

Fear as a Dynamic in Supervision

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We live in many contexts of fear. Ordinary dimensions of being human, like death, suffering, and hardships, frighten us. The nightly news or the television barrage of dramas about crime and violence generate fear. At the same time, fear is used to sell products, services, or the latest drug for an ailment we did not even know we had until we heard the “public health alert” announced by a serious looking physician. Even for causes that should not lack public attention, like global warming or the unseen risk of terrorism, we use fear to motivate political action by scaring ourselves to death.

In this social context of fear, students come to supervision with specific fears of their own. Some students come from social and economic contexts where fear is constant because violence and lethal crime are common. Other people seeking supervision are ministering in clinical settings like prisons in which fear is a pervasive clinical dynamic. Still others come to supervision with personal histories of having been verbally or sexually abused as a child or as an adult. Others have served with the military or

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ministered to returning war veterans, for whom trauma is the prevailing diagnosis.

All these fears surround and permeate the supervisory hour. Individuals bring their own particular "fear history" to the supervisory conversation. The response of supervisors to these personal instances of fear will be determined by the supervisor's own fear history, their philosophy of supervision, and the organizational context in which the supervisory relationship occurs. How the dynamic of fear is handled is of vital importance if the supervision is to be effective and facilitate the student's growth.

This essay will explore the dynamic of fear that the student (and/or supervisor) brings into the supervisory process. Fear is more concrete or specific than anxiety, which tends to be free-floating. Fear also has a history. One fears that something specific will happen or happen again because of what has happened in the past. When we are anxious, we are nervous about the future or about what might happen. When fearful, we are afraid because of what has already happened. That fear may come from the student's family of origin or from the social-economic context. In any case, fear comes as baggage from the past, created somewhere else, but brought into the supervisory process.

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

In the 1960s, when I first entered clinical training, the prevailing assumption seemed to be that students had to be "broken down" before they could truly be open enough to learn. Students in supervision were exposed, stripped of their defenses, even embarrassed in the hope that they would fall to their knees and be more open and available. I never fell to my knees, but then I am a Calvinist. We do not fall on our knees. We just become deeply shamed at the prospect of not being good enough. No matter what I did to try to please my supervisor, it was met with the challenge to be more "real." My efforts to be vulnerable and real were met with scorn and humiliation. In the end, CPE was not a safe place for me. My fear history was reinforced and enlarged. Fear can immobilize us. Fear can also make us angry. Supervision made me angry a lot in those days.

Years later, as a new graduate student, I entered clinical supervision again, this time as a pastoral counseling student. I recall so well the first few times I took my audio recording of my counseling sessions to my super-

visor's office, the distinguished Howard Clinebell Jr. He would listen patiently to a portion of my tape, ask questions about what I thought I was doing at various segments, reflect back some alternative approaches, and then expound at length on a principle illustrated so well, either in the negative or the positive by my tape. I felt vulnerable and defenseless, stripped of the verbal tools with which I could explain myself. I was, on occasion, literally speechless.

Early on, Dr. Clinebell suggested that I participate in group supervision, adding fear upon fear. My peers, I feared, would see how incompetent I was. My vulnerability was not just limited to the supervisor's office or the group experience; it was also in the counseling office itself in the form of that "damn tape recorder," sitting on the desk next to my client. I felt like I was being watched, monitored, and spied on from afar. Big Brother Clinebell was watching like an unseen ghost in the counseling room. To make matters worse, on occasion the tape recorder would not work properly or the quality of the audiotape was so poor that Dr. Clinebell would look serious and say, "I really cannot help you, Scott, unless the tape is clearer." I began to fear supervision.

Was fear a motivator? It was for me. I did not want to be humiliated again. I checked and double-checked the tape recorder. I listened to my tapes in advance of supervision. I knew my work was not perfect, but at least I would know what it was. I was more comfortable in supervision because I was able to explain myself verbally, or at least recognize the issues present in the tape. And over time, I came to realize that much of my fear did not come first from the supervisory relationship as it came from within me, in my fear history, a history associated with being rejected, criticized, and/or with not fulfilling my own high expectations. In time, I came to enjoy supervision, to be more "growth motivated," to use Clinebell's term, and less "fear motivated," but it took a while for me to trust the process and trust the relationship.

