

**The Lost Voice of the Heart:**  
An Emotionally Focused Approach  
to Counselling Christian Clients

Helen Blake, 2005.

## Introduction

In a book called 'The Sacred Romance', the heart is described as the 'wellspring of the human soul', from which flows all true caring, all meaningful work, all real worship and all sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> The premise of the book is that we have lost touch with our hearts, leaving this inner part of ourselves behind in the rush to live 'external' lives, in the identity we've carved for ourselves. Another book describes the same idea: 'Our original shimmering self gets buried so deep we hardly live out of it at all...rather, we learn to live out of all the other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather'.<sup>2</sup> The rich use of metaphor by each of these Christian writers moved me to think more deeply about my work with Christian clients. This paper considers that some people are troubled by pain in their lives and have difficulty dealing with that pain because they have learned to silence the deepest yearnings, the voice of their heart.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the paper looks at counselling clients for whom Christian faith holds a central place. The writings of Christian therapists are used to highlight the difficulties sometimes faced when such clients are blocked off from themselves. The paper goes on to propose that Emotionally Focused Therapy offer them ways to bring them into contact with their 'inner life', the life of the heart.

## Silencing the heart

Clients bring to my counselling<sup>4</sup> practice the full range of human problems: relationship difficulties, addictions, loss, childhood abuse or neglect, domestic violence, other trauma, and depression. Those who are Christian come with similar issues, and they seem to have an additional layer of difficulty: 'As a Christian, I shouldn't have this problem'; or, 'because I am a Christian I should be able to overcome this problem.' Some Biblical texts are thought to suggest that being a Christian will, in itself, put an end to these problems, which are seen as sin and therefore incompatible with the Christian life:

*For we know that our old self was crucified with (Christ) ... so that we would no longer be slaves to sin, because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Romans 5:6-7)*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis, B and Eldridge, J. (1997) p 3-4

<sup>2</sup> Buechner, F. (1991) p45

<sup>3</sup> Curtis, B and Eldridge, J. op cit p5 I acknowledge the writers for the original idea of 'the voice of the heart' for the title of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> I am deliberately using the word 'counselling' to apply to both counselling and therapy work for the majority of this paper. Deeper and longer term work is referred to specifically as therapy when discussed briefly later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> Biblical quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (1978)

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

It is not within the scope of this paper to enter a discussion of the nature of sin, a central tenet of Christian teaching. It is very common, however, for Christians to equate emotional states with sin, and to suggest that sin causes emotional disorders. When this occurs, these verses take on a meaning along the following lines:

*For we know that our old self was crucified with (Christ) ... so that we would no longer have any problems, or feel bad, because anyone who has died has been set free from such things .*

*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The difficulties should have gone; but as I still have them I must not be in Christ.*

Christian psychologist Arch Hart<sup>6</sup> says that Christians often see emotions as incompatible with faith, and they experience great conflict trying to reconcile their experience of extreme feelings with their spirituality. This conflict is reinforced by Christian culture which tends to resist expression of real feelings, because people fear being seen as a failure; being honest about personal struggle will threaten their perceived respect from others. Attitudes and taboos about emotional expression lead to the following beliefs

- 'it is unchristian to be depressed'
- 'to be an effective witness for Christ I have to deny and conceal my feelings'
- 'if I give in to my emotions I will lose control of myself'
- 'I should be free from emotional extremes. I should be calm at all times, neither too high or too low'

When people of faith hold such beliefs, they feel very bad when they struggle with emotional and other difficulties. They will feel, at best, guilty, and at worst, deeply ashamed. They will have trouble saying the prayer which opens the worship in mainstream churches all over Australia each Sunday:

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hidden...*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hart, A. (1979) p 15

<sup>7</sup> (1995) A Prayer Book for Australia p119

For some Christians, the prospect of God knowing their secrets makes them determined to keep Him at arms' length. Fear of exposure makes it necessary to develop an outer life to be lived out in 'shoulds' and 'oughts', which keeps the heart hidden away, sometimes even from oneself.

### **Knowing the heart**

If the heart is indeed the wellspring of the soul, then by nature it reflects something of the inner self of the person. David Benner, a contemporary Christian therapist, says that the self is a co-creation; it is only intelligible in relation to God and to others. As a result, 'genuine knowing of the self' requires several things of the person. Firstly, they need to understand how God sees them:

*For you created my inmost being: you knit me together in my mother's womb...I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Ps 139:13-14*

Secondly, genuine knowing of the self requires that they experience themselves in relation to others, being in intimate relationships and reflecting on their experiences within them.

