

Chapter

1

“Can You Talk with Me?”

Who is the counselee? Who is this person sitting here with you, in this unfamiliar posture of vulnerability? What brings someone to this strenuous, awkward, hopeful moment? What do you hear when I say, “Do you have some time to talk with me?” What is there in me that overcomes all my natural reserves of diffidence or pride and makes me risk the plea? What has induced me to step, falteringly, through the boundaries of our business as usual and into this alien moment of confessional?

These are not ordinary questions, and they invite more than ordinary discernment. As a counselor, your ears are tuned to hear things you don't hear in our business as usual. My trembling daring act of becoming a counselee calls you to step through boundaries, too, into the trembling daring act of becoming a counselor; into the discipline of according me an attentiveness more searing than either of us could withstand in our business as usual. As with others under religious discipline through the centuries, you let yourself be quietly focused on deeper essential meanings and undistracted by surface clutter.

So when I offer myself, tentatively, as counselee, you hear me confessing a woundedness I customarily hide—

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...a little even as I venture to disclose it—a sense of paralysis, numbness. "I am not myself. I am becoming less than myself. I cannot see things as they are. I cannot feel things as they are. I cannot cope with things as I should. There is something wrong with me. I am not as I was created to be. I need help. I need help."

It is to this sense of self-depletion and insufficiency, this sense of being a misfit and wrong that pastoral counseling is directed. Pastoral counseling aspires to a conversion, to a new sense of self, to an empowerment.

However casual the person is in lingering after a committee meeting or in crossing your path after worship, however businesslike or brazen or apologetic in claiming your time, however self-sufficient or even overbearing the person has always seemed to you, when you hear that phrase, "Can I talk to you?" or its equivalent, it should be taken as the self-disclosure of a tormented person who feels unable to cope. It's a cry for help that is more desperate than it may sound because it is a confession of some degree of personal deficiency and paralysis.

I feel transported into an alien world—that is the torment and the terror that brings me to pastoral counseling. I'm out of bounds, not in my familiar world, not in God's world. Either that or, as with Job, God has changed the rules. I am through the looking glass, into some parallel universe, where things don't work the way they should. Trust and faith are eroded, precarious, and hope and love sapped. A lifetime of verities is in question, in crisis. Like Job, I know in some residual but barely accessible place in my soul that I am all right. I'm not *really* crazy and helpless (or I would need more drastic therapy than pastoral counseling). I'm not *really* abandoned (or I would need more

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drastic religious revival). I really *can* cope. I really *am* me. I just can't cope, I can't feel myself, *here* and *now* and with *this*. I can handle many things, but I can't handle *this*. *This* doesn't play by the rules. My usual strategies for dealing with problems, the usual things I tell myself, and my usual maneuvers with others don't work. I have plenty of reserves and resources. But they don't work this time. If the usual worked, I wouldn't be here. For now I feel kidnapped into another world, a demonic underworld, an alien other-world. My life has been overpowered by invading aliens. I have been conquered by a new strain of virus. I have leprosy of the soul. I no longer fit into my own life. I don't know how to live my life. This is the terror and the despair that brings me to pastoral counseling. I am not myself.

SELF-ANXIETY CODED AND PROTECTED BY "PROBLEMS"

The counselee cannot say such things at first, maybe not for a long while. The counselor may or may not sense the contours of this counselee's particular distress. The counselor doesn't need to. It is enough to know that the person is asking for counseling to surmise that he or she feels apprehensive, overwhelmed, drowning, disabled, derailed.

You can hardly expect the counselee to portray and name the distress clearly. The counselee is here precisely because perspective and clarity are lost. Events are somehow out of focus, out of control. You will not be surprised, or annoyed, when the counselee can't describe the problem in a way you can understand, or even when the counselee goes mute and unexpressive, or floods an hour with rambling incoherence, or obsesses about circumstances that are actually settled or resolved, or overreacts, or

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seems blind to the obvious. If people could function well as counselees, they wouldn't be seeking counseling. In these "anticounseling" maneuvers, you will detect hints of what brings the person to counseling, overtones of feeling overwhelmed, incapacitated, disabled. You will realize that the counselee's core terror is that there is no core, that there is no one there, long before the counselee says it.

The counselee will speak at first, and perhaps at length, of events and circumstances and other people: a spouse's death, a lost job, a feared divorce, a mounting debt, a rebellious teenager, an abusive or uncommunicative mate, an injustice in the workplace, an unrelenting addiction, an invading tumor, or perhaps much less dramatic, the perplexities and quandaries of daily life. Murray speaks of Sam. Alice speaks of cleaning and landscaping and choosing highway routes. These events and circumstances are distressing, and the counselor will not disregard them or think them trivial. But they are not the business of counseling; they are the business of life. They may well be the business of the parish community and of the pastor as leader of this community, but they are not the business of pastoral counseling. These are things one talks about with friends, neighbors, lawyers, doctors, social workers, legislators, union leaders, or bartenders. They are problems that friends and neighbors—or professional experts—can help to resolve or try to. But not a counselor. What brings someone to counseling, and what counseling can deal with, are not the events and circumstances, but the wounds they inflict or disclose, their attack on the selfhood, the awful feelings they arouse of being incapacitated, unable to cope, alienated.

To be sure, the counselor, like the counselee, is tempted to focus on the outer events and circumstances, because

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they seem so much more tractable and manageable, as well as, at first glance, more compelling. But the counselor who intervenes and manages or resolves the circumstantial problem hijacks the opportunity for pastoral counseling. Such intervention not only fails the opportunity for enablement but in fact imposes further disempowerment by making the counselee feel all the more inept. To avoid this, the counselor offers, as a gift, the discipline of tolerating ambiguity and irresolution.

When the external circumstances are overwhelming—as in the experience of serious poverty or a massively abusive relationship—when life cannot be lived until some action is taken to deal with the circumstances, it is especially important to preserve the focus of pastoral counseling: the empowerment of the person. When circumstances are overwhelming, it is particularly tempting to see things in reverse, to suppose that these circumstances must be repaired before a person can benefit from counseling. But, in fact, when circumstances are overwhelming, the intentions of pastoral counseling are all the more urgent: to mobilize and empower the person to cope, to discern and take responsibility, to decide and enact changes and repairs.

Pastoral counseling deals with the meaning that the events have for the counselee. The work of pastoral counseling is to explore and expand the meaning the counselee finds in the events. Pastoral counseling aims at the disclosure of self, not the closure of a problem.

