

A Pastor Ripped Apart by Our Divided Country

For Dan White Jr., a trauma diagnosis pushed him toward a new calling: helping other exhausted faith leaders find peace.

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[MUSIC]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

We're all feeling exhausted. Between the stress of the pandemic, growing political divides and declining trust in institutions, burnout is at an all-time high, especially among those who have traditionally been society's bridge-builders. Teachers and health care workers are quitting in droves. It's the kind of moment when you might turn to a religious community or faith leaders for guidance. But those leaders are also struggling. Dan White, Jr., grew up in upstate New York, going to a small Baptist church down the street from his house. He knew early on that he wanted to be a pastor, a role he imagined as a unifying one. But trying to unify people in these divisive times ultimately led to his physical collapse. Now, he has a new calling: running a retreat center for burnt-out pastors in Puerto Rico. From New York Times Opinion, I'm Lulu Garcia-Navarro, and this is "First Person." Today, Dan White, Jr., and the great pastor resignation.

Are you ready to go?

Dan White Jr.

I feel good, yeah.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

You feel good? You feel good? What's the weather like there?

Dan White Jr.

Oh, it's always the same. It's, like, 82, 83, sunny, slight breeze.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Paradise, you mean.

Dan White Jr.

It is, yeah.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

All right. Dan, can you take me back to your early days as a pastor? When did you feel like you first started to understand what kind of pastor you were going to be, what your calling was, how you'd minister?

Dan White Jr.

Yeah. My early days of a pastor are a bit — I didn't know what I was doing. You know I — my first pastoral position was in another small Baptist church two hours away from where I grew up. And I didn't really have insight into the daily operations. Like, what am I supposed to do? I've got to prepare sermons, and visit people, and create Bible studies.

But there was this moment. I was 25, and a mother called me late at night, and her son had attempted suicide. And she said, you need to come over to the hospital, please, can you come over. And I remember, at that moment, having no idea what I'm supposed to do when I get to the hospital.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Were you scared?

Dan White Jr.

I was scared, yeah. I was — I didn't feel equipped for that horrific event. And so I got in the car and drove over there and, the only things I could think through was like, is there a — do I have — are there Bible verses to say at this moment? Is there a prayer I should pray? What should I say? I was just ruminating on running into every room in my mind to find out what I should do. And when I got there, the anguish was just very thick in the room.

And I remember sitting down next to this young guy, and the only thing I did — I don't know if it was automatic or intentional. But I put my hand on his arm and just rubbed his arm for almost 30 minutes. I just rubbed his arm. And that was my pastoral presence. And I do think, at that moment, I realized that this was going to be the way that I pastored.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So I mean, that sounds like a really key moment where you start to understand your approach to ministry. Were there other moments that felt really important in your journey as a faith leader?

Dan White Jr.

There's a lot of very personal and tender moments that no one would see, like that moment in the hospital. And then there are public moments where you're rallying a community of people around a very important time. And one of those was, my church and all of the surrounding neighborhoods experienced a horrible flood, and it just ruined everything. It ruined a town, and people were underwater for days. And at that moment was — I was aware of my power to rally people to move towards compassion and care. And —

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

How did that play out?

Dan White Jr.

Well, it was a lot of inviting people that weren't flooded to —

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Step up.

Dan White Jr.

— go down to a war zone, and just slug, and pull stuff out of people's basements and bring — if they had a shop vac, bring a shop vac. And that flood cleanup took months. And so it wasn't just a one-time event you did on a Saturday. It was something that I just had to keep inviting people into. And this was also a mark of — I was hoping, a mark of my ministry, that we weren't just going to take care of our own.

We were going to take care of people who weren't kind of inside our Christian community. And that was a significant — I think a second mark for me, was that — is caring about people that you probably wouldn't naturally care about, or caring about people you wouldn't actually be friends with, and helping them overcome that boundary. And so that was another big moment for me in rallying people to care.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

It's interesting, because you become a pastor in the early 2000s, right?

Dan White Jr.

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

And it's about that moment that the church starts to see a really big drop in attendance. It's a decline that I think has essentially continued every year since.

Dan White Jr.

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

And I think that this was often talked about as a sign of Americans becoming increasingly detached from religious institutions. But you're there trying to pull people in. Did you start to see, though, that happen in your own congregation — this sense of people actually pulling away from what you're trying to build?

Dan White Jr.

