

Not to “Lord it Over”: Tempering the Power Differential through the Use of Narrative Therapy

Introduction

I sat excitedly in a seminary classroom anticipating a rich and thick discourse on the ethics of pastoral counseling from a practical theologian. The first part of the class was replete with therapeutic psychobabble adopting, ultimately, the Rogerian dictum of the non-directive approach. At the end of the first part of the course, we were given an assignment in our respective small groups to formulate a pastoral counseling approach to a given crisis. My small group was given a case of a young, unwed woman contemplating abortion. One member of the group surmised the contents of the course thus far with this touching illustration from another Pastoral Counseling professor: the pastoral counselor (PC) in any given counseling situation is invited to that counselee’s living room. The PC is a guest, and is only able to visit the different rooms the host is willing to divulge and discuss with the hope that in this process, the counselee will open up more given a positive correlation of time and trust.

The small group’s final answer was to allow the woman to speak freely by avoiding every proclivity to interject any of our own opinions, thoughts, insights, or even questions. Admittedly, such a gentle, non-threatening stance can promote a healthy context for allowing the counselee to control the direction of the counseling session; however, it does in many ways render the PC unduly powerless to broach any difficult questions for fear of discomforting the host. Because of such instances, Alan Billings adamantly discourages pastors to be counselors. He indicts the non-directive approach as reflecting, “Unexamined utilitarian ethics of a liberal and secular culture....Christian pastors cannot be non-directive for if Christianity is true we can

hardly be said to be offering Christian pastoral care if we do not pass on to people that truth about the human condition and human destiny.”¹

At the second half of the course, the professor taught us a problem-solving counseling methodology, which entailed studying the given situation thoroughly, constructing options for the person to choose from, dialoguing with the person to disclose these options, and then supporting the person in whichever decision the person chooses.² For our final project, we were to apply this problem-solving approach to a family crisis involving the death of a beloved son and the decision for or against organ donation. The small group completed the assignment of laying out the options after a thorough perusal of the situation. Such a stance can achieve an objective solution to a given problem in a brief duration; however, it delegates the PC as the powerful creator who delineates what the options are for the person, possibly having an influential role in the person’s decision making process.

Clearly, the discrepancy of the power relationship between the PC and the counselee are overt in the two above-described approaches. The power differential between the PC and the counselee, and the attempt to close the gap between these parties have been a difficult task for the pastoral counseling practice so much so that in one pastoral counseling class, starkly contrasting models in terms of pastoral influence, are presented without meaningful exposition of their differences. To his credit, the professor introduced a worthy topic in pastoral counseling -

¹ Alan Billings, "Pastors or Counsellors," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context*, ed. David Willows and John Swinton (Philadelphia: Kingsley, 2000).

² Not all problem-solving approaches require an active role of just the PC, wherein the pastor, as a lone ranger, seeks to peruse the given situation and lay out the options. In crisis counseling, problem-solving might be the only effective option; however, as David Switzer point out in his article, problem-solving through the three steps of contact, focus, and cope involves extensive dialoguing with the counselee. Switzer astutely observes, “The danger in all this is that the activity and directness may be expressed in ways which communicate paternalism or authoritarianism, which are directive in the sense of suggesting that the counselor will do for the person what that person must do for himself or herself.” David K. Switzer, "Crisis Intervention and Problem Solving," in *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, ed. Robert J. Wicks, Richard D. Parsons, and Donald Capps (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 158.

the ethics regarding the subtle pastoral temptation of power and the inherent influence in counseling approaches.

Although much has already been researched and written on the dynamics of the power issue and the transpiration of sexual abuse in unhealthy relating,³ not much has been addressed, in terms of the power differential and the counseling approaches that PCs utilize, which may contribute to the destruction of the personhood of the counselee through harsh, overly authoritarian approaches or to the incapacitation of the counselor through a spineless activity of listening only to reflect back. In most of the fine work on the power disparity in the pastor-parish relationship, the imbalance seems to acknowledge the issue of sexual misconduct as stated earlier.