"I am not myself. I can't make it." These confessions are hard to make to friends and neighbors, and harder for them to accept. They are hard for a counselor to hear too; the counselor may wish he or she could be talking about events, circumstances, and other people, about

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facts rather than feelings. But these difficult confessions are what counseling is for.

A pastor is a pastor in many ways, all valid and important, all faithful to call and commission, sometimes relying on resources of theological perspective or of ordination, sometimes not. Sometimes a pastor exhorts and instructs, sometimes not. Sometimes a pastor intervenes, like any other good friend, to add resources to solving a problem, to finding a job, to making a decision, to breaking an addiction, to corralling stray passions. Sometimes, that is, a pastor works on the problem.

But sometimes a pastor is a counselor, and that is different.

As counselor, the pastor abstains from "working on the problem" for the sake of attending to the meaning the counselee attaches to these events. As counselor, the pastor is under the discipline of abstaining from the ordinary response to others' problems in order to deal with the extraordinary and less obvious dimensions. This approach requires discipline because these more direct and more obvious modes of helping are also the more familiar, more comfortable, and more satisfying modes. (What the pastor does *not* abandon, what makes *pastoral* counseling pastoral, is the vocation of holding another's life closely before God and of invoking God's presence in that life. It is just that the forms of that vocation may be different in counseling than the pastor is used to in other roles. We'll talk more about this later.)

In the counselee's life, distressing outer events have transmuted into internal distress. A death, a rejection, a failure, a quandary has left one feeling shriveled and stuck, poisoned and poisonous, helpless and hopeless, angry and self-blaming, empty of faith and trust. Sometimes the

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pastor finds ways to assault and assuage this inner distress, to correct the distorted views and doubts, to comfort.

But, again, sometimes a pastor is a counselor, and that is different.

As counselor, the pastor doesn't try to conquer the inner distress but nurtures it, trusts it as a necessary process that is gift and not curse, a part of Creation, not of the Fall. The counselor does not try to rescue the counselee from the valley of despair but walks with the counselee through this valley to see what can be found there. Faith comes not by denying the doubt but by wrestling with it. Hope is restored in facing the bleakness, love by living through the loneliness.

The pastoral counselor "accepts" the distress and its distortions not out of a permissive, sentimental compromise with principles but out of a firm commitment to the principle that God has chosen and provided the griefs and torments of life as a special mode of revelation and redemption.

Counseling is intended not to hear the report "I have problems" but to receive the confession "I feel like I *am* a problem." When the counselee's self-perception is converted back to "I *have* problems" (and "I have the resources to deal with them"), then counseling has done its work. If counseling begins with "Help, I'm in deep water so I must be drowning," it ends with "Look, I'm in deep water so I must be swimming." The counselor has enabled this outcome, not by dramatic rescue from the water or even by giving swimming lessons (though a pastor may sometimes, in noncounseling roles, perform the equivalent of rescue or lessons) but rather by swimming alongside. That is pastoral counseling.

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HEARING THE MEANING OF EVENTS AND PROBLEMS

The despair may indeed be occasioned by events, and the counseling may indeed begin with a recital of facts and events. But what the counselee brings to pastoral counseling are the wounds—the feelings of being impaired, overwhelmed, unable, the measure of oneself as small, as wanting, as alienated, alienated above all from oneself, the feelings of being kidnapped from one's own life, sidetracked, out of bounds, shipwrecked, derailed. What the counselee needs from the counseling is nothing more than a kind of personal conversion, a reorientation of self that restores wholeness and hope. And nothing less than that.

The usual doesn't work. So, in counseling, the counselee comes to feel safe enough to be willing to let go of the usual, to become naked of the familiar resources and strategies so as to discover new ways of coping, new things to tell the self and others. To deal with the distress, the counselee must become, in some sense, a child again, must relinquish hard-won and comfortable but failing patterns of identity and adulthood, and move for a time without moorings or maps. Pastoral counseling aims to make this risk possible.

COUNSELEE AS GRIEVER

Grief as Religious Confession

Pastoral counseling is the arena for wrestling with the fundamental religious confrontation between profoundly immortal hopes and stubbornly mortal limitations. That is, pastoral counseling is the arena for wrestling with grief. Perhaps we should always understand the counselee as a

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person in grief. Whatever a counselee's circumstances, whatever other emotions may be in the overtones, it may always be safe to perceive "Do you have time to talk?" as the signal that you are in the presence of grieving, a time for religious confession and growth. Something needful is missing and irrecoverable. Something especially relied on has proved mortal. The props are knocked out, and I am shattered. Perhaps something (spouse, marriage, job, public image, nimbleness of mind, suppleness of healthy body) in which I have invested myself, something I have made a foundation for my soul, has crumbled or disappeared, and I am desolate. It feels as though what I have lost is a part of myself, a central part. It feels that way because that is the way it is. We know ourselves in relationships and in our doings, and when a relationship is lost or the doings stymied, for a time, we cannot find ourselves. The inner progress of the soul has come to a crippling dead end, and the sense of self is devastated, all because something self and soul have relied on is not there. Grief brings one starkly to the archetypal religious confession that those things on which we commonly and inevitably rely to save us (status, work, spouses, children, wealth, etc.) are but fallible idols.

The numbing grief of the self forsaken also bares the frightening grief of the self insufficient. It is not only that an *other* on which I have relied has proved fallible; more excruciatingly, something *inner* on which I have relied has proved fallible. My desperate need to feel in command of my own destiny—and the illusion that I do—has been assaulted. Grief brings one starkly to the archetypal religious confession that the self cannot save itself.

So the angers and fears, the remorse and chagrin, the despair and the fertile vulnerability of grief are the

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ingredients of pastoral counseling. How *can* I be saved? Who will rescue me from this legacy of death? All grief counseling is pastoral counseling. All pastoral counseling is grief counseling.

Grief of the Finished and Unfinished

There are two kinds of grief: the grief over what is finished and the grief over what is unfinished. The grief of a past that must stay in the past, forever gone; and the grief of a future that must stay in the future, perpetually beyond. The grief of "once more" becoming "never again"; and the grief of "not yet" becoming "never." The grief to which the resurrection is the response of faith; and the grief to which eschatological hope is the response.

The first grief—the sorrow over what is now finished—is the more familiar. It is what is usually meant by "grief." It is the more assuagable. In facing retirement, Murray grieves the loss of status and satisfaction that work brings him. In facing her father's decline, Alice grieves the loss of a vigorous parent. The past is gradually left behind, and one moves on.

