

I Walk Through Life Oddly: Dispositions, Character, and Identity in Clinical Pastoral Supervision

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*If you bring forth what is within you,
what you bring forth will save you.*

*If you do not bring forth what is within you,
what you do not bring forth will destroy you.*

—Jesus, *The Gospel of Thomas*

Supervision in clinical pastoral education is a complex and multi-faceted endeavor. What might look simple on the surface becomes rather treacherous as the process unfolds. Just ask any person in the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) certification process. There are many factors to consider in the process; some are obvious like the position papers students preparing to be clinical pastoral supervisors are required to write in which they state their emerging understanding of theology, personality, and education as related to supervisory practice. Other factors are not so obvious. These other factors, often operating on subterranean levels, impact the

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educational process. For example, the supervisor needs to know something about the context in which a particular CPE program occurs.

- The content of the curriculum needs to address the various levels and specific objectives and outcomes for the program.
- Power dynamics are always at play and need to be recognized. Ethical issues need to be addressed.
- The competing interests between service to the institution and the educational process for the students have to be acknowledged.
- Both the informal and formal evaluation processes need to be put in place fairly.
- Learning goals need to be developed in accordance with current ACPE Standards.
- Issues of safety and trust in the group and in individual supervision must be acknowledged and addressed.
- The minute details of program administration require attention. Issues surrounding the theology and practice of ministry need focus.

All of these factors and more need to be addressed by the supervisor. The process of pastoral supervision, like peeling an onion, consists of many different layers, all of which make up the transformative experience of CPE.

Historically, the literature in clinical pastoral education has focused primarily on theoretical developments in supervision. There is a void, however, when it comes to reflecting on curriculum planning and why we do what we do. For example, one will find only a smattering of articles on the theory and use of a verbatim in our literature.¹ Wittingly or unwittingly, we still follow the outline of Russell Dicks from the mid-1930s.² Curriculum planning stays hidden in the background of CPE programs or gets lumped under the headings of process education and clinical method of learning.

How we plan a curriculum operates mainly on an implicit level in supervision. We do what we do because that is the way we were taught. We may have learned a certain way of doing verbatims, interpersonal relation seminars, individual supervision, and theological reflection and so adopt that method as part of the curriculum. We may even branch out ever so slightly and use films and other media as a curriculum resource. Some supervisors stress the importance of quantitative research as part of the curriculum and others do not. In this essay, I offer some reflections on curricular planning as one particular aspect of the supervisory process.

In the field of adult education, there are many different and competing theories of program and curriculum planning. Current adult education

theorists in the area of program planning include Stephen Brookfield, Rosemary Caffarella, Ronald Cervero and Arthur Wilson, Thomas Sork, and Jane Vella.³ Each theorist offers a certain way of planning while acknowledging biases and assumptions embedded in the theory along with different emphases and different uses of language. For example, Brookfield emphasizes reflective practice in applying principles of adult education to the program planning process. His work seeks to bridge a high level theoretical perspective with the everyday practicalities found in specific contexts. Like Brookfield, Caffarella seeks to integrate the theoretical concepts with practical knowledge. She proposes an intentional integrative model of program planning.

Cervero and Wilson focus on moving program planning from technical rationality to recognition of the power dynamics operating in educational systems. Sork, on the other hand, brings to the fore an awareness of the ethical responsibility of the program planner. He argues that program planners need to recognize the moral commitments within the programs that are developed. Finally, Vella makes extensive use of dialogue, grounded in adult education theory, to facilitate the design of educational programs. The discipline of clinical pastoral education has yet to reach a similar level of reflection on its own biases and assumptions which drive the educational methodology. I believe what is missing in these theories is any attention to the disposition and character of the adult educator. The disposition and character of the adult educator is crucial to the unfolding of the educational process. Since clinical pastoral education places a strong emphasis on the use of self in the practice of supervision, reflection on the identity of the supervisor is essential. The disposition and character of the pastoral supervisor, in the final analysis, shapes the clinical pastoral education process.

DISPOSITIONS, CHARACTER, AND IDENTITY

A disposition is defined as a prevailing tendency or inclination. It might be described as a person's temperamental makeup, nature, and tendency to act in a certain way. For example, a person might be described as having a cheerful disposition. Students in a summer CPE program described one of their peers as "Mr. Sunshine." His understanding of ministry revolved around attempts to cheer up patients even when they did not want to be cheerful. An individual whose reactive response to any suggestion is always a quick and critical 'No' may be seen as a contrarian. Other persons might be identified as

a joker, an eternal optimist, or a sad sack; others might be thought of as being hot-headed and aggressive or a soft-hearted romantic. Dispositions appear as moods or attitudes about life in general and reflect the qualities of an individual. In this way, dispositions push reflection back onto the issue of character.

