CHAPTER

1

Creating Space Within

In Ghana, a community of women have a saying written over the door to their residence, which states "A house is made of stones but a home is built in the hearts of people. Welcome to our home." Reading these words and experiencing the smiles of greeting received when the door opens sets the stage for stress to be set aside for all those who enter. This is the kind of greeting all counselors and caregivers seek to offer those who enter their lives looking for help as well. Yet, for this to occur and actually be a genuine encounter with the client, there must be room *within* the counselor for offering such a welcome; otherwise, interpersonal "space" will be absent or contaminated. In the words of psychologist and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen (1975):

> When we think back to the places where we felt most at home, we quickly see that it was where our hosts gave us the precious freedom to come and go on our own terms and did not claim us for their own needs. Only in a free space can re-creation take place and new life be found. The real host is one who offers that space where we do not have to be afraid and where we can listen to our own inner voices and find our own personal way of being human. But to be such a host we have to first of all be at home in our own house. (pp. 72–73)

In a similar vein, David Brazier, author of *Zen Therapy* (1995), reminds those in the helping professions that "The therapist models stillness and is not frightened by the client nor what they present. The client feels driven, but the therapist demonstrates that this is not inevitable" (p. 61). A sense of presence and mindfulness on the part of the counselor allows this to be possible. Yet, while creating this space through being mindful is quite simple and powerful, it is not easy—even if we as counselors proclaim our commitment to such an approach to counseling and life.

I remember what I found to be a typical and humorous experience for me on this reality. I had just finished reading a section of a quite informative book on mindfulness and psychotherapy by Germer, Siegel, and Fulton (2005). As I was preparing dinner, the key concept of the book kept coming back to me: Be in the present moment with a true sense of openness. As I was recalling this valuable lesson, I was also in the process of placing my dinner in the oven to be cooked. I was so enthralled with the *concept* of mindfulness that they were encouraging that I was distracted from what I was actually doing and abruptly burnt my hand on the hot rack in the oven. So much for really being truly mindful!

AUTHENTICITY AND TRANSPARENCY

What we request and expect of others, we must be faithful to in ourselves. A young pastoral counselor put it this way:

> The Zulu tribe's most common greeting is *Sawubona*, which translates, "I see you." The response, *Ngikhona*, translates, "I am here." It is our relationships where we are liberated, when we are truly seen through the mirror of another. Pastoral counseling is saying intently to a client, "I see you." Going into a client's inner landscape

> with her is based on her trust. I believe this trust is built through relating *Sawubona* to the client. Truly seeing a client and maintaining unconditional appreciation opens the door to a strong therapeutic alliance that fosters trust. Within this context of trust, the client is able to go into her inner landscape, look about, and say, *Sawubona*, "I see you."

However, this same counselor realizes that for this process to take place, it must constantly be taking place in her as well. She goes on to say:

> I recently saw a cartoon depicting Socrates, in robe and sandals, holding a sign that states "Know Thyself." A man with a blank stare replies, "How boring." Today's culture is virtually swimming in self-help books, promising fulfillment and happiness and, in the midst of the deluge, it seems the simple, deep truth of the Greek aphorism *gnothi seauton* (know thyself) has either been lost, or has been watered down into 12 easy steps.
>
> What has been remarkable to me, as I have gained counseling experience over the past 2 years, is how little clients know of themselves. And what has been even more remarkable to discover, is how very little I know of myself. This has led me to view my inner landscape as a territory, partially discovered, partially untouched land. Some of the territory I enjoy and cultivate well. It has been weeded and pruned, and is a comfortable place. Some of the land is wholly untended, and it is my instinct to avoid the uncomfortable thoughts, emotions, and beliefs that the land evokes. However, when I do find

> myself in that territory (and it often happens by surprise), if I can stick around long enough to do a little weeding and pruning, it eventually becomes a peaceful place to dwell.

No one is immune to forgetting their value and need, even those whose life is outwardly committed to being informally mindful (being present, open, and aware), and are involved in the practice of daily formal meditation. This can be especially true when in a caregiving role. An example of this comes to mind when I think of my time working with the English-speaking helpers in Cambodia who were trying to help the Khmer people rebuild their country after years of terror and torture.