The second grief—the pang over what is destined to remain unfinished—haunts unremittingly. What might have been, what should have been, remains just that. Unkept promises remain promises still unkept—those promises made to me, which I have trusted, and, still more excruciatingly, those promises I have made to others, which I thought I meant. For Murray it is facing the fact that work will never provide for him the satisfactions he always dreamed of. Alice will never have the relationship with her father that she yearns for. Something that still needs to happen will never happen.

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Conventional grief counseling deals with endings, with what is finished: a marriage, a career, a parent's life (or the idealization of spouse, career, or parent). It remembers and celebrates what has been and lets it be finished. The album and diary entries are savored, one by one, and the page is turned. Memories are consigned to be memories. With or without explicit pastoral counseling, the grief work will happen.

Still, when a spouse dies, or the ending comes to any other portion of life, not only is there the searing grief of the finished but also the haunting grief of the unfinished: things deferred, things unsaid, intimacies still unexchanged. The easier grief of the finished may disturb the repose of the self, but the griefs of the unfinished erode the worth of the self, and so especially command the attention of the pastoral counselor.

The grief of the unfinished appears not just in the acute moments of death, loss, and change. It is a chronic, persistent, low-grade, disconsolate nagging at the soul of the faithful. Such grief is the substance of pastoral counseling because it is the brooding shadow that always accompanies faith, hope, and love, the substance of all pastoral care. Faith, hope, and love, the promises we exchange with God, bid us to a life beyond our own. So the aspiration exalts our life but also dooms us to the despair of chasing what is beyond our reach. Promises that lofty must forever remain promises. That is their purpose, and that is their curse. If the aspirations of faith, hope, and love have already brought a person into pastoral care, into a pastor's community, then the grief-stricken partialness of faith, hope, and love will bring that person to the doorstep of pastoral counseling.

Those less well endowed (it is tempting to say less afflicted by) with faith, hope, and love are more immune to

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grief. Those with the highest aspirations to the religious virtues are most vulnerable to the despair of grief. It is the religious heroes taking massive gulps of faith, hope, and love who become tragic heroes, completely enveloped in what cannot sustain. "I poured my soul upon the sand," Augustine lamented (Book 4 of his Confessions). "He whom I loved as though he would never die was dead." Strong faith, strong hope, strong love cannot but pour itself out, prodigally and recklessly, and cannot but issue in strong grief.

Grief, then, is the badge of one committed to the unattainable imperatives and promises that transcend, undergird, define—and thwart—the self. Grief is the badge of membership in a community of faithful aspirers. Grief is the mark of one who has been vouchsafed a glimpse of the promised land and so cannot but live in it even while unable to live in it. Daily life can never be the same again, never dreary and meaningless, because it is now lived in the transcendent hope, but also never without a twinge of melancholy because it is now lived in the transcendent hope.

The pastoral counselor, vicar of the community of those enlivened and tormented by hope, knows well this blessing and this torment—nowhere more than in the act of pastoral counseling. As we shall see in chapter 3, the counselor's role is that of witnessing and re-visioning the life of the counselee in light of the realities of the faith, hope, and love, which are the counselee's lot. But the counselor's burden is to sense these aspirations so keenly as to be excruciatingly aware of how the counselee's life (like the counselor's counseling) falls short. That burden keeps the counselor in constant temptation to intervene, to reduce the counselor's discomfort over the dissonance by ma-

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neuvering the counselee's life into conformity with the mandates and promises of the transcendent. However, the counselor resists the temptation to live the counselee's life and remains faithful to the commitment to provide the context that will enable the counselee to live his or her own life faithfully in a way that embraces the grief.

LOCATING COUNSELING IN THE COUNSELEE'S LIFE

To be more formal about locating pastoral counseling in the counselee's life, we can distinguish four "levels" or facets of human development. All clamor for attention; however, not all are equally appropriate for the pastoral counselor to attend to. We can diagram the levels and their relationship:

Context→Self-Regard→Traits and Habits→Coping and Functioning

Coping and Functioning

This is the realm of everyday behavior in which I count my successes and failures. I do my work, relate to others, live my faith, meet my responsibilities as a citizen, get my priorities straight, grieve my losses, and confront adversity and adversaries. I do these things well or not so well, and I try to do them better. They are most likely to be exactly and explicitly what I talk about when I come to counseling ("Things are not going well on the job, or at home, or in my retirement," etc.). The counselor considers this the vocabulary of the *presenting* problem and knows there are overtones yet to be sounded and heard. But the counselee and friends and family are likely to think of the presenting problem as *the* problem. "My boss is being unfair to me. I am not relating well to my kids. I don't have my old zest for

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helping in the day care. I want to change these behaviors. I want to cope better, to function better. Others want me to change these behaviors, and they are ready to tell me how." Offering advice on such practical matters may be extremely useful. But this is *not* the realm of pastoral counseling. The pastoral counselor may be extremely tempted, sometimes for very attractive and valid reasons (and sometimes for less worthy reasons), to intervene into a counselee's life at this level and to work on changes in behavior, to teach how to cope, how to function, to make an immediate and direct difference. But this is not the business of pastoral counseling. Improved functioning is, of course, to be fondly welcomed when it happens, and, in a sense, can even be regarded as a long-range goal of pastoral counseling. But it is a goal to be achieved indirectly, as a by-product, not something to be produced by pastoral counseling. ("Producers" stage shows or manage factories; neither is a suitable model for pastoral counseling.)

Traits and Habits—Personality Characteristics

In the perpetual fencing match with the world, which describes everyone's normal process of development, the self thrusts and parries, ventures and retreats, feints and dodges, and gradually perfects certain strategies for being in the world—we call them personality characteristics, traits, or talents—that seem to keep the path relatively smooth and safe.

Problems in coping and functioning are seldom isolated. They are parts of more general patterns. The breakdown in relations with a boss turns out to be similar to a breakdown in relations with a previous boss, and/or a spouse, and/or a parent, and/or loss of faith. Seeing the pattern helps to

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focus and define the issues with the boss. It also defuses and diffuses tension with this particular person by attending to the more general pattern or *trait*. Colloquially, this is the "baggage" one brings to a squabble.

Discerning such patterns is often thought to be the mission and the skill of all mental health professionals (a category in which pastoral counseling may sometimes be included—erroneously, I think). ("You hate/fear your boss/God/therapist/spouse because/as you hated/feared your father.") A therapist is thought to be like a detective solving a mystery by finding the early clues that "explain" later events, or the traits (always "underlying" traits) that "explain" behaviors. It's a challenge or a game bested by astute wits and insight, an intellectual contest.

