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New Thinking About Counselling

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Abstract

This article is based on a keynote address given by the author at the Fall Conference of the Atlantic Chapter of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association on October 11, 1978 in Moncton, New Brunswick. A discussion of certain deleterious trends in contemporary, changing society is presented together with a brief analysis of the phenomenon of creative potential in change. A framework for guidance and counselling is presented which argues that counsellors have an essential role to play in modern society. Both practical and visionary, the perspective presented stresses that counsellors should appropriate a responsible, constructive place in society and that they are in a better position to do this when they connect their daily practical counselling activities with the creation of persons, society, culture, spirit, and history.

## New Thinking About Counselling

When I was asked if I wished to talk at a conference which had as its theme "Energize For The 80's", I quickly said "yes", for I recognized the importance of such an idea.

In the ensuing months I gave much thought to just what I should say and why. It was clear to me right away that I did not wish to summarize or repeat what others are saying about counselling, nor did I wish to elaborate upon some aspect of counselling because of my own specializations in the field of guidance and counselling. Instead I knew that I wished to speak from a different perspective - one that would invite listeners to consider such questions as "What is it about our present time that makes guidance and counselling a necessary and even vital part of life?" "What are we really doing when we counsel?" "How can we develop a vision of our work which will give us a sense of constructiveness within Canadian society?" "How can we gain a vital orientation toward personal and social well-being, both for ourselves and for those whom we counsel?"

In the daily work of counselling - that is, in listening, conferring, testing, guiding, refereeing and so on - it is all too easy to assume a cynical attitude, or to feel that one's efforts are not worth much, or to become down-hearted and resigned to merely "doing one's job". This will almost certainly happen if we do not see how our daily activities have a meaningful connection with the lives of other people and with the larger social, economic and historical context.

First, I want to indicate what our life-situation is today. Secondly, I will indicate why wise and effective counselling and guidance is essential

to many people in their struggles to achieve a life of better quality both materially and spiritually. I will try to open up ideas about why one can genuinely take pride in being a counsellor or "guide" in modern society. Due to the limit of time, I can only suggest the briefest indications of where we are and what we can do to energize for the 80's. I hope that my remarks will influence you to carry out further reflections and actions on your own and with your colleagues in the remainder of the conference and after you leave here and return to your homes and places of work.

One more prefatory remark. I believe, as E. F. Schumacher (1979) put it, that the primary task of the individual who wishes to take a responsible stand (and I believe that counsellors should take a responsible stand) in society is "To foster and build within oneself a genuine understanding of the situation which confronts us, and to build conviction, determination and persuasiveness upon such understanding. (p. 37)". Is this too much to ask, particularly of persons who assume such important roles of influence as do counsellors, teachers, social workers and other of societies "helpers"? I think not. In fact, I will go one step further and say that each of us has the responsibility and the capacity to construct our own map of reality, "and to dream, think, and act on the basis of it (Gillingham, 1979, p. 148)", and then to reflect on our own actions and the consequences of our actions so that our succeeding cycles of dreaming, thinking and acting can be clarified, strengthened and made more influential and beneficial.

#### Our Social Situation

It seems patently absurd to try to sketch in "our social situation" in a few paragraphs. However, I am willing to try the absurd.

First, we can observe some characteristics of modern Western society which we may take as significant "signs" of our contemporary social situation. It should be borne in mind that most of the signs which I describe in the following paragraphs are two sided: They have both negative and positive values. Further, these characteristics should be seen in some perspective. They were underway before the turn of this century and most were greatly hastened by World War II and its economic and political aftermaths.

1. Break-up of community and neighborhood life. This trend is world-wide and is most clearly evidenced in the urbanization of society with marked decline in rural settlements. The important consequence of this migration is that there has been nearly a total failure to form integral or organic communities or neighborhoods within the urban context. Existentially, countless individuals experience themselves as homeless and without practical guidance in the face of complex, urban existence.

2. Increase in criminality. This has occurred at all levels from so-called corporate level crimes down to the more garden variety of crimes such as arson, robbery, rape, break and entry and shoplifting. The increase in anti-social behaviors, especially among the young, produces widespread feelings of vulnerability and hardening desires for revenge.

