2

How to Construct a Conversation

As noted, Michael P. Nichols believes that friends make the best listeners. This is because the relationship between friends, being voluntary and optional, makes it safer to be honest and take risks. In addition, with a friend, "You can talk over painful and embarrassing subjects, reveal self-doubts, try out different sides of yourself, and be who you are" (1995, p. 226). Friends who listen also "make us feel interesting, and their interest inspires us to say more interesting things. Their receptivity is transformative: by listening intently to us, our friends make us feel larger, more alive. That's the glory of friendship" (p. 226). Of course, there is the downside as well. Nichols discusses situations where friends take sides when conflicts develop between friends, where a friend's offer of constructive criticism backfires, and where friends seem to outgrow each other. Explaining why she decided to write a book about gossip, Patricia Meyer Spacks, a professor of English literature at Yale University, relates a personal experience. It involved a close friend, a woman colleague, whom she met early every weekday morning for half an hour of "coffee and reinvigorating conversation" (p. ix). Sometimes a male colleague would come in, his expression

seeming to convey contempt at their verbal trivialities as their talk moved from details of their own lives to speculation about others, or from discussion of novels to contemplation of friends' love affairs. Considering their frequently proclaimed, desperate need for time, their husbands could not understand why they counted these minutes together sacred. The two women had difficulty explaining to their husbands why they insisted on these early morning conversations, nor could they even fully explain it to themselves. Spacks concluded that it afforded them a chance to "gossip," and her book was written to redeem gossip from its ignoble connotations.

In *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (1992), Mitchell Duneier focuses his attention on a group of working-class black men who would meet each evening in a cafeteria in the Hyde Park area of Chicago for coffee, dessert, and conversation. One of the men explained to Duneier, a sociology student at the University of Chicago, that this was one occasion in his life where he could participate in "intelligent conversation" (p. 111).

What these three authors–a psychotherapist, an English professor, and a sociology student–seem to agree on is that there is a great need for conversation among friends, a need so great that individuals will make significant sacrifices in order to have these conversations. I believe that Nichols is right in suggesting that conversations between friends should serve as a sort of ideal model for all the other conversations in which we become involved, including those between wives and husbands, parents and children, work associates, and therapist and client. Of course, these other conversations will have dimensions that are not found in a conversation between friends, and the injection of these other dimensions into a conversation between friends–for example, when a friend acts as if he were my therapist–may ruin the conversation, if not the friendship itself: "What are you trying to do, play amateur psychiatrist at my expense?" Even so, the more these conversations approximate a conversation between friends, the more satisfying they are likely to be.

I am especially interested here in Nichols' view that the conversation between therapist and client should have many of the features of a conversation between friends. If this is true of a therapeutic conversation, should it not be equally true of a conversation in which a minister is providing counsel? Several writers in the field of pastoral care and counseling have suggested that the best term for the counseling that ministers do is "pastoral conversation." (Carol Lakey Hess [1996] has made a similar proposal in the field of religious education.) Gaylord

Noyce has used this term to emphasize that the work of the minister is more of a seamless whole than we might otherwise perceive it to be (1981). Conversation is the glue that holds it all together. When we use terms such as "pastoral counseling" or "pastoral psychotherapy," the role of the minister as counselor seems to become more formal, more technical, and more official. In contrast, "pastoral conversation" communicates a less formal, technical, and official interaction between two or more persons, one that more nearly approximates a conversation between friends.

In chapter 5, I will discuss the dangers that are involved when the minister sheds the formalities of her office and asks the other person to think of her as "just a friend." In this chapter, however, I want to emphasize its positive aspects. I have titled this chapter "How to Construct a Conversation" in order to emphasize that a conversation in which the minister understands himself to be providing counsel does not simply happen by chance. It needs to be "made" or "created," and the minister bears primary responsibility for this. Several things should be taken into account as one goes about creating a conversational milieu. I will begin with the most obvious issue, which is, How does the minister respond to what the other person says or communicates?

Responding to the Other

One of the most–perhaps *the* most–pressing concerns that the very idea of assuming the counselor role raises for a seminarian is expressed in the questions, What will I say? What *should* I say? These questions, and the obvious anxiety behind them, are somewhat reminiscent of the rather shy teenager who is going out on her first date: "What will I talk about? What will I say?" If her mother says, "Just be your natural self. You talk with Bobby at school, and he has liked the way you talk with him or he wouldn't have asked you out," such reassuring words are likely to elicit the protest, "But, Mother, he's taking me to a party, and then we're going to Moondoggies after that. *This is different!*" If Eleanor's father happened to be listening in on this conversation, he might make the sage comment that mother and daughter are both right, which, while true, may not seem to be especially helpful. Still, mother is right to say that Eleanor should treat this as not fundamentally different from the other times she has talked with Bobby, and Eleanor is right to point out that there are some important differences. Also, her mother's reassurances are vitally important ("You already know how to talk with Bobby, and he wouldn't have asked you out if he didn't like the way

you talk with him."). The anxiety that Eleanor is experiencing, however, suggests that it may be helpful for her mother (or father) to offer her a few "pointers" on how to navigate her way, conversationally speaking, through her first date.

Like Eleanor and Bobby, the minister and the person who has requested a meeting with her have most likely had previous conversations. This is an important difference between the minister and the pastoral psychotherapist (to whom the client was referred by a minister or other professional). These may have been friendly little chats, or they may have been more formal and polite interchanges. Unless the minister has good reason for thinking otherwise, she should assume that, at least initially, the other person wants the basic nature of the conversation to be the same. If Eleanor has come across to Bobby as a rather shy girl whom he has come to know and like, he will find a suddenly boisterous, wisecracking Eleanor more than a little puzzling. If the minister and the other person have been on friendly terms, there is no reason why the minister should suddenly adopt a more "official" style, as if to announce, "I am now your counselor, and you are my client." If, on the other hand, their previous interactions have been more formal and polite, the mere fact that the other person has asked to talk with the minister in private does not mean that she should suddenly become friendly in a folksy sort of way. A radical shift from the customary way in which the two persons have related to each other on other occasions is likely to be disconcerting to the other person, an unnerving distraction from his purpose in coming.

On the other hand, although the general demeanor of the minister does not change, there *is* a difference between the friendly little chats or the formal interchanges the two have had before and what is likely to transpire in *this* conversation. As we have already noted in chapter 1, the minister will be intentional about listening. Such intentionality may have been true of their previous conversations, but the very fact that this time the other person has requested an opportunity to talk with the minister means that this intentionality is not optional (as it may have been when they were engaging in light and friendly banter on previous occasions). Such banter will not necessarily be out of place, but it cannot be allowed to distract from the fact that the other person would not have requested this meeting if there was not something on her mind that she wanted to discuss. How the minister *responds* to what is being related will also be more intentional than in the friendly chats–or polite interchanges–they have previously experienced.

The pastoral counseling literature is filled with suggestions, together with snippets from actual pastoral conversations, for how–and how not–to respond to the counselee. Many of the same suggestions have been made a common feature of clinical pastoral education. Over the years, a rather broad consensus has developed on what types of responses are most likely to reflect and contribute to good or effective listening. A particularly useful formulation of these responses is the one Howard Clinebell presents in *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (1984, pp. 94–96). He cites Elias H. Porter's typology of five counselor responses and then adds a sixth of his own (*advising*):

1. *Supportive.* Responses indicating the intent to reassure and perhaps reduce the counselee's intensity of feeling.
2. *Understanding.* Responses indicating the intention to communicate understanding and in effect to inquire whether this understanding is accurate.
3. *Interpretive.* Responses indicating the intent to teach, to impart meaning, or explain why.
4. *Probing.* Responses indicating the intent to query, to seek further information or provoke further discussion along a certain line.
5. *Evaluative.* Responses expressing a judgment concerning the relative appropriateness, correctness, or effectiveness of the counselee's thoughts, feelings, or behavior.
6. *Advising.* Responses indicating the intent to recommend certain approaches, actions, attitudes, or beliefs (or to recommend against them).