What about a sincere PC's struggle for power and influence, especially with a genuine heart to help the one who is hurting? How does the PC practice the admonition, "Do not lord it over those in your charge?"⁴ Psychoanalyst Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig in his insightful book, *Power In The Helping Professions*, speaks with clarity the inherent archetypal shadow of the power for hunger:

The dark side of this noble image of the man of God is the lying hypocrite, the man who preaches not because he believes but in order to gain influence and power. As in the case of the doctor and his patients, so with the clergyman it is frequently the members of his congregation who involuntarily activate his dark brother...the clergyman becomes a hypocrite and false prophet precisely because he wants to bring people to the true faith....⁵

³ For example, Marie M. Fortune in *Is Nothing Sacred?* deals quite well with pastors in a position of trust, who utilize their power to sexually abuse their parishioners, resulting in the destruction of lives, marriages, and congregations and the defamations of the Church. Marie M. Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?: When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2002). Others like James Poling in *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, Karen Lebacqz, Ronald G. Barton in *Sex in the Parish*, and Peter Rutter in *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* all caution the clergy against this lurking occupational hazard. In addition, the American Academy of Pastoral Counseling states the following client-relationship principle in their Ethics code: "We recognize that the therapist/client relationship involves a power imbalance, the residual effects of which are operative following the termination of the therapy relationship. Therefore, all sexual behavior or harassment as defined in Principle III, G with former clients is unethical." Ethics code of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, Principle III, H.

⁴ 1 Peter 5:3.

⁵ Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, *Power in the Helping Professions* (Putnam: Spring Publications, 1971), 19, 26.

The subtle temptation for power that emanates from the pastor's own humanness –well intentioned or not,⁶ the authoritative functional role of the pastor in the eyes of the members in many church contexts,⁷ and the conflicting ideologies of psychotherapies bombarding the PC remains problematic. As pastors and counselors in this spiritual helping profession, the PC's sincere desire to minister and the desire to make a difference through influence may be the tension that becomes an ethical issue. This is especially true because the PC can convince her/himself with easy rationale that the intention is only for the good of the counselee, to love, help, and edify in a truly ministerial manner. Unfortunately, Guggenbühl-Craig adamantly avers, "No one can act out of exclusively pure motives. Even the noblest deeds are based on pure and impure, light and dark motivations."⁸ The PC must be cognizant that both light and shadow sides reside in her/him.

Although there are preventative measures to safeguard against these proclivities such as the need for holy friendships that challenge narcissistic tendencies as well as affirm the gifts, true life of discipleship, clergy self-care and the like described by L. Gregory Jones in his poignant essay, *Needy Pastors*, for the purpose of this paper, I will limit the topic to the following

⁶ Henri Nouwen, in his book on leadership, *In the Name of Jesus*, reflects on three temptations leaders face: the need for relevance, the need to be spectacular, and the need for power. He writes, "Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life." Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 59. At the same time, the pastor's sincere desire to help and change the situation can be the drive for impatient authoritarianism.

⁷ Admittedly, the Bible does confer some form of authority to those in leadership. Samuel Southard explains that this authority is "the power to influence opinion, induce belief, and so lead to action in areas defined as spiritual by a group of persons who acknowledge Christ as Lord." Samuel Southard, *Pastoral Authority in Personal Relationships* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 29. However, the discrepancy persists in his prescribed approach to authority in that this author, while staunchly rejecting domination (86), espouses a patriarchal model of authority, characterizing it as *manly* authority of personal commitment, realistic judgment, direct conversation, and understanding relations (63). Guggenbühl-Craig points out that the patients, "for various reasons, wish to see in him someone who is not only psychically healthy but is far along on the path to individuation. In other words they want their therapist to be an **omniscient magician**." For pastors this magician image is projected even more so because of their role of God's representative. Guggenbühl-Craig, 131.

⁸ Guggenbühl-Craig, 9.

question:⁹ Of the current psychotherapies, what is one of the therapies that offers the Pastoral Counselor, the attitude, approach, and ethics to guard against the power trap by preferring the other while offering non-directive insights? I will assert that Narrative therapy is a viable psychotherapy that can assist the PC to hold the ethical tension in check to foster a mutual relationship between the pastor and the parish through its attitude, approach, and the underlying ethic. The PC can offer insights by questions of curiosity while maintaining mutuality of the pastor-parish relationship by preferring the counselee's stories and positions in the counseling situation since in worship through liturgies, sacraments, and proclamation of the Word, the parish already is aware of the normative Christian praxes.

In this paper, I will discuss a few of the basic types of pastoral counseling methods that represent the extremes of discrepancies in therapeutic approaches with respect to the power/influence of the PC, offer the attitude, approach, and ethics of Narrative Therapy as the alternative for PC as a sanction against the pastor's temptation for power and as a sanction for a mutuality of relationship between pastor-parish, and conclude with a therapy conversation.