3. Increase in illness. Medical science has extended longevity, greatly reduced infectious diseases and developed many sophisticated treatment procedures. Yet other "medical" facts need to be kept in mind: certain emotional disturbances (depression, for example) have increased with the urbanization of society; some types of biochemical affliction such as cancer - have increased drastically in recent decades; psychosomatic

and stress related diseases have become more prevalent. The medicalization of society, especially sedation, tranquillization and surgery, has reached epidemic proportions.

4. Escalation of standards of living and expectations for ever-higher standards of living. Of course, to work for the improvement of one's existence is both valid and desirable. However, the terrible confusion between needs and wants which has been promoted by modern advertising and marketing techniques gives rise to expectations which often can not be met, thus producing frustration and anti-social methods of meeting needs.

5. Turmoil of the family. There is a great debate going on over the so-called decline of the family. Whether there will ever be any fruitful outcome of this discussion I do not know. Within the context of marriage and family, however, certain factors are clear. (a) The over-all family size is smaller than it use to be. (b) Elders are increasingly excluded from extended family patterns. (c) Marriage break-up has markedly increased in recent decades. (d) Parents find more difficulty in controlling children and juveniles than in previous times. (e) Violence in the family is frequent. (f) Family mobility is much greater than in previous times. (g) There is an increasing expectation that families in need will receive aid from outside sources. (h) Male-female/wife-husband roles are undergoing redefinition. It is my opinion that womanhood has undergone (and still is undergoing) more examination and redefinition in the last few decades than in all previous history.

6. Replacement of human labor by machine function. With the ascendancy of world-wide industrial technological network, the role of the individual worker has diminished. Very large numbers of worker functions have been

replaced by automated, cybernated, computerized technologies. While there certainly is nothing wrong with reducing toil in the lives of people, a problem arises when the time and effort of machine-displaced individuals is not re-directed to leisure and employment which has personal significance. By and large, this re-direction is not occurring satisfactorily even in the most advanced countries. Instead the spectre of high levels of unemployment haunts most countries today. Work as the foundation of life-meaning has badly deteriorated for many people. This has severe results for a society since a person's work is one of the most decisive formative influences on character and personality. Satisfying work is crucial in the formation of self-esteem.

There are other factors which I could enumerate. However, these six give us adequate basis to make three summary statements about our contemporary social situations.

1. Social life is rapidly increasing in complexity, in mechanization and in urbanization.

2. Social life is improving in that direct economic and social exploitation and oppression is lessening and in a limited sense it improves as material standards of living increase. Relatively speaking, however, not all members of Canadian society are experiencing an increase in living standards.

3. Social life is worsening in that conventional forms of moral guidance which had functioned for centuries have practically disappeared in our time. The fundamental questions "Who am I?" and "What ought I do?" have become increasingly difficult to answer. When these questions go unanswered, the result is social disorientation and the rise of anti-social behavior.

### Realms of Life

While we might wish otherwise, it is a social fact that the family, church, clan, tribe, guild, and neighborhood elders no longer give lucid guidance to either youth or adults about dilemmas within the five basic realms of life. These realms are reflected in the following questions - the most important, life-organizing questions an individual will ever ask: (a) Who am I? (b) What can I do (with my life)? (c) What ought I to do with my life? (d) What about all those other people out there? (e) What will be my fate in the end?

"Who am I?" is an existential question. "What can I do with my life?" is an educational and vocational question. "What ought I to do with my life?" is an ethical question. "What about all those other people out there?" is a community or compassionate question and "What will be my fate in the end?" is a spiritual question.

These five questions, asked by children, youth, and adults clearly indicate the value, the necessity, the urgency of counselling and guidance in our time. The questions themselves are ageless, asked by people of every generation down through all the ages of mankind. They take on critical importance in our time for counsellors because social life, education, and economic life become enormously more complex in each passing decade. At the same time traditional institutions and agents of the community that have aided people to secure answers to these questions in the past have declined in influence on both young and old. In this "guidance vacuum", a crucial question is: "Can (and should) counsellors assume roles of greater influence in aiding individuals seek answers, make choices and take action in existential, vocational, ethical, compassionate, and spiritual realms of life?"