In the adult education program planning literature, there are no references to how the dispositions of the educator might impact and influence the educational process. Much of the literature is focused on the theories to be learned and the skills to be mastered. More often, the concept of dispositions is referred to in the K–12 teaching literature where a person has, say, a disposition for science education or a disposition for teaching reading. The teacher is said to be inclined toward or have a temperament for this particular arena.

Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner takes this understanding of disposition as an inclination or temperament further as she defines dispositions as “values, attitudes, and commitment in action.”⁴ For Wiessner, dispositions are more about the character and identity of the educator than a predetermined set of skills like teaching reading which might be developed and brought to bear on the educational process. Wiessner’s language is echoed in Standard 309.2 of the ACPE. This objective speaks to how the ACPE center’s curriculum is designed “to develop student’s awareness of how their *attitudes, values, assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses* affect their pastoral care (italics mine).”⁵ Wiessner’s definition of disposition, with its emphasis on action, invites reflection on exactly *how* these values, attitudes, and commitments are experienced in the educational process. To wit: How are these values, attitudes, and commitments embodied within the educator and thus lived out in and during the educational program? What actions are most likely to reveal the person’s values, attitudes, and commitments?

CHARACTER MATTERS

James Hillman’s work on character is instructive here.⁶ As an archetypal psychologist, Hillman describes character as a calling, an essence of the individual as it were. Character is the core identity found deep within an individual. According to Hillman, a person is “born with a character.”⁷ It is character that defines the person. Character challenges. Character is relentless. It is embedded in each person’s calling. Character is what defines the person’s life when they say, “I can do no other.” Or yet, when the person says, “I can be no other.” More: Hillman argues character is not just *what* I do; it is the *way* I do it. Character is what is embedded. Character is what is seen. I used to say to

students that doing an overnight on-call shift in the hospital builds character. Now I tell them that it reveals character. Their character, their core identity, is revealed in the way they practice ministry in the deep of the night when no one else is watching. They see their character more clearly, as it were.

The concept of character defies rational conceptualization. For James Hillman, “character is mystery, and it is individual.”⁸ It cannot be reduced to data, studied, or quantified. Rather character may be seen, for example, as passion, as effort, as vision. It is the way a person’s values and attitudes are embodied. For example, the character of the supervisor may be seen in the *way* the issue of safety is addressed, in the *way* students are respected, in the *way* dialogue is encouraged, and in the *way* power is acknowledged and used.

The character of an individual is what the world sees and certainly what students see in supervision. They see and experience, often on an unarticulated level, the character of the supervisor. What most of us remember from our supervisors is not their theories or skill sets or how they planned a unit of CPE but rather we remember who they were to us. We tell different stories of our encounters, stories of challenge, of humor, and maybe even of anger, maybe even of their weirdness. “Could you believe it when Supervisor X did...?” We remember how we were listened to, encouraged, and pressed to do the hard interior work required by this process. It is their dispositions and character that make a difference in our lives, not their theories. To paraphrase the quote from the *Gospel of Thomas* that began the essay, character brought forth from within the supervisor in the educational process. It cannot be avoided. It is the authentic core that will be revealed. The paradox—and miracle—of the CPE process is that the way supervisors bring forth their character in the supervisory relationship invites and challenges the student to do the same. This is another way of speaking about the use of self in the supervisory process.

James Hillman goes on to suggest that character eventually rests on differences. He notes that character is “an observable mark, quality, or property by which any thing, person, species, or event may be known as different from something else.”⁹ In adult education, for example, there are distinct differences in the program planning models espoused by Brookfield and Cervano and Wilson—and Sork’s model is different than Caffarella’s. The differences are not just simply in how theory is formulated and the skill set needed to implement it. There is more to it. The difference goes back to the character of each theorist and the *way* the values and attitudes are embodied. Pastoral supervisors are no different. The art of supervision arises from within. Furthermore, Hillman argues that rational, behavior-centered lan-

guage cannot do justice to character. Poetic language is needed to describe what is embodied, what is seen and always on display. He says, "Character forces me to encounter each event in my particular style. It forces me to differ. I walk through life oddly. No one else walks as I do, and this is my courage, my dignity, my morality, and my ruin."¹⁰ No one else supervises as I do for good and ill. Character is brought forth from within.

