

The Relational Processes that Surround Us

I want to turn now to another foundational concept that is critical to surviving in ministry. That is to look at the processes as they unfold around us. A process is a continuous action, operation, or series of changes taking place in a definite manner: *the process of governing the country, the process of loving my neighbor, the process of selecting the next minister of our church.* Take a look at the process that is occurring here.

*Tell my people what's wrong with their lives,
Face my family Jacob with their sins!
They're busy, busy, busy at worship,
And love studying all about me.
To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people –
law-abiding, God-honoring.
They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?
And love having me on their side.
But they also complain, Why do we fast and you don't look our way?
Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?
"Well, here's why: "The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.
You drive your employees much too hard.
This is the kind of fast day I'm after:
To break the chains of injustice,
To get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts.
What I'm interested in seeing you do is:
Sharing your food with the hungry,
Inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
Putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
Being available to your own families
Do this and the lights will turn on,
And your lives will turn around at once.
Firm muscles, strong bones.*

This is Isaiah 58:1-9 from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. The writer seems to be saying we perform to the standards of the letter, but yet miss the whole point in the process as it unfolds." You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me." Jesus picks up on this theme of empty traditional processes over and over in the Gospels. More than the rote performance of some spiritual behavior or tradition, God seems to be more interested in the process. And it is in the processes of our unfolding spiritual lives that the authentic or the inauthentic shines through. Let's explore this in more detail.

Processes surround us, and we are constantly involved with simultaneously occurring processes as we go about our daily life and work, comprising the context in which we live our lives. Most of the processes are quite unconscious. We've learned to participate in them, and we go about our lives utilizing these processes, never taking the time to actually stop and analyze them.

There's the process of getting up in the morning and all the processes involved in dressing, bathing, grooming, etc. There's the process of breakfasting, and traveling to our places of work. And the processes used to accomplish work, play, recreation, socializing, etc. And then of course, there's the processes of sermon preparation and delivery, building wholesome staff relations, visiting the sick, conducting a funeral, and all the other processes surrounding ministry. These processes are largely performed automatically and largely unconsciously.

Life under the surface

So much of what happens in our unfolding life is under the surface, and not readily available to our conscious alterations without concentrated reflection accompanied by wise guidance. "We know in part" [1 Cor. 13]. We live in the shadows, so much of what we experience is a delusion. Best place to see this is in the ads on TV, which basically present a delusional world.

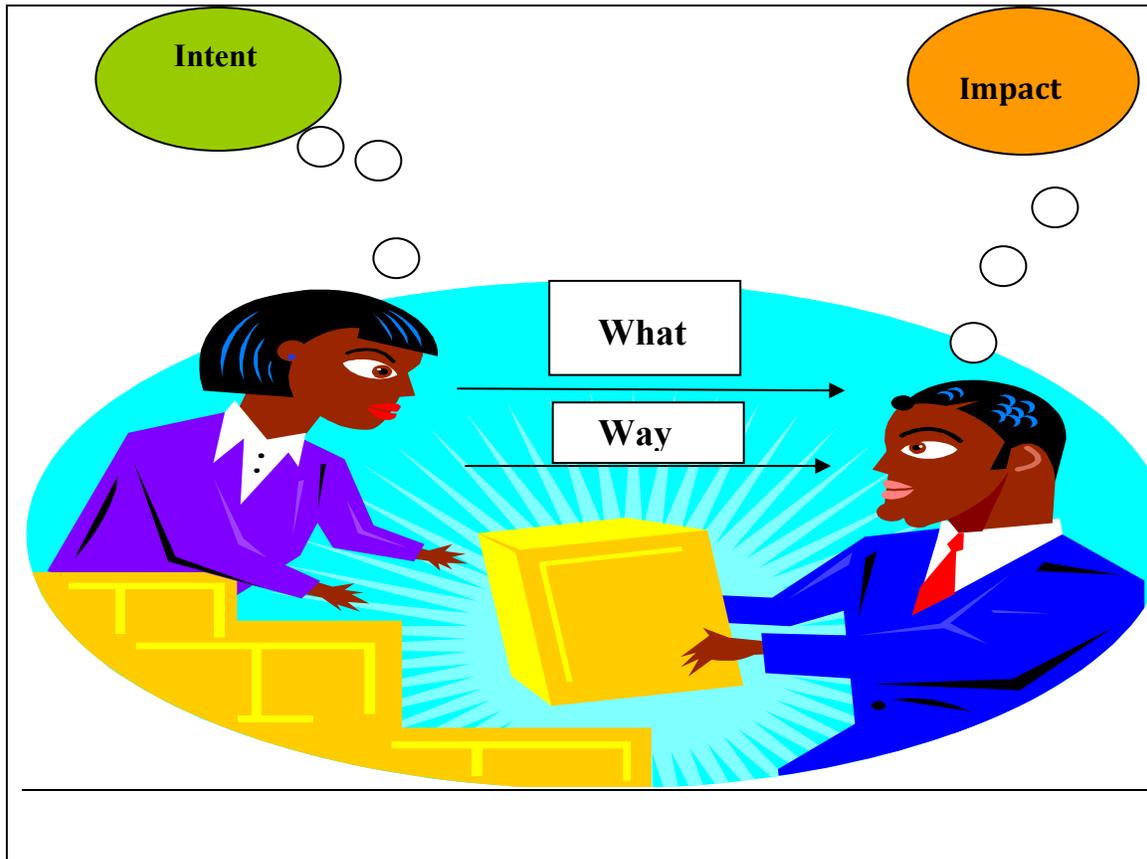
Because we don't tend to monitor processes effectively, these processes often direct our behavior in ways that at times can seem mysterious to us. Take for instance the issue of gaining weight. Many people in this country are overweight, and yet are basically unaware (except for the most elementary aspects of overeating and calorie counting) as to what physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual processes that might be at play. As a result, simplistic solutions such as, "Just push back from the table" are offered as solutions.

