

“To Be Nice or Not to Be Nice?” That’s *Not* the Question: A Case from Clinical Pastoral Education Supervision

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In 2017, the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) began sponsoring the development of Communities of Practice for its members.¹ For the past two years, a Community of Practice comprised of members of the ACPE’s former Eastern Region has been gathering twice each year to engage in reflective practices and build community. Mirroring the learning process in clinical pastoral education (CPE), the gatherings have invited and fostered candor and vulnerability. At each of these gatherings, a certified educator (CE) colleague has presented a case drawn from their

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supervisory practice and a circle of respondents, also CEs, have reflected on these cases through theological, pedagogical, and psychological lenses.

At the November 2019 gathering, one of us (Johnny) presented the case that is the subject of this article. Two of us (David and Mychal) responded to the case through the lenses of education and theology, respectively. A third colleague responded through the lens of personality/psychology but chose not to participate in this project of turning the oral presentations into a written piece. The fourth one of us (Jo) coordinated the planning committee for this gathering, which included soliciting the case presenter and responders.

We are four ACPE certified educators. We have been supervising CPE students for between five and twenty-four years. We are all ordained, and we represent Episcopalian, Missionary Baptist, and Jewish (Reform and Conservative) traditions. One of us is African American, three of us are White, and two of us are Ashkenazi Jews. We are all cisgender; two of us are women and two of us are men. One of us is queer. We all live and work in the metropolitan New York area.

CASE STUDIES IN CONTEXT

There is a rich body of literature about the practice of clinical supervision, but these works include only a small number of case studies. In preparing this article, we found only a small number of case studies exploring pastoral supervision.¹ However, we turned to George Fitchett's and Steve Nolan's two recent collections of spiritual care case studies for guidance in writing this article.² Fitchett and Nolan compiled these collections in order to contribute to chaplaincy research, support the training of new chaplains, and educate colleagues in other professions about what chaplains do. Prior to the publication of these two books, David McCurdy and Fitchett outlined ethical considerations when publishing case studies about chaplains' practice with patients. They recommend obtaining patients' permission for the publication of such cases and providing patients (or their surviving family members) with the opportunity to read their own case study.³

THE CASE OF "ABDUL" (BY JOHNNY)

Context

We offer this case about "Abdul," a CPE resident, with the intention of contributing to the very small literature on case studies that illustrate supervision in CPE settings. Following McCurdy and Fitchett, the ACPE CE secured written permission from the CPE resident and provided him with the opportunity to read the case before it was submitted for publication. We present this written version of the case and our reflections on it in the same spirit in which we brought this work to our Community of Practice gathering. We regard clinical supervision of CPE students as sacred work that requires educators to stay connected to our vulnerability, compassion, and humanity. We first presented this case verbally in the context of the intimacy and collegiality of a gathering of people who had been reflecting and learning together for a number of hours the previous afternoon and evening. As we transfer these spoken words to the page, we are aware that we cannot anticipate who our readers will be and we cannot see your reactions. We are conscious of what Mychal calls the "audacity" of "a Jew offering theological guidance to a Christian about supervising a Muslim." We are cognizant that David and Mychal are White people offering reflections to an African American CE on his supervision of an African CPE student. We offer these words humbly and out of the belief that communicating across lines of difference in our professional and educational settings is essential if we are to grow, change, and learn. Thank you for joining us in this endeavor.

The Student

Abdul is forty years old, a native of Ghana, and a student in a year-long CPE residency program. He was raised in a Quran community where his father had several wives; the two women who reared Abdul, his mother and his stepmother, had ten and five children, respectively. Abdul is the eighth of the ten and an identical twin. His primary education began in a Presbyterian parochial school. He is married and the father of five. He was called to the imamate as a teenager and served in both civil and religious contexts for more than two decades. He has been a resident of the United States for nearly five years. Abdul holds a master of philosophy degree in Quranic exegesis. I have found him to be attentive, gentle, humble, skilled and committed, hard-working, and deeply reflective. His self-expression is charmed

with smiles, he is soft spoken, and he is somewhat overly understanding of others, many times at his own expense.