Whatever kind of CPE program is planned, the character of an individual supervisor points beyond the skills and issues needed to be addressed to something more essential: character points to the *way* the program is planned. Character does not settle for an analysis of the *what*. Character invites the supervisor to look deeper into the curriculum process and to look beyond or below issues, for example, of technicality and social-political dynamics

CHARACTER AND IDENTITY

Not surprisingly therefore, character is intimately related to identity. Whereas Hillman says character is not what I do but rather the way I do it, Parker Palmer frames identity in a somewhat different manner. Palmer proposes that "we teach who we are."¹¹ The implications of this statement for the use of self in the supervisory process are legion. Supervision is intimately connected to the curriculum planning process; it is not an isolated endeavor nor is it done on the spur of the moment without thought. The supervisory process is woven into a solid curriculum planning process in which all the attendant issues are addressed. What is the primary focus and purpose of the verbatim? What is the intent of IPR group? Why choose a certain set of readings over another? What is the most important thing a beginning CPE student needs to learn?

Good curriculum planning, like good supervision, is grounded in the total personhood of the educator—his or her dispositions, character, and identity. While Palmer insists that, "teaching...emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse,"¹² I would suggest the same principle applies to the curriculum planning process. The process of planning emerges from the supervisor's own sense of identity. Curriculum planning, like supervision, is not an isolated process unconnected from the supervisory event or, and this is the main point, the character of the supervisor.

Moreover, Palmer says that teaching is about creating the good conditions for learning. He writes, "good teaching requires that we understand the *inner* sources of both intent and the act (*italics mine*)."¹³ This is also true for curriculum planning. Understanding the inner sources of the supervisor

for planning is essential for good teaching. This knowing is more than being able to name a certain skill set. It is deeper and richer. It goes beyond simply following a theory to its logical conclusion. It is more complicated and more mysterious. Good curriculum planning comes out of a sense of identity. What are my strengths as a pastoral supervisor? What are my weaknesses? Where are my blind spots? Knowing one's identity is prior to and foundational for planning, and subsequently for good supervision. As a white, middle-aged, privileged male, I have learned—and been convicted—over the years about differences and diversity. In my bumbling ways, I learned there were other visions of pastoral care and theology than that of white males; there were other ways of seeing and understanding the world. My CPE curriculum these days includes, for example, not only Carroll Wise and John Patton but Carrie Doehring, Harriet Goldhor Lerner, and Edward Wimberly as well.

“Good teaching,” Palmer insists, “cannot be reduced to techniques; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”¹⁴ There is no other way. Similarly, good supervision cannot be reduced to techniques however tempting that may be. Good supervision arises from the identity, character, and disposition of the supervision. It is what is brought forth from within the teaching and learning encounter.

In sum, dispositions, character, and identity are intimately interrelated and connected to each other. They are not distinct, stand-alone concepts but they work hand-in-hand to provide an image of personhood that is, as Hillman says, “mysterious and unique to each individual.”

IMPLICATIONS OF DISPOSITIONS, CHARACTER, AND IDENTITY ON CURRICULUM PLANNING

Dispositions, character, and identity constantly interact with all the issues involved in the supervisory process. This constellation of dispositions, character, and identity is at the core of teaching and foundational to the supervisory process. In the final analysis, pastoral supervision is more about the *who* rather than the *what* or the *how*. It is the *who* which really determines the *what* and the *how*.

If that proposal is correct, and I believe it is, then the primary question changes. Who am I as a pastoral supervisor and educator is still a critical question but there is more: How does my identity as a pastoral supervisor and educator impact my curriculum planning? Hillman and Palmer are clear. I do what I do because of who I am. I supervise because I am a pastoral supervisor,

not the other way around, e.g., I am a pastoral supervisor because I supervise. Becoming and being a pastoral supervisor is more than a role; it is a vocation, a summons, a calling. Some suggest a calling might even be destiny.¹⁵ I supervise because I can neither do nor be any other. The moral primacy of dispositions, character, and identity calls for the supervisor then to be/become aware of the way their whole personhood gets embodied in the curriculum planning process.