Fear immobilizes and fear motivates. Why was my fear immobilizing in one context and motivating in another? Because I believe that fear has a threshold. Up to a certain point, fear, regardless of its origins, can motivate. Beyond that point, fear immobilizes us, inhibits learning, and impedes growth. Fear is not always a bad thing. Fear is part of the human condition, both collectively and individually. The challenge in supervision is to find that threshold and keep fear on the side of motivation and growth.

POWER DIFFERENTIALS AND FEAR IN SUPERVISION

One of the things we have learned from a new awareness of harassment dynamics in the workplace is that a power differential is part of all supervisory relationships. Power differentials derive from the fact that the supervisor (professor or director) has power over the student/trainee in the form of grades, evaluations, and/or recommendations. The supervisor is a gatekeeper, preventing or allowing students to enter a desired status or profession. Power differentials are further complicated by gender, race, and ethnic differences. The supervisor's power is not just legal or institutional in nature. The supervisor's power is also psychological. It is the power to influence, the power to persuade, the power to control, but it is also the power to hurt another person emotionally. Supervisory relationships include all these power dynamics.

Power differentials are inherent in supervisory relationships and therefore a common source of fear. The fear may be overt and used intentionally by the supervisor. Or the fear may be subtle, like an unconscious fear of displeasing one's respected mentor. Those who are motivated by achievement may seek to determine what the teacher wants and provide it in order to earn grades or approval. Such psychological preferences feed and color the power differential.

Fear may also run in the other direction. Supervisors may fear or at least be uncomfortable with the dynamics of the power differential. Some supervisors do not wear the mantle of power easily or comfortably. Moreover, supervisors may fear students as much as students fear supervisors. Or to put it another way, supervisors may fear the supervisory process as much as students fear the supervisory process. An authentic supervisory process tends to expose all parties, make all vulnerable, break open issues on both sides. Because fear breeds fear, the unconscious fear of the supervisor is transmitted to the student and vice versa. Fear has a life of its own.

David was an enthusiastic and energetic supervisor until just after he returned from a holiday visit with his parents. It seemed like David withdrew from the process of supervision. The more David withdrew, the harder the supervisor worked. In the year-end evaluation period, Chaplain Johns put it this way. "It seemed like I was working harder at your supervision than you were. What was that about?" They discovered together that as David disengaged from the process, fearful of ever-increasing vulnerability, Chaplain Johns felt rejected and tried har-

der to win back his student lest he fail as a supervisor-in-training. Fear is like that. It is infectious and cyclical, often feeding off itself.

Given the reality of power differentials in all supervisory relationships, it is appropriate to ask whether the abuse of power in pastoral supervision could be a form of harassment. By definition, harassment in the workplace involves a supervisor repeatedly making belittling, degrading, critical, and humiliating remarks to an employee or about an employee's work, appearance, or behavior. Harassment also occurs when a supervisor allows or condones the creation of a "hostile work environment." Might some pastoral supervisors be understood as abusive by contemporary standards of the work place? Might some supervisory styles create hostile work environments and therein be defined as a type of harassment?

Janet came into supervision announcing that her personal therapist had diagnosed her as suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. That was not a surprise. I had guessed as much from observing some of her cautious behaviors around me. What did surprise me, however, was that Janet announced in our first supervisory hour that her PTSD originated from previous supervision. As Janet described it, she often left her former supervisor's office in tears, convinced she could do nothing right. Her supervisor was devoted to a particular school of therapy, imposed that perspective on all of her students, and required compliance. Janet's previous supervisor had misused the power differential.

Most supervisors, however, are not prone to harassing styles of supervision. In fact, most supervisors would like to be perceived as humanistic and egalitarian, without the power differential. They would rather not badger and harass students into learning. Most supervisors would rather be growth motivators, not fear motivators. Supervisors who have tried to ignore the power differential over the years have discovered that it does not work very well.