The Supervisory Edge

As an educator, I wanted to simply encourage Abdul's interpersonal honesty. I confronted him in the group and in individual supervision with the observation that his niceness many times seemed to eclipse his personhood. I wondered if he, as a Muslim in the group, was blending in so as to play down his faith. Why was this not a good thing? I'm still searching. I could have been transferring some of my own pain from being African American and having to blend in at work, in some professional circles, and in educational arenas. "Blending in" can suck the life out of me when I'm not conscious of decisions I make for the good of the other instead of myself. I wanted to both understand and agitate Abdul as a learner. His complicity with authority also intensified this dynamic.

Self-Supervision

I had wondered about the cost to Abdul of his niceness. He stood alone, Islamically, in the peer group of Christians and seemed to blend in. In my opinion, he knew a great deal more about Christianity, Jesus, and the Bible than any of us combined knew about Islam. At times his calmness, peacefulness, generosity, and humility outshone the Christians; in my opinion, in this he exhibited better Christian values than did his peers and I, who were all Christian. Now, admitting this makes me wonder about my biases, as if such virtues are sole possessions of Christians, which I know not to be true. It also invites me to fearfully consider having been victimized by Christianity in the United States, propagandizing media, and simply a lack of knowledge that erroneously asserts that Muslims are not peaceful; they engage in war and don't mind dying for their faith; they are Father Abraham's illegitimate seed and are angry about not getting God's blessing.

Group Dynamics

In the group processes, Abdul would often pair off with his Ghanaian Christian peer, given their commonalities in culture, frame of reference, and familiar difference. Their pairing energy earned them the unconscious honor of being the group's twins. The group also celebrated Abdul's Islamic

faith almost as a type of “badge of honor” for their claims of religious and theological diversity.

The Student's Ministry

Abdul's clinical work was deeply caring of others, sometimes to his own detriment. On one occasion he was the chaplain being hurled by the medical staff into a family's chaotic expressions of mourning. They were quite expressive and opinionated. Abdul was introduced by the statement, “Here's the chaplain. He's here for you.” As the family began to speculate about his nationality, Abdul experienced the musings as their attempt at being open. In their ramblings of loss and grief and the related fear of change, they were also more than open about immigration and Muslims coming into the United States. It is not clear if they knew he was Muslim as he does not wear the kufi except when leading Jumu'ah prayers in the hospital. Abdul maintained a supportive presence and did not think it was his role to confront their biases and values.

On another occasion, Abdul shared his cross-cultural work with a Turkish Muslim family. As he approached the family offering the Islamic greeting of peace, the husband, who was the patient, ordered his wife to veil her face in deference to Abdul. The veiling was distant from and somewhat disempowering of women in Abdul's culture and practice of Islam. Abdul was able to receive the transferred honor and provide prayers and recitations from the Quran.

Self-Reflection and Insight

My initial belief that Abdul would “win the award for niceness” was without the experience of context and relationship. It took time for me to learn about what I perceived as Abdul's niceness and the role it (the perceived niceness) played culturally and socially. From my spiritual perspective as a Black Christian, “treading upon serpents” is fraught with danger; as an African American male I know what it's like to be sent out into the world of professional ministry as a “sheep among wolves.” I could resonate with Abdul being a long way from home, where Islam and Christianity co-exist peacefully. However, in the United States he represents a faith that is currently “flagged” as “the goddamned other” and that conjures up fear in people who do not know the way of Islam.

Being an African American given to reflective practice and bearing gifts of empathy, I am now able to see the sense of balance with which Abdul must walk; it's like walking on eggshells. The New Zealand mosque shootings in March 2019 that killed over fifty people and wounded another fifty shook Abdul and his faith community to their cores. I could see the loss and the complexity of the grief and did experience some of the grief journeying with him. It was all too real. Abdul's ethic of kindness made more sense, and I could see the distance between niceness and kindness. It was more a kindness and hospitality to the dominant culture and also a living in fear of fear; I regret the impact of my own internalized privilege as a Christian in the United States, how my privilege momentarily puts up with other beliefs, practices, and faiths for my benefit.

