“First Reformed” as a couple’s vignette

The couple is in their mid-30’s and live in a small, close-knit town in the mid-West. The wife is pregnant, and at the end of services one Sunday, has asked the pastor to come and talk with her husband who has been depressed for some time. Thus far, we have no other background on the couple’s history. The pastor is a former military officer who has lost his son to the Iraq war and his wife to divorce. Part of his effort to heal has involved turning towards his faith and training for the ministry. He has a long-standing drinking problem that is known to his own mentor in the Church, but to no one else.

This is the “set up” of “First Reformed,” a film by Paul Schrader and starring Ethan Hawke in the title role. It offers an opportunity to dig into the many-layered challenge of helping a couple, helping them in a crisis centered around the emotional implications of the climate situation, and of seeing how another person approaches the helping process and perhaps imagining how one might supervise the pastor’s efforts.

As the scene unfolds, we learn that the presenting issue for the couple is the husband’s distress over the pregnancy and what burden he would feel in bringing a life into this world as it is about to undergo terrifying changes. He brings out piles of research on the climate situation and the various apocalyptic scenarios that have been predicted by scientists. Looking at the pastor, his voice breaks as he says “when she, let’s say it’s a she, the baby is a girl, when she says to me “you knew this!” What can I tell her?” {actual quote inserted here} In response, the pastor attempts to argue that there always have been dark moments in human history, and even cataclysms that might result in the end of human life. But still, we go on to face the future – there’s always a tomorrow.

True to life, the pastor’s own feelings are interwoven in the clinical setting and that lends some understanding to his rather brittle response. He has turned to the role of pastor in part to deal with his own grief and the effort to emerge from loss. At a deeper level, he is emotionally frozen and limited in his empathic capacity. In addition, he is fearful of others and turns away the clear interest certain female parishioners have in him even as he displays his own nascent, repressed feelings for the wife of the couple. His rigidity leads him to awkwardly and dismissively push away any offering of support or caring, as well as approaching the couple’s problem as though it were a philosophical challenge. In his first encounter with the depressed husband, he is heard to think “it was exhilarating!” about their time together even as it is clear to the viewer that he is not at all connecting with the young man’s distress.

Work with couples is inherently complex and there are a multitude of differing modes of therapy and angles of approach. The objective of this exercise is to take your own model of treatment and consider the challenges presented by a couple divided in a particular way by their feelings regarding the climate problem and facing a decision as significant as having children in the face of those feelings and that disagreement. In the film, the intensity of feeling is extreme, and the stakes emerge as enormous. That, too, is an aspect that must be taken into account by a treating clinician and intensifies the subjective emotional states (or countertransferences) that this situation evokes. What are the “tools'' one might bring to bear in working with this couple, and in helping oneself bear the stress of agreeing to meet with them?