There are, of course, many ways to supervise, and many values to commit to the supervisory endeavor although the ACPE certification process may be in danger of unknowingly pressing supervisory students to be more alike than different. For instance, my own embodiment of identity will be different from another's. My own dispositions, character, and identity show up in different strengths and different weaknesses. At this point in my life, I am being drawn into poetry. Poetry speaks to me now in ways that are life-shattering. I find that there is emotional power in poetry. It provides a radically different engagement of experiences as it touches and conveys the emotional core of those experiences. Through an economy of words and the use of images and metaphors, poetry captivates the language of feelings. I find that poetry serves as a gateway into the emotional aspects of learning.¹⁶ The emotional aspects of learning are transformative and are critical in the process of clinical pastoral education. Poetry helps me tap into that part of learning. Something from within is being called forth, often in odd and weird ways as I even try to write poetry.

I now incorporate poetry into my curriculum in different ways. For example, I select a poem to begin a seminar session. I give each a copy and I read it out loud in a *lectio divina* way. We do not discuss the possible meanings of the poem; rather my intent is to let the emotional power of the poem simply sit with each person however they hear it. It is not within my understanding to give them the exact meaning of the poem. I use poems by some of my favorite poets such as Mary Oliver, Rainer Maria Rilke, David Whyte, Wendell Berry, and Jane Hirschfield. I find that the themes of the poems I select—journey, grief, searching, love, nature, God—show up in the seminar work.

Students are able to make connections between the poems and their struggle to learn the art of pastoral care. I write final evaluations using one of the poems as an extended metaphor for the student's learning process. I try to weave the words of the poet with a description of the learning and the ACPE Outcomes. I ask the student to also pick one poem that has been most meaningful to them and most representative of their learning. It is a nice synchronistic feeling when we both choose the same poem. I have more passion and

energy for writing evaluations in this manner, and it is more meaningful to me than a checklist. All in all, I find that poetry invites and challenges students to think differently, to see differently, to feel differently. Some poems speak to students on a profound level. Some students shake their heads, roll their eyes, and say they don't get it. Even as I am writing this, I wonder about using music in this way. We all have our own odd and weird ways.

A focus on dispositions, character, and identity in the supervisory process requires an awareness of the diverse gifts and graces of each person. There simply is not a "one-size-fits-all" theory of pastoral supervision, just as there is not a single theory of curriculum planning and just as there is not a single set of dispositions which make for good planning. There are no "best-in-class" character values which lend themselves to superb supervision or planning. There is no one certain, set apart and most desired, identity for the ideal pastoral supervisor of CPE programs. Such a person does not exist contrary to expectations years ago that supervisory students could write a paper about the ideal supervisor. The program planners in adult education are also unique, each bringing their own gifts and oddities into the process. Each theorist brings his or her own strengths and weaknesses into the planning process along with his or her unique dispositions, character, and identity.

It should be noted here that while dispositions, character, and identity are at the core of the curriculum planning process, they are not static concepts. A supervisor's disposition, character, and identity are not once-for-all set in stone, unchangeable, and therefore unable to be developed. Rather, I believe that dispositions, character, and identity can be shaped, nuanced, challenged, and called forth by intentional personal reflective work. Growth and learning do indeed occur for supervisors as well as students. There are two models for this development of an increased awareness of the supervisor's dispositions, character, and identity. One model is found in Donald Schön's idea of the reflective practitioner.¹⁷ The second model is Palmer's circle of trust.¹⁸

REFLECTING ON PRACTICE AND CIRCLES OF TRUST

The concept of reflective practice is well known within the discipline of adult education.¹⁹ Generally, reflective practice is a critical process in which a practitioner thoughtfully, carefully, and intentionally reflects upon his or her own experiences while refining his or her artistry within his or her own discipline. In clinical pastoral education, we refer to this as an action-reflection model of learning. Reflective practice allows for the possibility of learning through

experience. It involves the reflecting back on a process or experience even while the process or experience is occurring. In other words, reflective practice involves an on-going component of formative education.

However, the reflection is not just limited to a program or educational experience. Certainly reflection on these takes place. I would suggest that reflective practice needs to be deeper. It should invite an intentional effort to think not only about the program, but also the issues lying underneath the program, issues involving dispositions, issues raising concerns about character, and issues which embody the identity of the supervisor. Such reflective practice requires that the supervisor looks beyond the obvious content and purpose of the program. The supervisor is thus required to look inward, toward their own strengths and weaknesses. Strengths may be quite clear; weakness not as evident.

