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Secret Relationships in Ministry

JACK HOLLAND

In the disturbing short story, “The Secret Sharer,” published in 1911, author Joseph Conrad tells of a young sea captain, anxious in his first post as the new commander of a ship. On the first voyage in his role as the new captain, the protagonist and narrator of the story has an ongoing dialogue with himself about how he is being perceived by his crew. Will they respect his authority? As the second youngest on board the ship, will his youth and inexperience be questioned by the more seasoned veterans of the sea? His doubts even extend to questions of his own competence in comparison to the other officers, “They had simply to be equal to their tasks; but I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one’s own personality every man sets up for himself secretly?”¹

At the end of the day, early in the journey, the young captain, wishing to be alone, orders the entire crew to retire for the evening. Introspectively he observes that “My strangeness, which had made me sleepless, had prompted the unconventional arrangement, as if I had expected in those solitary hours of the night to get on terms with the ship of which I knew nothing, manned by men of whom I knew very little more.”² Realizing that he had sent the crew below before they finished all the tasks of securing the ship for the evening the young captain observes that the side ladder of the ship had not been hauled in. Debating with himself if he should retrieve the ladder he wonders “whether it was wise to interfere with the established routine of duties even from the kindest of motives. My action might have made me appear eccentric . . . I was vexed with myself.”³

Finally deciding to retrieve the ladder, he gives the rope a “vigorous tug, which should have brought it flying on board”⁴ but the ladder is somehow restrained. Peering over the side of the ship he is shocked to see the naked body of a man. At first believing that he has discovered a corpse he gazes over the side of the ship, only to see the man’s head move. After an awkward interchange the captain raises the ladder and the stranger climbs onto the boat. Introducing himself as “Leggatt,” the mysterious stowaway tells the story of how he arrived at this odd place. It seems that he escaped from a nearby ship. According to Leggatt he was involved in a fight during a terrible storm in which another crew member was tragically, but accidentally killed. The witnesses blamed him for murder and in an act of desperation Leggatt escaped by jumping ship and swimming to a small jetty of rocks where he hid until he saw the light of this other vessel.

Out of his own anxiety and feelings as a “stranger” on the ship the captain accepts Leggatt’s story and begins an odyssey of measures to hide the stowaway on board. Secretly they move to the captain’s quarters where he remains hidden as the captain tries to appear normal to the rest of the crew. On occasion he sneaks back to his quarters and in whispered conversations develops a friendship and identity with the rescued fugitive.

1. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Selected Short Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 155.

2. *Ibid.*, 156.

3. *Ibid.*, 157.

4. *Ibid.*, 157.

A number of critical interpretations have been written about this odd story. Many literary critics interpret the basic theme as a tale in which the young captain needs to come to terms with himself and his new role. These critics view Leggatt as a psychological symbol of the inner personal struggle of the captain's relationship with himself. Pete Steinke proposes that this story is a useful narrative for discussions of vocation and identity in training for pastoral care.⁵ I propose that, even more specifically, "The Secret Sharer" offers a poignant illustration for framing a discussion of secret relationships in ministry; particularly in this application, to the individual's private use of pornography and other expressions of sexuality, and their role in the maintenance of his⁶ personal anxiety. I believe that in congregational and other types of leadership, ministers (when anxious and insecure about how they feel they are being perceived by those whom they are responsible for leading) can be prone to similar temptations as the captain.

The reader may wish to consult the often-cited work of Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*,⁷ for a thorough treatment of anxiety and self-differentiation in ministerial leadership. In brief, Friedman's presentation is based on the family systems concept of self-differentiated leadership as developed by Murray Bowen.⁸ Friedman proposes that effective leadership "has more to do with the leader's capacity for self-definition than the ability to motivate others."⁹ For Friedman self-defined leadership is grounded in "the capacity of the leader to define his or her own goals and values while trying to maintain a non-anxious presence within the system."¹⁰ I propose that the captain's secret relationship and the secret relationships of ministers arise out of their misguided attempts to calm their personal anxieties by avoiding the riskier relationships of relating to their followers in a self-defined, non-anxious manner.

