

Seminaries in pain: Talking through conflict

by [Peter L. Steinke](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

I recently began consulting with three seminary faculties that have gone through significant changes and crises in the past three years. These crises involved retirements, staff sexual misconduct, building programs, faculty-administration conflicts, curriculum changes and financial strains. In addition, personal tragedies had affected staff relationships by deepening both personal and corporate pain. In one case, conflict led leaders to make decisions without consulting staff or faculty groups. When those decisions directly affected individual lives and eliminated jobs, friendships were tested. Antagonism became overt, with organized anger focused on leaders.

A group of two to five professors in each school convinced colleagues to bring in outside help. In my meetings with faculty and administrative staffs, I noticed a common behavior. In spite of the high degree of pain that individuals were experiencing, most of them had great difficulty talking about their pain. These were extremely articulate, keenly observant and deeply committed people, yet none of these strengths gave them command of what to do with pain, especially the kind that fractures relationships and increases emotional distance.

In one tense meeting, a faculty member finally broke the silence in order to challenge her colleagues. "We have not spent our pain wisely," she said. "Our avoidance and surface courtesy disguise the hurt some of us feel. There's no profit in that."

Talking about painful topics or experiences means starting down a trail of losses: a loss of face, a loss of control, a loss of respect and perhaps a loss of professional stature. I suspected that the faculty members were afraid of one another and not sure how the others would respond if one of them dared to admit vulnerability. If I say nothing, most of them had decided, I'll save myself horrible embarrassment. In a seminary setting wrapped in idealism, high standards and perfectionism, pain could

be translated as weakness. Why expose one's shaky side? Better to keep the pain undisclosed than to lose respect. Besides, confronting another faculty member or an administrator about his hurtful action or her ill-advised decision would probably evoke a defensive response rather than a word of acknowledgment. Expressed pain pierces a hole in a person's or group's veil of politeness and fusion. Why take the chance of self-disclosure and experience the displeasure of others?

But not talking about painful things brings its own lineup of losses. Unaddressed pain has a habit of turning into sour complaints, showing up in physical symptoms and coming loose in sudden outbursts. Pain denied does not disappear; it only goes underground.

It is pain's unpleasantness that makes it effective in protecting us. Pain is part of the design for preserving life; pain is intense and protracted or sharp and intermittent precisely to engender a response. When we avoid paying attention to pain, and see or treat it only as an intruder or an injustice, we miss its warning signal and deny it its power to instruct. After medical missionary Paul Brand treated leprosy patients who sustained injuries and even loss of limbs because the disease kept them from feeling pain, he realized the value of pain and called it "the gift nobody wants."

We cannot learn without pain. This does not mean that we should allow pain more power than it should have. But we must talk about painful things, facing facts and one another when pain issues from important relationships. When we do this, speaking the truth in love can be the crossroads where good psychology and evangelical counsel meet.

As an observer of theological institutions, I wonder if the academic culture combined with the religious context magnifies the reticence to discuss distressful situations. When people operate primarily in the mental world, can they lose contact with the emotional side of life? Perhaps academics mentally dodge pain by immersing themselves in theory or doctrine and dulling their self-awareness. But if pain becomes something nonmentionable, how can it—this unwanted teacher—instruct? Intelligent explanations of pain, no matter how elaborate and clever, will not exorcise the pain from one's life.

Burying pain below our awareness is like disconnecting a fire alarm because we don't like loud noises. Pain seizes upon consciousness, and it involves cognition as well as sensation. As Plato remarked, "All thought begins with the recognition that

something is out of place.” One of pain’s functions is to disorient and displace. Only then do we bother to view things differently and hopefully move toward discovery and healing. As John Updike observed, some things are known only by the symptom of a 104-degree fever. Blotting out pain or diminishing its impact carries a consequence—no awareness, no choice.

Pain can paralyze, but it can also motivate. As a motivator, it spurs us to imagine what might be and to consider an alternate course of action. Edwin Friedman (*Generation to Generation*) claims that the degree to which we can tolerate pain in ourselves and others is the degree to which we and they will grow. Pain can make us incredibly adaptive.

Unfortunately, in my experience as a consultant with congregations and schools, I find that most people want to soothe too quickly. When someone pulls the cure trigger prematurely, he relieves himself of his own awkwardness in the presence of pain and never recognizes pain as a possible ally in the healing of the other or of himself. To paraphrase the words of the prophet Jeremiah, we heal people’s wounds too lightly by doing it too soon. We also stymie their growth.

Most of all, to silence pain is to perpetuate loneliness. Pain has a way of separating people. When we decide to break the silence and ease the separation, we must hear the confessions of pain and give a response that shows love and support. This requires spiritual maturity. We have to resist the urge to respond in judgment—vocally or even silently.

To their credit (and to their ultimate benefit) all three seminary groups knew that they needed to break the silence. They looked outside of themselves for assistance in unlocking the impasse. Only after the pain was expressed did they take action to solve problems and open lines of communication.

James Pennebaker, who has researched the correlation between self-disclosure and health, cites a number of positive results stemming from talking about painful things, such as an increase in immune response and a decrease in stress hormones. He discovered that people who articulated their pain were more capable of coming to terms with life experiences, reinterpreting them and integrating them into life, living more comfortably and being more connected with others. In fact, the word *articulate* is hewn from a word meaning a *joint*. Talking about painful things can actually join people together. Martin Luther intimated that the grace of God is

present in the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.”

There’s a pastoral issue here too. If someone mutes her pain or denies it, she will not receive comfort from others. The apostle Paul suggests that no matter how painful our wounds, they are social as well as personal. He instructs the early Christians to bring the comfort by which they have been aided in their affliction to bear upon and affect the wounds of others. We can become “comforted healers” who have known and received comfort from others and are able to share the same.

If pain cannot be talked about in Christian community, including a seminary, part of life’s curriculum is missing. This abdication will leave people looking for other voices—the quacks, the cheap comforters and the media pontificators. If those of us in Christian communities cannot share painful stories with each other, how do we expect others to respond to us? People will continue to look for help when they need to restore their lives and destinies, but they will look outside the Christian community and outside the Christian story. Let’s work to nurture and sustain the seminary as a place where we engage “the total harvest of thinking and feeling”—pain and all.