

What is at Core?

More than any single topic this may be the most germane to counselors. We are the ones who have volunteered to go on the journey that takes us into the inner and usually darker realms of the speaker. We are committed to finding out what is underneath the elaborate protections, identifications, and organizing principals, that keeps one from knowing who they are, where they belong, what they need and how to ask for it. We elect to go into the landscapes that most people spend their life avoiding. It isn't easy. It takes skill, compassion and devotion. But we do it because we recognize that it is the realm of the sacred.

The Well of Grief

*Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief*

*turning downward through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe*

*will never know the source from which we drink,
the secret water, cold and clear,*

*nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown by those who wished for something else.*

David Whyte

I was trained to think of these places as vulnerabilities which were more akin to injuries and wounds needing treatment. And that a proper empathic stance was one of being warm and telling the individual that I felt for them and that they needed help and that I was the one to provide it. This dynamic created a mystique that the speaker's vulnerabilities were evidence of what was wrong with them. As if they were damaged. That teaching can't help but to create a power differential wherein the client is diagnosable and the counselor is the

healer. It reinforces the notion that something is unhealthy, and needs healing and we counselors are the ones to do it. This is a setup for both parties, putting us both in a precarious position.

Empathy implies a resonating with, but unfortunately it has also become a technique a listener can employ when they are uncomfortable, anxious or lack understanding. Empathy is supposed to communicate a particular quality of connection but can speak of an emotional distance and an inability to experience the other. If one says something like “this is really hard for you now” or “I hear that you are sad” with that particular up and back tone it communicates “you are suffering and I am not.” This is a pseudo empathic response which can reinforce the inaccurate message that the speaker is sick relative to the listener’s health. The presumption is that this kind of comment is healing to a wound but that the counselor is above it. There is no above it. We are either in it or not. Real empathy allows the listener to experience (at least quite closely) the experience of the speaker. When one does this there is no above it, there is only the human experience. And therefore, by definition, something each of us can experience in kind.

As the client we all recognize when a counselor communicates with that particular façade. We understand they are being kind and that we should feel grateful, yet we feel a bit more isolated. We feel like injured infants unable to receive the kindness just bestowed upon us. Most counselors don’t even know they are doing it. It is how most of us were trained. But if we pay close attention we find there is a tickle of anxiety which arises just before the empathic statement. And if we pay closer attention we find that the anxiety is quieted after we have issued our empathic response. I’m speaking therefore of the counselors anxiety and need for comfort and how we can use empathy as way of soothing ourselves under the guise of connecting to the speaker.

Now I have been guilty of doing this too. In fact I am skilled at it. But it is a hindrance. I do not feel any closer to the speaker and most times, if I am paying attention, I am more remote and in fact feel sheltered (usually for reasons I do not yet understand). There is nothing like a hackneyed empathic response to give me the protection I want while still maintaining the façade of real contact.

As a client I was always sensitive to this kind of response. I could feel the therapist drifting and the succor they experienced as result of the slight distance they had just created. I could acutely experience that they were not with me. Not really. I can also experience this with my closest friends. All of whom are therapy types. An expression was born among the closet of these. When one felt that the other had retreated into the easy chair of a clever empathic summation or interpretation without really being in the vulnerability we would say, "Stop doing me." It was code for, "You are trying to fix something which needs no fixing. You are trying to sound like you understand what it is like for me but you can't by virtue of the fact that you are not really connected to me." They were doing something as opposed to being something. One knows the difference.

I have a rule; if I am not feeling, in my body, what the speaker is talking about I remain silent and listen or ask questions until I have a felt sense of the experience. Then, if I am not quite sure, I ask if what I am feeling connects to what is going on inside them. In fact even when I am quite sure I will ask.