Lurking behind these processes are our motivations and intentions. Have you ever thought to yourself, Why do I minister at my church every week? The logical centers in your brain will come up with the "right" answer to that. 'I minister at the church because I was called to do that.' Yes, well, that hopefully is part of it. But there are probably other motivations at work – I like to be looked up to and feel important. My mother always said I should be a minister.

There are individual processes, processes that individuals perform, and there are relational processes, those processes that are driven by the myriad relationships that surround and incorporate us. This is a somewhat arbitrary differentiation, but let's use it in our discussion.

Communication process

A good place to begin looking at processes is in the area of communication. Communication is constantly occurring, and because we all speak the same language, there's the assumption that communication is a simple process. It is not. Communication is difficult in that we communicate through different channels, and we register other people's communication in different parts of our brains. Look at this drawing.



Notice that the woman is saying something (*what*) to the man. She has a particular intent: 'John, would you put that box over here.' Hopefully what she intends by her message equals the impact of her message on John. But that isn't always the case. That's because communication has more than one channel. My content (*what*) also carries relational signals in the *way* that I say things – body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, etc.

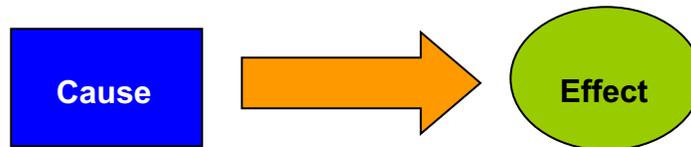
When I say something to you, my words carry one message, that you hear consciously (the *what* of my message), and my body language communicates another message (the *way* of my message), which is communicated by me and registered by you unconsciously. What that means is that I can say one thing ("I really value women and their contribution in the workplace") and at the same time contradict that message by my body language (I never seek out women for their opinions, and tend to only hear and value contributions by men). Whenever there is a discrepancy between what I say verbally, and how I act non-verbally (a double message), the verbal message is rejected. Also, trust in the communicator is diminished or destroyed.

The main aspect of the trust-building process that all leaders struggle with is tied up in this model of communication. Trust is built when people are authentic, or congruent – when *what* they say is backed up by the *way* that they say it (which also involves the way they conduct their lives. This is, of course, easier said than done.

