

# Staying Alive in Ministry: WHAT LIGHTS US UP?

D O N N A S C H A P E R

Staying alive in ministry involves knowing what we mean by “alive” and what we mean by “ministry.” There is a pollution of words and confusion of roles that has to be managed before anything else can be managed.

One clergywoman said to me, “The biggest task at my church is keeping me from burning out. I am the chief asset here.” We know what she means. Ask any search

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committee: they know that the clergy leader is the chief asset of the organization. They may forget that over time. Since churches don’t think they are supposed to care for pastors—in fact they think the opposite—the matter of caring for the pastor is up to the pastor. Start there: if you don’t take care of yourself, no one else will. Care of yourself is your job. “Self-care” is the new buzzword. I prefer to get at the word pollution in “burn out.” Clergy roles are to care for the congregation. The congregation is not to care for the clergy. So the clergy must care for him or herself.

The language pollution of burn out implies that we are machines. We are not. I prefer to say that the role of clergy in caring

for ourselves is to stay lit. The problem with most people is not that they are “burnt out” but that they are not yet lit. Not yet on fire. Not yet alive. Before we can address the problem of staying alive, we have to become alive to our call. There are prestrategic issues to staying alive in ministry that involve getting alive in the first place. The key to self-care is remembering what lights us up, what invigorates us and staying close to it, actively not preventively. Watch all the negatives: avoid being burnt out is a preventive action. Look instead for the positives: get lit, stay lit, stay alive. Self care is getting lit and keeping ourselves lit.

Staying alive in ministry is protecting our capacity to be leaders. That’s what we were called to do and when we do that, most of us stay lit. Joseph Sittler’s great term for ministry was “maceration” or being chopped up in little pieces. When we get macerated we burn out. We can’t keep our dimly burning wick lit. Leadership is what lights us. Being leaders will keep us lit.

Leadership is setting a direction. It is compass work. It is air traffic control. It is flying on this latitude rather than that one. Many people think in the airplane metaphor that the leader is the pilot; often the leader is the knowledge on the ground, which the pilot wisely accepts. Leadership is the conversation between air and ground—between a pilot who has been magnificently trained to follow certain directions and to know what to do if directions fail. Leadership is a direction setting interaction between leader and followers. I often think that the issue for pastoral leaders is managing our shine. It is resisting the projections people put on our screen. It is being willing to be servant not CEO. It is getting our terms straight and resisting word and meaning pollution.

If leadership is setting an interactive direction, what is shine? Shine is what happens when you get rubbed too

often like that that famous bunny in the famous book. In *The Velveteen Rabbit*, we are told that “by the time you get real, most of your hair has been loved off, your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shiny.” Leadership soars when it has something to do with love: it crashes and burns when it serves other gods. Leadership wears you out. It rubs you raw. It makes you shiny with love.

The New Testament has yet another definition of leadership, much more interesting than mine. Mine is a little raw and a little realistic. Many pilots really don’t feel that good about air traffic controllers, even though they are absolutely dependent on them. In the New Testament, leadership is releasing the treasure born by earthen vessels. Leadership is cracking the pot open.

Without the New Testament understanding of leadership, I would probably be a farmer, not a preacher. Because of the New Testament understanding—that leadership is a treasure in an earthen vessel, I see that leaders are often crackpots or cracked pots. I wake up in the morning and try to be a leader, with joy and gratitude, seasoned with raw realism. Another way to stay alive in ministry is to insist on being imperfect. When we try to convince our people how good we are, we usually fail. Instead we should acquaint them with our humanity and our fallibility.

Leaders are not always holy. Nor are they always unholy. Leaders are cracked pots. They break open to spill. They crack open to set direction. They are the lead voice in the choir. Not the authoritarian or titled or robed or set apart so much as part of the choir, leading it. I have been amazed that the Roman Catholic Church has not hauled out its best heresy during the recent bout of unholiness in holy men. That heresy was resolved in this magnificent statement in the twelfth century. They took two years to come up with it. It says, “The Bread is good even if the giver isn’t.” One great way to stay alive in ministry is to come to trust the bread, even more than we trust ourselves.

In New York, we all woke up last Monday to these words, “New York’s most powerful tug joined a full-moon high tide to pull the Intrepid out of a dock in Mannhantans’ Harbor so that the boat could be fixed in Bayonne.” The Intrepid did not move. Silt and mud were victors over tide and tug. The Intrepid had been there for twenty-four years. Mud and silt had accumulated and became an obstacle to motion.

Ministry often becomes the victim of silt and mud. I know of one church in Philadelphia where the famous Tinley organ is housed. It has chosen silt over substance, mud over destination. In the pastor’s study there, the former pastor’s glasses sit on the desk and the Bible is open to his last seen page. Why? The church loved those thirty-five years so much they were not able to move on.

Larger versions of silt and mud exist. Many myths hound leaders who are ministers. That ministry is management and therapy is common knowledge today. Ministry involves some management and some therapy but mostly it is slogging through

the mud to get the ship moving. If there is a time conflict between ministry as movement and ministry as management or therapy, good leaders choose to move and let chaos in the office reign. Really good leaders avoid those conflicts in the first place by getting ahead of them—but, as I have already stated, ministry is by and for crackpots. Ministry is for people who are usually a little more earthen than they are vessels. We break. Listen to Barbara Brown Taylor describe her exit from ministry in her new book, *Leaving Church*.

“Behind my heroic image of myself, I saw a tiresome perfectionism, my resentment of those who did not try as hard as I did, and my huge appetite for approval. Above all, I saw that my desire to draw near to God as I could had backfired on me somehow. Drawn to care for hurt things, I had ended up with compassion fatigue. Drawn to a life of servanthood, I had ended up a service provider. Drawn to marry the divine presence, I had ended up estranged. I wondered if I had devoted myself to an illusion.”

Rabbi Edwin Friedman argues that the typical Protestant congregation consists of an over-functioning pastor surrounded by infantilized or under-functioning laity. No one but the pastor can break this myth open.

Standing at an airlines desk, I overheard this conversation. Big man, big suit, says to small woman in uniform behind desk: “What do you mean my ticket is for tomorrow and not today? HOW COULD SHEEE (his assistant) have done that to me? Small woman says to large man, with smile on face, “Because she is human, that’s why.” Nice way to think about leadership, isn’t it? A reminder about the bread being good even if the giver is not. Pastors should liturgize: “You are not a perfect congregation; I am surely not a perfect pastor. Come, let us rub each other raw.”

A clergy friend of mine just left her church. She put her departure this way: “I was invited

to do church their way but not my way. I was there only to do legacy protection. I wanted to do that and something more. Was I wrong to do want that?” Wrong if you wanted the job, not wrong if you wanted the work. My friend Tony Robinson begins his book, *The Worst Jobs in History*, this way: “I loved the work and hated the job.” I daresay his statement applies not only to ministry but also to medicine and law, parenting and air traffic control. We often love the work and hate the job.

Silt and mud are often victorious over self-care and leadership. But we have options: we can stay lit by caring for our selves as a way of truly caring for our people. □



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