Pastoral Counseling

The power differential enters as the clergy are held in high esteem, wearing many hats: priest, prophet, moral advocate, pastor, teacher, community leader, social leader, and counselor.¹⁰ Being aware of the influence conferred unto the role of a pastor by the parish affords

⁹ L. Gregory Jones, "Needy Pastors," *Christian Century* 119, no. 21 (2002): 62. Jones' call for clergy care to be included in the ministry of the whole congregation since "self-absorbed ministry emerges out of a pastor's lack of Christian character. Whether due to an excessive estimation of one's own importance or a sense of weakness, everything revolves around the pastor's need to be the focus of attention and affirmation." Also, Donald Capps points out that one of the major reasons for the need for power is shame-boundness: "Striving for power is the solution to shame to which the grandiose self is most prone, while striving for perfection has particular appeal to the idealizing self." Donald Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 130.

¹⁰ Pastoral Theologian, Charles Gerkin traces the pastoral heritage through biblical and historical contexts, naming the priests, prophetic leaders, kings, reconcilers, wise and vigilant shepherds, guides, conductors of rituals

the PC to remain more conscious and open about the values, assumptions, and preferences that he/she holds. William Miller and Kathleen Jackson surmise, “It is vital to be conscious of your power in counseling and to guard carefully against situations and motivations that may lead you to misdirect or misuse your influence.”¹¹ The vigilance necessary to continuously be aware is difficult, especially because the pastor has the role of moral/ethical preponderant while concomitantly has the corresponding role of a caring nurturer. In vulnerability, the counselee often seeks out and follows the PC’s advice, so it is extremely important that the PC stay aware of the motives involved and does not misuse the office of the ministry to meet the personal need to feel powerful.

Although the pastoral role is situation oriented (e.g. in a more fundamental church as well as different cultural contexts the male, authoritarian, patriarchal, and paternal patterns are the norm), the laity ascribe respect and power to the pastor as their spiritual leader in most contexts. Howard Clinebell, eminent professor of pastoral counseling notes that some church traditions even encourage their pastors to hold onto an idealized self-image that produces self-righteous attitudes. He notes, “It is important to remind ourselves that some degree of defensive superiority is in most of us. Ministers and church lay leaders are far from immune... This makes it difficult to accept their dark shadow side and integrate it with their ‘good’ side so that the two can balance and enrich each other within their personalities.”¹²

Albeit, these are culturally constructed ideas of a pastor, one of the occupational hazards is the drive towards power. Hence, some pastors unwittingly or unintentionally might be subtly

and worship, physicians of the spirit, soul caretakers, preachers, community leaders, etc. Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 23-51.

¹¹ William R. Miller and Kathleen A. Jackson, *Practical Psychology for Pastors*, Second ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), 29.

¹² Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*, Revised and Enlarged ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 154.

tempted to embrace the laity's bestowal of their status as God-given and in patriarchal and/or hierarchical way, problem solve with formulaic steps or confront belligerently "under the guise of 'righteous indignation.'" ¹³ Clinebell describes such approach as "Neo-Moralism" and compares it to a powerful medicine that has the potential to be more pernicious than helpful when used in an authoritarian, vertical relationship. Critiquing O. Hobart Mower's "Integrity Therapy," Clinebell warns against the therapy's proclivity to foster judgmental moralism that lacks grace because of its sole focus on constructive behavior without any room for emotions. ¹⁴ This is akin to Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy or some forms of Cognitive Behavior Therapy. Utilizing these psychotherapies, the PC could insist on intervention techniques, self-righteously averring his/her own absolutist ideals of "right-thinking" and "holy behaving" by proof-texting Scripture with aggressive prescriptions for the benefit of their own powerful stance. Such usages of biblical imperatives as his/her authoritative basis come in the form of "the Bible says" or even "thus sayeth the Lord." ¹⁵

The interpretation of the Bible and the insistence of that interpretation regarding the truth claims and morality can become truly oppressive and abusive. Donald Capps, in opposition to those who call the pastor back to a moral position from a value neutral psychotherapy, strongly

¹³ James A. Knight, "Confrontation in Counseling with Special Emphasis on the Student Setting," *Pastoral Psychology* 16, no. D (1965): 48.

¹⁴ Clinebell, 162-3.

