

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

'CHOOSE YOUR COMPANIONS FROM AMONG THE BEST'

W.B. YEATS – 'TO A YOUNG BEAUTY'

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS

MASTER OF ARTS

'CHOOSE YOUR COMPANIONS FROM AMONG THE BEST'
(W.B. YEATS – 'TO A YOUNG BEAUTY')

By ANNE C. HOLMES

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This is a discussion of some aspects of regular, active engagement with the creative arts as a way of repairing the energy expended in sensitive pastoral care. I have considered recent handbooks for those in ministry. I have focused on issues of grief and loss and identified a gap in this literature around the resourcing of those who minister. I have referred to the Kleinian literature which makes important connections between grief and creativity. I have contributed the expression *creative repair* to the debate.

I have evaluated the responses to a list of relevant questions from two groups of practitioners, one a recorded live group discussion set up on group-analytic principles, the other individual e-mail responses. These confirmed my belief in the prophylactic value of regular engagement with the creative arts as a contribution to the prevention of clergy burnout.

I have drawn an analogy between divine and human creativity drawing on the work of Dorothy Sayers in *The Mind of the Maker*. I have given an example of unconscious obedience to the creative imperative. I have considered the importance of *kenosis* in Christological thinking and brought it into dialogue with the psycho-analytic notion of *abstinence*. I have returned to the responses of the two groups, especially their theological reflection around the questions discussed.

I have suggested certain implications for theological training and ongoing Continuing Ministerial Development. I recommend regular checks and balances against overwork or over-involvement in pastoral situations. I indicate the need for careful attention to be paid to the setting up of new appointments. I recommend that the regular practice of *creative repair* needs to be modelled by those in positions of influence, so that those coming into public ministry, whether lay or ordained, may know that it is vital to good pastoral practice.

BIAPT MA Dissertation Prize Summary

This dissertation was an opportunity to test out a hunch which I have had for some time. I have been concerned about the phenomenon of clergy stress and burnout for many years. While I was in ministry training I was struck by the rather patchy experience of training around the emotional and psychological aspects of ministry. I was informed by many years of training and practice as a counsellor and psychotherapist in which mechanisms for self-reflection and renewal were built into our routine and discipline and I believed that some of these practices would be transferable to other professions involving personal relationships. By the time I was ready to embark on the dissertation, certain relevant handbooks had been published. Meanwhile I had moved on from the potential value of transferring professional skills to the importance of a prophylactic approach. As there has always been a basic assumption that the creative arts can replenish our mental and emotional resources within the broadly psychological disciplines, especially those based in the psychoanalytical tradition, it made sense to explore the connection between that resource and the prevention of clergy burnout.

I began in the first chapter by engaging in a critical conversation with two of the recent handbooks, *The Vicar's Guide* (Ison, 2005) and *The Curate's Guide* (Witcombe, 2005) on aspects of their discussion of pastoral care in ministry. I explored whether or not they seemed to take full account of the emotional impact of pastoral care, with a particular focus on what it means to accompany those experiencing serious loss and bereavement. The framework for the critique was a combination of the theory and practice of psychoanalytical psychotherapy.

I stressed the importance of good beginnings in ministry as a foundation for ongoing resourcing and referred to the importance of a sound emotional start in life as assumed in psychoanalytical literature. Given the experience of vulnerability in important new adult beginnings, I drew a comparison between early life and the crucial relationship between curate and training incumbent in any first curacy. I turned from beginnings to endings and the seminal role of clergy in accompanying those who mourn. I outlined some of the theory used in psychoanalytical literature regarding the connection between grief and creativity. My particular focus was the Kleinian work which identified the impact of un-mourned loss on creativity and its contribution to creative block. I drew on my experience as a clinician working with both individuals and groups. I have had several experiences of people whose depression took the form of repressed or denied grief. When the former losses were sufficiently grieved, my patients were able to initiate or resume creative projects, which were brought to completion.

The implications of this for ministry embraced the importance of distinguishing between being in a crisis situation and ordinary life. If, for example, clergy have 'gone the extra mile' to help someone in crisis, they then need to replenish the resources drawn on during that time. The danger is that they get

used to a crisis way of life and fail to notice early signs of fatigue and take them seriously. If, on the other hand, they have regular access to the creative arts, they can restore their spiritual resources routinely. By bringing together the Kleinian insight into blocked creativity and the importance of resourcing pastoral ministry I coined the expression *creative repair* and thus made an original contribution to the discussion.

As recorded in the second chapter, in order to test out the core idea, I devised a set of questions and invited various ordained colleagues to consider them and take part in a live, recorded discussion of them. I set up the group and meeting using applied group analytic principles. I later transcribed the discussion and analysed it for the purpose of the dissertation. No comments were attributed to particular participants, who remained anonymous. Some of my initial group were interested in the questions, but unable to attend the live discussion, so I invited them to answer the questions by e-mail. Their comments remained private and individual, but supplemented the content of the group discussion. In addition to their comments on the role of the creative arts in preventing burnout, I looked for clues from their responses to the theological aspects of the practice of *creative repair*.

