

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  November/December 2011

Lessons Learned from Saying “Good-bye”

After having said “Hello” many years ago to a career as a pastoral psychotherapist at the Center, this past August I said “Good-bye” to clients as I began the transition to a full-time position at Des Moines University. In several cases, I had the privilege of working with individuals for many years; in others, for several short months. Regardless of the time spent together, the partings were difficult, and each was marked by its unique expression of grief for what was being lost or left behind, and celebration for what had been and would continue to live on.

Then in September, I sat in the opening circle of *PrairieFire** as we listened and shared with one another what spiritual practices had brought meaning to our lives over the summer months. It was a prayerful time for this community of twenty-one people as they reconnected for their continuing journey of spiritual growth. And, it was a time for me to say “Good-bye” to a group of people with whom I had travelled a common path over the course of a year, and to five colleagues with whom I had shared a common vision of all that *PrairieFire* could one day become.

In the first instance, I was humbly reminded of the tremendous impact two people can have on one another’s lives when they share a commitment to work together on the “hard things of life.” In the second, I was reminded of the life-changing power and spirit that can develop within a community of people who intentionally come together to share a common journey. Both instances call attention to qualities of relationship that are so critically precious to us human beings, and to how important we truly are to one another.

The Foundational Nature of Relationship

From the moment of birth (and perhaps before), each of the interactions we have with the people that hold us, talk with us, play with us, and guide us through the course of our lives are like colorful threads meticulously woven together to create the fabric that becomes our life’s story.

Volumes of research tell us that our minds are built from the “outside in” and not from the “inside out.”¹ This is another way of saying we literally co-create the minds of one another through the relationships we establish and the quality of the interactions we share. As James Ashbrook reminded us, “None of us is a person until we have been called forth by the responsiveness of others.”² Some interactions call forth a stronger sense of our uniquely created souls, while other interactions reflect a distorted picture of who we truly are. In the former case, a secure and strong sense of self is nurtured and encouraged to grow over time; in the latter case, an insecure, weakened and defensive self may be called forth.

The nature and quality of these interactions determine to a large degree who and how we become. They are instrumental in building up the neurological connections that form our minds, create our personalities, and ultimately affect how we see and relate to others throughout the course of our lives. It is impossible to over-estimate the long-term ripple effects such formative relationships have on the lives of each of us, the institutions we create and within which we work, and even the political alliances and policies we fashion. We each contribute to weaving the fabric that binds us together within a common social order and culture. Likewise, we share responsibility for mending it when it unravels or becomes torn.

The Importance of Stories Told, Witnessed and Co-authored Anew

In the course of saying “Good-bye,” one of my clients said, “This is a tremendous loss for me. You know me and my life story like no one else does or ever will. When you leave, I’ll lose access to that.” The unequivocal manner in which she said this caught me by surprise, but there are multiple layers of truth in what she said.

In the back-and-forth exchanges that define the counseling process, life stories are told, and holes torn in the fabric of one’s life are repaired. Some loose threads that have hung around the edges are respectfully shed, while others become sources of new strength as they are gently woven back into the whole. The fabric that results from this re-weaving process is a culmination of the selective sharing and remembering of particular parts of one’s story.

It is in this telling, remembering and re-telling of a life story in relationship to another that change occurs and the fabric of a life is re-woven. When these important relationships end, there is a loss suffered by both parties that cannot be recovered and can only be grieved. Upon reflection and with the passing of time, however, some comfort and consolation can sometimes be found in knowing that the fabric they created together will live on, and will serve as a reminder of the gift they have been to one another.

The Need for Safety and Sanctuary

Within relationships, the first step to real change is a “felt sense of safety” that encourages a willingness to acknowledge honestly and courageously where one currently is. This sense of safety does not happen automatically between two people or in a group. It takes a commitment on the part of one person to protect the self-respect and soul of the other, and willingness in the other to risk being vulnerable.

* *PrairieFire* is a two-year program of spiritual renewal and formation offered by the Center.

