Hermeneutics as a Tool for Pastoral Counseling Theory
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THE LIVING HUMAN DOCUMENT IN CLINICAL PASTORAL EDUCATION
In his *Exploration of the Inner World*, chaplain and author Anton Boisen described the lives of people as "living human documents." His metaphor was developed for theological students working in the ministry field, where they would turn from Scripture and theological texts to study human nature first hand. Boisen made the metaphor clear; he wanted students to "learn to read human documents as well as books."[1] One contribution this metaphor has made to the study of theology has been to increase the incorporation of the social sciences into theological work. Another contribution of the metaphor was the growing acceptance of fieldwork as a foundation of theological education. Boisen therefore expanded the study of how praxis could inform theory.

HERMENEUTICS AND THEORY OF PASTORAL COUNSELING
The idea of learning from people as living human documents suggests the unique applicability of hermeneutics to pastoral theology. As the art and science of interpretation, hermeneutics holds great potential for crossover into the field of pastoral care and counseling and has been pivotal to my chaplaincy work as well as to my faith as a Christian. Theological field education often includes actions or liturgical practices that themselves require interpretation on the part of the student and the participating community. Likewise, pastoral counseling within field education requires a continual interpretive process on the part of both the pastoral counselor and the counselee. Creatively incorporating principles and theories from hermeneutics may be able to enrich, engage, and enhance pastoral work by creating greater empathy, greater communicative clarity, and a stronger interpersonal and spiritual connection between people and their beliefs.

Conveniently for CPE supervisors and theological educators, hermeneutics has long enjoyed a respected status, embedded within and throughout Christian-based seminary education. Even beyond "Hermeneutics" class, courses on theology, Bible, ethics, and homiletics all allude to principles and theories learned from hermeneutics as foundational background, so hermeneutics is often required early in a course of study (such as a Master of Divinity curriculum). Additionally, students at various field sites may be coming from divergent cultural, denominational, and religious backgrounds and may bring with them unique hermeneutical expressions that represent differences among theological institutions as well as the religious and cultural communities represented. All of these have the potential to enrich professional practice and group learning within field education.

With its integration into existing structures of theological education, hermeneutics has great potential as a springboard for creatively theorizing and practicing pastoral care and counseling for theological students, such as those enrolled

in CPE units. CPE supervisors and other field educators may find that creatively incorporating hermeneutics into their curriculum allows them to tap into rich philosophical and theological resources and traditions over which students already have some mastery. Likewise, field educators, in encouraging students to make strong connections between theory in the classroom and the actual practice of pastoral work, may find that hermeneutics supplies a rich array of concepts, or even divergent philosophies, that students can employ in individualized ways. Incorporating hermeneutics into pastoral pedagogy may also enliven vastly different cultural, denominational, and interreligious expressions of faith in ways that allow educators to respect and embolden these distinctive assets that students bring to their CPE education, enriching not only the learning acquired but also the services rendered by students at field sites.

  So, how might students and field educators creatively incorporate hermeneutics into pastoral praxis? How might the incorporation of hermeneutics increase pastoral professionals' practice of empathy and better serve relevant populations?

  Turning back to Boisen's image of the living human document, we find a metaphor that brings the content of pastoral encounters directly into the interpretive framework of hermeneutics. For Boisen, the metaphor was primarily intended to justify the usefulness of experience in theological education. Consequently, many of the rich connections between pastoral work and hermeneutics were left to be discovered by later pastoral theologians. Since Boisen, several notable works have attempted to explicitly borrow from hermeneutics in ways that translate hermeneutic theory directly into pastoral care and counseling. Charles Gerkin's *Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*[2] describes pastoral counseling theory in richly hermeneutical language and also uses ideas from narrative studies to look at pastoral counseling from several levels of hermeneutical metaphor. Don Capps's *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics*[3] primarily applies Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics to pastoral actions to better understand how they might be interpreted. Jason Cusick's *Read Me Like a Book: Using Hermeneutics as a Guide to Pastoral Counseling*[4] provides a perspective on using hermeneutics to guide and structure pastoral counseling. Additionally Bonnie Miller-McLemore has expanded on the living human document to theorize the *living human web*, through which she argues that a more systemic perspective is necessary for pastoral caregivers.[5]

  The remainder of this paper will focus on Charles Gerkin's notion of the living human document and my own experiences in a year-long CPE residency in a hospital, during which I utilized Gerkin's ideas to inform and inspire my pastoral counseling practice. I hope to share the ways my practice and theory of pastoral counseling have been largely informed by hermeneutics so that others might be inspired to design their own unique expressions of hermeneutics within pastoral counseling. Gerkin's work was and is extremely meaningful to me, resonating on a deep spiritual level, and so

hopefully my engagement with it may spark others' curiosity and creative responses as to how they might uniquely integrate their own hermeneutics into pastoral counseling.

