

Marriage, Ministry and the Families that Shaped Us

Stanley A. Rock

Both partners in a clergy marriage, whatever the particular configuration of the marital pair, will face special challenges to the viability of the marriage and the full development of each partner's sense of vocation. Clergy couples bring to their relationships certain expectations for marriage which may differ in the light of family of origin patterns. Every clergy couple has some dream, some vision of how the future may unfold in the light of each partner's calling or sense of vocation. However, the North American culture of narcissism may inhibit the full development of each person, challenging couples' capacities to live in mature relationships. Increasing numbers of clergy couples come from families in which narcissistic wounds have impaired the growth of a sense of a solid self necessary for genuine intimacy (Steinke, 19, p. 1)¹. That same culture has also fostered a freer, more flexible approach to role relationships and shared power. Working carefully with these realities can help to foster self-differentiation and thereby greater marital satisfaction.

The Dream and Marital Beginnings

I dreamed that love would never die.
I dreamed that God would be forgiving
Then I was young and unafraid
And dreams were made and used and wasted.
There was no ransom to be paid,
No song unsung, no wine untasted.
But the tigers came at night
With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart,
As they turn your dream to shame.

Andrew Lloyd Weber
The musical: *Les Miserables*

¹ This article describes the clinical profile of pastors who have crossed professional boundaries through sexual affairs with parishioners or church staff. An unhealthy narcissism is a common characteristic in this profile.

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For twenty-two years I have offered a course in marriage and family counseling which has included a major segment devoted to marital enrichment. Students who are married are required to register with their spouses (or fiancés). Single students have their own enrichment process with a communication partner. Couple dialogue and supervised small group work provide an experiential way into ministry. Together in small groups, we acknowledge that every marriage—and ev-

ery life in ministry—begins with a dream. To unite those dreams, whether at the beginning of a marriage or many years later, presents very special joys and challenges. So we open our marriages, our dreams, our hurts, and our hopes to one another. We learn how the families that have shaped us and the congregations that both love and hurt pastors and their families inevitably impact the reworking and refining of the dream.

I find that alumni, years later, remember this course with special fondness as an experience of building that made them more resilient to what lay ahead in ministry and marriage. Then I rejoice with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote in a wedding sermon from a prison cell, “Every wedding is an occasion of joy, joy that human beings can do such great things, that they have been granted the freedom and the power to take the rudder of their lives into their own hands” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 34).

Our starting point in the course is my own story and that of my wife, Nancy, at the point of our premarital counseling thirty-six years ago. We met with an aging, frail, but kind United Methodist minister in Nancy’s hometown in western New York. We had one session. The minister knew that I was in some kind of ministry, and he knew Nancy’s solid family. He simply smiled at us, gave us his blessing, and then went over the wedding liturgy.

I suppose in our bright-eyed, optimistic way, we thought it would be just that simple. We were both committed and full of vision and hope for the future. The night I proposed was a starry crisp January night at the pinnacle of Lovers’ Lane in the University of Michigan’s arboretum. I sketched out my dreams for the student Christian movement, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), which I served in New England. Other expectations for our couple relationship were largely blissful and benign.

I felt Nancy’s passionate support. She did not say it, but the words of Ruth to Naomi come to mind: “Whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou liest, I will lie” (Ruth 1:18a, KJV). Little did we know that on the fifth day of our honeymoon, this pledge would be put to the test. We found ourselves sharing a mattress and box springs with another newly married couple, as together we led a conference of college students in the Boston area! The other couple took the mattress; we took the box springs.

And *go* Nancy did, for the first seven years of our marriage, to a little Boston apartment, far from her family and friends, to Holland, MI, (a whole new sub-culture), for three years in support of my theological education, to Philadelphia and New York City, to a parish near Princeton, N.J., and then in 1970 a move one thousand miles west to a campus church at Drake University in Des Moines, IA.

During that period of seven years, Nancy worked full or part time as a nurse and we were blessed with three daughters, our youngest being two months old when we moved into the parish house of Collegiate Church in Des Moines in 1970.

It was then that we discovered the price of our youthful, fearless dreams and, as the opening Weber lyric so aptly puts it, met the first of our "tigers in the night." Our congregation was so proud of its parish house, where office and meeting place and home for the minister and family were all conveniently melded together. But there was not even a door to our quarters, just a stairway. The neighborhood seemed cold and impersonal, with large fraternity and sorority houses and apartment houses near-by. And my wife (who had borne everything all these years with a "can do" spirit and a gracious smile), was depressed and miserable, exhausted from the move, feeling isolated and lonely, having left good friends and relatives far behind.