Following a presentation to a group of relief workers and NGOs (persons from nongovernmental organizations), an American Buddhist who was working there at the time asked to meet with me privately. She said she was worried about a young Khmer Buddhist who was helping in a local hospital with those persons who had lost limbs from stepping on mines while farming.

Many of the mines placed by different factions during the Cambodian conflict were cleared by the United States Special Forces after the conflict. However, some of the mines were made of plastic, so when the flooding season came, mines from unclear areas sometimes floated into previously cleared areas, and then when the unsuspecting farmers went back into the rice paddies with the assurance it was safe, they would sometimes step on a mine and lose either one or both of their legs.

In the hospital and afterward, the Society of Friends (the Quakers) attempted to deal with this situation by setting up a system in which the patients could be fitted with prosthetic devices so they could walk and be active again. However, before this process took place, the Khmers who had undergone this tragedy

would naturally suffer both psychologically and physically. It was during this phase of their recovery that this young Buddhist would visit and console them. His mentor told me that experiencing this suffering day-after-day was very upsetting to him, and he was becoming depressed. It was starting to take a real psychological toll on him, and she was worried about him developing vicarious posttraumatic stress disorder.

When I asked her how he was doing processing the aftermath of such an experience in a brief meditative period, before he returned home, she looked at me with a blank expression and said, "Why, I never thought of having him do that." I then suggested that she have him begin this exploratory process to see how it would help and also suggested other procedures with her on self-care, personal debriefing, the use of mentoring, and other processes of regaining perspective.

Each day we must consciously seek to be mindful and have brief—as well as hopefully longer—meditative periods of formal mindfulness so there is space within us as well as space for others. When I work with physicians and nurses, I use the parallel of the medical model to bring this point across. I let them know that the hospital or health care facility is one of the few places where employees are encouraged to wash their hands not only *after* they go to the bathroom so they don't run the risk of contaminating others but also *before* they go to the bathroom, so they don't run the risk of contaminating themselves with the infections of the patients with whom they have just been in contact.

As counselors, psychologically, and some may say spiritually, it is essential to have space:

- *Before you begin your clinical practice each day* so that you are centered before beginning to see your counseling clients or therapy patients

- *Between clients* so you don't contaminate your next client with the issues of the last one
- *Once your day of consultations is done* so you don't contaminate your family at home or remain absorbed with the negativity you may have experienced during the day

Having such spaces of time to accomplish this is not a nicety; it is a necessity. Otherwise, slowly but surely the insidious depletion of energy and the destruction of a healthy perspective will start to take place. Chronic secondary stress (what some would refer to as "burnout") can be like psychological carbon monoxide poisoning or undergoing a slow, quiet reverse spiritual transfusion. Without knowing it, you become drained, lose the original sense of meaning and mission that counseling reflects and should be, and the negative or stressful aspects of clinical practice become more pronounced while the positive realities of the work lose parity. And so, taking various steps back, each day, is essential—especially for counselors.

Still, knowing this and actually practicing it seems so unrealistic for many counselors. This is the first fallacy, point of denial, or cognitive distortion that must be confronted in caring for your inner life as a counselor or caregiver. Once you do this, several key elements involved in stepping back from the "drivenness" of your own life should be honored. This includes valuing the *sincerity* and *humility* that molds an attitude that directly or indirectly opens up space and atrophies unhealthy self-centeredness.

Sincerity is one of the key elements of effective counseling and leading a life of meaning. Even though we read and attend Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to learn new therapeutic techniques—as, of course, we should—somewhere in our consciousness there is a sense of respect for the *person* of the counselor and some doubt or anxiety about whether we are up to being that person or not.

Fortunately, if such doubts are faced directly, they can become gates to new learning and commitment as well as fresh entryways into deeper awareness for, and sincerity about, what being a counselor truly means. It is also an awakening to what is at the very core of the counseling process: *sincerity*. It is all right at times to feel like a charlatan as a counselor. When we never feel that way, that's when it becomes dangerous. As a matter of fact, when one goes deeper into oneself, feelings of inauthenticity should surface, because while we see the right concept or goal, we recognize we are still far from living it.

Mindfulness meditation, which will be discussed later, helps in this regard, because it enables us to be clearer about our goals and the blocks we put in our way to keep us from reaching them. Many who meditate tell stories of such instances. For example, one counselor educator shared the following experience he had in his office one afternoon.