CHARLES GERKIN'S *THE LIVING HUMAN DOCUMENT*
Noticing that Boisen's powerful metaphor was both richly theological and psychological, Gerkin endeavored to expound upon his own conception of the living human document within the context of pastoral counseling, which he believed could open theoretical avenues that had been largely overlooked.

Gerkin begins his work, *The Living Human Document*, by identifying two ways that the hermeneutical metaphor is useful, two levels of dialogue that then form Gerkin's hermeneutical paradigm. The first is the dialogue between psychology and theology, fields that Gerkin envisions as forming a necessary foundation for pastoral counseling and that ultimately co-create a hermeneutic of the self. While his focus is on the interplay between psychology and theology, Gerkin identifies three important domains that affect what he calls "the life of the self," domains that collectively incorporate theology and psychology. These are the ego (which for Gerkin is mostly based on object relations theory), the social context (e.g., historical embeddedness), and the interpretation of faith and culture. Each of these domains informs the dialectic of a self-hermeneutic, the self in conversation with itself, as individuals live in the tension created by each of these three poles.[6]

Of course, both pastoral counselors and counselees have their own distinct internal dialogues containing these three domains, complicating the ways in which pastoral counselors and counselees relate to one another. Within the ego domain, object relations theory offers Gerkin a psychological paradigm that also functions well as a psychological hermeneutic since object relations theory details the ways in which the self-differentiates throughout its development, eventually coming into its own identity as separate from the world and separate from others. The domain of societal context relates mostly to the historically situated nature of one's existence and how changes in society at large may challenge faith or internal structures of understanding. The final domain, the interpretation of faith and culture, pertains largely to religious identity as formed by community, culture, heritage, and tradition and, as such, is very important to the distinctiveness of the pastoral counseling discipline.

This level of the hermeneutical metaphor pertains therefore to how an individual can be understood through a sort of interdisciplinary dialogical exchange between the different components that compose the self. This level of Gerkin's hermeneutical mode implies the criticality of the pre-understandings of the pastoral counselor and the counselee since these have significant effects on how they uniquely interpret themselves, the world, and others.

The next level of hermeneutical dialogue consists of the relationship between the pastoral counselor and the counselee. Gerkin views the pastoral counselor and the counselee as two distinct living human documents, two subjective people, each approaching the dialogue with unique preunderstandings as described above in the first level of the metaphor. Unlike Boisen, who primarily envisioned professionals operating as subjects interpreting people as living human documents, Gerkin employs a more phenomenological hermeneutic wherein "it is erroneous to consider the hermeneutical task in subject-object terms."[7] Instead, Gerkin borrows from the hermeneutic philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer and suggests that the relationship between pastoral counselor and counselee is an intersubjective one, which necessitates a fusion of disparate horizons of meaning and understanding. Like Gadamer's hermeneutical theory, Gerkin envisions effective pastoral counseling as requiring a deep self-awareness on the counselor's part so as to cultivate awareness of how the caregiver affects the intersubjective dialogue. In this way, Gerkin rejects a Cartesian subject-object relationship and instead favors a phenomenological and intersubjective hermeneutical mode where the subjective experiences of both pastoral counselor and counselee are given authority. Importantly, Gerkin envisions the pastoral counselor as representative of the world of faith and religion, bringing religious ideas and images to bear within the counseling relationship as they coincide with the counselee's faith and language worlds. He also envisions the Holy Spirit as working in the place where the two disparate horizons meet, thus solidifying the innately spiritual nature of pastoral counseling relationships.[8]

Within this second level of the metaphor, Gerkin moves from his deeply theoretical hermeneutical language into one that models a very practical hermeneutical approach to the practice of pastoral counseling. Despite the mysterious and obscure way in which the Holy Spirit connects two people within Gerkin's model, at this second level of the metaphor Gerkin brings in a practical outline for the pastoral counseling process. He states that "to lose the sense of story line in one's life is to lose the sense of being a self."[9] In this way, his hermeneutical mode of pastoral counseling describes an essentially narrative-oriented approach. His basic outline for pastoral counseling in a hermeneutical mode is to evoke the story, change the story, and bring the story into the faith community.

