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Embracing and Engaging Holistically: A pastoral response to youth (or anyone) struggling with anxiety and depression

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EMBRACING AND ENGAGING HOLISTICALLY:

A pastoral response to youth (or anyone) struggling with anxiety and depression

*Have you ever felt like nobody was there
Have you ever felt forgotten in the middle of nowhere
Have you ever felt like you could disappear
Like you could fall and no one would hear*

//

*Well, let that lonely feeling wash away
Maybe there's a reason to believe you'll be okay
'Cause when you don't feel strong enough to stand
You can reach, reach out your hand*

//

*And oh, someone will come running
And I know they'll take you home*

//

*Even when the dark comes crashing through
When you need a friend to carry you
And when you're broken on the ground
You will be found*

//

*So let the sun come streaming in
'Cause you'll reach up and you'll rise again
Lift up your head and look around¹*

1 Ben Platt, vocalist, "You Will Be Found," by Benji Pasek and Justin Paul, recorded 2017, track 8 on *Dear Evan Hansen (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, Atlantic Records, MP3.

[Descriptive Task]

“Every time you call out you’re a little less alone...from across the silence, your voice is heard²”

My heart is pounding so loudly in my chest it seems there is no doubt everyone around me can hear it. My hands are shaking, and I sit, wringing them together, twirling my rings around my fingers, in an attempt to convince them I’m not completely freaking out. I catch myself forgetting to breathe for long stretches of time, so sit gasping every few minutes. I close my eyes, whispering to myself, ‘it’s okay, you’re going to be okay.’ All my attempts to convince myself I am not nervous are failing. My hands are still shaking, and I let them. My heart beats, *thump, thump, thump*. When I open my eyes again, I find I am alone, still waiting.

Though I am alone, I feel a deep sense of shame. It starts at the center of my chest and seems to be radiating out of me. I don’t know what to do about it. What happened to me where I found myself here? What did I do wrong? Why does it feel like my entire life is falling apart? I know I shouldn’t feel this way. Yet the question echoes: what am I doing here, sitting in an office, waiting to meet a therapist? I breathe again, in an attempt to collect myself.

The first hour passes. I talk. I’m listened to. I go home. I return the following week, and then, each subsequent week, until suddenly a year has passed. Each time, I talk. I am listened to. I listen. And soon, I find peace and healing. I am a case study of one: seeking counsel works, or at the very least, can³.

What prevented and prevents me *still* from honestly sharing my own story and struggles with others? What happened in *this* space where I

2 “You Will Be Found,” *Dear Evan Hansen*.

3 Dr. Michel Ewing, PhD, LP, the Director of the Counseling and Health Promotions at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University, provided some insight into this intake interview process that I found to be so successful: “You have to try and create a balance, asking ‘where would you like to start?’ and then following that by tapping into the expertise of – in this case – you. You are literally the *only one* who can articulate in that setting exactly what is going on inside of your head and what you need.”

finally realized I could admit to my very real and authentic experience with anxiety and depression? I know I am not alone. The data clearly proves this. A study from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine estimates 2.2 million adolescents, aged 12-17, experience depression, a nearly 40 percent increase from 2005⁴, and this number is likely even higher today. Statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention illustrate how this number constitutes 13-20% of children living in the United States, or 1 in every 5 children⁵. An estimated 31.9% of adolescents experience an anxiety disorder⁶. Yet, 60% are *not* seeking treatment⁷. These numbers are astounding, evidence this is clearly a problem. I invite you to close your eyes, and let the reality of these numbers settle in.

But I want to be realistic. This is a huge topic, and I have limited space. So, for the purposes of this paper, I am not going to define either depression or anxiety, nor will I place blame. However, I do want to bring to light the potential harm brought by residual stigma and societal expectations⁸. Looking through the lens of pastoral care and ministry, my question becomes entangled in what we can do in community to quell these hinderances and bring in same the sense of peace and healing I was able to receive. Mirroring the question from my own experience, what are effective pastoral strategies that counselors and

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- 4 Pew Research Center, "Many Recommend Teaching Mental Health in Schools: Now Two States Will Require it," June 18, 2018. Available at: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2018/06/15/many-recommend-teaching-mental-health-in-schools-now-two-states-will-require-it>.
 - 5 National Alliance of Mental Health, "Ending the Silence," Available at: <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Ending-the-Silence>.
 - 6 National Institute of Mental Health, "Any Anxiety Disorder." Available at: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml#part_155096.
 - 7 NIMH, "Major Depression." Available at: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml#part_155721.
 - 8 My friend, mentor, and former colleague Nick Hamel, program director at Breakthrough Twin Cities, describes this reality as being a result, in part, because of the increasing avenues in which we can escape being with ourselves. "We have our phones, it's how we start and end our days; it isn't healthy. There isn't maybe so much of a generational stigma anymore, but our society is certainly set up in a way that tells its young people that they aren't good enough as they are. All they are seeing are gilded images of the world and others and they want that for themselves too but can't actually attain it."

other professionals employ to engage and encourage youth struggling with anxiety and depression to come and seek this counsel?

