

THE SILENT PARTNER: CRITICAL INCIDENT

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Background

Last year I was appointed a counselor in a high school. This is a very good school with an excellent principal and staff, located in a high income community. My own training was directed by a professor who was highly nondirective, and being the kind of person who believes in following rules strictly, I also became nondirective in any situation in which I didn't know quite what to do, or in any situation in which the individual was exploring his individuality.

One day a girl came to see me and told me she had "problems." I had no time to see her just then, but asked her to make an appointment at a suitable time so that I could give her a full half-hour of my undivided attention. We set a time for the next day at our mutual convenience. I wondered what was troubling her for she showed evidence of being greatly agitated.

Incident

In a manner of speaking the incident was nothing, for the girl said nothing when she came in. I mean this literally. She knocked on the door, and I went to open it, and greeted her pleasantly. At my invitation she sat down, and we looked at each other. I waited for her to say something, to explain, complain, or ask questions. I looked at her trying to be as pleasant and as accepting as I could. Her eyes filled with tears and the tears rolled down her face, but she said nothing. I wondered what I should do. The simplest and most natural thing might have been to say, "What is bothering you?" But it must be remembered that I had been trained precisely not to ask questions or to give advice, and so, feeling quite foolish, I just kept looking at the girl. For half an hour, nothing happened. I then said to her, "It is time to end our session. Would you like to see me again?" Somewhat to my surprise and relief, she nodded, and when I suggested another appointment at the same time next week, she nodded again, and went out without having said a single word.

The following session was a repeat of the first one. We looked at each other, she cried silently, I waited, and then she once again accepted my invitation for another session without a word being said. Not to weary the reader, we had two more sessions and they were all exact duplicates of the first two, though several times I thought that the student was about to talk. At the end of the fourth session, when I again asked if she wanted to have another session, she shook her head, and walked out.

Discussion

I was really puzzled about this and wrote to my professor. He was kind enough to respond, telling me that I had misunderstood the theory and philosophy of nondirective counseling and that I could have either shown some expression of sympathy or given the girl some indication about my own feelings. I didn't know what to do after I got this letter and considered calling in the girl and making a full confession that I had been following the book and that I really was interested in her. I wondered whether she thought there was something wrong with me. However, things were very different from what I suspected because during the last week of the semester I got another request from Jill, and I saw her immediately. Her statement was a critical incident for me.

"I want to thank you very much for what you did for me, Mrs.--"

"But I did nothing!" I impulsively cried out. "I wanted to so much help you, but I just did nothing but look at you."

"You did a great deal. You changed my whole personality. That you had the kindness and love to wait for me to talk, to just be there, and not to ask me questions, or try to make me talk, that you were willing to just be there, and not be critical, and not complain that I was wasting your time was the best and most wonderful thing. While we were looking at each other I was thinking how wonderful the silence was, how good it was for you to understand me, and make me feel good and important; you were loving and comforting. I just couldn't talk, and if I had it would have been banalities. Because you valued me so much, that you just were willing to be with me, I realized that my crazy thoughts that no one loved me or cared for me, were all wrong. You loved me and you cared for me and you were patient and kind and understanding and warm, and you couldn't put any pressure on me or try to get me to talk or to manipulate me. I felt so comfortable with you, and the relationship was so real. No, did a great deal for me, and as a result I decided I was worthwhile and I was a good person and I was one to be respected, and I was able to solve my problems which I had sorely exaggerated."

After this long statement, we talked a bit and indeed she seemed to have really changed from the girl she told me she had been prior to the counseling to the girl she was now. She insisted that the four sessions with me had represented a turning point in her life.

I just wonder what the principal or the girl's parents or any member of the school board would have thought of my behavior during the sessions. I can imagine them thinking that there was something wrong with the counselor. However, during the half-hour, or those four half-hours, I really worked hard, even though it may have appeared that I did nothing. I was very restless, and wanted to read or to do something. I did think of saying to her: "If you have nothing to say to me, why don't you return when you do?" Or, "Just sit there and when you feel you can talk let me know" and I would have done some reading or writing. However, my training told me to be alert to her, watch her, and give her silent support by giving her my full attention.

I must confess that by the end of the second session I wondered if I had not made a serious mistake in my procedure and wondered how long this would go on, and what I would say if someone found out about our strange interaction and were to ask me for its rationale. However, I am very happy that I acted in a consistent manner and I can now see how Jill could have felt loved and valued by my behavior or nonbehavior. Words aren't everything.

