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## **WISDOM-BASED HELPING PRACTICE**

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**PRESENTED TO THE HUMAN SCIENCE PRESEARCH CONFERENCE, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, JUNE 19, 2002**

Psychotherapists, counsellors, child care workers, and social workers share a common concern about their respective practices—are we effective? After a half century of doing research and practice in the helping professions, I am persuaded that this is not the most important question for helpers. Instead, I believe that—regardless of the problem or issue faced by help seekers—the most important question that help seekers ask is: “How should I fashion my life?” This question, simple though it seems, indicates that every worry and trouble, big and small, that a person can experience has an ethical-moral dimension. To ask: what kind of career is best and possible for me is to ask “How should I live my life?” To consider the best way to treat a child is to ask “How should I live my life with regard to this child?” Consequently, I believe, we helpers should be pre-occupied with the ways in which we try to produce answers to this fundamental moral and existential question. We often must decide on the actions to take in order to produce a solution to some dilemma. More fundamentally, however, we are engaged at the ethical/moral level of trying to decide how to be a good person, and how to “do” in a way that is “good” both for self and for others. Not just “how do I do this”, but “What **should** I do?”

“How should I fashion my life?” is a philosophical question and merits a philosophical response from help-givers. In recent years I have formulated a wisdom-based approach to helping that is concerned with the “good” in helping and in deciding on perspectives and actions to take in the conduct of one’s life (Peavy, in-press). Wisdom-based practice is concerned with both being good (Blackburn, 2001) as well as doing good. To act in helpful ways and to support others to do likewise is an ethical good in all cultures, independent of doctrine or ideology. This perspective is unabashedly philosophical as well as psychological. It also draws on literary metaphors such as “self-author”.

From the writings of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1859) we can glean the beginnings of wisdom based helping practice:

1. Listen with a fresh ear and from the perspective of the other, and allow yourself to be amazed at what you hear
2. Exercise patience, respect, and equality
3. Begin your offer of help where the other is, existentially, and not where you expect, assume or want the other to be
4. Come to the helping situation in a state of not-knowing; let the other teach you about her life
5. Restrain your own vanity, self-importance, and egoistic need to assert yourself

Wisdom is not simply one thing and cannot be defined in a final, precise and operational manner. At a minimum, wisdom based helping practice means:

- **Reality seeking**—trying to perceive things as they are; letting other people, situations and things speak to us constitutively and not as we presume or want them to appear
- **Commitment to the identification of faulty assumptions**—practice of evidentiary perception and rejection of discrimination, prejudice and assumptiveness
- **Acting in prudent and fruitful ways**
- **Perceiving from the perspective of the whole**
- **Commitment to gaining a better-than-ordinary** grasp of existential situations
- Knowledge of *when to act*, and *when not to act*
- Facing the world and problems with *steadfastness, quietness and compassion*
- Possessing a *reflective and critical thinking attitude* toward ideas and problems
- *Openness to lived-experience* as the first order reality
- Ability to *anticipate* problems—based on life experience and on study
- Gaining a repertory of *good ideas* that can act as cultural guides in how one should think, act and live in particular contexts
- Appreciation and acceptance of both *active and contemplative stances* in life
- *Capacity for dialogical communication* in various modes: verbal, writing, mapping, and imaginative

A wisdom-based helping practice can assist in the process of affirming the integrity of the individual as an agent and as a social actor effectively engaged in dialogical relations with others (Touraine, 1988).

The philosopher of existenz, Karl Jaspers wrote:

*If one is to get a firm grip on one's own life and form ties with others on the basis of trust, then a philosophy to live by is essential. Only by judging what ideas are good to live by, and what are not, can the individual create him- or herself as an independent being secure in the experience of trust-worthy relationships.*

A wisdom-based practice places greatest emphasis on ideas, perspectives and meaning. Actions are important, however they are guided by ideas. The task of the wisdom based helping practice is to aid help seekers to identify and evaluate ideas and perspectives which in turn can guide fruitful actions. Ideas and actions are bound together through the medium of meaning.

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