

A Response to Philip Culbertson's Presentation

John McAlpine

Philip, thank you for your paper. I honour both you and your contribution to the field of counselling and psychotherapy. My response to you is more personal than academic. It is a response that has evolved from forty years' experience as a Christian priest, and more than twenty years' practice as a counsellor/psychotherapist. I trust it will be of interest to you and our counselling colleagues.

Some years ago I was invited to write a concise statement summarising my counselling and psychotherapeutic philosophy. In part it read:

While deeply grounded in Person Centred counselling, I work eclectically, using the therapeutic method best suited to each of my clients. ... I have a deep belief that everything within us, including the unhelpful and painful, is striving towards our wholeness and healing. Accordingly, I work with clients in helping them honour all within themselves, aiming to develop the whole person with a balance of head and heart, body and spirit. ... I assist clients to integrate spirituality with wholesome human living. I respect and value the spiritual dimension in each person, and believe in the freedom of everyone to follow his or her own path of spiritual development.

Is this a description of a Christian counsellor? Some Christians may say "No!" Philip, I warm to your carefully formulated response to an inquiry: "Are you a Christian counsellor?" I respond in a similar way to such inquiry, i.e., "I am a counsellor /psychotherapist; and I am a Christian; and I work with people in ways that meet them and their spirituality." Often that response sufficiently signals that I will be sensitive to the enquirer's Christian ethic. If, however, the response to my response is: "But do you follow the Bible as you counsel?", I need to answer along these lines: "I understand the Bible as primarily the faith stories of my forebears-in-faith—stories that can help us grapple with our issues today; stories that invite us into an intimate relationship with God, others, and ourselves. I don't see the Bible as a rule-book telling me what to do, or as God's last words; I believe God continues to reveal today; I believe that Jesus saw

sacred text in everyday life, not only in the sacred texts of his forebears-in-faith.”

Philip, I resonate with your conviction that:

the purpose of counselling and psychotherapy is to “sit with” people while they find ways to “wake up,” tell the truth as best they can, make sense out of their lives, and then move into the task of living a fuller, more aware, more satisfying life in which they are making conscious, rather than driven, choices and are able to carry on interdependent relationships with those around them.

You’ve got me thinking about your admission that in your work as a therapist, you perhaps tend more to “discipline and disciple” than to “liberate,” a tendency arising from your passion that your client discover the “correct” version of Christianity. I suspect that you “discipline and disciple” so that your client can be “liberated” from unhelpful understandings of Christianity, but still I wince at the thought of “discipline and disciple.” Is that because I suspect that I work in the same way, or do I come to the task of counselling and psychotherapy from a different angle? Do I favour “companioning” rather than “directing” my clients? By the end of this presentation I may have answered my own question and in the process, discovered that you and I are on the same page. You may also discover that I believe in, to echo the words of poet Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, “living into the questions and gradually growing into answers,” more than answer-providing.

I personally don’t believe in “past lives” or “reincarnation,” but I have worked successfully with a small number of clients who do. I once accompanied a woman—let’s call her Mary—who, after months of intensive work with me, seemed to have made little progress. Mary often hinted that she constantly felt pursued. One day, when she was ready, I helped her face her pursuer, who she discovered to be from a past life. A robust encounter ensued between the “past” and the “present.” Mary was greatly liberated and quickly moved to the next stage of her therapy. Despite my own personal belief, I was able to join her in the “metaphor” of her reality and Mary claimed liberation for herself.

Many years ago I worked with a client—let’s call him Andrew. I can’t remember how he made contact with me, or if he knew I was a priest. In summary, Andrew’s primary issue was that he deeply loved a particular woman; but he also loved sex and was continuing to have sex with many other women. He was deeply dissatisfied with himself, and he wanted to commit to this one woman, but didn’t know if he could and still thrive. In brief: what did he really want of life? Shortly after he commenced work with me, I facilitated his taking a journey deep within himself as he sought that which

he really wanted out of being sexual with another. He arrived at a place within himself, describing it, after some searching for the right word(s), as "I Am." He allowed himself to deeply experience that I Am. As he emerged from this experience, he exclaimed: "What the hell was all that? It was bloody amazing!" I paused and asked, "Have you ever used those words to describe yourself, or have you ever heard those words being used before?" "Never," was his response; "I don't talk like that!" I responded, "The Jewish people, in their ancient stories, believe that 'I AM' is one of God's names." His response was one of amazement: "Bloody hell, does that mean...?" I nodded: "That the divine is within you—what do you think?" "Bloody hell!" was all he could say. Andrew was radically changed after that encounter.

