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On the Roads of Life: Becoming a Competent Counselor and Person of Integrity

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We travel many roads in life. They vary in accordance with our development. Our age, gender, clinical training, and family of origin enter into the mixture, too. Then there is the unexpected. Regardless, roads and road metaphors appeal to us. It is little wonder then that a book such as Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*, a poem such as Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, or a song such as Willie Nelson's *On the Road Again*, gains and retains popularity with the general public for years. Yet life is not an endless road with infinite opportunities. Indeed, options may fade fast and the openings available to us at different points in our lives may end.

The scholarly works of Erik Erikson and Carol Gilligan, among others, outline different stages in life and the challenges of each. We as men and women traverse life's roads with some uniqueness and some overlap. For some of us the roads we have traveled in our growth and in our struggles to become our own persons have had interesting and appropriate names. For instance, as a child growing up in a religious family and wrestling with the questions about the ultimate, I had to smile when I realized that I lived on Church Street. As a young adult, grappling with the question, "What do I want to do with my life?", I found it ironic that my apartment was on Prospect Street. Later, when confused over intimacy questions I had in regard to a young woman, I found myself working in a rural county where the streets had numbers but not names. So I said silently to myself, "I think my number is up," and it was!

The point is that we are all journeymen and journeywomen in life. What we do initially, and what we decide to do later as we mature further, determines how or whether we reach our ideal destinations. For some, the decisions will be thought out. For others resolutions and directions will depend on feelings. For a few, the physical surroundings at the time they set out will make a major impact. The point is that the roads we take have an influence on what we do and how or whether we thrive professionally and/or personally.

The purpose of this article is to focus on traveling in life as a counselor. The concentration is on *being* and *becoming* as a professional counselor and as a person of integrity.

Being

I find it difficult to talk about being. While I enjoy being alive, discussions about the subject of being often end up as boring diatribes that are stuffy, stale, and esoteric. Furthermore, I hesitate to approach the subject of being since philosophers from Aristotle to Hume have delved into the subject matter deeply and rather thoroughly. Nevertheless, let me relate two personal experiences that come to mind when I think about being. The second is more detailed and serious.

In the first memory, I am transported back to my Introduction to Philosophy course in college. There I realized one day as I emerged after a rather brutal test that "If I am to be, I must pass philosophy." That is, if I was going to be a college graduate I had to study hard to make a passing grade in this required course. Thus Descartes cascaded through my brain and I thought; therefore, I was more serious and intentional. Some similar experiences may hold true for many of us in regard to the dramas or traumas we have had in college or elsewhere.

However, an emphasis on being does not have to be a moment in which our minds are full of memories from the past. Rather, it can be a time of enlightened and even unexpected insight. That fact came home to me one day when I lived in Connecticut. At the time, I had a professional friendship with an older man by the name of Art Lerner. He lived in California and had double PhDs in literature and psychology. Art had taken me on as a project after I had made a professional presentation at a convention and had mentioned his name and one of his books. He wanted to teach me everything he knew, so he would sometimes call and just talk to me about everything from probability to the use of theory in counseling. One day he called and

queried “Could you meet me in the city? I’m coming to New York to see my agent.”

Well, before you could say “I want to be a part of it,” I said “yes,” and on the appointed day of his arrival I took the train into the city and met him at Grand Central Station. I did not have an agenda but he did. He had made luncheon reservations at the United Nations for us where we saw both interesting people and had a delightful, and inexpensive, meal. Then it was on through the subway to his agent’s apartment, where I met an elderly ben-over woman with blue hair and a cane whose living quarters were chock-full of books and filled with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and chocolate chip cookies. Amid the clutter and smell, much discussion occurred between Art and his agent, whom I shall call Agnes. Since I was not involved directly in their conversation, I nibbled on cookie crumbs, drank coffee, and caught a glimpse of how the high-powered world of New York publications really worked. I was both impressed and intimidated.

As we were about to depart, however, Agnes looked at me for what I thought was really the first time and asked pointedly, “So are you going to write too?”

I was surprised by her query. Thus I reflected momentarily and then hesitantly replied that I did not think I had lived long enough to have any experiences that were worth sharing with others.

