

No Release: Ministry Under Pressure

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A Joke

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Under Pressure

In her comedy special, *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby proposes that part of what makes comedy work is the way the comic builds and then releases tension.

You were laughing as I told my story, partly because poop is gross and funny and bodies are embarrassing, and we can share that.

You were laughing because I was reading my paper in the way we always do at Prairie Group, but I was talking about things we never never never do, and that was uncomfortably and hilariously incongruous.

You were laughing because you were grateful that this, I hope, has never happened to you.

And you were laughing, Gadsby would tell us, because I built and built and built the tension, and drew it out, and then I resolved it for you.

You weren't sure how it was going to turn out. Would it end in humiliation, or would I be spared? You didn't know. And that primed you to want to laugh. Because laughing is one of the ways our bodies discharge stress.

Gadsby puts it like this:

“Laughter is very good for the human. It really is. ‘Cause when you laugh, you release tension. And when you hold tension in your human body, it’s not healthy.”¹

She says some funny stuff next, and then she explains:

“Let me explain to you what a joke is. And when you strip it back to its bare essential... components, like, its bare minimum, a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work. A setup and a punch line. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right? But in this context, what a joke is is a question that I have artificially inseminated. Tension. I do that, that’s my job. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you’re like, “Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.” I made you tense. This is an abusive relationship. Do you know why I’m such a funny fucker? Do you? It’s because, you know, I’ve been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a child. Back then it wasn’t a job, wasn’t even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn’t have to invent the tension. I was the tension. And... I’m tired of tension. Tension is making me sick. It is time... I stopped... comedy. I have to quit comedy.”²

¹ Gadsby, Hannah. *Nanette*. Netflix, 2018.

² *ibid.*

It's Making Us Sick

About 14 months ago, I became certain that the ministry was killing me.

I was three months back from maternity leave after the birth of my second baby. I was nursing and pumping full-time to the tune of 30 hours a week. I was co-parenting an infant and a two-year old, one of whom was building their brand new immune system with constant illnesses, and the other of whom was potty training.

I was working my actual full-time congregational ministry job and legitimately dropping balls left and right. I was being a barely adequate partner to my spouse.

And I was doing ok. I was powering through. Even enjoying life. Delighting in my family and still loving my work.

I was also sick, experiencing a debilitating flare of a mysterious condition from which I have suffered for the last ten years.

The summer I did CPE at Brigham & Women's Hospital in 2009, I started experiencing odd neuromuscular sensations. You know the feeling when you get a twitch in your eyelid? I was experiencing *that*, all over my body, all the time, in small and large muscle groups, mostly when trying to relax.

This all came on just as I was journeying as a baby-chaplain deep into the stories of folks suffering and dying from various rare maladies on the ICU at a world-renowned research hospital.

This was... not really the time you want to be having mysterious neurological symptoms... And, as I later found, probably not a coincidence.

After a period of fear and repression and avoidance, I finally pursued the whole situation with a neurologist and found out I didn't seem to have MS. That was about all I found out.

After another flare years later, I pursued further testing and received a diagnosis of irritable myopathy, which is a medical term that roughly translates to: "Yes, there is something going wrong in your body, but we don't know exactly what it is. It probably will not kill you. Keep us posted."

Fast forward to last year. I was overwhelmed by life and having the worst flare I had ever experienced. Twitching, cramping, and fatigue had me hurting, exhausted, and distracted. But more than that it had me terrified. I believed that I might be dying of a degenerative condition.

I started imagining my children growing up without me. I began making videos of us together, ostensibly to send cute clips to the grandparents, but actually because I wanted documentary evidence of my presence in their lives.

And because I am both creative and controlling, I started planning the scrapbooks of letters and poetry I would leave them with, to provide advice at strategic points in their life and to influence them even beyond my death.

It was like the opposite of suicidal ideation. Unwilling tragedy ideation. But I was making concrete plans. So I knew it was time to get help.