Important themes to emerge from both groups were:

1. The reality of burnout and the need for a prophylactic approach. Two of the group had experienced burnout and two more had come very close to it. All of them identified the role of the creative arts in either the healing process or in the avoidance of burnout. Each had highlighted the importance of continuing these practices in the prevention of any future crisis and would have valued a prophylactic approach which had prioritised these needs.
2. The complexity of boundaries in ministry. Whatever the textbooks might now recommend, it became clear that healthy boundaries were rarely modelled by those in senior roles. A culture of long hours and the need always to be busy contributed to fatigue, as did the failure to acknowledge the very demanding nature of pastoral care.
3. Evidence from the discussion that my thesis is right, i.e. that the creative arts are important for the prevention and cure of stress/exhaustion/burnout. The majority of the participants recognised that failure to give proper place to their involvement in the creative arts spelt danger to their health and energy levels.
4. An examination of what it is about the creative arts that is so helpful. This was considered in terms of two categories:
 - a. The importance of a *physical* engagement with the creative arts. The group were interested in the holistic implications of body-based creativity.
 - b. A consideration of what is participation and what is not. This was clarified as being about *active participation*, as for example when being taken in imagination into another world in a book or a film.

5. The theological resources drawn upon when people reflected on their need to engage with the creative arts. These were wide-ranging, embracing the Creation, Christian mystics, the Eucharist and the Benedictine practice of prayer – work – study.
6. The importance of the context of ministry and the influence of ministry teams. Parish and hospital contexts were compared and tended to vary less according to context than as a result of the presence or absence of well-functioning teams and the leadership style of team leaders.
7. The implications for theological and ministry training. Attitudes were found to be hard to shift: when tutors attempted to put more space into the week of their students, many students just filled the gaps with more activities. Nevertheless there was agreement that good practice established during the time of ministerial formation could establish long term habits of ongoing *creative repair*.

Finally, many of the respondents paid tribute to the value of responding to the questions, whether in the group or by e-mail. It was as if the very exercise itself had been an experience of *creative repair*.

The third and final chapter explored the beginnings of a theology of *creative repair*. This had three aspects:

1. An analogy between God as Creator and human beings as creators, drawing on the idea of a threefold process of creativity as expressed by Dorothy Sayers in *The Mind of the Maker* (Sayers, 1941). Sayers illuminated the doctrine of the Trinity by relating it to the process of writing fiction. Comparing the Trinity with this threefold activity, the Father became the creative vision, labelled Idea; the Son translated as the realisation of that vision or Energy; the Holy Spirit was interpreted as the impact of that vision on others, or Power. Sayers drew on her experience of writing fiction without committing to personal beliefs, writing at a time of assumed objectivism. I suggested that what seems to be assumed is the importance of obedience to the creative imperative.
2. I brought the idea of *kenosis* in Christological thinking into dialogue with the psycho-analytical notion of *abstinence*. The capacity to be present, silently representing God as Christ loving his neighbour, is a kind of self-emptying or *kenosis* reminiscent of the way in which God “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7). This may be compared to the psycho-analytical practice of *abstinence* and not-knowing. In practice this means the discipline of beginning a particular therapeutic session, having emptied oneself of previous sessions, in order to be freely available to the patient in the here and now. These two ways of being, theological and psychoanalytical, each involve the process of withdrawing oneself, thus enabling the creativity of others. It is demanding and draining and requires the pastor’s or therapist’s self-replenishment, another opportunity for the regular practice of *creative repair*.

3. These two aspects were then connected with the theological responses of the group. One idea which was stressed was the importance of keeping the Sabbath, transferred to another day by clergy who are enabling the keeping of the Sabbath by others. Several people drew on the example of Jesus in ensuring that he had time away from his teaching and healing ministry. The practice of engaging in the creative arts was seen to be complementary to time spent in silence and solitude. Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God" inspired many of the respondents in both their time alone with God and time spent absorbed in the creative arts.

I suggested that the common ground of the witness of a creative artist such as Sayers and the self-emptying of God in Jesus as mirrored in the abstinence of the consulting room, is one of awe and trust in something beyond oneself. It also connects with the practice of good pastoral care. The discipline of a good training or formation and the structure of time set aside are essential to enable the unique now-ness of the encounter in which God may work in us. This work is tiring. Those who spoke in the group or responded by e-mail were witnesses to my basic assumption that when we engage in *creative* activity we draw from the wellsprings of the divine Source and thus are bound to *repair* our own energy, if we are open to that possibility.

The dissertation ended with certain implications both for theological training and ongoing Continuing Ministerial Development and were as follows:

1. There needs to be a reframing of the Church's whole view of pastoral care, in order to take account of the emotional demands which can accumulate over time and lead to tiredness, or even exhaustion or burnout.
2. Any regular ministerial review needs to prioritise the importance of regular checks and balances against overwork or over-involvement in pastoral situations. This should include an opportunity to reflect on the way in which time off is spent.
3. Careful attention needs to be paid to the setting-up of new appointments, whether a first curacy, initial post of responsibility, or new setting later on in ministry.
4. Every effort needs to be made to help established and senior clergy to understand the long-term value of the examples of good practice which are demonstrated in the various handbooks on ministry that have been published over the last few years.
5. The regular practice of *creative repair* needs to be modelled by those in positions of influence, so that those coming into public ministry, whether lay or ordained, may know that it is a *sine qua non* of good pastoral practice.

I concluded that there may be other ways in which the emotional and spiritual energy of pastoral ministers may be resourced, but the implementation of these recommendations would go a long way towards enabling them to realise their full potential.