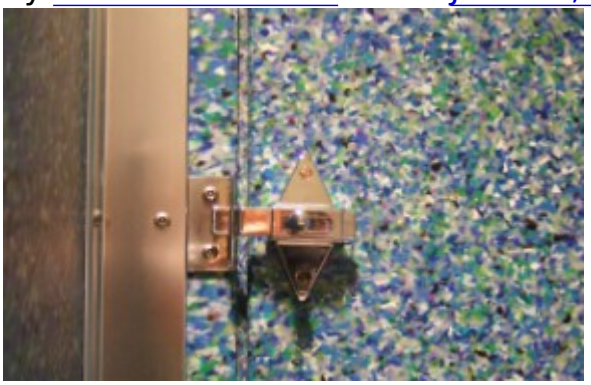
A preacher’s anxiety: Between panic and pride

by Teri McDowell Ott in the June 24, 2015 issue



I cannot stand still. People are streaming into our college’s chapel for worship—students, faculty, administrators, community members—and I am in the lobby, pacing. I greet people overenthusiastically. Every three minutes I count the pages of the sermon clutched in my hand, terrified that a page will go missing. Realizing how ridiculous I look, I slip off to the bathroom to hide in one of the stalls. It’s obviously me in there, though. Anyone can tell by the black robe and the red tartan stole peaking beneath the door.

What do people think I’m doing in here? I’m in no condition to care. All I know is that the cool, metal walls feel good to me, enclosing me like a womb, as I practice the breathing technique a psychologist taught me to calm my nerves. Inhaling deeply, I hold my breath as long as I can. Exhale, inhale deeply and hold, exhale. I do this until my head starts to feel light and dizzy. I obsessively check that the little green light on my wireless microphone is off as I mutter the liturgical words I have been trying to memorize for the service. My heart is pumping wildly, my blood thudding between my ears.

Covering my face with my hands, I pray desperate prayers. I get frank with God: “What the hell were you thinking?” The accusation escapes the silence of my thoughts, startling the woman in the stall next to mine. “Why couldn’t you have called me to some quiet cubicle somewhere?”

God doesn’t help my anxiety much in these preworship moments. There is so much cortisol rushing my brain, and the Holy Spirit doesn’t come in antidepressant form. What does help is my growing impatience with the fact that I have spent too much of my life in hiding. I want out. I want to be liberated from the fears that have kept me captive.

I recently discovered feminist theologian Susan Nelson’s classic article critiquing Reinhold Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin. Niebuhr emphasizes pride as the primary sin and promotes self-sacrifice as the way to self-transcendence. Nelson argues that this approach negates what she sees as the primary sin of woman: the sin of *hiding*. In order for a woman to know self-transcendence—to know her full humanity—she must confess the sin of hiding, stand “exposed in her insecurities and self-doubts, revealed in her true vulnerability, so she can learn how to cope either with her own shortcomings, or with her talents and desires.” In this way, “the woman is on the record; she is given a forum, an arena, a *life* to be lived.”

Nelson’s words resonate deeply with me. I have been slowly untangling myself from all that has kept me in hiding. When I first started to talk about my sense of call as a sophomore in college, it surprised people. I was deeply introverted and painfully shy. It didn’t make much sense to imagine me in a “people profession,” especially not one that involves public speaking. It was hard to ignore the voices in my head saying that I didn’t have much to give and that I certainly didn’t have anything to say worthy of a pulpit. But I have been learning to trust the people who encourage me—and the call that keeps urging me out of the bathroom stall toward more.

I process down the aisle and climb the steps to the pulpit. My heart is still pounding, but my head is now in the game. I can feel the potential of the moment, with all these people gathered for worship. I want this to go well. I want the people to experience something. It is Ash Wednesday, and my sermon focuses on the story of a young alum who died the year before in a biking accident. As the college chaplain, I felt Ash Wednesday was an appropriate occasion to reflect upon this tragedy within our community. Like his classmates, I was affected by this student’s death and by the extraordinary way he lived his short life—with joy, attention, and a wiser-than-his- years understanding that life is a gift.

While I preach, the students’ eyes stay on me. But their faces are unreadable. I can never anticipate how students will respond to my sermons. In spite of their blank faces, I preach on, with passion, about death, the fragility of life, and the importance

of paying attention.

As soon as the service is over, however, I sense something beautiful has happened. Lowering my hands after the blessing, I walk down the chancel steps and pause on the floor to unclip my microphone and unwrap its wire from the folds of my robe. The microphone is just my excuse, though. I pause to exhale the nerves of preaching and to survey the mood of the room. After most services I race to the front of the chapel to greet people as they leave. On this occasion, though, such a move feels awkward, like a desperate grab for compliments. So I stay put, standing off to the side, where I can observe the people gathering their coats and book bags to leave.

