

| Prayer in Counselling

by Dr Ann Long



Introduction

We become Real through our relationship with our self, other people, the planet earth and a God of our understanding. How well, or how poorly, we embrace all of these relationships has an impact on our mental health and wellbeing. For the purpose of this paper I am reflecting briefly on how to develop and maintain my relationship with the God of my understanding through prayer in counselling.

Yet, I am still wondering why I should pray when God knows, that I as a counsellor, need His strength and His tenderness to embrace and convey my therapeutic presence when working with other human beings. Surprisingly, I am reminded of the work of Thomas Aquinas who professed that God, in his abundant love, allows us, in prayer, to participate as co-creators in His work in the universe. Yes, God, in his omnipotence, knows our needs and our aspirations but in His great wisdom He also knows that we crave to participate with Him in the fulfilment of these needs and aspirations and, that when we perceive problems, we yearn to be part of the solutions. Of course, outcomes may not always be as we wish. That is why we must pray as Jesus prayed: 'Father... not my will but yours be done'. (Luke 22:42)

Methods of prayer

Prayer is as unique as the individual who prays. Some methods of prayer include:

Vocal prayer, which employs a specific word formula

Mental prayer, which is more of a conversation with God

Discursive prayer, which is led by one's reason

Affective prayer, in which love, joy or other emotions may predominate

Meditation, in which one considers different aspects of God's activity

Contemplation, which involve a "simple gazing" lovingly upon God

Centering prayer, in which one contemplates God at the centre of one's being

Mystical prayer, which is led by God's grace

Private prayer

Communal prayer, which we observe when we see a group of worshippers pray together (Wright, 1993).

Most scholars of prayer believe that: 'there are no infallible techniques to prayer that will lead to a deeper relationship with God: there is only a longing in the heart to follow where prayer leads' (Casey, 1996).

In the preface of her classic spiritual allegory Hurnard (1975)

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reminded us that, as the 'Song of Songs' expresses, there is in each human heart a spiritual hunger – a cry for more; a desire for deeper union with God. In relation to the clients' spiritual cry for more, they may need to verbalise the ultimate spiritual and existential concerns and anxieties about death, isolation, meaning in life and, freedom (Yalom, 2010) in the presence of a caring and supportive listener.

Listening with mind, heart and soul

As counsellors we learn to listen and listen well. We listen attentively to the needs and concerns of the clients we serve. However, after a long day of listening I find my brain overloaded and I sometimes feel too fatigued, distracted and worried to listen to my family and to the God of my understanding. Groeschel (1984) urges us to listen to God with both our minds and our hearts and to continually relate the experience of listening to the external world- as perceived by our senses in our internal prayer world. On the inside I am filled with the desire to care for each client I serve as I would care for Jesus. Given this precious opportunity to listen, my fragile human spirit touches the vulnerability of the client's human spirit. In counselling we are blessed with perfect opportunities to listen to both the voice of the spirit in my prayer and also to the voice of the Spirit in my counselling. If I counsel my clients with love and respect along with the gentleness I would care for Jesus then I will, as Groeschel intends, have listened and prayed silently with my mind, heart and soul.

Sharing their life stories

Providing a sacred space where clients can share their stories is one of the key activities that counsellors engage in as it allows clients to find meaning. Counsellors offer the

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sacred space in which the wounding memories of the past can be reached and brought back into the light in safety, without fear. For counsellors, this space can be called 'standing [or better still sitting] on holy ground.

During periods of despair, clients' latent emotional and spiritual stresses may surface, generating existential responses such as anxiety and feelings of fear, loneliness and alienation. It is important that we facilitate the expression of these very real concerns.

Veronica: the exemplar of the counsellor.

Literature demonstrates that the Christian woman Veronica is recognised as the pre-figure of carers. Legend identifies Veronica as the woman who wiped the wounded face of Jesus during His agonising Journey to Calvary. Veronica had the courage to step forward from the crowd and wipe His face and then found on the 'towel' not blood but the imprint of the love of God. Counsellors help clients to cleanse their emotional 'grit' (the 'baggage') they have been carrying from the past.

Becoming a modern Veronica means we are willing to transpose our compassion into the therapeutic relationship with spiritual gentleness. To be a modern Veronica means to have our eyes wide open to the sufferings of others and to see the world and the God of their understanding empathically through their lenses – not ours. Although a number of variations appear among the stories of Veronica in the literature, the central theme

of the legend is similar. Modern Veronicas (in counselling) use tender compassion while helping clients cleanse and heal their emotional and spiritual wounds.