> I was grappling with something that I needed to address in my own life. If I didn't, I couldn't move on; I would emotionally be frozen in place. Finally, in line with my normal practice at the university and partially out of frustration, I went into my office, closed the door, sat down, and meditated for twenty minutes. As I was doing this, a sense or really a question came to me: Why all this concern about courage to face something in your life? Don't the graduate students you supervise in clinical group have courage to face their issues? Don't the clients who come to you show more courage than you claim that you need now to have to face this issue directly?
>
> When these questions dawned on me, I didn't feel guilt or shame, just clarity. Yes, change or not change, I could with ease face my own personal challenges openly, and when I realized this, I felt free. I felt different.

Humility is also a key, but often an underestimated and unexamined aspect of being a counselor. We seek to help our clients to be extra-ordinary, in other words to be fully themselves. But because much of the impact of this depends on the *presence* of the counselor, it is truly difficult if we as counselors don't recognize deep within ourselves that true ordinariness is tangible wonder and seek it within ourselves as well.

Humility is the ability to fully appreciate our innate gifts and our current "growing edges" in ways that enable us to learn, act, and flow with our lives as never before. Before this important passage we may be drained by defensiveness or wander in our own desert chasing a false image of self that has nothing to do with who we are really meant to be.

Most of us know that at some point we need to go through the gate of humility. That is not the problem. The issue is that we are often unaware of the fact that we have actually stopped being humble and, in the process, have lost our sense of perspective and gratitude. If we are lucky, something wakes us up to this fact, even if rudely. The following story shared with me by a friend illustrates the point quite well:

I had a dream that death
Came the other night,
And Heaven's gate swung wide open.

With kindly grace
An angel ushered me inside;
And there to my astonishment
Stood folks I had known on earth,
And some I had judged
And labeled unfit and of little worth.

Indignant words rose to my lips
But never were set free;
For every face showed stunned surprise,
Not one expected *me*.

—*Anonymous*
(Wicks, 2003, p. 26)

With humility, knowledge is transformed into wisdom. Such wisdom then ultimately leads us to open up new space within ourselves where we, as well as others, can experience true freedom and love. Humility allows us to be transparent; that is why it is so important. So much unnecessary worry and stress can be avoided if we treasure this gift. A dialogue from a collection of classic stories and teachings of the early Christian writers (*Patrologia Latina* and *Patrologia Graeca*) told by the *ammas* (Mothers) and *abbas* (Fathers) of the fourth-century desert in Persia and northern Africa illustrates this. It is told from the vantage point of persons totally dedicated to living a full, meditative life of inner peace, humility, and unself-conscious compassion—a place all of us should seek to be in at some level.

> The devil appeared to a Desert Father, in the disguise of an angel of the Lord, and said to him, "I am the angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you."
>
> However, the Father softly responded, "See if you are not being sent to someone else. I certainly do not deserve to have an angel sent to me."
>
> Immediately, the devil disappeared. (Author's translation)

This is the kind of natural attitude we need to have if we wish the perspective, peace, and joy that result when we know and value our ordinary, transparent selves without wasting the energy it takes to add or subtract anything from whom we really

are. Humility is an *essential* ingredient in life because it provides a *kenosis*, an emptying of the self. At its core, humility dramatically opens up beautiful space in our inner life that includes:

- A space for simplicity amidst the complex demands of both home and office
- A space for solitude to listen to the messages of our quiet spirit lest they be drowned out by the day's noise
- A space for pacing ourselves while resisting the lure of speed and new technology
- A space for gratefulness and giftedness in a world filled with a sense of entitlement
- A space for honesty and clarity rather than spinning the truth to our own advantage
- A space for real relationships in place of mere manipulation of others
- A space for restraint instead of instant gratification and aggression
- A space for doubt and deeper questions rather than filling ourselves with false certainty and pat answers
- A space for reflection so that compassion doesn't lead to undisciplined activism
- A space for generosity where previously only strident self-interest stood
- A space for transparency where opaque defensiveness is our normal rule
- A space for sound self-respect in lieu of inordinate self-doubt or unbridled self-assurance
- A space for intrigue or curiosity about our actions and motivations so we don't wander down the blind alleys of projection, self-condemnation, or discouragement

- A space for forgiveness so we don't fall prey to rigidity and self-righteousness
- A space for what will always be true rather than solely having an interest in what is currently in vogue
- A space for the courage needed to be ordinary instead of wasting all of our time chasing after what we believe will make us someone special

Yes, the ability to empty ourselves creates new inner space in our lives for the surprising remarkable gifts of humility.