Yes, it was — a lot of people had experienced injuries, or even abuse, from a pastor at some point in their life. And maybe it wasn't even firsthand. They had known someone that had, or a family member had. And there was a significant image shift for them, where the pastor was not seen as the shepherd. There's —

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

But the wolf.

Dan White Jr.

Yes, that's exactly it. It wasn't looked at with just automatic kind of warmth and respect. And I think it's because people had seen some major public abuses and failures in pastors, and maybe even experienced some themselves. And so then therefore, all kind of pastors get characterized that way.

And there is this seesaw, or maybe a tipping point, where do I want to stick with this because of this injury and this hurt that I've experienced from this pastor? Is the whole thing called into question because of this one representation? And I think a lot of people were starting to ask that question because of their experiences with harsh and painful leadership.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

And how did that affect your work, all of these questions?

Dan White Jr.

Yeah. It took something that I think I had a lot of idealistic joy around and created an anxiety around it. Honestly, Lulu, I stopped sharing with people that I was a pastor.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Really?

Dan White Jr.

Oh, yeah. My wife and I would have conversations on a ride to some place, a party or social event, and I would say, Tonya, what should I tell people I do? It would always kind of take the air out of the room when I said what I did, if I was a pastor. And I had some shame, I guess, about having that role.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Can you get a little bit more specific about the shame?

Dan White Jr.

Yes. I had a few circumstances where — I'll give you one in particular. I had decided — our leaders had decided together that we were going to buy a building. We were going to buy this old Victorian house, and we

were going to renovate it and turn it into a place for refugees, as well as a coffee shop, and then also a multipurpose ministry space.

And we sought the input of the neighborhood, if they wanted this. And we just got so much information. So we held a vote one Sunday at church. And the majority said yes, but there was a few people that voted no, which is normal. But their response was, if this vote's going to go through, then I'm going to ruin you.

And they sent out a mass email to the entire church that this was a bad idea, but Dan is a bad leader. And they had actually convinced a little faction of people in our church that this decision was really just my mastermind psychological skills to convince people to do something they didn't really want to do with their money.

And I realized at that moment that being a pastor is this really precarious little spot you sit in that people project all of their wants, and needs, and demands, expectations, unrealized hopes onto you. And when you don't meet them, they are posed with a response. Either they're going to reject you, or ruin you, or abandon you.

And that's ultimately what started to settle into my own ministry, was just this fear of being abandoned and losing people, and being interpreted in very villainous, demonizing ways and not knowing how to like — that's the shame. Not knowing how to get that off me.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So your feelings about the role are changing, and the way that it's being perceived is changing. What would you say changed about the work itself at that time?

Dan White Jr.

Yes.

Everybody is aware of how heated politics are. But during the Romney and Obama election, that really hit our church pretty hard. And I had a — I remember vividly, a woman came up to me right after I was done preaching, a dear woman who I loved, and she said Dan, I've got to leave this church. I'm conservative, and I don't feel safe here, and I feel judged here, and I just can't stay here with this kind of judgment.

And I responded with, no, there's space for you. You do belong here. I'm so sorry. I tried to kind of assuage those fears. But she just said, I've got to go, and she left.

And just in two weeks, a young couple came up to me after I was preaching with the same kind of news, but from the opposite perspective.

And they said, Dan, we can't stay in this church knowing there are people who are voting conservative and who are — we can't be complicit to this injustice, and there's no space for us here, and we have to go. And I — just in shock that both of these people didn't think they could belong in the same community. And I didn't really have words to keep them.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

You couldn't show them a path through the middle?

Dan White Jr.

I was trying. And you know, I don't even call myself a centrist I don't think I was a middle ground person. I just wanted to — unity was really important. And I think a lot of pastors, even if they have political persuasions, have this fierce and passionate desire to keep the church

unified, to keep us together. And that power was breaking. That ability was just being shattered.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

That increasing politicization, of course, comes to a head in 2016 with the election of Donald Trump.

Dan White Jr.

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Did that feel like it supercharged the experience you were already having of struggling to hold the community together?

Dan White Jr.

Oh, the election of Trump just threw battery acid on the whole reality. Where people would never have felt comfortable calling another brother or sister in Christ, you know, a horrible name like a Marxist or a white supremacist or a baby killer, I mean, these things just started to — they were just flowing off people's tongues when Trump got elected.

And I think for a lot of pastors, at that point, I think we were disappointed. I think we were disappointed that all our work, and all our discipleship, and all our preaching, and this is what we were seeing. It seemed like every six to nine months, there was a new ripping and tearing that was around my inability to keep people together or to meet the need that they had.