RESPONSE FROM AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE (BY DAVID)

Johnny looks back with openness and curiosity on his supervision through critical theory (CT), which asks how we use our power. CT shifts the focus from the personal to the social. Identifying and critiquing underlying social structures, not only personal behaviors, is central. In so doing, CT can serve as a pathway toward freedom from oppression, a central concern of Johnny's for his students and society at large.

Where do Johnny's and Abdul's identities overlap and diverge? How does that affect the power dynamics in the supervisory relationship? Both are married men with children. Both are people of color and have experienced injustice in America. They are different in that Abdul is African-born; Johnny is American-born. Abdul is an immigrant; Johnny is not. Abdul is Muslim; Johnny is Christian. In the educational context, one is an educator and one is a student.

Working through the lens of CT, Johnny seeks to better understand the dynamics of oppression and power within the group and himself. He is reflective about his Christian biases and what he really think[s] about Islam. Wisely, he asks, How is my power operating in this supervisory relationship and how can I use it for Abdul's empowerment?

Systems-centered theory (SCT) posits that all living human systems survive, develop, and transform from simple to complex by differentiating and integrating difference. The process of change is linked to dealing effectively with diversity. A system that integrates its differences in its diversity

will develop and transform. A system that stereotypes its differences will survive at the expense of development and transformation. Central to this process is identifying and exploring differences in the apparently similar and similarities in the apparently different. The primary vehicle for doing this is functional subgrouping, a process by which a system moves beyond stereotypical diversity toward functional diversity.

Abdul introduced a lot of difference to his CPE group. He was from a different country and continent (although he had a Ghanaian peer). He belonged to a different religion, and he was raised in a different family structure (i.e., a polygamous one). Did Johnny facilitate the group process in such a way that helped Abdul and the group move beyond stereotypical differences? One possibility is to focus the group process on exploring shared feelings, seeking to find the similarities in the differences rather than joining around their stereotypical differences.

Abdul often subgrouped with his Ghanaian Christian peer, which is an example of stereotypical subgrouping. Abdul is Muslim and his peer is Christian, yet they share Ghanaian culture. Where are the functional differences and similarities among this subgroup? How might exploring their shared pain, anger, joy, etc., facilitate the development of their subgroup and the group as a whole? How did Johnny engage the rest of the group in these explorations and steer them away from the human tendency to scapegoat difference?

Johnny notes that “the group lightheartedly referred to these two as twins.” What might the group be placing in the Ghanaian subgroup that they don’t want to explore within themselves? Johnny believes that the peer group viewed it as a badge of honor to have such a profound difference—a Muslim—in the group. As the group takes pride in this, from what might they be moving away? Is it a manifestation of scapegoating, an indication of their defense against integrating difference? The group may be struggling to acknowledge that whatever they see in Abdul’s chair—good, bad, or indifferent—belongs to the whole group.

Was Johnny complicit in this dynamic? He wrote, “[I]n my opinion, in this [Abdul] exhibited better Christian values than did his peers and I, who were all Christian.” What was Johnny projecting into Abdul’s chair that he could reclaim for himself so that Abdul isn’t left holding all the hopes and fears of the group? Injustice is often the result of our unconscious desire for someone else to make our load lighter by holding more than they can possibly bear. By working that dynamic in the group, Johnny could facilitate

freedom from oppression on a small scale, which might then reverberate (through the principle of isomorphy) throughout the larger society.

Johnny provides a helpful reflection on his countertransference when he writes about his experience "as an African American male . . . sent out into the world of professional ministry as a 'sheep among wolves.'" He writes, "I could have been transferring some of my own pain from being African American and having to blend in at work, in some professional circles, and educational arenas. 'Blending in' can suck the life out of me when I'm not conscious of decisions I make for the good of the other instead of myself." Johnny clearly "gets in the boat" with someone who has faced dangerous contexts. Did Johnny's identification with Abdul take him back to his own traumatic experiences of disempowerment? SCT calls this a survivor role. How might Johnny move into a more functional explorer role and get curious about his own experience?