“Then you must think again,” my hostess countered. “You must be a person who knows the depth of his soul and the width of the world. You need to go inside as you go outside. Then you may realize who you are and you may write.”

Her words caught me off guard. I had no reply. I walked with my friend back to the train station while catching glimpses of my breath in the cold, darkening air. There I boarded the train toward New Haven somewhat stunned and looked out the window at the frosted countryside during the long ride home. Since that day, I have wondered if the words conveyed during my brief conversation with a woman I hardly knew might have some universal dimension in them of what it is “to be.” I am especially still caught up in her words that “you must go inside as you go outside to realize who you are.”

If that is so, then what is becoming?

Becoming

As with being, I think there are a lot of ways to talk about becoming, and many, if not most, are a bit ethereal in nature. However, there is more than one way to become. Some popular strategies include

- a Jungian approach of listening to our dreams and what they can teach us about our strength, our fears, our fantasies, and our strategies in living;
- an Adlerian approach of employing an as-if method as a way of getting past rough times or intimidating situations;
- an Albert Ellis type of persistence in our efforts to do what we have aspirations for;
- an existential emphasis of learning from failure and finding inner strength; and
- a family therapy stress on getting love and support from significant others in our lives, such as families, partners, and friends.

I have written about these factors in two of my books: *Becoming a Counselor: The Light, the Bright, and the Serious* (2002) and *Counseling as an Art: The Creative Arts in Counseling* (2005). Therefore, I will not elaborate on them here. Rather, I want to highlight other ways that we can become, specifically through

- knowledge of ourselves;
- hard work as constant learner;
- preparation for and follow through in regard to change;
- writing;
- being open to happenstance;
- looking at the humorous, as well as the serious, nature of counseling; and
- learning to be creative.

Knowledge of Ourselves

The first way I think our growth is enhanced is to develop a deep knowledge of ourselves. I realize that may sound simple or simplistic; however, it is anything but that. For instance, look at the work of Murray Bowen who researched development as related to a person’s family of origin. He found that if we have unresolved issues with our families, we need to do our best to resolve them or we risk become pseudo individuated, i.e., acting like but never really becoming our own person. Resolving issues in families is not easy, and it may be especially difficult if one is an orphan or if there were disruptions or gaps in one’s family history. The latter may have occurred because of immigration irregularities or because of dysfunctional systems condoned by society at the time, such as slavery. Nevertheless, everyone has a family of some type, even a surrogate family, with whom there has been and still may be interaction. Examining our history in regard to that family may take time and be difficult, but it also takes the mystery out of why we have done or continue to do some of the things we do.

For instance, by examining my own life, I realized that I foreclosed on career options as a youth because of a confluence of circumstances that led me toward thinking early and often that I was going to be a minister. These factors included being named Samuel (which means “called by God”), the same first name as my maternal grandfather who was a minister, and also being given my maternal grandfather’s last name, Templeman. Basically, the deck was loaded. Thus, it was not until my second year at Yale Divinity School that I started exploring careers as I realized I did not want to be a minister. Finding out more about who we are, vertically as well as horizontally, is one of the best gifts we can ever give ourselves in regard to growth and becoming. That is what Bowen emphasized.

Hard Work as a Constant Learner

Besides a thorough knowledge of ourselves (which sounds like advice Clifford Beers —The Father of Guidance— would give), I think the second guideline to becoming competent as a professional and a person of integrity is hard work. For all of us in counseling, hard work means doing such things as reading professional journals and books, reflecting on such professional material, and even writing our responses or reactions to this material. I remember trying to learn Spanish once by a subliminal method, but the fact is that there is no substitute for hard work. Besides mastering linear materials, it is also crucial that we practice our helping skills such as active listening, reflection of content and feeling, and summarization.

In our hard work we must be prepared to be the student, i.e., the learner, regardless of our age or status. It is when we have the openness and eagerness for new knowledge that we are best able to make the most of our experiences. For example, I remember when I went to Calcutta, India, to work with Mother Teresa in the mid-1990s, I thought I was prepared and would not be shocked or taken back by what I saw. After all, I had seen poor people struggle daily while working in a rural mental health center in the 1970s. I had also taken several courses dealing with death and dying and had led grief groups.