What is at core seems to be consistently unspoken and sometimes unknown to the speaker. In my previous meeting with a couple we were dealing with how the husband had difficulty being vulnerable because he felt like a "clumsy wimp" and therefore not deserving of his wife's care and concern. She supported him saying she was there and wanted to care for him but that he needed to stop pulling away. Today they came in and she said she felt "resistant" to caring for him during the week, didn't know why and felt badly about it. She began recalling times in the past when she needed him and felt failed by him. He, for example, never asked if she needed help with the kids even when she was ill. It was clear that some resentment and bitterness had fermented over the years. And to work on that would have been good work. But by her eyes and sad face one could see that there was something underneath. The husband was quite sad about having failed her and with tears in his eyes committed to "be there" for her and to put her first and his job second. She heard him and recognized his sincerity but did not relax, open or receive his offer. Rather than focus on the couples work I felt compelled to understand why she was unable to make use of her husband's genuine

apology. “I see that you believe him but it seems you can’t quite open to what he is offering.” “These are only words,” she said.

On face value this is the kind of sentence that leads one to think that perhaps there is more history and resentment to work through. Probably a pattern of being taken for granted. But her tone communicated helplessness as if she wished she could make more use of his regret and devotion but couldn’t. I asked what it was like to recognize his sincerity and still feel alone and shut down. “I don’t know” she responded. “I believe him and the truth is he has changed a lot but I can’t take it in.” I asked if I could play her and that I was going to speak to her husband and guess about what might be underneath. “You don’t get it,” I started. “If I ask you to stay home from work and then you don’t I will be devastated. I have been self-sufficient all my life so if I need someone and they don’t show up I know I’ll be OK. But to ask... to open to needing you is too much.” She began to cry. “In fact,” I continued, “just allowing myself to feel my need for you is too much, too scary.” Now she really cried. I looked at her while she wept. She said “I can’t go there.” “I know,” I offered. We sat quietly for a bit. Her husband was perplexed. After she stopped crying I said “I know you can’t go there but can you say where you can’t go?” Now she began to laugh as she recognized that I was teasing her, poking her, cajoling her to say the unspeakable.

And as if she were a poet she said, “It is the opening itself that is so tearing.” “In fact,” she continued now looking at her husband, “The moment you began to speak I felt hope. I immediately, without thinking about it, pushed the hope away so I could no longer feel it. I really didn’t feel it anymore. I just felt the aloneness I know so well. I have done this for as long as I can remember. I never give anyone the chance to disappoint me here. I could not survive that.”

We discussed how under the “resistance” and resentment we found the most vulnerable of places. So vulnerable that she could barely allow herself to experience its tender, just ready to collapse, quality. It was not so much the fear that she would be failed (she was absolutely convinced that she was alone and would always be failed. In fact she lived her life in the state of being failed) it was the experience of *hoping* for anything different that was too frightening. That is what was at the core. This is sacred territory.

This is what I mean by an organizing principle. The principal by which one's life is defined and therefore within which it is limited. These organizing principals are not questioned. We know (without ever questioning them) that they are the facts of our life. Like gravity, we know it is there and to question its existence is pointless. But unlike the physics which determine the parameters of our life, to question our organizing principles brings a sense of doom or, as some psychoanalytic thinkers have wisely coined, annihilation anxiety.

I had been seeing Tim and Linda for over a year and had a pretty good idea of the communication dynamics and how they both sabotaged constructive contact and remained rigidly in old patterns. Tim had finally went to a psychiatrist and found an anti-depressant that took the edge off his depression. But after a long while and a lot of hard work we were still unable to get him to drop his protective shield. Tim had an incredibly fortified wall that he could not come out from behind even when his wife did her best to reach him. He would be cold and resolutely secluded pointing out that she blamed him for all the family troubles, took no responsibility for her anxiety ridden contributions and it was hopeless because she was going to leave him anyway. There was truth to Tim's argument. Linda did blame him, was aggressive when she meant to make contact and had real difficulty reaching out with one hand without throwing a dart with the other. Yet I knew that no real progress could be made as long as he didn't open to the possibility of contact. I had confronted him a number of times telling him the obvious; that his choice to remain behind the wall wasn't protecting him but rather guaranteeing that the marriage would end in divorce and that he was responsible for creating the outcome he so feared and put on her. And even though he was right that Linda did have her own aggression issues he held all the power by refusing to communicate.

