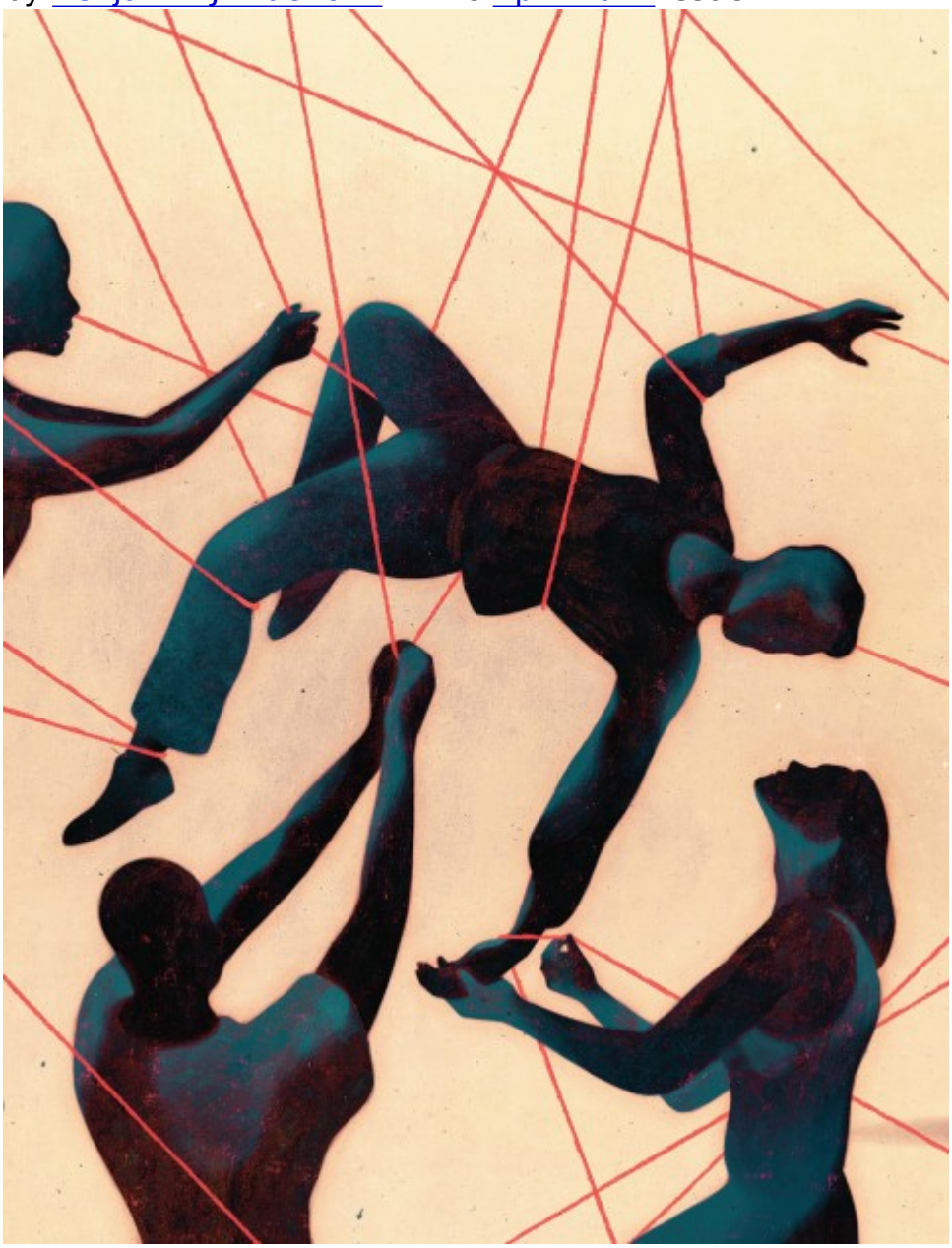
What comes after clergy self-care?

I didn’t need more candles or journaling. I needed solidarity with others.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the April 2024 issue



(Illustration by Owen Gent)

I had been advised against opening the door to the church when I was there alone, but I could see through the peephole that it was just a young woman. When I

cracked the door a few inches to ask how I could help her, she pushed past me into the entry of the small narthex. She asked for someone who wasn't there, and I warily introduced myself as the intern. She needed some money, which neither I nor the church had on hand. As I explained this, she started pressing on the front of my thrift-store pants—which again, not that it matters, contained no money whatsoever. Suddenly grasping the situation, I rather brusquely showed her out.

Then, under the unforgiving fluorescent lights and exhausted ceiling tiles, I cried—not for myself, but for a woman who apparently had no better options than cold-calling a penniless ministry intern for sex work. And when I got home, I emailed the director of my recently completed ministry program to request a referral for a therapist. I had assumed, without even thinking, that an impressive career in notable academic institutions, years of residence on Chicago's South Side, and some time serving pleasant White churches would be enough to keep me from being overwhelmed. I was wrong.