I confessed to our beloved colleague Dottie Mathews, and we strategized for my survival. She sat beside me while I got another MRI, which came back mysteriously clean. And she held me accountable as I started working with a therapist named Chris who specializes in somatic experiencing and embodied healing from toxic stress.

Chris saved my life.

She saved my life by teaching me to feel again... as in, literally helping me access the sensations of my body, because I had lost that access entirely in my efforts to survive the tension of being a sensitive person in this world.

I learned from Chris that the symptoms that I have experienced in fits and flares since that first deep-end dive into the work of ministry are all common expressions of hyper-vigilance and nervous system overwhelm.

They are all ways tension makes me sick.

And I learned that one common way of handling this physiological overwhelm is by dissociating from it so that we can feel in control of our bodies and lives. We clamp down so hard that we lose sensation, and we never realize that we are in a constant state of nervous system dysregulation.

But the body keeps the score. And the tension that we carry will out, sometimes in the twitching of muscle groups, and sometimes even in the disfunction of the digestive system, particularly for a preaching minister on a Sunday morning.

This job. It asks so much of us.

We get up every Sunday in the pulpit, or we sit every day in the hospital or prison or military base, or we organize our communities in the depths of existential pain. And we show them our scars, and we tell them they too can heal.

And we are responsible and we follow that old preaching maxim: we don't bleed on them.

But how many of us have gotten the message, from white supremacy or patriarchy or some other system that trades our humanity for our success, that not bleeding on them means we must not bleed?

This job isn't so hard, when it comes down to it. We are called to be human with our people, in public and in private. We are called to feel with them and love them.

But we are trying to do this job under a system that strips us of our humanity, that perverts our instincts toward connection and numbs our capacity to feel, that asks us to be pale and bloodless.

We are trying to love people in a ministry culture that has trained us to internalize a neoliberal, white, commodified understanding of what it means to be professional... A culture that is individualistic, power hungry, conflict avoidant, binary, urgent, detached, and perfectionist.

When I say the ministry was killing me, I mean it. But I don't mean that ministry itself is deadly, or even the combination of ministry and parenting and partnering.

It is ministering under these supremacy systems and in this culture that is killing me. It is killing us.

And there is no easy release.

The solution to this intense pressure, this impossible tension, is the opposite of bucking up and powering through. It is the opposite of laughing it off or numbing it out.

The only way through to our wholeness is learning to feel again. It is learning to stay with the tension until it stretches us to growth. It is refusing cheap release in favor of deep engagement.

Comedy can give us tools for this work. Laughing is one of the productive way our bodies process and release tension in the short term, and awakening one sense can help us reawaken others. Comedy can challenge and interrogate power structures and help us refuse shame.

But comedy can also be a band aid, a cheap release, or even a re-performance of trauma, as Hannah Gadsby points out in *Nanette*.

The place where our ministries can be informed by the tools of comedy is the meeting point of power, tension, and release, and those are the dynamics I will explore with you today. Those are the dynamics we must interrogate if we're going to survive this work and these times.

A Confession

I'll confess here that I was annoyed when the Prairie Group chose comedy as its topic for 2019. For one thing, I am nothing if not earnest, and I don't relate much to the genre of comedy. For another, the choice felt very "let them eat cake" of us.

We are pastoring in a time when our president is openly a white supremacist serial rapist and white Americans voted in droves to elect him anyway.

We are pastoring during a time of slow and inexorable climate breakdown and a mass extinction that this time could include us.

We are pastoring during a time when brown and black children are being traumatized in cages and killed by police and white children are being actively recruited into supremacy cults.

"How dare we choose to study comedy?" I thought. The tension is killing us, and there is no cheap release.

We are serving within Unitarian Universalism in a time when UUs of color and of many marginalized identities are calling us to reckon at last with all the ways our human institutions have failed and do fail to live up to our values of dignity and interconnection.

We are serving within Unitarian Universalism in a time of open backlash, when invitations to accountability are met with accusations of witch hunts. UU ministers are calling moral clarity about supremacy systems religious orthodoxy. UU congregants are unknowingly parroting alt-right vocabulary like "cancel culture," "ultra-PC" and "anti-free-speech" when we set firm boundaries around our values.