With a great push from Linda, Tim agreed to meet with me alone for a while. I thought we were readying for the big show down. A street brawl wherein I would confront him about his destructive withdrawal and he would shut down and withdraw. I had done this previously and Tim did see the truth of it and temporarily opened to his wife. But when he arrived there was a softness

about him, a receptivity perhaps. I held my tongue. He began talking about his sister whom he felt was a lost soul who would never come back to life. He spoke of their horrible childhood and how unloved and valueless they both felt. He knew he was in much better shape than his sister and was grateful that he no longer woke up every morning with suicide on his mind. Yet he could not conceive of coming out from behind the wall as he knew only intolerable pain and disappointment was outside its confining borders. We sat in silence for a bit as I dropped into his feeling state and at the same time felt my agenda to get him to come out for behind this wall dissipate. I led with curiosity. "Are you free and protected behind that wall or are you confined?" "I'm terrified," was his response. Tears began to make his eyes glisten. This was the first time I had seen him tear up. "Can you imagine what you will be thinking and feeling if 40 years from now you are on your deathbed having remained behind the wall?" Now the tears poured forth freely. He opened and revealed that he had always felt worthless and undeserving of love and that if anyone stayed with him it was because he hadn't yet revealed how wretched he was. He reflected story after story of how his parents communicated he was a burden and a waste of their energy. He "knew" this wasn't just an issue of bad parenting. He "knew" he was so horribly treated because he deserved to be horribly treated.

And this is when the core vulnerability was revealed. He knew from our couple's work that he had been unfairly programmed by his alcoholic parents and that he involuntarily reinforced that education. But for Tim the core vulnerability was daring to hope for anything else. It wasn't only the *risk* of being rejected or abandoned. He lived his entire life knowing that he was *already* rejected and abandoned. His organizing principle was simply that he was undeserving of love and to hope for anything else was foolish and dangerous. In fact previous therapies had focused on his fear of abandonment and had failed because that wasn't his primary fear. He knew he could survive abandonment. He had survived that for over 50 years. He lived in that hell 24/7. It was the experience of *opening to the possibility* that he may be of value that could kill him. It was like the fear of taking a deep breath after 50 years of constricted inhalations. It wasn't just the fact that he may breathe toxic air. It was the fear that his ribs would shatter with a full breath. His core conviction was that if he tried to take a breath he would be obliterated.

Before the fear of rejection was the conviction of annihilation. Annihilation brought about by his own longing, his own hope that he might be loved, his own daring to take a breath. Asking him to come out from behind his fortified wall was sure to fail. He needed someone to understand that the very thought that he could be loved was akin to suicide. That, in fact, the only way to avoid suicide was to avoid thoughts, hopes, or longings to be loved. And in this he was quite successful for most of his life.

In a later meeting to help him challenge this organizing principle I asked, “Were you undeserving of love when you were one year old?” “Absolutely,” he recalled without hesitation. “I challenge you to go to one thousand hospitals and look at one hundred thousand babies and find the one who is undeserving of love.” He could not hear any suggestion that *he* was of value. But he could hear the absurdity of thinking about any other child that way.

When, in future meetings, I asked him what he had thought about himself when his wife asked him to open and essentially trust her he said he could only feel self-loathing because he was too scared to trust. He was utterly alone.

One day in the hope of giving him a different perspective I spoke of “this child” who lived this life with those parents who taught him through a million trails that he was not worthy of their time or love. “What was it like for this kid who was taught he should never breathe in the hope of being loved?”

He was silent.

And then slowly he began to tear up. After another long silence I asked “What are the tears?” “For the first time in my life I feel empathy for that kid...and I can’t breathe.” Now we both cried. We simply looked into each other’s eyes and cried.

