
Pastoral Care in an Age of Autonomy

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Introduction

Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810) left us a timeless tale of human community. "Once upon a time there was a king who knew that the next harvest would be cursed. Whosoever would eat from it would go mad. So he ordered an enormous granary built and stored there all that remained from the last crop. He entrusted the key to his friend and this is what he told him: 'When my subjects and their king will have been struck with madness, you alone will have the right to enter the storehouse and eat uncontaminated food. Thus you will escape the malediction. But in exchange, your mission will be to cover the earth, going from country to country, from town to town, from one street to the other, from one man to the other, telling tales, ours—and you will shout, you will shout with all your might: Good people, do not forget! What is at stake is your life, your survival! Do not forget. Do not forget!'"¹

Do not forget community. In an age of autonomy, when each individual must define a self apart from social constraints or communal wisdom, the context of nurturing solidarity once assumed as the source of emerging personhood is disappearing. Pastoral care of individuals is moving from the care of persons-in-community to the care of "isolates." The goal of all care must now be a double vision, care of persons, and care of the communities they inhabit. Where those communities are failing them, we must help them construct personal communities of diverse character that can support health and well-being and enlist them in the support of the health and well-being of others. Autonomy, now the central characteristic of the functional person in Western societies, sadly has come to require a differentiation not within but from community. Autonomy, once a word to designate agency and responsibility, is coming to define impermeable boundary around self, centeredness in self, and goals for self-realization. Langdon Gilkey describes this internalization of the developmental task as "each solely on her own."

As the source of whatever optimism and courage the modern spirit possesses, autonomy places the human solely "on her/his own." We are set in a context indifferent to our deepest purposes, so whatever hope and meaning there is to be found must come from within. We must know our own truth, decide about our own existence, create our own meaning, and establish our own values. We are self-creating, self-directing, free beings. If it believes anything at all, the modern spirit holds that we must, in some essential regard, live our lives in

autonomy if those lives are to be creative and human and triumph over destiny by exercising freedom to master fate.²

The individual "I" is not fundamental enough to create true humanness. Each one of us is necessary to the larger society, but not sufficient as an atom of human sociation if the human community at large is to continue to exist. If we believe that individually we are functional units of human experience influencing the health of the social order, we are too shortsighted. We must form the coalitions that create human interactions, the collaboration that builds contexts which nurture value formation, and the cooperation that carries us toward goals greater than ourselves. Martin Buber wrote prophetically a half century ago: "If psychologism becomes so intensified that the man can simply no longer bring his capacity for external relationship . . . to others, to the world, if his strength of relationship recoils backward into the I, if he has to encounter himself, . . . then that state exists that I call self-contradiction."³ The emergence of the autonomous individual has placed us all in self-contradiction. The self we have become is, to borrow the words of social commentators such as Peter Berger, Christopher Lasch, Robert Bellah, Stanley Hauerwas, Martin Gross, or Allan Bloom, a "Homeless, Fragmented, Narcissistic, Preferential, Cybernetic, Strategic, and Closed Mind." Homeless (where do I belong? My home is within me), Fragmented (where is my center? My center is within), Narcissistic (what ultimately matters to me? First, what about me?), Preferential (I am a value center—I must clarify my chosen values), Cybernetic (I am my technology—my toys are me), Strategic (I must make something of myself—I plan my own life), and Closed (I am overwhelmed by diversity, I must protect myself against too much possibility).

Autonomy is a daunting task. To attempt a life project with a subject orientation where the self is the object, with transitory supports and an idealized goal of nebulous character, is no little thing. Our flight from heteronomy (where the other may control us) or homonomy (where we are in solidarity with the other) has left us with a version of autonomy which demands more than most humans can achieve with integrity. The autonomous self must be hopeful of its own efforts to realize such potential, respectful of the attempts of others. Growing up in a postmodern social location, tolerance becomes the first of values, and openness its corollary. Such humility about the ability to make assumptions about the other can enhance dialogue and discovery of the other or render such engagement an impossible dream, render suspect any attempt to take firm positions of one's own, numb one's ability to make the tough decisions necessary for discerning value, and paralyze our capacity to choose. Without firm core values we are incapable of deciding among authentic options.

