

“I haven’t told anyone else about this yet . . . ”

I have become the holder of many confidences. Musings, plans, ideas, and challenges from a variety of people I care deeply for have been laid trustingly in my hands over the past several years. I find this both humbling and surprising; who am I that these people give me such a gift of trust?

When I interviewed and was hired as Family Minister, pastoral care was not on the job description. Well, not beyond such fun as visiting families with a new baby. Understand that even in my 40’s I still struggle to think of myself as an adult; this is either the reason for or the result of a career working with children and youth! So how anyone can turn to me with something so important is still a bit mysterious on my side.

Comforting a parent or child in obvious distress? Well that goes without saying. But having something of value to offer a wide variety of friends and parishioners . . . I hadn’t recognized that in myself a few years ago.

So when a mom told me her youth daughter had become severely challenging at home, I wanted to plead; “But your kids are older than mine . . . you’ve been parenting longer than I have . . . you’re MY role model when it comes to raising boys! *How* can you trust anything I have to say?!”

Obviously I didn’t say that. Instead I thought back to every workshop, article, and conversation I’ve ever had about active listening, took a deep breath, and met with the teenager and her parents – separately. I heard the same stories from across a great chasm of different understandings. I heard broiling anger and mistrust from both sides of a relationship I’d always admired. I saw where each party’s words and actions left gaping wounds to the other’s psyche.

And yes, I wanted to tell them each off, in one way or another. I wanted to ask “Why on earth are you treating your loved one this way?” To shake their shoulders and make them see how their need to be in the right was a terrible and potentially permanent wrong.

Obviously I didn’t do that, either. It was hard; these are people I’ve known and loved for years, and I saw huge mistakes and damage on each side. I gave myself permission to speak *only* if I needed clarification or to paraphrase what they’d already said; to acknowledge the pain and hurt and frustration without laying blame. I learned that keeping still instead of

filling the air with my words led them to reflect and even analyze their own behaviors, and to begin to acknowledge possible wrongdoing on their own side.

Then I got each party’s permission to speak with the other. In those meetings, it was critical to keep myself and my interpretations out of the conversation, telling them only what I’d been given permission to tell. I also said that I felt professional counseling would be beneficial for all of them, and that while I was happy to keep meeting with them, I don’t have the training or skills I thought their situation required. The last thing I wanted was to take their trust and do damage through any amateurish attempt at family counseling. I offered to get some referrals through a friend.

In the meantime, the parents themselves recommended that I continue meeting with their daughter, with whom I am very close. They agreed to step back, understanding their child’s need to feel that I was on her ‘side.’ I felt deeply touched not only by their trust in me as their daughter’s confidante, but also in their willingness to step back for her benefit.

This all culminated a little more than a year ago. There were tearful calls and texts from the teen several times, and one evening I found myself going back and forth from her cell phone to her parents’, talking them all through a particularly volatile situation.

Because this all involved a minor, I documented everything. I went to my rector to share the basics of the situation with him. I’ve kept records of the texts exchanged between the teen and myself. Counseling helped them learn to communicate in a new way as the child grows into adulthood, and they are thriving as a family.

So anytime a conversation begins with, “I haven’t told anyone else about this yet,” I take a deep breathe and remind myself that somehow, through God’s grace, I am worthy of this confidence and will do all I can to support the person in whatever change or challenge is happening. And I pray, in thanks for the trust these people are placing in me, and in supplication for wisdom and courage. Then I listen.

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