Clinebell indicates that a *supportive* response seeks to reassure, undergird, or inspire; an *understanding* response reflects empathy for the counselee's feelings and attitudes; an *interpretive* response intends to teach or explain the dynamics (the why) of a person's thoughts, feelings, or behavior; a *probing* response is one that questions; an *evaluative* response carries a value judgment; and an *advising* response offers a constructive suggestion for coping with a problem. In his view, all six have a place in pastoral counseling, and a minister "should be able to use them all with flexible selectivity, depending on the needs of the particular counselee" (p. 95). He further suggests that *understanding* responses should predominate in the rapport-building phase of counseling, but that they should be present in all stages (and types) of pastoral counseling. He notes that ministers with little or no training in counseling seldom

use understanding responses, and that the counseling style of many clergy tends to be weakest in this type of response. Different types of pastoral counseling call for greater use of some types than others. For example, in crisis counseling, *supportive* responses are especially important.

To illustrate these responses, Clinebell (p. 95) provides the following statement (which I have slightly modified) by a woman, age 19, to her counselor:

> I tell you, I hate my father. I hate him! I really hate him! I realize I have no good reason for this. After all, he is a minister, and a good man, and he has never laid a hand on me. Yet I have this strong feeling against him, and what makes me feel so terrible about it is that there really isn't any reason for it. I also know that the Bible says to love and honor your father, that hating your father is therefore a sin, and this worries me too.

Clinebell then provides examples that are reflective of six types of responses. Because several of these, as Clinebell notes, are negative examples of the response in question (i.e., what not to say), I have constructed what are, in my own judgment, better (i.e., more positive) illustrations of each type:

> *Supportive:* "It may seem as though having hateful feelings toward your own father is a terrible thing, especially a father who is a minister, but the very fact that you want to talk about these feelings with me and perhaps to discover why you have them is itself a step in the right direction. I know that it requires courage to talk with someone who is also a minister about these feelings."
>
> *Understanding:* "You are saying that your father is a good minister and hasn't struck you, and yet you have hateful feelings toward him, and the apparent absence of any good reason for your feelings concerns and troubles you."
>
> *Interpretive:* "You wonder why you could have hateful feelings toward your father when, as you say, he is a good minister and hasn't actually struck you physically. There seems to be a discrepancy here between your portrayal of him and your feelings toward him. Perhaps we should look at this discrepancy. It may help us to understand the feelings you have toward him."

Probing: "Perhaps you could tell me more about how these feelings toward your father emerge. For example, what is happening between the two of you when these feelings well up inside you? What situations trigger them? Do they begin with an argument or conflict?"

Evaluative: "I wonder if there are, in fact, some grounds for your feelings toward your father. That he is a minister and hasn't actually struck you physically doesn't necessarily mean that he hasn't done anything to warrant your hateful feelings toward him. If you consider some of the ways that he has possibly mistreated you, you may find that at least some of these feelings are warranted."

Advising: "Because you have feelings toward your father that you cannot explain, you could either simply try to get rid of these feelings or you could try to see if there is some explanation for them. I am willing for us to take whatever course you think best, though I tend to think the second approach is preferable because you and I find these hateful feelings of yours rather mystifying."

As noted, Clinebell believes that *understanding* responses should predominate in the rapport-building phase of counseling. If we assume that this is the first conversation the minister and the woman have had–that her hateful feelings toward her father are the main reason she requested the meeting–this would suggest, perhaps, that the understanding response identified above–which also happens to be the most succinct–would be the preferable one. This, however, is not necessarily the case, as this particular woman's tone of voice and physical demeanor may suggest that she is desperately in need of support (in which case, the *supportive* response may be the preferred one). On the other hand, it may be that this is not the first allusion she has made to her hateful feelings toward her father, and that the minister has already responded to the earlier ones with supportive and/or understanding responses. This being the case, she may be ready for, even anticipating, an *interpretive* response. The suggested interpretive response is, incidentally, a confrontational one, though stated in a very nonaggressive manner.

Conceivably, an *evaluative, probing,* or *advising* response would be appropriate as well, though I tend to believe that in this case, the *interpretive* response that was offered is likely to achieve what the

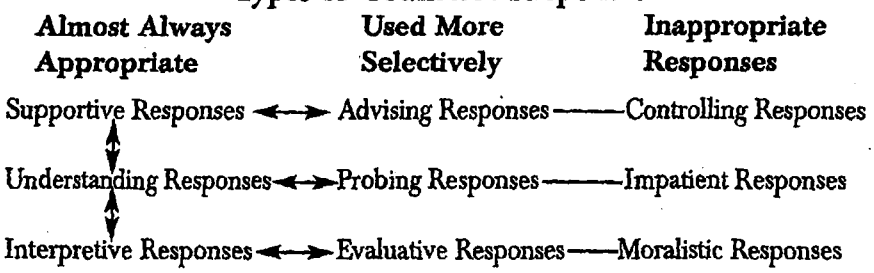
evaluative response is intended to realize without the danger that she will defend her father against the suggestion that he has "mistreated" her. The *probing* response assumes that discerning how and why her hateful feelings emerge will help to explain why she has these feelings, and it guesses that these feelings have to do with arguments or conflicts. These assumptions and hunches may be on the right track, but the question here is whether the *understanding* response will achieve the same goal, and with less likelihood that she will deny that she and her father have any arguments or conflicts, which may, in fact, be true. Also, the *understanding* response refers to the "apparent" absence of any good reason for her feelings, and therefore invites her to consider whether there may *possibly* be a good reason or reasons for her feelings. The tone of the *understanding* response is therefore more conversational, whereas the *probing* response has more of an interview tone.

The *advising* response is one that is probably best saved for the end of the conversation when the two of them are trying to decide what to do next. The issue of her hatred of her father has been opened up in this initial conversation, but where do we go from here? If introduced later, the minister's advice would not have the controlling feel that it would have if it came immediately after her initial confession regarding her hateful feelings toward her father. Because the basis for her hateful feelings toward her father may, in fact, be *his* controlling ways, the *advising* response, if offered too early, might be reminiscent to her of the way her father has been treating her.

In other words, I would augment Clinebell's point about the importance of *understanding* responses in the "rapport-building phase" of counseling to say that *supportive*, *understanding*, and *interpretive* responses are likely to be more appropriate in what I would call the "tone-setting phase" of the conversation, whereas *probing*, *evaluative*, and *advising* responses are likely to be used more strategically as the conversation moves into what I would call its "exploratory phase." (Later, I will discuss the third or "resolution phase.") In addition, as Figure 1 indicates, there are certain correlations between the three primary (or "tone-setting") responses and the three secondary (or "exploratory phase") responses. These are *supportive-advising*, *understanding-probing*, and *interpretive-evaluative*. In each case, the second responses are more interventionist (or directive) and therefore carry greater risk, especially if employed early in the "tone-setting" phase. These correlations may be described as follows:

Figure 1

Types of Counselor Responses



Supportive-Advising. If the *supportive* response is intended to reassure the other person, the *advising* response goes beyond reassurance by offering recommendations. Ministers who view themselves as *supportive* may find that their supportive role tends to shade over into an *advising* role. In this case, the minister goes beyond reassuring the woman that her desire to talk about her feelings toward her father is an expression of her courage (a *supportive* response) to making suggestions as to how she might deal with these feelings (an *advising* response). He notes two possible approaches she could take–try to get rid of these feelings or explore the possible reasons she has them–and recommends the latter course.

