

## Making a Defence<sup>1</sup> by W.J. Ottenbreit

Near the beginning of my path toward becoming a professional counsellor, I had an unfortunate conversation. Picking the brain of someone already working in a Catholic school, she told me that the environment *limited* her ability to help young people. By this I took her to mean that she perceived restrictions in her work with students. That comment has stayed with me even a decade later.

Integrity, a trait universally esteemed if not as much upheld, implies consistency between the different aspects of the individual person. It could be well-argued even that dis-integration is one of ‘those evils’ against which therapy is pitted.

If integration is worthy for clients, it is certainly also so for us. Those of us who identify both as professionals and religious believers (who take seriously the implications of our faith) cannot put up an arbitrary wall between the office and what-takes-place-on-Sunday. Our lives are of one piece, even if different parts receive different emphases in different circumstances.

No matter the counselling flavour, four ethical principles are commonly accepted. As we work with our clients we are to uphold autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Yet these are not self-defining; they require a worldview within which they achieve meaning. The postmodern approach introduced hesitancy to accept universals and the primacy of objective truths; this brought some balance to a frame of reference which unduly ignored the weight of subjective experience and interpretation. In our work these considerations are of great importance. Yet to probe perception should not mean to deny what is objective.

Beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice too, presuppose an understanding of what is helpful and what is harmful – in other words, of what is good. At a basic level, goodness might be defined as the quality of being suitable to purpose. Thus a pen is good when it writes, a lamp when it gives light. Though more complex, we measure human goodness in relation to our own purpose(s). And we all, Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, assign some meaning to life. Therapeutic interventions are good when they further clients toward greater health; they are harmful when they further disintegration.

We necessarily carry this into our offices. Even the principle of autonomy, perhaps paradoxically, cannot stand alone. Client goals are not simply *prima facie* accepted. Imagine a client who wished to pursue destructive goals; that

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<sup>1</sup> “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15)

designation of “destructive” implies judgment about the good, grounded in professional formation. There are even times when we *must* act contrary to client wishes, due to legal or ethical mandates.

Devoutly religious believers merely have some more obvious commitments. If I believe in a life after this, in a God who created us from love, in obligations placed upon us due to our created natures, these will affect my practice. This is necessary. This is even good.

Inasmuch as is appropriate to their effect on the process, all therapists need to be transparent about their beliefs. As a guidance counsellor in a Catholic school, the identity of the institution informs how I work; by their membership in this community, families have given at least tacit agreement to share this identity. In respect for their own beliefs, I will not require them to conform to my own, but likewise I cannot work to help them seek what I am convinced is an essentially harmful end.

There is similarity even in a private practice outside a religiously-grounded institution. Whether my client shares my faith or not, we need to determine if hiring me would be effective; it certainly will not be if we cannot agree on goals. This is not religious imposition. The increasingly egalitarian world of talk-therapy sees the client-therapist relationship decreasingly marked by power differentials. We work *together*; each contributing necessary pieces to advance a solution.

Counselling within a religious worldview opens up therapeutic approaches. Based on a fuller understanding of the human person, it expands the range of strategies. Rather than decreasing freedom, it offers opportunities not even conceived of by a mindset that fails to see spiritual realities.

This decade later, I cannot help but believe that it was the perceptions of my well-intentioned colleague that limited her work in a religious setting, not the realities upon which that setting was based.