The reason why this becomes a problem for ministry, and not just society, is eloquently explained by Parker Palmer in his book *Let Your Life Speak* when he writes: “Though it is a deeply *personal* matter, it is not necessarily a *private* matter: inner work can be helped along in community. Indeed, doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone. Left to our own devices, we may delude ourselves in ways that others can help us correct⁹.” He continues, stating “the key to this form of community involves holding a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness¹⁰ (my reaction: *wow*). We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul¹¹ . . . never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.”¹² I invite you to sit with this for a moment before reading on.

[Interpretive Task]

“You say you walk an open road / Even the blind can walk alone / The road will climb, the road will bend / And every man might see again”¹³

Leading out of these ideas left to us by Palmer – the necessity of protecting our aloneness, respecting the solitude of our souls, and coming together in community¹⁴ I am brought into dialogue with one word: *identity*. I was recently able to sit down with Ashley Cooper, school counselor at Mounds Park Academy in St. Paul, and throughout our conversation, we kept circling back to this (seemingly) simple

9 Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 92.

10 Nick also spoke of the importance being able to validate our inner selves – “all of us are asked to have this space and capacity within ourselves,” he told me.

11 Nick again: “We’re maybe less aware of our inner worlds than ever and there is definitely a necessity for building a spiritual practice into our daily, everyday lives. *That could potentially* be a good place to start.”

12 Palmer, 92.

13 Peter Bradley Adams, “Hey Believers,” recorded February 2014, track 2 on *The Mighty Storm*, Sarathan Records, MP3.

14 Palmer, 92.

word. In thinking about how to begin answering all of the questions that continue emerging, this seems like the best place to start.

Psychologist Erik Erikson is perhaps one of the most influential thinkers in this realm. His theory of human development includes eight stages ranging from infancy to adulthood, each involving an inherent conflict to be overcome. Family and *culture-based*, Erikson believed each individual is shaped by the social world around them¹⁵. For adolescents, this view is especially important, as their stage is rooted in creating personal identity¹⁶, or else be subjected to ‘role confusion’¹⁷. That is to say, this time of life is surrounded by the questions of “who am I, where is my place in the world¹⁸, how do I fit in with my peers and what makes me unique?” The very heart of these questions long for the essences of who we are, our personalities¹⁹.

I want to attempt to outline this simply: this social, and consequently pastoral, problem lies in our **inability** to properly answer these questions and fully develop a sense of self-identity. The trends of raising rates of anxiety and depression among the adolescent cohort align with this reality. Combined with the context in which today’s young people have grown up²⁰, the overwhelming amount of information available at the press of a button, the ‘gilded images’ and the inability to disconnect from it all, it isn’t hard to imagine the difficulty facing today’s youth. Where do young people have to look in order to develop their authentic person and sense of self?²¹

15 Justin T. Sokol, “Identity Development Through the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory,” *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 142.

16 For Erik Erikson, identity refers to a sense of who one is as a person and contributor to society (Sokol, 142).

17 The stage is formally called ‘Identity vs. Role Confusion’ by Erikson.

18 Sokol, 142.

19 “Erik Erikson,” Harvard University Department of Psychology, 2018, accessed 11 October 2018. <https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/people/erik-erikson>.

20 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

21 This could be an entire research topic in itself, if only I had more space! When I speak of authenticity, I envision a pure expression of self.

Erikson's theory is especially enlightening surrounding this concept of role confusion, defined as a time in which the individual's "essential personality characteristics, view of [themselves] and perceived view of others" are all called into serious question²². This stage in Erikson's theory suggests that without a solid sense of identity, our perception of ourselves *could* transform into a morphed worldview. Without a solid sense of identity or sureness in our decisions, even the littlest thing perceived as 'failure' *could* feel devastating²³. What I fear this leads to is only increased feelings of isolation, feelings of shame, and silence because of a fear of not being understood: an epidemic of believing we are 'not good enough' (read: "I am not good enough"). What is the young person to do when *these* questions arise²⁴?