The first to approach me is a student I specifically invited to the service. Church is not really his thing; he is into theater. I invited him because I had a feeling he would appreciate the drama and symbolism of Ash Wednesday. He did. He can't thank me enough, shaking my hand vigorously. He even offers to help me pick up after the service. I give him the dirtiest job: cleaning my small, ceramic pot of ash. When I hand it to him it is like I have handed him a pot of gold. He is that excited.

Other students approach me, too. They want to thank me, to tell me how meaningful the service was. And it seems like they want to touch me, stand next to me, hear me speak personal words just to them. Out of nowhere, I feel magnetic. People are drawn to me, fluttering and buzzing about. It isn't possible to speak to them all. Out of the corner of my eye, I see one student slip away disappointed because he can't reach me through the crowd.

Eventually, the excitement dies down, the people all leave, and I go to find my husband, who helped lead the service music. "What did you think?" I ask him, as I do after every sermon.

"It was great," he responds. "It was really great." That evening I ask him the same question two or three more times, just to hear him tell me again. I want to relive the moment over and over, soaring away on my preacher's high.

The feeling lasts all the way through the next day. As I set out for my morning run, I am still reliving the joy of that preaching moment. It was intoxicating, all that attention. I obsess over every detail, replaying each one through my mind, still feeling the energy from the evening before coursing through my body. It buoys my steps as I run down the shoulder of the country road, cornfields on either side of me. I feel so alive, so important, so full of my own power.

I've known moments like this before in my ministry—moments that send my ego soaring so far beyond the preworship bathroom stall it's like that panic-stricken preacher didn't even exist. When my mind finally catches up to my ego, I get the sudden feeling that I have danced up to the edge of a cliff. It's a place that feeds my desire to be known and admired. But the fear of falling into a blind arrogance is also there, especially since the cliff's edge is so real and close and so quick to crumble.

The danger isn't anything that would land me behind bars. I'm no Jim Bakker. I wouldn't embezzle my college's funds, and I wouldn't get defrocked for sexual indiscretion. My ego's not strong enough even to become your average narcissist. No, my crime would be subtler—and thus more easily overlooked. The bottom of my cliff would be where I lose myself because I think too much of myself.

The thought of this makes my stomach turn, and it leads me to all sorts of questions. Will I feel myself falling? Will I know if my ministry is shape-shifting into being more about me than the people I serve, the word I preach, or the God who honored me with this position in the first place? Will anyone in my life be bold enough to tell me the truth? If so, will I listen?

These questions and fears usually guide me back to a memory from the summer before I left for seminary. I sat on the back deck of my parent's house, a shy, insecure 22-year-old, contemplating my call and writing in my journal. My excitement rose as I wrote. The idea of this call made me feel special, like there was something in store for me, something big. I was ready to take my first steps out of the shadows, to come out of hiding—but I was also afraid. Something about this particular call, the call to ministry, felt dangerous.

I'm not sure what it was that clued me in to this danger at that early stage of ministry. Perhaps it was how I idolized my childhood pastor—he was like God to me. Or perhaps it was the attention I was already receiving from others after announcing my decision to go to seminary. (My parents were bursting with pride. My friends looked at me strangely. "I didn't know you were that *religious*," they said.) Whatever it was, something was telling me to be careful as I ventured down this path.

I paused from my journaling to take in the tall maples surrounding my childhood yard. I listened as their tops waved and swept through the wind. Then I picked up my pen again and wrote this: "July 14th, 1994—No matter what happens, Teri, keep your feet on the ground."

However clichéd they are, these words from 20 years ago come back to me whenever I find myself reveling in a personal success—particularly a public one, such as preaching a well-received sermon. They also come back to me whenever I find myself in hiding. Neither one is a place of faithfulness. Neither is the place to which I am called. So I am seeking a sense of balance, a place where I can stand and feel my feet planted firmly on the ground. I am seeking a place where I can offer the gifts God has given me while avoiding the danger of losing myself by the lure of my ego's demanding desires.

My journey to this place of faithfulness is far from over. Xanax is still my best friend when I preach, and my ego continues to lap up kudos like a thirsty dog at the water bowl. The ground of ministry can feel so precarious. But each time I am on that chancel, draped in black wool and my college's red tartan stole, I recognize myself as a woman becoming a full person. I will stumble and teeter here, but to live anywhere else would be a denial of the gift that is my life, and of the expectations of the giver—who imagines more for me than I ever dreamed possible.