During this same time, I felt caught in a very painful triangle between the leadership of the congregation and a hurting spouse. I could not understand how it was that they could not identify with our dilemma as a family. In hindsight, I can see their genuine excitement and sense of accomplishment that such a modest band of adventurous risk-takers had done so much with what little they had.

What had happened to our dream for marriage and ministry, that sincere commitment that two people made in that moment of unashamed intense intimacy before God and each other? Atlanta psychiatrist John Barnett describes the natural history of a marriage as something grounded in an "emotional contract," that gives marriage its life and personal substance. This contract is a "living thing," born in courtship and nourished in the honeymoon, lasting not weeks or months, but for five to seven years. For each partner, there is a "fine print" section of the contract, which Barnett calls the "hidden codicils" of the heart, where there are expectations (mostly unarticulated) of personal growth and personal intimacy. It is the failure to deliver this personal growth and intimacy which makes partners so resentful (Barnett, 1981, pp. 5-6). So many couples, including an increasing number of clergy couples, experience this *fall* in the relationship and then move to divorce or *locked in* destructive patterns, rather than creative course correcting.

A Course Correction

After a year in the parish house, Nancy went to her local physician and she let the toxic feelings that had been pushed down *explode* in his office

with tears of release. He prescribed two things: (1) a move to our own home and (2) part-time work outside the home.

If I thought at one time that marriage *just happened*, I was in for a *real awakening* in this crisis. I had to act quickly in a way that differed from my customary "please all others first" style. I began my self-talk, "Now, Stan, compromise, make it work, but don't raise any waves; avoid conflict," just as I had tried to keep the peace in a conflict-ridden family of origin that finally blew apart when I was a senior in high school.

But I could not operate in my usual facilitating style. I had to make a strong new initiative on behalf of my wife and my family. It was not easy. This motley crew of 40 who sustained this campus church had sacrificed a great deal to begin this ministry. They were committed to the limit of their resources. They did not understand the need for quick action, but they trusted us as we bought a little home in a near-by neighborhood, and Nancy went back to work part-time at Iowa Lutheran Hospital. I made commitments to childcare and some sharing of household responsibilities.

Differentiation of Self

We went off after that first year to a week-long marriage enrichment event for clergy couples at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. Nancy has little memory of that week, but I recall it as a watershed moment in redefining our relationship. It was not long after that week in Gettysburg that Nancy sat me down on our Iowa front porch and spoke in clear powerful words, "Stan, I'm tired of being simply your mistress, the governess of your children, and your housekeeper. I intend to be more than that!"

Her words and her anger shocked me to the core, partly because she had never spoken so directly before. I had little sense of how resentful Nancy felt about my total immersion in ministry and my own graduate pursuits, leaving little consideration for her sense of vocation, her feelings about family life and our relationship. I felt like a failure and a fraud as a husband and a father. I who preached and taught and counseled so diligently toward the healing and strengthening of marriage was seriously neglecting my own family.

That encounter on our Iowa front porch was a driving force behind a small group model for marriage preparation and marriage enrichment that has worked so well in congregational and clergy groups over the years. Nancy and I have led well over 150 of such weekends since 1970. On each occasion we have selected an area of our own relation-

ship for exploration in the small group. It is of paramount importance that topics for exploration by couples in the group must be *mutually* agreed upon. This process brings energy to the couple dialogue, which takes place in the presence of the small group. It is quite amazing to see the way in which the group works hard not to take sides but to reflect each partner's perspective (Rock, & Tormey, 1980, p. 9).²

We have learned with our group members, as marital therapist David Schnarch puts it, that "nobody's ready for marriage. It is marriage that makes you ready for marriage" (1997, p. 25). Each partner must find his/her own unique way of bringing one's gifts to a relationship that allows both partners "to live and love on life's terms" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 47). I used to think that marriage was a safe harbor, where I could come home and have my nurse wife heal the day's wounds. But I have discovered that marriage is more like a refining "crucible" where the rough edges are ground off through the "normal abrasions of long-term intimate relationships" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 51). It is a daunting experience to define one's sense of selfhood while at the same time, remaining intimately connected to that other person.

It is especially difficult to maintain one's best sense of self-definition in the fishbowl of the ministry, with a host of congregants' expectations. Each partner in a clergy marriage is challenged to live with all of the courage, resiliency, determination, and playfulness each can muster. The process is akin to what the apostle Paul wrote paradoxically in Phil. 2:12b-13; "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his (God's) good pleasure" (NRSV). As we stand in awe before the mystery of our lives as those who have been caught up in God's great saving work, we know intuitively that there is a whole lifetime of living out our call to shine as lights in a dark world (v. 15). So also in marriage, we discover that this special gift of a partner and a family must be received and nurtured. It takes risking careful self-definition to build a life-long partnership, knowing that in and through it all, God is at work, empowering us to find in this relationship and in our faith community our own real selves, a place of God's delight.