Qualities of Modernity

The qualities of modernity that have shaped both our personalities and our social structures, and have reshaped such institutions as family, congregation, and the political household of the nation, are:

1. **Passive Pluralism:** Whereas traditional society affirmed common values, convictions, and institutions, modernity offers a culturally diverse, radically heterogeneous plethora of groups, faiths, values, worldviews, and lifestyles. As we encounter competing value systems, meet alien belief structures, engage with novel lifestyles, and seek to explain the inexplicable behaviors of compatriots, formerly unquestionable values crumble or reify into brittle reactive rigidity. In constructive pluralism we affirm the dignity of the neighbor and complementarity of our diversity while clearly asserting our own central commitments and confessing our essential convictions. Then authentic conversation is possible. But a pluralism of egalitarianism levels all to the tentative, heuristic, and provisional.
2. **Selective Relativity:** Where once beliefs had a transcendent referent point, a connection to an universal, now a popular form of mass media-defined postmodernity invites each to pick and choose what is preferable. Human beliefs, inherently fragile, need periodic confirmation by conversation, interaction, convention, and ritual to remain plausible. When one no longer lives in a social network that certifies one's beliefs—what Peter Berger calls a plausibility structure—then all becomes relative to which structure one is visiting at the moment. The thick plausibility of the Mennonite community of my youth that needed little theology more than an ethic is the polar opposite to the loose plausibility structure of contemporary diversity that requires an elaborated theology to maintain core beliefs. The encounter with differing others thrusts us into the stream of relativity where we tread water in a world gone fluid. But the goal is not to flounder in midstream but to make the other bank where we can speak of absolutes, but in a new sense with new clarity and humility.
3. **Narrow Specialization:** Where once life had a wholeness and seamless interconnectedness, the age of autonomy has dissected, diced, and sorted existence into componentiality. Each slice or sliver of our lives is assigned to a specialist. (Your teeth, for example, are assigned to those who clean them [hygienists]; fill them [dentists]; crown, pull, or replace them [oral surgeons]; whiten or cap them [cosmetic dentists]; straighten them [orthodontists]; and purchase them [the tooth fairy].) The crucial events of our lives have moved from the solidarity of the home to specialized settings: the birthing centers, hospital nurseries, day care, school, mall, spa, grooming salon, factory, office, golf course, resort, hospital, counseling center, surgery center, cardiac unit, oncology center, hospice, funeral parlor, mortuary, and urn. We learn to separate life into sectors—religion, politics, medicine, economy, leisure, education, work, therapy—each with its own cadre of specialists. Life is broken up into stages, seasons, passages, crises—next Friday my mid-life crisis begins—I shall even go through stages of death and dying. (If I die in denial I get a "D," if I make it to acceptance I get an "A"). Pastoral care is responsible to sacralize as well as to facilitate each threshold.

4. **Amnesiac Futurity:** In traditional culture, human beings lived in the present, but faced the past. The future was behind them. As they aged they moved backward to join their ancestors. Modern societies look forward into the future with a passion to plan, strategize, predict, and project outcomes—to impose some meaningful control on a capricious destiny. This compulsion is driven by our sense of transience and temporality. Life has always been seen as temporal and transient, but the modern sense is different in its total character. All is in passage out of the past and into the future, and the meaning of history lies in patterns of development leading toward a future goal rather than in repeated participation in an eternal order established at the beginning of things.⁴
5. **Isolating Individualism:** In traditional society at its better moments, people were persons in solidarity; in contemporary society at its best they have become islands linked by communication systems. The solidarity, both secure and stifling, of connectedness to family, kin, clan, village, and tribe offered a group identity that through social bonding was not only ethically binding; it often became ethnically blinding. Modernity created a macramé of relational ties whose knots are loose and easily untied. The individual has become the supreme reality. To doubt this supremacy of individual rights is the cardinal and unpardonable sin of our age. To achieve individual self-actualization, the modern citizen of the age of autonomy sheds family and community constraints, shapes his or her own destiny by "finding oneself," and achieves fulfillment in love and work. The résumé is the ultimate document of individuation—a polished record of the unique experiences, qualifications, certifications, and achievements that qualify and market the self to the world. It is ultimately up to the individual "to make it alone" with help from no one but his or her personal therapist (who is an indispensable accoutrement for living successfully in this postmodern milieu).
6. **Therapeutic Interiority:** Identity, for the modern Western person, is "peculiarly differentiated." Traditional personhood was experienced with an internal and external coherence which required little differentiation—differentiation here is defined as the discrimination of distinctions, differences, boundaries, and part processes with explanatory power to resolve tensions. This differentiation process has the following social antecedents and consequents as developed by Peter Berger:⁵
 - a. A pluralism of social worlds in modern society has replaced the single coherent world which seemed firm and inevitable in traditional society.
 - b. The structures of each particular world in the pluralistic situation are experienced as relatively unstable and unreliable. Thus, the experience of their vulnerability and their overlapping boundaries relativizes every one of them.
 - c. The institutional order of marriage, family, community, and society undergoes a certain loss of reality. The "accent of reality" consequently

