

Abstract:

The author, a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor, believing that one's theological thinking influences one's pastoral practice, invites his CPE students to pay attention to their theological constructs. This paper describes an experiment in which he invited 16 students (3 CPE groups) to write, weekly, a theological reflection aligned to a supervisor-supplied, non-biblical quote, whilst taking into consideration pastoral ministry. To distil the essence of their thinking, they were confined to 100 words; they then shared their reflections in the supervision group. The students consistently remarked on stimulated theological awareness, and on the grace with which contributions were shared and received. The author did not contribute written reflections in the first group, but did in the second and third group. In this paper, excerpts from the writings of the second group (4 students: 2 female 2 male, 3 denominations, 3 ethnicities) are provided, plus the contributions of the author, who believes that the excerpts are typical of all 16 student reflections.

Edwina Gateley (cited in Rupp, 2011, first page, month of May) wrote:

Once when I was preparing to spend a period of time in a hermitage, I found myself spontaneously writing; the words tumbled from deep within me: 'When I asked my God if I could come and stay with Him for a while, She said: Yes, but don't bring your God with you.' How easy it is to clutter up the path of the Holy Spirit with my images and preconceptions of God!

What theological clutter do I bring to a pastoral encounter? This is the question I proffer myself and my CPE students. I don't believe that it is my task (or right) as a CPE supervisor to change a student's theology. I do believe, however, that one of my supervisory tasks is to assist students to understand how their theology shapes and informs their pastoral practice e.g. put crudely: if you think the world is basically corrupt and that Jesus saves us from this corruption to take us to a better world, then you will approach people in a particular way; if you believe that the world is basically good and that Jesus invites us to a fuller appreciation and participation in this (God's) world, then you will approach people in another way. Our theological constructs shape our pastoral practice.

This experiment took the form of inviting students to 'enlarge the tent' (Isaiah 54:2), or to 'widen the Divine image-pool from which we fish' (Webb, 2007, p.66) in respect to their thinking about God at work in the people they met in their pastoral work and in the CPE group itself.

I list the quotes in the order they were considered throughout the course. I offered no rationale when I gave the students the weekly quote, though I had intentionally chosen the quote. I offer my rationale throughout this paper.

1.

No one knows as much as all of us (NZ Coaching & Mentoring Centre).

My hope was that my students, building on the group-forming-work we had accomplished in the first weeks of CPE, would recognise God at work in our here-in-now-group, and would open themselves accordingly. All seemed open to something new:

God created us for community ... in community our weaknesses are complemented by others' strengths ... many people, gathered, bring to the table their perspective and a 3D picture can form, one which our own perspective will never realize.

Each one of us has wealth, knowledge, and a kernel of truth - the combination of which is far greater and richer than any individual can hold ...

We learn from each other, sharing our individual gifts, while working together for the benefit of the whole; we are, in fact, like the branches of the vine that is Jesus ...

My contribution was:

I believe that every human is held in the heart of God, that God lives in the heart of every human, and that every human is a unique image of God. So too, everything within creation pulses with the energy of God. Just as the eye of a fly consists of a large number of optic lenses that together provide the fly with a complete all-around picture, so too can our multi-faceted understandings of God-at-work in our midst provide us with a richer understanding and experience of God, both within our CPE group and within the people we meet in our ministry.

Barbara Brown-Taylor (2009, p. 5) comments on her experience of group-faith-sharing:

... it was as if we were building a fire together, each of us adding something to the blaze so that the light and heat in our midst grew. Yet the light exceeded our fire, just as the warmth did. We did our parts, and then there was more. There was *More*.

While none of the students actually used the word '*More*' to describe their experience of God, they frequently echoed the refrain 'No one knows ...' and acknowledged the 'enlarging of their tents.'

2.

**It seems to me Lord
that we search
much too desperately
for answers
when a good question
holds as much grace
as an answer.**

**Jesus
you are the Great Questioner.
Keep our questions alive
that we may always be seekers
rather than settlers.**

**Guard us well
from the sin of settling in
with our answers
hugged to our breasts.**

**Make of us
a wondering
far-sighted
questioning
restless people.**

**And give us the feet of pilgrims
on this journey unfinished** (Wiederkehr, 1991, p.188).

My intention here was to invite my students to be open to questions arising from their pastoral encounters, and to risk peeping outside the 'tent-flap' itself. Their responses suggested such willingness:

Every time we find an answer, we stop searching, risk stagnating and halt growth ... quelling other possibilities, eliminating any alternative ... limiting ourselves to what we currently know, limiting God's revealing to us ...

A pilgrim journey implies a quest - wandering, seeking, curious searching, noticing attentively, and participating in what happens along the way. Wondering and questioning may also suggest an involved waiting, in the silence, in the darkness, for clarity to emerge, shades and nuances of light to appear - as seeds wait in the darkness of the earth for the warmth and light of the sun to draw forth growth ...