And I wasn't really present to how frequent it was. I just felt like it was just part of being a pastor.

And then I took a vacation — my wife and I took a vacation — and I remember being so tired that the first day we got there, I slept 14 hours. I was just so tired. I couldn't get enough sleep. And I remember coming out of the bedroom and my wife asking, are you OK?

Did you — you were in a coma in there. And I said, oh, I'm just tired. And I sat down to have a bowl of cereal, and I lifted a spoonful of Cheerios to my mouth and my hands were shaking. And my wife said, why are your hands shaking. And I kind of passed it off as just low blood sugar. But the shaking never went away. That whole 10-day vacation, they just wouldn't stop trembling.

And we started to get really nervous that maybe this is Parkinson's, maybe — and we actually cut our vacation short by two days and went home and met with the physician, and they put me through a week-long kind of battery of tests — neurological tests, with a neurologist. All of the wires hooked up to your head, and you're on a treadmill, and then you're doing brain scans. I mean, just so many tests to figure out what was going on in my brain.

And they called me in after they received all of the tests, and they were going to go over them with me, and they pulled me into the room, and the neurologist introduced me to a psychologist that was also in the room. And I thought that was weird. And he said, your neurology is showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

PTSD.

Dan White Jr.

Yeah. And I said, what? No. I thought he was smoking something. And the psychologist was there, and she's like, well, what do you do for a

living? And I said, well, I'm a pastor. She says, have you ever experienced traumatic events, very painful events? And I said no. I kept saying, no, I don't think so.

She's like, when a veteran comes back from a physically hostile and emotionally hostile environment, they start to have a tremor in their hands because the adrenaline in their forearms and in their legs will not turn off. Their brain is telling them that they're still not in safety.

She's like, I think you have CTSD, which is cumulative traumatic stress disorder. It's not from one significant violent act.

It's just consistently being in a very conflict-oriented, painful circumstance over a long period of time. And your body starts to adapt to it. She's like, would you like to meet with me so we can work through this? She's like, just three or four sessions. I remember going home and telling my wife, and I just was kind of incredulous, that this is just a joke. I was really having a hard time believing that something I loved had done damage to me.

[MUSIC]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Dan, can you tell me, when you were talking to your therapist, what you were recounting as these traumatic experiences? How were you describing what that had looked like?

Dan White Jr.

Well, I don't think I want you completely in the therapy office with me, but there was a tool that she walked me through that was what she called an emotional and relational audit. And I mapped out, over the 20-

year period, people that I had loved that were no longer in my life. I had to name people that had attacked me.

And then I also had to name events that I was privy to in people's lives that were traumatic for them, and I had to be present to them. And I mapped out, over a period of 20 years, over 180 people that had come into my life or left in my life. And I had just tucked all of this stuff under the carpet. And what she called it — she's like these are all little deaths. These are all little deaths that you've experienced. And you haven't grieved any of them.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

I was diagnosed with PTSD after being in war zones. And so I know from my own experience that when you get a diagnosis like that, the guidance you're given is to get yourself out of whatever situation is causing you that continuing stress, if you can.

Dan White Jr.

True. Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

I also know how hard it is to separate yourself from something that you love doing.

Dan White Jr.

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So what happened?

Dan White Jr.

Well, Lulu, I fought it for, like, a year. She said to me, if you keep this up, you're going to have a heart attack. You need to unplug from this job. And for a year, I lingered in resistance and stubbornness. And I didn't think there was any other way. I had to — and partly is, I just didn't want to give up on people, and I love them, and I didn't want to be a quitter.

So I he was laying in bed one morning and just — I don't know if you've ever felt kind of that depression, or just a weight, and you just don't want to get out of bed. You just don't want to — I had a meeting that was, like, at 11:00, and it was, like, 10:30. And my wife comes in the room and she says, are you getting ready? Do you feel sick? Are you going to — and I said, I can't. I can't do it.

And she's like, what can't you do? I said, I can't — I cannot stay. I cannot do this. And she's like, OK, do you need to quit? And I said, I can't quit. She's like, that's an oxymoron. That doesn't make sense. And I said, I don't have the power to say I quit.

I'm afraid of being a failure. I cannot fail. And I said, I think I'm too weak to say I'm done. And she said, I'll do that for you.

And so when we finally announced that I was done to the congregation, we had a Sunday morning meeting, and everyone knew that it was something significant.