If I were to continue down this road, I would need help. For much of the next 11 years, I was in therapy once or twice a month. I don't remember the term *self-care* being current in my circles when I started, but that's what it was, and without it, I'd have flamed out of ministry like a Perseid meteor in summer, before I could leave a trace.

Stop me if you've heard this one: "Don't go into ministry if you can imagine yourself doing anything else." I've heard it, read it, and said it to myself and others. This is an amiable reframing of the starker call stories in scripture, where God takes the initiative and doesn't seem keen to take no for an answer. Jeremiah complains that God has seduced him and that his vocation is like "fire shut up in [his] bones" that consumes him if he is silent and draws mockery if he speaks (Jer. 20:9). Jonah runs away straight into the belly of the whale. In later tradition, it's the mobs of the faithful rather than God who won't take no; they drag would-be hermits off to be consecrated as bishops. You might end up in clergy orders if your side lost a power struggle in Byzantium (often short your eyes and/or testicles), if you were a younger son of the precarious lower gentry, or if you wanted to avoid conscription.

I don't think any of these scenarios offers a close analogy to clergy formation in 21st-century American Christianity. But the cultural imprint of compulsion can still be read, faintly, in our more humanistic descriptions of calling. We are often taught to frame our calling as needing our assent and cooperation, not our planning and

designing. The irony, of course, is that it is actually quite difficult to default into a clergy career. The obstacles vary by tradition, but they are mostly considerable and require active, deliberate surpassing. “Are you sure about this?” is a question asked, in so many words and in the mere fact of endless meetings and evaluations, over and again, and all it takes to stop it is to answer no a single time.

Yet our own agency is carefully nudged to a supporting role. It might not be strictly unimaginable to do something else—most of us have done something else, even a summer painting houses or shelving books, and would do it again if we had to—but it is at least poor form to say no. The burden appears to be on us to deny either the “deep gladness” in oneself or the “world’s deep hunger” whose intersection, in the oft-quoted words of Frederick Buechner, define the concept of vocation. Our fate is written not in the stars nor in the stern command of God nor in the vicissitudes of social context but in the workings of our souls and their gifts.

In this way, self-care becomes the routine maintenance of fate’s machinery. It is necessary both for our own well-being and for the fulfillment of this quasi-compulsory role. Find a therapist. Take your day off (the sabbath command, God’s original wellness program). Cultivate your hobbies. Establish and maintain healthy boundaries between your work and your life. Get control, in whatever way works best for you, of your relationship with substance use and your own sexuality. And don’t forget to eat right and exercise.

Having done these things, if only ever imperfectly, and watched others strive to do the same, I have started to observe their essential limitations. (I have also seen good work utterly destroyed by the inability or unwillingness to attempt them, but that’s another story.) There is a fixed lower limit to the amount of alcohol or drugs you can consume and a fixed upper limit to how many hours of refreshment a vacation day can contain. Apart from therapy, the most helpful self-care practice I’ve ever adopted has been regular exercise, but there’s only so much time in a given day anyone with a job can devote to it, even without the onset of diminishing returns.

And of course there are critiques of self-care culture that find the mark. It transmutes collective problems into personal ones (though the problems are also unavoidably personal). It becomes its own set of burdensome duties, undertaken for the sake of others (our churches, our families, or even God benefit from our time off). These critiques have a frustratingly irrelevant kind of truth. It isn’t worthless to

go to therapy just because therapy doesn’t halt global warming or does make you better at your job. The real problem with self-care is that it can’t actually make our jobs better. The machinery of fate may turn fast or slow, smoothly or with agony. But either way, it often feels as though it is going in a circle.

Survey data suggests that, the self-care revolution notwithstanding, American clergy are a pretty discontented group. When a Barna survey found that more than 40 percent of Protestant clergy had considered leaving ministry in the prior year, a number of us rushed in with explanations. Participation in religious communities is declining. Budgets are struggling. Expectations are often very, even unrealistically, high all the same, and in many congregations the experiences of decline and broader political polarization have instigated or entrenched some bad habits. We need good boundaries to survive, but “healthy boundaries will continue until giving improves” would be a nonsensical message.

A budding literature of lamentation and departure among clergy has grown up, too, especially since the pandemic. When these stories find their way to my social media feeds or my bookshelf, I often recognize their expressions of futility and emotional exhaustion, and I grieve over the mistreatment they sometimes recount. But there is also an unmistakable note of woundedness in these stories traceable, I suspect, to the ghosts of compulsion in our theologies. All this trouble, and God put us up to it.

