

Generation to Generation

FAMILY PROCESS IN
CHURCH AND SYNAGOGUE

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Leaving and Entering a Congregational Family

Shortly after World War II a new congregation in a developing urban area became sharply divided. The intensity generated by the opposing factions caused a dozen families to leave abruptly. As is the nature of cells that divide, a new colony was formed. They started their own congregation several miles away. The daughter congregation, imbued with a competitive spirit, grew rapidly. But in its 7th year, the "noise of this solemn assembly," hitherto muffled by its pioneering energy, drowned out its minister's message. Forty families that had become close in the unity of their "rejection" left the parish and created a third community. Emphasizing peace, harmony, and family togetherness, they found a naive seminary graduate to take the post.

Things went well for 2 years; then they turned him out unceremoniously and hired another to take his place. Again things went well for a while, but after 5 years history repeated itself once more. For their third match they selected a minister who was almost the opposite of all the previous ones. He was different in stature and, unlike his predecessors, not interested in social action or preaching. He saw himself primarily as a shepherd, and devoted all his time to his people's needs. It appeared that whatever "evil spirit" had troubled the members of this "family" for more than 15 years (for some it had been more than 20) finally had been laid to rest. Then, suddenly, with no warning, their saintly, devoted pastor committed suicide.

It has been emphasized that problems in a family can be the residue of emotional processes carried over from previous generations. The exact same transmission occurs with congregational families. Nor does the similarity end there. As with personal families, such processes tend to be perpetuated by, or originated during, transition periods. There is a great irony here because, as illustrated in Chapter 7, the

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major way to exorcise the demons that travel this multigenerational path falls within the clergy's own expertise, namely, rites of passage. Such nodal periods have the same natural therapeutic efficacy in the life of a church or synagogue, with potential long-range benefits for both the congregational family and its separating partner.

This chapter will apply the systems and ceremonies insights of Chapter 7 to the nodal events of a congregational family, in particular to the entering and leaving of its spiritual leader. As mentioned earlier, these moments are the one experience we can all relate to, and often they are the experience through which some of us are related. The manner in which each of us handles our separation from a given congregation goes far toward determining the kind of "family" our successor will "marry into."

THE LAME DUCK MYTH

In perhaps no other area of the clergy's emotional life has the emphasis on personality and psychodynamics created so much distraction from the natural healing power inherent in our community position. "Savvy" psychological advice is often given to ministers, priests and rabbis: "Once you are going to leave a congregation, don't be narcissistic; don't interfere in the selection process; stay out of the way; temper your ego; cut the cord; sever the bonds; what happens from now on in the future relationship of the congregation and your successor is none of your business; accept the reality of your 'lame duck' condition." But no member of the clergy would say that to a member of the congregation who is separating from his or her spouse, and who has been significantly involved in the raising of their children. Nor would this kind of advice to cut off be given to the relatives of someone who has a terminal illness, or the parents of a child (much less the child himself or herself) who has decided to leave home.

The notion that clergy become lame ducks, once it is known that they are leaving a post, is as short-sighted as are approaches to any terminal condition that urge physical distance or minimizing contact as the way to reduce emotional intensity. As in personal family situations, the effect of such all-or-nothing approaches to separation is far more likely to transfer the intensity of the experience than to reduce it. Obviously, as with a child leaving home to marry, it is better for the parent to stay away than to hang on. But it is not at all clear that staying away, particularly to the extent it approximates an emotional cut-off, is less pathogenic in the long run than hanging on.

That extreme forms of separation (cutting off and hanging on) are, in fact, connected is illustrated by the following tale: A rabbinical

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student quit his studies abruptly in the middle of the night. By the next morning he had left with all his belongings. He never made contact with anyone again. Years later, after a successful career in another field, he died while on a visit to another country. His family and his wife fought for years over who should have custody of his remains. In both types of separation, all or nothing was this family's style.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO SEPARATING

The family model offers a third alternative to these either/or choices. When the separation between a congregation and its clergyman or clergywoman can be handled in the manner emphasized throughout this work, the so-called lame duck periods can be among the most fruitful in the life of that family. Where the terminal period in our relationship with a congregation can be treated as an opportunity for emotional growth, rather than as a painful period to be shortened or avoided, the long-range benefits, for both the congregation and for ourselves, are numerous and fundamental; and more than the pastoral aspect of things is involved here. The nature of the separation can influence the lasting effects of all our previous years of effort.