In the contemporary culture that prizes such psychological savvy, counselees and their friends and pastoral counselors also are likely to be intrigued by and even adept at this kind of psychologizing, the finding of general patterns of behavior. Such skill, providing it is chastened, disciplined, and responsible—that is, providing it is accurate—is usually welcomed. It yields vocabulary and analytic insight that may become useful tools. But it should never be mistaken for either the means or the ends of pastoral counseling. For one thing, pastoral counseling is not an intellectual exercise that whets psychological cleverness, but more of an affective experience that embraces the whole person. For another, traits—whether benign or otherwise—and talents—whether sturdy or otherwise—do not emerge from, and are seldom modified by, intellectual awareness and insight. Naming a pattern is satisfying but seldom improves it.

Traits and talents are not modules of machinery to be turned on or off, inserted or modified or otherwise

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engineered. They are organic growths, and they grow out of the interaction between an emerging selfhood and its environment. Throughout its lifetime of development, the self learns to deal with the world of reality in ways that assert, gratify, protect, and defend the self by devising and adopting a variety of strategies and postures. These strategies and postures are what we refer to as traits and talents. We can understand them and we can affect them not by regarding them as autonomous, but as emerging out of complex developmental processes. These processes must be affected if we are to influence the traits and talents that govern coping and functioning. So we turn to the next "level" of development.

Self-Regard

In the process of growing a personality and its traits, nothing is more important than self-regard, the way the self perceives itself. Does the self feel safe or threatened, large or small, sturdy or fragile, vivid or shadowy, true or false, integrated or divided, available and present or hidden and obscure? If I feel myself unsafe or inadequate, for example, I will adopt strategies that exaggerate aggressiveness, rigidity, or defensiveness at the cost of underdeveloping strategies of fluidity or smooth interaction with others. If I feel safe, sturdy, and together, I will venture strategies that stretch the self, extend it beyond narrow boundaries into more intimate liaisons with events and people. In terms of the diagram, high regard for self fosters traits and talents that function well and cope well.

The counselee recognizes the crucial importance of self-regard, and its occasional fragility, when he or she re-

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marks, "I don't feel myself these days" or "I don't know just where I fit in" or "I just don't want to get out of bed these days." Or the counselee may tote up the impact of pastoral counseling by noticing "I feel better about myself" rather than just "I feel friendlier or more comfortable or more peaceful" (traits and talents) or "My spouse and I are getting along better" (coping and functioning).

This level of self-regard can be an arena for the functioning of God's grace. It occasions the kinds of affirmations—about "being"—that we associate with the power of grace. The level of functioning and even the level of traits invite the kinds of appraisals and admonitions—about "doings"—that we associate with the workings of law.

Far more than the levels of coping and functioning or of traits and habits, the level of self-regard is the business of pastoral counseling. The pastoral counselor knows that difficulty in coping and awkwardness of trait reflect something askew in self-regard. The pastoral counselor knows that an enhanced self-regard can be trusted to discover improved traits and to devise more effective functioning. Whether or not they are ever discussed in counseling, the traits and the coping benefit from the enhanced self-regard, which is addressed by the counselor.

Enabling self-regard is indirect. It's an art not a science; an experience not an instruction. Acquiring and mastering this art is the discipline of pastoral counseling. Self-regard cannot be engineered or manufactured; it cannot be willed or talked into being. Self-regard grows, like all else in Creation, when given a chance, when provided a benign and nurturing environment. So for the clearest and most compelling sense of its mission, pastoral counseling turns to a fourth level of human development.

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Context

We all live evicted from that Garden which is created just for us, and so we cannot escape some degree of that wariness and wiliness which we require to survive outside the garden but which stunts our hearty growth. The self can survive and thrive only when it can trust, and outside the garden, trust is jaded. At best, then, we are distorted and dysfunctional—sinners, we used to say, and perhaps still should. Some portions, some moments of our lives are afflicted with a threat and sense of fragility, so at these times our energies are especially distracted into defensive strategizing, squandered on building fences rather than bridges. We may protect ourselves, but we don't function well. One does not move nimbly or gracefully while wearing heavy armor, whether metallic or psychological.

Pastoral counseling cannot change the basic realities of the context in which we have lived and do live. It cannot remove whatever threats and disdain have plagued us, whatever bribes, whatever tightly conditioned love and respect. It cannot make the context in which we find, or try to find, ourselves more benign than it is. (God doesn't do that either. God doesn't save us by removing curses and sin, but in spite of them, by blunting the power they hold over us, by offering a radically new experience of grace, a new context.)

Pastoral counseling cannot change reality. But it can offer a time-out from struggling with hostile contexts, and it can offer a sample of a more benign reality. For a few minutes, now and then, we can begin to let down our guard, take off our armor, and see what it is like to channel our energies not into protecting ourselves but into productive, constructive, creative adventure. (We'll talk more about

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this process in the coming chapters.) Here, the point is to locate pastoral counseling, to notice that the level of *context* is where pastoral counseling aims to make a difference. The pastoral counselor does not aim directly to change styles of coping and functioning, to revise personality traits, or to improve self-regard. The pastoral counselor does try to offer a graceful context, trusting that this will in turn impact the self-regard, personality traits, and modes of functioning.

A fifth level? Perhaps that last statement leaves too much initiative and responsibility to the pastoral counselor. In fact, the counselor does not generate this gracious context but simply communicates it. Changes in coping and personal functioning all depend on a benign context provided by the pastoral counseling. But *that* depends on something too: the prior experience by the counselor of grace. The counselor cannot deliver what the counselor has not received. So a *fifth level of experience assumed* in this analysis is the pastoral counselor's own experience of blessing.

Which brings us to a confession at the heart of pastoral counseling. This healing never happens as neatly or thoroughly as we would like to depict it. Pastoral counselors are highly imperfect vessels of grace. Our own sense of participating in a "benign context" is ambiguous and partial, at best, and therefore so is our capacity to convey such an experience to others. If pastoral counseling proceeded at the level of coping, we might easily fall victim to the pretense of expertise and let ourselves believe that we could correctly coach and prescribe how to deal, for example, with a difficult boss. People do let themselves fantasize such expertise, and that is one of the urgent problems in conducting counseling addressed to that level. But when we recognize

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that the key, the germ of counseling is lodged in the experience of grace, we readily acknowledge how flawed and imperfect is our own spiritual journey—a confession that opens us and our pastoral counseling more fully to the influx of grace that is essential to its effectiveness.

