

Termination: Saying Goodbye in Clinical Pastoral Education Groups

Jeffery M. Silberman

Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) Certified Educators (CEs) are familiar with the stages of group development. In 1965, psychologist Bruce Tuckman posited that teams go through five stages of development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.¹ Somewhat surprisingly, a search of the literature on endings of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) groups offered nothing to help in understanding and acting on observations of these stages, both personally and professionally.² According to Tuckman's framework, each stage plays a part in building and ending a high-functioning team. These stages start from the time that a group first meets until its program ends.³ In CPE, this pattern has often been used to chart paths of group development during a typical CPE unit.

Most group theories recognize a final stage, like Tuckman's term adjourning, as a normal last phase for all groups. Generally, we understand this to be the time in which the program or groups end, but it is often not seriously addressed by CEs except as the unit's final Covenant Group/Interpersonal Relations Group (IPR). A major reason is that it takes a great deal of energy and intentionality to do it well. Many CEs devote little time to the last stage. There are a variety of reasons for this, not the least of which is

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how emotionally demanding it is to implement a structured ending or ad-journing process, i.e., saying goodbye.

The purpose of this essay is to explore dimensions of termination, to demonstrate an effective model of saying goodbye, and to discuss aspects of the dynamic that make it difficult, if not one of the most challenging aspects of CPE, for both students and CEs.

The use in this essay of the word “termination” needs to be introduced. When proposed to students, this term most commonly is associated with death. Intentionally, it gives listeners pause, as termination seems an overly serious and intense expression. My goal is to communicate a focused meaning—dealing with loss and endings in relationships through a variety of means and the rituals associated with those events and feelings. An obvious implication is that the word “termination” conveys the very real difficulties in being explicit about how this process feels.

Surely, it would be more acceptable and less intense to use any of a variety of other phrases. For example, *leave-taking*, which commonly means the process or ritual associated with ending of a relationship, or *saying goodbye*, the formal expressions around leave-taking, or *closure*. Through another lens, this process involves *loss*, *grief*, and *mourning*, that is, the emotional experiences that any kind of ending evokes.

Experience clearly affirms that termination as a task for the group is demanding and is often given short shrift in CPE, as reported by many students who trained in various CPE programs. This is by virtue of several significant assumptions about termination, which include the following. Most people do not want or like to say goodbye. Most people want to avoid the pain of leave-taking and attempt to avoid it through a variety of means. Most people struggle to deal with the implications of loss. The feelings associated with goodbyes are generally unpleasant and thus are regularly avoided. No one likes to be left behind when a relationship is ending. Most people have little, if any, training in how to say goodbye. These assumptions point to the arduous nature of actually engaging the group in this task of termination. CEs do not want to do it, and neither do students, congregants, or virtually anyone else. Yet, to function effectively as group leaders, CEs must understand and master some tools for processing termination.

1

Congregation clergy regularly encounter situations of termination related to death and dying. Typical expectations are that we know exactly what to do and what to say. We are supposed to know how to die, how to let go, and how to grieve intuitively, if not by training. Other expectations regarding death and loss include the expectations that clergy know all of the appropriate facts about funeral directors, cremations, cemeteries, donating one's body to science, coffins, etc.; clergy know the right things to do religiously (from rituals to "superstitions"); clergy know the proper words of comfort, both formal (in eulogies and memorial services) and informal (during shiva, home visits, etc.); and clergy help to facilitate appropriate family communications when loved ones are dying. And why should we not know all of these things? After all, this is what clergy in congregations, churches, synagogues, masjids, and temples do.

At the same time, numerous other termination situations demonstrate what clergy must also address on a regular basis. This list offers some examples:

- divorce, separation
- changing family configurations
- vocational changes (e.g., loss of jobs)
- adoption (e.g., loss of ability to have one's own child)
- empty nest syndrome
- moving (e.g., losses connected to moving, loss of neighbors)
- career changes (e.g., retirement)
- loss of standard of living
- accidents/injuries (loss of limb or abilities or freedom)
- loss of abilities (e.g., through medical problems)
- aging (loss of youth or independence)
- loss of control (e.g., in legal battles)
- loss (death) of friends
- hidden losses (being disenfranchised)
- restrictions due to COVID-19
- miscarriages (e.g., spontaneous or death of a fetus)
- loss of status in family, such as loss of parenthood or grandparenthood

Broadly defined, dealing with termination (loss, change, transition, etc.) can be seen as the major task for congregational clergy. In particular, in the context of COVID-19 and the associated social restrictions, clergy are confronted with a continuous dynamic of loss.