Reflective practice on the curriculum planning process can take place in several different ways. The supervisor might journal about his or her experience within the process, drilling down to the issues of the heart, or one might consult with a trusted mentor on the process about what went well and what did not. The supervisor might engage in an intentionally reflective practice with other supervisors as a way of debriefing and giving each other feedback. Feedback is a key element in a reflective practice process. It provides a loop of learning, from the actual planning process back to the supervisor and then back again to the planning process. Schön suggests that this feedback involve a seasoned member of the discipline, a mentor and trusted colleague.

Palmer, it seems, extends the concept of reflective practice to the idea of a circle of trust. He describes a circle of trust as a group of friends and colleagues and peers who have covenanted together to "support rather than supplant the individual's quest for integrity."²⁰ The purpose of a circle of trust is not to "fix" the person or even give advice. Rather, the purpose is to create safe space for the person so they can bring, in full honesty, concerns of the heart for reflection. The purpose of a circle of trust is "to make it safe for the soul to show up and offer us its guidance."²¹ In its essence, a circle of trust is about a sense of trusted community. The work of circles of trust reminds me of Peter Senge's evocative image of "ruthlessly compassionate" friends.²²

A circle of trust is not about doing the actual work of the curriculum planning process. It is not about attending to the myriad of details and concerns. A circle of trust is not about following a certain theory of planning. Rather a circle of trust, as Palmer envisions it, is an intentional way of creating time and space for reflection within community and for initiating apprecia-

tive inquiry with trusted colleagues.²³ It is an opportunity for the supervisor to bring forth what is within and see ways in which dispositions, character, and identity are embodied. In other words, a circle of trust is more focused on the personhood of the supervisor than the actual planning process itself.

Through reflective practice and a circle of trust, the supervisor has the opportunity to step back, slow down, take a deep breath, and look anew at the many ways his or her values and attitudes and commitments are being lived out. It seems that one of the dangers of a complex and treacherous curriculum planning process is that it is easy for the supervisor to get lost in the details and theories. And by getting lost, the supervisor may allow his or her dispositions, character, and identity slip into the background where they operate underground and in the dark. An intentional process of reflective practice and the use of a circle of trust provides a way for the supervisor's dispositions, character, and identity to stay in the forefront of the curriculum planning process.

Learning occurs in community. Identity is formed within community. Character is experienced in and through communal activities. Dispositions are experienced in and through the give and take of the interdependent relationships found in community. There is no escaping the importance of community in adult learning. Even as one who lives and moves and has his being in solitude, I still know the value of community and relationships. It is a caring community, much like the circle of trust, which calls forth what is within the supervisor even as their dispositions, character, and identity embody a walk through life oddly with all the courage, dignity, morality, and ruin that such a walk entails.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Logan Jones, "Baptism by Fire in Clinical Pastoral Education: The Theory and Practice of Learning the Art of Pastoral Care through Verbatims," *Reflective Practice* 7, no. 1 (2006): 125-142; and Henri Nouwen, "Case-Recording in Pastoral Education," *Journal of the Academy of Parish Clergy* IV, no. 2 (1974): 1-11.
2. Richard Cabot and Russell Dicks, *The Art of Ministering to the Sick* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1947), 256-257.
3. Stephen Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986); Rosemary Caffarella, *Planning Programs for Adult Learners: A Practical Guide for Educators, Trainers, and Staff Developers*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001); Ronald Cervero and Arthur Wilson, *Planning Responsibly for Adult Education: A Guide to Negotiating Power and Interests* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994); Thomas Sork, "Planning Educational Programs," in *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*, Arthur Wilson and Elisabeth Hayes, eds. (San Fran-

- cisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 171–190; and Jane Vella. *Training Through Dialogue: Promoting Effective Learning and Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).
4. Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner, personal communication, 2005.
 5. *ACPE Standards and Manuals: 2010 Standards* (Decatur, GA: Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc., 2010), 13.
 6. James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (New York: Random House, 1996) and *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life* (New York: Random House, 1999).
 7. Hillman, *The Soul's Code*, 7.
 8. *Ibid.*, 251.
 9. Hillman, *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*, 98.
 10. *Ibid.*, 181.
 11. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 2.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. *Ibid.*, 6.
 14. *Ibid.*, 10.
 15. See Michael Meade, *Fate and Destiny: The Two Agreements of the Soul* (Seattle: GreenFire Press, 2010); and James Hollis, *Creating a Life: Finding Your Individual Path* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 2001).
 16. See Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life* (New York: Harmony Books, 2001).
 17. Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987).
 18. Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004), 25.
 19. See, for example, Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995); and Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
 20. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 25.
 21. *Ibid.*, 22.
 22. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 202.
 23. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 72–87.