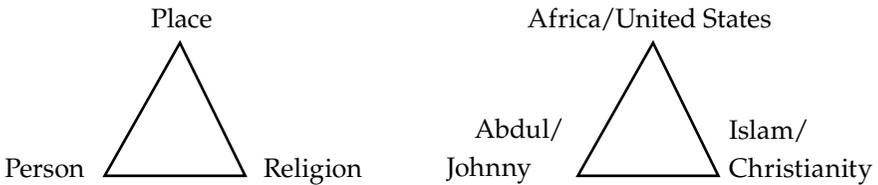
There is a transformation in Johnny when he sees how Abdul's compliance is part of his survivor role. Johnny writes, "Abdul's ethic of kindness made more sense, and I could see the distance between niceness and kindness. It was more a kindness and hospitality to the dominant culture and also a living in fear of fear." Abdul and his community have figured out a way to survive. SCT asks, How does this strategy of niceness drive and restrain Abdul's and the group's goals of surviving, developing, and transforming? It is clear that Johnny longs for Abdul and his community to do more than survive. How might Johnny use his privilege, and his awareness of it, to help Abdul and the group not only survive but also develop and transform?

A RESPONSE FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE (BY MYCHAL)

Exile and Return as Spiritual Themes

The theory papers that I wrote when I was in supervisory education back in the 1990s were entitled "Exile and Return Retold." As a Jew, exile has always been a central theme in my life. As someone whose mother was born in Mandatory Palestine, I have always had a concrete and palpable sense of what it means that I live in diaspora, in a foreign land, with an ache for a home that is not here. And in the evolution of my spiritual life I have come to understand that this ache is part of the human condition, the reality of life as a human being. But before I explore the theme of exile as the human condition, I want to explore some of the particularities of exile in this case.

There are two overlapping triangles at the heart of this case:



As I encounter Abdul in this case, an African Muslim living in exile in the United States, I'm aware that his African exile is quite different from Johnny's. Here, Abdul is part of a tiny religious minority. Johnny shows sensitivity to his own majority religious status and Abdul's minority religious status and demonstrates candor in reflecting on his attitudes toward Islam. As we locate Abdul in the context of his home in Ghana, his African exile gains more complexity in relation to Johnny. While Muslims are often treated with suspicion in this country, in his home country Abdul is part of a substantial minority that largely lives in harmony with people of other religions.

Another significant way in which Abdul's exile is different from Johnny's is that Abdul has a physical home in Africa. He came from this home, can identify with it, and can return there if he wishes. Abdul chose to come to the United States as a free man. While Johnny has an African lineage as part of his identity, he does not know where in Africa his ancestors lived before they were stolen, sold into slavery, and brought to this country against their will. Being in a diaspora with a clear sense of home is fundamentally different from being in a diaspora in which home is no longer home. In this way, a powerful intersection of two very different African diasporas lives in Abdul and Johnny.

Despite Abdul and Johnny's different experiences of exile, they both belong to traditions that place exile at the center. In the Hebrew Bible and in the Quran, there is a Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve are banished after eating forbidden fruit. Exile from the Garden of Eden is a core spiritual experience. All three Abrahamic religions understand that the human experience takes place in the brokenness of being outside the garden, of longing for the wholeness that the garden represents. As pastoral educators, we help our students make space for their experiences of exile—both

literal and spiritual—so that they can make space for the exilic realities of the people with whom they engage in spiritual care. Only when we make space for exile can we hope to experience the possibilities of return.

In his book *Sacred Attunement*, Michael Fishbane writes powerfully about the dynamics of exile and the longing to return.

