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In Search of Value and Meaning[1] (1979)

The word 'counsellor' is open to such misunderstanding that I feel it necessary at the outset to quote from the literature of my own professional association so that the word can be more adequately understood in its educational context:

> Clients consult a counsellor because they are in difficulties and hope that by discussing their concerns with the counsellor they will gain fresh insights and move towards a more creative response to their problems. The professionally trained counsellor is seldom an advice giver … Instead he will try to assist a person to see his own situation more clearly and then provide the opportunity for looking at ways of behaving differently or of arriving at decisions … The client himself is the primary judge of what is or what is not an appropriate concern to take to a counsellor. Counsellors should be prepared and equipped to respond to a wide range of personal, emotional, social and educational difficulties … All counsellors observe a code of professional confidentiality and information is not divulged to others unless the client gives specific permission for this to occur. Often a single interview with a counsellor may be enough to point the way forward. On the other hand, where someone is experiencing more serious difficulties it is possible for him, if he so wishes, to maintain contact with a counsellor for longer periods of time, in which case counselling may continue over many sessions. (Association for Student Counselling, 1977)

[1] From *Theology* **LXXXII**, no 685, 1979, with permission. Chapter 6 in the original publication.

Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment: Bridging Faith and Person-Centred Therapy, First Edition. Brian Thorne.

This, then, is the nature of the work in which I have been engaged for a decade and during that time I have met with increasing frequency the intelligent man or woman who can find no value or purpose in living. For me such an encounter constitutes a challenge and a threat, for each time it happens I am faced again by the task of re-examining the purpose of my own life and the nature of my own beliefs. In short, it calls for the kind of faith which risks its own extinction by offering intimate companionship to pointlessness and absurdity.

Many years ago now, a student I knew uttered words which I have never forgotten: 'I feel I am adrift on a limitless ocean of relativity.' He was not a person who was overtly struggling – on the contrary he was sociable and articulate, he had friends of both sexes and he was an above-average student in academic performance – in short he possessed many of the distinctive features of the successful young man.

More recently Penelope, a young woman of 23, entered my office and collapsed on the floor after indicating that she had taken a mild overdose – a mixture of her mother's and her grandmother's sleeping tablets. It was only later that I discovered that, by putting herself to sleep in this way, she had successfully avoided a consultation with her GP with whom she was to have discussed contraception at the insistent request of her boyfriend who wished her to go on the Pill.

An American therapist, Clark Moustakas, in his recent book *Creative Life* (1977) tells of Don, an adolescent who during the course of therapy changed from an inhibited, restricted individual to an outgoing, socially effective person. His parents and teachers regarded the change as a blessing, but Moustakas himself became alarmed when Don began to boast about his conquests and achievements over peers to whom he had once felt distinctly inferior. He was troubled even further when Don told him gleefully of the strategies by which his mother was twisting money out of an insurance company with the help of lawyers and accountants who were only too happy to connive at covert dishonesty. When therapy ended – abruptly and prematurely in Moustakas's eyes – it was deemed highly successful by Don's parents in that the problems which had brought the boy to the clinic were now resolved. Moustakas himself was conscious of letting loose on the world a young man who had learned to be assertive and autonomous, but who remained totally divorced from any knowledge of the moral core of his being.

These three people were confronting or failing to confront the task that constitutes the individual's stiffest challenge in his search for identity – the

task of establishing value and meaning or, as I should prefer to define it, of being rooted in the knowledge of what is good and just and true. Moustakas puts it well: 'Being free to be is the right of every human being. Freedom is necessary to maintain one's humanity; the denial of freedom is equivalent to giving up an essential human characteristic. Freedom within the framework of ethical and moral value means not simply the will to choose but choice growing out of a knowledge of the good and a willingness to choose the good' (Moustakas, 1977, p.75).