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf is helpful here in his incisive dialogue with an interlocutor: "But what about those who in the name of truth oppress the weak? ... Though I must be ready to deny myself for the sake of *the* truth, I may not sacrifice the other at the altar of *my* truth. ... 'The truth will make you free,' said Jesus. Free from what? ... free to make journeys from the self to the other and back and to see our common history from their perspective as well as ours, rather than closing ourselves off and insisting on the absolute truth of our own perspective; free to live a truthful life and hence be a self-effacing witness to truth rather than fabricating our own 'truths' and imposing them on others; free to embrace others in truth rather than engage in open or clandestine acts of deceitful violence against them." Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 272. By "*the* truth" Volf is referencing Jesus Christ. He emphasizes, "Applied to the question of truth this means that, unlike Jesus Christ, we are *not* the truth and we are not self-effacing witnesses to the truth. This is why we believe in Jesus Christ – to help us see that we are not what we ought to be and to help us become what we ought to be. Our commitment to Jesus Christ, who is the truth, does not therefore translate into the claim that we possess the absolute truth" (271).

contends that the precedence must be given to the nurture to instill hope for the counselees over against morality.¹⁶ Although the PC might intend well for the counselee, “Integrity” or Moral therapy can easily slip into a condemning, condescending, guilt and/or shame evoking power play that traps the counselee into the PC’s valuations.

On the other hand, the PC eschews his/her differentiation as a *pastoral* counselor by latching onto current therapeutic techniques.¹⁷ For instance, by fully introjecting the client-centered, humanistic approaches of Carl Rogers, the pastor’s role can degenerate into only a practice of active listening of merely being “fully present, listening carefully, and responding accurate and warmly to whatever the parishioner communicates by words, voice tone, or body language,” giving only understanding responses,¹⁸ without fully embracing the uniqueness of the function of the PC to facilitate “*spiritual growth [as] an essential objective in all caring and counseling.*”¹⁹

The role of the pastor, whether conferred by the parishioners or expected by the social constructs as the representative of God, spiritual consultant, prophet, trustworthy guide, etc., behooves her/him to walk more humbly before the Lord and before others, in the awareness of his/her own dark sides and be able to confront those less desirable sides in self and others. How does the pastor do so in a counseling situation? Already through the proclamation of the Word

¹⁶ Capps, 92. Capps cites Gaylord Noyce’s book, *The Minister as Moral Counselor*. Noyce’s basic argument is for pastor to renew, no longer abdicate, their moral commitments and basis as counselors.

¹⁷ Philip Rieff bemoans the prevalent therapeutic culture from which the PC can receive vital warnings against unqualified introjection of ideas and techniques. For instance, in critiquing Carl Jung, Rieff protests, “Theologians might well reconsider, therefore, who is more dangerous: Freud or Jung. Better a forthright enemy than an untrustworthy friend” (91). Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

¹⁸ In the section on “The Foundation of All Types of Caring and Counseling,” Clinebell delineates this type of empathic response to build relationship and rapport with the counselee. In supportive counseling, some gratifying of the dependency needs (i.e. the good parent figure) is useful\ Clinebell, 102, 172. However, if the PC stops here, however, the goal for healing and growth can not come to fruition.

¹⁹ Clinebell encourages the ministers as capable of excellent counseling since they “are the only counseling professionals whose usual training includes systematic study of philosophy, theology, ethics, biblical studies, church history,...” with the ability to integrate the theological and clinical education. *Ibid.*, 67.

in preaching, through sacraments, and other liturgical practices, the pastor is fully disseminating the biblical practices and the expectations of the community of Christian faith.

Although variations of the presenting problem may call for different approaches - be it a sustained, chronic situation compared with an acute, crisis event, the PC must exercise conscious attentiveness to his/her desire to influence the counselee according to the PC's own value systems and preferential outcomes. The warrant for such vigilance derives from admonitions that arise from self-reflection of persons like John R. Haule in his forward to *Power in the Helping Professions*, wherein he surmises the inherent nature of this shadow especially for those who are in the helping profession:

The more we strive to be professional helpers who have the best interests of our clients at heart, the more we are in danger of acting out of our power-hungry shadow. As soon as we know "what's best" for our patient or student... one of us is all knowing and all-powerful, and the other is ignorant, neurotic, and powerless.... Clothed in the persona of selfless concern, [the counselor] unconsciously asserts the will over the client.²⁰

To prevent the slip from healthy, rational authority to authoritarianism, from healing, liberating ministry to manipulative maneuvering to satiate the drive for power, I suggest "interpathy." Prolific writer of pastoral counseling, David Augsburger, suggests "interpathy" in relating to persons across socio-cultural lines: "Interpathy enables one to enter a second culture cognitively and affectively, to perceive and conceptualize the internal coherence that links the elements of the culture into a dynamic interrelatedness, and to respect that culture (with its strengths and weaknesses) as equally as valid as one's own."²¹ Augsburger uses interpathy to