Theologically interiorized, homeland and heartland comprise a magnetic pole, charging the mind with longing and memory. Exile thus becomes the space of weeping and diminishment, of vows and rites of remembrance. By contrast, any and every restoration of the people is an ingathering of the remnant and harvest of song (Ps. 126). In exile, one is always a homeless pilgrim, in body and soul, ever a wanderer "east of Eden." But in the homeland one becomes a dweller, well-rooted in the earth. In exile there is waiting, hopeful expectation, and prophetic promise.⁴

People who have been located in one spot for multiple generations may need to use their imaginations to locate their spiritual experience of brokenness in the landscape of exile. For anyone who has experienced being uprooted, however, either in our own lives or in the stories of those from whom they have descended, exile captures the profound alienation from self when people are deracinated and far from the sacred center. The invitation of the pastoral relationship is to find a hint of home in relationships lived in exile.

On Polygamy and dina d'malkhuta dina (the Law of the Land Is the Law)

Abdul's experience of growing up as a child of a polygamous marriage is not uncommon in Ghana and is even normative. In the United States, however, polygamy is prohibited and shows up as a TV novelty, as demonstrated by *Big Love*. Abdul's choice to refer to his other mother as his "stepmother" may be a way in which he minimizes potential conflict by translating his reality into norms more accepted in American culture.

Polygamy was acceptable in Judaism until around 1000 CE when, in Mainz, Germany, Rabbenu Gershom Me'or Hagola (960–1040 CE) issued a ban against it. Why would Jews decide to ban polygamy when the Bible permits it? The principle at play is *dina d'malkhuta dina*, the law of the land is the law. This Talmudic principle was introduced by the *amora* (scholar) Samuel, who lived in the Babylonian exile under a foreign power and argued that Jews need to adapt in order to survive under the rule of others. As people in exile, we need to be on good terms with the majority culture and those in power who set the laws. We need to learn

how to “smile,” to be “understanding of others,” in order to survive. This kind of “smiling” is essential; it allows people from different places and cultures to blend in.

On Dispersal and Its Effects: The Tower of Babel

The story of the Tower of Babel teaches us a great deal about the state of being dispersed. (Whereas the Tower of Babel is found in the Hebrew Bible, there is a story in the Quran in which Pharaoh wants to build a tower to heaven.) In Genesis 11:4–6, we read of a time when “everyone on earth” spoke the same language:

(4) And they said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.” (5) The LORD came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, (6) and the LORD said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.”⁵

Dispersal is a divine response brought about by God’s desire to restrict human power. The confounding of speech and the scattering of the people over the earth—their dispersal—are intrinsically connected. Spread out over the whole world, the people lose the ability to communicate with one another; they lose their power.

Chizkuni, a thirteenth-century French biblical commentator, wrote the following exegesis of verse 6: “And now that they all know seventy tongues, unless they will be scattered, they cannot be prevented from translating their evil design into action.”⁶ The simple meaning of the text suggests that they all knew *one* language, yet Chizkuni teaches that each person knew *seventy* languages, a number that represents fullness, wholeness, all the languages of the world; everyone understood everyone else across their differences. It could have been idyllic. But this moment of full understanding lets loose a powerful evil design that cannot be stopped. People, when they become too powerful, “translat[e] their evil design into action.” Power and evil action are companions. In the context of this case, when we speak of evil action we must speak about slavery, which crosses continents and racial and religious borders and entangles us all.

Is Your Smile Dear to You?

And, finally, we come to this Talmudic story about Rabbi Yohanan:

Rabbi Yohanan's student, Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, fell ill. Rabbi Yohanan entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Hiyya said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yohanan stood him up and restored him to health. Similarly, Rabbi Yohanan fell ill. Rabbi Hanina entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yohanan said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Rabbi Hanina said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Hanina stood him up and restored him to health. The Gemara asks: Why did Rabbi Yohanan wait for Rabbi Hanina to restore him to health? If he was able to heal his student, let Rabbi Yohanan stand himself up. The Gemara answers, they say: A prisoner cannot free himself from prison.⁷

We can understand this story as being about the supervisory relationship, about extending the hand, witnessing where people are and what they live with, inviting engagement and transformation. Abdul needs to be in charge of how he regards his smiling. Is it suffering? Is it dear to him? We can retell the story substituting the characters of our case study.