Questions

1. What do you think of my behavior? Suppose that I had come to you at the end of the first session and said to you that a student came to see me and that I waited for her to say something and she said nothing for the whole half-hour? Suppose I asked what I should do if she repeated this behavior another time?
2. Why do you think Jill really felt appreciated of me and believed she improved?
3. Do you believe it is wise to follow some theory even if one doesn't understand it? I did what I did because I felt that my professor would have wanted me to. At times I felt annoyed and foolish, and yet, once having started acting in one way I felt that I had to continue in the same manner. It all worked out well, however, and I wonder if it is because of my allegiance to client-centered theory that I was successful.
4. Suppose I had changed my approach in midstream, as it were, and suppose I had intervened and asked her questions? Do you think that progress might have been made anyway? That is, if a student improves, does this mean that what one did was the right thing to do?

COMMENTS ON THE INCIDENT

The Editors

Is counseling just common sense? Is the ideal counselor a warm and friendly person with considerable knowledge about school systems and understanding of the world of work? Or is the counselor a junior psychiatrist, dealing with complex human problems? If the former is true, then common sense and knowledge may be enough. But if the counselor is to act as a psychotherapist, what may be needed is a theory of personality and an institutionalized mode of operation which differs from common sense. For the counselor qua therapist often works in unfamiliar territory, and cannot depend solely on his own experiences and thinking. He must operate according to certain rules dictated by theory.

However, rigid adherence to a theory may precipitate problems. The client may be puzzled and threatened by the counselor's atypical responses and not know what to do or say. The counselor, in turn, may find himself dealing with material and problems that are beyond the scope of his skills and understanding and having no one to turn to for

guidance or for direction. This is one of the hazards of using a system of therapy without adequate training and knowledge.

In this fascinating incident a counselor relentlessly employed, perhaps unwisely, an unfamiliar procedure. Once started, she grimly decided to stay with it. The process of counseling was distinctly unusual, and so too, perhaps, was the outcome.

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It is interesting how the term "nondirective" persists when, since 1951, it has been superseded by the term "client-centered." In my experience, those continuing to use the former designation, even though they may be counselor-educators, are in the 1949-1951 era of client-centered counseling. This certainly seems to apply to the counselor-educator involved in this incident. I am continually amazed at the misconceptions about client-centered counseling that persist and which are being taught in counselor education programs. The only system of counseling or psychotherapy that is more misunderstood than client-centered counseling is psychoanalysis. Well-known psychiatrists and psychologists continue to refer to the passivity and inactivity of the client-centered counselor and his technique of "merely" or "simply" listening and reflecting.

While I deny that client-centered counseling is inactive, passive, and unresponsive--a "grunt-and-groan" technique--I would continue by saying that listening empathically is a major--the major--technique of every good counselor and that it is by no means a passive technique. Respecting the desire or need of the client for silence and his simply valuing the presence of the counselor is an important aspect of any approach to counseling.

The counselor in the present instance learned well the first requirement of any counseling approach--to keep one's mouth shut, at least most of the time, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. Some counseling students never seem to learn this. They cannot tolerate a silence, but must fill it up with their own chatter if the client is less verbal than they are.

But not all clients want or need silence or can tolerate long periods of it. It can be perceived as evidence of lack of interest on the part of the counselor. Thus the counselor needs to know how the client is feeling about this and the simplest, most direct, and most honest method is to ask. This counselor, in her misperception of client-centered counseling, felt that she could not do this. But once the client indicated that she wished to return it was no longer necessary to wonder or to ask, since the client was indicating that she wanted more of the same treatment. In effect, the counselor stumbled into an appropriate relationship with this client.

The first session might have been more comfortable for the counselor (though, perhaps, not the client) if the counselor had through some simple interchange, ascertained that the girl did not wish to talk or to be talked to. In spite of the counselor's discomfort, she did communicate to the girl her interest, concern, and respect. Simply giving her time, as the girl reported, conveyed this.

The pressure for activity, for filling up every interpersonal relationship with talk, is a characteristic of our Western society. We abhor silence in a social situation as nature abhors a vacuum. The concern of the counselor in this incident about what others would think of her behavior is of interest. It led me to recall a situation in my early work as a counselor, where, in a less than completely soundproof office, an administrative superior--anti-client-centered in attitude--"overheard" a long silence in an interview. Apparently feeling that I was not earning my salary, this inactivity was reported to my professional superior in Washington.

The occupation--or preoccupation--of the counselor during long silences has been of some concern. Rogers once said, if I remember correctly, that he would engage in work at his desk, telling the client to speak when he wanted to. I have never been able to do this, but I have done a lot of thinking, sometimes mentally drafting papers I have been working on. One cannot stare directly at a client for the full hour--or at least one should not with some clients, who may be uncomfortable in this situation, as one client once told me.

A final comment: It was not because the counselor followed a theory that she was successful. She was successful in spite of her adherence to a (misconception of) theory, because of the person she was--a person who showed herself to the client without need of verbalization.