It is important to say more about this sense of moral and ethical value for it is not the same as a *value system*. The latter refers to beliefs, hopes, expectations, expressed preferences which can offer direction to a person and influence his or her decisions and choices. Such a system may indeed be grounded in the sense of moral and ethical value, but it need not be. Hitler had a value system. The sense of value to which I refer is the dimension of the self which unites and integrates. Without it there can be no wholeness. With it there is a commitment to life and to the enrichment of life in its highest forms. With it, too, there is meaning. It is the highest sense of identity and it is the most crucial of all in the development of the individual and in the evolution of a civilisation. Furthermore, I believe it to be much neglected in our society. Neither in education nor in counselling do I see it as a primary concern, let alone the central force. And so it is that much that happens in education and in counselling is destitute of enduring value and that even freedom, knowledge and autonomy are sometimes bereft of meaning. Shortly before he died, the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow gave an interview to Professor Willard Frick and at one point, with great emotion, he cast an ominous shadow over the theory of human needs which he had himself so painstakingly evolved.

> I'd always assumed … that if you cleared away the rubbish and the neurosis and the garbage and so on, then the person would blossom out, that he'd find his own way. I find especially with young people that it just ain't so sometimes. You get people who are in the … beautiful … need-gratifying situation and yet get kind of a value pathology. That is, it's possible to be loved and respected, etc., and, even so, to feel cynical and materialistic, and to feel there's nothing worth working for … Especially in younger rather than older people you can see this. It's sort of a loss of nerve, and I think we're at this point where the traditional culture has broken down altogether, and for many people they just feel, 'My God, there's nothing'. (Frick, 1971, p.27)

In the face of such an existential vacuum – and how immediately recognisable it is to any counsellor working in higher education – it becomes clear that we cannot be content with education which focuses primarily on knowledge, skill and professional competence, nor can we place trust in a therapeutic process which is concerned primarily with change towards self-confidence, social effectiveness and realness in expression. Maslow himself had indicated the answer to his own dismay when a decade before he had insisted that education and therapy reach into the moral realm and enable the individual to encounter the inner experience of value from which comes the will and the strength to become more honest, good, just and beautiful.

It is perhaps hardly surprising that teachers are slow to engage in a battle for moral truth and that counsellors shy away from encountering their clients in the area of moral and ethical value. The spectre of meaninglessness haunts this battlefield and the fear of drowning in the limitless ocean of relativity is never far distant. But what, after all, is the point of teaching anything or counselling anyone if there is no moral value and thus no meaning to life? What kind of counselling success is it if my client feels loved and autonomous and utterly futile? What kind of satisfaction is it for a teacher when his student gets a first-class degree but sees no point either in his success or in his life ahead? What more natural, then, that counsellors and teachers alike should remain indifferent to the moral realm in order to cherish a false sense of accomplishment? If I do not seek to enter the world of my client's futility or of my student's pointlessness, I can congratulate myself on my effective performance – see how independent he is after my counselling, or what a brilliant examination script he has produced after my teaching!

The ocean of relativity was partly induced by my student's university education. The development of a critical, enquiring mind has often been acknowledged as the primary aim of higher education and such an aim has a long and honourable history. Students are required to examine their basic assumptions and to reject them if they do not stand the test of rigorous intellectual scrutiny. There is no doubt that, through such a process, many individuals are delivered from ignorance and prejudice and from false and lazy thinking. However, the very same individuals can be confronted simultaneously by a world where everything seems to depend on a point of view and where there are no longer any certainties. Such apparent relativity can often be the herald of meaninglessness. In a society where values are secure and traditions strong, such uncertainty – and even the loss of

meaning itself – can often be contained, at least long enough for the individual to reorient him- or herself and rediscover some firm reference points. But at a time when traditions and values are themselves crumbling, the individual is horrifyingly vulnerable. The individual cannot rely on a prevailing stability within his culture to see him through his personal crisis. He has only his personal resources to call upon.

Cardinal Newman saw a university as a place for the exercise of the *whole* intellect and for him a truly great intellect was 'one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near and which has insight into the influence of all these, one on another' (Newman, 1852). Owen Chadwick has recently suggested, however, that there is a fatal flaw even in Newman's vision, and if Chadwick is right it is all the more surprising when one remembers Newman's religious convictions (Chadwick, 1976). Newman, according to Chadwick, believed that mental development could take place independently of or at least without direct reference to ethical development and that a university should be primarily concerned with the former. I do not believe that in a post-Christian era this can any longer be advocated without condoning the irresponsibility which springs from failing to make the essential connection between thinking, feeling and caring. We now know only too well that mental development *can* indeed proceed without ethical growth and we see the results all around us and in the history of the twentieth century. The time has come to affirm what logical thought reveals to us without any possibility of contradiction – that mental development *must not* proceed independently of ethical development if we are to have any chance of halting our present gallop towards self-extermination. In short, I am suggesting that unless a university commits itself to the creation of an environment where emotional and ethical development command parity of esteem with mental development, it will not nourish the logical thought processes which can alone come to grips with the appalling problems of the contemporary world.