Again, this small amount of information and even more questions leads me back to the idea of what can be done in a community setting. Therefore, I feel compelled to lean into some possible solutions. These come out of my conversations with Ashley. First off: we need to give young people basic information about themselves, their biology, and their brains²⁵. Erikson's theory speaks of the time of adolescence as one in which the brain is going through some pretty major cognitive

22 Sokol, 142.

23 Mike Ewing: "Looking at these two campuses, at most 18-22-year-olds, I would say that most, that is at least 51% of the people I see are struggling with some sort of crisis of identity. It's not necessarily causal, but it is central.

24 Fr. Nick Kleespie, OSB, chaplain at St. John's University adds to the complexity of a possible answer to this question saying, "Prayer can be a good thing here, but prayer is often a learned response coming out of an immature, naive faith. Prayer cannot solve the struggles at hand, it cannot swallow depression. God gets really small when we start demanding something specific." He sighed for a second: "What's funny about church is that it has such potential to harm. What we need to be able to do is support the person in front of us in engaging with their faith in a way that can crack open their struggles and bring about an openness and acceptance." My additions: We are dealing with holistic people. Faith is an aspect and piece of that, but it isn't everything. Even if we are working at this from a faith perspective, that isn't always the first step.

25 Mike Ewing again: "In a therapy setting, using humor helps as well, like, there is a lot of truth to saying, 'yes, the problem really is happening all inside of your head!' Because really, it is happening all inside of your head. Cognitive behavioral therapy is designed in a way to help change the way we think and acknowledge the fact that in some cases, our thoughts can hurt us and make us believe things that are not true about ourselves. Emotions are inside of our head too; we cannot just ignore them."

changes²⁶. However, because this is something everyone goes through, these experiences should be normalized. Talking about what is going on and how we are feeling *should be okay*, and because of all the confusion going on, it is even more essential to validate these feelings and experiences as being real. We cannot not just assume irrationality because then, the cycle I described earlier – isolation, shame and silence – will only continue.

In the end, a sense of identity is a universal goal. All people, Ashley and I concluded, whether they show it or not, really just want to know they are doing okay²⁷. This thought is what should lead us into the space of listening and care that is so desperately needed.

[Theological Interpretation and Analysis]

*“When you feel the world around you / spinning out of control / you
can find someone around you to bring you out of the cold / But you
don’t ever have to hide what you really feel inside”²⁸*

The prologue of the *Rule of St. Benedict* begins with the challenging command: *listen*. As each chapter progresses, the image of what it means to “listen with the ear of your heart²⁹” deepens in the context of the Benedictine community. In light of the questions posed in this paper thus far, I want to hold onto and question what this means and what it might look like outside of the monastery. However, I would like to explore this through the lens of another one of St. Benedict’s rules, chapter 53: the reception of guests, as well as the theological concept of incarnation. How might these concepts provide the space to allow us to dive more deeply into the issues of identity and seeking counsel?

26 Sokol, 142.

27 I’d like to quote Ashley’s approach to therapy here: “therapy is about helping people see that they have value and to work with them to find ways that their internal perceptions can match the external ones. When one acts opposite of how they feel, there is inner conflict [like what Erikson describes] and ‘pretending’ is exhausting, confusing, and inconsistent.

28 Moon Taxi, “Two High,” recorded January 2018, track 4 on *Let the Record Play*, RCA Records, MP3.

29 *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue 1.

First, chapter 53 as presented in the *Rule*: All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* (Matthew 25:35)³⁰. The image of being welcomed as Christ invites the image of incarnation, the central mystery of Christianity³¹: where is Christ to be found on earth? While incarnation is most commonly understood as occurring only during the life of Jesus, the time in which “God walked the earth,” with Jesus’ physical body being the word made flesh that now remains in heaven, this is an unfortunate misunderstanding. What is implied by this view is that the incarnation was a sort of “thirty-year experiment,” as described by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI³², over and done. No, the incarnation is not something that can be talked about in the past tense. Rather, it is something that is still going on. It is just as real today and as “radically physical” as it was when Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth³³.

The word itself, *incarnation*, in-carnus, shows us why this is so, as it literally means “in physical flesh.” When we say, “we are the body of Christ,” we are not speaking in metaphorical terms; Rolheiser explains that “to say the word ‘Christ’ is to refer, at one and the same time, to Jesus, the Eucharist, *and to the community of faith*³⁴: you, me, and everyone else. The image of Christ, and therefore the image of God, is something that can be seen in *everyone and everything*; the presence of God is in this world, in our here and now. It is a striking image: **we**, as the people of God are to seize and act upon the very presence of Jesus Christ, because we are (even, and especially, in our brokenness and most vulnerable moments), as St. Teresa of Ávila tells us, the hands, feet, mouth, and heart of Christ³⁵. I again invite you to sit with this image for a moment.