However, Calcutta was different. People were living on the streets with nothing over their heads except plastic tarps if they were lucky. On almost every corner were truly needy and hungry individuals. There were also people dying in those same streets daily. The first time I stepped over a dead body I knew my previous knowledge had not translated or transferred well. I had to learn anew in order to be genuinely helpful. It was a humbling but most meaningful experience. Since then I have thought that becoming a counselor or a person in a new environment may involve setting aside past

learning. Even within the same environment, we must be open to facts and people we do not know in order to be able to do good.

Change

Third, I think becoming a counselor and a person with any depth means being prepared to change. That change includes our habits, routines, opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of people and life. As we know, nothing stays the same and that includes us. However, change is not easy and sometimes takes us by surprise. One aspect that sometimes escapes us includes the small but significant changes that impact our lives. That fact came home to me literally when my children were young and I was trying to get them to bed one night. As I made my wishes known, my oldest son, Ben, who was age 5 at the time, said, “Dad, it’s only white dark. We don’t go to bed until it is blue dark, and we don’t go to sleep until it is black dark.”

He was right. He knew the subtle changes of twilight and what they meant. I was not as aware but could have been and I am now, because through Ben I changed my perception of twilight.

Writing

A fourth way to help ourselves get the most out of our potential is to write and to tell our stories. James Pennebaker (2004), a researcher at the University of Texas, has found that students who write (and this goes for professors and other people too) not only feel better but also are physically healthier than those who do not. (Pennebaker has taken blood samples to reveal this fact!) The time length for writing Pennebaker suggests is 20 minutes four times a week. However, the important thing about this finding is that writing can help promote wellness, and those who are well are much more likely to be aware and of service to society than those who are not.

Happenstance

A close examination of the power of happenstance is another factor that we must consider in our professional and personal growth. There is an old Jewish saying that “People plan, God laughs.” Take the story of Tim Duncan, the National Basketball Association’s most valuable player for 2 years and a stalwart with the San Antonio Spurs. Duncan did not aspire to be a basketball player growing up. Instead, he wanted to be an Olympic swimmer. Thus, he practiced swimming each day on the island of Saint Thomas in the Virgin Islands until the summer of his 16th year, when the only Olympic-size swimming pool on the island was destroyed by a hurricane. Tim was left with only a few sports options, including playing basketball. Since he

came to the game so late, only three colleges made any attempt to recruit him, and none of them tried hard. He landed at Wake Forest, became an All American, and the rest is history.

The point is that had the hurricane not destroyed the swimming pool in which Tim Duncan practiced, he would not be an NBA All Star and an outstanding role model for today's youth in the United States. Happenstance was the force behind the history. Like Duncan, we should not evaluate harshly or quickly the events that occur in our lives. Sometimes what seems like a tragedy can be an opening to a future.

Humor in Counseling

A sixth healthy way to become is to remember to find the humor in counseling and in life as well as the seriousness. As the cartoon character Frank in the comic strip "Frank and Ernest" says when requesting a date from a computer dating service, "It's not that I prefer a woman with a good sense of humor. I just think my chances would be better with one."

So it is with us all. We can become better instead of bitter or despondent if we include some humor as a part of our lives.

Humor is associated with positive wellness. Research has indicated that involvement in humor has a therapeutic effect on one's overall health. Humor, particularly when it is accompanied by laughter, creates physiological, psychological, and social changes. The skeletal muscles become more relaxed, breathing changes, and the brain releases certain chemicals that are positive to our well-being (Gladding, 2005).

People who are able to laugh at themselves or their situations are able to positively take charge of their lives. Humor seems to be a factor in increasing attention spans, improving comprehension, and promoting recall, all of which are crucial to the fostering of mental health. Humor is negatively correlated with worry, hence the truth in the song "Don't worry, be happy." People basically gain an "aha" experience from their "ha-ha" perspective. In the process, they achieve insight into problems that have heretofore perplexed them. It is like the story of the conversation between the math book and counseling book in which the math book said, "I've got problems," and the counseling book replied, "Don't worry, I'm solution focused." There is truth and humor in both sentences.

Be Creative

Seventh, in becoming, open yourself up to being creative by letting yourself think divergently. There are about 200 definitions of creativity, but Sternberg (1999) has given one of the best and most succinct. To

summarize, he defines creativity as the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original or unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful or meets task constraints).