Linear vs. Recursive Processes

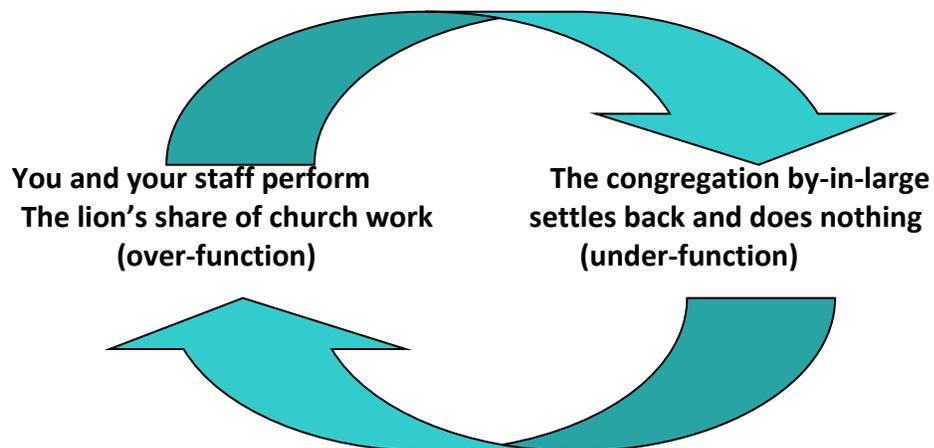
The old Newtonian way of seeing things was linear. One person acted upon another. 'You made me mad.' 'We didn't make our third quarter goals because John didn't work hard enough.' When a consultant hears a person or multiple persons explain a problem, almost invariably linear designations are employed. "My co-worker made me late to the meeting."

Linear



The new systems way of seeing the world brought in a recursive sense of cause and effect. The old 'You made me late' became, 'You were late because I was mad and treated you like an imbecile, which only made you later (because that was your best chance to get back at me) which only made me madder, which only made you later, and on and on.'

Recursive



This recursive pattern makes it impossible to tease out cause and effect. One cause is also an effect. The pattern is self-perpetuating.

All of a sudden we are given a new pair of glasses by which to see the world. This is a pair of glasses that looks not just at the *what* of things (the content if you will), but the *way* things unfold and relate to one another – the process. People in the western world are not very good at spotting processes.

Patterns Relationships Take

Anxiety and stress begins to spread through an organization. And as it spreads, certain things start to happen within that organization. As people within the organization sense the anxiety, the tendency (especially for those who are the least well-defined individuals) is to begin to 'herd,' drawing closer together emotionally. This drawing together spells the further loss of each person's individuality and assumption of the group identity. This herding together is an attempt to reduce anxiety, but it in fact creates its own anxiety, thus adding to the mounting difficulty in the organization.

People in the stressed organization herd together. They also assume certain postures in an attempt to reduce the anxiety. Note a particular pattern: solutions to certain problems themselves turn into problems. In other words, as you solve the wrong problem, or solve the right problem with the wrong solution, the solution becomes the problem. You can see this throughout organizational life, and throughout history.

Let's consider an example. A minister comes to a church in the suburbs of a city. The congregation is made up of highly educated, high ranking members who were used to thinking on their own, and issuing orders. The minister is a command-control fellow who, in his former congregations out in the hinterlands, was used to shouting 'Jump,' with the congregation responding 'How high?'

This minister was in trouble from the start, as a recursive pattern formed. He would give his orders to staff and congregation, who would largely ignore or push back. He would then double down on his commanding style, and also isolate more and more from his people. They in turn would continue to question his leadership with talk of dismissal rising.

This example can easily be reversed. Consider another minister called to a church with a very dependent congregation who was used to being taken by the hand and told what to do. But this minister is more of a contemplative, who is mild-mannered not wanting to 'upset the applecart' ever. This congregation would have the same problem as the one mentioned above. "We can't this guy to lead us."