HUMILITY IN SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Anthony de Mello (1986), an Indian Jesuit priest and psychologist, relates the following classic dialogue between a spiritual master and a novice disciple:

> "Why is everyone here so happy except me?" "Because they have learned to see goodness and beauty everywhere."
>
> "Why don't I see goodness and beauty everywhere?" "Because you cannot see outside of you what you fail to see inside." (p. 35)

When we sit in silence and solitude, we expect a sense of peace. At first, this is what happens. We are so glad that we have entered a space where we are free from the fast pace and tensions of life. However, if we sit long enough we may eventually get uncomfortable, even anxious. We get ideas. We remember things we must do. We want to get up and write these things down, make phone calls, or pick up a book.

If we resist such actions, the next phase of the silent period begins. During this period, we hear the noise that is going on in

our belief system. Like a radio turned onto scan, our mind moves from different events—both recent and remote—that have emotional power. Hurts, shame, the silver casket of nostalgia, proud moments, anger, and resentment all come to the surface. Depending on our personality style, we may respond to them with projection, self-condemnation, or discouragement that we are still dealing with these issues and old agendas. This is a crucial point on the road to both humility and a spirit of letting go.

Buddhists would gently suggest that we keep our seat and let the stories of the past move through us, acting as though it were about someone else. No judgment. No excuses. No blame. Just watch. From a Western religious perspective, Amma Syncletica, a fourth-century desert dweller, would also offer encouragement by putting it this way:

> In the beginning of meditation there is struggle and lots of work. . . . But after that, there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: At first it is smoky and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and effort. (Author's translation)

From a psychological perspective, what happens in the silence is that we are able to create an opportunity for the irrational but as-yet-undisputed thoughts about ourselves and the world to surface. Such thoughts usually remain in hiding because we don't like them. As soon as they surface, we want to avoid or justify them in some way—even when, maybe especially when, we are alone.

This is unfortunate because they are the front line of deeper irrational beliefs that are crippling us. In therapy, supervision, or spiritual mentoring, we begin to see these irrational beliefs for what they are once we have enough trust to share everything that

comes to mind. However, think how wonderful it would be if, in the search for our true selves and the desire to experience the inner space offered by humility, we could also do this *with ourselves* through regular, even brief, periods of silence and solitude.

Lacking opportunities for such uncoverings and debriefings with ourselves, such thoughts are left to attack us at night and keep us awake. They haunt us when events occur in our lives that make us uncomfortable. They pain us when we feel we have done the wrong thing as counselors with clients or in our personal life with family members and friends, or with others in our professional and personal lives who have mistreated us. But such suffering at those times, in those ways, unfortunately doesn't teach us anything of worth. What a waste.

If we intentionally make the space for—in Buddhist imagery—those "unruly children" running around in our unconscious asking to be faced, calmed down, and welcomed home, then our silence and solitude can become a classroom where we learn what is driving us—usually in the *wrong* direction. Also, as was implied by Amma Syncletica in her previous comment, we will have a chance, once the initial dust of delusion settles, to create a space within us to be freer in life and more open to others.

If we see our growing edges clearly—without excuses, inordinate self-blame, or discouragement (maybe because we have not improved quickly enough to our own liking; after all, we are counselors!)—then the energy usually employed to defend (or sometimes unwittingly attack ourselves) can be more profitably understood and channeled into learning how we might better enjoy the life we have been given. In addition, our life, and the way we honestly view it, can provide a clearer path in our counseling and personal relationships as well.

Opening ourselves up to past agendas, distorted thoughts, hurtful ideas, and false beliefs that lurk below the surface, and rise into the vacuum we have created in silence, can teach us much.

We just need to give ourselves the space to allow these unexamined memories and perceptions to surface so we can see, examine, and address them with love and understanding. The brilliant analyst Alfred Adler once pointed out that children are great observers but poor interpreters. The un-worked-through interpretations we also made as children that remain within our unconscious and preconscious are really no different—even though we are counselors and have probably gone through our own therapy as well as intense clinical supervision. We must meet them and allow them to tell their stories if we are to find the truth. Inner freedom is an ongoing process, not a final accomplishment.

