

## Christian Counseling: Integration of Psychology and Spirituality

William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

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Chattanooga, Tennessee

When Dr. Terrell first offered me a job at Richmond, I told him I didn't think I was Christian enough to teach here. Later, I began to understand why he had not been worried by my doubt. He knew *you*.

A few weeks ago, I asked a student what I should speak about today. I was told three words: "Give us encouragement, hope, and love." Another student said, "Tell us what you really think about us."

Sometimes, I feel like if the only thing I knew of the Christian faith was what I have learned from Richmond students, then I would know all I really need to know. Of course, there's more to it than that.

I am a scientist and a psychotherapist---not a theologian. For me, the *truth* of the resurrection is found in the change of those whose lives have been *touched* by it. The empirical *evidence* is seen in the lives of those who have been *transformed*. Those of us who have been your teachers have seen your lives, your many talents, your special abilities. I have seen your enthusiasm, your perseverance, your dedication to a purpose. I have seen the way you balance your commitments---to your studies and to your work, to your families and your churches, to your husbands and wives, and to your clinical training. I have *also* seen the way that you *sacrifice* yourselves for others. You are much brighter, more creative, and much more talented than most of us who have been your partners in education. You also have much *more to give*, and when you give *completely*, you will discover that there is *more* of you to give. And when the day comes that you have *nothing left* to give, you will realize that the only thing you really have to give is *yourself*.

As my final charge to you, let me begin with a paraphrase of the Great Commission<sup>1</sup> of Matthew 28:19: Go ye into all the world---into the majestic mountains of Tennessee, into the skyscrapers of Atlanta, and into the sprawling suburbs in between and beyond, [Pause] and, yes, even into Buckhead and the corners of the Earth. Go ye into all the world and be *disciples*---preaching and teaching, but more importantly, *listening* to others---listening to the stories of others. Let God use your *words* to speak to others, but *more importantly*, let God use your *ears* to *listen* to others---because it is in your listening that *healing* occurs.

What better example of *healing* do we have than the Great Physician who *listened* to the lives of others?

You are not only *professional* counselors; you are the *state of the art* in professional counseling. You are not only *Christian* counselors; you are the *standard of excellence* in Christian counseling. You have earned Masters' degrees in *both* counseling psychology *and* Christian theology---integrating the sacred and the secular. You have learned your books and theories well, and now it is time to put them aside when you touch the miracle of living souls (Carl Jung, 1953, p. 4).<sup>2</sup>

*Fifty years* of psychotherapy research---as well as 40 years of my own study of psychology---have revealed three things that the Master therapist taught us 2,000 years ago: *empathy*, *authenticity*, and *unconditionality*<sup>3</sup>---the necessary and sufficient conditions for positive therapeutic change.<sup>4</sup> The ability to develop a relationship and form an emotional connection with a person will create a far stronger foundation for positive change than any therapeutic technique that has ever been validated by empirical science.<sup>5</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> **Empathy** is the ability to feel, understand, and respond to the suffering of others. It is the prerequisite of *compassion*, more active and vigorous than empathy, which allows us to enter into and maintain a relationship of caring. Although you will *listen and learn* a lot from the people you serve, you will discover that they will not *care* how much you *know* so much as they will *know* how much you *care*.

2<sup>nd</sup> **Authenticity** is also known as genuineness or congruence. It refers to your being a fully integrated person; it is the opposite of wearing a mask or maintaining a façade. Not just talking the talk, but walking the walk. It is the consistency between what you believe and how you behave, what you think and how you act, who you are and what you do. In the Bible, it is what is sometimes described as *wholeness*.

3<sup>rd</sup> **Unconditionality** is described in the psychology journals as unconditional positive regard. It is the secular version of that which in our faith tradition we call *agape*---a caring for the other that is greater than one's care for oneself. It involves radical acceptance, which, for lack of a better word, we call *love*.

The beginning of love...[Merton]...is to let those we love be *perfectly themselves*, and not twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the *reflection* of ourselves that we see in them.<sup>6</sup>

### So? So what?

**So** what does all this have to do with encouragement, hope, and love?

1<sup>st</sup> By completely **being** with others where they *are*, rather than where you wish they were, you give **love**---bringing into expression what they are *meant* to be.

