Learning Prayer Through Childhood Trauma

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Lorraine Cavanagh

At my convent boarding school we thought a great deal about God, although I do not remember being actually taught to pray. We were very afraid of the nuns, especially of the nun who could 'freeze' a room full of little girls simply by entering it. I often wondered how she prayed when she was alone with God and concluded that since she was a nun, she was setting us an example of the kind of God we were supposed to pray to, remote and yet disturbingly seductive. Chapel was redolent with the sensory delights of incense and polished wood, but the God we were taught about did not seem to be a God who identified with our immediate needs, or with the real questions we were asking. For some of us, the most significant of these pertained to making sense of our abandonment by our parents and of the innate unworthiness inculcated through the religious teaching we received at school and which was reinforced at home.

In terms of a person's faith journey this kind of negative combination of contrary feelings about God and human relationships would be likely to leave a child stranded somewhere between the first and third stages of Fowler's stages of faith development, fixed between the intuitive/projective faith of early childhood and unable to progress beyond a 'synthetic/conventional' faith which is part of the wider landscape of day to day life. It is only at the fourth 'intuitive reflective' stage that a person begins to reflect and question their beliefs independently of what they may have been taught or modelled in early life. The child will want to believe in a nurturing and all loving God and, failing to find that God in his or her immediate emotional surroundings, will project God into a fantasy version of one or both of their inadequate parents. In my own case, I knew that I had effectively been abandoned but I wove myself a story of love and devotion for my parents which somehow transcended the

feelings I was really experiencing. At home, I therefore accepted the humiliations and put-downs inflicted as due to me.

All of this entailed a great deal of emotional energy and psychological resilience, leaving little for what might be called faith. But there seemed to be a given that you went on believing because the faith you were being taught was the only steady and reliable element in your otherwise baffling and chaotic emotional existence. God governed largely through a fear that in later adult life would translate as an inbuilt almost permanent state of anxiety. As a Catholic, straight from the convent, you took the emotional baggage of Catholicism, as it then was, home with you. You cycled several miles to Mass on Sunday, lest you commit the mortal sin of omission and go straight to hell, not having had a chance to go to confession in the holidays. You said the rosary with frantic devotion. All prayer was driven by anxiety and would remain so well into adult life.

Against such a background it is hard to point to the moment when a transition from a belief based on a psychological need for basic comfort and reassurance to something like mature faith that is grounded in questioning trust might have occurred. As with many people, I went through a necessary period of wandering and exploration, of testing the bounds of religion, and those of the Church especially, but finding them to be unbreachable. God lay hidden behind them, out of reach and unknowable. Early adult years spent in Franco's Spain are marked with the memories of dark churches, distant priests muttering in Latin or preaching in an incomprehensible echoing monotone, rickety cane kneelers and incense. In all of this lay a determination to find what I imagined to be the holy.

The idea of holiness seemed to me to be entirely separate from my own lived experience but, nevertheless, to be desired. Desiring holiness was also bound up with a sense of what one ought to be, in order to fulfil the expectations of others and one's own pious fantasies. There was no emotional space to spare for asking oneself whether these expectations were reasonable, what God might expect, or whether God expected anything at all. Neither was it possible to create an intellectual space in which to begin to ask questions about the things the Church taught or about the nature of faith itself.

If you have suffered abuse in childhood, you are grateful for this realm of unknowability which also offers no explanation for the wrongs committed against you by your abusive parents, or even the necessity of owning them. You were told that whatever wrongs you

experienced were either imagined, or simply things that were due to you. You shaped all these conflicting feelings into what you took to be the unimpeachable rightness of God, and of all those in positions of authority. God was asking you to suffer, so you ‘offered it up’, as we were taught to do by the nuns. You acquiesced and survived.

A person who is in survival mode, in regard to trauma experienced in childhood, through religion compounded by upbringing, does not have the mental space or personal inclination for questioning the beliefs handed to them. The best they can hope for lies in finding a relatively shame-free space in which to embrace the religion they have inherited with a degree of confidence. This is never a straightforward process because it is fundamentally dishonest. While it may begin in early childhood, in the natural questioning which every child ought to be encouraged in, it is often later suppressed or denied in an environment where the maturing individual feels controlled by others, through a general denial of their innate goodness. If this goodness has been further obscured as a result of sexual abuse, the journey to faith through prayer is a hard one. If they have had any kind of religious formation in their early years, they will have formed an idea of God and then tried to fit that idea with the emotions they experience later in life. Looking back over these conflicting emotions and confused understandings of the nature of God, I am returned to the fundamental anxiety of trying to bring them all together under the heading of faith and how that faith translated as prayer.