Triangling

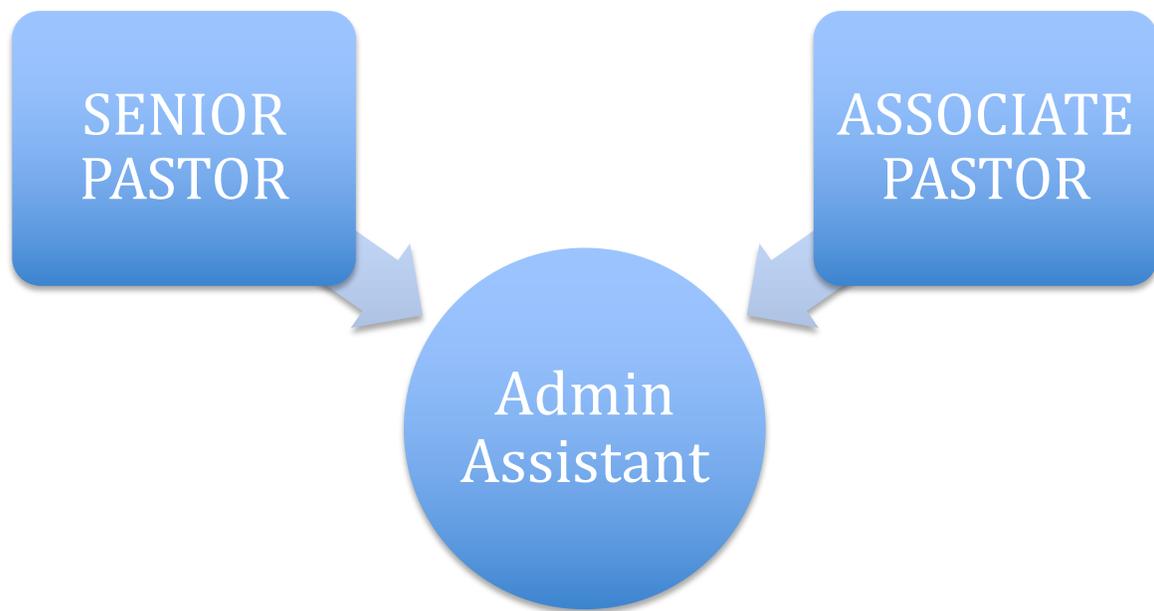
When anxiety builds in an organization, one of the automatic postures people assume together is that of the triangle. Let's say the Senior Pastor of a church comes to the

office early after a board meeting the evening before. He is anxious because the board was very angry about the last quarter financial performance of the church. How long does it take the Associate Pastor to figure it out that the Senior Pastor is upset? Like the cows, she knows immediately. And, like them, she quite possibly takes it on herself (remember how quickly it spread in the cows). The Senior Pastor transmits, and Associate Pastor takes on the anxiety instantly. Interestingly, as soon as she takes on the anxiety, the Senior Pastor often calms down.

Now, if one of the administrative assistants (or whoever else is part of that office staff) comes around the Associate Pastor, he or she, if poorly defined with poor boundaries, will take on the anxiety and end up carrying the anxiety that the Senior Pastor originally brought in that morning. The Senior Pastor and the Associate Pastor feel better. So now we have two calm church senior staff, but an upset admin assistant. If this particular cycle happens often enough, with the anxiety ending up in the admin assistant, we have a triangle pattern.

Further, if the organizational anxiety tends to settle in one person (in this case, the admin assistant) often enough, that person is likely to develop a symptom (either physical, mental/emotional, spiritual and/or social). This is also true of whole groups, as we will discuss below.

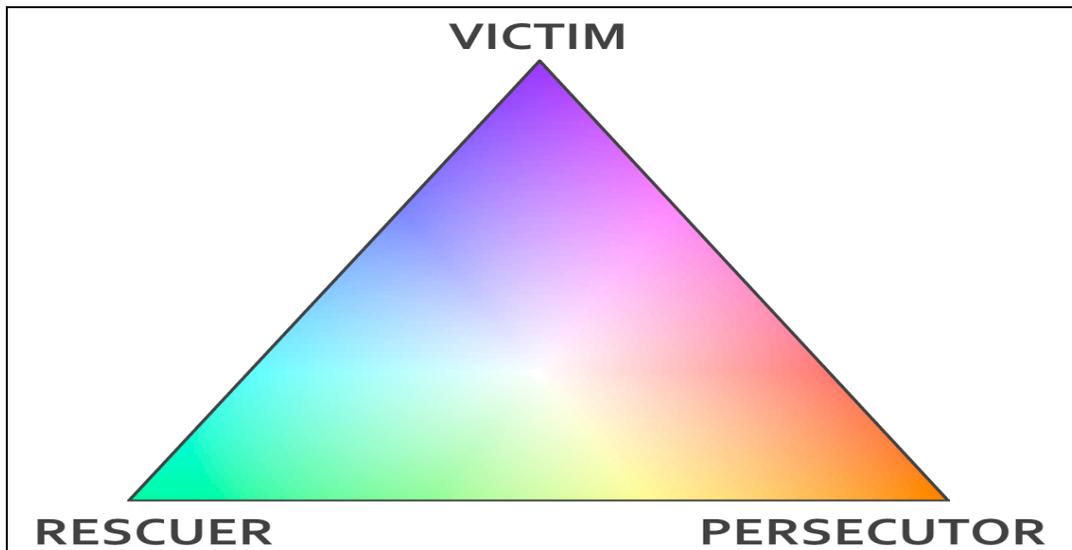
The onset of the symptom may add to the Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor's anxiety. They will begin to worry about the admin assistant (at least if this person is important to their functioning). The more they worry, the more anxious that person becomes, intensifying the symptom, and so a vicious cycle ensues. But let's say the Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor have had a long-standing, under-the surface conflict between them. Focusing on the admin assistant takes the pressure off their conflict, and thus the triangle serves the purpose of reducing the conflict between the two principles.