2

As already mentioned, termination generates *many different feelings* in each person. Most of these feelings are uncomfortable or painful.⁴ To complicate matters, for most people there is not just one feeling but a mixture of various feelings that may shift and change quickly as people often experience more than one feeling at the same time. Sometimes these feelings are contradictory. Sometimes these feelings make no sense. While, most commonly, feelings related to termination are painful and unpleasant, feelings of relief or happiness are also not unusual. This can make for an especially confusing situation to those who have not considered the powerful nature of feelings and their impact. Even at the time of a death, while we expect people simply to be sad, that is only one of a myriad of possibilities. When my father died twenty years ago, he lost all ability to care for himself and was in tremendous continual pain. It became necessary for me or for nurses to help him do virtually everything, including eating and urinating. When he eventually died, I felt both sadness and relief that he was no longer in terrible pain. It is not hard to understand why people seek to avoid these distressing feelings.

Consider how one's feelings about death and loss often are based upon messages given in one's family about loss and death. Think about the messages you received in your family. How did your family talk or not talk about death? What was whispered when someone you knew was dying? What losses or deaths were hidden from you as a child? Were children allowed to go the funeral home or to the cemetery? What feelings were permitted? What feelings were shunned or prohibited?

In a sense, remembering one's own history helps to identify the wide range of feelings around loss and death. Characteristic emotions include sadness, loss, anger, fear, betrayal, emptiness, alienation, relief, abandonment, shame, guilt, ambivalence, and regret, among many others.

Yet most techniques people develop or adopt for saying goodbye are really ways of *avoiding feelings*. Associated with loss and leave-taking, two

primary strategies surface to avoid unpleasant feelings arising in termination. One is to generally avoid the feelings altogether, in essence, to actively do something that sidesteps any manifestation of emotional involvement. The second strategy is when we try but “miss the mark.” In context, this means that we do something we believe fulfills the task of saying goodbye but in fact is often just another way of avoiding feelings. With either approach, we do not really engage the process of saying goodbye. Some strategies actually fall into both categories.

Consider again how you have said goodbye to those people important to you. In leaving one congregation as an assistant rabbi, I found a way to pick a fight with the senior rabbi. Truthfully, it was a shared issue due to our personal limitations in saying goodbye. The bottom line was that we fought, our relationship ended very poorly, and, sadly, it was never resolved.

Over the years, my students have repeatedly acted out their torment with termination. Some ways they used to avoid the feelings of saying goodbye included:

- not showing up, being absent without an excuse
- disappearing; sneaking out without saying anything
- getting drunk, getting high, overcelebrating in some way
- picking a fight at or near the end
- getting angry about the past/past hurts/actions, etc.
- denying the significance of the person, job, setting
- promising to write, call, visit, see
- making lame excuses for not being there
- getting sick or having an accident or a medical appointment
- making future plans (focusing away from the present)
- being the last to leave (in effect, taking no responsibility to do anything)

As noted, certain ways in which we try to say goodbye, in which we *make an effort*, do not really engage the process. Instead, we merely skim the surface of feelings. When we do this, we are not fully experiencing our feelings or engaging the termination process. Many efforts of CPE students illustrate “not quite” dealing with termination, such as

- waiting until the last possible minute to do it
- crying excessively (which involves grieving old losses, not the current one)
- writing a note or letter (rather than speaking face to face)

- leaving something (e.g., cookies) for the other person, with a note
- buying a present (with the intent to represent one's feelings)
- promising to get together soon or to call, write, or visit (e.g., making a list of phone numbers or email addresses)
- standing in the doorway as you say goodbye ("doorknob goodbye")
- having a large party in which nothing personal is said
- when speaking, lumping people together in a group (as opposed to being personal and specific)
- physically holding on to one another (not wanting to let go)
- having sexual relations
- offering generalizations (which again do not speak to the personal relationship)

3

Forgotten, or at least somewhat discounted, is how termination impacts CEs as much as CPE students. Based on frequent informal comments, one reason that CEs devote little time to or interest in termination is because of the emotional and practical onus that saying goodbye places on them. The work of termination requires CEs to exert much personal energy. My pattern at the end of an intense ten-week summer CPE session typically involved getting cranky and depressed.

Not only do CEs have to observe what is going on with the students, CEs also have to name it in a way that will be instructive to students. Recall that this engaging termination is a novel process for most students. They do not know the "how's" and "why's" of saying goodbye. Often, they want to run away from or ignore it. These tendencies compound the burden on CEs to make goodbyes explicit, both so the students get it and also to teach about termination so that they can use what they have learned in other settings.