"How dare we choose to study comedy?" I thought. The tension is killing us, and there is no cheap release.

We are studying together at Prairie Group in a time of generational shift, when junior colleagues are trained in frontline liberation theologies and queer theory and climate justice and are joining a prestigious study group only to find themselves perplexed and frustrated at the invitation to (re-)read Schleiermacher, may he rest in a deeply felt and affective peace.

We are studying together in a time of cultural reckoning, when our own Prairie Group is being called by its newer members to do something about the soul wounds of supremacy that are stifling us and limiting the ways we can be in deep relationship with one another.

We are studying together in a time when we have circled closer and closer these last few years to deeply vulnerable and necessary healing and transformation informed by our best academic work and most rigorous thought.

And as we circled closer still, the choice of topics boiled down to trauma, or reparations, or comedy.

And you chose comedy.

“How dare you?” I thought. “You want release,” I thought, “but the tension is killing us.”

Well, in some ways the joke is on me.

Because in fact this topic has taken me on an intellectual and embodied journey into the interplay of tension and release that is exactly the work calling to me in these times.

And in fact, I have come to believe that we actually have a profound need to engage humor in a way that is emotionally intelligent and life-giving rather than detached and nihilistic.

For the sake of our faith, for the sake of our lives, for the sake of our souls, we need to figure out how to deal with tension and release.

Why So Serious?

In May of this year, an anonymous Mom in the DC area published an essay in *Washingtonian Magazine* about her 13 year old son, who had been recruited online into the alt-right movement. Her observations of this seduction are stunning.

It all began when her young white son was accused by a fellow student of sexual harassment, in what he felt was a huge misunderstanding. The school came down hard on him in a process that left him feeling alone, misunderstood, and persecuted.

He isolated himself from his friends and started hanging out online on Reddit and 4chan, unregulated social networks popular with right wing recruiters. He got deeply into what is often called meme culture, which uses inside jokes in online forums to train young white men into anti-PC, anti-feminist cynicism.³

An early meme in these circles used an image of Heath Ledger’s joker from the Dark Knight Batman movies. His tagline “Why So Serious?” became a rallying cry of these young men, whose disaffection moved them into a kind of nihilistic humor, the contention that the world itself is just a big joke.

³ Anonymous. “What Happened After My 13-Year-Old Son Joined the Alt-Right.” *Washingtonian Magazine*, May 5, 2019. Accessed September 2019 at <https://www.washingtonian.com/2019/05/05/what-happened-after-my-13-year-old-son-joined-the-alt-right/>

Meme culture seeks nothing more than it seeks “lulz,” which is laughter at another’s expense, and it finds the most laughter in tearing down anyone who dares to care about things. A former meme-ster defines it as such: “The lulz is an almost pathological need to undo [the other’s] seriousness. To undo what [they] care about. To not make sense. There isn't a side. There isn't a belief. The only goal is to burn down [the other] side. After all, "Some men just want to watch the world burn.””⁴

These young men show up at Alt-Right rallies waving a flag for a made up nation called Kekistan.⁵ Their general sense of mocking gives them an out for any of their views; they say horrifying racist and sexist things, but if the shit hits the fan, well then it was all just a joke, and too bad for you if you don’t get their irony.

I see these kids on campus at Mizzou all the time. They come to progressive protests in polo shirts and loafers, holding up ridiculous signs for silly things and jeering at those who are there in earnest. It could be considered harmless mocking. Until it comes to the line where it’s not, because the whole point of their humor is that nothing you care about matters, even/especially when what you care about is women’s agency, or immigrant children, or the sanctity of black lives.

The uniting origin story for a lot of these young alt-right converts seems to be some event that caused a tension for them that they were entirely unprepared to handle... An accusation of something they feel is overblown or unfounded, accountability for something they were taught was simply theirs to take, or rejection of any kind.

