

Vulnerability in the pulpit

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I had the dream again. I was kayaking in a beautiful bay, following the snaking paths of the marsh, trying not to upset the nesting swans. Then, I looked down and realized that I was naked.

Naked dreams are common. For me, the archetypal visions began in junior high, as I went to school, anxious about mean girls and forgetting my clothes. They continued as I went to seminary, unprepared for a test, and also naked. I've taught classes naked. I've keynoted at conferences naked. And I've ended up in the pulpit naked. It's my subconscious conjuring up all my feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. It's my inner self, warning me, *see what will happen if you do this thing? You'll completely embarrass yourself! You can't do this. You'll only end up a fool!*

And so I wake up, put on my clothes, and listen to my fears. I smile and nod at them for a few moments, and then I tell my anxiety to back off because I've got to get back to learning, teaching, and preaching.

But being naked in the marshes felt like a different sort of dream somehow. I woke up and realized that I had been too naked with my congregation.

I had asked for a raise, and instead of listing my accomplishments, I appealed to my need. I know some ministers who are completely honest about their needs when asking for an increase and it works for them, but it left me feeling ashamed.

Most of my congregation were at the end of their lives, with housing values that had skyrocketed and investments that had soared. They didn't understand what it was like to try to buy into their market, with student loans looming. A couple members responded by nit-picking the way that I lived, complaining if I ever ate out, lifting eyebrows when I bought a lamp from the yard sale, and questioning me about my husband's income.

Being too vulnerable with them had left me embarrassed. Ashamed. Knowledge is power, and the more knowledge they had about me, the more power they had over me. In this case, it didn't lead to a deeper sense of community, vulnerability, and working together. It led me to a great deal of pain and therapy. And naked kayaking dreams.

This dream came to mind when Rachel Hackenburg asked me about vulnerability and self care. We've been going back and forth, trying to sort out our complex feelings about clergy self-care. (You can read our conversations [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) [Rachel wrote](#):

I'm not one who has any natural inclination to vulnerability, but the [suggestions I read](#) that clergy vulnerability should be exercised in the pulpit of all places really make me cringe. I've asked Carol Howard Merritt for her thoughts on vulnerability as an element of clergy self-care.

The suggestions come from [Jen Hatmaker's Washington Post article](#) on clergy burnout. She asks that pastors be more vulnerable in the pulpit. The article is excellent in many ways, but I cringe along with Rachel when it comes to solutions.

Maybe there are times when it works out the way that Hatmaker imagines. We pastors tell our parishioners in a sermon that we're trolling for sex on Ashley Madison and they have a load of understanding and love for us, and we form a deeper bond of community. But I doubt it. (I grew up in a church where the pastor confessed his affair from the pulpit and it just blew up the church.)

If we're burnt out and looking for love from strangers on the Internet, then we do need help, but it's not the sort that we can get from preaching about it. We need to go to counseling, with a therapist who is equipped with working with us on our deeper issues.

On the other hand, I am pretty vulnerable in the pulpit, much more than some preachers would advise. I do it, because I believe preaching needs to hit some sort of emotional chord. So how do we balance self-care and vulnerability? Here's some of my advice:

•**Don't give the wolves raw meat.** Within every church that I have served, I can name two to three people who wanted me fired. Sometimes they were actively working on it, other times they were just mumbling about it, but they wanted me

gone. If you're in this situation, it's not always because you're bad at your job. Sometimes the better you are at being a pastor, the more people want to have you fired. So don't feed the wolves. If people want to get rid of you (and they probably do), then don't give them a reason.

- **Protect your family.** I might be completely vulnerable and open about my life, but my daughter really doesn't want to go along for the ride. She is a private person, and I always keep that in mind.

- **Use third person.** Sometimes I want to get into a deep emotional truth, but I'm afraid if I tell my own story, the emotional energy of the congregation will go into trying to help me. And I don't need their care, concern, or casseroles; I want them to reflect on their own lives. So I use third person.

- **Don't use the pulpit as your therapist.** Preaching, when done well, is intellectually demanding and requires emotional health. We need a professional to help us unpack what's going on inside of us. Your congregation is not equipped to be that person.

- **Wait a couple of years.** If it feels too painful to talk about in the pulpit, then it probably is. Time is on your side. You can wait until the subject comes up in the lectionary cycle again.

- In all of this, **take care of yourself.** And I'm not just talking about getting a pedicure on Tuesday. I'm talking about getting the real care that you need--therapy, exercise, sobriety, friends, vegetables, financial sanity, or healthy sex. I don't advise that you hash all out in the pulpit, or even on Facebook. But learn to do it somewhere.

And, what would you add? What's your advice about vulnerability in the pulpit?