### Adult Models

It seems to me that no single factor is more powerful in promoting a constructive transition from childhood and youth to adulthood than adult models. The most powerful form of learning is imitative learning. One of the traumas of our time is that youth learning from youth has, in too large a degree, replaced youth learning from elders. While this issue is complicated, it can be remedied in part by adults who have stabilized their own identities. Adults who know "who" they are and "where" in the world they are, are better models than adults who are confused and lost. While it is a lot to ask, I believe that the counsellor should be a stable model. Further, the counsellor as exemplar may find his constancy and stability through commitment to change itself. Rather than resisting or decrying change, the contemporary counsellor can utilize change to form a Protean self which appropriates the best from the five realms of life in a changing world. At the very least, it seems to me, the counsellor should, act as a model of one who can explore, invent, experiment and benefit from change.

As counsellors, the body of knowledge we have about practical well-being is substantial. For example, we can clearly assert the following knowledge statements without fear that we are either misled or misleading.

1. We know that infants and small children need stability and stimulation.
2. We know that children need to be accepted and have a deep instinct to learn.
3. We know that adolescents need meaning, limits, and must come to terms with sexuality.
4. We know that adults need satisfying work, a sustaining purpose in life and must come to terms with mating and parenting.

5. We know that the elderly need security and must come to terms with death.

As counsellors we do not need to be totally lost and tossed about by the latest fad and whim. We have access to a good body of knowledge about human well-being, we can assess and confront the situation we are actually living in, we have some pretty good ideas about both the training of counsellors and the practical activities in which counsellors can and should undertake to bring benefit to clients. Our knowledge, if we take the effort to acquire it, and our training, if we take the effort to acquire it, can provide an effective counselling orientation which is both a practical psychology and a moral stance. A practical psychology will help define what can be done and a moral stance will help define what ought to be done.

#### We Are Survivors

We should think of ourselves as survivors. And what is it we have survived? For a few of us here today, the hard times of the 1930's. For more of us World War II. For most of us the "lost" decade of the 50's. For all of us the experimental and liberation of the 60's and early 70's. Underneath all of this of course we are surviving many technological revolutions: atomic and nuclear physics, computers and cybernetics, space travel and communications. We are experiencing a raising of ecological consciousness, a recognition that energy, or its lack, may gravely influence our standard of living. Politics seems to have become a continuous legal investigation; education is under the spell of a conservatism with accountability, back-to-basics and declining enrolments being common topics in educational criticism. Of course we will survive all this, too.

Survivors can be numbed and paralyzed by their experiences. They can also be energized. Survivors can be dislocated and homeless. They can also be transformed and find the energy and creativity to fashion a new reality.

Amidst all of the mocking and uncertainty, the plastic and the absurd, in the center of vast social changes and technological revolutions in the aftermath of fallen bastions of morality, in the sweep and swirl of changing political, economic and social tides, we are survivors. We can be survivors with a strong energy and a powerful forward thrust to our work. As counsellors we can use our experience as survivors to inform and empower our work.

#### A Creative Perspective For Counselling

The positive side of all the flux and change of our times is that the possibility for creating a life rich in confidence, spirit, intelligence and material achievement is open to many more people than in past ages. In former societies with strong institutions of tribe and class, church and family, with highly defined roles of who one was, and what one could do, the potential was much less for creating a life role different from that which one was born into. Today, while many will fail to do so, the potential for developing a creative and need-fulfilling life is much greater, then in previous times.

The basic building block of civilization, and for enlarging the process of evolution, is the human person. Nothing is more fundamental than the life and experiences of individuals.

The development of creative capacity and spirit in persons is of great importance not only for individuals but also for the life of the culture and for the civilization.