²⁰ Guggenbühl-Craig, xiii.. In fact, Robert Heiliger advises the counselor to refer when the counseling serves the pastor's needs more than it serves the church member or the person seeking help, when the pastor begins to over-identify with the hurting person's problem, when the person seeking your help has now begun to transfer unnecessary power, expectations, authority, responsibility or fantasy upon you, the pastor, and when it begins to feel funny or when the boundaries are fuzzy or are being crossed. *Robert Heiliger, "When to Refer," in Professional Pastoral Counseling Institute (1998).*

²¹ David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 14.

enter into an empathic relationship between different ethnic cultures: I propose that since each individual the PC encounters comes from a socio-cultural milieu unique to the individual's microcosms (family systems) and ecosystems (school, church, work, etc.) the PC enters into an interpathic, subject-subject relationship wherein alternate worldviews are respected and honored.²² Narrative Therapy allows the PC to remain balanced in power - to enter and sustain a counseling relationship that is genuinely an interpathic relationship. The counselee's voice is privileged while the PC through questions of curiosity and subjunctive statements of wondering interject pastoral insights.

The Narrative Therapy Advantage

The attitudes, approaches, and ethics behind Narrative Therapy (NT) provide a necessary anchor that can hold the tensions of influence and directive for the PC. Beyond theory, technique and orientation, the attitude of welcoming and entering the other's space and validating the other's experience comprise the core of NT, attitudinally. I propose that NT provides the PC with the delicate balance David Switzer envisages within a counseling context: "The delicate balance of being direct without being directive, of being active without being authoritarian, of being one upon whom the other can be temporarily dependent while still seeking to nourish an egalitarian relationship requires attention on the part of the counselor both to his or her own personality and to particular skills of intervention."²³

Shifting the paradigm from systems to stories with the basic theme that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem, Michael White and David Epston hold that the

²² I say subject – subject relationship in reference to Martin Buber's formulation of the I-Thou relationship as opposed to I-It relationship, wherein the other is objectified. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone Book, 1996). Also, with the potential power-subjugation in mind, Guggenbühl-Craig warns, "In a relationship one subject confronts another. Each relates to the other as a subject. In a relationship in which power is a dominant factor, one subject tries to make an object out of the other, while the latter subjects himself to the former. Guggenbühl-Craig, 79.

²³ Switzer, 158.

knowledge and stories (narratives) emanating from their culture, families and experiences shape persons.²⁴ This approach is a product of postmodernist assumptions that fosters equality of experiences for all persons in each respective culture in an effort to privilege the counselee's narrative over therapeutic prescriptions. The premise of narrative therapy is that the narrative metaphor affords each individual's story its own meaning and fulfillment inherent within its interactive context.

Before moving forward, a note of corrective must be interjected here. The postmodern view of reality, on which NT is premised, staunchly opposes any claim to Truth, or metanarratives, "There are no essential truths."²⁵ Social Constructionist, Kenneth Gergen delineates the preferred implication for deconstructing metanarratives: "Constructionism can furnish mandate for feminists, ethnic minorities, Christians, Muslims, and others to speak boldly on issues of value, but it does not thereby grant the validity of their claims, or claim certain moral verities to be superior."²⁶ This stance against metanarratives is understandable, especially in light of all the oppressive and authoritative metanarratives that restrict and manipulate persons.²⁷ In such cases, the contradictions and hypocrisies in dominant cultural assumptions need to be deconstructed, and that process is whole-heartedly welcomed. However, not all dominant discourse classify as an "oppressive metanarrative." The biblical metanarrative of love, healing, care, reconciliation, and liberation is far from being "oppressive." Rather, biblical

²⁴ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990).

²⁵ Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 22.

²⁶ Kenneth J. Gergen, *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 81.

²⁷ For example, the fundamentalist Christian-cultural expectation of the female gender to submit under all male leadership played havoc in physically abusive marital relationship. In his discussion of women and their tendency to give, so much so that they are in danger of "literally without a self," Miroslav Volf suggests that the self-giving, *per se*, is good only if not met by "exploitation and brutality," rather reciprocal self-donation. This reciprocity, however, did not happen at the cross or in the lives of his disciples after they discovered a promise - "In his empty tomb they saw the proof of God will eventually 'shine' upon a redeemed world Volf, 26-7.

imperatives such as “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute, Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9) extend further than the social constructionist’s equitable desire to privilege those who are marginalized. The indiscriminate attitude of openness towards all, without ascribing *truthfulness* to one over against others seem very inviting at first; however, a ‘mandate’ for this type of initiative is in itself a metanarrative of sorts.²⁸ Nonetheless, NT offers much to the PC in the search for a psychotherapy that mediates the power differential.