I have written the *advising* response in a way that presents advising in an essentially positive light. Over the years, whether advising has any place in pastoral counseling has been a much-debated issue. I share Clinebell's view that it *does* have a place, but I strongly oppose the heavy-handed advising that is advocated by some writers in the pastoral counseling field (i.e., those who believe that one has not provided counsel unless he has given explicit advice). The *advising* response indicated here is one that communicates to the woman that, even as it was her decision to come to the minister to talk about her feelings toward her father, it remains her decision as to how she wants to carry this conversation further. The minister states his own preference, but indicates that he is willing to take the other course. Also, by identifying these two possible courses, he also helps the woman to anticipate a resolution of her problem, and this in itself is inherently supportive or reassuring.

In short, advising is an extension of support, but it needs to be used with caution, as it can communicate that the minister believes that the other person lacks the necessary resources to address her own problems (with appropriate support from the minister). In other words, the

dangers of advising are either that the minister will make himself indispensable or that he will force the other person into a position where she needs to reject his advice in order to maintain her autonomy. The advice itself may be good advice, but the advisory role of the minister is perceived as a threat.

Understanding-Probing. If the *understanding* response is intended to communicate the minister's understanding and, in effect, to inquire whether this understanding is accurate, the *probing* response takes this a step further and suggests that there are aspects to the problem or issue that are not yet understood or understandable. If the *understanding* response observes "an apparent absence of any good reason for" the daughter's feelings toward her father, the *probing* response wants to know why she has these feelings. It seeks an explanation for what so far has not been adequately explained. Ministers who are primarily oriented toward understanding, who see themselves as *understanding*, nonjudgmental persons, may find that their efforts to be understanding sometimes shade over into efforts to *probe* for explanations. They are capable of making *understanding* responses–"You are saying that..."–but they are also aware of a small, insistent voice in their minds that is saying to them, "I wonder why she has these feelings toward her father? What is causing this? Could it be that her 'reasons' for why she should not have these feelings are actually inadequate, that they are hiding other reasons why she *should* have these feelings toward her father?"

One reason why *understanding* responses have been so highly valued in the pastoral counseling field (as Clinebell's comment that they should predominate in the rapport-building phase indicates) is that ministers have had a tendency to move too quickly into *probing* responses. These responses, in turn, often cause the person who has asked for counsel to become defensive. As noted, a *probing* response, especially if it is made in the tone-setting phase of the conversation, is likely to be experienced as threatening. The *probing* response that I have offered here–"What is happening between the two of you? What situations trigger them? Do they begin with an argument or conflict?"–could, for example, threaten the woman's need to idealize her father, because her own positive self-image may be dependent on the fact that she is the daughter of a father who is a good minister and thus revered by others. An *understanding* response–"The apparent absence of any good reason for your feelings concerns and troubles you"–is more tentative, more provisional, more simply based on what she has already more-or-less said, inviting her to go in the very direction that the *probing* response suggests or implies, but at her own pace and in her own way.

It is true, of course, that a conversation consisting only of "What I hear you saying" responses can be maddening to the other. A good case in point is the following set of interchanges between a minister and a sixty-eight-year-old woman who had recently suffered the deaths of her husband and father (Cryer and Vayhinger, 1962, pp. 71–73).

> Mrs. O.: Living here alone doesn't seem to be working out at all. Ever since my father died and my husband, just a short time later, I've been left all alone. I don't know if I can take it. My children all want someone to stay here with me. I just don't know.
>
> Minister: The death of your father, then your husband, so close together, has left you feeling lonely, and your children all want you to have someone stay here with you, is that it?
>
> Mrs. O.: Yes, that's it. I just feel that the responsibility of taking care of a house is too much.
>
> Minister: The responsibility of caring for the house seems too much for you, is that it?
>
> Mrs. O.: It's all such a care and I am all alone, but I know that it is all up to me. It is such a hard task, and lonely, but I'll have to bear it alone.
>
> Minister: You feel that all of the care and responsibility is left upon your own shoulders and that the task ahead must be met alone.
>
> Mrs. O.: Yes, that's it, I must handle these things alone.
>
> Minister: You feel, then, that these things must definitely be done by you?
>
> Mrs. O.: Yes. No one can work them out for me.
>
> Minister: No one else can work them out for you, is that it?

This minister, obviously attempting to be a good, "client-centered" counselor, was pleased with the fact that he avoided the temptation to give "a good sermon on the fatherhood of God during those times throughout the interview that seemed to call for spiritualizing" and instead "managed to maintain the internal frame of reference," the latter being the term that Carl Rogers employed to convey the counselor's effort to "perceive the world as the client sees it" (Rogers, 1951, p. 29). His tendency to parrot Mrs. O. and then repeat the query, "Is that it?" (a phrase she soon finds herself adopting) belies this claim, however, and it also shows–by way of negative example–that good *understanding*

responses help to move the conversation forward. A sign that one is using too many *understanding* responses, that there is insufficient variation in one's responses, is the sense that the conversation is not going anywhere, that the two parties involved seem to be spinning their wheels. When this happens, it is very likely that a *probing* response *is* called for, or that one should turn to a more *interpretive* mode.

Interpretive-Evaluative. If the *interpretive* response is intended to teach, impart meaning, or explain why, the *evaluative* response takes this a step further and expresses a judgment concerning the relative appropriateness or effectiveness of the other person's thoughts, feelings, or behavior. In effect, one communicates to the other: "This is what I think you are doing and why you are doing it (interpretive), and, on the basis of this interpretation, I think what you are doing is good (for such-and-such reason) or not good (for such-and-such reason)." Ministers who view themselves as primarily *interpreters* (for example, preachers or teachers) are likely to be most comfortable with this way of communicating. Some ministers can do this effectively without undermining the conversational milieu itself.

In the case of the daughter of the minister, the counseling minister's *interpretive* response notes (as does the *understanding* response) the seeming "discrepancy" between the woman's portrayal of her father and her hateful feelings toward him, and gently suggests that they might focus on this apparent discrepancy. Other words, of course, might have been used. Some readers might prefer "a disconnect," while others might prefer "a gap." The goal would be to note the issue itself while avoiding language that might seem judgmental or critical. "Inconsistency," "conflict," or "confusion," all of which may be true, are likely to seem more judgmental, and thus to provoke a counter-defense.

The *evaluative* response, however, *does* contain a note of judgment or critique, though it is directed not toward her but toward her father: "That he is a minister and hasn't actually struck you physically does not necessarily mean that he hasn't done anything to warrant your hateful feelings toward him. If you consider some of the ways that he has possibly mistreated you, you may find that at least some of these feelings are warranted." The suggestion that she may in fact have grounds for hating her father has been put forward, and the way has been opened for her to consider the appropriateness of her feelings toward him. Maybe he *is* subject not only to psychological critique (i.e., he has not been as faithful to the responsibilities of a father as he should have been) but also moral judgment (i.e., he is guilty of wrongdoing).

I assume that most persons who read the daughter's statement have much the same reaction as this *evaluative* response suggests, that they suspect that her father *has* done something to warrant these feelings of hers, that these feelings are not unprovoked. Some may feel this so strongly that they consider the evaluative response presented here to be too tentative or too tepid: "Her father's a tyrant!" In any case, because we tend to respond this way, we make, in effect, two evaluations, one of her father (whom we consider culpable, though we do not yet know why), and one of her (who seems unable to see that her explanations for why she should not feel this way leave many unanswered questions and open up many alternative explanations). We are probably correct in this initial judgment, but we *do* need to be aware that we have, in fact, made an evaluative comment based on very little empirical evidence. There is a chance, for example, that hateful feelings arising from some other cause or source have been displaced onto her father. If so, they *do* have an explanation, but not one for which the father himself is culpable. In that case, the *evaluative* response has taken a wrong turn, and, if so, the minister needs to remain open to correction.