IN SUMMARY

What brings someone to pastoral counseling? Who is the counselee? What is the agenda for pastoral counseling?

The vocabulary of the counseling may be an array of problems, events, situations, relationships, daily behaviors—circumstances about the counselee's life that need adjusting. The vocabulary of the counseling may even include strategies for making these adjustments. But the agenda for the pastoral counseling has to do with the meaning these circumstances have for the counselee.

The counselor may safely expect to hear something like this as the meaning, the agenda:

My life is wrong. It is not the life I was promised. It is not the life I have promised. It is not the life that was intended for me. It is not the life that I intended. I am not myself. I need conversion. I need to be re-deemed. How can I be saved?

I am not living my own life. I feel fractured, sidelined, out of the action of my own life. I feel like a spectator to my own life, alienated from myself. I need integration, integrity. How can I become whole, healed, holy?

My life is beyond my control. I don't know how to live my life. I can't cope. I am baffled, vexed. I have resources, but they don't work anymore. I need empowerment.

How can I be graced?

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My life seems subject to unfriendly forces, not just alien but hostile. A spiritual virus is eroding my soul. Things don't play by the rules anymore. They call forth my worst. They drive me into desperate, defensive maneuvers that thwart and twist and distort. I need trust and peace. How can I recover faith, hope, and love?

These are the fundamental and familiar spiritual torments that make pastoral counseling *pastoral*. Addressing these torments is the tacit commitment of both counselor and counselee. What makes pastoral counseling *counseling* is that these questions are incarnated in daily events and life problems and are addressed in the vocabulary of those events and problems. Counselor and counselee seldom speak of their commitments and goals in the familiar but abstract language used in the above paragraphs; they encode these existential issues in the vocabulary of daily events. The discipline required of the pastoral counselor is to maintain fidelity to the fundamental spiritual goals while acknowledging the authority of the incarnated form in which they are presented.

The Counselee's Experience of Counseling

How does it feel to be a counselee? How do counselees describe the experience of pastoral counseling?

It is usually startling, a strenuous adjustment, hard to describe, hard to get used to. It is a culture shock. It is like landing in an alien culture where social conventions are different, where people behave differently from what you expect, where people treat you differently from what you are used to. It's not an unpleasant change, but it is nevertheless abrupt and jarring. The ways of behaving that make you who you are—your self-defining, self-defending, self-enhancing habits of personality—don't work well and are not called for.

Maybe it is as startling and as freeing as learning to survive the dust, heat, thirst, and vastness of the desert and then suddenly finding yourself in an oasis where life is not fragile but abundant and assured, so that all your habitual survival skills are useless and unnecessary. As delightful as the change may be, it still leaves you psychologically naked. Maybe it is like having to shift from the well-practiced strategizing of courting a lover to the experience of feeling securely and unconditionally loved, and, in doing so, finding oneself speechless and helpless. Maybe it is

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like breaking out of everyday experience for a moment of glimpsing the kingdom—surrendering to one's most daring yearning for an untroubled, relaxed, unguarded, healing moment—a glimpse afforded us, we are told, only if we are able to become childlike.

It takes some getting used to. It takes some time to trust. The counselor has stepped out of everyday life into this deliberately different and transcending world as an act of discipline (to be discussed more fully in the next chapter). For the counselee, it is an act of discovery.

Words fail because words are the creatures (and creators) of everyday experience. The yearnings and needs that the counseling milieu meets are largely unspoken, and so is their realization. We have words for the coping and functioning end of the sequence diagrammed in the last chapter (which is where counselees usually expect counseling to be located), but not for the context end (where the counseling turns out to be located). Counselees turn to imagery and analogy to convey the experience of pastoral counseling.

"I felt freer, more myself," is the most common report. "I could take off masks, armor, stop pretending, stop trying to impress. I stopped worrying about whether I was pleasing or displeasing my counselor, stopped calculating things to say that would woo her and win her."

"I didn't feel constantly challenged. I didn't feel the need to be always vigilant, on guard, proving myself, protecting myself from being put down. I didn't feel at risk."

"Paradoxically, my pastoral counselor somehow became invisible, a non-factor in my life, even while he loomed huge, pervasive. He wasn't a player, but he was a presence."

It is like a sanctuary, one says, a wildlife sanctuary where life can go on naturally as it is supposed to, without fear of the depredations of "civilization."

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"And if 'sanctuary' means a holy place, I guess that's a good definition of holy—a freedom to be yourself as created by God, undistorted by the fear of hostile trespassers. People sometimes use the church as sanctuary from persecution by political authorities. I think I used pastoral counseling as sanctuary from persecution by other authorities in my life. Calling it a sanctuary recognizes a power in my life higher than the people I am running away from."

The counselee can experience a time-out, a time-off, can go off-duty. It's not an escape from problems and responsibilities. These things remain, but for the moment they are not sovereign; they are not defining or demanding your life. It's a moratorium from the pressure to perform, to conquer the problems, to appease all the responsibilities. It's a few minutes in which no one is keeping score, in which it doesn't matter whether you surmount the problems or succumb to them. Are the problems and responsibilities more than you can handle? Who cares right now? There is nothing at stake, nothing at risk in your present relationship with the person you are talking with, your pastoral counselor.

"In the counseling, I became heedless of other people—and I also became more mindful of other people, heedless of others as shapers of my life and mindful of others as opportunities in my life."

Does pastoral counseling displace or replace other relationships in the counselee's life? Does the counselor become a substitute for other important people? Does the counselee "fall in love" with the counselor, forsaking "real life" loves? Sometimes this happens, but it is not an intended effect of pastoral counseling. It can be minimized by the counselor's disciplined abstinence from affect (see next chapter). It is a distortion that counseling itself should

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correct. More often counselees report a curious paradox about how they feel about other people while they are talking with the counselor. On the one hand, the dealings with others seem more remote, less intense, less urgent ("I don't need to have that showdown with her."). On the other hand, people feel closer, more real, more present; relationships feel warmer.

The time-out is like a truce, says a man whose troubled marriage prompted him and his wife to seek pastoral counseling. "Like joking about the game with the other team during a football time-out, or like they told about troops in World War I coming out of the trenches and having a Christmas party together. It seemed like a time when there was no point in my wife and I shooting at each other, so we tried something else."