We are, however, very far from being alone in any of these ways. A 2022 McKinsey survey found that 40 percent of all American workers were thinking about leaving their jobs. Journalism and higher education in the humanities have been experiencing structural contraction just like churches, with budget constraints to match. Health-care workers and teachers have to deal with rude, even dangerous behavior from the people they serve. Amazon drivers have to deal with excessive expectations and excessive heat (not to mention other drivers).

Most of our complaints, however justified, are in fact pretty ordinary. They are widely shared by the people we minister to and among. That does not make them any easier to handle. In fact, it suggests that there is probably no patch on or reform of our systems that will make them more manageable. In generally unfavorable circumstances, self-care serves the necessary but insufficient role of helping us balance precariously between the high ideals of our work and its often embittering realities. And every other option follows that individual, self-optimizing pattern. We leave for greener grass, we build new skills and find a margin for vitality in them, or

we make poetry of our disappointments.

What, then, do we do after we have maxed out on candles, burpees, and journaling? First, I suggest that we turn our focus to solidarity, with each other and then with other working people facing similar issues. To the extent that we face shared circumstances and have shared interests, we need to think about what it would look like to address them together. There is a kind of negative solidarity that develops, in my experience, when pastors get together—a powerful dynamic of cosigning each other's complaints and affirming our self-characterizations as the healthiest part of unhealthy systems.

But what would it look like if instead we formulated requests of our church bodies to set more realistic policies? My denomination is fully on board with market-rate health insurance, with premiums to be shouldered by congregations. This places a major burden on small congregations while pushing down on cash compensation and making health-care coverage a serious concern for pastors who might want to retire, take on more marginal calls, or just take risks that might not pay off in their present setting. No higher authority can force congregations to be good workplaces, but a better sharing of the costs of security would go a long way to making our work more sustainable for everyone.

And in this perspective, we might connect our needs to those of our fellow citizens and workers. Why should anyone have to worry about health insurance or the basic needs of old age or disability? How much of our struggles, personal and collective, in this work and beyond, come down to inadequate time off? How can we ensure that everyone can get leave for the birth or adoption of a child or to care for a family member? Can we imagine a more prosocial world, with higher trust, in which we can distinguish the passions of politics from the everyday demands of getting along with each other? What if that young woman in a Chicago church all those years ago was an instance not just of a tragedy in which I might intervene or a test of my own capacities, but a fellow human whose needs and ultimate interests are more or less the same as my own?

Yet even as I write these words, I begin to form objections. A better church, in which obligations are shared rather than pushed down to the lowest and most precarious level of financial responsibility, can be imagined. A better world, in which the security of all who sell their time and labor to survive is prioritized more highly, can be imagined, too. But they are far-off at best and will not come in time for most of

those experiencing vocational crisis now. Clearer and more focused solidarity is necessary for its own sake, but it won't make anything happen on its own. It can neither substitute for nor complete the maintenance work of self-care.

And there are problems that building a humane floor under a working life won't solve for us. The psychic wounds and vulnerabilities that drive congregational dysfunction won't go away, the decline of participation won't be arrested, and the disproportion of our tasks to our capacities will continue to widen. People will still have to leave ministry, whether because churches won't be able to pay them or because the intangible costs will simply be too great. Perhaps for most of us there will always be the threat of one knock at the door, one meeting gone wrong, one spiritual dry spell too many, after which we will find nothing to say but the prophet's appeal: "Take this burden from me."

This is where our theological language and, more importantly, our mental habits about clergy vocations really matter. As we feel compelled into ministry to begin with, we will still be tempted to feel driven out at the end. And I wonder what it would be like to redescribe vocation in terms of a fundamental existential freedom, not in the sense that God takes no initiative and we simply make things up for ourselves, but in the sense that our participation in that initiative is under-determined. It is not reducible to mechanical causes. We can, in fact, do something else. We are, if we've done anything worthwhile in ministry, actually suited for other things, too. Our gladness and the world's need are fungible beyond the confines of any single job or vocation. Likewise, our flaws are not necessarily misunderstood virtues and our failures are not necessarily successes that arrived out of season.

Even scripture itself gives us alternatives to the image of irresistible vocation. "For which of you," Jesus asks a crowd of his would-be followers, "intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28). I knew the words by heart but understood them not at all back when I was weighing whether to open the doors of my internship church. If God—or the Christian community, if you're more disenchanted—is the one setting the cost, it is exacted in the currency of our own freedom. It may be paid in the cultivation of personal virtue and well-being. It may be paid in the long laments, bad habits, and self-pitying resignation of those who feel seduced and abandoned, whose bone fire can neither ignite the world nor be fully smothered but only smolders to their own hurt. Or it may be paid by the unsecured bet on solidarity—the hope that unknown others will look out for our interests even as we

try to look out for theirs.

Perhaps it is all three, as our needs and circumstances change. Freedom really is like currency in that it is a universal medium, present everywhere. Whoever is knocking, on whichever side and for whatever reason, the door to the church can always be opened.