I wrote:

I am reminded of the following quote of Rainer Maria Rilke: 'Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer' (cited in Nouwen, 1998, p.19).

3.

Pooh began to feel a little more comfortable, because when you are a bear of Very Little Brain and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it (Milne, 1992, p.250).

I found this quote pinned on the wall of a seminar room I once hired to conduct supervision training for people in the helping professions. The workshop participants were quick to connect it with their experience of good supervision i.e. safe space where they could unpack some of their own '*thingishness*.' This was my hope for my students within their

experience of supervision; and also that they could create similar space for the people they met in their pastoral encounters. They responded:

Thoughts mulling over inside us can take on a new meaning or importance when they are revealed to the gaze of others. What we thought was a two-dimensional picture can suddenly take on a new look and feel, as others add depth and height ... The creative input of others ... can be a scary place; that which was known and familiar can suddenly take on an unknown quantity or quality and actually might become something new.

Risking exposing our thoughts and feelings to another requires trust ... having another receive our messiness and confusion may help us find a way through to discern truth and wisdom at its heart ...

I wrote:

Pooh, wrestling with something, unsure what to call it, calls it a 'Thing' because it seems very 'Thingish'. Pooh remembers an old proverb: 'A problem shared is a problem halved.' So he shares his struggle with someone who really hears the heart of his struggle, doesn't try to take his struggle away, and doesn't try to problem-solve. As Pooh gets in touch deep down with his 'Thingy', it no longer seems to be a problem, but more like a way forward. Pooh no longer feels alone; he remembers something else: 'I am always with you' and then Pooh just knows that he's OK and loveable, and can get on with loving life, and honey.

4.

It is only when we are truly at home with ourselves that we can be truly hospitable to others (Norris, 1998, p.267, slightly adapted).

Deep into the first half of CPE, students are often wrestling with their self-insights. I invite them to be compassionate hosts to themselves - training ground for offering such compassion to others. One student wrote:

The Latin word '*hospes*' means '*guest*' and is the root of the words *hospitable*, *hospital*, *hospice*, *hostel* - words with the common meaning of 'offering a place of rest and shelter for weary travellers on a long journey' - a kind of home-away-from-home. Being hospitable means offering welcoming space to receive and focus attention on the guest. It means freeing my 'home' of my own clutter, recognizing and owning it, as part of who I am and letting it go over time, or keeping what is needed, sometimes with the help of another.

I wrote:

I am still a 'work-in-progress' and perhaps this 'progress' will continue into eternity. I have not 'arrived' nor can I tell you my exact 'destination'. All this unsettles me because I prefer to have everything 'sorted and tidied', and if the truth be known, I'd prefer you too to be 'sorted and tidied'. However the God that Jesus shows me loves me as I am, a 'work-in-progress'. Can I learn to be likewise generous to myself? Can I make peace with the mystery of who I am - thus freed and enabled to welcome the mysterious 'work-in-progress' encased in your skin?

5.

God does not give an answer to all our questions but, in Jesus, God enters into the heart of our questions (Leonardo Boff, cited in Millar, 1998, p.47).

Again, I challenge: can we embrace humanity's questions, and see in Jesus a way forward, rather than **the-answer-period!** Two students wrote:

An Irish proverb says 'a questioning person is half-way to being wise.' Maybe God wants us to recognize that fullness of wisdom comes in waiting, in stillness, in darkness, in our wondering at the mysteries of life ...

Most often when we ask questions, we already have an expected answer which we feel is acceptable to us. God does not answer in this way ... does not always conform to our 'expected' answers ...

6.

The Bible itself demands that we do not treat it as a final authority. Jesus promises that further revelation is to come with the 'Spirit of truth' – meaning that the church can never claim that revelation has ceased or that she has access to the full truth. Yes, the Scriptures are our defining documents; they are the reflections of our ancestors in faith on the experience of God in their lives. The Scriptures can therefore function as maps for us, pointing us in the right direction, giving us clues about how to find God in our own lives. However, we walk in territory uncharted by our ancestors-in-faith and we have to draw our own maps. The Scriptures show us how to do it and, by showing us where God has been in the past, help us pick up the scent of God in the present (Stuart, 1997, p.45, slightly adapted).

Here I offer the reflections of three students in my third CPE group, because in that group the widest expression of theological expression emerged. Indeed, I was provoking them to 'step out the tent' itself. The students accepted my challenge, emerging with the following thoughts. As they shared their reflections, they thoughtfully and gracefully acknowledged their differences and continued to learn from each other.