Thirdly, they need to come face to face with the darker, shadow aspects of their personality:

*The Heart is deceitful above all things' (Jer 17.9)*

Rationalisation, repression, denial or rejection: all keep them in the darkness and unable to live in the light of truth. To do this, they need to come to understand and undo their characteristic strategies of self-deception.<sup>8</sup> Religion purports to offer human beings a solution to such deceptions. Thomas Moore, however, suggests that religion often avoids the dark, making it into some kind of demon, hiding behind platitudes and false assurances and offering a light that is more sentimental than tangible. As such it can easily become a defence and an avoidance.<sup>9</sup> His view is that pain, rather than whisking people away from daily challenges, initiates them into spiritual adulthood, offering an intelligent way of dealing with the complexities of life.<sup>10</sup> Emotional experience, the experience of the heart, can inform and teach. When the heart is silenced, the person is deprived of a rich resource for growth and relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Benner, D. (1998). p 100-102

<sup>9</sup> Moore, T. (2004). p 15

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Introduction

It would be simplistic to put the blame for avoidance of feeling and unwillingness for people to look into themselves on organised religion in general or the Christian faith in particular. For emotional processes and their attitudes to them have been shaped by their history, from the earliest experiences of attachment in the family of origin and including experiences at school, in sporting clubs, scouts and guides, youth groups and peer relationships. These models form the individual's beliefs about their worth and significance through their responses to their expressions of need. Beginning very early, through the mirror of those who cared for them, they have absorbed both nurture and criticism, many have absorbed a distorted perception of themselves and they have been hindered in their ability to listen to the deepest yearnings of their heart.

For most people, the critical or shaming messages from their parent figures, and sometimes even their spiritual mentors, as well as painful events and experiences, have been felt like 'arrows... delivered in a hail of projectiles... or descending in a more subtle flight'.<sup>11</sup> Rather than feeling and responding from their pierced hearts, they have learned to silence its cry. They find ways to avoid feeling: they deny it by covering it with other feelings or by cutting it off. Instead of dealing with the arrows, they silence the longing<sup>12</sup> - to be real about what they are feeling, to express it and to receive the nurturing response they yearn for. They have learned to live in a way that is external, where compliance and performance are highly valued and where problems, feelings and longings are not accepted and supported.<sup>13</sup> And so they learn to put on the coats and hats of protection against the 'weather': the pain of life. They have developed elaborate defence mechanisms to block pain. American psychotherapist Donald Winnicott named this developed self as the 'false self', a defensive emotional wall built to protect the fragile 'true self'.<sup>14</sup> And so is formed the external life, the 'coats and hats' seen and known by others, the life driven by *shoulds and oughts* rather than *needs and wants*.

### **The Christian and the heart**

Christians, too, suffer the affliction of life's 'arrows': they face the daily struggles of relationships with colleagues, friends, partners, children and parents, the threat of retrenchment or unemployment, financial worry and sexual temptation; these bring wounds of hurt, sadness, loss, rejection, loneliness, anger. They are likely to be just as disconnected from their emotional life and perhaps even more so. They are similarly defended, having learned and practised

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<sup>11</sup> Curtis and Eldridge, op cit, p 23

<sup>12</sup> Ibid pp 27-8, 33

<sup>13</sup> I acknowledge the use of these metaphors of the heart and the arrows from Curtis and Eldridge.

<sup>14</sup> In Webster (2004) (i) p 79

protective behaviours from an early age so that they are automatic, often unnoticed and usually unchallenged. Suppressed emotions, compulsive perfectionism, drivenness, withdrawal and passivity, attacking others who hurt them, punishing themselves when they fail, seeking acceptance, helping others to gain appreciation: they are often unaware of the extent of emotional, relational or spiritual hurt because of a lack of objectivity about themselves<sup>15</sup>. Many who become counselling clients will have learned that needs and wants are emotional, and therefore unworthy of their calling and are even sinful. They are unable to tune in to their emotional selves, to the small (or perhaps bigger) sighs of the heart. Relational and personal struggles remain hidden since the shame of admitting them provides a powerful motivation to maintain the external face of 'OKness'.

Another aspect of difficulty faced by Christians is related to various teachings of the Bible. The New Testament has many passages of teaching which refer to coming before God as a child. For those whose experiences of childhood were painful and damaging this is a difficult concept. Their vulnerability is something they have tried to cover and protect, and perhaps even to forget; they are unlikely to risk exposure to an all-powerful God. Similarly, the Bible represents God as Father. For those whose earthly fathers have been annihilating<sup>16</sup> or abandoning<sup>17</sup>, such a God will be rendered frightening or remote.