To evoke a story requires bringing an awareness of the pastoral counselor's own biases and preunderstandings, not allowing initial confirmation of their biases to determine the interpretive course. Gerkin suggests that evoking the story requires listening for a narrative story line to discover the meaning world of the person and then to see how the unfolding of the story, as told from the perspective of the counselee's meaning world, is being blocked in their life. Drawing from narrative parallels, Gerkin suggests that evoking the story may also require awareness of things such as plot, character, and tone in the stories that are revealed by counselees.[10] To the extent that the

pastoral counselor can differentiate their own preunderstandings, additional narrative elements will stand out with greater clarity from the dialogue, including fragments of overarching narrative, narrative themes, connections, and symbolisms, all of which reveal a deeper level of the concerns of the counselee.[11] For instance, in his case study of a woman named Susan, Gerkin identifies the contradictory themes of *desire* and *obligation*, each of which bear particular psychological, social, and faith-oriented significance in Susan's life.

The next stage is to change the narrative. For Gerkin, narrative change requires building an awareness in the counselee of how their story has become stuck. To change the story, Gerkin borrows again from hermeneutic philosophy, this time from Paul Ricoeur, who argued that all texts have a "surplus of meaning."[12] In Susan's case, the themes of desire and obligation are blocking her story, so what is needed is a reinterpretation of particular religious themes that are stifling other aspects of herself, namely, her understanding of the religious concept of the "old self" from the book of Romans, which Gerkin believes may need to be demythologized.[13]

Borrowing from John Dominic Crossan's *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, Gerkin mentions several more narrative elements that may need to be addressed for counselees to change their story, I address only two here. First, *apologues*, or moral fables, give people a way of understanding how the world works but may eventually contribute to blockages in their unfolding story. Gerkin recommends addressing these moral stories not by *correcting* them but by allowing them to be challenged by counselees themselves, a feat which is quite possible given that the counseling relationship usually contains an implicit anti-mythical quality and counselees expect to be challenged.[14] Next, *parables* are often represented through vignettes of the counselee's experiences and represent a truth for the person. Parables can suggest experientially how someone understands themselves and therefore their unfolding narrative. But when these parables cause a person to become stuck, Gerkin believes that avenues to new meaning can be developed by reinterpreting these parables anew, much in the way that Jesus subverted the meanings of contemporaneous Jewish parables.

The final stage that Gerkin offers is essentially a sending off of the counselee into the faith community, which he describes as a "community of shared vision and narrative structure."[15] Importantly, for Gerkin pastoral counseling differs from secular counseling partially through the suggestion that, at the completion of counseling, the counselee will become involved in or continue involvement in a community, one that understands and supports the unique spiritual context of the counselee's unfolding narrative. Gerkin acknowledges that his hermeneutical mode also emphasizes the counselee's autonomy in the changing of their narrative, which necessarily risks the forgoing of immersion within a faith community. On this Gerkin remains ambivalent, apart from stating that at times the pastoral counselor may openly disclose their own opinions, one of which is a belief in the importance of spiritual community.[16]

MY HERMENEUTICAL MODE

Gerkin's theory was particularly helpful to me when I served as a chaplain resident in a small inner-city hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. Patient demographics included roughly equal numbers of Caucasian and African American patients, totaling about 80 percent of the total patient population; another 10 percent or so was Hispanic, and the remainder was mixed/other. The majority of patients who identified as religious were primarily some forms of Christian, within which Baptists and Catholics were strongly represented. Smaller but stable populations of Muslim, atheist, and several other Christian identities were also present. The bulk of my patient-contact hours during the residency consisted of completing rounds on various units, including the adult psychiatric, detoxification, general medical, intensive care/COVID-19, and post-surgery units.

Through trial and error, I found that the most useful information that I could gain prior to visiting patients were the brief narratives from previous chaplain visits or narratives from other professionals, such as intake narratives, which provided some subjective data. On the other hand, objective demographics, and information such as age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and health history, while available on the chart, often only supplied a superficial account of the patient. Thus, when I knocked on a patient's door during rounds, I experienced a slurry of unknowns leading to feelings of great excitement and also feelings of great uncertainty, especially when minimal narrative information was available prior to the visit. Yet it was only through embracing the risks of the intersubjective exchange that I could learn the unique horizon of each patient. Along with several others in my chaplaincy cohort, I often commented during CPE seminars that clearing our minds and attempting to encounter each new patient with an open and unoccupied mind helped me to remain aware of the uniqueness of each person and their expressions and their perspective and to remain sensitive to the possibilities within the exchange. Only in this way did I and the other CPE students in my cohort find we could truly understand a patient.

