



ATTACHMENT VS. DETACHMENT by the Rev. N. Graham Standish, PhD, MSW, MDiv, MA

This is one in a bi-monthly series of reflections to help therapists and other healers integrate spirituality into their practice by introducing them to foundational spiritual themes and topics that aren't commonly taught in psychotherapy. These are rooted in Graham's 30+ years of advanced spiritual study, teaching, pastoring, and serving as a spiritual director.

Centering Prayer (start with a time of quiet centering, then read the prayer)

Holy Mystery, you know how much I long to draw close to you by giving myself to you, but I worry about what I have to give up to be close. It's hard for me to let go of all that has a hold on me—my ambitions, fears, possessions, substances, habits, beliefs, perceptions, and so much more. It's not that they are bad. It's that I often love and depend upon them more than I do you. Help me to live in a more centered way that can lead me to a greater sense of freedom. Amen.

Reflection

I don't have much in common with the late, great Pittsburgh Steelers football coach, Chuck Noll (although I do like to joke that between the two of us we've coached 4 Super Bowl-winning teams). We do share a favorite story that Noll would tell his players whenever it seemed as though his players were holding onto a defeat for too long:

Two monks, brothers Leo and Luke, had taken a vow of celibacy, which include never interacting with women lest they be tempted. One day, as they traveled to a distant monastery, they came to a river where the only bridge had rotted away. They had no choice but to swim across.

As they prepared to , brother Luke saw a woman crying along the bank. He walked over and asked her what the problem was. She said, "I have to get back to my family, but I can't swim. How will I get across?" Luke replied, "It's okay, I'll carry you." So he swam across with her on his back. Safely on the other side, the woman disembarked, profusely hugged him, and went on her way.

As the two monks continued their journey, brother Leo quietly fumed. Unable to hold it in any longer, he turned to Luke and said, "How could you have broken your vow? You not only spoke to her, but you carried her!" For a mile he berated Luke. Finally, Luke said, "Brother, I let that woman go five miles back. Why are you still carrying her?"

According to players on the team, their reaction to the story was, "What's he talking about? Monk? Woman? What's that have to do with losing?" I get it, though. Chuck Noll was talking about *detachment*, and detachment is fundamental to a healthy spiritual and psychological life.

To understand detachment, you first have to understand *attachment*. History's great spiritual teachers have consistently spoken about how the root of so much spiritual restlessness is our constant attachment to possessions, ideas, lifestyles, ambitions, need for control, and more. We're so unaware of how much our self-image and self-worth is glued to the stuff we love that we end up letting them control us. That's the point of the story. Leo was so attached to his ideal of purity that he lost his ability to compassionately help someone in need.

Modern life is plagued by attachments, and history's great spiritual teachers point out that the more we fall in love with certain things, structures, ideals, and experiences, the less free truly are. Our emotions and our desires become our masters. Addictions are attachments to the extreme. We become so attached to a substance (whether alcohol, a drug, or the brain chemical effect an activity has on us) that we lose all ability to make free, healthy, and life-giving choices.

Detachment is an intentional choice to disconnect ourselves from everything that has power and control over us. We still live normal lives with possessions, ideas, lifestyles, ambitions, control, emotions, and more. We just try to detach from our obsession with them. We free ourselves from their emotional power to dominate our lives. It's easy to cynically believe that detachment is a sophisticated version of denial or repression. It's not. Denial and repression numb us so we can survive. *Detachment frees us so we can thrive.* And that thriving opens us spiritually.

Here's an edited version of what I wrote on detachment in the *Upper Room Dictionary of Spiritual Formation* in 2003:

While it is normal psychologically to form strong attachments to people, things, events, and experiences, from a spiritual point of view attachments can be destructive.

They slowly erode our faith and spirituality by directing our attention away from God and onto thoughts, passions, people, things, and events of temporary and diminishing value. The more we are attached to anything, the less receptive we are to God.

Striving to become detached doesn't mean becoming objective and dispassionate in the way a scientist is expected to be while running an experiment or study. Detaching doesn't mean cutting off our emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. We still have feelings, opinions, and pain. Instead, it is complete awareness of the hold our attachments have on us, and of our need to be freed. It frees us to form deeper, richer emotions, perceptions, and thoughts because we are less encumbered by the need to appease our egos, passions, or the constricting and repressing rules of our culture. It allows us to care more deeply for others without wanting take their burdens onto our shoulders. We become engaged in projects without anxieties and fears about their outcomes. We do the best we can and give the results to God. In everything, God becomes the center. Detachment allows us to follow the example of Christ, who says, "yet not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

What's the impact of this for therapy? So many of our clients are controlled by fears, anxieties, shame, guilt, anger, ambitions, frustrations, addictions, false hopes, unrealistic expectations, obsessions, past abuses, and more. Spiritually-integrated therapists help them work through these. The spiritual part is working with their faith, however fragile it might be, so that they open up to spiritual healing by helping them: 1) become awake to the influence of their attachments; 2) become more aware of the emotional power their attachments have over them; 3) decide to work on detaching; and 4) become more open to God's guidance.

Ideas for Intervention

How do we do help people detach? Several thoughts:

- *Invite the client to explore her or his attachments, exploring the power they have over her or him, and then talk about ways to reduce their power.*
- *Share with them the idea of detachment, and encourage them to think of detachment as still having an emotional connection with everything, but loosening their power over them.*
- *If the person has a stronger faith, encourage her or him to identify specific attachments and then prayerfully give them to God: "God, I am so attached to this. I give it to you so that you can free me. And when I take it back, please help me to give it back again and let it go."*

