do. For pot-stirrers, it means creating little fires here and there to ignite the reactors in the organization so as to avoid having to act consciously and deliberately with regard to the real issues.

Taking a proactive stance while maintaining, as we therapists like to say, “a non anxious presence” is a whole lot easier said than done. It is not about steel-jawed perseverance or some kind of controlled, machine-like neutrality that comes from being dissociated from your feelings. Rather, being mindful and response-able for whatever one *is* feeling from moment to moment as well as for the choices one makes, while continuing to serve the truth in love, is what is most needed. Noticing, while not identifying, with the “log in my own eye” is essential.

Clergy were often compulsive cross-bearers in their families of origin without realizing it. The ‘log in the eye’ of the parentified-child-become-clergy usually involves some dreaded and unexamined anxiety that we *are* somehow the cause of whatever pain or conflict is experienced by people around us. The parentified child learned long ago to be unaware of her/his own needs, seeking instead to meet the parent’s needs in order to stave off abandonment. An alcoholic or depressed, mentally ill, chronically sick parent becomes a magnet for the child’s attempts to minister to the pain. Later, becoming a minister and taking on the world’s pain as ‘one’s cross to bear’ then seems familiar and quite natural – a kind of ‘calling.’ But clergy need to remember that Jesus “freely” gave his life. He said “No one takes it from me. I give it.” Cross bearing is not compulsive. It is necessary to help the child put down the cross so the adult can freely pick it up. This means getting in touch and staying in touch with the adult’s unmet and unacknowledged needs for intimacy, love, play, having your own opinion, and yes...rest. It means having compassion for the child you once were and being a witness to the child’s unvoiced and unexperienced pain. This is a pre-requisite for being able to be genuinely human in ministry rather than acting out a role as a kind of substitute identity, while leaving the real self behind.

Failure of nerve is about losing your salt and no longer being able to act as a catalyst and preservative in a destructive or rapidly decaying situation because you lack consciousness and the freedom to choose. Obedience to the Grace of God, not people-pleasing, is what makes this possible.

How does the pastor get nerve? One of the pitfalls along the way of self-correction for leaders who find themselves consistently caving in to pressure to mollify the problem people in the church 'family' is that they may abruptly abandon consensus building with the justification that they are exercising 'leadership' by making the 'tough choices.' Disregarding people's feelings altogether, they end up trading one problem for another. A steeling of nerve, rigidity and top down hierarchical control is equally as problematic as kowtowing to the least differentiated person in the system who cannot assume responsibility for her/his actions and interpretations.

One way to tell the difference between these twin engines of immature leadership— unconscious rigidity and overfunctioning pliability— is by asking about the fruits of the leader's actions which will be evident in the organization. Authentically differentiated and spiritually aligned leadership reveals distinct traits in the system over time. Are the most creative and high-functioning persons in the organization empowered while limiting the damage of the lowest functioning? Since pastors do not tend to fire parishioners, the question of leadership becomes one of whether the leader is able to facilitate a dialogical community that elicits and benefits from creative dissent, consistently empowering dissenting voices in ways that contribute to the church's mission. Healthy leaders invite questioning of the institutional status quo in order to find creative solutions that build a more vital community around an emerging vision. By contrast, authoritarian or impulsive wishy-washy reactive leaders stifle dissent, creating groupthink through fear or appeasement, in order in order to lower their own anxiety at the expense of community's growth.

In a church system that seems to be stuck in one or other of these extremes, it's useful to ask who the 'extremists' are in the organization and how the leader is functioning so as to empower them (or prevent others from disempowering them). Are these persons low-functioning malcontents who routinely offer no creative solutions, but only complaints? Are they fearful of change itself, holding to "the way we have always done it" even when this is shown to be an error? Are they over functioning perfectionists without mercy or appreciation for others in the organization whose tempo and way of doing things differs from their own? If so this calls for a leader to limit their damage to the system by translating their complaints into their unmet needs for which they, not the system or the pastor, is responsible.

By contrast, if the marginalized voices in a system are those of the Ghandi's, the Martin Luther King, Jrs., Vaclav Havel's, Mandela's and Socrates's who raise difficult questions about contradictions, point out inequities or unexamined actions in the organization any one of which can create anxiety in certain member of the 'family,' it may be that the leader is attempting to cultivate oneness of mind above conscience and mission. If so, any such critique will likely trigger a dominating paternalistic voice who demands obedience regardless of truth or suggests cheery sorts of banalities like, "Let's all just get along" or "look on the bright side" which do nothing to invite dialogue regarding the real and difficult issues. When this happens it is likely that the pastor is taking too much responsibility for having to have all the answers and not empowering the

laity in such a way as to be able to grow from self-examination. The twin giants of justification, “It’s the way we have always done things” or “my way or the highway” are evidence that the nerves of the leader are either wet noodles, or they remain brittle because they haven’t been cooked by successfully by negotiating the hot waters of conflict enough times to gain sufficient wisdom, mercy and forbearance needed for pastoral leadership. In this case, the pastor could be the problem.

ⁱ Friedman, E.H. *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. Seabury Books, New York. 2007)