And I stood next to my wife, I stood next to our leaders, and we read a statement that I had a physical diagnosis of this and I needed to resign in order to find health. And there were gasps, and there was —

it created, at that moment, a lot of questions. Like, they wanted more details. They wanted more information. They wanted me to answer for

myself. And I just was at the point of having no energy and no words left. And I just was too exhausted.

And afterwards, I had people come up to me and say beautiful, beautiful, heart-affirming things. And I also had people say really violent things. You gave up on us. I had someone say, you're a spiritual father that's abandoning us. And so it actually, Lulu, was like — I remember driving home after that service and being like, yeah, I can't do this. Yeah, I'm glad I'm done.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So you quit. And it's not just like quitting any job, because being a faith leader is not a job. It's a vocation. I wonder what it was like to wake up the day after you quit and not be that anymore.

Dan White Jr.

Well, I did — I woke up and I thought, what the Hades did I just do? We struggled financially because we didn't have my income. And I did struggle with the question every time someone asked me in public, you know, what do you do for a living? I'm a burnt-out pastor. I didn't really know how to respond.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Yeah. I mean, it's funny, because there was that earlier period where you were ashamed to say you were a pastor when you were a pastor, and now, you're kind of ashamed to say you used to be a pastor.

Dan White Jr.

Yeah. You noticed that. Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

A lot of complicated feelings there.

Dan White Jr.

Yes, there is. Yeah.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Does there come a moment when you realize that this is not an isolated experience that you've been having, that your story sort of fits into the larger story of something going on in this country with faith leaders?

Dan White Jr.

That's a great question. I thought I was alone. I thought I was like — and I'm sure — I know this is a common experience for anybody that's experienced a trauma event. That's the first thing you feel, is I don't think anyone understands me. I don't think anyone can ever understand me. You feel so socially isolated.

But the more I shared it with pastors and with ministry leaders, and even some social workers, floodgates were starting to open up. It was like I found another alcoholic who was trying to recover. Like, you too? I started to find that this was a widespread groundswell of ministry leaders who were carrying such a burden that — and there wasn't a lot of permission to talk about it.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

How did that feel? Better to know that you weren't alone, worse to know that this was a huge problem facing the church?

Dan White Jr.

I felt frustrated. And I think it introduced a healthy discontent. Something is not right here and has to be addressed. My wife and I

looked for — I mean, we looked and looked and looked for a place to help us with this. And every place was like a Betty Ford Clinic, if you know what that is.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

I do.

Dan White Jr.

Like, \$5,000 or \$10,000, or \$15,000, and come for a week.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Fancy places that are sort of, like, retreats, but they're dealing with people with alcohol abuse or drug abuse or other attendant issues, but they're really expensive.

Dan White Jr.

Totally. Really expensive. And as a pastor making, like, \$38,000 a year — or was — I mean, I couldn't swing that.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So you wanted a Betty Ford for pastors.

Dan White Jr.

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

What did you do?

Dan White Jr.

Well, my hope was initially quite small. I thought, huh, what if I just buy a house with a small one-bedroom apartment and just take one leader at

a time, you know, maybe 10 leaders a year, and they just — I just spent time with them, and we have conversations, and I help them unpack.

And I started sharing that with people, that maybe that's how God was going to repurpose my pain, was that I was going to — even though I was still healing, I was going to create a space to do that for people. So quickly, my wife said, let's move to Puerto Rico and stay somewhere warm while we're recovering.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Can I just say here that I like your wife?

Dan White Jr.

She's awesome, yes. She is —

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Your wife makes some very good decisions for you.

Dan White Jr.

Decisions. Yes, she does.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Go on.

Dan White Jr.

She's like, let's go to Puerto Rico. We'll just get a Airbnb. It could just be a month. It could be two months. And then we'll figure it out from there. So we didn't really have a plan. We got an Airbnb, and it had a one-month expiration date. And every month, we were just asking the lady, can we stay a little longer, for another month? So we kept renewing this.

And Puerto Rico, being so beautiful and quiet, it helped my anxiety kind of lower. And then one day, she was looking on Zillow, and she saw this \$500,000 property that was like a mini-resort slash restaurant. It was kind of in a state of just, they just wanted to sell it and move on.

And it was in the rainforest between the mountains and the Caribbean Sea. Fruits were growing on the property, and the beauty was really that it was a garden. And she said, hey, look at this. This is much bigger than an apartment. And I said, I don't think I can do that. And so —

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So you said no.

Dan White Jr.

