



NEW HORIZONS
**THE PROFESSIONALIZATION
OF COUNSELLING**

BY DOMINIE NELSON

For some years the once-informal undertaking called 'counselling' has been undergoing changes as we carefully navigate our chosen path towards becoming a credible, consistent and compassionate body of people-helping agents of change. What has changed or is indeed in the process of change as we become a profession? And what is our understanding of what it means to be a profession?



DEFINING THE PROFESSIONAL

The basis of a profession lies in its moral pledge to serve a '... constituency, typically people in some state of vulnerability...' (Koehn 1994, in Sercombe 2012, p.10). The word 'professional' is a relational term: 'a dentist isn't someone who fixes teeth. A dentist is someone who works with people to ensure their mouths stay healthy' (ibid, p.11). Clear boundaries are an essential part of professional practice therefore 'the (counselling) relationship is intentionally limited in order to create conditions of safety within which a client can make themselves vulnerable' (ibid).

Protection of the vulnerable is a very relevant part of Christian tradition, and the roots and shoots of counselling are at least in part founded within the pastoral care tradition of the local church. The five pastoral functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, nurturing and reconciling are an often unacknowledged part of the average counselling process. (Hurding, 1986, Oates, 1982, Clebsch and Jaekle, 1983). The core of counselling is helping people to change, although the outworking of this takes many different forms and guises. The movement towards a greater professionalism can be seen in many existing professions. Common reasons for professionalization include organization, standardization and accountability of practice. Professionalization results a greater cohesiveness through creating and expressing a professional identity.

Visibility in the public domain grows and public confidence increases with identity and accountability. Ethical codes and complaints procedures provide avenues of accountability and redress for the public. Standards of practice monitored by Professional Practice panels and reinforced by clear and feasible training standards ensure professional identity grows with consistency. Eventually standards become part of our law; hence the term 'professional' has legal implications. Bearing these facts in mind, training institutions gear academic programs towards current research and best practice while retaining the best of seminal thinking.

'PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLOR' – AN OXYMORON?

Is the professionalization of counselling at odds with the practice of counselling itself? (Armstrong, Bowers and Pelling, 2006). While there are benefits to professionalization there are also costs. Counselling was once conducted as a purely relational endeavor. Your counsellor was likely to be a trusted relative or friend, sometimes your hairdresser, occasionally the barman at the local hostelry – people with whom we had a connection and in circumstances providing an opportunity. Counselling was devoid of professional context, the objective for the person was simply to connect and to talk.

Talking over a problem has several positives. It eases emotional pressure, provides a sense of connection or companionship and sometimes produces handy outcomes if a word in season gives a new way of thinking. Indeed, some clients benefit most from a relational context within which they can ventilate and obtain emotional validation, empathy and support. Others who

are adept at reflective thinking gain new insights or awareness. New thinking when accompanied by new ways of being can be the method by which change is achieved. These outcomes certainly coincide with the goals of counselling. In becoming a profession we must retain the best of relational connection and combine this with counselling skills and theoretical understanding.

NOT EITHER/OR BUT BOTH/AND...

One hopes that with increasing professional understanding a trained counsellor could achieve a relational tone while bringing into service the multiple skills and theories in which he or she is trained. However how do we help a client to recognize that it is worthwhile paying for these 'extras'? This can be a difficult task. At the end of a second session one client announced to me that I hadn't done anything to help her. I asked her how she had felt when she entered the office and invited her to compare her experience now, at the end of the session. She responded with a smile that she felt more confident, relaxed and at peace with (an unchangeable) situation. It had taken a great deal of skill on my part to achieve that outcome, as there were significant cultural differences between us, a lifetime of problem-saturated thinking and a level of suspicion and mistrust on her part just short of the pathological divide. If only we didn't make it look so easy! It is an expectation that we would pay for the services of a lawyer, social worker or other professional and with time counselling as a professional service will take its place within the ranks of other allied health professions.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS?

While I would argue for the benefits and wisdom of securing the services of a professionally trained counsellor, it comes at a price for the client. For example, years of training come at a cost and counsellors generally, while generous souls, desire to recoup at least some of these costs. The high cost of psychology (\$218 per hour consult) or psychiatry reflects the many years of study and training which go into gaining the qualification. Professionals generally work from an office, for which rent must be paid. Supervision, insurance, registration and professional development all incur costs. For most professions one third of income is expended in outgoings. Having done the arithmetic during fifteen years of practice, I agree. At our current stage of professionalization it is difficult to recoup considerable outgoings.

One organization negotiated a \$60 fee for counselling services with an Employee Assistance Program based upon the rationale that \$60 is better than nothing. However by charging a fee of \$60 per session a counsellor working in

a professional context would by my estimation accrue an income of about \$22 per hour once costs and time are taken into account. Case note taking, letter writing and administrative tasks relevant billing, together with the occasional emergency which crops up (last week I spent 90 minutes reporting an at-risk child, 60 minutes of that being 'on hold' with an overworked report line) makes it unreasonable to maintain a regular client load in excess of 5 clients per day. Add into this the statistic that approximately one in 8 clients re-schedule an appointment often at short notice and you have a situation where a professional qualification does not produce a professional income. At least it may not in a private practice situation. When we consider the roots of counselling (ministers and pastoral care workers, our hairdresser or barman) we may find a resistance to the fee-for-service model expected for a professional undertaking. It may take time to change this expectation. In the interim, counsellors may do well to pursue alternative income streams if private practice is their calling.