Further, serious emotional and physical abuse of woman and children has been minimized or silenced because of 'theological' tenets about marriage and the family. Such teachings have not only failed to equip the vulnerable to resist violent behaviour but may even 'legitimize' the violence itself<sup>18</sup>. Victims hold beliefs such as 'suffering is my cross to bear' and 'Jesus said I am to forgive seventy times seven'. When others say 'God never gives anything more than you can handle' and 'there's a reason for everything', an abused person can fall into self-blame, isolation and helplessness.

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<sup>15</sup> McGee, R. (1998) p 3

<sup>16</sup> Annihilation is a form of rejection which occurs by being blamed or attacked. The more extreme forms of annihilation include physical and sexual abuse, but may also be repeated criticism. These clients avoid their emotional experience, are often critical and abrasive in their relationships with others. Webster (2004) (ii) p 1, Webster (2004) (i) p104

<sup>17</sup> Abandonment is another form of rejection where a client feels they have been ignored or unnoticed; their experience is of lack of acknowledgment. Abandoned clients are 'not good enough', feel small and regressed, and have difficulty operating in the world. Webster (2004)(ii) p 104 and (2003)(ii) p 1

<sup>18</sup> Beste, J. (2005) p102

## **Shame and the heart**

Shame is a particular issue for Christians. Lewis Smedes defines shame as what people feel for what they are and for what they are not; they feel shame because they think they are bad and they feel unworthy.<sup>19</sup> A lifelong relationship with shame is begun when children's 'naughty' behaviours are reflected in the disapproving faces of parents. Further, not only is the behaviour bad, but that *they* are bad, defective or rotten. Shaming attitudes and language produce clusters of negative feelings about the self, and most people develop adaptive, destructive behaviours and thought patterns to protect themselves from feeling shame again. Since families, communities and cultures often use shame as a way of maintaining identities, traditions and beliefs, it is not surprising that shame operates in the church as well.<sup>20</sup> Overt shaming occurs in church communities when people judge and condemn others, but more subtle is the shaming affect of sermons and hymns which speak of unworthiness. Such messages feed into the shaming beliefs people bring with them to church. Smedes describes such beliefs as

*The voice of duty: God required me to be perfect before I could be acceptable to him and  
The voice of failure: I was flawed, worse than imperfect, and all in all a totally unacceptable  
human being.*<sup>21</sup>

These voices are often heard more loudly in the church community.

For the person who has encountered shame within the family or the church, and when forgiveness and restoration have not been in their experience, it is difficult to take hold of the Christian message which is directed to these very matters. The comprehensive hope in Christ is intended for each person to receive healing, as they allow their wounds to be exposed to the physician and allow his life to 'sink into' their lives.<sup>22</sup>

*The voice of grace: by the grace of God, I could be forgiven for my failure.*<sup>23</sup>

When people's hearts are crippled by trauma of life experiences, this voice which has the power to heal is overridden by the voice of duty and failure. They are cut off from themselves and their

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<sup>19</sup> Smedes.L. (1993) p 9-11

<sup>20</sup> McClintock, K. (2001) p 22-27

<sup>21</sup> Smedes, *ibid*, p 78

<sup>22</sup> Williams, Most Rev R. (2005) p5.

<sup>23</sup> Smedes *op cit* p 78

ability to reach out to God or another person has usually been shattered. They are unable to live the life of freedom promised in the New Testament, where it is promised that Christ can make them whole in every aspect of their lives. It is understandable that they fear exposure to other Christians, since they model their understanding of God on their human relationships; it is perhaps also to be understood that they fear exposure to God. They hide away, are unable to live well in relation to themselves, to others and to God. They become blocked off, and may not know why or how this has occurred. They are unable to overcome such difficulties on their own.

### **Searching for the voice of the heart**

What, then, can assist the Christian person to know who they are, to feel and live more authentically? It is my view that counselling which works with emotions can assist people to find a deeper and more authentic experience of themselves, their relationships with others and with God. Counselling which assists them to 'taste' rather than 'look', 'feel' rather than 'think', builds a feeling vocabulary, enabling them to live in a more intelligent and complete way the lives God gave them to live. Understanding what brings them to their emotional behaviour rather than just 'venting' can lead to necessary corrective steps towards more integrated lives; such understanding that can set them free.<sup>24</sup> God may use it to help individuals to discover how they hide the truth from themselves and block the integrative work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> As Robert McGee says in his programme 'The Search for Significance'<sup>26</sup> it is difficult to turn the light of objectivity on themselves, and it is wise to be honest about their pain and hurts in the context of affirming relationships so the healing can begin. A good therapist is an assistant or a mediator in this process, and a Christian therapist seeks the aid of the Holy Spirit for discernment and wisdom in understanding the Scriptures and assisting the client to find their meaning for themselves.

