

Alternatives to becoming an armadillo

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“You *have* to grow tougher skin, Carol,” my colleague told me when I invited him to lunch and asked for his advice on a church matter.

I inhaled deeply. That was the same response I heard repeatedly for the first five years of my pastorate. Whenever I got frustrated, well-meaning friends and colleagues would tell me that I needed to miraculously grow some sort of Teflon epidermis.

Am I too sensitive? I don’t know. What I do know is that I don’t thrive well in positions where members of the church constantly criticize, because I can never ignore them. I left one call partly because of relentless complaints, and I’m sensitive to that aspect of congregational life now. I can walk into a church and *feel* it. I know it’s there even before meeting the church members, because churches usually show their pettiness in those passive aggressive notes. (Like that cross-stitched sign above the kitchen sink: “Your mother doesn’t work here, please clean up after yourself.”)

I feel the pain of people dying. I became more aware of the eventuality of death, but I experience the sorrow acutely.

I am sensitive to the unfairness of life. People walk around, go to work, sing hymns, pray liturgies, while tragedies rip up their days. My heart breaks when I find out about the horrible things people do to one another. I become overwhelmed by the worry that people bear for one another.

Sometimes being a pastor means that the burdens of an ordinary life multiply, because we know what's going on around us. All of those things people hide with their schedules and smiles, and their innocuous "I'm doing fine" greetings. That sensitive underbelly has been revealed to us. We feel it.

Except, sometimes we learn ways to not feel. At the restaurant, the colleague telling me to grow tougher skin was doling out his wisdom over a Scotch—even though we met for lunch at 11:00 a.m. I laughed when he ordered it. Then I noticed that the waitress was not laughing and I realized that liquor before noon was his daily habit.

There are many ways to grow the shell of an armadillo while in ministry. Drinking is one option, and probably the one that we indulge in the most.

Narcissism is also effective. It's an easy one for pastors to develop and it comes with the side benefit of becoming blind to the emotions of others. One way to deflect criticism is to exaggerate our achievements and how much we work. Narcissists often do well in the ministry because it's dreadfully easy to build a church on arrogance and bluster. People want a leader they can follow.

If our narcissistic tendencies turn cruel, then we can slip into become so overly sensitive to criticism that we start to detest people who don't admire us. When we respond to them with rage, then they may eventually leave the church. And all of our problems are solved.

Workaholism is another way that ministers grow that tougher skin. When we are being criticized, then we can respond with working longer hours and proving the critics wrong. We have the added bonus of evading the crises developing at home by spending time in the office. Even with a small church, we can easily end up in the office twelve hours a day. (I know from personal experience. This is my coping mechanism of choice. Although I have little insight on how this actually works, because of my lack of self-awareness.)

I could go on. There are endless ways of growing thicker skin. But there's another option as well. We could just feel the emotions—sadness, disappointment, grief, anger, bitterness—it's uncomfortable. But we can learn to sit with them. Journal them. Walk with them. Run through them. Meditate with them.

Sensitive skin might not always be the greatest thing for being an administrator, but it can make us solid writers. When we sit with people who suffer, we can move into empathy quickly. When we can resonate with the emotional depth of our text, we preach passionately.

Recently, I met Curt Thompson, a psychiatrist and expert in interpersonal neurobiology. He explained to me that people don't remember much of what we teach or preach, but they do remember the emotions we invoke. He talks about the importance of emotions in his book, [*Anatomy of the Soul*](#):

This disdain toward our emotions often influences our life with God. That's because emotion is the very energy around which the brain organizes itself. Without emotion, life would come to a standstill. It is the means by which we experience and connect with God, others, and ourselves in the most basic way possible.

So, if you're feeling burdened by the calling, **go ahead and feel burdened by it**. If you're afraid you're going to have a nervous breakdown if you stop, that's probably a good indication that you need to rest. As Thompson goes on to say, "If we ignore emotion, we do so to our own peril, for to ignore it is to ignore the voice of God."