- shifts from the objective order of institutions to the realm of subjectivity and personal interiority.
- d. The individual's experience of the self becomes more real than the experience of the objective social world. So the person seeks to find a "foothold" in reality within the self rather than outside in the human context.
 - e. The individual's subjective reality (what is commonly regarded as the person's psychology or the study of the psyche) becomes increasingly differentiated, complex, and interesting to the self.
 - f. Subjectivity, interiority, and exploration of a differentiated elaborated psyche acquire previously unconceived "depths." To borrow one of the many terminologies for such elaborate interiority—that of Carl Jung—one unmask the façade or persona, examines the ego behind the persona, encounters the shadow the ego casts, meets the anima or animus who stands behind this as counter gender muse and guide to growth, and identifies and is instructed by the emerging archetypes that guide from the collective unconscious and seek the self-center with its potential contact point with the divine. Mystery, magic, intrigue, transformation, cure.

Ultimate Autonomy

This focus on individual interiority permeates the Western educational process. Personality theory, faith formation, spirituality, and human growth and development possess richly diversified depths and elaborate inner structures. Most Western psychotherapy is grounded in the basic premise of the inviolable autonomy of the individual. From this the following assumptions emerge:

The individual can create personal meaning independent of social entanglements as a self, meaning defined by oneself, for oneself.

The personality can separate itself from binding family emotional heritage by breaking away, writing off, moving out, and rising above.

Freedom and growth come from cutting loose from imperfect parents, toxic siblings, stifling family rules and roles, and finding oneself.

The individual has the power to look unafraid at the insecurities of a helpless childhood through the wisdom of adult rationalization.

The individual has the transcendence to review the crises of life objectively and dispassionately, and step courageously across the thresholds to new integrations.

The individual has the capacity to channel sexuality, aggression, rage, egotism, and greed toward creative goals through self-knowledge.

The individual can face suffering without avoidance, death without denial, and mortality with equanimity.

And all this rises from the individual powers of the fully realized autonomous self.⁶

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah and associates concluded after a careful examination of individuality in the American experiment that:

Much of the thinking about the self of educated Americans, . . . is based on inadequate social science, impoverished philosophy, and vacuous theology. There are truths we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism. We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions but through them. We never get to the bottom of our selves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. . . . Finally, we are not simply ends in ourselves, either as individuals or as a society. We are parts of a larger whole that we can neither forget nor imagine in our own image without paying a high price. If we are not to have a self that hangs in the void, slowing twisting in the wind, these are issues we cannot ignore.⁷

The Autonomous Journey

The four key characteristics of the age of autonomy that Bellah and company identified are four central concerns of pastoral care and counseling: leaving home, leaving church, finding oneself, and choosing community. Effective pastoral care is concerned deeply about each of these. The following argument will summarize the Bellah group's prophetic and uncomfortably accurate analysis of contemporary life. In each of these transitions, we will argue, the pastoral counselor is not on the side of cut-offs, but an advocate for linking. Thus pastoral counselors invite people to connect anew while making necessary disconnections, and when disconnecting what has been dysfunctional to reconnect functionally.