Given the nature of my religious upbringing the main work that needed to be done, as I saw it, involved making God notice me, just as the primary objective in my relationship with both my parents involved earning their respect, making them honour me. People who have experienced emotional abuse in childhood will retain a memory of not being valued, of their total insignificance despite the fact that the parents may be happy to tout their children’s achievements or personal attributes to their friends. This can be particularly dangerous in father- daughter relationships where a total abrogation of parental responsibility can be replaced by an unhealthily sexualised one. For the daughter, the inability to win the father’s affection in a normal parental way pushes her to indulge and provoke, even manipulate his affections, to the point of appearing to condone actual sexual abuse.

When these experiences are returned to the ‘spiritual’ context in which that person may have grown up it is impossible to make sense of them. In no way do they fit with the loving Father God they have been taught to believe in. At the same time, the abuse survivor has been

conditioned to believe that the parent can never be wrong, so she imagines that God must not mind, or even approves of, what has happened to her, and is not interested in her still unhealed wounds. Therefore, the daughter must tell herself, it is she who is sinful and selfish in both parental contexts. She has failed both parents and she has unduly bothered God by trusting God with her sense of guilt and failure, which now compound the pain of the abuse itself.

As a victim, it is always your fault. In the case of your home relationships, if you speak of the abuse and of the genuine perplexities that arise in your mind as a result of it, you will either not be believed or, in the case of the parental relationship itself, the matter will be dismissed in an indulgent attitude towards the parent of the opposite sex. It is therefore still your fault, or you are a liar.

By the time you reach this point, you are faced with a choice in regard to God and life as you know it. You either deny the truth of what is happening to you and continue to seek a kind of spurious holiness which might remove you from these realities, at least when you are praying. Or you give up on God altogether. But even if you give up on God, you do not entirely relinquish the will to pray. It simply translates as an inarticulate longing for justice and truth, but not a justice to which you feel really entitled. So your relationship with God remains one of being fundamentally unworthy while at the same time continuing to 'believe' in God's justice and mercy. In all this ambivalence you remain locked in Fowler's first stage (the 'intuitive-projective stage'), insofar as your dependence on your prayer being heard is indirectly shaped by the way you have been conditioned to be emotionally dependent on a narcissistic parent's approval and validation. You are never an independent agent. You are without either spiritual or emotional autonomy. All that is left to you is compliance.

In terms of the faith journey of someone who has experienced any kind of abuse in childhood, compliance is the softest of options. It gives you permission to remain in an infantile state both emotionally and spiritually. But problems begin to arise when a person's normal intellectual and emotional development start to take shape, perhaps as a result of the healing experienced in a healthy long-term partner relationship, or through therapy. Part of that development will involve coming to terms with the real nature of their relationship with a parent, that they were objectified by the parent either in the way I have already described, or because the parent of the same sex found them threatening. In this case, the mother will glory in the daughter's achievements or attributes to the extent that she can claim them as her own

but will diminish the daughter with a put-down only minutes later. 'She gets it from me' was a refrain I frequently heard from my own mother in regard to my ability as a writer, followed by a reference to some aspect of my appearance about which I was particularly sensitive. The father will push the son into careers, and hence identities, that reinforce or satisfy his own narcissistic craving.

Both of these briefly sketched scenarios impact on how a person learns to pray 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). If you are the child of a narcissistic parent you will know that you are expected to be 'perfect'. You will go for years trying to reconcile the parent's idea of perfection with the words Jesus speaks to his followers, 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5:48). These words only serve to add to the confusion you experience in regard to God as a loving parent, since you have not had that kind of parenting modelled to you in early life. This may have intensified your need to replicate the 'good parenting of God' for your own children. On the one hand, it obliges you to live with more failure, because you will never achieve the idealised parenting you are striving for: on the other hand, it produces behaviours that mirror the narcissistic pattern itself, notably 'love bombing', where your need for your children to know that you really love them can overwhelm them.

Unlike the often contested perfection that Jesus speaks of, the perfection required of you is frequently contradictory, or blurred by the constantly shifting sands of your parents' own moral or material life map. 'Perfection', however it is seen, pertains only to God. Striving for it in purely human terms, out of human strength alone, sets us up for failure. All of this invites a more extended discussion on the outworking of grace which, while germane to the subject being discussed, falls outside the scope of this paper.

When it comes to the perfection expected of you by an abusive parent, you must conform to whatever they, in any given moment, need or require of you. That is your life and that is your truth. You will never satisfy the parent because the ground is always changing, the goal posts are always moving. As a result, you live with a deep sense of inadequacy. You also live with, and try to make sense of, the seemingly contradictory teaching that you are somehow 'worthy' in the eyes of God. You go through life trying to reconcile this idea of worth before God with the unworthiness that is now part of your emotional DNA. God is another person who needs to be satisfied.

