

Introduction: Preface to a Post-Capitalist Pastoral Theology

How could it happen that a Baptist minister who grew up in the United States, in the Deep South no less, in a politically and religiously conservative milieu, ever wanted to author a book criticizing capitalism? I am aware of three sets of motives. First, from the mid-1980s to this day, I have worked as a pastoral counselor and psychotherapist. Aside from some adjunct teaching, this was my sole occupation from 1992 until 2010. Throughout my professional career, I have conducted approximately 30,000 counseling sessions. Sustaining such intimate acquaintance with people over time has permitted me to observe bewildering changes that have been occurring between and within human beings in my part of the world during these 30 years.

The average individual I encounter in the clinical situation today is not the same as the person who sat with me 30 years ago. Sometimes the changes are subtle. Often they are obvious. But they are pervasive and apparently widespread. There has been a marked increase in self-blame among those seeking my care, as well as an amorphous but potent dread that they are somehow teetering on the edge of a precipice. This is confounded by the appearance of a few individuals who seem far more self-assured and confident, even entitled or defiant, than I have previously witnessed. Somewhat mysteriously, these highly self-reliant souls seem more superficial and one-dimensional than their depressive or anxious cohorts. Meanwhile, addictive behaviors have become more prevalent and

have quickly expanded into areas of life not usually associated with compulsivity. Relationships, even familial or romantic ones, seem to be becoming more ephemeral and contrived, almost businesslike. The people I now see tend to manifest a far more diffuse or fragmented sense of self, are frequently more overwhelmed, experience powerful forms of anxiety and depression too vague to be named, display less self-awareness, have often loosened or dropped affiliations with conventional human collectives, and are increasingly haunted by shame rooted in a nebulous sense of personal failure. I find myself more disquieted and even confused than I used to be while sitting with people, even less “myself.” What has happened?

Puzzled by this, I began to investigate. I soon became aware that a number of clinicians, particularly psychoanalysts, had been making observations similar to mine. In a prescient set of reflections, Bollas (1987) had argued that a new sort of person was emerging that he called “normotic personality” (pp. 135–156). Such an individual suffers a numbing or erasure of subjectivity, experiencing herself as a commodity in a world of commodities. Samuels (2003/2006) noted that something happened during the period from 1980 to 1990 that began to alter his patients’ presentations. Consulting with his analytic colleagues, he concluded: “We tended to put it down to the fact that, since the mid-1980s, the pace of political change in the world appeared to have quickened” (pp. 12–13). The analysts Layton, Hollander, and Gutwill (2006) pinned such changes to powerful shifts within capitalism as it was practiced in the United States, arguing that such alterations had produced a “traumatogenic environment” (pp. 1–5). Noticing that other clinicians’ observations, like my own, were chiefly anecdotal, I looked around for additional sorts of evidence. Sure enough, careful scientific surveys and empirical studies were showing that depression, anxiety, and addiction were increasing, not only in the United States but globally. Simultaneously, I noticed that a number of sociologists and geographers were recognizing developments pointing to the erosion of communities and human collectives.

I returned to my therapy patients.¹ I listened ever more closely to their self-blame. Were there clues? My suffering subjects complained persistently about their situations or moods, but almost all (except the super-confident outliers) concluded they themselves were somehow the problem. If they had not made that fateful decision, or if they were more intelligent, or more motivated, or more beautiful, or more talented, and so on, then maybe they would not be in this mess. Many perceived their problems as rooted in their identities. Maybe if they were not a woman, or a man,

or gay, or black, or white, or adopted, or an immigrant, or Catholic, and so on, things would be better for them. Many attributed their sufferings to childhood traumas, or parental or family dysfunctions. But even those who saw the roots of their psychic pain in their identities or in trauma still believed *only they could do anything about their problems*. If they had suffered so long and still were not making headway, they mused, perhaps they were doing something wrong; or, even worse, something was wrong with them. So in the end, they felt just as responsible as my other, ostensibly more fortunate clients. I was starting to understand why people were drinking more, taking more drugs, “veg’ing out” playing video games, retreating into their smartphones, social media, iPads, or otherwise losing themselves in some other manic activity or distraction. I was beginning to entertain it myself.

Then I began to notice how much blaming was occurring in our society, particularly toward those who were not succeeding in “the land of opportunity.” On cable and online news outlets, pundits could be heard villainizing the less fortunate. Apparently if people were poor, or were struggling in some way, it was their own damned fault. Even those in the shrinking middle class were often portrayed as less than sufficiently successful, as deficient in some fundamental way. Television programs had become heavily populated by beautiful and well-off people, with the apparent suggestion that these are the ones we should emulate. The ever-popular “reality shows” had turned cut-throat competition into entertainment, thus normalizing the belief that it is natural for the world to contain a very few “winners” surrounded by multitudes of “losers.”

