

## EXISTENTIAL REFLECTIONS ON COUNSELLING

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### Abstract

The main contention in this article is that philosophy, especially as it is lived, is indispensable to counsellors, as well as to clients, in their search for ever more efficacious life situations. How can the counsellor be of service to others in the formation of their life projects if the counsellor himself has no substantial ideas of his own on the subject of how to live? This question is examined from an existential perspective including a commentary on a case example from the author's own counselling practice.

### Résumé

La thèse principale de cet article soutient que la philosophie, surtout quand elle est appliquée au plan de la "vie vécue", s'avère indispensable tant aux conseillers qu'à leurs clients dans la recherche de situations de plus en plus valables par rapport à leurs modes de vie. De quelle manière le conseiller peut-il être de service à d'autres personnes dans le développement de leurs projets de vie, si le conseiller n'a lui-même aucune idée précise de son propre mode de vie? On étudie cette question selon une perspective existentialiste. Enfin, on inclut un commentaire sur un exemple tiré de l'expérience personnelle de l'auteur comme conseiller.

Philosophy is a path along which we may strive for rescue . . . the significance of philosophizing is that it is our attempt to confirm ourselves.

*K. Jaspers*

### INTRODUCTION

Consciously or not, all counsellors are also philosophers in that they espouse a specific life style based upon a personal philosophy. Some counsellors have carefully examined and articulated the philosophy which guides their life, many have not. There are even counsellors who deny the importance of philosophy to counselling without realizing that this very denial *is* a philosophy, albeit of a lowly order. Philosophy is a way of thinking critically about oneself, others, and the world. It is a type of thinking "that seeks to discover connected truth about all available experience" (Brightman, 1963, p. 7). As such, philosophy is indispensable to counselling.

Common sense, science, and philosophy all contribute to man's knowledge of himself. All three are, therefore, important to counselling. Of the three, however, it is philosophy, and especially existential philosophy, which strives to sustain human consciousness as an open possibility and which supports the individual's struggle to attain a selfhood informed by hope, freedom and responsibility. Assuming that one is technically competent as a counsellor, in the end it is one's "orientation" which determines efficacy in the

counselling encounter. This "orientation" is an expression of the kind and degree of one's own self-illumination and personal philosophy.

About the need for a personal philosophy, Maslow (1962) once wrote:

The human being needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life . . . to live by and understand by, in about the same sense that he needs sunlight, calcium, and love. (p. 192)

Maslow (1962) went on to predict that one day counselling and therapy might even be defined as "a search for values". He held that the condition of being confused about values, or having inappropriate or inadequate values is a pathogenic state of existence. The search for one's values is, in essence, the search for identity.

Counselling, especially counselling with adults, is frequently an occasion for discussion about values. Not only does the adult client want to find out *how to* do something, but also wishes to decide what *ought* to be done. Not just how *can* I live my life, but more fundamentally, how *ought* I to live it? It is in discussion such as these that the counsellor's own philosophy takes on crucial importance. In discussing with clients what is real, true, and good in daily life, counsellors must have something substantial to contribute to the dialogue. Further, counsellors want clients to change; this means that they must have some guiding ideas or value convictions about the

direction change should take. As Robert White (1973) has observed:

Whatever procedure the counsellor adopts, he can hardly be of service if he has no guiding ideas of his own on the subject of how to live. (p. 3)

In the matter of values, then, what is good for the goose is also good for the gander. Value clarification is not just for clients, but also for counsellors. What can a client expect from a counsellor who is unconscious of his own world view? Confusion? Artifice? Self-deception? These are hardly qualities useful to clients who are themselves in a crisis about values. The concept of objective, value-free counselling has been largely exposed as a myth. The counselling interview is an encounter of reciprocal influence, and it is *inescapable* that counsellors will influence clients in the real of values. What is important about value discussions in counselling is: first, that counsellors not impose values on clients *by coercive means*; second, that counsellors refrain from *unconsciously* imposing upon clients values which they learned during their own childhoods but which have not been examined since. With respect to values, a further important consideration is that the counsellor's personal philosophy is an essential precondition for the efficient use of counselling techniques. This idea is nicely expressed in the saying of an ancient adept:

If the wrong man uses the right means, the right means works in the wrong way.