This triangling doesn't have to just exist between three individuals. It can encompass whole departments. As an example, senior leadership is having tension with the children's ministry. The executive pastor jumps in to rescue that ministry. The children's ministry begins to experience turnover both in paid staff and volunteers. Whole departments can become symptomatic, usually by being consumed with dysfunction and under-performing. Often the solution to this is to fire the department head. But in lieu of system analysis and change, pulling one leader out and installing another will not solve the problem. Usually the new leader merely assumes the mantle of dysfunction.

The Karpman Drama Triangle is an example of the ongoing triangling that exists between individuals and between groups of individuals, seen with regards to the stylized roles people often take toward one another .

The Drama Triangle



In conflicted situations, people will often adopt three habitual roles:

- The person who is treated as, or accepts the role of, a *victim* (the victim is not really as helpless as s/he feels)
- The person who pressures, coerces or *persecutes* the victim (the persecutor doesn't really have a valid complaint), and
- The *rescuer*, who intervenes out of an ostensible wish to help the situation or the underdog.

The drama plays out when the protagonist begins in one of the three main roles: Rescuer, Persecutor, or Victim, with the other principal player (the antagonist) in one of the other roles. Thereafter the players move around the triangle, thus switching roles – the persecutor becoming the victim (when the rescuer starts to persecute her for persecuting the victim), the victim becoming the rescuer, or the rescuer switching to persecuting.

The covert purpose for each 'player' is to get their unspoken (and frequently unconscious) psychological wishes/needs met in a manner they feel justified, without having to acknowledge the broader dysfunction or harm done in the system as a whole. As such, each player is acting upon his own selfish 'needs', rather than acting in a genuinely responsible or altruistic manner.

The relationship between the victim and the rescuer can be one of codependency. The Rescuer keeps the Victim dependent on them by playing into their Victimhood. The Victim gets her needs met by having the rescuer take care of her.

The chief cause of burn-out is not working too much, but getting sucked into other people's problems. Well-defined, non-anxious people resist being triangled. Thus

influencing others to take responsibility for themselves. Non-anxious leaders are able to tolerate other people's anxiety, thus requiring them to take personal responsibility. Anxiety is thus diffused in the organization, allowing it to function in a healthy way.

