

A Response: Friendship as a Balm for Fear

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The culture of fear that permeates our society and the people we serve as pastoral supervisors corrupts and undermines meaning. Politicians, media personalities, and opinion makers have led an assault on integrity by cynical manipulation of words and ideas. Lies are described as “the truth as we know it.” The denial of reality is abetted by phrases like “perception is reality.” Fraud, embezzlement, and thievery are “standard operating procedure.” The dismantling of the public education system is called “No Child Left Behind.” The increased pollution of the air we breathe is referred to as “the Blue Sky Act.” Propaganda is paraded as “network news.” In a culture where “bad” means “good,” it is little wonder that “truth” is relative and “meaning” is defined by rugged individualists. It is also no surprise that we are easily manipulated, confused, and rendered helpless. We truly are a nation that has lost its way.

There have always been politicians, opinion-makers, and spiritual leaders who have played on the emotions of people to achieve power. Most everyone has some kind of wishful state or ideal that promises special stat-

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us along with safety and security. People usually begin their search for this safety in a deity that is greater and more powerful than they are. When we realize that these 'gods' can't guarantee the desired outcomes, we turn to others who are eager to promise what we long for. This results in the exploitation of people's anxiety and fear with promises of security, safety, and "special" status.

Primal human fear, argues Martha Stortz, is anchored in the fear of death.¹ Using her own criteria, however, the concept of death seems to be too derivative to define primal fear. As an alternative, I would suggest that a more primal fear is "fear of the unknown." This seems more closely aligned to a developmental understanding of the primal task inherent in "Trust v. Mistrust," which speaks to our need for dependability, safety, security, and connection. The forms of love that Stortz proposes must be created by healthy persons capable of providing this love appropriately, consistently, and compassionately. My caution about her proposal is that the world around us seems too jaded, too cynical, and too pathological to be affected by conversations about or even the modeling of love.

Clinical pastoral education (CPE) was born into a world that was well aware of the culture of fear. It was contextually different, but a culture of fear nonetheless. Anton Boisen, one of the earliest pioneers in CPE, invited anyone who would listen to join him on the journey into the unknown in order to confront fear. He believed we were made to face the unknown and the unknowable, and that we were intended to journey together, in relationship, into mental illness, physical illness, or spiritual illness. His invitation to us, even today, is to return to our pastoral care roots, to have the courage to risk being politically incorrect and to reclaim our birthright as prophets as well as teachers.

What is called for in our present circumstance is truth telling in the face of lies and deceit, faithfulness over against betrayal, and hopefulness in opposition to evil. One part of our response to the culture of fear is to lean into our courage. It is there that we will find ourselves buoyed by hope that is anchored in reality, faith that is unsinkable, and love that binds hearts and souls together against all storms. Clearly, we are called to live out our beliefs and attitudes knowing that they will contrast starkly to the behaviors of those that surround us. In this culture of fear, God calls us to the faithful response of constructive resistance, embodied by the relationships we enter into, nurture, and sustain.

Rather than becoming distracted by the baggage attached to the construct of love that Martha Stortz has proposed as an alternative to fear, I propose that we appropriate the construct of friendship. Throughout sacred scripture, across many religions, friendship remains a significant force in sustaining relationships and communities. Pastoral supervision is a relational ministry. It requires commitment, trust, integrity, faithfulness, caring, discipline, and mutuality. Friendship has the power and the potential to transform, to reform, and to renew. After three years together, Jesus, the Teacher, said to his students, “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends” (Jn 15:14a NRSV). It was in the context of a community of friends that Jesus challenged the prevailing powers of this world, and it was through this company of friends that he unleashed a new power and a new reality that can change the world—one friendship at a time, one day at a time. The challenge will be to move beyond the superficial connections of friendship to a spiritual and theological depth that will strengthen us to live and work in a “culture of fear.” As pastoral supervisors, fear is part of our cultural context, but our commitment to journey with those who would become our friends will allow us to transcend even the most primal fear of the unknown.

NOTE

1. Martha Ellen Stortz, “Living the Gospel in a Culture of Fear: Love as the Key to a Culture of Connection,” *Reflective Practice* 28 (2008): 8–23.