In my experience, seminarians have a distinct tendency to make *evaluative* responses and to make them in the tone-setting phase of the conversation. Often these are simple expressions such as, "It's okay for you to feel this way," or "Good for you," or "I'm proud of you." These statements, explicitly or implicitly, offer an evaluation of the thoughts, emotions, or behavior of the other person. Although they may seem to the speaker to be a *supportive* response, one that offers reassurance, they carry some evaluative freight that may be detrimental to the conversation. Why? Because they substitute evaluation for understanding, and in doing so, they fail to enter into the experiential world of the other in its fullness or complexity. If the woman in this example were to be told, "It's okay for you to feel this way about your father," a large part of her experiential world would be denied, namely, the part that believes it is *not* okay for her to feel this way because it seems unjustified or wrong. Also, she may wonder on what grounds the person she is now talking with makes this ostensibly supportive (but actually evaluative) statement. Is the minister speaking on his own behalf? Is he speaking in the name of God? The very fact that it is possible to raise such questions as these supports the view that *evaluative* responses should be used selectively.

Another concern is that an *evaluative* response–"It's okay to feel this way," "Good for you," or "I'm proud of you"–*can* come across to the

other person as paternalistic, maternalistic, big-brotherish, or big-sisterish. Some persons may react negatively to what they perceive to be a certain presumption that seems to inform such statements: "Who gave you the right to say that it is okay for me to feel this way or that what I have said or done is praiseworthy?" Some future ministers (perhaps especially those who are elder brothers and sisters or are the high achievers in their families of origin) may have developed the habit of praising others for their achievements and may not recognize that these others resent the presumption that stands behind these seemingly innocent remarks. Learning to create a conversation based on understanding may require these future ministers to abstain from such words of support and praise and to develop a way of communicating that is less likely to cause offense.

None of this means, of course, that the minister has no right to make evaluations as to the goodness or correctness of the other person's thoughts, emotions, or behavior. If psychotherapists make evaluative comments, then surely ministers may too. In fact, there has been a whole spate of literature on the minister as "moral counselor" (for example, Browning, 1976; Noyce, 1989) that argues this very point. My point here, though, is that an *interpretive* response—which, as we have seen, *can* be confrontational—is usually preferable to a more overtly *evaluative* response, as it allows the other person to make her own evaluations. The minister's suggestion that there is an apparent "discrepancy" between her portrayal of her father and her feelings toward him should be sufficient encouragement for her to make her own evaluation.

Inappropriate responses. The figure above also indicates three types of responses that are not conducive to a good, productive conversation between the minister and the person who has asked for counsel. These responses are on a continuum with the six responses already noted. As *supportive* responses may go a step further toward *advising* responses, so advising responses may go further yet and become *controlling.* Similarly, *understanding* responses may move toward *probing* responses, and these may go further and become *impatient* responses. In the same way, *interpretive* responses may move toward *evaluative* responses, and these may go a step beyond evaluation and become *moralistic.*

This movement across the continuum frequently occurs in communication between parents and children, teachers and students, and spouses. A mother, for example, may have a genuine desire to support her teenage daughter as she struggles to figure out what to do with her life. In the early stages of their conversation together, she may

offer *supportive* reassurances, "I know that you'll find your way. After all, you are my daughter, and I've raised you to be strong and resourceful." As the conversation continues, and her daughter does not seem responsive to these reassurances–"Mother, I'm just so confused and mixed-up"–her mother may respond to her helplessness with an *advising* response, "Well, maybe you should go and see the guidance counselor and also talk with the youth minister at church. They may have some really good ideas." Her daughter may react to this advice, "I don't think it will do any good. They don't really know me, and they only care about the more popular kids who have promising futures." At this point, the mother–anxious about her daughter's low opinion of herself and unwillingness to act on her advice–may move to a more *controlling* response: "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll call the guidance counselor first thing tomorrow morning and ask her to make an appointment to see you. Then, just to be sure she followed up on this, I'll call later in the day to find out how it went." In the movement across the continuum, the mother has gone from reassuring her daughter that she has the strength and resourcefulness to see the problem through to arranging the solution and checking to see if there was compliance with it. In effect, the reassurances at the beginning of the conversation have been nullified at the end.

With regard to the case that we have been discussing, the following illustrates what I mean by *controlling, impatient,* and *moralistic* responses.

> *Controlling:* "You have feelings about your father that you wish you didn't have. I know a really great method for getting rid of negative thoughts and feelings. I'll help you work through the steps–there are seven of them, and you do one step per week. Sounds good, huh?"
>
> *Impatient:* "If you are saying that there is no good reason for you to have hateful feelings toward your father, why don't you just get rid of them? If you let them fester as you've been doing, they will turn you into a bitter and unhappy woman."
>
> *Moralistic:* "Your guilt is telling you that it is wrong for you to have these hateful feelings toward your father. As you yourself said, your father is a good person. He doesn't deserve these bad feelings you have for him from his own flesh and blood. Think of all he's sacrificed for you. Let's see what we can do to correct your feelings toward him."

I have written these responses so as to make the point that they are on a continuum with the other two responses with which they are related on the chart. Thus, the *controlling* response is ostensibly *supportive*, as it recognizes the woman's deep concern about the feelings she has toward her father and what they are doing to her and their relationship. This *is* supportive. But then it goes on to recommend a method that, with the assistance of the minister, should enable her to divest herself of her negative feelings in seven weeks. This recommendation is undoubtedly well-intentioned, but it puts the woman into the position of either accepting the minister's plan for dealing with these hateful feelings or leaving the conversation altogether. This is what makes it controlling. Conceivably, the very reason she has these hateful feelings toward her father is that *his* goodness is also of the controlling kind. She may feel, then, that in seeking this minister out, she has been confronted with simply more of the same. Her decision not to accept the minister's offer may therefore produce additional guilt: "There must be something wrong with me for resisting such kind, well-intentioned attention."

A clue to the fact that his response is controlling is that it has gone beyond his *advising* response, that her options seemed to be to either try to get rid of the feelings she has toward her father or see if there is some explanation for them. The *advising* response indicated his openness to taking either course she thought best, but expressed the opinion that "the second approach is preferable because you and I find these hateful feelings of yours rather mystifying." Now, the minister is taking the further step of telling her that there is one course that he would recommend and presenting the plan with no input from her whatsoever. It could, of course, be argued that if he knows a surefire method for solving her problem it would be unethical for him to withhold it from her. In this case, however, he is leaving her no choice in the matter. It is his way, or no way. He has not only blocked the option of "trying to see if there is some explanation" for her feelings but any other option–a possible third that he (or she) has not thought of–as well.

The *impatient* response is ostensibly based on *understanding*, for the minister does express concern that she will become "a bitter and unhappy woman." But the tone of the response undermines this attempt to express understanding. The genuine concern he has expressed over her struggle to make sense of the fact that her feelings are incongruent with her perception of her father has given way to a need to get the problem solved as expeditiously as possible. A clue to the fact that the minister's response is an impatient one is that it goes beyond the *probing*

response, which asked her to tell him more about how these feelings emerge (What situations trigger them? Arguments? Conflicts?), by implying that such probing may take time and effort and may not, in any case, yield very much. Why not, then, simply cut to the chase and get her from point A to point B? The tone of the response–just get rid of these feelings; otherwise they will turn you into a bitter woman–suggests the need to act posthaste, that time is against her, and the sooner she gets over this problem and gets on with her life the better. There is also the implication that the relational dynamics between the woman and her father need not be considered, that the counseling minister–to save time and trouble?–is quite happy to take at face value her comment that she has no reason to have these feelings toward her father. If this is the case, these feelings serve no useful purpose. Conceivably, the impatience expressed in this response is shared by the woman herself. Perhaps she fended off his earlier *probing* responses ("I don't want to get into all that"), or previous experience has taught him that the persons who come to him for counsel resist, even resent, his desire to probe. "I didn't come here to be psychoanalyzed, I wanted you to listen and then suggest something I can do." But such experiences, no matter how discouraging they may have been, do not justify the impatient response presented here. Nor does the fact that the other person is impatient mean that the minister should accommodate her, especially if he knows that "getting rid of these feelings," even if successful, will have other consequences (for example, cause her to develop physical symptoms that appear equally mystifying).