### **Unblocking the heart**

An Emotionally Focused<sup>27</sup> approach to counselling works with the client's emotional experience to address the yearnings of the heart. This therapeutic model holds as a fundamental principle that people are blocked from the change they seek because they cannot allow themselves to feel, either by denying or avoiding their feelings, by rationalising them away, or by not feeling

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<sup>24</sup> Hart, op cit. p8

<sup>25</sup> Corbett-Jones, M.(1996)*An Holistic Approach to Christian Counselling* (Unpublished) p1

<sup>26</sup> McGee, R. (1998) p 3

<sup>27</sup> EFT is an approach to couple therapy developed by Leslie Greenberg and Susan Johnson in Canada in the 1980s. A significant thinker and practitioner developing EFT for individual and couple work here in Australia is Michelle Webster, Director of the Institute for Emotionally Focused Therapy in Sydney. Dr Webster has written extensively and her articles are available through various journals as well as the Institute itself. My approach to EFT has to this point been largely informed by my studies at the Institute.



entitled to have such feelings.<sup>28</sup> They create an external, *secondary experience* of living which covers their *primary experience* of fear, anger, sadness, loss or grief, which must be blocked if an individual is to avoid that feeling surfacing. Actions taken to block the feelings begin to create problematic patterns of reacting and relating. When a client is able to hear the acceptance and understanding of the therapist, when they speak the thoughts, express the feelings and identify the behaviours they experience, they begin to feel safe to explore themselves further. Other feelings begin to emerge, ones which have been hidden away and out of awareness. These may reflect the client's primary feelings, but also their inner experience of themselves (the client's *interior experience*).<sup>29</sup> This primary experience is the voice of the heart.

### **Getting to know the voice of the heart**

The Emotionally Focused counsellor approaches clients from an empathic and emotional position which reflects the counsellor entering, as much as possible, into the experience of the client. This 'joining' with the client fosters the therapeutic relationship and promotes safety enough for the client to feel and express feelings; they are able to discover the depth and significance of the experience for themselves. This creates a meaningful context for feeling; no longer disconnected it is understood and accepted as appropriate for that experience. This new entitlement to that feeling unblocks them, and opens them to a deeper and more authentic experience of themselves, their relationships with others and with God; to relate from their heart.

Emotion is seen to occur as a result of interactions and exchanges, so that what happens between individuals is as important to understand as what happens within each one of them. Emotional experience – a complex mix of feeling, thought and behaviour, is created out of the positive and negative things that occur in normal life experiences. Emotionally Focused Therapy is therefore an inter-personal and interactionally-oriented therapy as well as an intra-psychic therapy which addresses what happens within a person in terms of their emotional experience.

### **Feeling the heart of the Christian client**

In my experience Christian clients often present with secondary feelings of confusion, anxiety and guilt. They think about what they should be doing, but find they are unable to follow with action, often doing something they know they shouldn't be doing. They feel bad about themselves because they are unable to live up to what they know is right so they have interior

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<sup>28</sup> Webster (2003) (i) p 13

<sup>29</sup> Secondary, primary and interior experience are ways of classifying a client's emotional experience. These terms have been developed at the Institute of Emotionally Focused Therapy as a refinement of the work of Greenberg and Paivio (1997) in the classification of feeling and experience.

feelings of unworthiness and shame. These feelings are fed by teachings about sin and a critical and judgmental God which are sometimes inaccurate or incorrectly applied; they are usually mixed up with earlier life experiences from which the actions of others have been projected onto God. Interior feelings are about themselves and are often overwhelming; they prevent them from feeling primary sadness, anger, or fear which, while an appropriate response to an event earlier in life, have been avoided and unfelt.