Earlier it was mentioned that, in some uncanny time warp, how we function in a family before the death of a parishioner can do more for the ultimate grief work than the most sensitive counseling and eulogies after his or her demise. A similar time reversal occurs in separations. How we function during the end-stage of our relationships with our congregations can do more to prolong the message we had been spreading than how forcefully we articulated that message in the first place.

For the congregational family, the major benefit of a family systems approach to separation is that it will enable more objectivity in the selection of a new partner. Also, the new relationship will have a fresher start. There will be less baggage. And the individual members of the congregation will learn something about separation that they can carry over into terminal situations in their own families. Indeed, members of the congregational family may be at that very moment going through some personal separation experience in their own families, such as terminal illness, divorce, or a child leaving home. In those situations, their reactions to the congregational family breakup will be sharper. But, as always, the emotional interlock between personal and congregational families also has the capacity to heighten understanding.

For the clergy, all the same benefits hold. We also will have a fresher start in our next professional relationship, and our personal families can also benefit from our increased capacity to deal with end-

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stage family situations. In addition, our future counseling of parishioner families suffering separation problems will be enriched by our own professional termination experience; each will inform the other, and out of that mutuality will develop a more integrated ministry and minister.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO ENTERING

But it is not just with regard to the rites of leaving that lessons can be learned from personal family emotional processes. Family theory can also be applied to the early stages of a relationship between a congregation and its minister. Analogies to so-called blended families, where one partner marries a spouse who already has children, are particularly apt. This kind of increasingly frequent family situation can teach us relevant strategies for how to function when we are first called to a post so as to minimize the effects of the residue left by the previous relationship. Also of benefit are analogies to the engagement period. For example, the manner in which we leave our previous system (here, seminary or congregation rather than parent or previous partner) can have a significant effect on our resiliency and objectivity in any new congregational relationship. In addition, as with personal marriage, a family history of our future congregational partner can provide many clues about the nature of its emotional system, when it is likely to be troubled, and how it is likely to function in crisis.

THE RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY AS AN EXTENDED SYSTEM

There is also a third dimension to the relationships of clergy and their congregations that is brought into sharper focus by the family model: the extended system of the religious hierarchy. Even as a full understanding of the joining or rending asunder of any personal marriage must be set against the background of the partners' extended families, so too in these professional marriages the extended system of the religious hierarchies affects and is affected by nodal events in the various nuclear families of which they are composed.

While the major focus of this chapter will be the clergy-congregational bond, it is first worth noting some of the emotional processes in these extended hierarchical systems. They always provide the larger context and as with any family of origin, often exert a very subtle influence. In addition, as with any extended family, a hierarchy often provides the continuous set of feedback loops through which unresolved issues in the faith system are transmitted from one congrega-

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tion to another, and from one generation to another. Understanding how emotional process in these extended systems interlocks with emotional process in specific nuclear congregational-clergy groupings can help broaden the perspective on their "marriage problems."

HIERARCHICAL TRIANGLES

No matter what the denomination, religious hierarchies composed of district supervisors, directors, bishops, provincials, superiors, placement committees, etc., necessarily become involved in the upward, downward, and lateral movement of their members, sometimes excommunicatingly so. In fact, a huge proportion of their time and energy is spent in matchmaking and mending. But since the members of these hierarchies are, together with the various congregational-clergy relationships, all part of some larger, extended emotional system, what often results is a broad, complex set of "in-law" issues.

Trapped in such a network of relations, those who occupy hierarchical positions are subject to endless, enervating triangulation. From the point of view of the front-line minister, priest, or rabbi, those over him or her may seem to have all the power, much as children tend to think that way about their elders (who think that way about their children). But, as in any family, those who supposedly have all this power often feel caught because of the perpetual juggling act they are expected to perform. The constantly revolving door, or game of musical chairs, as some have called it, can be extremely stressful for those who try to keep the entire system in balance.

In addition, the constant pulls from every direction make effective counseling within the system itself almost impossible. In religious hierarchies, the counselor must always be watching his or her own flank. It is difficult enough to try to help any congregational family and its minister work out their problems. It becomes much more difficult when there are various interlocking triangles that include the counselor's own boss in the extended system, or his or her own predecessor, or his or her boss's predecessor, not to mention the counselee minister's predecessor, who by now may have become the counselor's own boss. And this does not even begin to take into consideration the possibility that the people at the top of the hierarchy have alliances with members of the very parish that is experiencing trouble with their minister. This is like trying to do effective marriage counseling with your own brother and sister-in-law, who, along with your spouse, work for her father, who, in turn, is having an affair with your own father's sister, who is married to a man who was your father-in-law's chief business competitor. No wonder clergy in the hierarchy and clergy in

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congregations are often suspicious of one another. As was said earlier, the manner in which clergy "parent" their parishioners affects the way the latter parent their children. Some similar effect exists with regard to the way members of a hierarchy parent the congregational clergy, thus grandparenting the members of the congregation.