As we will see later in this chapter, a strong case can and has been made that ministers should employ brief counseling approaches in their role as counselors. One can be an advocate of brief counseling, however, and not endorse the impatient "just get it out of your system" response indicated here.

The *moralistic* response is an extension of the *interpretive* mode, as it focuses on what the woman's guilt is telling her, and interprets this as an indication that her hateful feelings are wrong (and does not entertain the possibility that her guilt itself is wrong). It implies that an *evaluation* has already taken place, that is, that her statements about not having any good reason to hate her father are reliable, and that her feelings toward him are therefore inappropriate. What this moralistic statement adds is the judgment that her father does not deserve this, especially from his own daughter, and adds the caveat that he has made sacrifices for her: "Is this any way to repay your father for his

kindness toward you?" A correction of her feelings is needed, and the minister offers to assist her in doing so.

The *evaluative* response presented earlier suggested that her father may have done something "to warrant your hateful feelings toward him." The *moralistic* response presented here places the onus on her. Does this mean that this response is moralistic simply because it makes a judgment against her and not her father? No. A *moralistic* response could also have been made by taking the earlier *evaluative* response a step or two further. It might, for example, suggest that she has every reason to have hateful feelings toward her father because she wouldn't have these feelings "unless he had mistreated you," adding, "We need to uncover these bad things that he has done to you." Where the earlier *evaluative* statement was cautious, suggesting that he has "possibly mistreated you" and that "at least some of these feelings are warranted," a *moralistic* response would condemn her father without any supporting evidence. What makes this and the other response moralistic is that character judgments are being made on the basis of few, if any, facts. Why assume that her father "doesn't deserve this, especially from his own daughter"? Why assume that he has done "bad things" to her? As noted above, what if her hateful feelings derive from the fact that his goodness and kindness are experienced by her as controlling?

Controlling, impatient, and *moralistic* responses are inappropriate in a conversation between a minister and a person who has sought her counsel. If a minister finds herself making these kinds of responses, she should ask herself why she is doing so, and whether she is doing this with only one or two of the persons for whom she is providing counsel or with several or all of them. It may be that one person simply evokes the worst in her. If so, this very fact may provide a valuable insight into that person, as it may be that he has a similar effect on other persons too. She should also, though, engage in introspection in order to discover why this person *does* have this effect on her. Specifically, "Why am I responding in a controlling, impatient, or moralistic manner to what this particular individual says?" Very possibly, these responses reveal anxieties (as discussed in chapter 1) that are activated by this individual and no other. If, on the other hand, the minister finds that he is responding controllingly, impatiently, or moralistically with virtually everyone with whom he has conversations in which he is in the counselor role, this also calls for introspection, but with a different question in mind: "Why am I responding in virtually all my conversations in a controlling, or impatient, or moralistic way?"

This question is especially important for the minister to ask himself if he is not typically this way. Some persons are controlling, impatient, or moralistic by nature, and, certainly, some of these persons are found among the clergy. Unless, through training and/or life experiences, they are able to change (working, as it were, from the right side to the left side of the chart), they are unlikely to make good listeners and good conversation partners. But if the minister is normally oriented toward the appropriate or selectively employed responses, the fact that she has changed invites exploration. Why has her usual tendency to offer *supportive, understanding,* or *interpretive* responses given way to *controlling, impatient,* or *moralistic* responses? What is going on in her life that is causing this alteration in her normal manner of responding to persons who have asked her to listen to them? Could it be that she resents being the listener all the time ("I wish someone would listen to me for once")? Could she be suffering from apathy, depression, fatigue, restlessness? To discover whether this is the case, she may want to conduct an "internal conversation" not unlike those she has with persons she counsels, and alternately assume the position of "listener" and "listened to." Or she may need to talk to a trusted friend about the problem, for a friend may be more willing to be honest and take risks than her husband or significant other, who wants above all to be supportive of her. (On the tendency of ministers *not* to be introspective when writing their own pastoral care cases, see Capps and Fowler, 2001, chap. 6).

I have given quite a lot of attention to the types of responses that ministers should–and should not–employ in conversations with persons who seek their counsel because responding, like listening, is integral to any good conversation, and the "pastoral conversation" is no exception. By identifying specific types of responses, even though this may seem rather artificial, readers may practice making the kinds of responses that have received great support over the years in courses in pastoral care and counseling and in clinical pastoral education programs. They may also find that the correlations presented in the chart are self-revealing, as they may discover that they tend to prefer one of these types of responses over the other two. This, in turn, may help them to identify their particular strengths but also the potential dangers in their preferred approach. No particular judgment is implied here regarding which "model" is the most or least preferable, though, understandably, some persons who seek a minister's counsel will prefer one over the other, and certain situations may, in fact, make one or the other the preferred approach. The minister who is able to employ the full range of

appropriate and selectively used responses is likely to be more helpful, other things being equal. I have indicated by the use of arrows on the left side of the chart on page 63 that the minister should make every effort to use supportive, understanding, *and* interpretive responses, as these can often be mutually reinforcing.

Types of Conversations

Having discussed the types of responses that occur in conversations between ministers and those who seek or require their counsel, I now want to turn to Gaylord Noyce's suggestion that there are essentially four types of conversations (1981, pp. 9–11). These types are not limited to those that occur between a minister and a parishioner, as they are typical of all conversations, and perhaps especially of conversations between friends. What I want to suggest is that the minister can be especially aware of what type of conversation is expected or desirable, and thus allow or enable the conversation to take this form rather than one of the others. In this way, the minister shapes the conversation, giving it a form or structure, but in a way that is unobtrusive and, like the banks of a river, facilitates the conversational flow:

1. *Turning-point:* A person is at a junction in life, trying to make a decision, and feels that a talk with the minister may help to bring clarity and identify an appropriate course of action.
2. *Shared self-disclosure:* The minister and the person she is talking with move to a new level of mutual understanding because one or both reveals something about herself that was not previously known.
3. *Growing edge exchange:* The interests of one person and the competence of the other are in such resonance that both learn from the conversation.
4. *Rehearsal:* Conversation that enables the participants to share, celebrate, or remember certain events.

Because *rehearsal* not only has the connotation of recounting a previous experience (this is essentially how Noyce uses the word), but also, and more popularly, the connotation of a practice for a future performance, I suggest that we replace the term *rehearsal* with *recollection.* In this way, there is less likelihood of its being confused with the *turning-point* conversation, which is very likely to involve rehearsal of a decision that has not yet been made.

Noyce suggests that the *turning-point* conversation is not one in which "someone else tells us what to do but that the person facilitates our own decision, quite possibly not even realizing what a help he or she is being at the time" (1981, p. 9). He relates the time when he was making a professional decision–whether to move or to stay where he was. A single comment in a conversation with a friend was so helpful that he has often recalled it when faced with other tough decisions. When decisions are hard for him, he is tempted to think that one way is "right" and the other is "wrong," and he begins to fear that he will make the "wrong" one. Then paralysis sets in, and the decision gets even harder to make: "What if I make the wrong decision and regret it the rest of my life?" As he was struggling with the decision of whether to move or stay where he was, the friend said to him, "Gaylord, you'll be happy either way." For Noyce, "this was like a word of grace, lifting a hidden burden from my shoulders" (p. 10).

