

## Counseling: A Critical Comment

In the counseling encounter we have a face-to-face situation in which one person tries to aid or help another. Upon first glance it might seem that aiding another person with a life issue which is both problematic and important is an easy task. Yet from much effort and not so much success we know that such is not the case.

The experienced counselor knows that it is not in his power to 'solve' the other's problems, nor even to make the other happy. He may well believe, however, that he can assist the client to perceive more clearly what is wrong or what is needed; and that he can aid the client to make a better choice or take appropriate action. Furthermore, the counselor knows that within the counseling encounter these objectives may be furthered by careful listening so that the client 'feels' understood; by reformulating so that confusion is reduced; and by clarifying alternatives so that a basis for action may be laid.

What we have said so far will surely be agreed to by nearly all counselors and hardly advances any ideas about counseling which are likely to stir passions. In the paragraphs which follow, however, I will state certain theses which may not be so quickly and easily agreed upon. Some of what I suggest will doubtless strike some counselors as radical, others as irrelevant, and still others as simply foolish.

### Counseling in Search of A Better Paradigm

In my view, the social conditions which give rise to the need for counseling are rapidly becoming more prevalent. I mean conditions of

social change and break-up as reflected in indices such as marriage disorders and failures, delinquency, school failures, economic displacement, and so forth. The difficulty of making personal choices increases radically as societies transform under the impact of technology.

At the very time when the advancement of counseling is imperative, the enterprise of counseling is plagued by a serious misconception in need of careful analysis and, in my view, correction. This serious misconception is: That counseling can be built upon a scientific-technological model. The technology of testing, the attempts to computerize counseling, the technology of skill and technique development for counselors, behavioral engineering for counseling, and counseling research using group-centered experimental methods are all indicators of the technological paradigm upon which counseling uneasily rests.

The essential features of the technological paradigm are control, prediction, efficiency, use of numbers, and manipulation. The central social forces which render the individual impotent in today's society are technology, power, money, violence and oppression. The technological paradigm for counseling, then, is itself reflective of factors which are inimical to personal choice and existence. In my opinion, we should try to rationalize and advance counseling from a foundation which reflects human reality rather than technical reality; which, in short is humane rather than technical.

#### Humanism and Humanistic Psychology

Humanism as an intellectual movement from the 15th century to the present has advanced the humanistic ideals of liberation, wholeness,

creativity and a humane society for mankind. The Old Saybrook Conference in 1964 brought together several dozen leading figures from psychology and the humanistic disciplines. George Kelley, Jacques Barzun, Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Charlotte Bühler, Gordon Allport, Gardner Murphy, Carl Rogers, Rene Dubos and others tried to define what might be the chief elements in a "third" psychology - humanistic psychology.

The first and second psychologies - psychoanalysis and experimental psychology, behaviorism especially - have expanded rapidly since their beginnings in the early part of this century. However, after fifty years of development and research, neither psychoanalysis nor experimental psychology had produced either a general theory of behavior nor specific principles or findings which could be convincingly applied to such psychological specialties as counseling.

Psychoanalysis had grown from an initial analysis of abnormality and thus became organized around a paradigm of 'sickness'. Experimental psychology organized itself around a 'prediction and control' interest which was largely directed to studies of rats, cats, monkeys, dogs and pigeons. Both psychologies developed a reductionistic view of man. That is to say, man is nothing but a matrix of traits which will some day be explained by an even more careful analysis of neurological, physiological, bio-chemical and behavioristic aspects of the individual.