The family model can be beneficial to the extended family of the hierarchy in several ways. It can lay the basis for setting up programs that teach ministers and congregations how to use transition periods creatively, and that will ultimately affect their own work and stress. The model could be used to establish guidelines to help foster the institutionalization of transitions, with rites of passage appropriate for that community. As with personal family marriage and divorce, the ceremonial focus is almost exclusively on joining. Religious communities tend to place far more emphasis on the installation ceremonies of a new minister than on appropriate terminal ceremonies for the outgoing spiritual leader. But once again, it is the "family" that is going through change, as well as the identified celebrant(s). Ceremonies marking the end of a given clergy-congregational relationship are often more important for the future of all the family members than those initiating a beginning for the new "couple."

A family systems understanding of entering and leaving congregations can also offer members of any hierarchy new ways to facilitate such changes through the realization that the entire passage comprises the year surrounding the event; using the concept of an emotional triangle enables one to coach without getting caught in the middle. Indeed, the concept of an emotional triangle almost appears to have been specifically created for these kinds of situations. The following is an illustration of triangles typically found in extended family hierarchies.

Coaching in the Hierarchy: A member of a hierarchy was called in because a church wanted a new minister. The latter was functioning in a very immature way, but the church also was displacing onto him their unresolved grief over their previous minister's abrupt resignation. It happened that the person who had been asked to mediate had above her in the hierarchy someone with relatives in that congregation. She was beside herself as to what approach or decisions would be best for the church, for the minister, or for herself. Adding to her stress was the fact that there was no one else available for the pulpit. It was suggested that she use the coaching model, and not take on personally such awesome responsibility for the congregation. As when a couple comes in to their minister and asks whether they should get divorced, she should try to facilitate a process in which the parties tell her what decisions *they* wanted to make. She should further this process by

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giving everyone choices. The congregation could be told, "If you really want him out, I can do that; but you will be without a replacement indefinitely." The minister, who was an "injustice collector," could be told, "If you really want to stay, that probably could be arranged; but you will have to be willing to face some interpersonal issues."

A lay leader had drawn up a list of grievances that he wanted to be read in secret session. It was suggested that the mediator tell the group, "If I am to be present, I have to be the judge of what should be reported back." The congregational committee agreed to let the minister be present. The list paralleled almost exactly the list of content charges congregational families usually bring against their clergy (see Chapter 8). Throughout the meeting, the mediator maintained a nonanxious presence with this "couple" in order to catalyze self-definition in the manner described in Chapter 3, detriangling after every complaint to her by asking each side its perception of another's grievance. Finally, one of the members of the congregational family got some distance, and joked that only an auto-de-fé would solve everything. At this point, the mediating minister suggested that the "marriage" might be continued on a trial basis for 6 months, after which a replacement would be available.

She continued during that period to use her extended family position in the triangle in order to keep both sides communicating. At the end of the 6 months, the congregation was ready to have the minister stay on, but he decided he would prefer to work on a college campus. They split up amicably, with genuine sorrow expressed on both sides.

The most important point is this: Far more than conflict resolution was accomplished. The process approach to resolution, rather than simply dealing with the content of the issues, managed to dissolve much of the emotional residue of the congregation's previous unworked-out marriage. The next minister enjoyed a very harmonious union. No matter who that person would have been, no matter what his or her strengths, he or she would have found the job much more difficult had the residue from the un-worked-out previous breakup two generations back been heightened by its transmission through one more unresolved separation. This is exactly the kind of systemic healing that has been going on in personal families for centuries when marriages, births, bar mitzvahs, baptisms, deaths, and divorces, not handled in an uptight manner, are able to exorcise the spooks that entered the system during a previous uptight passage.

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into three parts: (1) a family-systems-based strategy for separating from a church or synagogue that is designed to leave the least amount of residue for each

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partner; (2) a description of my own efforts to put these principles into practice when, after 15 years of leadership, I left the congregation I had helped found; and (3) a family systems strategy for entering a post that reduces the likelihood of getting caught in the residue of our congregational partner's previous relationship(s).

A STRATEGY OF SEPARATION

There are four interconnecting elements to a family systems model for leaving congregational families in a manner that minimizes pathological residue: (1) regulating our own emotional reactivity to others; (2) permitting emotional reactivity in others; (3) nonanxiously being a part of the transition process; and (4) staying in touch after we have left, but continuing to detriangle.