Commitment is a word that strikes terror in the hearts of many. It means taking a stand and affirming values. There are times at the end of a day when I feel engulfed by a wave of despair that we cannot affirm two simple values which, if we embraced them, might transform education overnight. The first would be an affirmation that mankind is of infinite worth and the second that the world is worth saving.

These two values are certainly not reflected in the society on which educational institutions uncomfortably depend. Competitive materialism remains the motivating force there, however much politicians may wrap it

up in fine-sounding words – although of late they have ceased even to do that. Unashamedly now, we are exhorted to exercise self-denial but only so that we may have more goodies later. We must sacrifice one motor car this year so that we may have three in five years' time. What kind of democracy can it be where men are prepared to down tools and take up industrial arms not because they lack money but because their differentials have been eroded? In the face of such a secular ethic, the universities seem at present to stand powerless. They must either collude with it or somehow pretend it has nothing to do with them – the academic washing of hands which betrays the irresponsibility of educators who are no longer inspired by what William Arrowsmith described as 'a care and concern for the future of man, a Platonic love of the species not for what it is but what it might be' (Arrowsmith, 1967).

The situation of Penelope, the second student, was different but no less common. Caught in a network of conflicting values and judgements, she could dimly hear her own voice but not act upon it. She consequently felt ashamed and impotent and finally desperate. Her actions demonstrated her almost complete inability to stay in touch with her own sense of value. In conflict about her relationship with her boyfriend, she went home to a house inhabited by a depressive mother and an ailing grandmother – a home she knew she should not visit in a vulnerable state. Once there she was swept into an addiction culture and stole tablets (of which she heartily disapproved) and used them to avoid a consultation about contraceptive measures which she did not wish to take. Only after this grisly process of self-betrayal was she able, in the counselling relationship, to affirm her own sense of value and to hear her own voice stating plainly that she did not wish to have intercourse without commitment, that she wanted to take responsibility for her own convictions and that she scorned pills as a means of deadening psychological pain or relieving tension. With support she was then able to live out this sense of value and confront her boyfriend with her deep feelings about the physical side of their relationship. Most strikingly, Penelope's experience illustrates that when a person's own essential nature is encouraged and supported his or her sense of value assumes its rightful authority. Penelope was initially unable to act upon the messages emanating from her own sense of value and therefore her sense of shame was intense and her despair predictable. She experienced what I have come to recognise as *appropriate guilt* – i.e. a guilt which springs from having failed to be true to the deepest regions in oneself. Such guilt bears no comparison with the inappropriate guilt experienced by so many which springs from

having failed to live up to someone else's judgement or expectations. For the counsellor, nothing is more crucial than his or her ability to help a person distinguish between these two forms of guilt, for the one points directly to the personal sense of moral and ethical value, whereas the other blocks the individual's path to such a sense and lumbers him instead with a burden which he often finds himself both unable to carry and unable to reject. Appropriate guilt calls for forgiveness and an affirmation of the nature which has been betrayed. Inappropriate guilt calls for the identification of the usurping judge and a refusal to accept his authority. Both states cause great distress and demand all the love and understanding a counsellor can muster if the context is to be created in which the necessary work – so different in the two cases – can be done.

The case of Don is the most perturbing of the three, for it reveals the power of a culture to obstruct a person's path to the deepest sense of moral and ethical value because it has lost the map of the world where such journeys have meaning. The search for truth, beauty, love, justice and wisdom makes no sense in a culture where the expertise of lawyers and accountants is exploited to develop fraudulent strategies to beat insurance companies at their own game, and where such behaviour is seen as both typical and normal. Materialism, if it is all-pervasive, affords no signposts for the journey to ethical and moral value and no nourishment for the would-be traveller. Furthermore, it creates a moral desert in which the conscience is stillborn.