(quoted in Jung, 1962, p. 83)

If counsellors are to be an important influence on the "cultural and moral changes in twentieth-century western society" as Paul Halmos (1965) has predicted, then one can hardly escape concluding that the counsellor must offer something more than behavioural technology, or human relations expertise. That "something more", the writer submits, is a consciously articulated personal philosophy which informs and orients, binds one to others, and is itself full of substance. Put another way, that "something more" is the set of guiding ideas which one attempts to live by.

In introducing this essay the writer has briefly emphasized the importance of philosophy, and especially the counsellor's personal philosophy, to counselling. This is especially so in adult counselling where decisions, questions of commitment and responsibility, and value discussions are often in the forefront. In the rest of the essay the writer will undertake an existential reflection on the significance of "guiding" ideas in counselling. This is not to imply that an "existential" perspective is the best orientation for counselling. Rather this perspective has been chosen to illustrate the writer's more general contention that a personal

philosophy is a crucial precondition for effective counselling. Specific counselling techniques and methods will not be discussed. Rather, the writer wishes to stimulate readers to think about their own personal framework of values and guiding ideas which orient action in the counselling encounter.

### *The Existential Perspective*

Existentialism must be lived to be sincere. To live as an existentialist means to be ready to pay for this view.

J.P. Sartre

There is an enormous literature on existentialism, going back at least to Pascal (1623-1662). Shaken one day by a profound realization of his finiteness, Pascal (1666) composed the following prototypical insight into existential loneliness:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of space of which I am ignorant, and which knows me not, I am frightened, and am astonished being here rather than there, why now rather than then? (pp. 157-158)

Two centuries later, Soren Kierkegaard and Frederich Nietzsche ushered in the era of modern existential thought. Lonely, brilliant, prophetic, these two revolutionary philosophers were determined to establish the priority of the individual over and against all social forms, ideas and practices which deny or suppress human fulfillment. Philosophers of crisis and liberation, they were convinced that the very fact of human *being* is in itself the presence of possibilities for human betterment. Their common enemy was *dehumanization* which, they were convinced, would increase under the future impact of institutions, bureaucracy, mechanization, technology, militarization and increased powers of the state. While material progress would surely occur, the individual's ability to become, and remain, an authentic person would continue to be thwarted by growing collectivization. In psychological terms, man's problems would increasingly become those of alienation, over-conformation, helplessness and collapse of values and meaning to live by.

Nonetheless, both of these thinkers were convinced that *within each individual there resides a true, authentic self* ("this is really me") as opposed to the false, inauthentic self ("this is the me which 'they' require"). The true self must fight its way to responsibility and freedom against the commands and constraints of prosaic social life. About the individual who struggles for responsible fulfillment as an authentic self, Kierkegaard (1956) wrote: "There is but one fault, one offence:

disloyalty to his own self or the denial of his own better self" (p. 140). From Nietzsche (1966) came a similar declaration: "Higher than 'thou shalt' is 'I will'; higher than 'I will' stands 'I am'" (p. 495). Kierkegaard's "own self" and Nietzsche's "I am" is the powerful, creative, unique identity to be attained by self-actualization. The "I will" is the means to grasp "I am". To the existentialist, life's fundamental character is "process unto death"; "authentic" living is a self-surpassing process whose internal agency is will. Will brings on self-surpassing by apprehending possibilities and transforming them into actualities: *I will take command of my life by recognizing my possibilities and by taking actions to fulfill them.* These few references to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche suggest the orientation which is given by modern existential thought. As Maurice Friedman (1967) has written, "existentialism" cannot be thought of as a single unified system of philosophy. Rather it is:

a mood embracing a number of disparate philosophies: . . . the temper which unites them . . . can best be described as a reaction against the static, the abstract, the purely rational, the merely irrational, in favor of the dynamic and the concrete, personal involvement and "engagement", action, choice, commitment, the distinction between "authentic" and "inauthentic" existence, and the existential subject as the starting place of thought. (Friedman, 1967, p. 244)

Numerous noteworthy attempts have been made by Frankl (1965), Gendlin (1966), van Kaam (1964), as well as others, to develop an existential approach to counselling and therapy based on principles of existentialism.