Adopting Gerkin's tripartite hermeneutic of the self, each patient I visited presented a unique ego, along with a unique interpretation of their social context and a unique interpretation of their faith and culture. However, these unique characteristics could only be truly uncovered within the intersubjective pastoral counseling relationship, through which interpretations of objective material were revealed.

Gerkin's first level of the hermeneutical metaphor involves a thorough examination of the three domains within the pastoral counselor that comprise the pastoral counselor's self-hermeneutic. Fortunately, the CPE curriculum included ample opportunity for self-reflection and self-reinterpretation, which facilitated a deep grappling with my own preunderstandings as they related to my practice of pastoral counseling. As I increasingly realized the ways in which my own ego, social context, and faith and culture affected the way in which I interpreted others, I discovered my

own need to re-interpret these preunderstandings to from a more objective framework for pastoral counseling through which I could more efficiently gain access to the horizons of others.

The first and most obvious starting point for me was my interpretation of my faith tradition. Not only did hermeneutical theory help me to conceptualize my practice of pastoral counseling, but it also enabled me to integrate my own unique spiritual and religious identity into my pastoral counseling practice through incorporating parallel ideas from within the study of hermeneutics into my personal hermeneutical mode of pastoral counseling. For example, within the roots of my evangelical and Reformed religious tradition exists a belief in the primacy of Scripture. To evangelicals, Scripture is the objective content that inspires faithful responses within those who follow it. My seminary studies helped me understand that there is a plurality of interpretations of Scripture within my own spiritual tradition and beyond. Individual differences such as social and historical situatedness, differing languages and translations, and even differing opinions informed by the ego all represent domains from Gerkin's hermeneutic of the self whereby unique selves interpret their scriptures and faith traditions idiosyncratically. So, I began to believe increasingly in the plurality and inexhaustibility of the interpretive process. This reciprocally enabled me to clarify aspects of theological texts with which I agreed and disagreed, solidifying the unity of my individualized self-hermeneutic through a perpetual internal dialectical process. My expanding theology of Scripture became useful as I accepted the differences in its interpretation without compromising my belief that the text stands forever as timeless, holy, and foundational. The parallel within the pastoral counseling relationship is such that a person's experience and attributes exist as a sort of objective source cognate to Scripture, despite the plurality of ways in which these experiences may be interpreted.

As I hinted at above, a similar experience occurs when a seminary student seeks to understand a theological work, in the process shedding aspects of their own preunderstandings in order to understand, even empathize, with the author. This fusing of horizons creates an intersubjective exchange that brings about changes in the reader. As I crafted my own theology of Scripture to accommodate greater plurality and greater interpretive humility, realizing the breadth and depth of intercultural contributions to the understanding of the text, I found I was better able to prevent my own preunderstandings from imposing my own interpretation within my practice of pastoral counseling with a diverse population. Likewise, I also discovered the potential harms of following a strict exegetical process of interpreting others, through which following some standard procedure may lead to a coercive intervention by the pastoral counselor.

Apart from the interpretation of my faith, I also explored the other levels of the self-hermeneutic, both the social situatedness and my own ego, through the CPE seminar. For example, a vulnerable exploration of my upbringing through the

presentation of my own story, combined with feedback and group discussions, yielded insights into my expectations of others as well as the unhealthy relational habits within my existing relationships. Here, my ego horizon was informed by the experiences of supportive peers who held me accountable to becoming my authentic self. Likewise, exploring intercultural and interreligious studies and learning from the diverse staff and patient population at the hospital through verbatims further revealed to me my privilege and my many biases as a White born in America. These humbling experiences of receiving outside interpretations of my own self-hermeneutic enabled me to expand into a more objective self-hermeneutic, one that could reciprocally inform a more objective practice within intersubjective pastoral counseling relationships. In other words, I became more able to go outside of myself during my sessions with others, more able to empathize with differing experiences, a process which became vital and spiritual for me.