30 RB 53.1.

31 Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (Image: New York), 75.

32 Rolheiser, 76.

33 Rolheiser, 76.

34 Rolheiser, 79-80.

35 Rolheiser, 80.

I use the words “brokenness” and “vulnerable” here carefully and intentionally because of the great implications they have in expanding our view of what being incarnate images of Christ means. In its original Greek text, the New Testament uses two words to reference the body: as a) the *soma*, the whole good action of a person and b) the *sarx*, one deeply *flawed*; the pejorative nature of being human³⁶. The word used in reference to Christ’s body in the Gospel of John is the latter: this imperfect being. *This* is who we are called to be: to be Christ exactly as we are.

Viewing Christ incarnate as the *sarx* rather than the *soma* leads me to think more deeply about this pastoral issue, as it lends itself back to the concept of identity and developing a sense of worth. More importantly, it leads me to question: what are ways in which individuals can and need to be supported in discovering this for themselves? What are ways to guide others to see themselves as “good enough” simply *because of* their incarnational relationship with Christ? The simple act of sitting and listening without judgment – rather, with compassion – is the first image that comes to mind, this “listening with the ear of our hearts” at the stories of successes and struggles that emerge in the development of a relationship. Guided by the acknowledged reality of Christ inside of us all – welcoming the guest as Christ – could be a source of healing, a way of stirring our own *eros*, our inner passions and fire, the essences of ourselves and our deepest and most authentic selves.

What emerges from the questions above is a sense of responsibility to recognize the gifts, talents, and charisms of the spirit that each person has contained within them. It is recognizing the importance of saying (not unlike the guests welcomed to the monastery in the time of St. Benedict), “it is good you are here right now exactly as you are because there is no one quite like you³⁷.” In light of my own story, my breakthrough came in the recognition of my own sense of worthiness—being able to finally look in the mirror and realize that I was, in fact, “good enough.” This only

36 Rolheiser, 97-8.

37 This is not unlike what Dr. Mike Ewing said to me: It’s about tapping into the expertise of each person in front of you.

came with having someone who sat with me, listened deeply, and was willing to metaphorically “pour water on my hands” and wash my feet³⁸, acting as Christ to help reveal the Christ in me to myself.

[Pastoral Response]

“All of these lines across my face / Tell you the story of who I am”³⁹

I am finally led into thinking about what a pastoral response might be in light of this question. As much as I wish I could say there are simple steps or a plan to follow, this, I have realized, is impossible, by our very nature of being human. Each person is unique, so each response must also be. As suggested by Erikson, this question of who we are is essential to our full development as human beings, yet it cannot be answered alone. Rather, as Palmer wrote, our struggles and triumphs must become entangled within our communities so as to *protect* each other’s aloneness⁴⁰. Therefore, in thinking about the goal for any pastoral minister, one thing is clear: it should not be centered around the assumed brokenness, struggles, or sadness of a person, but instead seek to engage more fully with standing witness to Christ – as the *sarx* – within that person. What is at the heart of answering this question, then, is discovering the authentic, real person *behind* the struggle.

From my personal experience, I know this can only come with listening and time; it was key to the healing I longed for. *We need to listen to the stories placed in front of us*, Dr. Mike Ewing told me. *There is so much power contained within them*. Because of this, I have attempted to put together a list of skills and strategies that might prove to be helpful here, but I can only do this by way of a story first.

The first night of faith formation this year, I had the opportunity to lead a large group session for our seventh-eleventh grade students. The theme I chose for my talk was “Embracing Authenticity – and finding God even in our lowest moments.” I shared with students a reflection I

38 RB, 53.13.

39 Brandi Carlile, “The Story,” recorded April 2007, track 2 on *The Story*, Columbia Records, MP3.

40 Palmer, 92.

had written in light of recovering from a concussion and the start of my therapy journey, ending with three bullet points:

- Vulnerability ≠ weakness
- Being ALWAYS AUTHENTIC will help create my best self.
- I can be my greatest champion – but sometimes I need others to help me.

