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Notes on Counselling for the World Seminar
On Employment Counselling:
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In my remarks I am departing from the pragmatic tenor of many of the communications being given at this Seminar.

Let me begin by saying that in our present society generally and in the field of counselling specifically we are tormented by ideas which do not work. Paraphrasing Spinoza only slightly I think that we can say that we are gathered here at this seminar not to brag, not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand.

And just what is it that we should attempt to understand? Certainly the various papers and discussions on counselling methods, the use of technology in counselling, the problems of employment and unemployment are all worthy and interesting. For the most part, though, they do not identify the crucial consideration which brings us all together in this seminar. I will state this consideration, as I see it, first in a negative form, then in a more positive form after which I will discuss one or two ideas which I believe torment counsellors - and others as well.

Our central problem is not employment, unemployment, counselling service and so on, but rather the problem we confront is the widespread fracturing of individuals from footholds of validity in our society, or as some like to say our present age dis-ease is fragmentation. Put in a question form we can ask: Just how are individuals to establish liveable bonds with the social order? This issue becomes increasingly more problematic as institutionalization of life progresses and as technology becomes more sophisticated and pervasive.

It is exactly this disturbed and uncertain relationship between the individual and the technical social order which accounts for the dramatic emergence of counselling in this century.

Historically, bonding between individuals and the social order have taken shape from three existential decision-points:

- (1) With whom will I mate and build a family?
- (2) What will be my personal fate, in the end? and
- (3) What work can I take up which will sustain me as a valid and significant being?

Certainly no one here today needs to be reminded of the many disturbances and transformations which are occurring within the realm of the family and relations between the sexes. When we consider the question of fate, it is possible to conclude that the great experiment to live without religion has failed but what the next step is in spiritual life remains unclear. So far as work is concerned, and this is a main theme of this seminar, here too we have ideas which torment us and I will come back to this shortly. First, I want to address what I regard to be a tormenting idea about counselling itself.

Counselling got off on the wrong foot many years ago to the degree that it opted for an allegiance with psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is, unfortunately, construed to be a "curing" process although there are attempts being given to demonstrate that even psychotherapy is not so much a process of curing as it is a process of learning. This is understandable since mental "sickness" except in a few biochemical instances does not exist and the curing of mental sickness in an imitation of medicine is an empty and pointless exercise. Counsellor training is inordinately preoccupied and thus tormented with theories of psychotherapy as a conceptual basis for counselling.

The fact is that nearly all people who seek counselling are beset with problems in living. In the great majority of cases, they have failed to learn something - skill, knowledge, values, concepts. Further, they can only acquire these through learning. Thus, the counsellor is primarily an educator. Of course within the context of counselling, learning and education must be made to fit the needs of the specific person.

I have frequently heard the question: "Well just exactly is the task of the counsellor?" It definitely is not the task of the counsellor to cure anyone. Rather it is the task of the counsellor through educational means to assist individuals to learn for the first time or to re-establish constructive objective relations with other people and with the technical social order. The counsellor should recognize that such connections are established, if at all, through three processes: Person-to-person exchanges, working and learning. All forms of counselling, including employment counselling can find a genuine root in life-integration and self-formation. In other words the work of the counsellor is to aid the person to develop or form a coherent sense of self and achieve a constructive bond with the social order.

To achieve such aims, the counsellor is able to offer two things to persons seeking aid, and this regardless of whether the connection is one-to-one or group: First the counsellor can offer a shelter, a sanctuary as it were, within which it is possible to talk things over, to feel safe from assault and criticism and to rest; second, the counsellor can provide a learning laboratory within which it is possible to learn many necessary requirements for socially constructive living: This is what life-skills training is all about, and role-playing, and self-teaching materials, and simulation and modeling and peer learning and BJRT and EOW classes, and assertiveness training classes and so on.

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Most importantly, the counsellor exerts his or her educational influence significantly by becoming vitaly present to the other and thus takes the side of the individual in a compassionate, advocating, and tutoring way to aid the other toward social engagement and coherency of self.

Another set of ideas which torments us are our ideas about work: We do not understand the significance of work in the present age, I believe. Surely, but what are we to understand about work. First, that a terrible degradation of work has occurred under the onslaught of mechanization. The Oxford dictionary defines work as "an expenditure of energy, striving, application of effort for some purpose." For many people the purpose of work is subsistence - it is an alternative to starvation. One works to subsist and such work is the price one pays, penal in nature, a necessary evil. The Greek word for work, "ponos," has the same root as the Latin "poena:" Punishment, penalty, pain. Thus work is equated with labor or toil, and with pain. Convicts are sentenced to "hard labor" - they must toil and suffer for their sins. They are modern examples of a medieval conception of work.

Karl Marx conceived work to be typically "an alienation of life since ... I work in order to (provide) for myself the means of living. Working is not living." In 1829 Carlyle wrote that "The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster ... Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also."

For the majority of people in our present society, work may be said to pay. By means of my work I am able to buy free time. Thus our work is the means by which we sleep till noon, attend stimulating conferences, do needlepoint or

fly to the Carribean. Work is a currency and its value is that it purchases above and beyond subsistence. Even so, the ends always involve not working, i.e., wealth, retirement.

In our society most unemployed are abandoned victims. For a host of reasons they have either lost or never gained a foothold in the economic apparatus of society. Worst of all they are all too frequently blamed or even persecuted for their plight. Should not a modern society such as ours provide a foothold upon which each citizen can stand and say "I am valid?" "I have a right to this validity through work."

Whether one is a subsistence worker or a worker who is able to buy free time or is an unemployed, it seems to me abundantly clear that the ideas which we have about work torment us. Our ideas about work (and work itself) are not instrumental (for bringing significance) to human life in our present society.

Simone Weil, who worked in the Renault Auto Works assembly lines in the 1930's, wrote just before her death in 1943, "Our age has its own particular mission, or vocation, the creation of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work." Can we find ways to broaden the meaning and currency of work to include paid training leave, leisure and, perhaps vocational counselling which has a life-integration orientation? Unemployment and its many disturbing consequences results not from lazy, shiftless citizens but from ideas which no longer work.

By these few remarks I have tried to indicate that counsellors have an essential role to play in assisting individuals to find a significant foothold for self-validity in a society so much in change that vast numbers of people are dislodged from their footholds. Further, that both counsellors and those

who train counsellors must replace certain ideas about the nature and function of counselling which are not adequate to perform the essential tasks which counselling faces in our present society.

Can counsellors and counsellor educators form a vision and a program of counselling which is an educational (rather than a treatment) process and which is designed to enable the individual to form decisions which engage and bond the person in constructive ways to the social order? Can this be done through a revitalized conception of work and the worker's relation with work? Can employment counselling help to achieve such a life-integration affect? I close by suggesting that it is such questions as these which should be allowed to guide our thinking about the relation between training and practice in counselling.