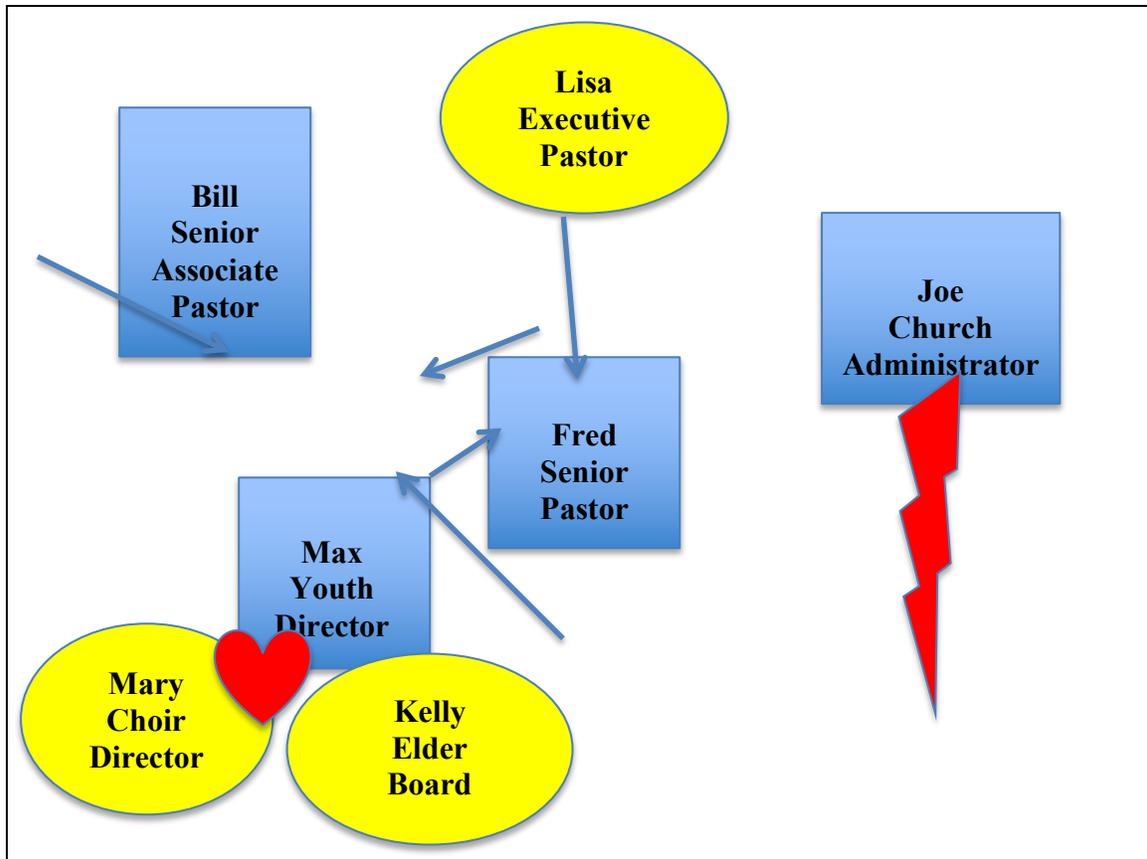
As an example, a direct report comes into the manager's office to complain about another direct report. "Fred never gets his work done on time, and that directly effects my ability to meet deadlines," Sally complains. Rather than storming out of his office to confront Fred (thus getting triangled between the two), the manager says to the complainer, "So have you spoken to Fred about this? If not, I suggest you start there, then if it goes no where, come back and speak to me about it."

Getting on the Balcony

One reason recognizing relationship processes is so difficult is the fact that we are usually participating in what we are trying to observe. Ron Heifetz coined the term, Getting on the Balcony, to describe how we might best be able to spot processes that surround us. His metaphor is of a dance floor, with people swirling around with their partners to the music. When you are on the dance floor dancing, it is hard to observe much of what is going on around you. If you were to leave the dance floor and get on a balcony that overlooks the dance floor, you would be able then to see the various patterns that develop as people dance, not only with their partners, but with the other people swirling close by. Many couples dancing, in order not to become entangled in a hodge-podge of disconnected movements, need to coordinate with those around them. And this coordination process is largely unconscious. Someone standing on a balcony observing can begin to see these processes emerging that allow many couples to enjoy the dance and maintain a sense of order, even though none of this is externally coordinated.

The difficulty of getting on the balcony is that fact that most often people who wish to be on the balcony to observe process are also part of the dance. When this is true, a great deal of time and practice must pass for the person to become proficient at observing when she is also a part of the process she is observing. This is one benefit of independent consulting. When an organization brings in an independent consultant, what in fact they are asking for is someone to be on the balcony and observe the dance, observe that which the dancers themselves cannot see. As one gets on the balcony, one can begin to see (and diagram) the patterns of the organization.





In the above diagram, Fred is the Senior Pastor of a large in-town legacy church. He wants very much for all information to flow through him (he's a control freak and becomes anxious with independent action). He discourages dialogues between the other principles on his leadership team (Lisa, Executive Pastor, Bill, Senior Associate Pastor, and Joe, the Church Administrator). Max, the Youth Director and Mary, the Choir Director (and not on the senior leadership team) are involved in an affair with each other, thus making Mary privy to leadership information she would not ordinarily have. Kelly, the Elder Board Chair, is in conflict with Joe which is long-standing, under the surface, and highly distracting to ongoing operations. So obviously, though Fred wants all communication to flow through him, there are relationship issues on his team that are toxic, and information is definitely flowing between members outside of his awareness. This is a description of this process dance that is taking place within this church staff. If one were to look at the organizational chart of this organization, it would not help in seeing this informal network. That has to be seen by 'being on the balcony.'

Over/Under-functioning

Over-functioning/under-functioning reciprocity describes two people trying to make one self out of two. One person in a relationship (let's say one member of a small group) becomes the more dominant decision-maker while the other (another member of the small group and friend) adapts to the situation by always subordinating to the other's

decisions. In small group meetings, the dominant friend always initiates comments, with the recessive member always chiming in with a supportive comment.