Those who gathered at the Old Saybrook Conference attempted to formulate the start of a psychology which would deal with human beings as they love, work, play, make war, and die. Since 1964, humanistic psychology has, in fact, been founded and we may conclude this brief discussion of

humanism and humanistic psychology with the definition of humanistic psychology as one which aims to study the whole individual by methods "... that are distinctly human, for the purpose of helping him live a happier, more self-actualizing, and more creative existence".<sup>1</sup>

I suggest that a 'humanistic' paradigm which seeks to interpret man in the full range of his humanity including not only his 'behaviors' and his perversions but also his lovingness, creativity, self-actualizing tendencies and capacity for change as well as his violence, confusion, suffering and death is a more suitable model for counseling than a technological paradigm or a model of perversion. If what I am suggesting is at all true, then we may be able to envision a humanistic counseling. To develop this conception I will briefly analyze elements which may particularly constitute such a vision, namely: self-actualization, choice, ethics, counseling as learning, creativity, and the counseling encounter.

#### Self-actualization

In modern life, the individual is constantly under the shadow of captivity. His life is a tension between autonomy and institutionalization. Institutions such as marriage, the family, schools, the state, corporate life, welfare, and hospitalization do have a capacity for aiding the individual become autonomous. More frequently, however, they act as subtle and pervasive forms of captivity. The individual, under the sway of institutionalization, becomes locked into a series of narrow, set responses to the world. The individual's fate seems to be either that of

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<sup>1</sup>Ellis, A. Humanistic psychotherapy. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974, p. 3.

robot existence or by stepping out of automatized, institutional life, alienation. Neither option grants the individual much claim to personal choice and creativity.

Existential psychologists, having perceived the oppression/alienation dilemma facing men in modern technological society argue that the concept of self-actualization is indispensable to a psychology which would correctly interpret human life.

The gestalt psychologist Goldstein wrote: "... an organism is governed by a tendency to actualize, as much as possible, its individual capacities, its nature in the world".<sup>2</sup> This original insight is supported by Angyal's<sup>3</sup> concept of self-realization as the intrinsic purpose of life; by Rogers' theory that the organism's basic tendency is "... - to actualize, maintain and advance the experiencing organism"<sup>4</sup>; and by Maslow's formulation of a human need hierarchy: physical, safety, belongingness, and self-actualization.<sup>5</sup>

If, on the one hand, we take man's basic motivation to be self-actualization and on the other that modern institutional life is at best indifferent and at worst hostile and oppressive to this need, then we can see that a humanistic counsellor is one who aids the individual in his self-actualization struggle. The humanistic counsellor takes emancipation rather than adjustment as a motif.

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<sup>2</sup>Goldstein, K. The Organism. New York: World Book, 1939, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>Angyal, A. Foundations for a science of personality. New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1941, p. 354.

<sup>4</sup>Rogers, C. Client-centered therapy. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1951, p. 487.

<sup>5</sup>Maslow, A. Motivation and personality. (2nd ed.) New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 35-47.

Primacy of Choice

One of the greatest problems for the modern individual is ambiguity, a kind of mental state which says yes and no at the same time. To state this dilemma in a positive form: the ability to choose, to decide, to be able to say, yes and no, is fundamental to a successful and meaningful existence, and is a second theme of the humanistic counseling orientation.

Some images of man - man as machine, man as animal, man as puppet, - suggest that man is helpless. Under the sway of these images, man is determined, conditioned, a victim and pawn - He can do little more than mechanically react to the external. Studies on self-fulfilling prophecy tell us that if man is treated as helpless, he becomes helpless, if he acts helpless, he is helpless.

While not denying that we are indeed always under the influence of our situation, humanistic counseling takes on principle that man may choose, and decide, on endless alternatives. The world of each person is simply one reality carved out of endless possibilities.<sup>6</sup>

The individual's basic reality is his choice. While biology and the physical world influence man in his decisions, he is determined by neither. The "problem" of his existence is not ultimately soluable, he must decide anew again and again. Of course we may, in many ways, attempt to avoid, postpone or deny our freedom of choice. Kaufmann<sup>7</sup> has written that the fear of making decisions, which he terms decidophobia, leads the individual to three false options: (a) avoid a decision, if possible; (b) if not,

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<sup>6</sup>Lee, D. Freedom and culture. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959.