One counselee said that the experience of counseling was like being relieved for an afternoon of the constant care of an invalid mother. She was free to nap, shop, scrub the kitchen floor, consult a doctor about her mother—all without having the constant fear of missing her mother's call, of not giving the medications properly, of not making her comfortable, of displeasing her. Perhaps it is even more like the experience of being assisted in the caretaking by someone who is without the personal stake, who does not panic or scold or reassure, who is not terror-struck about pleasing or discomfoting mother.

Another counselee described the climate of pastoral counseling this way: "It's like the time last winter when my car stalled, and I couldn't get it going again. Everyone behind me started honking, and everyone around me stared, and I found myself trying to deal with them more than with the car, and I wasn't doing very well with either. Then I saw this big cop ambling over to me, and I really panicked: Now

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I'm going to get a ticket for obstructing traffic. I fumbled with the window—one more thing I couldn't manage well. Then he leaned nonchalantly on the car, grinned, and finally said, 'These Corollas just don't like this weather; it happens all the time.' Then he ambled away saying, 'I guess I'll go see what they are making all that noise about.' He meant, 'Don't let them bother you.' And they didn't and I calmed down, remembered to tap the gas pedal, and got the car going. He made a place for me where the pressure and self-consciousness and demands were off."

It's a shelter for the homeless, one person has said, the spiritually homeless. It gets you off the streets psychologically and gives you the spiritual equivalent of a good night's rest and a good meal.

"I feel like my pastoral counselor is the one person in my life who doesn't have a claim on me. Everyone else wants something from me—or sometimes what is worse, they want something for me—and I spend all my energy fending them off or compromising or explaining so as not to antagonize them—except when I explode and blow up. But I don't have to do this with her."

Pastoral counseling has been likened to gulping a breath of fresh air after being trapped under water or in a stuffy room or in a cloud of smog. Sometimes one doesn't recognize the smog as smog or its poisoning effects until one tastes the fresh air. Or perhaps it is like catching your breath after losing it in the panicked panting of fright, flight, or fight.

Pastoral counseling provides a *virtual* life-space. You can practice living. But the risks are confined to the simulation. You can always reset and try again. It's a training module in which you are guaranteed a safe landing.

"It is the opposite of all the warnings about 'driving

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defensively,' which have pretty much preoccupied and preempted my life."

"Driving defensively" means to expect the worst at all times from all people. It means to be attentive to the dangers that may loom at any time without warning. It means to stay on duty and not be distracted by leisurely sight-seeing. It means to learn to read the most subtle signs of lurking disaster—the child on the sidewalk looking at the street, the car ahead changing lanes, the slight tug of a softening tire. It means to take the responsibility for averting trouble, even though the trouble may be started by someone else. It means, above all, constantly adjusting your own driving to meet and forestall all possible threats. Your driving is governed by the threats. Safety First is the rule; everything else takes a back seat. The defensive driver renounces conversation, companionship, scenery, radio, even destination (in the sense that getting there safely becomes more important than the "there"). That could be the slogan by which most of us live our lives, whether or not we are in a car: "Drive defensively."

Imagine what it would feel like to cruise the highway with safety somehow guaranteed, to drive without the need to be defensive. Just for this trip, you can be assured of no surprise ice spots, no errant drivers, no tire defects. You *can* be on vacation and enjoy the scenery, your companion, and your driving because you don't need to marshal all energies into defending. Relaxing, stretching the mind, freeing the spirit, discovering what it's like to be a different person, a nondefensive driver—or even a passenger—these new adventures may take a little practice. But the moratorium on risk is ample enough for that.

That's how it must feel to enter the temporary safety of counseling. The risks are abated. You can relax the life-

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long habits of living defensively, of putting all energies into survival, of adjusting yourself to avert trouble. You can practice living as you choose, not living on perpetual guard duty.

Counseling, of course, is artificial, a *virtual* road trip. It's not a real car on a real road in real traffic; no one can pretend to guarantee real life from harm. But in the training module, you can practice real driving under guaranteed safety.

You don't need to squander your energies in the repertory of preemptive self-justifications at which you are so practiced, because, for just this moment at least, no one is judging or keeping score; no one is responding to you with lurking appraisals of good or bad, yes or no. There is no need to protect, pretend, strut, or hide. You can find out what's there, what's possible, what's wanted behind the defensive facades and charades.

THE DIFFERENCE DEFINED

Pastoral counseling, then, provides an atmosphere, an emotional climate, a temporary virtual reality that the counselee usually experiences as different from everyday life in at least two crucial ways. First, the counselee is dealing with a person, the counselor, who looms in the counselee's life as a large presence, but not as a player. The counselee does not have to negotiate with the counselor as an adviser, as a coach, or as one who in any other way proffers an agenda or prescription. So the counselee can feel like a person, not a player. It's a moratorium on submitting the self to the buffeting of everyday life. The counselor is largely indifferent to the hassles, decisions, and dilemmas that seemed to beset the counselee to the point

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of seeking counseling. The counselor is not trying to "do" anything, so the counselee can just "be." Second, though the counseling relationship may be without agenda or prodding, it is not without affect. The counselor is experienced in affording personal support and regard that is unwavering and intimate. Because the counselor offers no agenda, no checklist, no criteria, that regard is felt as unconditional.

A Presence, Not a Player

Pastoral counseling provides an encounter, an atmosphere. We refer to the diagram that structured the last chapter and emphasize here that the pastoral counseling intervenes at the context end of the sequence, not the coping end. The counselee enters the pastoral counseling at the right end of the diagram but experiences the impact of the counseling at the left end.

The counselee arrives at counseling telling of events, circumstances, or persons that he or she defines as the problem. This is what needs changing. The conversation begins with talk about job or spouse or disease, and the vocabulary may even remain there; the counseling may end with the conversation still apparently about job or spouse or disease. Indeed the counseling, one hopes, improves the way these concerns are fit into the counselee's life. But the counseling is not about these matters. The counselor has not attended, primarily, to them. The effect of the counseling, the impact the counselee experiences, is in another domain.

In the beginning, if the counselee speaks of self, it is usually a self that is identified with these "problems," a self that is defined by them. Who am I? I am the victim, the

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culprit, or the dunce caught up in this turmoil. The self is rooted in the domain of coping because the domains at the left end of the diagram have atrophied. There is little sense of self as such because there is so little sense of a sustaining defining context. The sense of self is limited to the arena of coping and its failures in that arena, narrowed as though an actor on the stage had no sense of self beyond the twists of plot he or she was assigned to pursue for a couple of hours, no sense of self to bring to curtain calls or a life offstage, as though the only way to behave at the cast party is to perpetuate the onstage struggles.