A turning-point conversation in which the minister is asked to give counsel often occurs when the other person has become, or is on the verge of becoming, paralyzed. It can be a decision, like Noyce's, about whether to take a new position or remain where he is. It might also be a decision about whether to remain in an unhappy marriage or to seek a legal separation. Or the adult child of an elderly parent may be struggling with the decision of whether to place him in a long-term care facility. These examples may imply that turning-point conversations are only about momentous decisions that will be life-changing for one or more of the persons involved, but what makes this a turning-point conversation is not so much the momentousness of the decision itself, but the fact that the other person (or persons) is feeling conflicted and hopes that by talking with the minister she will be helped toward resolving the conflict.

The response of Noyce's friend was a *supportive* one, as it reassured him that whatever he decided would turn out okay for him. This supportive comment arrested the paralyzing mode of thinking into which he had been sinking–right versus wrong–and offered the reassuring thought that, in fact, either course he took would be the "right" one. It is as if one were to revise the last two lines of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" (Frost, p. 105) from "I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference" to read, "I took the one road rather than the other, / But I would have been happy either way." This revision replaces the original version's sense of the fatefulness of the decision to take the less traveled road and the implication that the other

road would have been "wrong" for Frost, and offers the more reassuring–if less dramatic–thought that the traveler was choosing between two fine alternatives, either of which would have been "right" for him. That the response of Noyce's friend was supportive is reflected in the fact that it was like a word of grace lifting a hidden burden from Noyce's shoulders.

Note that his friend was content to offer a supportive response and did not take the additional step of advising Noyce what to do. He did not tell his friend that he should stay put nor did he tell him he should accept the offer to go elsewhere. Conceivably, Noyce's recital of the pros and cons of the two alternatives gave his friend the sense that one was better than the other, or that Noyce was already leaning one way or the other, but, if so, he did not advise him either way. Nor, of course, did he take the even further step of trying to control Noyce: "You need to stay where you are. Think of your obligations to your family and to your employer. To ask your wife to leave her job, your children to leave their friends, and to leave your employer in the lurch would not be fair to them. I really don't think you have any other choice." The fact that his friend's supportive response lifted his burden and has been invoked many times since is itself evidence that the further step of advising him what to do, much less a response that attempted to exert control, was unnecessary, and might well have been counter-productive, as it would have been an endorsement of the paralyzing right versus wrong mode of thinking about these matters from which he needed to free himself.

While the friend's response was a supportive one, it also expressed *understanding*. He could not have given Noyce this reassurance if he had not already understood what his friend was going through by entering empathically into Noyce's own experiential world of perplexity and immobilization. He was also, one suspects, drawing on his knowledge of the kind of person that Noyce was, the fact that his friend was not the sort of person to bemoan the decision he eventually made or to punish himself for it if things did not turn out as well as he had hoped. Thus, the friend knew that Noyce's own intentionality would play a role in making whatever course he decided on a "happy" one.

The response was also *interpretive*. "You'll be happy either way" is an interpretation based on what Noyce had already told him about his choices. If Noyce were not genuinely perplexed, but had already made his decision, he would probably have presented the two alternatives in such a way as to communicate that one was clearly superior to the other. That he had not done so is reflected in his friend's interpretation of what he had heard, "There are good things about both, and you are the type

of person who will seize upon these good things and not let yourself succumb to regrets about what might have been." Incidentally, the friend here has employed the method of presenting a third alternative for breaking an immobilizing interpretive frame based on "either-or" thinking (see Capps, 1998, p. 105ff).

Thus, it may be that the friend's comment was so helpful to Noyce because it actually reflected all three of the almost always appropriate responses presented in the chart on page 63. As the arrows indicate, the response moved up and down instead of across, thus reflecting the supportive-understanding-interpretive atmosphere of the conversation as a whole. No advising-probing-evaluative responses seemed to be needed in order for Noyce to feel that a word of grace had been spoken.

Noyce illustrates the second type of conversation–*shared self-disclosure*–by referring to another conversation with a friend, one in which a friend said, with a happy note of surprise, "I guess I have just told you more about my present vocational ambivalence than I have told anyone but my therapist." Noyce adds, "This was no counseling session, but a walk along a city street" (1981, p. 10). Of course, this illustration indicates that, unlike the previous example, it was the friend and not Noyce who had made a significant self-disclosure. The fact that the previous illustration also involved self-disclosure indicates that self-disclosure is likely to be a feature of turning-point conversations as well, but here the emphasis is not on a decision that is hanging in the balance, but on the self-disclosure itself. As Noyce puts it, the disclosure leads the two persons to "a new level of mutual understanding" (p. 10).

This new level of mutual understanding is what a shared self-disclosure conversation is principally about. The friend in this case has entrusted Noyce with information about himself and his experiential world–that of vocational ambivalence–previously shared with only one other person, his therapist. That Noyce has remembered his friend's statement is itself evidence that he was honored, not made uncomfortable, by this self-disclosure. Noyce could have been saying to himself as the two of them parted, "He must view me as a pretty important friend in his life to have shared with me things he has only shared with his therapist." He might also have found himself thinking, "The fact that he mentioned his therapist tells me that the mutual understanding we have experienced is similar to, but different from, the relationship he has with his therapist." Noyce would be wise, in other words, to honor the difference and not use these disclosures as warrant for him to shift, however imperceptibly, from friend to therapist.

Noyce does not say what his response was to his friend's comment, but the fact that he suggests that the shared self-disclosure type of conversation leads to a new level of mutual understanding indicates that *understanding* responses are likely to be prominent in conversations of this type. Conceivably, Noyce responded to these self-disclosures wordlessly, or with a brief "I see" or "That's very interesting." One would expect, however, that he would have said something in return, indicating that he had understood the degree or depth of his friend's "present vocational ambivalence." He might have said, "You're really struggling with what you should be doing with your life," or "It's like being pulled in various directions at once," or "Your thoughts about your vocation in life are in something of a turmoil." The words *struggle, pulled,* and *turmoil* communicate the listener's effort to understand the speaker's experiential world from the inside, from where the feelings themselves reside.

Conceivably, Noyce might be prompted to go beyond understanding responses to probing ones, but, because he is a friend, and because they are walking along the street, he may well leave the probing to his friend's therapist, and remain content to respond on an understanding basis only. By responding with understanding comments such as these, he communicates his desire to be an interested, invested listener, thus forestalling any subsequent regrets his friend might have about having revealed so much about himself, while at the same time avoiding the questioning tone of a probing response. Also, as with our discussion of the turning-point conversation, in which a very supportive response proved to be one of understanding and an interpretive one as well, the understanding tone of these suggested responses would more than likely communicate support: "I feel your struggle, and I hope that *you* feel my solidarity with you." They are also likely to come across as mildly interpretive. These responses may, in fact, have led the friend to recognize, more profoundly than he had before, that his problem was one of "vocational ambivalence," that this was the interpretive framework within which this conversation could be viewed. Thus, as the chart on page 63 indicates, an essentially understanding mode of response may also shade into the supportive and interpretive.

Noyce illustrates *growing edge exchanges* with an account of an evening he spent with two biologists talking about evolution and genetic mutations. They also talked about the "necessary assumptions of causation that science makes and the limitations this process presents when it comes to understanding meaning and purpose–the science and

religion issue." He concludes, "We helped each other learn through conversation in an exciting evening of talk" (p. 10). While this conversation differed from the previous two in that a personal struggle was not involved, it nonetheless indicates how a conversation between a minister and another person who seeks her counsel might be a *growing-edge exchange.* In *The Pastoral Care Case* (2001), Gene Fowler and I relate the actual story of a parishioner (Bob) who had listened intently to the minister's sermon on the Nicodemus story (John 3:1–21) and had requested a meeting with him so that they could discuss what it really means to be "born again." The initial meeting was followed by a second one, both of which were growing-edge exchanges for both men.