The technical term given to this process of becoming more uniquely ourselves by *holding on to ourselves* in a relationship with those we love is called *differentiation of self* (Bowen, & Kerr, 1985).³ Self-differentiation involves having enough of a sense of self to sustain a maturing relationship without dominating another or devouring another or losing one's center in another.

One of the unforgettable vignettes in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* is the account of a female ghost, who makes her way from the insubstantial shadows of hell in a bus ride to the solid gates of heaven. The

² A fuller discussion of the model may be found in Rock, Tormey, 1982, p. 9. See also Rock, S. (1980) for another more structured model.

³ See Bowen, & Kerr, 1985, pp. 89-111, for a fuller discussion of this concept.

female ghost insists on the Spirit giving Robert (her husband) back to her. She complains to a heavenly solid self, Hilda:

“The ingratitude! It was I who made a man of him. Sacrificed my whole life to him. (and later) Now listen, Hilda, please, please! I’m so miserable. I must have someone to do things to. It’s simply frightful down there. No one minds about us at all. I can’t alter them. It’s dreadful to see them all sitting about and not able to do anything to them. Give him back to me...I want Robert. What right have you to keep him from me? I hate you.” (Lewis, 1946, p. 85 and p. 89)

Self-differentiation is just the opposite of trying to *will* change in our partners. We cannot *do for others* what only they can *do for themselves*. We cannot make our partners spend more time with the family, initiate more affection, give us the best of themselves, rather than the dregs of the day. It is frightening to think, like the female ghost who meant well, that we who work so hard to shape our partners, may in the end lose our own selves.

What is the real meaning of self-differentiation? It is not an easy concept to grasp, let alone live out in a marriage. It is a different way of thinking and being. In Genesis 2:24, the man is called to leave father and mother, and as the KJV English puts it, “cleave to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Unfortunately, the NRSV has used the verb, “cling,” which evokes a sense of dependency rather than a strong union of two persons. The self-differentiated partner has indeed left mother and father and committed to a covenant of fidelity and trust, and to a just and mutual partnership. To become “one flesh” is not the fusion of two selves into some kind of indistinct glob which denies individuality. It is just the opposite. Rather, out of a clear sense of who one is and what one brings to a marriage, one can love in a way that does not coerce or demand or manipulate the other person.

Self-differentiation is not self-centeredness or selfishness. It is rather the high calling of loving another person so much that I do not deny who I am or lose my integrity. The truly self-differentiated person *freely chooses* to be a self for others as a part of a healthy family system.

Self-differentiation is a challenge for every married couple, but is often even more difficult in clergy marriages, where *both* partners’ selves can be lost under the mantle of “ministry.” I have found that some clergy couples feel a kind of forced self-denial (pressure to accept the lower salary, the modest size congregation, to be model givers) rather than the freedom of self-sacrifice, and they may become embittered. Part of the problem, as I see it, is that in our woundedness and shallow

sense of self, we may hold back what little we have. It is only out of a deep and rich sense of self that truly generous giving flows.

Another challenge to differentiation of self is that clergy marriages, just as with other marriages, suffer from what Harville Hendrix has called the search for the “disowned self.” In our search for an ideal partner, we marry, in an unconscious way, a person who possesses both positive and negative characteristics of those who raised us. We are trying to complete the self, and heal old childhood wounds. We become furious when our partners fail us (Hendrix, 1990).

As one of my students expressed in her journal:

I am beginning to understand the anxiety that an intimacy-deprived child (now adult) experiences when that person’s spouse expresses affection. It is as if one says, ‘I like this but somehow I don’t deserve it.’ Barry (her husband) pulls back and distances himself.

This same pastor writes about her own childhood:

I am beginning to understand what I have denied for so long, that my mother modeled for me the inappropriateness of being angry with a parent. She was terrified of being angry with her mother, and I now realize I feel the same way. I never before realized how I cry out in pain and frustration (in my marriage) rather than feel anger. I thought my pain was my anger. It really wasn’t.