In reading these accounts of existential approaches to counselling one finds very little said about counselling "technique". This is not simply an oversight. Part of the existential perspective is the belief that one of the main hindrances to the understanding of human beings is an obsession with techniques and methods. The classic stance of the existential counsellor is that one's first task is to *understand* the client and then, perhaps to apply methods. The writer believes that the attempt to understand the client is primary, but that two further steps could be added to arrive at a more comprehensive orientation to counselling from the existential perspective. This extended orientation may be stated as follows: Counselling is a process within which both client and counsellor participate to:

- i. develop an *understanding* of the client's self and life situations,
- ii. make a *critical evaluation* of the client's situations including a review of the client's actual and possible actions within his life situations, and
- iii. initiate a conscious and *goal-directed use* of the *client's possibilities*.

The statement reflects three key points from the existential perspective. First, that understanding *is* essential and precedes everything else. Second, that a counsellor must find out just where the client stands in the world: that is, find out what the client's life situations *actually* are. Third, that both counsellor and client must strive to uncover possibilities for betterment of the client's troubling situation. These three points can be summed up in three questions: What is *felt* (understood at the effective level) in this situation? What is *actual* in this situation? What is *possible* in this situation? These questions establish the ground of hope and are informing principles capable of orienting action for both client and counsellor.

Life raises crisis-questions for most of us at various points in our adult lives. Each of us must struggle to find ways to consent to life. Sometimes we succeed, but inevitably we will also fail to do so. Many fundamental questions are not answerable, or if they are, we fail to find satisfactory answers to them. Often, however, existential crises are *outgrown*. Others are simply accepted and lived with. Whether in the midst of a crisis, or in doubt about values or meaning, or embroiled in some other predicament, one often turns to another human being for help. In the past, this would have been a priest, a family elder or respected member of the community. Today it is likely to be a counsellor who is appealed to for help and guidance.

### *An Example*

This essay will conclude by presenting an example of one such person-in-crisis from the writer's counselling practice together with an existential commentary which indicates some of the guiding ideas which inform certain responses to this client.

A man previously unknown to me had called early in the day to make a five o'clock appointment about a "problem". He said that Dr. R\_\_\_\_, had advised him to call me for counselling. I listened to his voice — quiet, simple, restrained. I heard an undercurrent of heaviness and urgency. At five he arrived; I saw a working man, solidly built, about fifty years old. We shook hands, I invited him to sit down. Without prompting he began to speak haltingly at first and then steadily for nearly an hour. His eyes, dark, hurt and tired, looked at me occasionally and then dropped away. As he spoke, I began to feel his existence — honest, troubled, heavy:

Something has gone wrong, I don't know what it is. You see, I am a lathe operator for more than twenty years now. I have always been good with the machine, I know its secret. But now, now I no longer want to do this work, I don't know why but I just don't want to go to work anymore. I don't know how to say this — my pride is gone. What I loved for

all those years, it means nothing to me now. I never was one of those guys who waited for Friday. I waited for Monday. Now, one day is the same as the last, the next. What difference does it make? Tell me, what difference does it make? My wife is pretty wrapped up in her friends, you know. And my son, it's three years now that he's been gone.

Well you see what I've been thinking is that suddenly I don't have much left. Mostly, I've just got the same thing that I've done every day for a long time. Even the paycheck doesn't matter to me anymore, I could take it or leave it. When I get to thinking "what is my life all about?" I start feeling pretty strange. There's the house, paid for, big, nice but so what. Mostly, it's empty. And we've both got cars, no real money problems. But, twenty years! Is this what it all adds up to? Tell me, what has happened. Where has the meaning in my life gone?

This man before me, honest and simple, is in an existential crisis. The surface of the life which supported him for many years has broken like ice on a Winter pond and he has fallen through into the dark water below. His routine life, for so long predictable is no longer so. Where there was purpose, now there is meaninglessness. His life project is no longer sufficient. The surface broken, he must re-discover meaning. The failure to do so is too foreboding for even this simple man. He does not want a broken life, or worse yet, death. The superficial will not support the weight of his realization. He wants a new ground. He wants to locate himself where he can again feel joy in life, where he can feel *at home*. He wants what Nietzsche (undated) wrote of:

O may I pray,  
 What doth the deepest midnight say?  
 From sleep, from sleep  
 I woke — where dreaming deep I lay: —  
 The world is deep,  
 With depth not dreamed of by the day.  
 Deep is its woe—,  
 Joy's deeper still than woe can be;  
 Woe saeth: Go!  
 But joy doth want eternity,  
 Want deep, want deep eternity. (p. 305)

In another era, this man might have turned to God with much the same request as the twenty-second Psalm:

My God, My God why has thou  
 forsaken me? . . .  
 Do not stand aside: trouble  
 is near . . .  
 I have no one to help me!