The pastoral counseling offers the counselee grounds for a selfhood independent of the coping problems, because the counselor is a presence independent of them and wants to regard the counselee as a person independent of them.

In the grounding, the counselee experiences a freshening, an energizing, and a wholing (= *healing* = *holying*) of person. There is a conversion of self from feeling some version of "I am a lost sinner" to feeling some version of "I am a lost sinner who also lives in God's grace." The counseling does not change the coping problems; they persist. The counseling does not—necessarily or immediately—change the ways the counselee addresses these problems, or even the way the counselee feels about them—the problems are still harrowing and baffling. The pastoral counseling does change the way the counselee feels about himself or herself. This proves the crucial difference. It proves to be the context that enables the counselee to muster the resources and skills to address or withstand the "problem."

This is how and why pastoral counseling is and must be different from other types of counseling. Friends and family respond to a problem or a crisis with advice and assistance

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in the coping. "Have you tried . . . ? Can I do anything? When that happened to me, I . . . You'll get over it." Often such helpfulness is constructive, even crucial; that's what friends and families are for. They become deeply involved; they make your problem their problem and struggle to solve it with all the personal energy of their own investment. They want you to accept the gift of their solution.

Pastoral counseling is different. By disciplined intent, the counselor is not personally invested in the problem, does not make it his or her own problem, and so is not compelled or qualified to search for ways to solve it.

When the pastoral counselor violates this discipline and does struggle to find or coach solutions to the problems, pastoral counseling is jeopardized. In two ways the counseling is precluded from providing the experience of unconditioned regard and support for self, which is the mission and gift of counseling. First, it is an opportunity missed: attention to the "problems," the issues of coping, preempts attention to the self, which is in fact the far more urgent need of the counselee. Second, attention to the "problems," the issues of coping, keeps the conversation precisely in the domain that has most likely proved devastating. Most likely, it is in fending off a well-meaning parent or other coach that the counselee has felt battered, most reduced to bartering, when the self has felt most teased and most dazed with conditioned offers of esteem, has experienced the most panic in trying to meet conditions to earn some respect. It is precisely the coaching, advising, and "helping" in the past that have eroded the sense of selfhood and left selfhood and love dependent on futile struggles to measure up and warrant affection and esteem. The counselor seriously risks becoming one more dispenser of love in exchange for performance.

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Unconditional Regard

Pastoral counseling assuages the pervasive human hunger for love without condition. In childhood and adulthood, most of us find ourselves required to barter for love and to earn, deserve, and win by our efforts and guardedness the esteem and affection without which we do not feel real or rooted. We are teased. We are tendered conditioned offers of love. The lover asks something from us in exchange. We are forced to focus our energies on the conditions, not on the love; on our own strategizing rather than on what we receive; on the means rather than the end. The anguish of misfitting the other's script and agenda supplants the delight of fitting into the other's life. The conditioned love compels us to live, as best we can, by our wits and williness—what Freud called our I—which is to say, by a distortion of our selfhood. But we are not created to live by our wits, by our I. We are created to live by our relationships and belonging, by faith, hope, and love. It is the conditioning of love that compels us to rely on our own strengths and therefore to carefully defend, exaggerate, and pretend such strength. It is the conditioning of love that compels us to deny and hide vulnerabilities, which is to deny the truth about ourselves. The conditioning compels us to pretend and defend self-sufficiency and to deny and prevent our dependence on others.

These distortions we impose on ourselves as part of our bartering tactics lead us into the dead ends of helplessness and hopelessness, the mistrust of self and of others, the problems and distress that bring us to pastoral counseling. In response, pastoral counseling provides surcease from the bartering and battering. It provides an alternative to the marketplace as the locus and the referee for the

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transaction of love. It provides corrective to the climate that has generated distortion and distress. Pastoral counseling provides a steady, unwavering regard that need not, that cannot, be manipulated; it is a regard that is not under the control of the counselee. "Whether or not I try to make it happen, this other is on my side, is with me."

The counselor's regard for the counselee does not substitute for the love of parent, spouse, child, or neighbor, which the counselee may have experienced only in rationed scarcity. It does not match in magnitude or salience the loves of real life. It is, to be sure, a common misunderstanding of counseling to suppose that the counselor does or should supply loving support so intense and intimate that it makes up for what has been missed and satisfies the hunger. When counselors seem to assume this burden or issue this promise, or when counselees summon this hope or issue this demand—that counselor can/must be God or parent—this is a distortion that itself deserves airing and remedy.

Pastoral counseling offers correction and remedy for the *conditioned quality* of crucial love in the counselee's past, not for the *diminished magnitude* of love. The counselor does not pretend to be God, parent, or spouse in prodigality of love. But whatever regard, esteem, or even love the counselor and counseling do offer the counselee, that is unconditional. The counselor has adopted the discipline of entering into an abstinent relationship in which he or she feels there is nothing at risk and nothing at stake, and in which there are no needs for personal satisfaction, no self-image to be guarded or bolstered, and no fragility to be protected. The counselor is immunized from being personally affected by anything the counselee says or does. The counselor's regard is unaffected, unresponsive, unconditional. If

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this seems like an artificially numb and one-sided relationship, it is. This is not a model or sample of how two people enter into intimate mutuality; it is a model of unconditional regard. The counselee is deprived of any leverage over the counselor, of any bargaining chips, and of anything with which to barter. The counselee has no way to seduce or enhance the counselor's regard, but also has no way to shrink or lose that regard. That regard is steady and unconditional, not because the counselor possesses any godlike power or virtue in loving, not because of any talent or skill in personal relationships, but because the counselor has been willing to accept the discipline of entering into an abstinent relationship and to renounce the satisfaction of personal needs. This immunizes the counselor's regard from conditions under the counselee's control.

This is often called "acceptance." But that is a misleading word if it implies approval or agreement or any other affective involvement by the counselor. The counselor's discipline of abstinence of affect means that his or her regard transcends questions concerning approval or endorsement. The counselor is abstracted into a situation of literally "not caring" what the counselee does or says while still unwaveringly caring for the counselee. The acceptance the counselee experiences is not approval or disapproval, not empathy or sympathy. It is not even tolerance or neutrality, for that would imply a personal affective reaction simply being withheld. The acceptance of the counselor is not a personal affective reaction. It is a stark, naked, existential, even depersonalized, regard of being. The counselor communicates a kind of sublimely nonchalant "whatever" about the counselee's doings while communicating a sublime unequivocal "yesness" about the counselee's personhood.