This discussion is presented as an alternative dialogue to the construct of sexual addiction that our culture is increasingly accepting. As observed by John Bancroft and Zoran Vukadinovic, "Increased attention is being paid to the concept of sexual behavior that is, in some way, out of control."¹¹ While the diagnosis of sexual addiction has acquired a level of common acceptance in public conversations of sexual compulsion, it is important to note that the fourth and most current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*¹² did not adopt this criterion as an acceptable diagnosis. In fairness to those who argue for its inclusion, an abundance of research is currently being conducted to promote the diagnostic category of sexual addiction. For a thorough presentation of this perspective I recommend consulting a leading proponent, The Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (<http://www.sash.net/>). One of the most prolific authors in the field of sexual addiction is Dr. Patrick Carnes, who first introduced the concept of sexual addiction in 1983 with his book *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction*.¹³ For a more detailed discussion than I present here for not classifying sexual addiction as a disorder I recommend the book *Constructing the Sexual Crucible* by Dr. David Schnarch (reviewed in this issue) which has been a primary resource in preparing this article.¹⁴

5. Pete Steinke, "Paul," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 60, no. 4 (2006): 335-342.

6. While there is a growing body of research on the sexual compulsions of women I found no literature regarding the issue for female ministers. Because the discussion appears to be limited to male ministers, I use masculine pronouns throughout this article in referring to the minister.

7. Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

8. Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978).

9. Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 221.

10. *Ibid.*, 3.

11. John Bancroft and Zoran Vukadinovic, "Sexual Addiction, Sexual Compulsivity, Sexual Impulsivity, or What? Toward a Theoretical Model," *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, no 3. (Aug 2004): 225.

12. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2004).

13. Patrick Carnes, *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction* (Minneapolis: CompCare, 1983).

14. David Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991)

In the common parlance regarding sexual addiction the diagnosis relies on a medical-disease model viewpoint that the client “has” the dysfunction as indicated by meeting a standardized measure of behavioral symptoms. Unlike a medical diagnosis for addiction to alcohol or drugs, sex cannot be measured by the presence of a certain substance that has been ingested into the body. Whether one agrees with the designation of addiction to sex, shopping, exercise, the Internet, golf or any of the growing plethora of addictive possibilities in our culture, it should be noted that there is a difference between behavioral compulsions toward an activity and substance dependence. While there are chemical reactions within the body of the individual who experiences an unhealthy and even debilitating dependence on a certain activity, those reactions do not result from taking a foreign substance into the body. Certainly a sexual act impacts the chemistry of the participant, but again, the influence is not the result of a substance.

Additionally, while some “addictions” contain elements that we should not use in any amount, such as cocaine, sex is not something that we want to rid ourselves of completely. The assumptions of sexual addiction treatment erroneously discourage intense sexual gratification. A healthy and active sex life can be one of the great joys of marriage.¹⁵

Certainly the mind and body connection is a complicated and mysterious relationship and I make no claim to be an authoritative voice in understanding the mystery. My intention in this article is to question the helpfulness of the medical model in understanding sexuality. This perspective is rooted in a belief that many of our assumptions about how to deal with the issue of “sexual addiction” are created in a sexually saturated and confused culture.

In a groundbreaking book in the field of pastoral care, *Addiction and Grace*,¹⁶ author Gerald May offers a paradigm shift for our culture’s thinking about addictions in general. While May does not explicitly examine addiction to sexuality, the basic tenets of his work are instructive. Basing his understanding of addiction on a belief in an innate human desire for God, May refers to Saint Augustine “. . . who once said that God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them. If our hands are full, they are full of the things to which we are addicted.”¹⁷ May refers to these addictions as “attachments,” noting “addiction *attaches* desire, bonds and enslaves the energy of desire to certain specific behaviors, things, or people.”¹⁸ Defending his thesis May states, “I am not being flippant when I say that all of us suffer from addiction. Nor am I reducing the meaning of addiction. I mean in all truth that the psychological, neurological, and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work within every human being.”¹⁹

While I heartily agree with the basic premise that addictions are unhealthy attachments, I personally wish that May had avoided the term addiction in referring to behavioral compulsions because of the immediate connotation that it now carries with the medical model of diagnosis. In distinguishing the non-substance behavior compulsions from substance addictions I intend complete respect for any who have either struggle. For the individual struggling with a sexual compulsion, the designation of the struggle as “attachment” offers the possibility for a different kind of conversation than one that assumes the presence of a disease.

Although he uses the term “addiction,” I believe that a close reading of May’s work suggests this alternate perspective. The starting point of this conversation is grounded in May’s three-stage theory about “how attachment happens.”²⁰ Stage one, “Learning,” is characterized by “associating a specific behavior with a feeling of pleasure or relief from pain.” Stage two, “Habit Formation,” intensifies the pattern as the

15. In his second book, sexual addiction proponent Patrick Carnes deals fairly adequately with this objection but he still relies on the language of addiction as a basic construct. See Patrick Carnes, *Contrary to Love* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1989).

16. Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 3.

20. *Ibid.*, 57.

individual not only repeats the behavior “for its own direct effects” but also as a comfort for displeasures in other areas of life. Stage three, “Struggle,” completes the cycle as the habit has now evolved to a point where the behavior itself becomes problematic to the individual, either in the internal battle to stop, or in the relational difficulties the behavior creates in other areas of life.²¹

Thinking about the non-substance compulsions as attachments in the context of the captain’s relationship with Leggatt is instructive in understanding these stages. In the first meeting the captain is simply curious about the strange stowaway that he discovers hanging onto the ship’s ladder. By hiding Leggatt in his cabin he enters into a relationship that is different from the relationships with his crew members. With Leggatt there is no threat of being criticized or rejected because the stowaway is at the captain’s mercy. Finding a person to relate to other than the crew that he feels so threatened by, the captain “learns” to manage and comfort his insecurity by relating to Leggatt. Protecting the “secret” becomes a “habit,” dominating all of his decisions. As the story unfolds that relationship becomes increasingly destructive to his leadership of the crew.

In a systemic escalation of the pattern of this relationship, the captain’s behavior because of the secret becomes increasingly odd to the crew. In turn, the increasingly odd behavior of the captain reinforces the crew’s questions about his leadership, which increases the captain’s anxiety, which he releases in the secret relationship with Leggatt. This cycle escalates to the point that the captain ultimately risks his leadership and the safety of the entire crew as he engages in the third stage “struggle” of trying to end the relationship. Guiding the ship too close to a corral reef, seeking to pass near an island where Leggatt can escape, the captain risks the safety of the boat and all on board.

The perilous spiral of protecting the secret, which further paralyzes the captain’s ability to lead, is eerily similar to the pattern of the minister caught in the web of a secret sexual compulsion. The recent and much publicized downfall of Ted Haggard,²² former pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado is a painful illustration of how destructive such a relationship can be for the minister, the minister’s family and the entire congregation. Sadly, the occurrence of such escapades does not seem to be limited to the evangelical celebrities of our day. A survey conducted by *Leadership Journal* reported that 51 percent of pastors said cyberporn is a possible temptation and 37 percent of respondents agreed that it was a current struggle.²³

It may begin with an innocent search on the Internet. If the number and content of the spam e-mails that I receive is any indication of what the average minister faces, there are on some days a dozen or more opportunities to follow a trail to some kind of pornographic website. The risks are different than we faced before the Internet, because this material can now be viewed in the privacy of one’s home or office, and within that secrecy lies the destructive power of cyberporn. Like the captain, a minister may initially begin with curiosity, but when that curiosity turns to the hidden release of some, possibly unidentified, anxiety, the scene is set for an internal battle of self-control.

As the practice turns to a habit, the individual’s guilt and remorse escalate with each ensuing failure. As May observes, since the individual has now learned to manage his anxiety by repeating the behavior, the anxiety of having that behavior interrupted, even by trying to stop, only makes him long for the behavior more.²⁴

In the meantime the minister, again like the captain, must maintain the appearance of adequate leadership lest the secret be revealed. And so, ministers like Ted Haggard risk the safety and reputation of entire congregations.

While “The Secret Sharer” ends with the escape of Leggatt and the apparent protection of the captain’s secret, we don’t have a sequel describing how his leadership of the crew was impacted by this hidden relationship. The psychological treatments of the story debate whether or not the captain came “to terms”

21. *Ibid.*, 57.

22. Chuck Plunkett and Eric Gorski, “Pastor Confessed,” *Denver Post*, http://www.denverpost.com/ci_4604135 (accessed August 14, 2007).

23. “The Leadership survey on Pastors and Internet Pornography,” *Leadership Journal* (Jan 2001), 89.

24. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 59.

with himself in the experience. I would argue that unless he accomplished a serious confrontation and resolution about how he managed the anxiety of his insecurity in relationships with others, he will probably find other “secret” ways to avoid those insecurities.