Silence and solitude will help us to delve into the joys and darkness in our inner life to accomplish this goal. However, we still cannot find the truth and the freedom of humility by ourselves in quiet meditation, although this is a necessary step in the intriguing process of self-understanding and appreciation. For a fuller self-understanding and appreciation of what humility might mean to us in concrete, practical ways that can be transformative, we will also need direction from the different voices present in our trusted circle of friends who help wake us up, encourage and tease us when we take ourselves too seriously, and inspire us to be all that we can be even though we are where we are at any given point in life (Wicks, 2008).

A true spirit of humility helps us to see our gifts and growing edges with a sense of equanimity. True humility helps us let go of our sense of entitlement, rejoice, and be grateful for all material and personal gifts we have been given in life, especially the gift of who we are. To have such an experience is not narcissism or pride. It's a sense of pure joy to recognize that we've been given intelligence, a sunrise to see, possibly possessing a good disposition, wonderful friends at different points in life, or whatever or whomever we have in our lives for which to be thankful. True humility allows us to enjoy and lift the bushel basket off

our talents for everyone in the world to see. We are able to do this without falling into the trap of being an egomaniac, because when we are truly honest about our gifts we also can simultaneously see our growing edges or defensive areas. Our lives become transparent.

In most world spiritualities, there is a wonderful recognition of how we can and should constantly embrace true humility by seeing ourselves directly without a coating of psychological makeup. In essence, we must constantly look at those areas in which we are unfree or defensive. Simultaneously, we must never forget to see and be truly pleased that we are gifted as counselors to be loving people capable of true compassion. (The recent literature on positive psychology certainly points to this need to have a balanced view of ourselves, which includes a clear awareness of our signature strengths.)

After a session of sitting *zazen* (quiet group meditation) with his disciples, Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki put humility's paradoxical quality of being grateful, yet honest, about who we are to them in this way. He said, "You are all perfect as you are." Then, after a short pause, and I suspect with a twinkle in his eye, he quickly added, "But you could all use a little improvement" (Chadwick, 2001, p. 3).

Deep gratefulness and humility go hand in hand because the issue of *quantity*—something valued in a consumer society—falls by the wayside. Instead, with a spirit of "all is gift," the *quality* of so much more around and in us is appreciated. Yet, that gift might seem insignificant without the humility and gratefulness to open our eyes and ears to all that we are given each day.

The senior *dharma* teacher Norman Fischer (2001) puts this simply and unself-consciously in the following experience that he was able to embrace because of the humility and gratefulness he was experiencing at that moment: "Last night I went to sleep. I heard an owl. At that moment I truly didn't need or want

anything else for my life, nor did I have the thought that I did not need nor want anything. Just, 'hoot, hoot'" (p. 91).

How often have all of us had small but meaningful experiences such as this and let them slip by? Maybe we have sat inside a warm house wrapped in an oversized sweater when it was a bitterly cold day outside, had a stirring and encouraging conversation with a dear friend, eaten a crisp salad that crunched with each bite, or laughed and had our thoughts twinkle as we read a poem, but still didn't fully recognize these moments for what they were: epiphanies of wonder and awe for which to be grateful.

Sadly, more often than we might be willing to admit, we don't see the daily joys of our counseling practice and life in this way. Like society in general, negative feelings or a sense of distance from our inner selves are our natural spontaneous responses to life. Contrary to this, a spirit of humble gratitude slows us down to recognize the need to pace our lives differently so we can see ourselves, life, and surroundings in a new way. Yet, with space within us and the right attitude or perspective that can arise in the proper use of *alonetime*, we can let go and see that new possibilities can arise in the human psyche no matter how dark things become. Certainly, given our frequent exposure to trauma, loss, depression, and other serious life challenges, this is an important lesson for those of us in the counseling profession to embrace—*now*.

Some Questions to Consider at This Point

What approaches do you employ to maintain space within yourself so both you and your clients may experience greater freedom?

What additional steps do you think are realistically possible for you to employ to expand this space within?

What resistances/excuses do you encounter in yourself when you seek periods of silence and solitude?

In your experience, what are some of the most effective ways to "make friends with" these resistances so they will atrophy and allow you to move forward and deeper rather than against or away from these perceived blocks to inner freedom?