This is one of the best examples of borrowing and trading of self in a close relationship. One may assume the dominant role with other close people who are less well-defined as people assuming an adaptive posture. The dominant one gains self at the expense of the more adaptive one, who loses self.¹

The one who functions for long periods of time in the one-down adaptive position gradually loses the ability to function and make decisions for herself. At that point, it requires no more than a moderate increase in anxiety and stress to trigger the adaptive one into dysfunction, which can be physical illness, emotional illness or social illness, such as drinking, acting out and irresponsible behavior.

The over-functioner:

- ✓ Knows the answers
- ✓ Does well in life
- ✓ Tells the other what to do, how to think, how to feel
- ✓ Tries to help too much
- ✓ Assumes increasing responsibility for the other
- ✓ Does things for the other he or she could do for self
- ✓ Sees the other as “the problem”
- ✓ Demands agreement, bringing on “groupthink”

The under-functioner:

- ✓ Relies on the other to know what to do
- ✓ Asks for advice unnecessarily
- ✓ Takes all offered help, needed or not, becoming passive Asks the other to do what he or she can do for self
- ✓ Sees self as “the problem” Is susceptible to “groupthink”
- ✓ Eventually becomes symptomatic
- ✓ Gives in on everything

By knowing about the patterns of relationships, we are able to watch for and see anxiety traveling in a system. When the anxiety is intense, the patterns are more visible. When the anxiety is low, there may be few or no apparent patterns at all.

¹ How one’s self is established and maintained is an intriguing concept. I didn’t want to expand it here, but you can explore this more fully in several of the books listed on family therapy.

After anxiety reaches a certain level (different for each person and organization), it overpowers thoughtful response. Logic is unavailable. It is as if the cerebral cortex (the thinking part of the brain) is “flooded” with anxiety. When that happens, the cerebrum is unable to function properly. Without the ability to be logical or give a thoughtful response, a relationship snag cannot be resolved. So, the anxiety continues to escalate. And as we have previously said, if any of the people caught in the relationship patterns were to manage their own part of the relationship differently, the pattern would disappear. But recursive patterns are self-sustaining and hard to identify and break by those caught in them.

Sufficient to say, a regressed organization or society focuses on the toxic environment they inhabit, not realizing that their own poor self-definition is a major contributor to the surrounding problems. Leaders are expected to come up with the quick fix solution, rather than helping people through suffering to take more personal responsibility. The more healthy organization focuses on how people can be more well-defined, Blue Zone, and thus more mature. It’s easier to focus on the external environment, because the only other option requires one to focus primarily on oneself *first*.

Boundaries

One of the top five problems I’ve encountered with folks in ministry is the process of establishing and maintaining of healthy boundaries. Healthy boundaries identify and separate the self from others and consequently are the foundation of the Blue Zone [discussed elsewhere]. Boundaries are the fences, both physical and emotional, that mark off our world, creating zones of safety, authority, privacy, and territoriality. Boundaries are essential components because they:

- Define who we are – what we believe, think, feel, and do – where my story ends and yours begins;
- Restrict access and intrusions;
- Protect priorities; and
- Differentiate between personal (Red Zone) and professional (Blue Zone) issues.

Boundary difficulties go hand-in-hand with poor self-definition. As I sink deeper into the morass of my own narrative, my personal boundaries invariably are involved, and I engage others in my emotional drama in unhealthy ways (I don’t have a well-defined sense of myself. I then must borrow some of your self to fill in the blanks and function more adequately).

For some people, boundaries become too rigid. Vital information -- the lifeblood of any healthy person – is greatly restricted. Stylized ways of behaving become fixed. Prejudices are constructed and maintained.

For other people, boundaries become too porous or ambiguous. In such cases, the integrity and cohesion of the person is threatened by a lack of definition -- "Who am I, other than an extension of you?"

People with boundaries that are too rigid, or too porous, are basically in the same position as to self-definition. Both are more poorly defined as selves, but employing polar opposite strategies to deal with this. "I can't let anybody's opinions in, or my self will be in trouble." "I have to let everybody's opinion influence me, because my self is so poorly defined I can't state an opinion that is wholly mine."

We are used to the visible boundary markers of our world: fences, hedges, traffic signs. Less obvious, but equally effective, are the internal boundaries that mark off emotional territory: "These are my thoughts, my feelings, my story" or "This is my responsibility, not yours." These internal boundaries are emotional barriers that protect and enhance the integrity of individuals.