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This is—to repeat the acknowledgment and caution—not an attractive model for human relationship. Pastoral counseling is not supposed to be such a model. It is not a friendship; it is not a paradigm for other forms of a pastoral relationship. Perhaps it can be said to resemble (and illuminate) the paradox of God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence, how God can be so intensely invested in human affairs yet remain so utterly abstracted and independent from them that God's gracious regard is unwaveringly immune to the ups and downs of those affairs. Perhaps the counselor's regard resembles the awesomely total welcome parents offer a newborn baby, totally affirming its very being without regard for any personal qualities or traits or behaviors, without regard for any virtue, skills, trespass, or failure—for there is none yet.

So the counselee does not experience intensely affective endorsement of behavior, opinions, or decisions. By the same token, the counselee experiences a starkly naked and utterly reliable affirmation that he or she is indeed a fully formed and legitimate human being, one entitled to walk this planet upright and to claim rights and responsibilities in God's Creation just as everyone else—despite any previous messages to the contrary.

Diverse Correctives for Diverse Deficits

As urgent as the hunger for unconditional love is for most of us, a caveat is called for here. Unconditional regard may not be everyone's most urgent hunger. For some it may not be the marketplating of love that has rendered their lives fallen and distorted. There are other poisons abroad, such as violent assaults on body and spirit and denied accessibility to love and opportunity. Therefore, for some coun-

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selees, unconditional regard may not be the corrective most needed in pastoral counseling.

Most of the discussions in this book assume that the distortions and inner distresses that bring people to pastoral counseling are rooted in the dynamics of bartering for affection and esteem, a system of bartering that is imposed by the rationed and conditioned availability of love, a system of bartering that compels people to distort and constrict themselves as they maneuver to induce others to grant affection. Life is reduced to the dishonest scramble of a dating game. Pastoral counseling intends to address the distortions and distress by recognizing these roots and providing a sample of an alternative reality, an atmosphere that is safe because regard is steady, unwavering, not at risk, not conditioned, not vulnerable to the maneuvers, stratagems, and wooing of the counselee. The need most often addressed in pastoral counseling is the need for relief from the marketplacing and conditioning of love.

However, the need for unconditional regard is not absolute or universal. It is culturally relative. I believe it is the crucial developmental plight for most people likely to be reading this book and for most pastoral counselees they are likely to encounter. But not all. It is important not to absolutize or universalize this prescription of unconditional regard as a foundation of pastoral counseling and to be open to other needs for corrective alternative realities. When the deficits of life are different, pastoral counseling is called to intervene with different correction.

The bartering-for-love analysis may be most accurate as a portrayal of the developmental experience of male European-Americans and of a culture dominated by them. It is the white male and those especially influenced by him who may especially feel the urgency to have it all and who

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may regard all of reality as a reluctant lover to be seduced or a teasing lover to be tamed. Love is a commodity to be amassed, to be bought, to be fought for rather than a resource to be savored or a transcendent reality to be trusted and welcomed as a gift.

If pastoral counseling is or should be different for women or for African-Americans, this is the point at which the difference must take hold, in the understanding of this distinct developmental history. For any person, the question is, "What is the distinct context that has nurtured distortions and that now deserves the correction of a distinctly different pastoral counseling context?"

Perhaps some persons experience love not as a tease, conditionally and ambiguously present, but as massively blockaded and inaccessible, as by abuse or withholding. Such barriers induce the distortions not of bartering but of submission and resignation. The corrective context, then, would not be that of steady, unconditioned regard, but that of accessibility and insistence. It is not the masks of disguise that the counselee is induced to shed, but the heavy cowl of hiding and disappearance.

Welcoming the Difference

This chapter has emphasized, perhaps even exaggerated, the abrupt dissonance the counselee experiences between the attitude of the pastoral counselor and the attitudes conveyed in the noncounseling everyday world. There may even be startling dissonance between the attitudes conveyed by the pastor in counseling roles and those conveyed by the same pastor in noncounseling pastoral roles.

The difference is restorative and healing, but it may also be troubling, especially at first. The counselor may seem

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unaccountably indirect, indifferent, withholding, absent, evasive, disinterested in the immediate, urgent problems that beset the counselee, unopinionated about questions on which the counselee expects the pastor to be expert. The distance between a counselor located at the left end of the diagram, illustrated on page 29, and a counselee located at the right end may seem a disconcertingly huge personal rift.

But the dissonance seems to affect the counselor more than it affects the counselee. It seems that counselees are much less troubled by this dissonance than counselors expect them to be. The counselor's attitude meets a need the counselee feels acutely even if not well articulated.

Of course, a word of transition and definition may be helpful. It can be simple, not elaborate or defensive. The counselor may say, "I find I can be most helpful if I just listen carefully for now." Or, "Before we try to figure all that out, let's give ourselves the luxury of discovering how *you* feel about this." Or, "I think you deserve a chance to figure out just what is happening to *you* in this mess. Let's use our time for that."

Counselees hunger for this attention and support. It becomes a welcome gift.

IN SUMMARY

The counselee feels a personal renewal, literally a newness of self, and a freshness of energy, resources, and strategy. "Born again" even. It's a revival, a conversion of the self from despair to hope, from distrust to faith, from alienation to love.

The counselee arrives saying, in so many words, "I can't cope. I can cope with many things. But something has

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come up that is beyond me. My usual strategy doesn't work. This is not playing by the usual rules. It's alien. It's a cancerous tumor in my soul; the devil has me. It leaves me helpless, defeated, shriveled. I feel the terror that I am not myself." But pastoral counseling leaves the old self behind. It dispenses a "culture shock" of renewal. It dispenses the "culture shock" of entering into a distinct relationship that is rooted in regard, not in the exchange of affection; the "culture shock" of dealing with problems not by struggling to solve them but by preempting them, by exploring their context and meaning; the "culture shock" of not working with problems but of playing with them; the "culture shock" of the virtual reality, the laboratory of pastoral counseling; the "culture shock" of taking the person more seriously, more substantially, than the problems.

If we find it creditable and meaningful to say, after a two-week vacation, "I feel like a new person," how much more plausible for a person to report after the time-out of pastoral counseling, "I feel like a new person, newly erect, newly equipped, newly robust. My usual method wasn't working for me, but I'm not 'my usual' anymore. I'm ready to try new things." It may be said diffidently, even fearfully—rebirthing is as vulnerable as any birthing—but it is also said with the genuine confidence garnered in the counseling. Stripped naked, perhaps, but glad of it for the promise of new garb.