Furthermore, CEs are required to monitor their own feelings and reactions to the process. CEs must identify the first signs of termination appearing in the words and deeds of students, whenever they occur. CEs carry the responsibility to be intentional about naming what is happening in the group that reflects the challenges of termination. Even recognizing behavior as related to termination can flummox the CE (refer to the examples above).

Yet, CEs are members of the group and therefore will experience feelings about ending the program and the pending departure of the students. In fact, CEs may have, in some ways, a harder time dealing with termination as it occurs, over and over, three (or more) times a year, with each CPE unit. Many CEs report exhaustion at the end of CPE programs. Every year brings a new set of students and new obligations to address and teach termination. Seeing this dynamic in hindsight is easier than while in the midst of it. For example, when I misidentify avoidance, it often comes back in the form of student anger about what I did not do right.

4

What makes for an effective termination is an amalgam of simple ideas taught in CPE as basic spiritual care. These suggested guidelines reflect practices of authenticity, honesty, and self-awareness. Using this list can be helpful in consolidating one's own concepts and thoughts about acknowledging loss, dealing with death, and saying goodbye to others in life. These concepts help make termination a more emotionally satisfying experience. Giving this framework to group members helps guide them to effectively engage termination.

The basic principles of "successful" termination are as follows:

1. First of all, termination is a process and not an event. This is a critical understanding that many people overlook. Yet, thinking about termination in this way not only improves engagement in the process but also helps people feel less of a burden than having to do it in a single effort.
2. Furthermore, all termination is necessarily incomplete. This is a logical corollary to the first point. It means, among other things, that no one can do it perfectly. The goal is to do as good a job as possible, not to get it perfect.
3. Expressing anger/or love (and any other feelings that one experiences) are essential aspects of termination and both normal and appropriate. Termination work is about feelings.
4. Be as specific as possible (i.e., avoid generalities). That is, when speaking to someone, naming what is unique about that person (over against words that could describe *any person* or relationship) is paramount. By contrast, when one talks to the group, it almost necessarily becomes general.
5. Authentic goodbyes reflect both positives and difficulties in relationships. Every significant relationship incorporates both good and bad.

6. As much as possible, goodbyes should be mutual. Both parties need to be involved and to share with one another. Herein lies the problematic aspect of talking to a group. It is hard to be mutual with a group over against an individual.
7. Each person comes to an acceptance of termination in their own time. Some people take longer than others in terms of when they are ready to say goodbye. Thus, think again of termination as a process, not an event.
8. Each person needs their own time frame in which to say goodbye. Consider how to create enough space for people to say all that they need to say. Strive not to be rushed.
9. Attempt to make termination as authentic as possible. Try to be real with the other person. If you are not honest, others will know and so will you.
10. Goodbyes may include apologies. But generally, it is not helpful to dwell on past mistakes.
11. You may clarify any assumptions that you may have had about the other person.

5

Using various images can assist in engaging emotions around termination, such as by concretizing termination. Metaphors can create tools to teach and communicate the process in ways that derive from familiar ideas.

One strategy is to consider how religious traditions and rituals give us models for termination. For example, clergy might add a unique dimension of the process by identifying the blessing of termination. For example:

It is a blessing that we have known this person, that we have had time together with that person, that we have shared something in common, that we have cared about one another, that we have noticed this person and been noticed ourselves.

Consider in what ways you bless someone in your faith tradition. This conceptual model might yield other language, rituals, or practices that will aid in successfully following through on termination.

6

In approaching the end of a CPE unit, CEs might ask questions about students' prior experiences with saying goodbye. How have they helped others (e.g., congregants, parishioners, colleagues) to say goodbye? How do

they teach others in their community to say goodbye? What kind of things do they say?

Using structured questions can be another strategy to practice the principles of successful termination. As a CPE group begins to understand termination as a process, these questions may assist students who are preparing to say goodbye to one another.