I said no. And she said, OK, all right, that's fine. That's cool. And she just closed the laptop. And but I do — I have to say, it dropped a little water in my soul that there might have been something bigger. And so a couple of months later, she re-looked at that Zillow and it was still there. And I was more open this time.

And at one point, I had a denominational leader, a large denomination, say, Dan, we are hemorrhaging. We are losing leaders every week, and we don't know how to help them. And we have a large church health budget, and we don't even know how to use it.

And we ended up inviting a chorus of people, supporters, denominational leaders, friends to consider rehabbing this Puerto Rico center into a Betty Ford Clinic for pastors. And we were able to raise about \$500,000 in order to — it was all designated to purchasing and renewing this place.

And so we opened the Kineo Center. And “kineo” is Greek for being moved. And as we opened our center, we realized we need to get clarity on who’s coming and why they’re coming. So we did an intake form. And I mean, quickly, we saw these same repeated pain points that almost showed up across gender, across denominations, across Black or white, Brown. It was like, wow, these are all the same.

And some of them — one is a pastor. And she came and she shared a story that ended up becoming a bomb that had shrapnel all over her church, specific to Covid. They decided — their church decided as a team to stop meeting in person when Covid started to get quite serious, early on. And she received a significant backlash from her church.

And she found herself constantly having to explain herself and defend herself, why we couldn’t meet in person. And her church is only 120 people, and 30 people left her church at that point. And then fast-forward just, like, a year and a half later.

Their church decided to kind of open up again and meet in person, but with a masked policy. And she had a faction of people who said, you want to murder people by meeting in person. And she lost another chunk of people.

And she’s like, I didn’t get into ministry to fight people. And that’s all I’ve been doing for the last two years, is fighting people. And she was so tired from the conflict, and ended up resigning.

And I’ve heard that story multiple times, that there really — a leader couldn’t make a decision that was a right decision. It was impossible to make a decision that a majority would be happy with. And rather than working through their frustration with the decision in a humane way, it

became very personal, and you know, they were demonized because of that, and lost people.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Well, to that point, do you fear that the church is going the way of so much of society in this moment, becoming increasingly pulled to extremes where there's just not a lot of space left for a shared middle?

Dan White Jr.

Yes. I mean, just flip through any cable news station and you — whether it's left or right, you can feel the intensity of how we demonize someone else. We have a little ground to speak generously and kindly, and also see people as people.

And that's why I spoke earlier about the disappointment pastors are feeling, is that I think we realize social media, and cable news, and the political partisanship that's just gripped us has done more forming and shaping on our congregation than our own sermons have.

I think that's contributing to the mass burnout that's happening.

And it's — burnout isn't just, like, you're working too many hours. There's an existential breaking that's happening. Is what I'm doing actually working? Is it fruitful? Are people really transforming to love people that are unlike them, or only just to love their own kind or their own political voting bloc? On and on and on.

I think that's — I think this last two or three years has revealed things we didn't know were there, that we didn't really want to know were there. And so that's why pastors are struggling with it so much.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Dan, there is, as we've been talking, a universality to what's happening. And yet the role of religion is unique in society. My question is, why should this matter, this erosion of the church specifically, to someone who maybe hasn't attended church in years, or never did? What do you think the significance of this change specifically is to a society at large?

Dan White Jr.

The role that the church has had, the role that that community, that bounded set of people, played was it gave many people a place to belong, and to find yourself, and to find family and affection. And I think because the center is eroding, and it's harder and harder for that to exist, I think that the consequence is going to be more depression, isolation and loneliness.

The things that we depended upon don't feel as dependable. Institutions, the role of pastor, the attendance every Sunday morning, meeting our needs, those things don't feel that dependable. And that creates a collective uncertainty.

And I do think that there will always be a space where people will still, like, hunker down and move into scarcity, and just try to keep the institution and the church alive as it is out of a survival mode. But I think that there will be a large evaluation.

I mean, I'm seeing pastors every week who would never have considered rethinking their call as a pastor, who are doing that every week. And it's just because things are so broken and hurting and exhausting, and they're faced with that question now. And they never had to face it before. So I think I think it's just kind of flipping over the apple cart, and everything is kind of being questioned.

[MUSIC]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Pastor Dan, thank you very much.

Dan White Jr.

Thank you, Lulu. It's been a joy.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

“First Person” is a production of New York Times Opinion. Thank you for listening. We’ll be back in the fall with more new episodes. In the meantime, tell us what you think of the show. You can email us at firstperson@nytimes.com.

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