A person can be so close-minded that no new thoughts and information reaches her. She can also be so loose with boundaries that she's swayed by every idea that comes along, never able to establish her own position on anything.

Here's a quick test to help you determine the strength and health of your own personal boundaries (based on ideas suggested by C.L. Whitfield in *Boundaries and Relationships*). See if you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Too Porous

- **I have difficulty making up my mind.**
- **I have difficulty saying no to people.**
- **I feel my happiness depends on other people.**
- **I would rather attend to others than to myself.**
- **Others' opinions are more important than mine.**
- **People take and use my things without asking me.**
- **I have difficulty asking for what I want or need.**
- **I would rather go along with other people than express what I would really like to do.**
- **It's hard for me to know what I think and believe.**
- **I have a hard time determining what I really feel.**
- **I don't get to spend much time alone.**
- **I have a hard time keeping a confidence.**
- **I am very sensitive to criticism.**
- **I tend to stay in relationships that are harmful to me.**
- **I tend to take on or feel what others are feeling.**

- **I feel responsible for other people's feelings.**
- **Now let's see if your boundaries might be too rigid.**

Now let's see if your boundaries might be too rigid.

Too Rigid

- **My mind is always made up.**
- **It is much easier for me to say no than to say yes to people.**
- **My happiness never depends on other people.**
- **I would rather attend to myself than to others.**
- **My opinion is more important than others'.**
- **I rarely if ever lend my things to other people.**
- **Most issues appear very black and white to me.**
- **I know exactly what I think and believe on almost every issue.**
- **I have a hard time determining what I really feel.**
- **I spend much time alone.**
- **I keep most of my thoughts to myself.**
- **I am immune to criticism.**
- **I find it difficult to make and maintain close relationships.**
- **I never feel responsible for other people's feelings.**

Creating Healthy Boundaries

Hopefully the above information will give you a better sense of your own boundaries, and your own emotional responses in various situations that may cause you to compromise your boundaries. Remember, rising anxiety in particular will be a main catalyst for boundary compromises. Be aware of people and situations that create and sustain this anxiety.

Monitoring the Energy

When I was in my role as a counseling psychologist, I was most interested in the energy in the room. As people's anxiety begins to rise, their behavior in relationship to that energy is altered. For some people, rising energy translates into physical movement that might seem somewhat out of place. For others, it's rapid speech, or slowed speech, or particular facial expressions. Some will interrupt the flow of conversation and change the subject. Others may become exceedingly quiet and withdrawn.

All of these behaviors should signal that anxiety is rising and may be approaching a threshold. Let's say you're in a church board meeting discussing the possibility of a new

program. If you're attuned to the process, you may notice that one or more people in the room are becoming agitated in one way or another. They may just say to you, "Pastor, I don't like this new program." Okay, now it's on the table for discussion. But it might just as likely not be clearly spoken, but demonstrated by various behaviors.

One motto I've always used is, Go where the energy is. If there is no energy, then there is little anxiety present. But also realize, if in meeting after meeting there is little or no anxiety, that should be a signal to you that nothing of import is occurring. The rule of thumb is this, If the anxiety is too low, raise it. If it is too high, lower it.

Raising the anxiety

This can be simply stated as, introduce issues that truly matter where there is conflict. Often the truly significant issues lie hidden as 'elephants in the room.' These tend to be 'radioactive' with no one willing to bring them up. As a result, the issues that are discussed are 'vanilla' where everyone is basically in agreement.

Lowering the anxiety

Let's say that one of those super-charged issues has finally been placed on the table, and predictably people's anxiety has risen and possibly sides have been established with conflict rising. Be advised if the anxiety is too high (people are unable to think clearly about the issue and possible ways forward), you as leader will need to lower the anxiety. That may include, "I don't think we can productively discuss this at this time. Let's table it and each of us do more research."

Take Away

- ✓ You are involved in myriad dramas that are unfolding around you. You can either be an unconscious participant, for all the good and evil that might imply, or you can become more aware of these dramas, and seek to shape them in more healthy, kingdom-affirming ways.

Take Action

- ✓ Sit in a meeting or a series of meetings where you do not have to be an active participant (it may be your child's school's PTA meeting). See if you can get on the balcony, generally ignore the content of the meeting, and note the patterns of relationships as these unfold – who speaks to who? How are women treated? Men? How does the leader handle that role? Who appear to be her favorites?