Because their conversation was prompted by a sermon on a biblical text, it was perhaps inevitable that the minister would be called on to make a series of *interpretive* responses. The questions that were in Bob's mind were not unlike those of Nicodemus himself. He wanted to know if what he had already experienced might qualify as having been "born again," though he doubted that this was the case. He also wanted to know if his "faith" was adequate as it was, though he acknowledged having a yearning for something more. As interpreter, the minister replied to Bob's questions with some theological distinctions that he had found personally helpful. In the give-and-take that followed, he did not take the further step of evaluating the quality of Bob's faith, though he accepted Bob's own perception that there was "something missing" or "lacking" in it. Nor did he resort to moralizing responses, suggesting, for example, that the present state of Bob's faith was "inadequate" or "immature." In response to the minister's theological interpretations, which centered on "born againness" being more a process than a single episode, Bob gave an account of what he took to be religious experiences–times of profound gratitude to God–that occurred in his walks in the Maine woods. These accounts prompted the minister to reread some essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson that he had read in college, ostensibly to learn more about where his parishioners were coming from, but also because he found something personally compelling in Bob's account of his experiences in nature. Like Noyce in his conversation with the two biologists, both minister and parishioner were enriched by these exchanges.

If the general mode of response in this case was one of interpretation–offering theological insights and clarifications–the two conversations they had about what it means to be "born again" were also experienced as ones in which the minister was supportive and understanding. His

interpretive responses carried a note of reassurance ("There is nothing fundamentally wrong with your faith") and of understanding ("These are perplexing issues for me as well, and I will therefore draw on what our church teaches and how I have tried to understand these teachings in my own faith journey"). Thus, as in the two previous types of conversation, the minister in this *growing-edge exchange* moved up and down the left column, augmenting interpretive responses with expressions of support and understanding.

Growing-edge exchanges are not necessarily limited to those involving theological or explicitly religious issues. They may also be about child-rearing, education, health issues, political issues, and so forth. One would assume, however, that the parishioner would raise the subject because she is seeking information or knowledge about something that is currently troubling her. The ensuing conversation may, in turn, lead to new perceptions and insights that the minister might not otherwise have. For example, the minister who is asked by a gay parishioner for help in understanding his church's objection to same-sex unions (an issue that *could* have come up in the above exchange, because Bob's daughter had actually left the denomination because it did not approve of lesbian relationships) may, in turn, learn something about why gay and lesbian couples would want a ceremony celebrating and endorsing their unions. The two individuals may not come to a common understanding as a result of a single conversation, but, as in Noyce's exchange with the two biologists, one or both may leave feeling more energized and alive than he has felt in a long time.

Noyce indicates that what I am calling the *recollective* type of conversation is one in which common memories are shared, especially by those who were eyewitnesses to them but also by others who were not present at the time but who are presumed to be interested in what happened. He cites the experience of the Kennedy assassination weekend, or of growing up in the '30s, or '50s, or '70s. These conversations are significant "not so much because a decision is facilitated, a relationship suddenly deepened, or something interesting learned, but because life is shared through them, and life shared is good, even if the things talked over are painful or sad" (1981, pp. 10–11).

Conversations of this type involving a minister may be prompted by the anniversary of the death of someone the other person (or persons) cherished, or perhaps by an elderly person's desire to talk about events or experiences in her past. Some conversations of this type may be solely for the purpose of taking a trip down memory lane, but there are times

when the recollective conversation has a note of urgency. For example (the following case is from Cryer and Vayhinger, 1962, pp. 60–62), a 68-year-old woman was dying of cancer. She had been a good church person, and apparently her minister was making regular pastoral visits to her home. But one Sunday after church, her son asked his own minister to call. She seems to have wanted her son's minister to visit her because she was preparing to relate an experience that she did not want her own minister to know about.

After he entered her room and sat down, she began, "I suppose you know I'm going to die?" Their conversation continued for a brief moment on how she would miss the beautiful things in life, and then she began to focus on her concern:

> Mrs. A: You know, Reverend, lying in bed waiting to die has some good points. I've been thinking. It's all so silly–I mean, life–its arguments, feuds, and all. It's all so silly when you think about it.
>
> Minister: It's easy to place the stress at the wrong point in life, I suppose.
>
> Mrs. A: Oh, how true. Sometimes I feel like laughing at my life. When I think of the heartaches and tears and worries, I just feel like laughing. Isn't it in the Bible, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity"?

Their conversation shifted briefly to her awareness that she was dying and then returned to her past life:

> Mrs. A.: If we could only relive parts of our lives again.
>
> Minister: You feel there might have been times when you could have been different?
>
> Mrs. A.: Yes, I know you'll think it's silly, Reverend, but for a long time I've been president of our women's group, almost twenty years, I guess. And once, when the others were going to consider another president, I did a terrible thing. I let them think the other woman was not good enough. Now she's gone, poor soul, and I keep thinking about it. It wasn't very Christian was it, Reverend?

The minister agreed, but assured her that the greatness of our faith is that "there is always room for failures," for "forgiveness is part of God's

nature." She replied in a tired voice, "I guess we all sin at times, and I suppose that forgiveness is ours." Sensing her tiredness and feeling there was not much more he could do on this visit, the minister proposed prayer and said the Lord's Prayer. When he finished, she responded, "Even the Lord's Prayer sounds different now." As he got up to go she added, "I hope I haven't bored you." He assured her that she had not.

This woman's recollection of the time when she defamed another woman in order to retain the presidency of the women's group raised for her the spectre of the vanity or absurdity of life, and it also seemed to be an episode in her life from which she sought some kind of peace or release before she died. The minister's response was meant to be supportive, providing reassurance that "failures" like this are encompassed by the forgiveness of God, whose very nature it is to forgive. One assumes that, as the Lord's Prayer was spoken, she heard the words, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," and made this prayer her own. Thus, what may have seemed a rather unoriginal pastoral intervention–the recitation of the Lord's Prayer–appears to have offered the very support she needed.

This example is noteworthy, however, for its use of interpretive and understanding responses as well. When the minister says, "It's easy to place the stress at the wrong point in life, I suppose" or "You feel there might have been times when you could have been different?" he is attempting to respond in an understanding way, entering to the best of his ability into her own experiential world. And when he says that "being a Christian is very difficult" and "it seems to me that we are bound to fail once in a while," he is making statements that move, if ever so slightly, from understanding to interpretive responses. The most important interpretive response, however, is his observation that "forgiveness is part of God's nature," a statement that not only reassures but also teaches, imparts meaning, or offers an explanation.

Thus, here, as with the three earlier conversation types, the minister moves up and down the left column responses, sometimes responding supportively, other times understandingly, and still other times in an interpretive mode. Under other circumstances, he might have used one or more of the more selectively employed responses–advising, probing, evaluating–but this particular *recollective* conversation was not the time for that. Of course, until her own response to his recitation of the Lord's Prayer, we would probably have concluded that his efforts to be supportive, understanding, and relevantly interpretive had not penetrated

her sense of life's absurdity and her guilt–and shame–for having defamed the other woman's character in order to win what seemed like such an insignificant prize. But even if she had not said that the "Lord's Prayer sounds different now," it would not mean that she would necessarily have been helped by his having taken a step in the advising, probing, and/or evaluative direction.

One important value of Noyce's typology of conversations is that it shows that the kinds of conversations that occur between friends are essentially the same kinds of conversations that occur when ministers assume the counselor role. Turning-point, shared self-disclosure, growing-edge exchanges, and recollective conversations compose the bulk of conversations between ministers and persons requesting or requiring counsel. There are, however, qualitative differences between conversations between friends and what Noyce calls "pastoral conversations." A major difference is that the minister makes a conscious effort to give pastoral conversations a structure that may not be present in conversations between friends.