2<sup>nd</sup> By **seeing** in others the unlimited potential that they do not see in themselves, you give **hope**---permitting them to become what they are *destined* to be.

3<sup>rd</sup> By completely **accepting** others as they *are*, rather than how you would *want* them to be, you give **encouragement**---allowing them to *become* whom they were *created* to be.

As counselors, what better example do we have than the Wonderful Counselor<sup>7</sup> who taught how us to counsel others by meeting them *exactly where they are*---such as the Centurian soldier who humbly said he was not worthy to receive.<sup>8</sup> Or the blind man who lived in the dark world of a crowded, noisy street, or the prostitute who was being dragged to her death.

What better example of **healing** do we have than the Great Physician<sup>9</sup> who *listened* to the lives of others? As the one who *completely* integrated the sacred and the secular, our Master *listened* to the pleas of the outcasts, the crippled, and the condemned. *These* are the ones we are called to serve. Our standard was set by the one who listened to a nameless thief hanging next to him when he was dying on the cross. Remember the words? "Today, you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

What better example do we have of words of encouragement, hope, and love?

*Some of you* may be called to die for your faith, but *all* of you are called to *live* your faith---each day, day by day, as your days turn into months, and your months turn into years. As you leave this sacred chapel this afternoon, I charge you to be *living legacies* to the faith that brought you here in the first place. I challenge you to be *living testaments* to the faith that will take you beyond any horizon that you can see tomorrow.

In my final charge to you, *counselors*...

1<sup>st</sup> I challenge you to be *role models* to your clients, as they progress beyond any vision that they can see when they first begin their journeys with you.

2<sup>nd</sup> I challenge you to be *visionaries* to your clients, as you see in them the unlimited

potential that they do not see in themselves.

3<sup>rd</sup> I challenge you to be *witnesses* to your clients, as their images of themselves as broken beings are transformed into visions of whom they were created to be.

In our *faith tradition*, you have been freely given the spiritual gifts of *encouragement, hope, and love*. Just as freely as you have been given these gifts, I ask you to give them freely to others. In your *clinical training*, you have developed the psychological skills of *empathy, authenticity, and unconditionality*. Just as vigorously as you have sharpened these skills in yourselves, I ask you to encourage their expression in others---allowing them to be transformed into lives that are more *empathic*, more *authentic*, and more *unconditional* in their love for others.

As a scientist, I *know* these things to be true because I have *seen* these spiritual gifts at *work* in you. As a psychotherapist, I *know* these things about you because I have *seen* these psychological skills *expressed* in you. I *know* these things about you---because it has been **your** empathy, **your** authenticity, and **your** unconditionality that have helped transform *me* along the way. It has been **your** encouragement, **your** hope, and your **love** that have helped me become who I was *meant* to be---*not Christian enough*, but enough to be your trusted servant.

Thank you.  
William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.  
Ethics Professor  
May 8, 2010

**Note to the Reader:** The bolded text shows words or phrases that were spoken with more emphasis during the address.

## Notes

1. Matthew 28:19-20. "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20).
2. Jung, Carl G. (1953). *Psychological Reflections*. New York: Pantheon Books. Page 4. "Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your own creative individuality alone must decide."
3. Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
4. Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21, 95–102.
5. Koocher, Gerald P. (2006, April). On being there. *APA Monitor*. Page 5. "Many studies have taught us that empathy, the ability to form an emotional connection, and forging an alliance with the client will create a far stronger foundation for change and quality of life than any treatment manual validated by a plethora of randomized clinical trials."
6. Merton, T. (1955). *No man is an island*. London: Hollis & Carter, London. "The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them."
7. Isaiah 9:6 (NIV): "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders, And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
8. This statement is a paraphrase of Matthew 8:8: "Lord I am not worthy to have you enter my house, but only say the word and my servant shall be healed."
9. Jesus referred to himself as physician twice: Luke 4:23: "And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself!'" Matthew 9: 12-13: "But when He heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, I desire compassion, and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." The word used for physician in Greek was *iatros*, derived from *iaomai*, which refers to spiritual as well as physical healing (similar to the Hebrew concept of *shalom* or *rapha*). Jesus was undoubtedly using the word "physician" to refer both to the spiritual and physical aspects of healing that He commanded.
10. Luke 23:43: "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

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