Like a bloodhound
On the way to heaven.
Nose to the ground
focused, following voraciously
the scent of God.
A fragrance that predates time
that seeped into the minds of the ancients.
Preserved on papyrus,
And printed on soft paper.
Like a bloodhound
hurrying along broad tracks
deeply furrowed by pilgrims from all ages.
Lured by the scent.
Enlivened.
Energised.
Mystified.
The scent swirls, becomes diluted.
Where to from here?
The bloodhound waits.
Twitching nostrils point the way once more.
A new path is forged, narrow at first but
broadened by those that follow
And one day becomes
a well-worn track.

... our Scriptures are not merely reflections of our ancestors on the experience of God in their lives. To the contrary, the authors of Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were not writing their words, they were writing God's words. Because of this, we are not drawing our own maps; we possess now - a sufficient map, more than a 'scent.' The Bible possesses 'divine authority in all things that pertain to life and godliness.' Our task is to sensitively use this map when we are confronted with the topography of complex and challenging life issues.

God's word (revelation) is sent out and does not return without accomplishing that for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). At times I fail to recognise God's revelation ... I'm also blown away by the Spirit of truth in my life and in the lives of others. Revelation is ongoing across all time and cultures. It is greater than the Christian scriptures. I would go further and say the Spirit of truth is also present in other religious texts. It is inconceivable that God's love and salvation is limited to one faith. Surely some revelation is at hand!

I wrote:

If God has stopped revealing, then God is dead. Anglicanism cherishes the broad range of God's revelation in text, tradition, and human experience. Let us listen to all three. Truth cannot be limited to, nor limited by, the Bible. In the manner of Richard Hooker, early Anglican theologian, Scripture is our primary source of authority, but it must not be isolated from reason or tradition. Hooker argued that a loving God worded revelation in a manner sensitive to the specific needs of a particular group of people in a unique historical context. Therefore, since not all people are alike, God's revelation does not apply in the same manner to everyone in every successive age.

7.

Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence (Paul Claudel, cited in Lanahan, 2001, p.71).

And we grappled with the mystery of suffering, our own and that of others.

8.

Those who set out to share the good news often discover that they are changed in the process. Good news does not always travel on a one-way street. We not only invite others to join us, but we also respond to the invitation to join others, to learn what they have seen and heard of God's way and God's word. We join each other. We join together in an unfolding journey of discovery and discipleship (Martin Copenhaver, 2002).

Behind this quote lay my unexpressed question: 'What is good news (gospel) and where might we find it?'

I was touched by these words, written by a student in group three:

When I was young I went on a mission trip with our church to Fiji. It was with *Habitat for Humanity* and we went primarily to help build houses. We went to bless them but I quickly realised, even while I was there but especially when I came back, that I was the one who really got blessed. They accepted us from the beginning and made a place for us. They gave to us out of their poverty and took us into their lives. They changed me, the way I viewed life when I came back. Who they were had become a part of me.

I wrote:

If I approach another person believing that I have 'the answer' for that person, I leave no room in myself to receive from that person, and run the danger of approaching with an attitude of 'condescension' rather than 'mutuality.' I believe 1) that God's 'pitching tent' in our midst in the person of Jesus demonstrated an attitude of 'mutuality' (God-and-us-together); and 2) the seed of God lies within everyone. In developing an attitude of curiosity, I may recognise that seed in the other, and in doing so the other may recognise the seed of God in me - leading to a good-news-exchange.

9.

Our first task in approaching other people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another's dream. More serious still, we may forget that God was there before we arrived (Max Warren, cited in Connecticut Mission Conference, 2013).

Before sharing our reflections emanating from this quote, I wondered aloud: 'Was God present in this land before our Christian forebears arrived?' Without allowing space for any response, I then asked the Tongan student: 'Was God in Tonga before the Christians arrived?' In a flash he responded: 'Of course, the seas were teeming with fish – before and since!' His response set the scene for our sharing. The Singaporean student shared her written reflection:

For many cultures, taking off one's shoes before entering a place, be it temple, mosque, meeting-house or a person's home, is a mark of respect. Showing respect to the other is a key attribute necessary when meeting people of another culture/tradition/religion. It implies that although we may not fully know or understand another's values/beliefs/culture, we are prepared to put ourselves on the same equal footing as the other. Perhaps that's the true meaning of 'taking off your shoes' ...

I wrote:

Each and every person is a world of complexity and beauty, and I only glimpse a small part of their story at any particular moment; only God knows the full story of their unfolding and becoming. When I 'care' for another person, I am but a momentary partner - maybe only a witness - to the 'work' of God in that person's life. This 'work' is sacred, and if I enter 'wearing the boots' of my profession/agency/theology I may, without noticing, step on tiny shoots of new life. Listening, curiosity and awe are necessary starting places in my pastoral work.

10.