A common response to the public exposure of indiscretion on the part of ministers like Ted Haggard is disbelief that he would take such a great risk, jeopardizing his reputation and family. I think that perhaps the risks of a secret tryst actually outweigh, in the mind of the perpetrator, the greater and possibly unconscious risks involved in a genuine relationship. Although there is the risk of being discovered in a secret relationship, the personal risk that it helps avoid is of a different nature. In the captain’s relationship with Leggatt, while there is the threat of the discovery of the secret, there is no threat of rejection from Leggatt in the same way the captain is threatened by the crew. In a similar fashion, there is no threat of rejection from cyberporn. This multimillion-dollar industry wants the customer to want more, and as long as one pays the fee for visiting the website, there is no threat of being turned away.

I’m not proposing that this is the only explanation for attaching oneself to a secret sexual relationship, but in the life of the minister it presents a pattern that I have seen with enough regularity to claim it as one explanation. In a number of instances the secret is discovered and exposed, often by the wife, who responds with shock, betrayal, self-doubt, disgust and questions about whether he can ever be trusted again. In the broken trust, the wife often begins “policing” the minister’s use of the Internet and suspecting his every move as another foray into his dark and private world. Demands that the husband seek counseling, join a sexual addiction group, or participate in some other form of treatment are made. In many instances the fallen minister adopts the sexual addiction explanation for his behavior.

In some cases, rather than ending the secret relationship, the impact of exposing the secret actually escalates the pattern. Now that the individual has been found out, he works harder to protect his secret; hiding behind the veil of remorse and promises to “never do that again.” If this “deeper” secret is discovered it serves to further confirm how “sick” the person truly must be, “his sex addiction must be even worse than we thought.”

The following may seem harsh to some who have accepted this diagnosis but my hope is that the reader will at least consider another view. I believe that the medical model diagnosis of sexual addiction as “disease” gives the perpetrator a rationale for his behavior that is outside of personal responsibility. The disease perspective presupposes that sexuality is a “drive,” not an “urge”—reinforcing the belief that it cannot be managed, that the sexual compulsion somehow controls the individual and his choices. In contrast I believe that sex is an urge that can be very strong, but its fulfillment is not a matter of life or death.

In a cogent challenge to the assumptions of the addiction model, Martin Bader observes that, “The fact that relationship ‘addicts’ feel that they are in the grips of a compulsion is often taken at face value by the addiction theorists and not recognized as disguised desire and attachment.”²⁵ Schnarch adds that, “Calling oneself an ‘addict’ offers an identity to people with little solid-self; the label offers instant acceptance, group membership, and a ‘hold-harmless’ clause built into the program.”²⁶ In contrast to this approach I am suggesting that although the compulsion may seem to be in control, attachment to that compulsion is a matter of choice, often grounded in the individual’s desire to avoid some other risk or pain.

As Christians we believe that the grace and mercy of God extends beyond mere forgiveness, that the power of the resurrection also sets the prisoner free. May says it well,

25. Martin J. Bader, “Looking for Addictions in All the Wrong Places,” *Tikkum* 3, no. 6 (1988): 97.

26. Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*, 519.

... Our real hope lies in that no matter how oppressed we may be, we always retain some spark of capacity to choose. We can use the ember of freedom to choose: to risk ourselves in the goodness of God or to continue to strive for our own autonomy or to give in to the powers that oppress us. I am convinced that nothing whatsoever determines the choice we make at this primal level. Here, finally, the choices are totally up to us; we really are free.²⁷

What might it thus mean for the minister trapped in a secret attachment to reject the diagnosis of sexual addiction? I propose that like the captain of "The Secret Sharer" there is a human tendency to calm the anxieties of life in unhealthy patterns of relationships. Viewing these relationships as attachments that we choose rather than addictions beyond personal control may expose us to that ember of freedom that is a blessing of God's grace.

As stated by Schnarch, "In accepting one's sexual behavior and experience as a reflection of oneself (even if contrary to conscious intent) one begins to 'see' one's self."²⁸ This inward look might begin a journey into therapy or some other treatment, which in many cases is indispensable. My challenge is not given in the expectation that the minister will just overcome these issues in solitary effort. I do believe that helpful treatment will work with the minister, and perhaps the spouse, to explore and challenge the attachment issues and emotional needs that have been expressed in the compulsion. I believe helpful therapy in these instances will be more than an empathetic place to further avoid the risks of insecurity and heartache, that it will be a place where, as in the words of May, we "taste the deep, holy deprivation of our souls" and are given space to "touch the sacred hunger God has given us."²⁹

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27. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 127.

28. Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*, 157.

29. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 181.