VOCATION OR PROFESSION?

For the Christian who counsels the concept of professionalization is simply the call to sound standards and wise practices. Our professional self is enriched by our spiritual worldview.

We may recognize we have made a moral pledge to serve a vulnerable constituency:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

This is by no means to say that such inspiring wisdom does not apply to professionals whose worldview does not find itself knowingly within a Christian worldview.

We expect to provide a relationship of service that is intentionally limited to protect the safety and wellbeing of the one who is being served:

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, NIV).

We undertake supervision in order to 'love our neighbor' appropriately and well, gaining an objective view of our practice and process. A good supervisor offers the same objective 'eye' to our personal wellbeing, as the instrument of our profession we must maintain personal wellness to practice as a counsellor.

Professional practice includes participation in formal professional processes such as training

and certification, membership of professional associations and compliance with ethical codes. In many places the New Testament places emphasis upon living in a manner that earns the respect of society and obedience to the laws of the land (providing the law does not directly contradict the primary values of our faith). Christian counselling therefore "requires that we not only become competent therapists, but also practicing theologians who not only draw upon the body of our clinical knowledge, but also of our spirituality." (Andersen, 2014 p.57). Spiritual life enriches our sense of self: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23a, NIV). Faith becomes both an invitation and inspiration to counsel wisely and well.

SPIRITUAL FAITH BRINGS A TRANSCENDENT PERSPECTIVE

Beyond the legalities of professional practice, there is a spiritual imperative which guides our action as counselling professionals. This imperative speaks to consistency in moral character and in this instance to our integrity or character in the counselling relationship. Bearing this in mind we may capture the essence of aspirational ethics, those which go beyond the existing code towards something finer and stronger which bears in mind always the vulnerability and value of the people whom we serve. Spirituality informs our counselling practice. The Durham Accord states spirituality to be a word we use to point towards "development of people's understanding of meaning and purpose within life; cultivation of an inner life and engagement with the world that is characterized by compassion; wonder; gratitude; the struggle for justice, reconciliation, peace-making and right living". A shared spiritual heritage and indeed the very fact that we are spiritual beings invite the spiritual dimension of human experience to rightfully take its place within a holistic counselling process.

SHARING HOPE, CREATING MEANING, DISCOVERING PURPOSE

Opening the door to spiritual discussion reveals vistas of possibility and hope. Spirituality opens up opportunities for ourselves and for others as it opens up the space within us to the action of the Divine. Tethered to the certainty that we are loved and valued beyond measure we find inner resources as we counsel. We are sustained and therefore can sustain others. Our shared spirituality opens up the space between us, inviting us to engage with a sense of what is sacred and reinforcing the value of connecting in

a relationally respectful way.¹

Spirituality connects us to hope, meaning and purpose, concepts which transcend life challenges, trauma and human pain. Spiritual intelligence awakens in us an ability to discriminate between what is good and what is best. By engaging spirituality we find ourselves able to temper rigid rules with understanding and compassion and to discern where compassion and understanding have their limits (Zohar & Marshall, 2000: pps 9 & 13). In drawing upon Christian traditions and the word of God to form our spirituality, we by no means displace the value and importance of different spiritual traditions. "Spirituality is the space within us from which we draw the kind of intelligence needed to work creatively to enhance the dignity of our clients. It is a space that we can help to open up and to recognize in others and from which we can evaluate the intelligence of our practice, faith communities and culture. Most of us draw our sense of spirituality from the living Christian tradition, hopefully, from this we will also explore the benefits and potential of engaging in broader, mutually respectful conversations with those whose spiritual energy is drawn from different sources." (Dr. Philip Daughtry, Sept. 2012).

SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

As we continue to define our identity as a profession, spirituality is taking its place as a core professional identifier that may differentiate our profession from other allied health professions. PACFA has foreshadowed the release of a literature review soon to be published at the PACFA website. The review of current research (since 2010) indicates that spirituality and religion/religious beliefs are factors that have both positive and negative influence on mental health. The embargo on mention of spirituality/religious issues has clearly been lifted if, as the literature reports there is ample evidence to support the usefulness of integrating a client's spiritual or religious beliefs and practices within counselling practice. "In the 2011 Australian census, 69% of the total population, and 81% of those of 65 years, reported some form of spirituality and/or religious practice (Australian Bureau of Statistic [ABS], 2014). In view of these statistics, it would follow that issues of spirituality and/or religion may be relevant to many clients who present for therapy. Post and Wade (2009) suggested that ... "the practical question for clinicians is no longer whether to address the sacred in psychotherapy with religious and spiritual clients,

but rather, the questions are when and how to address the sacred" (p.131).

Including the spiritual dimensions of human experience opens up the possibility of drawing upon the strengths of the client's religious traditions and introduces wider concepts of participation, hope, meaning and purpose. If mental illness is about rigidity and constriction of possibility then engaging the spiritual enlarges and expands possibility even as it opens up the space between client and counsellor.

CONCLUSION

People who counsel are the heart of the counselling profession, and character, integrity and compassion are the heartbeat of the counsellor. Professionalization is a process requiring time, advocacy and determination on the part of many and patience and perseverance from all. The horizon is always in view and our purpose and ultimate success continually held in mind. Well done, good and faithful servant.

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¹ I am indebted to the scholarship of Dr Phil Daughtry for this concept.