This heart-rending existential cry, once so powerful, could not pass the lips of this client. For him, God had never existed. He turns, instead, to a counsellor for help with his distress. As the counsellor, I must ask of myself: "Am I prepared to answer the call of this man? If so, how?" What guiding ideas are to inform me as I struggle with this man to re-locate him in a meaningful world?

Some of these ideas are outlined in the following paragraphs.

I must realize my limitations. After all, I can make no gesture to any final knowledge of anyone, least of all of this man before me. Can I, should I, clarify his immediate experience and his biography? This man has already descended into depth. Can I meet him there, or will my own shallowness prevent this? Is this man confronting a problem outside of himself or a mystery within? He appears to be tense, even anxious. Yes, I know how to reduce anxiety, but should I? It seems at first glance that to dispel anxiety would be a universal therapeutic aim. Yet, is it, or should it be? Consider Gebattel's dictum: "We are as doubtful whether we really want a life without anxiety as we are certain that we want a life without fear". What price would this man pay for relief from anxiety by pill or by desensitization? Perhaps anxiety, if not overwhelming, will be on his side — to take it away might result in an even greater loss of heart. Yes, that's it, *loss of heart!*

I do not wish to be foolish enough to expect counselling or therapy to bring about something that only living itself can bring. If this man is reaching with his heart, and I believe he is, what is he reaching for? A way to go home, perhaps. There is an old saying that "Home is where the hat is". In this client's case, though, "Home is where the heart is". I am remembering another passage from Nietzsche (1966):

The genius of the heart . . . whose voice is capable of reaching down into the depths of each soul . . . the genius of the heart, who silences all that is loud and complacency and teaches how to listen, who smooths the rough souls and lets them taste a new desire — to lie quietly like a mirror so that they may reflect the deep sky; the genius of the heart who divines the hidden and forgotten treasure . . . underneath the turbid ice and is a divining-rod for every grain of gold . . . the genius of the heart whose touch sends everyone away richer, richer of himself . . . burst open, caressed by a warm wind, sounded out, less certain perhaps, but full of hopes that have as yet no name, full of a new will. (p. 245)

How to reach through the heaviness of this client's existence so that his experience will be ". . . burst open, caressed by a warm wind, sounded out, less certain perhaps, but *full of hopes that have as yet no name, full of a new will*".

In counselling with this man I will remember that even in his dark and heavy state, he remains an open possibility. My efforts are sustained by Jaspers' (1951) words:

Man is always something more than he knows of himself. He is not what he is simply once for all, but he is a process; he is not merely an extant life, but is, within that life, endowed with possibilities through the freedom he possesses to make of himself what he will by the activities on which he decides. (p. 159)

As we meet together in the hours ahead my client and I must find a way for him to pose the questions: "Who am I?", "What am I doing here?", and "What about all these other people?" Answers to these questions come from all aspects of his being: thinking, feeling, behaviour, what is not done or shown as well as what is. In short *what* he experiences in his life, and *how* he experiences will tell us both *who* he is, *that* he is, and that it *matters* that he is. Our joint therapy aim will be to actualize a new existence from what is now only a dim possibility.

In our existential meetings I will bring to concentration my power to listen, to speak, and to use whatever counselling procedures I have learned and which will assist to bring about understanding, clarification and actualization. I will try to weave this concentration, together with my faith in the client and in myself, into a therapeutic dialog of word and silence which says:

I meet you with as much clarity as I can muster; it *matters* that we meet. I will help you to find out 'where in the world' you are; to discover that I care who and where you are; even more fundamentally that *you* care who and where you are. I will do my best to develop this understanding. And, I will help you discover, and take, those concrete steps required for *going home*.

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