On my road to becoming a counselor and an individual in society, I never dreamed of being creative or using creativity. Yet my clients taught me it was important. They would write verse, play music, act dramatically, or draw pictures. In other words, they gave me a good orientation of how to work more effectively as a counselor. In addition, my clients did not just use the arts, but through other means they showed me that if I could get beyond linear thinking at times, I could help them.

I have tried to keep that sense of creativity in other aspects of life. For instance, I was asked to write something novel to try to encourage members to vote in the American Counseling Association election. As I thought about what to write, I let my mind freely associate and envisioned ballots, past historical elections, famous people elected to office such as Sir Winston Churchill, historic times of Churchill such as World War II, and then my own service in the military and the people who influenced me in the service. After such divergent thinking, I then converged thoughts and came up with these words:

Elections can be trying or electrifying! It depends on who is on the ballot and who votes! This year's slate of ACA candidates is dynamic and exciting! To borrow and modify a sentence from Winston Churchill: "Seldom have so many counselors had an opportunity to vote for such noble nominees." Okay, maybe Sir Winston never said anything like that but the fact is, as members of ACA, we have the opportunity to vote for some excellent professionals to lead our Association for the next few years. I hope that you will exercise your right to vote for those for whom you are eligible. Apathy is not an excuse for "sitting this one out." In fact, to quote my old First Sergeant in the Army, "There are no excuses!" (That is an accurate quote, by the way, even though I have forgotten the First Sergeant's name, which was not, I am sure, Winston Churchill). So, please do not stuff the paper that has unfolded before you back in the envelope in which it came! Give it life! Give it liberty! Send it back to ACA in the enclosed addressed envelope with your choices clearly marked! I am sure you will feel better if you do! After all, both Winston Churchill and my First Sergeant lived fulfilling lives partially by following the motto ,

“Besides something tasty on the palate, the next best thing in life is voting by ballot!”

Conclusion

In concluding, let me tell you one last story. A little while ago, I did a newspaper interview with a reporter from what I considered to be a sophisticated publication. Her voice was friendly and enthusiastic. She was obviously an extrovert and an optimist with skills both in writing and in rapport. However, her first question threw me in the same way that an athlete throws a ball before he or she has had extensive practice. Thus I felt that I was being aimed in a certain direction but awkwardly.

“Tell me,” she said, “what are the five simple rules for becoming a competent professional counselor in our highly competitive world?”

“Well,” I thought, “simple rules and competent professional counselors do not exactly go together. Doesn’t everyone develop differently?”

Thus I replied, “I don’t think there are five simple rules for professional growth.”

Her response was, “Oh, are there 10?”

To which I countered, “I do think there are simple rules for becoming a counselor or a person. However, there are some guidelines that are valuable to keep in mind. Let me tell you about some theorists and counseling practitioners who were outstanding individuals.”

That being said, the reporter and I entered into a dialogue. To use a road metaphor, we briefly stopped at an intersection and then decided in what direction we would proceed.

I hope that what I have covered in these pages has given you some pause, too, and that you will reflect on your future growth as professionals and as persons with colleagues, friends, and family. The American Counseling Association can help in providing you with books, journals, professional meetings, low cost liability insurance, leadership opportunities, and online courses. Regardless, of what paths you follow, I challenge you to constantly seek new directions in life that are fulfilling and enriching for you.

Let me emphasize that developments on the road of life are likely to come more gradually than dramatically. That is probably good, for it gives us enough time to adjust and make sure we are going in directions that are fulfilling. Yet minute changes add up in significant ways. Just as you work in changing the lives of others, the work that you do on yourself and the way you approach it will make a significant

and positive difference if you allow it. So

- be the explorer of your family and history;
- be the hard working constant student (i.e., a learner);
- be prepared to change as well as to help others change;
- write as if your life depended on it, for it does;
- be open to happenstance and surprise;
- look at the humorous, as well as the serious side of counseling; and
- learn to be creative.

If you do these things, you will “go inside as you go outside and realize more of who you are.” You will also become more attuned to yourself, those you serve, and learn lessons that will stay with you forever.

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