When once asked in an interview, which of his many possessions he would save from the burning house, if it were on fire, Jean Cocteau answered without hesitation, 'I would take the Fire'(cited by Paulo Coelho, 2007).

CPE was ending, and I hoped that the flames of CPE would burn on. One student wrote:

From the house of CPE, I will take this intangible spirit of fire, really a symbol of suffering and healing. It has burnt and consumed the dead, dry, and drifting wood in my life. It flickers and flames, changing and shifting as deepening reflection and changing old patterns have moved me in new directions. This fire, within myself and others, needs ongoing tending and grounding, with prayer, patience, courage and kindness. The energy, vitality and creativity of fire are what I hopefully carry into ministry. The sparks of the spirit are everywhere if I am alert enough to catch them.

I wrote:

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin stated: 'Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire' (cited in Brainy Quotes, 2015). The Fire/Spirit of God is already present and everywhere, if I will but pay attention, and allow it to both warm me and assist me to welcome its spark in each person I encounter. Only then will I really know the love that must be the fire at the heart of all my pastoral care. CPE invites me to draw ever near to the hearth of this fire.

Conclusion:

In presenting this paper, it is my intention to describe both my experiment and my experience within it, and to invite my CPE supervisor-colleagues to find creative ways to entice their CPE students into critiquing the influence of their theological constructs within their pastoral encounters.

Initially some of my students found the weekly discipline to be a challenge. A few that had read theological tomes struggled to use ordinary everyday language. A few others began with the belief that they didn't know how to 'do theology' or even what was meant by 'theology.' These others seemed to be helped by my description: 'theology is simply *thinking about Theo* (theos: god) and the threads of *Theo's activity in our lives*.' Within a few weeks, all the students were creatively pondering, writing, and making connections with their pastoral ministry. A number of them even posted the weekly quotes on their home refrigerator and/or discussed them with their partner and/or their professional colleagues. Several also described themselves as occasionally being 'driven to distraction' by the challenge. In evaluating their experience in their end-of-CPE evaluations, they wrote in this vein:

I found the theological reflections to be thought-provoking and stimulating ... I have gained from the process that has helped me to be more open, accepting and understanding of others' theological and faith positions.

... a great way of recognising that we all saw the text differently. Each person put their own stamp on the subject... we opened ourselves to each other ...

Participation in the weekly theological reflections has allowed me to dig deeper ... The input from each member reflected the diverse pool of gifts and talents among us ... showing us that we are all theologians in our own right.

'We are all theologians in our own right.' My inner reaction when I read these words was 'bulls-eye!' Anton Boisen, one of the founders of CPE, encouraged his students to pay careful attention to both their own self and the people in their care. He urged his students to 'read these living-human-documents' as first-hand living source-materials about us and God, in contrast to second-hand statements found in textbooks. I believe that the theological reflections that I refer to in this article helped us, both students and supervisor, to better understand our own human condition and our own authentic experience of God in our midst.

It was noted that I offered no biblical quotes. This was a deliberate choice on my part. Too many people tend towards quoting Scripture as 'the answer' to pastoral dilemmas. I sought to invite my students away from this tendency, to be open to God at work in the here-and-now, and to find fresh language to describe their experience. Having said this, I observed that the students often made connections with the Scriptures e.g. 'no one knows as much as all of us' drew forth 1 Corinthians 12 (with its metaphor of body and complementary parts.)

Reflecting on my participation in the exercise: in group one, I didn't contribute a written reflection; in groups two and three, I did. I believe that my contribution enriched the learning of groups two and three. Whilst in this paper I have recorded the full text of most of my written reflections, and sometimes only extracts from the students' reflections, this should not be read as a privileging of my contributions. Despite me holding a position of power as supervisor within a CPE group, my written reflections were not privileged by the group. My comments simply sat alongside those of the other group members. Often no comment was offered regarding my insights, whilst the words of others solicited, not debate, but rather comments such as: 'that touched me;' 'that reminds me of ...;' 'I've never thought of it that way;' 'I have some more thinking to do ...;' and 'thank you - it feels good that someone else glimpses what I glimpse.' My contributions seldom drew comment, except for the sort of end-of-CPE evaluative comment such as: 'John models what he professes.'

In concluding, I emphasise again that our theological constructs are always limited when it comes to describing the work of the Divine. I leave the final words to Rainer Maria Rilke and Sally McFague respectively:

The form of a thing is a gate; the name of a thing is a name inscribed on the gate; pass through the gate into the meaning within (Rilke, cited in Van de Weyer, 1998, p.23).

Theological constructions are 'houses' to live in for a while, with windows partly open and doors ajar ... they become prisons when they no longer allow us to come and go, to add a new room or take one away - or if necessary, to move out and build a new house (McFague, 1987, p.27).

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