Attitude

In NT, the therapist has a stance of openness and respect for the client’s knowledge. Further, the therapist privileges the client as the “expert” of her own culture and own stories.²⁹ McIntyre’s statement, “Stories are lived before they are told –except in the case of fiction,” evidences the historical, experiential and practical nature of these stories.³⁰ Full respect for each individual story entrenched in its own microcosm lends space for the celebration of diversity and uniqueness of each individual.

²⁸ For a more detailed argumentation against the postmodern exclusion of metanarratives in the practice of NT, see Cameron Lee, "Agency and Purpose in Narrative Therapy: Questioning the Postmodern Rejection of Metanarrative," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 2 (2004).

²⁹ The Therapist has these assumptions toward each of their clients:

- 1) Client family members and I share more similarities than differences as human beings.
- 2) Family members are ordinary people leading everyday lives who unfortunately have encountered unusual and difficult life experiences.
- 3) Persons and families always possess more lived experience as a resource than can be contained by the available narratives about the problem.
- 4) Persons and family member in their deepest desires do not wish to harm self and others.
- 5) I cannot understand the meaning for the language a person uses until we talk together about it.
- 6) Change is always possible
- 7) A person or a family with a problem wishes to be free of the problem. Class notes, Jim Furrows, “Review of Narrative Therapy in Family Therapy,” Summer- 1994.

³⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 197.

The “not-knowing” stance levels the hierarchy so as to dethrone the therapist as the expert.³¹ Through questions that are elicited by curiosity, the therapist attempts to interject thoughts, without directive prescription of solutions to the presenting problem. Such a stance is an attractive and useful in that in the postmodern setting, a prescribed expert stance does not ingest well. Three considerable features emerge from this position. First, since present reality or knowledge have been negotiated within social interactions, there are no essential truths and all realities can be re-storied, re-created, and re-constructed by re-negotiating. Second, the hierarchy between the therapist or the ‘expert’ and the client or the ‘one in need of the expertise’ flattens as multiplicity of perspectives and experiences become validated in their own cultural/interconnectional context. As “privileged authors,” clients have their own personal stories and histories and are the primary constructors of their own future preferred stories. Since NT has to do with has to do with learning to tell a different story of yourself, depending on the starting point and how we tell it, the relationship becomes a collaborative partnership toward a specific goal to co-create a different narrative for the client.

The underlying attitude of curiosity in NT tenders the PC to become a co-creator of the counselee’s preferred selves, instead of dominating or belittling attitudes of direct, solicited or unsolicited, advice-giving, and at worst preaching in a counseling context.

Approach

³¹ Over against presumption or specific opinions of what the client ‘should,’ or ‘ought’ to do, this attitude has a generosity that moves away from typifying the client into a box. Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian, “The Client Is the Expert: A Not-Knowing Approach to Therapy,” in *Therapy as Social Construction*, ed. Sheila McNamee and Kenneth J. Gergen (London: Sage, 1992).

Through a stance of “not-knowing,” established when the therapists “concentrate on listening and when our talking is guided by and secondary to that listening,” the therapists can have a genuine curiosity from which questions that not only facilitate and clarify the presenting story, but also gently and indirectly offer insights.³² Coined as “deconstructive listening,” such questions of curiosity opens space for many alternative meanings than the one meaning the teller might cleave to as factual. The therapists insert alternative meanings through deconstructive questions or wondering out loud, rather than declarations. These “subjunctivizing” questions lead with “wondering if,” “might,” “perhaps,” “would,” or “could” and not “will” or “should” to introduce, not prescribe, possibilities.³³

Another key approach in NT that is helpful in empowering the client to change is externalizing the problem away from the identity of the person. The presenting problem through externalization becomes an entity of its own, rather than being enmeshed or fused into the identity of the client. The perception of the problem as separate and different from the client allocates power to the client to deal with the objectified problem rather than *being* the problem. Michael White and David Epston explain, “As persons become separated from their stories, they are able to experience a sense of personal agency; as they break from their performance of their stories, they experience a capacity to intervene in their own lives and relationships.”³⁴

Through the NT approach of questions of curiosity and wondering out loud, the PC has the wonderful opportunity to explore the counselee’s stories in depth, not only to get information to thicken the plot of the self that is being co-constructed, but to give information regarding what that preferred self might look like in light of the metanarrative of mercy and compassion of the

³² Freedman and Combs, 45. Otherwise known as “circular questioning,” they are masterful in giving rather than getting information at times (6).