Rev. Bush's student, Abdul, fell to smiling. Rev. Bush engaged him in supervision and said to him: Is your smiling dear to you?

One variation goes as follows:

Abdul said to him: I welcome neither this smiling nor its reward. Rev. Bush said to him: Give me your hand. Abdul gave him his hand, and Rev. Bush stood him up and restored him to himself.

And in a second variation:

Abdul said to him: I need my smiling that protects me in a foreign land. Rev. Bush sat down beside him and said: Then I will sit with you here. And Abdul experienced the powerful witnessing and embrace offered by Rev. Bush, and his smile shifted a little bit.

Similarly, Johnny has chosen to bring this case to our Community of Practice. And he has shared with us that he ultimately came to understand that he could get into Abdul's smiling boat as a "Black Christian"—a "sheep among wolves" who is surrounded by danger, living an exilic experience even at home. So, our story continues:

Similarly, Rev Bush fell to smiling. The Community of Practice visited him and said to him: Is your smiling dear to you? Rev. Bush said to us: I welcome neither this smiling nor its reward. The Community of Practice said to him: Give me your hand. He gave us his hand, and the Community of Practice stood him up and restored him to himself.

The Community of Practice is the place where Johnny can bring this case and be known in the realities of his exile. Johnny becomes better able to hold Abdul in his exile because he has a home in which he can be known, a community that can witness him in the complexity of his identity, in his at-homeness and his not-at-homeness. It is this community that extends the hand and invites connectedness in the face of disconnection.

And, finally:

The Gemara asks: Why did Rev. Bush wait for the Community of Practice to restore him to himself? If he was able to heal his student, let Rev. Bush stand himself up. The Gemara answers, they say: A prisoner cannot free himself from prison.

So, in this, of course, we hear echoes of mass incarceration. But this prison is not a place with walls and bars. So, we return to the question, If Johnny knows how to do this with Abdul, why does he need us to do it with him? And the answer is that the relationship is at the center of the healing. By telling of the story in community and connecting with all of us across all of our differences, Johnny accesses his own strength to face his challenges. And as he is enlivened in the experience of not being alone, he brings that awareness into relationship with Abdul, confident that Abdul does not always need his smile, even though he needs it sometimes.

FINAL WORDS

We are grateful to you, the reader, for joining us in this case study and some of the reactions it elicited. And we are grateful to the ACPE's Eastern Region Community of Practice, the transformative crucible that heard, held, and explored this case.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Terry Ruth Culbertson, Elizabeth Morey, and Sanford Moldenhauer, "Where Do You Want Me, Lord? The Case of Sandy, a Mid-Sixties CPE Student with a Traumatic Brain Injury," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 36 (2016): 146–58; Thom Kilts, Eldon L. Olson, Jeffery M. Silberman, Mary Ann Moman, Kamal Abu-Shamsieh, and Elizabeth Soto, "Johanna's Dilemma: A Case Study." *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 30 (2010): 64–79.
- 2 George Fitchett and Steve Nolan, eds., *Spiritual Care in Practice: Case Studies in Healthcare Chaplaincy* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2015), 11–12; George Fitchett and Steve Nolan, eds., *Case Studies in Spiritual Care: Healthcare Chaplaincy Assessments, Interventions and Outcomes* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2018).
- 3 David McCurdy and George Fitchett, "Ethical Issues in Case Study Publication: 'Making Our Case(s)' Ethically," *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 17, nos. 1–2 (2011): 55–74.
- 4 Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 181.
- 5 Tanakh: *A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 16–17.
- 6 Hezekiah ben Manoah, *Chizkuni*, Genesis 11:6:2, Sefaria, <https://www.sefaria.org>.
- 7 Berakhot 5b.