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY

The most important factor that affects the resolution of intense bonds is the degree of emotional reactivity between the partners. This is true during the course of a relationship itself, but is particularly true during its breakup. Reactivity, as compared to responsiveness, promotes fusion. It is a force for stuck-togetherness rather than an enabler of differentiation. Worse, reactivity inflames the wounds of separation rather than healing them. The idea is applicable to all kinds of leaving.

For example, the most intense forms of reactivity in marital divorce—battles over property visiting rights and support payments, kidnapping of children, refusal to let the other partner see the child, or no contact ever again—all are evidence that the couple had failed to separate. And the continuing struggle inhibits further separation. Property settlement struggles can also surface in a congregational-clergy split, of course, where the ruling lay committee says the minister is not entitled to a month's vacation, or the clergyman or clergywoman takes property from the "marriage," for example, books, furniture, ritual objects.

Similar symptoms indicating inability to separate surface after other kinds of separation as well, for example, property settlements after death, fights over the will, or the stealing of memorabilia; here too they lead to emotional cut-offs between survivors. However, as with divorce, it is the emotional reactivity already in the family and not the separation itself that promotes the bickering and the resulting cut-offs. And once again, continued reactivity inhibits resolution of the triangles between the relatives and the "separated" deceased.

Also similar is the conflict that can surround weddings (the separa-

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tion of leaving home). As mentioned in Chapter 7, intense reactivity at these joyous events is almost always indicative of the difficulty parent and children are having separating from one another and, once more, the reactivity itself inhibits the separation necessary for the future marriage to prosper.

Naturally, in any relationship, the partner who is not initiating the separation will tend to be more reactive. It is, therefore, up to the initiating partner to be prepared for reactivity in the other, and to regulate his or her own reactivity in order to prevent reciprocal escalation. What adds to the difficulty is that, when any intense relationship breaks up, the first partner who succeeds in finding a new partner will receive a depressed or sabotaging reaction from the other. But even when the other partner, marital or congregational, is the "jilter," the capacity to commit ourselves to a course of regulating our own reactivity, although it can be more difficult in such circumstances, can go far to facilitate the type of separation necessary for both to get on with our future lives. This is also good for our children (charges), whether it is a marital or professional "split."

PERMITTING REACTIVITY IN THE OTHER

It is also important to allow reactivity in the other. As most family members would prefer that their relatives die in the middle of the night rather than through a slow process of deterioration, so most separating marriage partners would like to steal away nocturnally and never have to deal with their spouses again. In a similar way, most members of the clergy would like to have as little time as possible between the announcement of their resignation and the actual termination of their contract. This is also true of a congregation after it has refused to renew a minister's contract. During such periods, the avoidance responses of either party are usually misinterpreted as hostility rather than as the inability to face a terminal condition. Yet, in any kind of separation, it is that avoidance response during the passage that "spooks" the future. It is the middle-of-the-night departure that fosters "shades." Of course, it is true that the shorter the period of the interregnum, the less reactivity one has to deal with. But the ability to allow or even make room for reactivity in the other, without reciprocating, creates the best chance that both partners can go on to their next relationships with the least amount of emotional baggage.

Celebrating Early: A priest had been told he would be transferred after enjoying a deep, intimate relationship with his flock. He was having great difficulty with the separation, as was the congregation, as

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evidenced by the lack of enthusiasm for all programs. He began to put all his energies into one massive, terminal sermon that he would give just before he left at Christmas.

It was suggested that this was hit-and-run and that he give his "Christmas" sermon immediately so that people would have ample opportunity to respond. He took the suggestion, and the depression hovering over both "partners" lifted immediately. Each also did well with the next "spouse." (Allowing the other to react while committing oneself not to react is what "dying with dignity" may really be all about.)

ENGAGING ACTIVELY IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS

In Chapter 7 it was shown that parents often go to one of two extremes around the time of weddings of their children. Either they tend to become overinvolved and interfering, or they remove themselves from the process as much as possible. While interference in the future relationships of a relative hinders the separation process, extreme avoidance, as with a purely comfort approach to terminal illness, fails to make use of the opportunity. It was shown there that if parents can become part of the leaving home process without trying to influence its direction, more separation will be accomplished and the new bond will have more flexibility than if they had remained distant.