I was able to conceptualize in my practice the second level of Gerkin's metaphor, pertaining to the actual pastoral counseling encounter between two people, only once I had grappled with the slippery first level of the metaphor. The self-investigation required by exploring my own self-hermeneutic enabled me to appreciate the effort required for self-awareness as well as the relative cost of vulnerable self-disclosure, which is generally a goal for counselees within the pastoral counseling relationship. Gerkin, drawing on Gadamer, points out that the process of self-discovery within the pastoral counselor must also be a goal within the pastoral counseling relationship, stating that "the fusion of horizons opens up a new and novel vision of possibility"[17] through which "all participants are changed."[18] Like the student immersed in a text who is conversing with the author and being changed through the dialogue, Gerkin's challenge implicates the necessity of the pastoral counselor's openness to each new situation. The successful pastoral counselor will be forced to grow and expand their horizons.

My best pastoral counseling sessions were marked with a notable spiritual significance, one that bridged the gap between two people in an intuitive and inexplicable manner. Often a deep feeling of connection, empathy, and understanding resulted in an encounter during which the patient expressed feeling relieved, helped, or heard. Often, I walked away from successful questions with meaningful emotions, deep questions, and increased curiosity. Each of these experiences were causes for personal reflection and often a reinterpretation of my own narrative from past to present. Gerkin describes this intersubjective exchange between two people as depending on the work of the Holy Spirit, in which the Spirit brings change when both parties engage with open minds and hearts.[19] During my CPE experience, I found this language consistent with my evangelical background, and as such it expanded my ability to remain open to various directions that patients might take within sessions. It also expanded the ways in which I interpreted the work of the Holy Spirit within sessions, learning new ways in

which God might teach me something through these experiences. Clearly, from within the foundation of my own faith and beliefs, the work of the Holy Spirit was correlated with positive outcomes within my pastoral counseling sessions. Despite the contrasting ways in which some patients might have characterized the force of change during these sessions (e.g., self-empowerment, the Universe, Allah, etc.), my personal hermeneutical framework and its incorporation of the connecting and transformative power of the Spirit was critical to my own delivery of pastoral care and became a source of continual inspiration. Respecting the non-proselytizing structure of chaplaincy, these ideas were not proclaimed as the means by which change occurred but served instead as internal structures that validated my own faith and practice as well as the unique faith and practice of the counselee. Sources of change from patients' perspectives were of course identified in a similar way, and they often offered patients their own sources of ongoing inspiration for growth beyond the chaplain encounter.

I adopted Gerkin's stages of pastoral counseling less explicitly during my CPE work, often because the brief sessions I was able to participate in usually did not accommodate the longer explorations of patient's narratives required by Gerkin's model. Nevertheless, when patients appeared to be stuck in their unfolding narrative, sometimes the foundations of my own self-awareness and my appreciation of the spiritual intersubjective exchange enabled more efficient connection with patients and more empathic movements toward helping patients reinterpret their stories.

CONCLUSION

Students of theology who are practicing pastoral counseling in field settings have a unique opportunity to provide spiritual leadership in very practical ways. Hermeneutics and its many manifestations may offer a way for students to uniquely integrate their faith and theology into their everyday counseling practice. It may enliven individual frameworks of pastoral care, transposing the rigorousness of hermeneutical investigations into the pastoral counseling process. My own experience of such an integration was intellectually, spiritually, and professionally stimulating. It encouraged me to listen as closely to the voices of hospital patients as to the voice of God, seeing each person and each encounter as God-given, vibrant, and mysterious. It was a way for me to realize each and every day that my work was not only to help patients in the hospital but to simultaneously fulfill my God-given purpose. Incorporating hermeneutical ideas may promote a new creative engagement that benefits both field students of pastoral counseling and those receiving care, ultimately creating more meaningful connections, more sustainable growth, and a more empathetic world.

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NOTES

[1] Anton Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World* (Chicago: Willet, Clark and Co., 1936), 10.

[2] Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

[3] Donald Capps and Don S. Browning, *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[4] Jason Cusick, *Read Me Like a Book: Using Hermeneutics as a Guide to Pastoral Counseling* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

[5] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "The Living Human Web: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective," *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 3 (2018): 305–21.

[6] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 102.

[7] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 44.

[8] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 124.

[9] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 114.

[10] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 113.

[11] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 126.

[12] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 151.

[13] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 149.

[14] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 164.

[15] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 179.

[16] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 180.

[17] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 46.

[18] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 47.

[19] Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 124.