The same themes were showing up in national and local politics. Many politicians, backed up by a number of theorists within the academy, interpreted growing inequality as either a temporary evil or the price of progress in a necessarily highly competitive market. It is inevitable, according to such experts, that some unfortunate ones are simply unable to keep up. Dominant economic ideologies increasingly paint the world in stark “survival of the fittest” terms. I began to wonder, along with the analysts I had been reading, if there might be a relationship between what I was seeing in the media, politics, and the economy, and what I was witnessing in the therapeutic space. I also started to suspect that “private” suffering was governed primarily by dynamics distal to the individual—in the broader social, economic, and political environment. I found this idea overwhelming, perhaps due to my own relatively privileged perspective as a professional white male, and decided to set it aside for later investigation.

However, I was unsuccessful. I could not leave it alone. Through the rearview mirror, I can see that my sensitivity to these matters has become more acute due to my having grown up in a working-class family and community. This has to qualify as another origin of my passion to write this book. My father was, at various times, a member of the United Automobile Workers and the International Union of Electricians. His father and grandfather were both life-long coal miners in Appalachia, and were active members of the United Mine Workers. My mother's family consisted chiefly of rural sustenance farmers, truck drivers, and factory hands. To this day, I support the right of workers to collective bargaining and union membership. If my father, by the time I was ten years of age, had not eventually earned union wages, I would never have been able to attend college.

The life circumstances of the working class are not just memories for me. Neither of my parents, nor my sister, and none of my cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, or great grandparents ever attended college. This was rarely even an option. Most have done jobs requiring hard physical labor, which has often meant that their bodies have worn out before they could reach retirement. Some have become prematurely disabled or died from work-related injuries. For over 30 years, my father worked on an assembly line, bending sheet metal at a General Electric factory. Today he is hearing impaired from sitting beside a hydraulic press for that period of time. Many in my extended family still struggle to sustain themselves. One cousin, now in his early 60s, has continued to work two jobs to make ends meet. He recently learned that his new boss, a college-educated individual less than half his age, moved him to another shift that will require him to quit one of his jobs. He will likely no longer earn a living wage. Another cousin, the one with whom I was most intimate during my childhood and youth, died a few years ago from a pulmonary embolus. His death was unnecessary. He had put off treatment for an infection in his leg, which was secondary to a serious work injury, because he had inadequate insurance and financial resources. Suffice it to say I have little patience for those who claim that the "underemployed" and the poor are happy to live off the government, or are lazy or unintelligent. My relatives, on the average, work as many or more hours than I do, and under conditions over which they have far less control. As such incidents suggest, recent changes within capitalism have not been kind to my relatives and friends back in my small hometown, or to most people in the remainder of the United States or the world for that matter. These developments will be illustrated, documented and untangled in this book.

So two motives for writing this book are already apparent. I am pushed by my allegiance to working-class people who brought me into this world, and I am pulled by curiosity as to what might explain the changes I have seen, over the last three decades, in the people coming to me for care. The third source concerns the *character* of my therapeutic practice as the *care of souls*. The focus of my clinical work has been two-fold: to alleviate pain and distress whenever possible, and, whether or not this is possible, to assist people in *hearing* their suffering. What is it calling them to do and/or to understand? Often in the course of pastoral conversations, I have noted that physical pain, according to physicians and biological scientists, has a function. It calls for us to attend to it, and to take action to address a threat or problem. Psychological, relational, and spiritual suffering, as I have frequently indicated to those receiving my consideration, has a similar function. At minimum these particular sufferings insist on finding a voice. And often they call upon their subjects to initiate a course of action. This action may be limited to their own material or psychological space, but most often also extends to their relational, communal, or even social or political spaces.

This method of attention has yielded practical wisdom, both for myself and for those I have served. I (and we) have learned that, when unheeded, pain produces and structures alienation, injustice, ignorance, division, and isolation into our individual and collective lives. As I have regularly said to those who seek my attention, much of our suffering comes from our efforts to avoid or deny suffering. I (we) have also learned that, when articulated and heard, pain may yield and structure connection, continuity, integrity, justice, and direction into our individual and collective lives.

Taken together, this type of attention and the wisdom it engenders constitute healing, the *care of soul*. In this context, soul refers neither to a supernatural or natural essence, nor to some dimension of self separate from the material. I understand soul, rather, as an aspect of the embodied self, namely *the activity of self-transcendence*, where this refers not to an act of individual rationality, but to that activity which holds individuals in relation with self, others, creation, and the Eternal (whether or not this ultimate value is recognized as God). While I will discuss soul in detail later in this book, I must note here that soul, by its very nature, cannot be confined within the individual. It is, rather, a fabric that embeds every one of us within all that is. It is our existence within the “living human web” (Miller-McLemore, 1996), and within creation. That said, souls do not simply become ill or fail to thrive from within. They wither or become disoriented when the fabric becomes torn or stained.