The stories of these young men show how privilege makes us brittle. When you are accustomed to moving through the world with much of the tension removed for you, you get no practice stretching or bending. A bit of pressure feels like existential threat. These kids don’t know what to do with that pressure, so they do on an exaggerated scale what we all try at one time or another because we are human - blame someone else, and then detach yourself from the tension at all costs. None of it matters, right? Burn it all down, while telling everyone else to lighten up. It’s all just a joke, after all.

I don’t want to draw too fine a comparison, because we are obviously not the alt-right. But the brittleness of privilege is not limited to the right. Responding to painful accountability by withdrawing oneself from relationship is all too human, and so is feeling outcast or cancelled by the one from whom you’ve withdrawn. This seems to be a dynamic playing out in Unitarian Universalism just as it plays out on a larger scale.

⁴ Film Crit Hulk. “Film Crit Hulk Smash: P.C. Culture vs. The Big Joke.” *Birth. Movies. Death*, February 23, 2017. Accessed September 2019 at <https://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/02/23/p.c.-culture-vs.-the-big-joke>

⁵ Kek is gamer slang for lol or laugh out loud.

The feeling that things would just go so much better if marginalized people would just chill out a bit is a seductive one. I hear it in the Gadfly mess making its way through our congregations; a demand that marginalized UUs in the midst of their own painful emotional labor should just lighten up. “It’s not like we’re actual white supremacists. We’re open to change and justice work. Just, don’t make it such a big deal. Save that for all the really bad things happening in the world.” The problem, of course, is that we *are* in the world.

I have heard similar sentiments from some senior colleagues complaining about the tension they feel from marginalized colleagues. “You know, maybe *I* could take them more seriously if they didn’t take *themselves* so seriously.” “They’re not doing themselves any favors with that approach.” “I wish they’d just lighten up.” Or, more insidiously, “They just need to be more self-differentiated.”

Privilege makes humans less prepared to hold tension. That is part of its nature. But what if instead of withdrawing, internalizing, or rejecting tension, we had better tools to process it through and out of our bodies? How much more effective and wholehearted could we be in our shared work of liberation and love?

Under Pressure

“Do you know why I’m such a funny fucker?” Asks Hannah Gadsby. “It’s because [...] I’ve been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a child. [...] And... I’m tired of tension. Tension is making me sick.”⁶

Our relationship to tension is directly impacted by our relationship to systemic power. Those with the least systemic power have long been cast as the diffusers, the release valve for those with more power. Women are trained from infancy to take the pressure off of men, people of color to diffuse the tension of white people, and so on and so forth. The flip is true, too. Men, white folks, and other privileged identities are trained to look to others for release and therefore tend to be the least prepared to hold their own tension.

If we are to engage power responsibly and in an anti-oppressive way, we have to learn to take responsibility for our own tension and *only* our own tension.

To do this, it helps to recognize that tension is actually making all of us sick... privileged and marginalized and intersectionally-identified, all, in different magnitudes and ways.

Supremacy systems put unbearable pressure on all of our lives. The work, which is unique to us each but also shared, is to resist refusing or diffusing that pressure so that we can be transformed by it.

⁶ Gadsby, Hannah. *Nanette*. Netflix, 2018.

How many of you have heard from congregants in these high pressure times that your preaching is too political and not spiritual enough? How many have heard from congregants that they need church to be a place where they get a break from the onslaught of life in these times, not another place where they are challenged?

The truth is, no matter how many of our congregations built retreats in the woods, church has never been the place for us to escape. It is the place for us to stretch.

Stretching is the productive way that we relieve the pain of tension. Stretching makes us more flexible. It extends our reach. It transforms pressure into a deeper capacity to respond.

Good comedy holds us in the tension zone long enough to demand that we reckon with the pressure. Good ministry keeps us in the place of complexity without rushing us through it. And good ministry can also give our people the training ground to learn to stretch.

Learning to Stretch

I have lately been on a journey of discovery about trauma, toxic stress, and the human nervous system. One thing I have learned is that every body has a “window of tolerance,”⁷ a zone within which their sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems can function well together. The zone is different for all of us, based on natural personality traits, past experience of trauma, social location, and a million other things.