Dr. Gunderson's supervision style was to be co-equals with his supervisees. Many of his supervisees were second career ministerial students, who deserved, in his mind, to be treated as professional more so than students. Dr. Gunderson often invited his supervisees to co-lead workshops, treat course requirements as optional, and to invite the mutual disclosure of personal information in the spirit of embracing their common humanity. His model worked often enough until one graduate student received what she believed was a poor evaluation. The student made a formal complaint to the Dean, expressing shock at this

apparent reversal of Dr. Gunderson's estimate of her, suggesting that maybe he had some personal problems the Dean needed to look into.

Even if supervisors deny the power deferential, most students never do; and in the end our denial will come back to hurt us, our students, and the supervisory work. The reality is this: there is a power deferential in all supervisory relationships. It is inherent in all supervision. Supervisors do hold power, psychological as well as professional power, over those who we train and teach. It would be irresponsible to pretend otherwise, just as it would be irresponsible to use our authority in abusive ways. One of the other implications of viewing supervision from the perspective of the modern workplace is the importance of creating a safe place for supervisees. For students with a personal 'fear history' involving boundary violations, harassment and/or abuse, creating a trustful, safe place is essential in the forming a new supervisory relationship.

It is important that supervisors anticipate fear as a dynamic in supervision, and act accordingly to clarify roles and define professional boundaries at the start of supervision in ways that will help to reduce anxiety in both supervisee and supervisor. Talking about the power issues is also very helpful, particularly as those power issues surface in the grading and evaluating process. To feel safe, supervisees with fear histories need to know clearly how they will be evaluated, by what criteria, and what role they will have in that process. A frank and open conversation about these topics goes a long way to help supervisees who have been victims of boundary violations or workplace harassment feel safe, and thereby work productively in supervision.

VARIABLES IN SUPERVISION STYLES

If fear is inevitably present in supervision, by virtue of our fear histories and by virtue of the nature of supervision, how do we use fear and not be used by it? What are the variables that affect students' ability to transform fear into positive motivation?

One of the variables is the supervisor's own need to feel and be perceived as superior. When supervisors have a need to be right or have their self-importance reinforced, they create a hero or guru-like supervisor-supervisee relationship. It is a condition or a temptation that comes with the territory, to think ourselves more important than we are by virtue of our

title, position, or authority. Such supervisors often twist and turn supervisory conversations into subtle power games to determine who is right, who has the most therapeutic work yet to do, who is most authentic. Even when supervisors approach their task in more collegial, growth oriented, and vulnerable ways, a delicate balance is necessary so as not to deny the essential nature of power. The supervisor's ability to use power constructively and transform fear into a constructive force is largely related to his or her own psychological needs.

Another set of variables is the teaching-learning model employed by the supervisor or the institution where supervision occurs. One model of teaching-learning could be characterized as "the expert model." Supervisors are seen as wise and experienced experts from whom the students must learn a clear body of knowledge and a particular way of working with people. In the expert model there are "right answers" and a right (and wrong) way of doing therapy or ministry. This model of teaching-learning is common among supervisors who are devoted to a particular school of therapy or philosophy of education. It often leads to a question and answer mode of learning. Because supervisors generally do have more experience and knowledge than most of their supervisees, it is easy to fall into this pattern. Because the expert model of teaching and learning is more hierarchical in nature, and tends to be more evaluative and exacting, fear is more likely a dynamic in supervision.

In the initial supervisory sessions, Han took notes feverishly. Every word I uttered was preserved in his ever-enlarging notebook. Han seldom looked directly at me. His deferential note taking lured me into expounding on a particular differential diagnosis and its theological implications. In the fifth session, I addressed the note taking directly, and the implied expert model. "What do you think about this case?" I asked. This changed the relationship from a monologue to a dialogue. Because Han was of a different culture, I became the student to his expertise. I invited him to teach me what it was like to do counseling in a Korean context. Gradually, his note taking decreased and mine increased.

An alternative to this expert model is a more mutual, egalitarian, and democratic model of teaching and learning. A co-learner model is more likely to be found in contexts that teach the therapeutic arts as opposed to the hard sciences. In this model, the student is empowered to be a self learner, to think more independently, to experiment and take risks, and to

become motivated by a love of learning instead of by a fear of failure. It is a model that encourages creativity and spontaneity.