Over many years, a rugged determination to stick with prayer will eventually reveal to you your own unique worth, or rather that God is not the kind of God you have been trying to please, along with the narcissistic parent. But before this happens you must wrestle with the paradox that is the need to 'die to self' (Gal. 2:20). But if Paul's theology is freed from the narrow constraints of male-orientated hermeneutics, we are given a self which shares in the very selfhood of Christ, an idea which is also central to Pauline thinking (Rom. 6: 3-11; Phil. 1:21)

Given what you have learned about yourself from your narcissistic parent, you are not sure that you actually have a self to die to, so you are faced with paradox. You have to die to self but you have been psychologically conditioned to succeed, and to the approval that comes with success, as the only means of emotional survival, the only way of knowing that you do indeed have a self to die to. This is perplexing and leaves you feeling that you have somehow failed to understand something fundamental about the Christian faith – and you have, although it is not what you have been telling yourself. You have not resisted ideas of salvation. You have simply not experienced it in a moment of profound understanding that failure, properly understood, is the very stuff of salvation itself.

By failure I mean not only the things we fail to do or become, many of which have been attempted in an unconscious effort to satisfy the narcissistic parent, possibly long after they are dead, but the deep sense of general failure that the parent has instilled in us since our earliest days, along with the fear that it engenders. Anybody who exposes themselves intellectually or creatively is at risk of experiencing this deep and irrational fear of failure, that you *will* fail, no matter how talented or intelligent you are. You may even have engineered the failure yourself by inviting the parent, or possibly partner, to witness, and thereby endorse, the success you crave. This happened to me when I invited my mother to come to a rehearsal of a play in which I was performing. Her presence annihilated my true sense of self, so that the performance was a failure in every sense. I experienced deep shame, both as a sense of inner disintegration, and in regard to having failed the director and the other actors.

The memory of this experience returns whenever I think of how the idea of salvation is worked out through the lives of persons, beginning perhaps with failure itself. If we accept that God in Christ redeems human failure through the explicit failure of the cross, we accept the ultimate transformation of what we perceive to be our own failures as intrinsic to the act

of atonement itself. As victims of abuse in childhood, we must accept the transformation of our perceived failure, from a lie that has been fed to us to a truth that is integral to the person who is known and honoured by God. The lie is held in the brokenness of the 'failed' Christ. Central to an expiatory idea of Christian atonement is that it is in Christ's being dishonoured that we are honoured and that from this place of being honoured that we become as Christ is before God. From this transformative understanding of the nature of failure, as it relates to how God is in regard to human beings, comes the beginning of the kind of prayer urged upon his disciples by Jesus himself, the 'worship' which is of spirit and truth (Jn. 4:24). Where prayer might be understood as intercessory and supplicatory, while worship concerns the whole self, as that self is given over to God, prayer and worship become one and the same, by virtue of our union with Christ in God.

The person who has experienced abuse, especially in childhood, learns prayer as God's truth about themselves. Over time, they may realise that the things they 'ask for' in prayer, especially when they relate to success and achievement, are often an extension of their need for the love and acceptance of other people, rooted in their unmet need for parental love in their early years. Over time, they will learn that qualifications and achievements matter insofar as they are an endorsement of God's love for them and part of his loving purpose for their lives, rather than something to be gained or achieved in order to qualify for that love, or the love or admiration of others (Morrigan 2017: 66). The same set of criteria for self-worth apply in the context of any system or organisation, including the Church, of which a person becomes a part in later life.

Mature faith, and the prayer that comes with it, affirms a person's worth over and against any system or organisation which fails to properly deploy, and thereby honour, the gifts of those who serve it. When the system fails them, the cross remains. The cross represents a state of lived equilibrium in regard to the past and to the needs which the past has generated for a person in any given present context or situation. This is the truth that sets a person free from the need for status or recognition (Jn. 8:32). Seen in this way, its implication for the life of the institutional Church is enormous. But what is of significance in the context of this discussion is the liberating truth from which we learn to pray our individual lives, both past and present.

From this place of equilibrium in regard to whatever abuse we may have suffered, we begin to learn acceptance of what has happened to us without the need for retribution or the inner

rage that fuels it. We can only accept when we are allowed to own and lament before God the truth about how we have been wronged. Acceptance also involves trusting in God's ultimate justice in regard to those who have hurt us, not that they will be punished, or receive their just deserts, but that they are known and understood by God, even as we ourselves are known and understood. This is about as near as most of us can get to forgiving our childhood abusers, so it is important to accept our own limitations in this frequently misunderstood area of the healing process. Forgiveness takes a lifetime to learn because it requires that we first accept that we are fundamentally good and that we deserve to be loved. Prayer learned through the cross of early suffering, and through all the untruthfulness about ourselves that our suffering may have fed us, is a living out of the mystery of unlimited Divine forgiveness in God's honouring of what has been dishonoured in us and in our lives.

References

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