

Boundary issues

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

Recently I met someone who had been to South Africa to witness the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He had all the usual admiring things to say about it, with one new piece of information. All of the members of that commission are ill in one way or another, he said. No one has survived the process with his or her health intact. While a physician might come to a different conclusion, this observer—who happens to be a priest—is pretty sure he knows why the commissioners are all ill. The things they have heard have made them sick.

In their efforts to purge the soul of their country, they have listened to confessions so full of toxic material that their own health has broken down. They have encountered evil in such strong and unfiltered doses that their spirits have been deeply wounded, and the hurt has surfaced in their bodies. They have participated in the healing of their nation, at great personal cost.

This sounded so right to me that I began to remember other, smaller incidents much closer to home. I remembered a woman with whom I spent a year in clinical pastoral education at a large, inner-city medical center. Neither of us had ever been a hospital chaplain before, and we saw things no one could have prepared us for: gray babies strangled by their own umbilical cords; children with flippers instead of feet; women with suppurating breast cancers; teenagers pulled from wrecked cars with their backs broken; old men with gangrenous legs who died an inch at a time.

My colleague was better at ministering to these people than I was. She had suffered more than I had, for one thing, and she was more willing to suffer, for another. When my beeper went off in the middle of the night, I would go do what I could and be back in my bed within the hour. She, on the other hand, would often get no sleep at all. If a patient went into cardiac arrest, she would sit with his terrified wife all night. If he died, she would not rest until the undertaker had come and every member of the family had gone home.

One morning I found her in the chaplain's lounge with both hands pressed to her chest. Her face was the same mustard yellow as the couch. Her hair looked as if she

had been out in a bad storm. When I asked her what she was doing, she said that she was covering the hole in her heart until it sealed over enough for her to stand up. Otherwise she was afraid that the little bit of life left inside of her would spill out and she would be gone.

She did not last as a chaplain. She turned out to have "boundary issues." She left after the second semester and I never saw or heard from her again.

Years and years later, as a parish minister, I was facing boundary issues of my own. A particularly disturbed member of my congregation had invited me to his home for lunch. Since he and I both knew that I ate lunch at other people's houses, there was no easy way for me to refuse him. How could I say, "Thank you, but I feel safer meeting you on my turf, not yours"? I was not afraid for my physical safety. It was my emotional safety that concerned me.

I went to lunch, and the moment I walked through his door I knew I had been right. His apartment reflected all the turmoil that I knew was going on inside of him. It was dark, cluttered and dirty. It smelled strongly of mothballs. The kitchen table was covered with magazines, junk mail, and what looked like loose potting soil. I sat down at it as he pulled our lunch of cheese and cold cuts from the refrigerator.

When he had prepared our plates, he cleared half of the table, brushing the soil to the floor with the back of his hand. Then he set my food down in front of me, asked me to say the blessing, and began to eat his lunch. All I could do was stare at mine, with fear rising in my throat. There was nothing wrong with the food, which was a generous offering in every way. My fear had to do with what I might swallow along with it. I was afraid that I might catch this man's disturbance, that I might ingest some of his turmoil along with his sliced ham, and wake up the next morning with a bad case of despair.

I cleaned my plate, but I left that kitchen with a new appreciation for Jesus's willingness to eat with outcasts and sinners. Unlike me, he gobbled up their sorrows. He did not try to protect himself from their distress. He ate every bite of their pain and trouble, and even asked for second helpings, so that a table set in the midst of deep brokenness became an altar where healing occurred.

Or at least where healing occurred for his dinner companions. As for him, there turned out to be a big price to pay for all the toxins he had ingested. His spirit was wounded, and the hurt surfaced in his body. He did not have enough hands to cover

the hole in his heart.

On his way out of this world, he cut the rest of us some slack. Pick up your cross daily, he said, making it sound as much a way of life as a way of death. In this life, there may still be times when we are called to risk our own health for the health of the world. If we decide to do it, then the radical comfort he offers us is that there is healing in store for us too. Sooner or later, God means to save us all.