The real issue, of course, should not be what teaching-learning model the supervisor prefers, but how best do supervisees learn? Which model of teaching-learning works best with which students? And which model of teaching-learning is most suitable to the subtle subject area of pastoral counseling, pastoral care, or spiritual direction? Becoming a theologian requires a different kind of learning than learning to be a spiritual director. Learning to do pastoral care work may require a different mode of learning than learning to preach effectively. How we tailor our teaching-learning style begins with a focus on the student and, secondly, attends to the nature of the subject being taught or learned. The teaching-learning model also has implications for the role of fear in the process.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES AND FEAR

Fear has a systemic dimension. The organizational context in which supervision occurs influences the nature of the supervision and the role of fear in that supervisory relationship. Fear, even if it originates in just one person, can permeate a human system, especially if that one person is the group's recognized emotional or designated leader. Fear has a way of infecting the culture of organizations of any size.

Every organization, large or small, has a culture, an unspoken set of values and norms and an emotional atmosphere. The culture of the organization influences the kind of supervision and training that occurs within that organization. Organizations with a "scarcity of resources" mentality are vulnerable to competition and turf battles. There is often intense pressure to be productive and accountable. The demand for greater and greater documentation, to the point that staff often spend one third of their clinical hour documenting the other two thirds of the time, fosters fear in the corporate culture. The organizational system becomes closed, rigid, and suspicious.

In such a corporate culture, the supervisor may fear for her job. Administrators may not value clinical/pastoral work in general or even think that supervisory work is unnecessary, partly because it is not a billable hour. There is direct and indirect pressure to cut corners, document results,

and get to the bottom line. How do supervisees and students learn in such a corporate setting?

Emily Smith, a field education student under the supervision of Rev. Wilma Jackson had a long history of depression. She was overly sensitive to feedback, isolated socially, and suffered from chronic low energy. Rev. Jackson wondered on many occasions whether Emily was really ready for full-time ministry. When Emily was encouraged to enter personal therapy, she insisted that God's equipping of her for ministry was sufficient. Rev. Jackson was reluctant to take a firmer stand, remembering the words of the seminary president that a few more students would solve its financial woes. Moreover, Rev. Jackson's congregation needed a youth pastor as much as the seminary with one less student. Fear entered supervision and kept Emily in the process.

We are left with several questions about fear and supervision. What is it about fear that makes us humans like it so much? Or what is it about being human that makes fear so common? Does it make us feel alive in an otherwise dull and technological age? How do we train and supervise theological students who come to us from a global context of fear and/or from a highly fear-based religious tradition? How do we supervise in a growth-motivated and grace-filled way that is nonetheless rigorous and demanding? And how do we do this kind of supervisory work within a larger context dominated by fear?

FEAR-BASED RELIGION AND SUPERVISION

The dynamics of fear are created by and/or reinforced by certain theological assumptions. Fear-based religious leaders embrace an image of God that is often punitive, demanding, and moralistic. That image filters down to the congregation, the family, and the parishioner and informs supervision. Criticism abounds. Punishment or the threat of punishment is a common motivator. Sometimes supervisees, coming from this tradition, have actually been verbally abused or physically abused by religious leaders or by parents under the influence of this tradition. They approach supervision with a distrustful stance, expecting and fearing that the supervisor will take this same punitive role toward them.

Susan asked for a woman supervisor. Male relationships had been hard for her, beginning with her relationship with her preacher-father. So Susan was surprised by her strong response to her female supervisor's willingness to take phone calls during their supervisory sessions. Once

was okay. Twice was tolerable, but when in the third session it happened twice in the same session, Susan burst into tears, suggesting that her supervisor did not take her seriously. Her fear history has been triggered. It was, in the long run, a helpful outburst because her unspoken fearful expectations of supervision were clarified and renegotiated.

There are several versions of fear-based religious traditions. Some churches or religious traditions emphasize moral purity, and in so doing, foster the fear disapproval in their congregants. Believers in these traditions have a hard time coming to terms with their less than virtuous desires and impulses. Other churches or religious traditions emphasize being saved marked by certain signs like being born again or baptized by the Holy Spirit. There is strong pressure in such congregations to define and redefine who is “in” and who is “out.” Supervisees from such traditions find it necessary to “check out” the supervisor in matters of faith and practice before trusting a supervisory relationship. If the supervisor passes the test, they may overcommit and become overly dependent on the supervisor.