³³ Ibid., 89, 179.

³⁴ White and Epston, 16.

love of God. The process of externalizing the problem such as fear as an object outside of the counselee empowers her/him to take an active agency in co-creating a new preferred self who does not have to be bound by that particular problem.

Ethics

The major ethical regard in NT is flattening of the hierarchy. In order to co-construct a preferred story, the therapist, through humility, listens to the client, orienting to the client's values, customs, and preferred ways of relating.³⁵ Such ethics of privileging the voice of the client (seen as the marginalized) rather than the voice of the therapist, gives the clients the safe space to tell their past and construct their future: More space is given to the client's ideas and preferences than the therapist's in order to counteract the professional hierarchy already implicit in the label, "therapist."³⁶

The realization of similarities as fallible human beings (having the experiences of being wounded and wounding) whether a therapist or a client, helps maintain the mutuality of the therapist-client relationship. This takes the practical form in that the therapist can be honest about the effect of the client on the therapist by crying and rejoicing with the client.

In addition, in the sense that realities are constructed in the social interaction with others, the importance the counselee's community is tantamount to the perception of the self. Most definitely, the therapist's involvement changes the client's social context.³⁷ However, NT also sees the relationship of the greater community of the client – the ecological systems paradigm.³⁸ Their involvement of a community of care known as the "leagues" (comprised of gathered

³⁵ The need to "acculturate" to the specific cultural context of the client is foremost in NT. Freedman and Combs, 92.

³⁶ Ibid., 280, 286.

³⁷ "In considering our questions and comments, people can't help but examine their stories in new ways. Our very presence makes their world a new and different reality."

Ibid., 47.

³⁸ The family is seen as "co-evolutionary ecosystem located in evolutionary timespace." Ibid., 6.

stories, letters, notes, journal entries, tapes, and work of arts of people who are struggling with similar problems and are overcoming or achieving success over those issues) impacts in powerful ways. Jill Freedman recognizes, “When combined with the externalization of problems, a community such as a league not only provides an audience for the circulation of stories of resistance and accomplishment, but also changes the context of people’s lives.”³⁹ These leagues, which includes the therapist, become the community the person continues to relate with to re-story, to re-create, and to re-engage the self (narrator) in many protagonist roles of various stories.⁴⁰

The PC already has connection to these ethics from biblical teachings as a pastor. The command to “love your neighbor as you love yourself” or to care for one another appears throughout both Testaments. Jesus sums up the relationship among God, self, and others in Mark 12: 30-1 (originally from Leviticus 19:18), “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” The moral principle, surmised as the ethic of love, validates the proposed praxis of mutual relationship that seeks to care not harm each other in the community. Surprisingly, NT puts to practice, the imperative in Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” since all human beings have the similarity described in Isaiah 53:6, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.”

³⁹ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁰ I am referring to the concept of the unitary self in multiple selves deduced by Alphonse Richert. He concludes, “Finally, from the integrated perspective offered here, self is understood as both story and the process of storying. For narrative therapists, self is constituted only in the interactions between people, and for humanists and existentialists it is an internal essence that is relatively unchanging across situations... It is understood as at once multiple – in that there are many *me*’s, protagonists, that populate the persons’ various stories – yet unitary- in that there is but one *I*, narrator, who weaves all those stories into a relatively coherent life narrative. Alphonse Richert, “Living Stories, Telling Stories, Changing Stories: Experiential Use of the Relationship in Narrative Therapy,” *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration* 33, no. 2 (2003): 205.

Conclusion

The issue of power is one that a pastor, especial a pastoral counselor (PC), must come face-to-face with because of the inevitable power differential between the pastor and parish. The gratifying feelings of being valued and appreciated from counselees are wonderful. This very feeling, however, can lead the PC to want to help and thus be more directive than warranted, actually thwarting the individuation and growth of the hurting, vulnerable person. At the same time, the need for persons to be “heard” can trap the PC into a mere sounding board, who echoes back the counselee’s pain. To eschew the human need for the ultimate meaning present in the biblical metanarrative, is to jettison the very One whose narratives coherently speak of compassion. The one who pours out his Spirit, anoints, and sends out persons to touch all of humanities pain:

...To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.... (Isaiah 61: 1-3 and Luke 4:18).

This concept is very much needed in the Christian ministry setting because of the apparent power differential that inherently exists in the pastor/parish relationship. Too often pastors are only comfortable in giving advice and disseminating opinions, advice, or *the* truth. The pastor is in a powerful position, especially with a hurting person who is seeking, even demanding her/his counsel.