The lasting impact of this open and honest sharing wasn't made known to me until nearly two months later, on a typical Wednesday night at youth group. I was doing what I was always doing – sitting and hanging out with the students who were there. Towards the end of our scheduled time, I had a student pull me aside, *Meghan, could we chat?* The roles were now reversed. She talked; I listened. My job was suddenly transformed into one in which my only responsibility was to be present and listen contemplatively and compassionately at the story being laid out before me. *I knew you were someone who I could talk to from that first night when you shared in large group*, she said. Together, we sat looking at the stories before us. Being fully present in that moment allowed me to listen carefully and attentively; it was not my responsibility there to fix anything, but instead, just to be. Coming out of this experience (as well as my own story) I am only able to offer some semblance of a plan, though it is more of a series of possible suggestions and thoughts:

1. Start out with sharing an authentic story, when appropriate.

This could be in a small or large group (like I did here), or individual setting. The action of standing in front of any number of people, acknowledging imperfection or struggle and admitting the difficulty in sharing a potentially vulnerable thing about yourself is a display of courage. Often one of the most difficult steps in seeking counsel in the first place is mustering up *enough* courage to jump past the potential fear of judgement or stigma surrounding asking for help. Therefore, it is important to begin with where we (ministers) are at (inherently imperfect and flawed human beings) and go from there. Our presence and actions are influential, whether this is known or not, and we must embrace this.

2. **Don't assume you know anything about how others experience anxiety or depression.** Instead, as Mike Ewing suggested, we must 'tap into the expertise of the other person'. It is important to meet individuals at their point of need. That is, though my personal experiences can be a great creator of empathy, it does not make me an expert about what anyone else is going through. This is why *listening is essential*. What is needed here, in this place? Ask questions and listen to the answer. The answer here, is will always be different for each person.
3. **Define what living empathetically looks like.** Oftentimes, the greatest display of empathy is simply expressing something like, *I don't really know the 'right' thing to say here, but I can be here for you in whatever way you need me.*
4. **Engage in contemplative listening⁴¹.** This is simply hearing another's story in an accepting and non-judgmental way. This kind of listening requires attentiveness, mindfulness, and presence to stay with the other person's story. We should not have expectations, just an open mind; there is not a right or wrong answer. Especially for youth still navigating the process of discovering their own identities, but for anyone, really, this is important – what we have to say matters, and our experiences are real. "All people really want," S. Joyce told me, "is to be listened to." Validating that is key.
5. **Practice contemplative dialogue.** This, like contemplative listening, is a skill that can and should be used every single day – a practice of providing non-defensive dialogue that invites the sharing and telling of one's story. Through our words, we expand our levels of understanding that allow us to extend our boundaries and capacity to respond and also listen. Being aware of our assumptions towards individuals is critical here, so that we do not allow them to become our beliefs about that person. In light of stereotypes surrounding depression or anxiety, it is good for us to know if we are thinking something like, "this

41 S. Joyce Iten (OSB) in discussion with the author, September 2018.

person is just sad; all they need to be is cheered up,” and turn our response into something like, “I’ve noticed by what you’re saying you haven’t felt like yourself lately, how long has this been going on?” Though this example is simplistic, it again acknowledges the reality and truth of the other individual’s story. Youth are used to adults telling them what to do or how to feel, so listening and striving to understand their perspective is a way to build up a positive rapport and show them how their ideas are valued and important.

6. **Focus on getting to know the person in front of you holistically, not ‘fixing’.** Start with a ‘weather report’ of sorts. Starting off with general questions like, “how are things going?” might seem simple but provides a starting place. If possible, engage with your identities together – who are *you*? What do you value? What do you have in common? Asking questions focused on this question of identity is important, as once a basis for who they are and what they believe is brought into the room (and conversely, for you to be able to answer this question as well), an opportunity is created to better support them in how to live out their values in an authentic way.
7. **Finally, lean into *accompaniment with that person.*** How is success to be measured in light of these suggestions? Returning to that ordinary Wednesday night, it was clear how powerful the act of sharing my time and story was in this student’s simple *thank you*. Expanding upon this *thank you*, I also heard: *thank you for seeing me and meeting me where I was in the midst of my chaos, sitting with me and being and seeing things as they are. For seeing Christ in me despite my brokenness and struggle. You could have jumped to conclusions or assumed XY or Z about me, but instead you sat and listened. Can we meet again next week?*

I have always been fascinated by stories: the ways they can bring us places, make us feel, and continue to teach us long after our initial experiences. I close my eyes, and return to my thumping heart, my nervous hands, and shame as I waited to meet my therapist for the first time. Yet, I can also close my eyes and return to remembering

the kindness in which I was met; the laughter we shared, the way I felt heard and the ways we engaged with and embraced my whole story, all its peaks and valleys. In this time of being listened to, I recognize how incredibly loved and important this made me feel. It does not seem to be such a far-fetched idea to say that this would not also be the hope of other pastoral ministers – to be able to evoke this same power of love. Herein lies the power of the story – the power of being – the power of accompanying – a source of healing, and a great place to begin.



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