At this moment, this most sacred of moments, counselors may try to say something “empathic” or to summarize but these words arise out of a need to protect the vulnerability that comes with this level of relational rawness. Neither of us had a need to be protected at that moment. We trusted each other to respect the sacred. Why, one may ask, do I refer to these moments as

sacred? Why not a more psychological appreciation for what occurs when we are listening to a recollection of a trauma and the dissociated pain which had been split-off? Because even though that perspective is accurate, taken by itself it is too limiting. It denies a level of possible connection. And in my experience if a speaker has broken through to the point of raw vulnerability anything less than meeting that with openness is missing the point.

To put it simply; these are moments I realize I am a spiritual being first and a psychological being second. If not anxious, one is naturally in awe at these moments. What mystics have labeled “agape.” But one cannot be open at these crossroads in others unless one has opened to them in oneself. I am consistently filled with a sense of awe and gratitude because these moments demonstrate that we are not alone, not separate. This experience Tim was having is universal and only individual from a particular, one might say filtered, perspective. Although my personality is quite different from Tim’s I too can be lost and grasping on to archaic defenses which precludes the experience for which I am most longing; the experience that without our shield-like personas, we are all cut from the same fabric. This is akin to the sacred moments we sometimes have in nature or meditation or love making. The junctures were we see, as Levinas describes, “the trace of the face of God” in the other. Without these moments the idea that we are all connected is but theoretical. An interesting intellectual construct but hardly identity altering. And this is the experience Tim and I co-created.

These moments also afford (and certainly with Tim that morning) a tacit celebration. We are celebrating a transformational occurrence that otherwise may have never taken place. What was impossible a few minutes earlier is now a reality. One can always have access to the habituated (and historically necessary and temporarily useful) defenses. But from this point on one will always have access to a different way of being in the world. An experience that there is another where one was convinced they were alone. No healing has taken place for in this scared realm as no one needed healing. But perhaps an organizing principal has lost some of its hook. In Tim’s case, the organizing principal was opening to love would result in annihilation. He now has another option where a moment ago there was only one.

In my opinion, it is not the assaults to our individuality which injure as much as the assaults to our oneness. Psychology is based on the former, spirituality on the latter. The moment the speaker is open, not attached to their habituated protections and at the threshold of recognizing our unity, I am no longer outside of them looking in. We are connected, witnessing with great intimacy the undefended reality of our oneness.

Allowing my own vulnerability to this raw moment is where and when I have transformed. Not in the articulations of defenses or interpretations of developmental patterns or even in the beauty of another's genuine empathy. But rather when I am through the defenses marveling at how far away from myself I have been while submerged in the distorted confusion that I was actually protecting myself. It is in these moments I realize I am not the identity I have tenaciously protected. I am not the constricted individual self. I am intimately connected to all and not just theoretically but experientially. These are transitional moments with breath taking potential. One stands at a threshold with a choice. Do we walk into a new understanding of who we are or go back to the isolated identity we constructed to protect ourselves from the pain that isolated identity, by its very nature, constitutes?

Each of us is a fascinatingly unique creature. No one in the history of human existence has walked the earth as you have. And yet there is a meeting place where all that distinguishes us from each other evaporates, where the unity which gives rise to this incredible diversity is recognized as home. This is what spirituality means to me. As a pastoral counselor I not only celebrate this diversity, and marvel at its complexity, I also recognize and hold the reality of that which joins us. This knowledge is not based on theory but on experience. It is what I see each day as I listen to people. We are completely unique and absolutely one. Buckminster Fuller once said that one could measure a person's maturity by their ability to hold the tension of a paradox. Perhaps one could also say you can measure a counselor's maturity the same way. To simultaneously hold the speaker's uniqueness and that which unifies us is a way I express my spirituality. The reason the focus of this paper is on what unifies is because so much of the psychotherapeutic literature focuses on individuality; on that which separates us.

Ironically it then strives to categorize into diagnostic categories in an attempt to render individuals collectively. That is one of the dangers of diagnosing. One can fail to see another's uniqueness (in all its subtle beauty) when employing categorical language. We do not want to white wash our inimitability when we discuss our spiritual nature. Rather we hope to celebrate it without perpetuating the delusion of isolation.