Within the zone, we are relationally present and flexible. Our bodies can take on stress, process it, and recover from it. Outside the zone, things start to go amiss.

When we habitually refuse pressure, we get trapped in a loop of hypo-vigilance (freeze) below the zone. There, we struggle to productively engage the sympathetic nervous system to get things done, therefore feeling perpetually stuck, detached, and unable to engage with our lives.⁸ “Why so serious?”

When we habitually take on all the pressure all the time but ignore, repress, or power through it, we get trapped in a loop of hyper-vigilance (fight/flee) above the zone. There, we never calm the system enough to let the parasympathetic nervous system help us recover, therefore feeling perpetually exhausted, overwhelmed, and even physically ill.⁹ “It’s making us sick.”

⁷ Kain, Kathy; Stephen Terrell; Peter Levine. *Nurturing Resilience: Helping Clients Move Forward from Developmental Trauma*. North Atlantic Books, 2018.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

Does the idea of the zone sound familiar to you? Though most ministers aren't trained in models of nervous system regulation, many of us have learned at least a basic grasp of Adaptive Leadership, which essentially uses the same model. Too little anxiety and the congregation won't be moved to change. Too much and they shut down. Keep them in the sweet spot of juuuust enough unknowing and complexity, and change begins to unfold over time.

We can apply the Zone to the liberation struggle. If we want to stay in the struggle in a way that is both engaged and healthy... if we want to learn to hold our own tension... we need to find a way to keep our nervous systems in the game.

The ask, then, is not for people to spend all their time outside their comfort zone, because outside the zone is where we shut down or overwhelm. The ask is to make the comfort zone bigger by stretching it, like we would a tight or tender muscle.

Students and scholars and healers of trauma have identified exercises to encourage this stretching, and I pray the Prairie Group will at some point engage the topic of trauma to study them at greater length than I can explore here.

The gist is that we must learn to feel again, to get back in touch with our bodies and all that they have to tell us about what we need to be whole.

Sometimes, learning to feel again means supporting the body in re-engaging with all the places where we have detached. Sometimes, learning to feel again means helping the body find rest and relaxation in the midst of overwhelm.

For all of us, it means finding ways to soothe our systems and stimulate the vagus nerve, often called the wandering nerve, or more recently the soul nerve.¹⁰

The vagus nerve is a decentralized network of sensory nerves that holds memory and quite literally centers us. It is also the organ that communicates the instructions of the amygdala or ancient brain to the rest of the body. It controls our autonomic functions and tells our body systems when to fight/flee and when it is safe to relax or rest/digest.

In his book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Resmaa Menakem writes that we can learn to work with our soul nerve to help us expand our window of tolerance and better process tension through and out of our bodies.¹¹ The vagus nerve is stimulated by deep slow breathing, cold water, om-ing or chanting, steady rocking, and singing, among other things.

¹⁰ So designated by Resmaa Menakem in *My Grandmother's Hands*, introduced to us beautifully last year by Ruth McKenzie.

¹¹ Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Central Recovery Press, 2017. Page 140.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of these tools are time-honored spiritual practices. Several may already be a part of our lives together. All of them are ways that we practice stretching our comfort zones, so that our bodies are prepared to process and transform the tension of living in this world.

I wonder how we can bring more intention to helping those we serve stretch by getting back in touch with the wisdom of their bodies and its needs in worship, in small groups, or in our pastoral care?

The Ridiculous Embarrassment of Living

Our bodies and their needs are ridiculous and embarrassing sometimes, even unbearably so. And so one shared task of comedians and ministers is an impossible, constant striving to make the unbearable bearable.

Sometimes comedy makes life bearable by releasing pressure for a moment so that we can gather the tools to transform it. Our ministries often do this well, and indeed can then bring the tools of transformation into the work of stretching.

Sometimes comedy makes life bearable by sharing the universality of how weird and hard it is to be a human and reminding us how very not alone we are. Ministers will rarely use the same stories or methods to get there, and we might leave out the gross parts for boundaries' sake, but we do this reminding well too.

