

THE CAMPUS MINISTER AS PSYCHOTHERAPIST

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If "psychotherapist" sounds artificial or pompous, remember that it merely means one who moves another person toward health or wholeness by some kind of talk therapy. "Counselor" is so widely used in our culture (financial, legal, advice givers, religious, etc.) that it is about like a church using the name "activities building" for gym and recreation building. I ask such churches, "Do you shoot craps in there, or square dance, or what?" Most churches have updated such buildings into "Family Centers" or "Recreation Centers."

Most students who have problems want to bounce some alternatives off the brain of someone they trust. Some have deep-seated problems that are about to inundate them, habits that they can't seem to overcome, like drugs, unacceptable sexual behavior, procrastination, isolation, kleptomania, or bulimia. These, of course, call for some astute diagnosis and maybe urgent treatment. Anyone who is in doubt about the seriousness of the problem needs to double-check with another therapist or refer to a therapist with more time and expertise than the campus minister has at the moment. For example, chronic procrastination or bulimia may be signs of depression -- with the high rate of student suicides, these red flags must not be overlooked.

Many students, however, need someone to talk to, and the campus minister is the ideal one. My observation is that she/he is much better prepared for this kind of help than the average pastor, even the pastor of a church that adjoins the campus. I refer to such problems as:

- (1) compulsive and repetitive doubts;
- (2) conflict with parents and confusion about how they ought to feel about one or both parents;

- (3) how far to go in petting or being affectionate in relationships with the other (preferred to "opposite") sex;
- (4) masturbation and/or lust feelings and thoughts;
- (5) how to get along with a roommate or faculty member;
- (6) breaking off a love affair or standing the hurt of being rejected because the other person is pulling away;
- (7) finding "the will of God" in life's vocation, summer mission work or even summer jobs;
- (8) deciding about how to go along with peers in what might be considered sinful or destructive or dangerous practices.

Many pastoral psychotherapists waste time and get the student off on rabbit trails (or sidetracks) by coming at the student's presenting problem with a bunch of preconceived ideas about counseling. You don't have to understand a life history in order to help a student get in touch with what she/he wishes to change and can change. If you listen carefully the first five minutes of the first session, you will probably get an idea of what the student wishes to change, and the presuppositions that cause the presenting problem to be a problem.

For example, "I don't love this boy but he vows that God wants him to marry me, that he is in love for the first time in his life. But I can't stand to hurt him." Listen to the word "can't" and "he vows" and the packaged words "in love." Her grandiose view of herself as a person who must not ever act in a manner that hurts anyone, his pushiness in dragging God into his wish fulfillment decision, and perhaps her concept of being "in love" -- these are already on the table to look at.

It is in the first session that we try to get the student focussed on what can be changed and what cannot. The only purpose of psychotherapy is to change something, patterns especially, what can be videotaped usually. Sometimes it is to change our attitude toward the existential aspects of life: our own limitations, the childishness and even maliciousness of other people, living with uncertainty and ambiguity, and

reaching out for meaning and relationship that will make life great. This requires hope and realism on the part of the therapist. Hope is the magic word (Rom. 8:24-25). Hope says, "You don't have to continue to be as you have been. You can change."

Often the way you ask questions helps to clarify the presenting problem: How is this a problem to you? How long have you gone over and over this indecision or whatever? What should happen if you did so-and-so? What have you tried and failed at (concerning the problem)? Is this something you have given up on? When was this handled better? What would your most sensible (or best) friend say you ought to do about this? What would it be like if it got worse? How would you act if you didn't have the problem? How would you know if you didn't have the problem?

All of such questions have a presupposition that something about the problem can be changed. The therapist may have to alert the person to some basically difficult reality factors, like you can't change another human being; only yourself. If the trouble is between the student and the parent, you may have to caution them not to cut off their noses to spite their faces, especially if they are economically dependent on the parents. Sometimes, in broken love relationships, the kindest thing to do is to urge them to be careful not to give double signals. "I don't love you now, but I don't know how I will feel about you a year from now" holds out hope and often causes the one who is clinging to pursue with renewed effort.