These deep family relationship patterns enhance or block our search for intimacy and healthy self-definition. It is imperative that we all go home again in some new way, for it is in reframing the primary group relationships of the past and learning to make modest but clearly self-differentiating moves in our family of origin that we become freer to live in the present. Here is where family of origin therapy is such a useful tool (Richardson, 1995).⁴

Hendrix also identifies the “conscious marriage,” where our childhood needs are satisfied in positive ways, where we learn how to leave behind our self-defeating methods of getting our needs met and take more responsibility for negotiating what we need and want. One of the great gifts that Nancy brought to our marriage is her capacity to express affection. Having come from a family of emotional and affectional distance, I was very conscious that she was the kind of person I wanted to marry. I have a long way yet to go, but through the years Nancy has

⁴ See Richardson, 1995, for an overview of this approach.

elicited in me a much more open, affectionate style that has served both family bonding and pastoral care. I have found that such interpersonal growth does not come automatically. It requires a kind of intimacy that engages parts of the self perhaps hidden or dormant, as well as those parts of the self more easily experienced.

Thomas Oden in his book, *Game Free*, offers an apt description of this kind of intimacy:

Intimacy is an intensely personal relationship of sustained closeness in which the intimus sphere (inner world) of each partner is affectionately known and beheld by the other through congruent, empathic understanding, mutual accountability, and negotiability; durable in time yet subject to ecstatic intensification, emotionally warm yet conflict-capable, self-disclosing yet distance-respecting, subject to death and yet in the form of hope reaching beyond death. (1974, pp. 24-25)

In contrast to our North American cultural ideal of blissful co-existence and instant union, there is in this definition both the capacity for closeness and for distance, moving toward the other and moving toward defining one's self. There is warmth and caring but also the capacity to move through conflict to a place of negotiated mutual agreement. Time and trust are, of course, essential to such fine-tuning of life-long, changing patterns of relating.

The Role of Natural Systems

I find it essential when I think of a couple's relationship to recognize that we live in a marital *system*. Each member of the family functions in a way that affects the health of the marital system. Rather than blaming one's partner as the "identified patient" or one's child as that "problem kid," I find it helpful to look at the health and resilience of marital systems as those systems have been influenced by our families of origin and by our extended families. Both toxic forces and forces for health are passed down through the generations.

In my own family of origin, one of those toxic forces is the tendency to disengage, to cut off from other family members in the midst of conflict. It was an early survival technique. This tendency in my extended family has cast its shadow across our marriage as I have so often pulled back and internalized the conflict. It has taken a long time to learn that my relationship with Nancy is a much safer place for

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resolving differences than the kitchen of my family of origin, where I still hear the ring of horrible accusations and physical violence.

In the early years of our marriage, when my spouse would raise her voice, I would hear echoes of my father cursing my mother, and of my mother escalating the argument. In those days, I would get out of bed and stand in between my parents, trying to keep my father, drunk and mindless, from beating my mother with a loaded shotgun in his hand, or a butcher knife. As a child these instances of domestic violence made me feel helpless and full of fear. As I entered my own marriage years later, I discovered that some of these same primary emotions would come into the foreground of a marital disagreement and block my capacity to hear accurately the concern of my wife. Now I am able to place that "noise" in the background when my spouse and I have a disagreement. I am not totally free of childhood fears surrounding marital conflict, but considerable healing has come as I have revisited with my parents the breakdown of their marriage. The fact that my parents have finally reached some form of reconciliation (but not remarriage) has sent a wave of peace through my family of origin. That *shalom* has somehow empowered me to deal more constructively with conflict.

On Nancy's side, I can see now so clearly what I did not see earlier. She is a person who had been raised in such a close intimate family that her dad came home from the train station (where he worked) for mid-morning coffee, in the town where her family had lived for a 100 years across three generations. And I took her through eight moves in the first seven years of marriage! Yet in spite of that situational depression in 1970, Nancy's resilience and connectedness with family has been the catalytic agent in our family that has served us so well. We are much more connected than separated. There is much more of a healthy balance of closeness and appropriate distance in our relationship.

As family systems go, clergy marriages are more vulnerable than other marriages of professionals to the interplay between the work system (the families of the congregation), the nuclear clergy family, and the partners' extended families of origin. Ed Friedman makes this point in his remarkable book, *Generation to Generation*: "For clergy, more than for any other professionals, work and family systems plug all too easily into one another and significant changes in either system may be quicker to unbalance the other" (Friedman, 1985, p. 279).

To carry this interplay further, in a lecture in 1989, Friedman went on to speak of the danger of the pastor behaving like an "overfunctioning spouse" in a marriage. In this unhealthy role, the pastor provides for the congregation, gives nurture and support, shores up the ragged edges, calms the troubled waters, holds this disparate congregational family

together. Unfortunately, the clergy person often submerges his or her own selfhood in a self-aggrandizing over-functioning or in compulsive efforts to please others or to keep the peace.