In the course of living our lives, whether in good fortune or bad, and depending upon what our experience is, we add something to our culture, we form our culture, we add to the process of evolution. By our actions as responsible members of society and especially through acts of compassion such as occur in authentic counselling, we are going beyond natural evolution and contributing to spiritual evolution. Through our daily work as counsellors we are helping to create and re-create the selfhoods of our clients, we are adding to the life of our society and our culture, we are taking a role in the formation of history. In an exalted sense, we are adding to spirit and the cosmos. This I believe, is the framework for all that we do in counselling and guidance. From this viewpoint we can assume a necessary and constructive part to play in the formation of persons and in the formation of society, now and in the future. This perspective provides us with an image of man which is hopeful, practical, and visionary: man as creator (Peavy, 1979).

Creativity takes place when something new is brought into existence. This is precisely what happens when, as counsellors, we help another person - a child, a youth, an adult - to plan, decide, consider, learn, to act. This is creativity in action. In these moments we are helping to create the quality of an individual life and at the same time we are also contributing to a culture, to history, to spirit.

So we come full circle in our reflections. The fabric of earlier times has broken down and much disorder is resulting. At the same time the possibility for creating, and helping others to create, a life of meaning, fulfillment and creativity is greater than ever before. We are indeed survivors. We cannot go back. Everything, the wonderful as well as the

terrible is before us.

In practical terms what are some of the projects which one can undertake so that the reality of counselling can be creative, personally and socially constructive - in short, vital and energized? Here I am raising a new set of issues and I will go no further than to ask eight questions, any one of which might be a beginning point for the larger project of vitalizing our work.

1. Do you have a plan for your own personal and professional development as a counsellor?

2. Have you recently reviewed your plan to see if you still hold the same vision for yourself, that you did five years ago; how are you progressing toward your life goals, and what is hindering you?

3. Do you and your colleagues where you work have a statement of consensus about what your program of counselling services should try to attain, and how?

4. Are you a member of a professional support group and are you doing your part to keep it going?

5. In your community, do you belong to an inter-agency committee which tries to coordinate the helping services of the community?

6. Do you have a vocational guidance service which tries to bridge the gaps between career exploration and selection, vocational education, and employment?

7. Have you recently written-up some aspect of your work about which you are proud, and passed the write-up along to your peers, to your supervisor, to your professional newsletter or association journal?

8. Have you deliberately engaged in a professional development activity during the past year - one that you chose to do and not one that was required?

Many thoughtful people fear that they will become (or have already become) the victims of urbanized life and suffer dehumanization at the hands of mechanization, materialism and institutionalism. Certainly these are real dangers to personal existence which we must struggle against and help others to do likewise. However, I believe that the real danger lies in everyone's potential for private dehumanization. "Private" factors such as internal hardening, insensitivity and failure of compassion are the grounds for cynicism, pessimism and moral paralysis. In my opinion, it is this "rot of the soul" which we as counsellors must guard against both singly and collectively.

Throughout, I have been indirectly suggesting that as counsellors what we need to move our work forward is an affirmation of will to value, to augment, to heighten, to exalt. We need a will to liberate ourselves from the dissipation of pessimism so that we can form our future and claim our place in society with vitality and imagination. I will close with an affirmative thought from that prescient philosopher Nietzsche (1887). It is a powerful thought, one that commands us to decide whether or not we are leading a life we actually believe in. What is our reaction when we consider that we may be commanded to lead this very same life again, and again, without end. In Nietzsche's own words:

What if a demon crept after you into your loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to you: "This life, as you are living it at present, and have lived it, you must live it once more, and again innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must come to you again, and all in the same series and sequence - and likewise this spider and

this moonlight among the trees, and likewise this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand-glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and you with it, you speck of sand!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth, and curse the demon that so spoke? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment in which you would answer him: "You are a god, and never did I hear anything so divine!" If that thought acquired power over you as you are, it would transform you, and perhaps crush you; the question with regard to all and everything: "Do I want this once more - and for innumerable times?" would lie as the heaviest burden upon your activity! Or, how you would have to become favorably inclined to yourself and to life, so as to long for nothing more ardently than for this last eternal sanctioning and sealing (p. 273)?

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