<sup>7</sup>Kaufmann, W. Without guilt and justice. New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1973, 1-34.

stack the cards so that one alternative is clearly correct; (c) if all else fails, join the crowd thus declining responsibility.

The humanistic counsellor places himself on the side of choice and responsibility. A client can hardly be expected to decide and to take responsibility for his own choices and actions if we supply or encourage excuses, alibis and "explanations" which hamper his efforts. "If we are to believe that man may choose and decide, he must have the freedom to create reality for himself (*italics mine*)."<sup>8</sup> The counsellor may obstruct this freedom in two ways: by explaining the ideas and behavior of the client as the consequent of conditioning; or, conversely by claiming that actions, decisions, thoughts and imaginings of the client are the result of "secret" internal causes.<sup>9</sup> The thoughts and actions of the client reflect his choices which he considers as possibilities within the social context at that time. A basic supposition of humanistic counseling is that choice rather than compulsion is a possibility for all. In Ortega's words:

To live is to feel ourselves fatally  
obliged to exercise our liberty, to  
decide what we are going to be in this  
world... Even when in desparation we  
abandon ourselves to whatever may happen,  
we have decided not to decide.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Waldman, R. Humanistic psychotherapy. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1971, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup>Ryle, G. Concept of the mind. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949.

<sup>10</sup>Ortega, Y., & Gasset, J. The revolt of the masses. New York: Norton, 1932.

### Ethics

Man creates his social order. In this sense his social forms are fictional. They are merely certain possibilities out of many; they are products of consciousness; they are continuously changing; and they are not reducible to physical dimensions. Man's actions, thoughts and imaginings are not simply arbitrary. More correctly, they are purposeful;<sup>11</sup> they reflect man's choice and they enable him to act in a world he has chosen.

To see ourselves as "fictional" i.e., as choosing our world enables us to distinguish between what is and what ought to be. A client's choice of one alternative among many is, among other things, an ethical decision. Not all action is equally fruitful nor equally ennobling. Humanistic counseling does not deny the place of values and ethical judgments in the counseling encounter. The task of the counsellor is not to impose values but to provide a context for clarifying the client's life situation and analyzing the problematic issues - not merely for understanding but more for the sake of self-liberation. The basic structure of the counseling encounter is suggested by the idealistic Adlerian notion that "anyone can do anything". This indicates that the client can become freer than he is; further, that his imprisonment is not based so much on biological instincts, repressed or unconscious thoughts and feelings, but on faulty ideas, life plans, ambiguity, denial of choice and false consciousness.

### Educational Model

Humanistic counseling is based on learning principles. Clients are

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<sup>11</sup>Vaihinger, H. The philosophy of "as if". London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1942.

viewed as individuals who have life-plans to formulate, tasks to accomplish, decisions to make, feelings to integrate, creativity to express, relationships to build, life-problems to clarify and solve.

The task of the counsellor is to provide, within the counseling encounter, a facilitative context wherein the client can clarify what he is, what he can become and what he can expect from others: to discover both possibility and limitation. The counsellor must take care not to aggravate the situation of the client through intervention and manipulation.

To guard against intervention and imposition by the counsellor, an aspirational procedure is required. The counsellor acts as clarifier so that the client may see more clearly what he aspires to do or be. The goal of learning, change or attainment should be the clients'. Once the aspirations of the client are worked out, then the counsellor is able to suggest and aid the client to select or acquire the means for realizing his aspirations. The success of counseling depends very much on whether or not the client perceives his involvement in counseling as one based on choice or on compulsion.

The counseling encounter is, in part, an educational contract. The contract contains the ground rules for conducting the counseling. It should provide verbal agreement that neither client nor counsellor dominate one another. The central factor in the encounter is affirmation of the client's choice and the assumption of responsibility which accompanies choosing. Adherence to a counseling contract emphasizes the counsellor's efforts to increase the client's awareness of the many ways he may delay, avoid and postpone choice.