I remember pointing out to a young woman that she was putting herself in a bad light by going too fast and too far in the relationship. It went something like this: "From what you say, he may interpret you as determined to win him and ultimately get you down the aisle. What he will want ultimately is a strong person who can stand on her own feet. What could you do that will show your strong side? I know it's there and you know it's there, but he may not. You may lose him by trying this, but at least you will have been authentic. You've tried pursuing and selling as he may see it. If he doesn't think you are worth his

pursuing you, there are other fish in the pond." It turned out that he had had an alcoholic mother and soon had the wisdom to seek help in finding out why he was afraid to get close to any woman.

Words are magic. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but primarily by catchwords." The Transactional Analysis school of therapy found out back in the Sixties that most, if not all, of us are operating on catchwords, tapes and scripts which we picked up in early childhood. They were implanted in us (or we said them to ourselves) by significant others, parents or teachers. We swallowed them and are carrying them out in our adult life. For example, my father said to me as a boy: "You can do anything anybody else can do, within reason, if you are willing to pay the price for it." That became a script of my life. Don't be afraid to call on autobiographical material to illustrate your points. Psychotherapy is partly re-education. People get disillusioned because they were illusioned in the first place.

Even attributions can become mandates. I have just read a book edited by an English psychologist, Charles Antaki, and an English psychiatrist, Chris Brewin, entitled Attributions and Psychological Change. It shows that people tend to be victimized or liberated depending on who they have met, or come to meet, people who believe in them, help them to rewrite their "tapes" and "scripts," someone who believes in them enough to cancel out their old destructive tapes. It has been referred to often in the Western World as the Pygmalian technique. Remember "My Fair Lady"? Every therapist worth his/her salt is a liberator from old armors and enslavers. The Apostle Paul was dealing with the task in Romans and Galatians, freedom in Christ that sets us free from the bondage of the law.

So helping students is partly (maybe largely) a matter of finding out where the chains are.

One way to do this is to get the student to eavesdrop on himself/herself. "What did you say to yourself when you got back to your room?" "If you didn't blow up and hurt with anger,

what would you say to yourself about yourself?" Everybody talks to themselves, out loud or silently. If we are going to manage ourselves well, we must make good input into our subconscious. Anyone who can make you bad-mouth yourself can wound you or cripple you permanently.

That last word is the catch, "permanently." Cognitive therapists (Beck and Ellis, for example) have known for years that we can rewrite our scripts. No one can keep us believing everything we held precious at eight years of age. Robert Browning, the Victorian poet, in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, has the young erring priest say:

I've broken bounds;
You should not take a fellow eight years old
And make him swear to never kiss the girls.

A good part of counseling young people is helping them to update their consciences and rethink the mishmash of values and prejudices and false beliefs that have been handed down to them. The competent psychotherapist is the one who sees people, not as a bucket to be filled, but as a candle to be lit.

A very excellent modern psychiatrist, Dr. Jas F. Masterson (in *The Real Self*, p. 61) says: "A therapist cannot direct, force, seduce, or intimidate real self-activation. . . One cannot direct, order, flatter, dominate, threaten, coerce, seduce, or otherwise force a patient to activate his real self or individuate." I would use words like grow, mature, become whole, or develop autonomy under Christ. Our goals are similar, though. We are trying to help people to forsake their sense of helplessness and stand tall, as tall as Christ (Eph. 4:11-16), and relate to people as a creatively caring person. Maslow had it right when he said, "One cannot become fully human in a blind alley" (*Journals*, p. 207).

The campus minister, then, is not trying to play junior psychoanalyst. He need not major on history, birth order, assessment of past traumas, or even dreams. He is problem

oriented and solution oriented. An analysis may become interminable, and some question whether analysis really changes people. As Robert Frost said, "We guess at one another." But change we must. Our choice is growth or decay. Maybe there is no greater role in life, nor greater vocation, than to be a catalyst for growth.

Thomas Mann, the German author, said the following: "There is at bottom only one problem in the world, and this is its name. How does one break through? How does one get open? How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?" (Doctor Faustus, p. 307).

It is when we have a problem that we face the opportunity to grow, to become, to hitch our little practical wagons to a star. Or if we can't find a star yet, we at least can hitch them to a horse. Herein lies the opportunities for the campus minister.