The same is true when leaving a post. Certainly, trying to influence the selection process of one's successor is "akin" to trying to choose a mate for one's child, or trying to nullify his or her choice. Either extreme will form pernicious triangles. But becoming involved in the creation of a selection process is another matter. For example, helping one's congregational partner to become more aware of how the relationship looks from the other side can heighten the congregation's objectivity in the selection process. Even though this "engages" outgoing clergy in more triangles at the time, ultimately it promotes more disengagement from them.

Depending on the faith group, the laity has varying degrees of say in the selection, but even when they have little choice during this rite of passage, members of any congregational family will be more open to appreciating the position of its spiritual leader if there is some involvement in the transition process. Where the laity is autonomous, helping them to find a successor—for example, by writing a job description based on our own expertise and experience—further the separation process in the same way as did the mother in Chapter 7, who helped with the wedding preparations but kept her personal preferences to herself.

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One of the great ironies that clergy will find at such moments, analogous to personal divorce, is that their partner is at last making the changes they had sought to bring about for years. This is much like the marriage partner who finds his sexless or frugal spouse going in the opposite direction after the breakup.

But that is the way fusion and separation affect relationships. For clergy who are truly interested in their entire faith community, and whose commitment goes beyond gathering disciples, taking advantage of the separation from our disciples to achieve what we could not achieve while still their leaders is in everyone's best interests. It is one of the most mutually beneficial activities that the clergy of any faith family can perform for one another. It requires nonreactivity, but it also helps regulate it for both partners.

STAYING IN TOUCH AFTER THE DIVORCE

In the same way that postmortems after parties add to their satisfaction, that remaining together after climax can prolong sexual enjoyment, and that wakes or coming back to the house after funerals can deepen the parting, so continuing to relate to members of a former congregation in a detriangling manner *after* one has taken a new post can further facilitate the separation. Just as in personal marriage, where the other side of successful engagement is continued successful disengagement (from families of origin), so the capacity of any congregation or member of the clergy to make his or her next relationship "take" is somewhat dependent on a continuing disengagement process after the "divorce." Indeed, some forms of disengagement are only possible after the separation. (Cemetery visits may serve the same disengagement process. Ostensibly made to remember, they may really help us to forget better than when we try to carry our remembrances in our head.)

For example, members of a congregation, as former marriage partners, may feel squeamish about having their two "lovers" meet. Yet when they are alone with either, they will immediately triangulate the two by telling the new one how bad the old partner was, or by telling the old partner how the new one does not measure up. (The former situation will be discussed below.) In the latter situation, if members of the clergy will keep up contact (a noninterfering contact) and comment upon such remarks in an uninvolved way, such moments can be opportunities to detriangle and to further more separation than if those remarks by former parishioners had never been given the opportunity to occur.

It is like a bride who comes back to mother attacking her husband.

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If mother sides with her child, the future may be self-fulfilling because she will be keeping her daughter bound. But her daughter's very comments can be seen as an inability on her part to separate from mother. Thus, it is better that daughter make the comment and have mother detriangle, than for daughter never to bring the issue "home."

Where we allow former congregants to attack our successor, but refuse to conspire in an emotional alliance against him or her (not too much more difficult than resisting the wiles of Satan), we further disengagement with our separated partner and encourage the process of a less fused engagement in our partner's new relationship as well as in our own. Is there a danger in this process? Absolutely! But once again, as with all emotional and spiritual growth, the rewards of non-cloistered virtues are proportional to the risks. Playing it safe is more peaceful, but is avoiding challenge what responsible leadership is all about?

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

The following story is about my own efforts to apply this four-fold strategy. It helped teach the teacher what separation was about.

My decision to leave my congregation was motivated primarily by a desire to devote more time to writing. I had agonized over it for several years but always put it off. Soon after my mother died, however, I found myself released to make this other separation. To whatever extent these nodal events in my life were related, I cannot be sure, but the correlation of such decisions with changes in family of origin is not unusual among the clergy. And, as I mentioned in Chapter 9, I do know that my mother's mother was the major influence on my own religious identity. (More will be mentioned about this type of connection in the next section on the clergy's family of origin.)

I had been the founding rabbi and the spiritual leader of the congregation throughout its first 15 years, and I knew that separation would not be easy for either of us. I therefore spent an entire summer planning how to go about it. My primary concern was to give my congregational partner as much time as possible to work through the separation. After all, I would be in the position of "jilter." I evolved the following plan: I decided to make the announcement at the beginning of the congregational year (September) in order to allow as much time as possible for working through the separation processes. I chose Yom Kippur evening since that was the occasion on which most of the congregation attended, and I thought it best that as much of the congregation as possible hear it at the same time and directly from me.