Did he become a Christian as a result? I don't know, but I trust he will keep journeying with I AM. He certainly was freed to commit to his fiancée, and to enter more deeply into love. Was I a Jewish counsellor in that session? Was I a Christian counsellor? Perhaps I was simply a Christian accompanying him as he travelled the path. Need I have drawn his attention to the Hebrew Scriptures? Only in that he was already quoting them without knowing that he was doing so. The Hebrew Scriptures contain stories peculiar to, but not exclusive to, Jewish people; rather, they are stories of humanity trying to answer the big questions of life, such as the five life questions posed by Carlton Cornett and referred to in your paper—five life questions foundational to what Cornett calls "an examined life."

I have been helped by the writings of Marcus Borg, a contemporary Christian scripture scholar and theologian. In various places in his writings, particularly in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, Borg outlines three macro stories found in the Hebrew Scriptures; stories that can help us as we journey with God, with each other, and with self. Borg describes how these three macro stories continue into the Christian Scriptures, helping us understand both the person and the mission of Jesus of Nazareth, of whom I am a follower.

These three stories are the *Exodus Story*, the *Exile and Return Story*, and the *Priestly Story*. They are central to the Bible. They shape the Bible as a whole, influencing the religious imagination and understanding of ancient Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and the early Christian movement.

The *Exodus Story* is about a people in bondage (physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and political, etc.), who hunger for liberation, and who embark on a journey toward a new freedom: a very human story, the likes of which we hear day in and day out in our counselling rooms. The experience of being in bondage and longing for liberation runs deep within us all.

The *Exile and Return Story* is about separation (being cut off) from all that is familiar, dear, and central to our lives; about grief, anger, powerlessness and marginality, and often about oppression and victimisation; about separation with physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and political dimensions: a very human story, the likes of which we hear day in and day out in our counselling rooms. The experience of being separated from home and longing for home runs deep within us all.

The *Priestly Story* is about guilt and shame; about being out of right relationship with God, with others, and with self: a very human story, the likes of which we hear day in and day out in our counselling rooms. The experience of being out of right relationship and seeking right relationship, acceptance, and forgiveness runs deep within us all.

Jesus of Nazareth was profoundly influenced by these three macro stories. The Christian story sees Jesus as a visible sign of God in our midst, liberating, welcoming home, accepting, and forgiving.

As I accompany clients in my role as counsellor/psychotherapist/priest, I do so as one also profoundly influenced by these three macro stories lived by my faith-forebears, including Jesus of Nazareth. I can't do otherwise. The Christian way is in my blood. The challenge that I face is to be a credible, visible sign of God, liberating, welcoming home, accepting, and forgiving. Do I need to use my faith stories in the doing? Can I meet my client with real integrity, be that client Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or of another persuasion, or of the "I'm not persuaded" persuasion? Can I meet them in their stories, in their search for liberation, homecoming, acceptance, and forgiveness? Can I begin with the client and stay with the client? I profoundly hope that I can and do.

Where is God in the mix? Throughout! Do I need to announce God's presence? Not necessarily; I trust God can do that unaided! Can I remain true to my calling as a Christian and counsel in an authentic, person-centred way? Yes, but only in as much as I accompany my clients, companionship as they discover the good news of liberation, homecoming, acceptance, and forgiveness. And when I do, then I believe I am being authentically Christian and authentically a counsellor or psychotherapist.

References

- Borg, M. J. (1994). *Meeting Jesus again for the first time: The historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Cornett, C. (1998). *The soul of psychotherapy: Recapturing the spiritual dimension in the therapeutic encounter*. New York: Free Press.

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