First, the pastoral counselor refuses the magical faith in the necessity of leaving home. Where our culture assumes the all-important necessity of leaving home, not just physically but emotionally and relationally, we challenge those

assumptions. In Western culture, childhood is seen chiefly as preparation for the all-important event of leaving home in an emotional, ideological, religio-ethical as well as geographical sense. Separation and individuation come to a head in adolescence when independence is only achieved in stepping out. Both are issues that must be faced by all human beings, but leaving home in the American sense is a distinct evolution of individualism and self-reliance.

Second, the pastoral counselor reconnects persons with the faith community. The American tradition of growing up requires leaving church. In late childhood or in adolescence one is culturally required to decide individually what church will be one's own, or if one will belong to any church. One must autonomously choose one's own God, one's own ultimate ends, and one's own faith and values whatever they shall be. The notion that one discovers one's deepest beliefs in and through tradition and community is not congenial to Americans. We imagine an autonomous self, existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps—if all goes well—choosing one. As the Bellah group concludes, "It is a powerful cultural fiction that we not only can, but must, make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves." Religious individualism has a long history in America. From Thomas Jefferson who said, "I am a sect myself," to Thomas Paine's creed, "My mind is my church," many influential figures in our nation understood faith as a solitary virtue. "Religion is what one does with his or her solitude," said Alfred North Whitehead, but he recommended joining one's solitude with that of others in worship. In *Habits of the Heart* we are introduced to a young nurse, Sheila Larson, who, after a good deal of therapy, describes her faith as "Sheilatism." "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilatism. Just my own little voice. . . . It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other."⁸

Third, the pastoral counselor as connector models, invites, and embodies the discovery of self in sustaining responsibly connected, not reactively disconnected, relationships. The American myth of finding oneself with little or no continuity with one's root connections assigns the task to "make something of oneself" through career choice, successful work, pursuing advancement, winning status, demonstrating competency, expanding power, achieving social standing and prestige, and thus achieving self-esteem. The self found, defined, and made is based on doing, on performance, and on achieved success. Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. We refuse "virtues" as morally absolute elements of good and right, and we espouse values. Values are good because I choose them; I do not choose them because they are good. Each person becomes an arbitrary center of volition, a preferential self.

Fourth, the pastoral counselor connects, embodies, and nurtures community. In American culture, having left home, church, and earlier incarnations of the self, the new self found now chooses community. The term community is widely and loosely used, most often in connection with lifestyle. But what is

actually experienced is not community, for true community has always been an inclusive whole of varied and differing people committed to interdependence in both public and private life, supporting each other in daily collaboration, and honoring each other's callings. What is more common in contemporary experience is a "lifestyle enclave." These are associations of similarity that exemplify and celebrate the narcissism of "likeness." They involve only an aspect of each individual's life—most often the use of leisure and the consumption of goods. The enclave includes only those who share the privilege and lifestyle of the particular consumer at leisure. Bellah suggests that we might consider the lifestyle enclave an appropriate form of collective support for individualists in a radically individualizing society, since individuation requires finding others who can reflect and confirm one's selfhood and thus validate one's private life.⁹

The Love of Community

The pastoral counselor is one who loves the dream and the actuality of health-giving and health-nurturing community. Such community is created by a triple foci—on self as a participant, on others as co-travelers, and on the principles of relationship that hold us in the creative tensions of organization, interdependence, and joint collaboration. Within authentic community, individuality is protected, but not atomized; dissent is welcomed, not suppressed; identity is conferred, but not dictated; ethics are discerned, but not imposed; meaning is preserved, not reinvented each generation *de novo*; contraries are united in diversity and complementarity, not merged in homogeneity; interdependence is realized, not construed as toxic codependence to justify avoidance; personal stories find lasting significance within the community's story; they are not lost in anonymity.