- What were your first impressions of this person?
- When did these first impressions change, and how?
- Is there a specific time and place when you can remember feeling a deeper connection with this person?
- If this person is a staff member, did they do anything that helped you feel welcome on the unit? Did they do anything that helped you feel part of the team?
- Were there any interactions with this person that were particularly meaningful? What were they? Why were they meaningful?
- Were there times when you felt particularly close to this person? When? What were the circumstances?
- Were there times when you felt distant from this person? When? What were the circumstances?
- What was something that this person did that surprised you? What did you do that you think surprised them?
- Were there times when you struggled with this person? What about? What moments do you remember as part of the struggle?
- What gifts have you received from this person (or what have you held from or for this person)? These can be tangible things, or they can be emotions. They could be negative (I held your negative judgment of me). They could be positive (I felt warmed by your positive regard and your statements about my being competent with patients).
- Is there anything that you've received or held that you want to give back? If so, what, and why? What do you want to keep?
- What gifts have you given this person? What was meaningful about giving them for you? Are there any gifts you have given them that you want back (e.g., if someone held your anger, do you want your anger back)?
- What is special about this person?
- What do you want to remember about this person?
- What do you want to hold on to about yourself that has arisen from having been in relationship with this person?

- Is there anything unresolved in your relationship that you would like to acknowledge?
- Is there anything you want from this person before you part?⁵

7

Before going any further, I return briefly to the role of clergy and termination. A key understanding about clergy is that they have an important and huge symbolic presence. In the congregation (e.g., church, masjid, or synagogue), this symbolic role may perhaps be less powerful today than in the past. This may be related to the fact that clergy do not have the exalted status they had in prior generations. Clergy today in many ways are just like everyone else. Many years ago, in Boston, if you put a “clergy” parking sign in your car, the police never wrote you a ticket, in deference to Roman Catholic priests. Nowadays, one almost never sees “clergy” signs in Massachusetts or in New York or anywhere else.

Yet some community people still hold clergy in very high esteem. In particular, in hospitals where issues of life and death abound, the symbolic presence of clergy remains significant. That significance becomes more concrete when the chaplain (as clergy) leaves. Hospital staff are largely a very religious group, irrespective of whether they attend weekly services or mass, and they experience this loss acutely.

By comparison, consider what it means when clergy leave the church, synagogue, or masjid. How do members react? What emotional impact falls upon those served by clergy when clergy leave? Sometimes, the departure of the pastor sends the congregation into chaos. People feel abandoned or rejected. Other people may express feeling relief or are even happy that the rabbi is leaving. Because of many factors, termination in a congregation can be a confusing and challenging time. Questions arise, such as, How has the clergy been a part of their lives? How have people related to the clergy? What expectations are there regarding the future? Typically, clergy leaving is a challenging time for all concerned. Depending on the structure and decisions of religious hierarchy, clergy themselves often struggle when leaving a community.

When CPE students leave the hospital, many of these same dynamics occur. Chaplain interns can often represent a very important symbolic presence on the clinical units. This usually is very hard for CPE students to rec-

ognize and appreciate. Their self-perception is that they barely have been noticed by staff. Yet, to staff, they are present when codes are called, when patients die, when families deal with trauma, when a staff person struggles personally. CPE students, in the role of chaplain, can be a source of reassurance and hope. More specifically, the chaplain can represent God being present. For some staff members, the student chaplain can further represent church/synagogue/masjid, a community of faith. The CPE students' embodiment of the role can evoke in others previous clergy relationships and the joy, trust, anger, and pain that those older relationships represented. These emotional links are especially true for religious clinical staff, who may perceive chaplain interns as more consequential to healing and wholeness than the chaplain interns' own perception. Therefore, the practical side of a chaplain's leaving must include a consideration of how others will experience the chaplain leaving. Further, intentionality regarding the chaplains' termination is required. Clinical staff and others benefit from help in recognizing and acknowledging the chaplain termination. What does it mean to clinical and hospital staff when the chaplain leaves? If all this is true, then on some level it affects people profoundly. It may remind them of other losses. It may cause feelings of abandonment. It may seem that chaplains do not care anymore about them. In the end, it demands that termination be deliberate.

What can chaplains do to facilitate their departure at the end of a CPE unit?

First, it requires that they be purposeful about the process. Understand that chaplains serve as a role model in enacting termination. Chaplains have both an opportunity and an obligation to teach staff about saying goodbye. In order to do this, chaplains must recognize what it means to self as well as to the other. This, of course, echoes what it means to provide spiritual care to patients and families.

Not surprisingly, students benefit from having some directive priorities for saying goodbye. Usually, the following formula helps. Begin with professional staff with whom you worked. This includes primarily nurses, physicians, social workers, and others. The assumption here is that these are people with whom you have developed a collegial relationship. Therefore, treat them that way, as colleagues.

Next, identify other staff with whom you have been close. This covers a wide range of hospital employees. From security guards to front desk re-

ceptionists to business associates, these are the people with whom you have spoken and, often, befriended socially during the program.