In the end, leadership (the head) becomes too fused with the body, and the pastor and the pastor's family suffers as a result. I worked recently with a pastoral crisis in which a highly successful pastor with years in the ministry lost his resilience by giving 150% to the congregation. Finally, he felt the effects of that effort ripping through his own body and saw various family members react with lower levels of functioning. The flip side of his over-giving was that there were few if any relationships of accountability and support for him within his congregation.

A clergy spouse may likewise find it hard to carve out his or her unique vocation or place in the pastoral system. There may be a tendency toward the extremes here. At one extreme, the spouse may become an assistant pastor, greeting the congregation at the door. At the other extreme, the spouse may have nothing to do with congregational life. Fortunately, most spouses have found a middle ground of connectedness and separation that is comfortable for both partners, where each recognizes the calling and gifts of the other person. I find that seminarians' spouses still have considerable anxiety about their vocational and role identities. Yet this generation of future clergy couples appears to have a greater acceptance of diversity in developing patterns which respect the gifts and calling of both partners.

Spiritual Issues

Clergy couples may find it more painful than others to deal with deep negative emotions, especially anger and resentment. After all, how can one fight God, or the people of God, or that man or woman of God in pastoral leadership? A spouse may feel guilt about raising personal or family needs that are in tension with "service" to God's people. There are many boundary issues at stake here.

David and Vera Mace's study in the late seventies of clergy marriages is still relevant two decades later. The Maces explored such boundary issues as living in a fishbowl, the role of the pastor's spouse, the tyranny of time, the pastor's heavy workload, compulsive patterns of work, housing issues, finances, and spiritual growth. The Maces offered a picture of both stresses and opportunities in ministry (Mace, 1980).⁵

In the Mace study, topping the list of the rewards of ministry was the "sense of shared commitment to the pastoral vocation and the spiri-

⁵ It should be noted that this study of 165 husbands and 155 wives from mainline denominations was done with all male clergy. There is little research yet on the clergy couple, in which the minister is female or where both partners are ordained.

tual resources on which the couple can draw” and the strong sense of unity in a “life of serve to others.” (Mace, 1980, p. 43) It is in this area of vocation that the Maces make their strongest contribution. They question the precedence which many in the Christian community give to the special call to ministry over the understanding of marriage as vocation, with an equally profound call to a man and to a woman “to minister to each other, and to the children born to them, in a Christian family” (Mace, 1980, p. 90).

Of special importance in the clergy family is the spiritual care and feeding of *both* clergy and spouse. Who is the pastor’s pastor? Who gives pastoral care to the minister’s spouse? How do minister and spouse find relationships of spiritual companionship? How do children of clergy find their unique places in the congregation and in the world? These are questions addressed to both clergy and spouse, and they can be responded to in a rich variety of ways.

In the new curriculum at our seminary, I am part of a team that will guide our first year students into a deepening experience of the inward and outward journeys through an eight-day retreat experience, where students will actually receive two hours of semester credit for deepening their life in God. We are trying to model a more integrative way of putting together our theology with our spiritual formation. We are devoting a whole year of what we call a “learning web” to the spiritual disciplines and hope to develop a spiritual resiliency in our students and a sabbath rhythm which will sustain the clergy family spiritually in the years to come in both *psyche* and *soma*.

Some couples work conjointly in seeking the resources of spiritual formation. Others approach this area more individually. Nancy and I have responded in different ways to the challenge of spiritual deepening at different periods of our lives. I get up very early in the morning, awakened by my need for Parkinson’s medication. Last winter I found myself wrestling with the psalms of lament, which facilitated frank and honest dialogues with God. This year Nancy and I have enjoyed working through together Marchiene Rienstra’s, *Come to the Feast*, (Rienstra, 1995) a wonderful guide for spiritual companionship. Couples will find their own individual ways alone and together, but the need for such refreshing of the Spirit runs deep for both partners. A clergy marriage soon falls into certain robotized holding patterns without the spiritual glue which holds the marriage together.

Conclusion

Through all of the seasons of clergy marriage, the theme of *God’s grasping hold of us* more than *our hanging on to God* remains central. I return

to that second chapter of Philippians where the apostle stresses again and again the one thing that really matters, i.e. working out one's common life in Christ, congregational life and family life, with all the parts working together for the health of the whole corpus. This common life in Christ will not be authentic without the hard work of self-differentiation throughout clergy marriage. This *holding on to our real selves* in order that we may freely serve one another is only possible because of the refining work of God's Spirit in the midst of our work. And God completes what God begins (Phil.1:6).

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