Failure in counseling may stem from the counsellor's lack of competence as an educator. He may neglect to impart essential information. Or he may be an ineffective model and thereby frustrate the client's search for alternative modes of conduct. The counsellor may not even conceive of himself as an educator and thus ignore the all-important principles of learning upon which all human conduct is based. What the individual is now and what he can become rests in no small part upon the processes of learning.

### Creativity in Counseling

Creativity refers not only to the genius of great artists but to the everyday life of the ordinary individual; not only to artistic productions such as poetry, paintings, sculpture, etc., but also to the concrete ways in which we live our daily lives. How we express ourselves in conversation, how we relate to others, how we do our daily work - each may be carried out creatively or not. In the counseling encounter, counsellor and client may bring creativity to bear upon those life issues which are being examined.

To create is to bring something new into being. The new may be an object, an idea, a relationship, a way of doing, or even an aspect of one's self. Within the counseling encounter, the emergence of something new often takes the following form. To begin with there is an awareness of opposition, a feeling of tension. Something I am doing or thinking is in conflict - what I believe is stopped or stuck. Next, is the startled sensation of insight. While the actual realization, the moment of insight is nearly always vivid as though one's perceptions were 'lit up', so to speak, this does not occur as a result of hard trying. The break through

of the new is more likely to come after an experience of detachment or ~~undirect~~ undirected reflection.

Client

I was darning socks, which I've never liked to do. I've always been impatient and clumsy-fingered.

Counselor

That sounds like boredom, something to be avoided.

Client

Oh yes! But yesterday something very strange happened. As usual, I'd been hurrying along trying to finish so I could do something, anything else. Then it was as though I began to mentally stand aside (Italics mine) from my hand. The had was now putting the needle in by itself. It was as though my mind was quietly watching or aware, but my hand was doing its own work. I felt as though I had realized something wonderful. There was such a sense of ease - the impatience, the annoyance was all gone.

Some days later the client remarked:

You just can't believe what a change I've felt since that insight I told you about - you know - with the socks. In all kinds of things, I've discovered that there are many ways of seeing the same thing. And that the different ways of perceiving are controllable, by me. (Italics mine)

The client has broken loose from a feeling of entrapment to a sense of personal freedom and creativity - an insight which began with the utterly mundane act of darning socks.

### Counseling and Crisis

A crisis is an up-ending experience. When in crisis we think the unthinkable - the unbelievable is happening. Crisis, however has a potential for constructive change and may, in fact, be the first step in a creative transformation.

Counseling can be designed to foster transcendent acts - that is, creating something new, and better, out of crisis. Creative thinking, and acting, by definition constitutes a departure from the known or from stereotypical behavior. In crisis the known, or rules, disappear and one is thrown into confusion and contradiction. The reconciliation of contradictions in the counseling process is more often than not a process of invention - inventing a larger view, a more effective response, a more satisfactory relationship.

The counsellor who wishes to enlist creativity in his work with clients has a number of processes to utilize. He may encourage and support break-out efforts on the part of the client. This means to aid the client experiment with new perceptions and behaviors in various life situations. A second process is not of integration: the new and the old, inner and outer, action and reflection. The client can be aided to appreciate the novel, that is, to actively value newness in self, tasks, relationships and thought. A final process in the counseling encounter which has much to do with the release of creativity is allowing. By this I am suggesting that the adept counsellor may be able to create a situation of encounter in which the client feels allowed to experience himself - his thoughts, feelings, imaginings, actions - in a way previously unknown. Laing says that:

the really decisive moments in psychotherapy, as every patient or therapist who has ever experienced them knows, are unpredictable, unique, unforgettable, always unrepeatable, and often undesirable. (1967, p. 47)<sup>12</sup>

Allowing consists of making these transient "moments" decisive.

This is the liberating creativity of the counseling encounter.

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<sup>12</sup>Laing, R. D. The politics of experience and the bird of paradise.  
London: Penguin, 1967.

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