Case Study: Fr. Tim

Fr. Tim is 46 years old and has been the pastor of a rural parish for the past five years. He lives by himself and has to drive an hour to get to the nearest city. When he was first at the parish, he made it a point to take a day off to visit his mother and on occasion to spend some time with a former classmate from the seminary. Since his mother died last year, he has left his parish less often and has frequently spent his day off by himself From his youth he has struggled with self-esteem because of his slim, gangly appearance and his belief that he was "just average." He was frequently compared to his older brother and in his mind always came out "the loser." He has few friends among the other priests in the diocese or among the people he has served.

Currently, Fr. Tim spends most of his day off "logged on" to the Internet. He is among the avid users who find themselves spending inordinate amounts of time in a popular on-line community. When not in the chat room or emailing a few of its participants, Fr. Tim can be found playing games late into the evening and on occasion visiting an adult porn site. Fr. Tim is so captivated by his cyberspace lifestyle that he wants to spend more time there, sometimes to the neglect of his pastoral duties and of connecting with others in his "real life."

Recently, Fr. Tim began to question his Internet use after reading an article that described healthy and pathological Internet use. For the first time, he began to look at his virtual life and to identify some of the factors that contribute to his unhealthy use of the Internet. With some reflection, Fr. Tim realized that he was attempting to meet some basic human needs by his cyberspace activities. In addition, Fr. Tim became aware that the more he felt deprived in his daily life, the more he escaped to the Internet. He also took an honest look at himself and how much his relational and ministerial life had become disrupted by his Internet activity. He wrote in the margins of the article, "my life is out of balance—I am living two lives."

CyberActivities & Human Needs

Fr. Tim found John Suler's article, *The Psychology of Cyberspace,* particularly helpful in identifying the **needs** he was meeting by his Internet use. Although some of his activities could be classified as non-social, e.g., his game playing and looking at pornography, he realized that the majority of his activity was social in nature. It was motivated by his desire for **connection and belonging.** Prior to his personal reflections, he was not aware that his cyberspace activities were an attempt to **overcome loneliness** and an internal **sense of emptiness.**

Fr. Tim was surprised to see that he was also trying to address a **need for achievement and mastery** through his on-line activity. In the chat room that he frequented, he learned the culture and norms and was quite successful in negotiating relationships, even shaping the future of the group. Being successful here helped him bolster his **self-esteem and feel part of the creative process of creating an on-line world,** insuring his return for more.

Fr. Tim was surprised by John Suler's statement "that almost all cyberspace activities address the most basic of human needs—**the need to interact with other human beings**." He realized that the Internet helped him feel more expressive, more in control and less vulnerable than he usually feels in face-to-face interactions. Learning how to transfer these abilities to his real life is something that Fr. Tim realizes he needs to do to have a more satisfying interpersonal life.

It also became clear to Fr. Tim that remnants of his past, namely, competition, low self-esteem, and desire for admiration continue to preoccupy him and are part of his cyber relating as well as in his real life. Because of the lack of integration of his on-line activity and his real life, cyber - relating was eating up his life rather than expanding and enhancing his life. This realization that his life had become narrow, isolated and rigid rather than full and complete, is prompting Fr. Tim to meet with a counselor to address these issues.

Through Suler's article, Fr. Tim was reminded that spirituality is grounded in being in right relationship with self, others, God and the earth. This kind of spirituality is integral to becoming one's true self. Fr. Tim realized that he had gotten sidetracked from his spiritual journey. He found that the 12-step spirituality of Webaholics Anonymous is helping him move away from on-line relating. He is also developing real-time relationships that are helping him to deepen and expand his life.

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