There was a clear sense of both of these in the *PrairieFire* opening circle last month. The opening question was, “What spiritual practices gave you a sense of meaning and purpose over the summer?” What struck me most that day, as in days past, was the vast array of responses offered by the members of the community: “My spiritual practices went out the window over the summer,” “I practiced letting go by cleaning out an old storage shed,” “I attended several retreats at nearby monasteries,” “I found peace in my early morning nature walks and collecting interesting leaves and sticks along the way.”

As each person responded, there was no judgment, no keeping score; no one gasped in horror, and no one was shunned; there were no expressions of praise for “doing it right” and no looks of disgust for “doing it wrong.” Rather, there was shared laughter of recognition, tears of condolence over losses suffered, and gratitude for unexpected gifts received. But most of all, there were deep sighs of relief as it became increasingly clear that everyone belonged, no one would be judged, and all were safely held by one another in safe and sacred space.



Wildlife Sanctuary in Northern Iowa.

Compassionate relationships and communities that convey a sense of personal safety and respect offer a welcoming sanctuary for tattered and weary-torn souls. These simple gifts do not come easily or cheaply, rather they are hewn with great intentionality and effort. In that process, they become sacred. There is loud rejoicing when they are found, and tears shed when they end.

Lastly, We Do Need to Actually Say “Good-bye”

For various reasons that are not important, the opening circle of *PrairieFire* mentioned earlier ended without me formally saying “Good-bye.” As I sat in my office later that morning, I had the nagging feeling that my parting was unfinished. I needed to go back and actually say, “Good-bye.”

The group had also felt a lack of closure with my abrupt departure. So it was with a mutual sense of relief and gratitude that I rejoined the circle, shared words of encouragement and charge to those gathered, and listened humbly and gratefully as they shared individual blessings and good wishes for me as I embarked upon a new journey. The circle that was broken by an abrupt leaving was reconnected through a ritual of mutual blessings and “Good-byes.”

In the midst of the unpredictability of life, the opportunity to acknowledge what the presence of another person in our life has meant to us may not be available. When it is, we need to seize it – for the sake of all of us.

A Postscript

The Center is a rich community of people who listen and learn from one another. It is a community that reaches far beyond our doors, and it forms the foundation for all we do. Every client who has come to our door, every person who has attended a class or a workshop, every student who has been mentored and supervised, every therapist who has sacrificed something of themselves for another, every community member who has served on the board or has contributed to our financial stability, every reader of this newsletter, and all those who have held us silently and faithfully in their hearts and prayers are woven into the fabric of Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. You are an integral part of each of us; a rich blessing to us all; and for your presence and all you’ve taught me, I will be forever grateful!

Footnotes

¹ Bleiberg & Fonagy, *Menninger Perspective*, 3, 2003; p.7.

² James Ashbrook. *Minding the Soul: Pastoral Counseling as Remembering*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996; p.3.

Note: For a wonderful and informative novel describing the fascinating interplay of our unconscious neurological processes on our daily lives and the decisions we make, see: David Brooks. *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*. New York: Random House, 2011.

J. Jeffrey Means, M.Div., Ph.D.

J. Jeffrey Means is the departing Director of the Institute for the Practice of Ministry at Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. He is now the full-time Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Behavioral Medicine at Des Moines University. He is a licensed clinical psychologist, pastoral counselor, and marriage and family therapist. He holds a master of divinity degree from Christian Theological Seminary and a doctoral degree in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy from Northwestern University. Dr. Means has interests in teaching, writing, supervision, professional formation, and clinical case consultation. He is the author of Trauma & Evil: Healing the Wounded Soul, published by Fortress Press, 2000.

Employment Opportunities at the Center

If you are a doctoral or master’s level therapist licensed with the state of Iowa, and if you are interested in a collegial working environment with extensive opportunities for professional development, we’d like to talk with you. Please contact Ellery Duke, Ph.D., Executive Director, 515-274-4006 or eduke@dmpcc.org.

Let Us Hear from You!

- If you have comments or suggestions about the newsletter, please direct these to Kathleen Murrin at the Center, (515) 274-4006, info@dmpcc.org, or 8553 Urbandale Ave., Urbandale, IA 50322.
- If you would prefer to receive your newsletter by e-mail, please contact the Center.
- If you would like your name removed from our mailing list, please contact the Center.