In the common life of women and men, an unformed mass is offered to us from which we can sculpt the face and form of God. This is a chaos we may help order, a conflict we can assist toward transformation, and an alienation we can bring toward communication. This does not occur through sweeping social revolution, nor through the coalescence of individuals into the emotional unity of patriotic glob or paranoid blob, but through the creation of cells—genuine community cells out of which larger communities are grown and nurtured. These will not be natural communities such as family, neighborhood, or village, but voluntary communities formed by the coming together of persons in direct relationships around a common center.

In *The Confirmation of Otherness*,¹⁰ Maurice Friedman writes of two kinds of community, "the community of otherness" and the "community of affinity or like-mindedness." This latter community is made up of people who cling together for security, using the same slogans and jargon, even though they do not have much real relation to each other. It is a false community, a flight from otherness, a retreat from opposition and conflict. "The community of otherness" begins with the recognition that there are as many—or more—points of view as

there are participants. The people are not alike but they share a common concern; they are not identical in values or perspectives but they share a joint commitment: they do not homogenize the group but confirm as much otherness as the community has resources for at any given time.

Somewhere in a rich commentary on the prophet Jeremiah, Martin Buber claimed that what God demands from Israel and from all humanity is not religion but community. Where God blames people for not having become a community, woman's claim upon woman and man, man's claim upon man and woman take precedence over God's claim. Not sacrifice, but justice, mercy, and humility—the ingredients of community building—are God's expectation according to the prophet Micah (6:8). Love of that community and care for that community are the beginning of all pastoral care.

The Care of Community

The pastoral counselor possesses what every therapist longs for—a community that surrounds, empowers, authentically grounds, commissions, and credentials the therapist. Further, the community designates the pastoral counselor to function as a *healing presence* who acts in behalf of the community to support, include, and empower other community members. The pastoral person is a representative of the community of the Spirit that offers a multidimensional network of caring and belonging, of moral discernment, of meaningful life direction, and of significance through service to others.

To be included in such a community is to be in the healing context of true humanness, no longer to be homeless, fragmented, narcissistic, preferential, strategic emotional orphans—which none of us fully escape in the age of autonomy—but to become full participants in a community, not an enclave; in solidarity, not association; in a web of enduring faithful relationships, not transitory interactions. We become committed co-travelers with fellow members of a joint experiment in caring and commitment called the family of God. We consider our priorities and proceed with our lives as persons identifying themselves as a part of God's new people (Eph. 2:19-22) with citizenship in heaven, of all places (Phil. 3:20-21). Their nationality, supra-allegiance, indeed their core self understanding is as "God's own people" (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

An Anonymous Rabbinic Tale: The Cost of Community

Long ago in a far distant land, a prince dreamed not of a secure kingdom, but of a new peopledom—a land in which all persons were committed to each other in loyalty and equality. In such a land persons sought the welfare of others even at a cost to themselves. The prince announced a meeting of all heads of clans to join the foundation of a new society. As a symbol of this social solidarity, each was asked to bring a bottle of the best wine produced from their ancestral vines. The wine would be poured into a communal vat, and blended—like true community would be—into a common vintage.

One of the winegrowers invited to this covenanting resisted such a loss of pride in a blended communal wine. "Sacrifice the unique variety of grape, the special climate of the year, the sweetness of a late harvest, the indefinable magic of flavor and bouquet, the distinctive art of the vintner? Never!" Instead he corked a bottle of tap water. At the time of communal ritual, he added his bit to the vat. "I will not squander the crisp and crystal wine of my separate selfhood, I will not be wasted in such commonality."

When the covenanting was solemnized, all filled their glasses from the giant barrel for the communal draft. Each drank the toast, not with wine, but with insipid water. No one was willing to pay the cost of community.

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Colleagues, let us go.
Go from town to town, from street to street.
Telling the tales of God's new community in this age of
autonomy.
And shout with all our might.
"Good people, do not forget.
What is at stake is your life, your survival.
Do not forget. Do not forget!"

ENDNOTES

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* (New York: Random House, 1972), 202.

² Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Revival of God-Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 60-62.

³ "On the Psychologizing of the World," a 1923 Zurich address to psychologists in *A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902 - 1965*, trans. by Maurice Friedman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 151.

⁴ Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind*, 52.

⁵ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973), 77-78.

⁶ David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 366.

⁷ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 73.

¹⁰ (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983).