The excessive use of authority is not limited to those religious communities that are institutionally hierarchical. Sometimes the dynamics of social authority and psychological control are prevalent in congregations that deny any formal hierarchical structure. Such religious traditions are often leader-oriented and dependent on the personality of the leader. Supervisees from such religious traditions come into supervision looking to be told what to do. They are eager to please, determined to achieve, and often look to their supervisor to be their mentor.

Peter approached me for supervision saying that he wanted to be “disciplined.” Our initial sessions were filled with personal sharing, requests for prayer, and reluctance to bring in audio recordings, all of which I understood as slow, but necessary trust-building. When Peter did present audiotapes, the client repeatedly made cryptic comments about sexuality that Peter brushed aside with boyish humor. The client wanted to talk about a problem with pornography, but Peter wasn’t hearing it. Peter found it so difficult to talk openly and non-judgmentally about this issue with his client. We named the fear. We also identified the inner shame that this topic triggered in Peter. Eventually, Peter lightened up on himself and became a better therapist too.

Regardless of which variety of fear-based religious tradition a supervisee comes from, there are some common challenges. Supervisees are often slow to trust their supervisor, especially with material that is not flattering. They are slow to trust their own experience and the validity of their own

experience, including their feelings and intuitions. They are slow to focus on the process of therapy or a pastoral conversation, not just its content. They have difficulty thinking outside of the box, being creative in their ministry work with people. They are overly concerned with doing it right. They are often frightened by the necessity of going deep with clients or probing the nature of ambivalence. They are slow to see pastoral counseling, for example, as process, not just results. They are often overly concerned with legal issues in counseling.

Most skillful supervisors assess a supervisee's fear within the first few supervisory sessions. They assess both the degree of fear, the type of fear(s), and the supervisee's available personal resources for managing such fears in a learning context. Through this process, mature supervisors get a sense of a supervisee's fear threshold—the point where fear ceases to be productive and becomes crippling. Based on that "assessment," skillful supervisors instinctually tailor the supervisory process to the supervisee. Supervision begins with where the supervisee is. If he is largely motivated by fear, or largely operating in an expert model of learning, or needing a great deal of trust building, then supervision starts there. Focusing and building on a supervisee's strengths is an effective learning strategy in the initial stages of supervision. Many overly punitive and legalistic religious supervisees are deeply hungry for an experience of grace. Start supervision there. Model grace and acceptance. Once fear-based supervisees experience grace, the issue of fear is bypassed a bit or reduced enough, so that their natural curiosity, self-reflection, and desire for growth can be engaged as motives.

FEAR AND FAITH IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Fear is the antithesis of faith, both experientially and theologically, when faith is defined as trust. The task of theological-clinical education, in whatever context it occurs, is always the same: transforming fear into faith. The addition of spiritual formation as an important ingredient in theological education must include coming to terms with fear. How do we create within students, supervisees, and directees a trustful life stance within a fear-based cultural atmosphere or a social and economic environment that is plagued by crime, violence, and death? We begin that process by learning to deal with fear first within the context of the supervisory relationship itself.

Fear is natural, an inevitable part of any supervisory relationship especially because the power differential is always present. Moreover, the fear dynamic is intensified by the student's own psychological and theological baggage. So the issue is not the elimination of fear, but recognition of its threshold and a management of its intensity. Our job is to build trust and at the same time surface fear, name fear, discuss fear, and own fear, thus robbing it of its power to control and motivate. The task of the supervisor is to help supervisees become fully aware of, deal with, and learn from their fear. The task of the supervisory process is not to increase fear or decrease fear, but to help the supervisee transform it.

My experience is that fear never goes away entirely. Fear and faith coexist in the supervisory relationship. Therefore, faith inevitably has or must have an "in spite of" quality to it. We trust in spite of fear. We risk in spite of dangers. We try on new behaviors, new thinking, and new identities, all of which require trusting in spite of fear. Ultimately, in so doing, I hope that I am teaching my supervisees and myself, how to have courage, an essential ingredient in effective ministry in these days, not to mention an essential ingredient in the life of faith. If signs of courage emerge in the supervisee, than I have done my supervisory work well.