C.O.O.L. CORNER

Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life



We encourage parents and caregivers to begin early to ritualize endings and transitions with children. This will help them to feel competent and secure when faced with the inevitable larger losses and grieving they will experience in life.

* Upon waking and going to sleep, parents/caregivers can intentionally connect with their

child in a similar manner each time. For example, at night a parent might read a story, say prayers, tuck in, kiss both cheeks, sing a lullaby, and/or say, "sweet dreams!" Similarly, in the morning a parent could say, "Rise and shine!" "Good morning, beautiful!"

* Parents can intentionally connect with their child during other daily transitions, for instance, saying "hello" when they come through the door, saying and waving "goodbye" when they are leaving for school/playtime.

* Helping a child intentionally connect with a friend that is moving away by exchanging photos, drawings, cards, etc.

* Helping a child have a ceremony or some other activity that helps the child celebrate the life or relationship that has passed or is changing.

* At mealtime or bedtime or any together-time, retelling the stories about past relationships, making sure to mention where the child fits into those relationships.

Year-End Giving

The holidays can be difficult emotionally for many people. Issues of depression, anxiety, grief, anger, marital or family conflict, and parenting concerns are often magnified during the holidays. The continuing stress in the economy will make this holiday season and the usual emotional issues especially tough on folks who have very few resources at hand.

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center is able to offer quality affordable counseling on an ability-to-pay basis thanks to contributions from individuals like you. Please consider a year-end contribution of cash, stock, or IRA rollover to help us serve clients who could not otherwise have access to the hope and healing of counseling.

Call Kathleen Murrin at (515) 274-4006 or send your tax-deductible contribution to the Center. Do make the Center your choice for directing your donation to make a difference in the lives of those struggling with mental illness.

WORKING with TRAUMA in PSYCHOTHERAPY ~ a 10-week course

Dates: November 18, 2011 - February 10, 2012
(Course will not meet 11/25, 12/23, or 12/30)
Time: Fridays, 8:15 - 9:45 a.m.
Location: Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center
8553 Urbandale Avenue, Urbandale 50322
Cost: \$200 plus optional texts
CEUs: 15.00 hours
Instructor: James Bustamante, M.A.
To Register: Contact the Center ~ 515-274-4006 or
info@dmpcc.org

This course will explore the ways in which a client's history of trauma impacts psychotherapeutic work with that client. All people experience trauma, but it is the severity of the trauma that determines the impact on an individual's life. Trauma may result from individual experiences or it may be the result of traumatic occurrences that include large groups of people, such as, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or war experiences. No matter what the source of the trauma, it may vary in level of severity. This course will explore how the various levels of trauma severity contribute to acute and chronic mental health issues, as well as how various treatment methods can be utilized to treat these disorders.

The Instructor: James Bustamante, M.A., is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. James earned his M.A. in Counseling from Webster University and is currently working towards a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from Walden University. He has been providing mental health counseling in Central Iowa for the past 12 years. Currently he is seeing clients in a private practice setting, utilizing a variety of methods, including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), to treat various forms of trauma.

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center FOUNDATION



One very prudent resolution for the New Year would be to find out more about the fiscal advantages to you and your heirs in naming the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center FOUNDATION as beneficiary for all or part of your IRA/401(k)/retirement fund assets. These are tax-deferred, not tax-free, instruments. Leaving all or part of your retirement funds to the FOUNDATION means your hard-earned savings would not be diminished by estate or income taxes. Your tax adviser or financial planner can help you with this. Please consider including the DMPCC Foundation in your planned giving.



Help us celebrate throughout 2012! Established in 1972, the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center has been providing 40 years of skill, compassion, hope and healing to tens of thousands of individuals and families struggling with the transitions and crises of life's journey. Thanks to the gracious support of our many donors, we have been able to provide high-quality, affordable counseling to help those with very limited resources to restore their lives, rebuild their relationships, and re-establish focus for their future. Watch for notice of celebration events in the next newsletter and please join us!

www.dmpcc.org
 Visit the Center's website for more information on the Center's counseling services and staff, special events and classes.

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 Editor: Kathleen Murrin

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