Emotional and spiritual cleansing

What does it mean to us as counsellors to help with emotional and spiritual cleansing? A significant amount of relief and comfort can be observed after clients share their pain with us. A client's inner 'power' is strengthened because 'something oppressing' (an obstacle for growth) has been removed. Counselling can be a nurturing of mind, spirit and body. Consequently, the spiritual importance of emotional cleansing can be inferred. This supports the acceptance of a spiritual dimension in the emotional and mental vocation of counselling. In practice, at the end of sessions as the clients walk away, I hand them over symbolically (demonstrating advanced empathy) into the care of the God of THEIR understanding. Later, I try to understand their faith and their belief system. (See for example, *Ethical issues in six religious traditions*, Morgan and Lawton, 1997)

The counsellor's way of the cross: accompanying clients on part of their life journey

Counsellors experience their own unique way of *being with* clients in the *here and now* through encountering, embracing and demonstrating empathy with their suffering. The counsellor's interactions and observations can be included in a counsellor's prayer life through associating the client's

agonies with those of our Blessed Lord in meditations and prayers. This represents symbolically a 'Counsellors' Way of the Cross'. It is the images captured on this journey that I would like to focus on to illustrate some of the ways that prayer may be manifested inwardly after counselling sessions.

1. Jesus is condemned to die. Alma is a beautiful girl, only 15. She has been diagnosed with a severe life-defeating illness. Her only crime is that she is ready to embrace her teenage life.

Counsellors' prayer: Help Alma to embrace this life-defeating illness, which condemns her to die shortly. It seems so unfair. I can't understand. I don't ask to. Only grant me the grace to cross over, to stand as your loving presence with those condemned to death from illness or disease.

2. Jesus takes up his cross. Betty is a young mother with two small children. She has been given one year to live.

The team say: 'We will begin an aggressive form of treatment. We can't save your hair but don't worry, we will get you a wig, they look so real now'.

The children cry in unison: 'Mummy, mummy, pick me up'.

Work say: 'Have you got an estimated date for when you are going to be able to return to work'.

Her husband thinks: 'I'll never be able to cope'.

Counsellors' prayer: Taking up a cross is a heavy weight to carry, but

you dear Lord, have blessed this fear-filled life happening with Your love and compassion. Guide my work with Betty as she looks to You (sometimes through angry lenses) to find courage and strength as she struggles with the carrying of her personal cross.

3. Jesus falls for the first time. Charlie had lived half of his 25 years drinking and taking drugs. He wanted to 'enjoy' Christmas. He forgot how fragile he was and ended up 'drunk out of his mind'. The hurt to his body was modest, the hurt to his spirit grievous.

Counsellors' prayer: It's really hard to fall when you think the path before you is smooth. It hurts not only the body but also the heart. Help me to emotionally hold (contain) clients when they fall. Help me especially to embrace their hope and their spirit that I might lift them up to you.

4. Jesus meets His sorrowful mother

Donna has anorexia nervosa. Her mother carried her out of the house to her car and then to hospital on her shoulders. Donna says limply: 'This is my mum'.

The mother's courage is overwhelming. When with her daughter, she teases gently, cajoles, supports and loves. Outside the room she dissolves into heart-wrenching sobs; she is her mother.

Counsellors' prayer: Help me to attend to the individual parents and siblings of children who are ill. Teach me to touch their pain with spiritual gentleness so that I might stand safely beside them as a

caring companion on their journeys of suffering. Help me also to be a 'mother' to myself so that I can nurture those for whom I care.

5. Simon helps Jesus to carry His cross.

A young counsellor working in primary care arrives to work with his head shaved.

Someone asks, 'Is he bald'?

Someone else asks: 'Is he on chemo'?

Someone suggested: 'He's making a statement'. The counsellor knows how hard it is for children on chemo to lose their hair so he decided that they should not feel alone on their journey. He shaved his head as a sign of support.

Counsellors' prayer: Teach me to symbolically use my hands, arms and heart to reach out and lighten the painful suffering of those I care for. Teach me to have the courage of Simon in the practice of my counselling.

5. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

Jim had hurt a lot of people in his life - most of all -those who were close to him. Many had judged him as being 'bad'. Some wondered if he was sad or mad. He believed that he always had to fight for his life as he had been brought up in Deprivation Street. He believed it was alright to fist-fight and it was alright for him to receive Paramilitary beatings - as he had done 'bad things' - and he deserved all he got. The counsellor listened gently and non-judgementally to his story and works with him on his journey towards cleansing, healing and self (and others) acceptance.

Counsellors' prayer: Dear Jesus, you know about having to struggle for life. You experienced human cruelty. Those You came to save betrayed you. We counsellors have a precious gift of being able to comfort clients

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as Veronica comforted you in your time of suffering. Teach me to honour and reverence pain and this gift of counselling.

7. Jesus falls for the second time.

Alcohol had ruled Alan's life for more years than he could remember. He had quit once for five weeks but he couldn't stay quit because the weight of his addiction was so heavy.

He said: 'I'm a failure, I fell off the wagon again', as he desperately struggled to rise again and regain his fragile foothold on life.

Counsellors' prayer: Dear Jesus in life you chose to experience the pain of a heavy cross and you embraced the shame of falling beneath its weight. Teach me to accept my own human weaknesses; and teach me never to judge the weaknesses of clients no matter how often they fall.

8. Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem

John had been diagnosed with depression. He just wanted 'out of it' He just 'wanted to die'. He looked at his wife, mother and sister. He saw that they were heartbroken. He believed that they would be 'better off' without him.

John said inwardly: 'Don't worry. I will not share my burden with you. You have enough troubles of your own'. He wanted to protect them from his pain. His eyes were filled with affection and care for his loved ones but he did not want them to suffer any more pain.

Counsellors' prayer: Dear Jesus, you knew what lay ahead, you knew about the suffering and the shame. Yet, in your own terrible pain, you reached out and comforted the

women who loved you. Help our clients to comfort their loved ones and help me to hold their hope for them, while they are trapped in their sorrow, and experiencing very little hope. Help me to accept themselves as fragile humans and also as a precious child of God.

9. Jesus falls for the third time.

This was her third marriage and it too 'had failed'. This time she felt he was a 'good enough' match. But then he left her like the others did. She had to return to being alone in the world – a failure – again. She felt less than whole. It was a crushing fall.

Some murmured: 'She can't hold down a relationship, what does that say about her'?

Counsellors' prayer: When You fell for the third time, did you wonder would you ever rise again and complete the awful journey? Help me to reach out to clients when they fall into the dip in the road. Help me to help them stand and embrace their unique journey in life.

10. Jesus is stripped of his garments

Eileen had been raped on the way home from a party. She hadn't the strength to moan but her eyes told the tale.

Some murmured: 'Her skirt was too short'.

Others said: 'What was she doing out so late at night?'

Several said: 'How could her parents allow her to stay out so late?'

Counsellors' prayer: It's so hard to watch clients' suffer so much, especially when a life event strips them of their human dignity

and leaves them wounded and traumatised. Help me always remember the reverence and sacredness of human life.

11. Jesus is nailed to the cross.

This was the first time Mona had come out of the house since her husband had taken his life. The loss of control seemed to be the worst part. She could not get out of bed on her own. Her friend had to bath her. To be forced into this position when she 'hadn't even done anything wrong' was devastating. 'I used to think everyone has a cross to carry. Now I feel I'm about to be nailed to the cross' she sighed. 'Life will never be the same'.

Counsellors' prayer: It is so very hard to hand your life over to the care of others. Teach me to act with spiritual gentleness toward my clients in their vulnerabilities; teach me to accept their anger and rage about the heavy blow they have been dealt. Teach me to help them bear their losses with grace and with dignity. Teach me to enable them to forgive.

12. Jesus dies on the cross.

Agnes had been on the ventilator for nearly three weeks. She was more than ready but the family were not willing to 'let her go'. Finally they said, 'Enough'. They all pulled out the plug but tenderly and with great sadness. They experienced the blessing of praying her into eternal life.

Counsellors' prayer: Dear Jesus, you knew human death intimately. It's a frightening thing this detaching and 'letting go' of everything and everyone we know. But you taught us how to know your Father in heaven. Help me to midwife my clients into His loving presence in eternity.

13. Jesus is taken down from the cross.

James had worked with Mrs Black for three months. When she took her own life he was devastated but he thought, 'this is someone's mother.

This is someone's wife. This is someone's friend. This is Jesus'.

Counsellors' prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me to see you in everyone I interact with. It's hard to lose those who have touched my spirit and my life. Help me to remember that they are now with You, that they are not lost to us. Externally they have departed but internally their memory and all they shared in life will live on in the hearts of those who loved them.

14. Jesus is placed in the tomb

I didn't want to go to the funeral. He was so young, only 26 and I had grown to love him during his last six months of his life. But he had asked for a celebration of his life so celebrate we did through the tears and the laughter and the terrible ache that felt like a hook had been driven into my heart and it had just been pulled out. He was too young.

Counsellors' prayer: Dear Jesus, you were only 33 and it seemed just too soon for you to go. But you, the divine son, knew that your Father's time is not our time. And you embraced the tomb that we might celebrate your life forever. Teach us to treasure the magnificent gift that your death and entombment was for us.

15. Jesus is raised from the dead

The Christian burial was over. The service had been poignant and healing, the sympathy of the family and friends had been genuine. But now the parents must go home alone to enter the barren house, which once echoed with childhood laughter. The tomb is empty. How can they bear their loss? They hold each other gently and remember the words their pastor had cited so tenderly. 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me even if he dies, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die' (John 11:25).

Counsellors' prayer: Dear Jesus, grant the bereaved the blessing of your tender love in their time of sorrow.

Conclusion

Without the support of prayer, the ability to truly embrace clients' holistic needs and truly practice compassionate counselling will be extremely difficult - if not impossible. And so it is seen that there is a richness of opportunity for prayer in counselling. Occasionally there is the gift of time, a quick break. *Our work can become our prayer.* If we remain open to the presence of God in the *room* and come to believe that we are but His channel, we will be blessed with a deeply fulfilling practice of counselling. It can become a graced vocation of contemplative counselling to those in need. May we never forget to see in the countenance of each person we serve, the blessed image of God's divine son? ☺

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