Last is all other staff that you have been with or seen on the unit. This can be, for example, housekeeping or cafeteria staff. These folks are frequently neglected by professional staff. For chaplains to intentionally acknowledge them in saying goodbye can be profoundly impactful. Making an effort to recognize these team members in specific terms carries a weight that one can only imagine.

When enacting the termination process, CPE students are surprised when a staff person at any level shares more of their own story with the chaplain intern. They even may be apologetic when telling the chaplain how during a personal family difficulty they have felt chaplains to be a supportive presence. This unexpected confession during termination proves the high value of chaplains' symbolic presence to staff.

One last practical suggestion for CPE students is relevant. When directed to utilize the above structure with staff, several complications arise. Once students tell staff that they are leaving, the initial phase of termination, some staff disappear, seemingly invisible on the floor. Even mentioning goodbye can prompt staff to avoid further contact with the chaplain intern. Therefore, students should make a request of staff using the following formula: "Since I will be leaving in three weeks [be specific], I would appreciate the chance to get feedback about how you have seen me and my work during this time. Would you be willing to sit down for a few minutes next week [be specific] to talk about how you have observed my work?" When staff members agree, it becomes an opportunity for students to tell the person what they appreciate about their experience as well. In other words, it implicitly creates an opening to tell staff goodbye, to terminate.

8

Termination in the peer group is understood by CEs to be an essential part of the program. Yet, many CEs do not devote adequate energy and attention to it. Often, they leave saying goodbye to the last day. Clearly, groups spend a great deal of time together and grow close to one another. That much is obvious. Now, all are losing this group. It is more than merely leaving one another and the program. All will no longer have this time (interpersonal relations group, covenant group, or small process group) to-

gether and will not be with these people in the same way anymore. One possible characterization, that “this group as a group is dying,” generally gets students’ attention. The intended message is, “Take this seriously; it is real.” Your interpersonal relationships with one another grew significant during this program. Even though the work of termination is hard, we must be resolute about doing it. If we are not, we miss the opportunity to use this experience for growth and learning.

Posing questions to the students in the early stages of termination prompts appropriate reflection. Why is saying goodbye in the peer group important? How should the group deal with saying goodbye? What about those who will remain in contact with one another? Do they need to say goodbye? My hope is that these questions prompt students to consider how they want to say goodbye and the mechanism they want to use. For example, will each person say goodbye to everyone during one session? Or, will they each say goodbye to one person and then move on to the next person? These considerations recall how and what they have said in the past within a similar small group setting. The answers are not as critical as the process.

Pragmatic questions also shape these decisions about termination. How much time is necessary to say goodbye? Does everyone, including the CE, have to speak? Are students’ comments in their final evaluations sufficient to address their peers? Written evaluations alone are inadequate as they merely touch upon the highlights of the time together and do not really speak to their personal feelings of one another.

In sum, starting early and creating opportunities to intentionally address termination is key to an effective termination process. This principal reflects my purpose in this essay and the formal and informal structures proposed.

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NOTES

- 1 Bruce W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965): 384–99. Tuckman's original paper had four stages of groups. He and doctoral student Mary Ann Jensen later added adjourning as the final stage, also known as mourning. See Bruce W. Tuckman and Mary Ann C. Jensen, "Stages of Small-Group Development Revisited," *Group and Organization Studies* 2, no. 4 (1977): 519–27.
- 2 Various articles in the group psychotherapy literature deal with saying goodbye, yet none directly address the subject in Clinical Pastoral Education. Although these articles address aspects of the issue, the context is very different from a CPE group. See Nina D. Fieldsteel, "When the Therapist Says Goodbye," *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 55, no. 2 (2005): 245–79; Walter N. Stone, "Saying Goodbye: Exploring Attachments as a Therapist Leaves a Group of Chronically Ill Persons," *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 55, no. 2 (2005): 281–303. In addition, other articles look at termination through the lens of psychoanalysis. For example, see Dina Wardi, "The Termination Phase in the Group Process," *Group Analysis* 22, no. 1 (1989): 87–98.
- 3 Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups."
- 4 In CPE, it is generally understood that feelings simply are, with no value judgment imposed. Yet, in common parlance, the words positive or negative and good or bad are used to describe feelings. I prefer to describe these feelings with terms like pleasant or unpleasant and agreeable or disagreeable.
- 5 These questions were originally formulated by ACPE CE Daniel David Klipper when he was a supervisory education student many years ago. These questions were edited by other students over time, and I am grateful to all who contributed.

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