Conscience is not a word which leaps from the pages of secular counselling literature and, when it does, it is often presented as the harbinger of guilt, the rod with which a person continues to beat his already bruised back, the weapon of self-punishment. As such, it is seen as the enemy of growth or interpreted as the result of conditioning processes associated with religion or the outmoded moral code of a previous generation. But true conscience or conscience that is healthy does not collude with this world of inappropriate guilt nor does it feed the fires of self-rejection. On the contrary, it is the only capacity left to human beings with which they can continue to find the unique meaning of their own life in the face of crumbling values and waning traditions.

It is to his enormous credit that the Austrian psychotherapist Viktor Frankl has rehabilitated the conscience and in so doing has redefined it in such a way that words such as good and bad take on fresh significance. Looking to the future, Frankl sees that morality 'will no longer define what is good and what is bad in terms of what one should do and what one must

not do. What is good will be defined as that which fosters the meaning fulfilment of a being. And what is bad will be defined as that which hinders this meaning fulfilment' (Frankl, 1977, p.114). In line with this definition, Frankl sees the conscience as the 'means to discover meanings, to 'sniff them out' as it were'. 'True conscience,' says Frankl, 'has nothing to do with the fearful expectation of punishment. As long as a man is still motivated by either the fear of punishment or the hope of reward – or, for that matter, by the wish to appease the super-ego – conscience has not yet had its say' (Frankl, 1977, pp.116–117).

Let me summarise and then look at the implications for educators:

1. An ultimate moral sense is present in the deepest region of the self and it is this sense that establishes meaning and value. Unless it is encountered, the life of the individual hovers ceaselessly on the brink of meaninglessness.
2. In an age when values and traditions are in the melting pot, the individual receives little help from his environment as he seeks to confront the ultimate questions of his own meaning and value. Indeed, he may for a while be separated altogether from these questions by an all-embracing materialism.
3. It is tempting for counsellors and teachers to avoid confronting their clients and students in the moral and ethical realm, for to do so may be to call into question the very validity of what is being offered as therapy or education.
4. By focusing on the undoubted evils of inappropriate guilt and self-punishing shame, counsellors may fail to identify the healthy but equally painful guilt and shame which come from a failure to accept the responsibility of fulfilling the meaning of a personal and unique life.
5. It is the conscience which – however much it is prone to err – can alone serve the individual in her search for the unique meaning of her life. To neglect conscience or to repress it is to surrender the one human capacity that can give direction to the person lost in the ocean of relativity or the fog of meaninglessness.

The message in all this for the counsellor and the teacher is no easy one. Nobody can give meaning to someone else and the counsellor who tries to offer meaning to his or her client or the teacher who attempts to teach moral and ethical principles are both equally doomed to failure. The moral sense cannot be taught or imposed: it can only be discovered. The educator's

task, therefore, is to create a context in which such discovery can take place and no task could be more formidable. It involves a willingness to move beyond views of counselling and education which concern themselves with knowledge, skill, social effectiveness, personal autonomy, beyond even the revered concepts of self-acceptance and self-fulfilment. The counsellor and the teacher faced by such a task have no alternative but to demonstrate their own personal commitment to the search for truth and meaning. It is with their whole being that they will reveal the attentiveness and the obedience of their own consciences in the midst of the countless situations with which life confronts them. They will show that they are not afraid to enter the moral struggle and that they do so not as professionals doing a job but as human beings who refuse to be bound by rules, routines and the endless absurdities of bureaucratic and procedural red tape. They will show their willingness to risk even the deepest uncertainty in response to the internal directive which, to quote Clark Moustakas again, 'keeps alive the mind and heart and soul of all humanity' (Moustakas, 1977, p.81).

In my own life I have come to the stark realisation that, when I lose contact with that internal directive, I risk inoculating others with despair – and that sounds cause enough for appropriate guilt and true shame in the breast of any counsellor. But I know, too, that when I am bold enough to affirm and embrace the meaning of my own life, with all the self-doubt and agony of spirit which that sometimes entails, I extend to others an invitation to do the same. There is no other way.

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