In a vulnerable position, a hurting person will often follow the pastor's advice, so it is extremely important that the pastor does not misuse the office of the ministry to meet personal needs to feel the euphoric sense of being valued and appreciated by providing help. Through the utilization of the attitude, approach, and ethics present in Narrative therapy,

the pastor can encourage and empower the hurting person. The “not-knowing” stance is combined with questions of curiosity grounded in Scripture to provide guidance, not certitudes, for living consistently according to the reign of God.

The use of NT in pastoral counseling does not locate authority in the interventions, but the narrative of God as co-constructionist, liberates the pastor from the ambition (of the pastor) and/or expectation (of the parish) to be “prophetic.” As co-creators, both pastor and parish enter into conversation where a new alternative preferred self that coheres to the gospel can be envisioned and experienced. In many ways, this model remains remote from triumphalistic or absolutist solutions. Rather through presence and solidarity with the one who is hurting, the Pastoral Counselor enters into interpathic relationship with the counselee, so as not to “Lord it Over” but to journey together through the use of Narrative Therapy.

A Therapy Conversation

Sarah, a beautiful young woman who is a trainer by profession, came to seek therapy to curtail the “patterns” she has seen with men. In her words, when a good man comes her way, she sabotages the relationship by lashing out or speaking negatively about the future of the relationship. Below is a sample of how NT attitude, approach, and ethics guided my conversation with Sarah in one of our sessions.

Sarah – I fear that I’m repeating the same pattern with Tom that I have been doing in the past. I always seem to sabotage God’s gift, slapping Him in the face. I’m not comfortable with God’s goodness. I fear God (pause).

I mean that He’ll take away the gift if I’m too proud and enjoy being in a relationship too much.

K – So, this fear comes on you (externalizing the problem) because you think that God doesn’t want you to enjoy life?

Sarah - Yes. I fear Him. He’s so powerful.

K - I wonder what it would be like to be able to trust Him instead of fear him because he’s so powerful?

Sarah – Mm-hmm. (pause) I am blessed to go to Him with anything. Like a child, I can explain, confess, and ask Him things.

K – Wow, so you can experience God as someone whom you can trust and speak honestly with?

Sarah – yeah, ...huh!

K – Tell me, when was the last time you had a conversation with God?

Sarah – Just the other day I asked him a lot of questions.

K – It’s wonderful to be able to ask him questions, isn’t it? What kind of questions did you ask?

Sarah – Oh, like Why? What do you want me to see? Why are you testing me? Do you want me to be alone for ever? Can you help me become more positive? Please keep me humble... . But I feel so futile without sensing hope. (Sarah takes a lot of time with these questions, crying and grieving).

K – (After a long silence of just sitting with Sarah) When you are asking God these questions, do you feel fear coming on you?

Sarah – Well, I guess not. Not when I am asking these questions. I just think that fearing God is good because it keeps me in check.

K – So you like it when fear comes because it helps you in some way?

Sarah – I never thought about it that way. I don’t like it when fear comes.

K – What happens when fear comes?

Sarah – I feel trapped and ensnared in a net when that happens, like I can’t get out.

K – What could you do to deter fear from coming and ensnaring you?

Sarah – I don’t know. I guess I can think of God in a different way. Uh... maybe really like my father, who is always there for me, even if he has to drive out 300 miles to see me. (Something she shared in a previous conversation where her father drove out to her college when she was having a difficult time).

K – Yeah. I wonder what it will be like if God were a compassionate and loving heavenly Father instead of a punitive God who would want us to fear Him so much so that we tremble and quake that He might pull the rug from right under us when we are just getting comfortable with His blessing (using Sarah’s own analogy from before). I’m

just wondering how life will be like for you if you could trust God, as your heavenly parent, who wants the very best for you.

Sarah – I guess I can live life more free to enjoy what I like without fearing that he'll take it away or something horrible will happen and that it's too good to be true, or last, if it is.

K – Would you like to imagine for a minute how things might be different? I mean what that life of freedom would be like? How would you feel? What would you do?

Sarah – That's hard. I've been living in fear for so long.

K – If we were to take that fear and perhaps lock it up in a box for just a few minutes, let's say like when you are asking God the questions?

Sarah – Oh, I would smile and really be happy, instead of faking it - you know, like wearing a mask. I can enjoy the gifts God gives me without questioning when they'll be taken away and I don't have to worry about being good enough to keep it.