And sometimes comedy makes the unbearable bearable by naming out loud the deepest darkest things of our humanness, putting them on the table, and refusing to be ashamed. Some of the raunchiest comedy is powerful not so much because it is forbidden but because it looks the ridiculous embarrassment of living straight in the face and says "Yeah, so?"

If we are going to stretch in the ways we need to stretch to survive, our ministries need this particular gift of comedy. We need to learn - and help our people learn - to be more resilient than our shame, or we will never get through all of the mistakes we inevitably make while struggling the path to liberation.

Do you remember Obama's anger translator played by comedian Keegan-Michael Key at the 2015 White House correspondents' dinner? He stood behind Obama while the President said measured and politic things, and he let out all the ranting and righteous indignation that Obama would never be allowed as a leader of color.

I was thinking about this conceit the other day, because the tension or brittleness of privilege, for me, is something like having a *shame* translator, standing behind me, turning truth into self-doubt.

A person of color says: “Hey that thing you participated in hurt me.” And from the shame translator on my shoulder I hear: “You are a bad person unworthy of love.” So I leave the table, because it’s better to not even try than to find myself feeling unworthy of love as I always suspected I am.

Or a trans colleague says: “When you centered your own needs in that sermon about trans people I felt invisible and dehumanized.” And from the shame translator on my shoulder I hear: “You mess everything up, and no one wants to hear your voice anyway. *You* should be the one to go disappear.” And because I don’t want to disappear I get big and angry and loud.

These shame translations are lies – they have nothing to do with what is being said or meant, and yet until we build the resilience to override those creeping voices of shame and self doubt with curiosity and humility, they are powerful enough to shut down transformation and conversation the world over. They have done it for centuries. Our brains cannot tell the difference between material or ideological threat, and so the lies of shame are powerful because they trigger our bodies’ stress responses.

Fighting, fleeing, or freezing in the face of pressure is natural. It’s a human response to pain and self-doubt.

And it’s one we must counter with flexibility and strength. If we are going to help heal our own souls, our people, or even a little bit of this world, we must grow our comfort zones larger than our shame.

The only way I’ve ever found to do this is the thing comedians do pathologically - to share something horribly, awkwardly human and to survive it. Comedy is often confession in a way that our congregations rarely provide.

The difference between ministers and comedians in this, is that our calling is to help people stretch their comfort zones enough first to make these revelations in soul-safety, in the service of growth.

Laughing and Crying Our Way to Salvation

Henri Nouwen wrote that: “Shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.”¹²

¹² Nouwen, Henri. *The Wounded Healer*. Doubleday, 1972. Page 93.

I have been giving a significant amount of my time in ministry to our local faith based community organizing collective, these last seven years, and one of the most important thing this work has taught me is that our greatest positive power for transformation is in our stories; particularly in the part of our stories where it aches.

Find the place where it hurts and you have found the drive to transform. Comedians know this, because that's also the place they mine for jokes.

Through the work of organizing, though, I have found that a significant number of our people are alienated from our pain. We can't access it, because we've bought the lie that we won't survive it, and we've locked it away into our bodies.

White supremacy culture and patriarchy teach white people and men to power through, produce anyway, never show the struggle. For a white person or man to be in pain is to admit failure in a world supposedly set up for them. Except that it's not actually set up for them. It's set up to extract their worth, just like the worth of everyone else, and to alienate them from their natural capacity for connection in the process.

Without access to our own pain, we are unreliable visitors in the work of justice, operating out of an intellectual desire to do good, rather than the sure knowledge that our souls and lives are at stake.

Even worse, without access to our pain, it festers. We twitch, we shit ourselves, we freeze up, we numb out, we burst open, and then to survive we pass the tension along to someone else.

Our self-interest in this work is clear, really. The tension is making us sick, and we need better tools to transform it.

The tension is making us sick. But it doesn't have to.

We can hold it together. We can laugh about it together, and we can cry about it too. We can learn to feel it in our bodies. We can let it stretch us until we are flexible, and resilient, and free.

But first, we have to let it stay in the room.