The Emotionally Focused counsellor works firstly at the level of secondary experience: how the client is living in the world. Seeking to have the client feel and express their anxiety and confusion, and identifying the accompanying beliefs and behaviours, the counsellor works to bring the client's experience into the room using creative and experiential exercises. The client is able to 'have' the experience with the support of the counsellor who does not move away, deny or minimise, but rather reflects, accepts, normalises and validates the experience in the client's context. This process often reveals what the client thinks of themselves and does to themselves as a result of having had these experiences: that is, the client's interior experience. If the client is saying 'I am not entitled to feel this, I am not worthy, I am not good enough', then they will be more cut off from their primary feelings. Christian clients have much difficulty in this area because of Biblical teachings about denying self<sup>30</sup>, being servants to others<sup>31</sup>, and being not good enough<sup>32</sup>. The client's beliefs here will be mixed up with early messages about worthiness which will need to be teased out gently and empathically. Understanding of the Bible is usually shaped by these human experiences and clients commonly live in a belief system skewed in favour of their sinfulness and unacceptability:

*There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless...Romans 3: 10b-11*

This is not balanced with the Bible's substantial teaching about their value in God's eyes:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...John 3:16*

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<sup>30</sup> Mark 8:34 *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*

<sup>31</sup> Mark 10:43-45 *...and whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all*

<sup>32</sup> Romans 3:23 *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*

## **The gentle heart of the counsellor**

Emotionally Focused Therapy provides a relational encounter which is supporting and enhancing, promoting the safety which is paramount to any process of change. This safety derives from the Christian's belief that God mediates his healing grace through loving interpersonal relationships. The Emotionally Focused Counsellor works towards *restoring a person gently* (Galatians 6:1) rather than admonishing and judging which may have been the client's experience in life, and, sometimes, in the church community. This relationship role will be informed by other qualities given importance in this Bible passage such as humility and self-examination.<sup>33</sup> Restoring gently means taking the time to be with the client, helping them to feel their emotions, separate their actions from their person (removing the condemnation which they may have experienced from others and may be directing to themselves) and allow them to come to understanding and conviction in their own time and their own way.

The Christian counsellor is well placed to assist clients to sort through the confused mix of experience and teaching; to support them to own their appropriate emotions at the deepest level and, where necessary, feel their pain and suffering in its original context. Integration occurs when the client is able to re-experience, in-session, what happens to them in the moment of difficulty, what they feel, what they do with the feeling, and how they are involved in creating their experience by taking into themselves what may not belong to them. They discover that something different happens for them when the therapist meets that feeling with an appropriate response. The experience of pain is already changed to a new experience; for example, from one of shame to one of pain at being wronged. No longer 'I am bad' but 'that person did that bad thing to me'. The client can see how they have taken into themselves the responsibility and blame for what happened to them; they are now able to direct it where it belongs. Grieving the loss, expressing the anger: whatever is appropriate at the primary level is important for the client's authentic experience of being human. This may mean that they can forgive themselves for that which they have previously blamed themselves. Forgiveness towards the self or towards others is an important but difficult process which is too complex to be covered in this paper. It does not come cheaply but is assisted by a patient, accepting counsellor who will support the client to find it as they are able.

An Emotionally Focused counsellor may work more deeply with some clients, whereby it is the inner world of the client's self and their particular relationship with that essential core of themselves which becomes the focus of longer-term therapy. Some clients who have

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<sup>33</sup> Galatians 6:1-5. Teaching material from *Certificate IV in Christian Counselling and Communication Skills* (2005). Trainers' Manual.p 23-24

experienced the piercing arrows of abuse and neglect early in life have been wounded at the deepest core of themselves. The therapeutic relationship provides the space for corrective emotional experience through a better and more caring response to the client's emotional difficulties, which enables the client both to have and to heal these experiences. For the counsellor to be 'fully present' with a client as they express their rage, betrayal and grief towards another who has wronged them, even towards God himself, can be very powerful as a way of expressing God's love and acceptance. The client brings their most vulnerable aspects into the relationship and the therapist is required to be emotionally very connected and present with the client and also with themselves.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

My experience with clients has found Emotionally Focused Therapy an approach to counselling which restores to the Christian their primary experience, the voice of the heart. The therapeutic relationship provides a safe and nurturing place where clients can experience something of God's grace in acceptance and worthiness, where they can learn to be more real and more authentic in relation to themselves, to others, and to God. As Buechner says, life batters and shapes it before it's done, but the original self they were born with, bearing the thumb print of the God who made them, is still there within them. It is a source of wisdom and strength and healing to draw upon as we choose.<sup>35</sup> It is my deepest privilege as a Christian counsellor and therapist to discover, hear, and draw upon, with my clients, the voice of the heart.

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<sup>34</sup> Webster, M (2003) i p 11

<sup>35</sup> Buechner, F. op cit, p 44

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