The Structure of the Conversation

Having discussed types of responses and types of conversations, I would now like to consider how the conversation, whatever type it may be, might be structured. In a practicum in client-centered counseling in which I was involved in graduate school, a student asked, "What if a counselee begins to weep very late in the scheduled fifty-minute appointment? Is it appropriate to allow the session to run over so that she has time to regain her composure?" The answer that our instructor gave surprised us. He said, "It rarely happens. If the counselee weeps, she will almost always do so in the middle of the session so that she allows *herself* time to regain her composure." This response elicited several comments that indicated many students were not convinced: "Isn't it possible that she may be weeping late in the session in order to manipulate us into allowing her more than her allotted time?" "Isn't it possible that she will begin exploring some very deep issues toward the end of the session, and these cause her to lose her composure?" The therapist-instructor who was leading the session agreed that these things are possible and that they do happen on occasion. He contended, however, that, by and large, the students could count on the point he was making about the counselee's own sense of timing. The anxiety behind the original question was not without foundation but was probably exaggerated. Instead, we should trust the process.

I relate this story because it suggests that there is a natural structure to a conversation, one that both parties to the conversation are implicitly aware of. Yet, surprisingly little has been written in the pastoral care and counseling literature about the structure of the "pastoral conversation." Many resources deal with the structure of a worship service, and considerable debate has ensued over how the service should be structured. Normally, the conversation in which a minister provides counsel is of roughly the same duration as the typical Sunday morning worship service. This temporal similarity between worshiping and counseling suggests that attention should also be given to the structure of the pastoral conversation. (Premarital counseling is a possible exception. Stahmann and Hiebert [1997, pp. 51–52] recommend one and one-half- to two-hour sessions.)

I recall my first few conversations with parishioners in my first parish assignment. I had learned some things about responsive listening, but I did not have a clue as to how the conversation itself was supposed to unfold. I found myself asking rather helplessly, "What am I to do after I have listened attentively?" I recall one rather fumbling attempt to conclude a conversation: "I hope you have found it useful to have been listened to," which elicited the reply, "Oh, yes, it has been very helpful." Then there was an awkward silence during which several gambits came to mind: I could say a prayer; I could ask her if she wanted to talk again some time; or I could get up and begin ushering her to the door. I chose the latter, not because I had anything against prayer, or because I was reluctant to schedule another conversation at some later date, but largely out of some anxiety that, because we had already been talking a full hour, I really shouldn't keep her any longer. After she left, I said to myself, "Well, I guess I won't be seeing *her* again." Then I remembered something that one of the salesmen told me when I was washing cars at a used car lot: "The toughest thing in this business, sonny, is closing the deal!"

I assume that I was not alone in my confusion, that the readers of this book are likely to find themselves faced with a similar dilemma. Of course, a prayer *would* have achieved a certain closure that my rather awkward effort to usher the woman to the door failed to achieve. But even a prayer typically leaves some loose ends, issues unresolved, a lingering ambiguity about "what's next." I want therefore to make a suggestion that may, on the face of it, seem trite or unhelpful. This is that the conversation has a beginning, a middle, and an end. As the previous illustration about a student's query regarding a weeping client

indicates, the therapist-instructor was very cognizant of these three phases. He said that crying was less likely to occur in the beginning or the ending phase of the conversation, and far more likely to occur in the middle phase. This suggests the usefulness of a conception of the pastoral conversation that has three identifiable phases–beginning, middle, and end.

Earlier in this chapter, I referred to the tone-setting phase, and noted that *supportive, understanding,* and *interpretive* responses are almost exclusively used in this initial phase. Then I referred to the exploratory phase, and suggested that while these three responses will continue to be predominant in this phase, *advising, probing,* and *evaluative* responses are likely to occur as well. Although advising, probing, and evaluation are likely to be rejected or resisted in the tone-setting phase, there is often more receptivity to them in the exploratory phase, especially if the beginning phase of the conversation was devoted to establishing a supportive-understanding-interpretive response milieu. (We should not forget that a favorable listening environment has also hopefully been established in the beginning phase.) I suggest that the third, ending phase be termed the "resolution phase."

Although this three-phase structure may appear to be rather arbitrary–why not two, or four, or five phases?–it has the weight of Christian tradition behind it. In his book on *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (1954), Louis L. Martz devotes a chapter to the structure of the meditative process that was developed in the fifteenth century by Jesuits and was then adopted, with some modifications, by the English Puritans. He notes that "the enormous popularity of methodical meditation...may be attributed to the fact that it satisfied and developed a natural, fundamental tendency of the human mind–a tendency to work from a particular situation, through analysis of that situation, and finally to some sort of resolution of the problem which the situation has presented" (p. 39). In a similar way, I am proposing that the structure of conversations in which the minister assumes the counselor role is a three-phase process, beginning with the formulation of the situation, continuing with the exploration of the situation, and concluding with "some sort of resolution of the problem which the situation has presented."

These three phases are not necessarily of equal duration, but I believe that both the minister and the person being counseled are at least subconsciously aware of a roughly equal duration between the three phases and that they sense the junctures in the conversation where they

have begun to move from phase one to phase two, and from phase two to phase three. There is usually some awareness by at least one of the conversation partners–preferably the minister–if the expected shift from one phase to the other has not occurred at its more-or-less appointed time. If too much time is being spent in the tone-setting phase, where the situation that brings the other person to the minister is presented, or in the exploratory phase, where the problem or problems embedded in the situation are explored, this may indicate that anxiety is an important dynamic in the conversation, whether the anxiety is on the part of the minister, the parishioner, or both. On the other hand, it could also simply mean that the minister does not have the requisite skill in structuring the conversation. Conversely, there may also be awareness by at least one of the conversation partners–preferably the minister–if there has been a premature shift from the first to the second, or from the second to the third phase. Anxiety may be the primary culprit here as well, though again, the minister's lack of skill in shaping the conversation may be the primary cause.

The Tone-setting Phase

To illustrate these three phases, I would like to return to the case of the nineteen-year-old woman who has hateful feelings toward her minister father. All that we have to work with is the simple statement she made about these feelings not being warranted. However, the various responses that I constructed to illustrate the types of responses that are especially useful in counseling indicate my assumption that this statement is likely to have been made in the tone-setting phase, though not, I would assume, at the very beginning of the conversation. Assuming that this is the first time the counseling minister and the woman have talked about the situation, there must have had to be some prior discussion of the sorts of things that would constitute a baseline for her confession that she had hateful feelings toward her father. Some of these may have centered on facts about her background, her family, her current life situation (college student? working full-time? living at home? has own apartment?), the usual things that we say about ourselves by way of introduction. If these things were already known to the minister (who may have been the minister of the church she attends, a campus pastor, a professor in the religion department, etc.) and the woman knew that he knew these things, they may have been dispensed with, but something about her family would most likely have been discussed before she

volunteered that she had hateful feelings toward her father. It is very unlikely that she entered the minister's office (or joined him at the lunch table) and immediately blurted out, "I tell you, I hate my father. I hate him! I really hate him!" If this had happened, I know I would have found myself rather taken aback and would have said something like, "Whoa, slow down, let's rewind the reel," or some such comment that would communicate the sense of being startled by what would seem, in that case, more of an announcement intended to be shocking than a thoughtful confession.

Also likely to have occurred earlier would be some indications, verbal or nonverbal, that she was struggling with the question whether to divulge these feelings to the minister. She may have felt that it was a betrayal of her father and her family to tell someone else about what she was feeling, especially when this someone else was himself a minister (and very possibly a professional acquaintance). In effect, this was to be a *shared self-disclosure* type of conversation, and we would therefore expect that she would have some initial resistance to making the disclosure. In fact, if the resistance was not present, we might wonder why. Had she reached the point of desperation where she simply had to tell someone about this? Did she have other motives for telling about her feelings toward her father, such as a desire to defame her father, but to do so by indirection, hoping that the listener would assume that her father *is* deserving of these hateful feelings toward him and, being a professional colleague of her father, would begin circulating the story? (The woman who wanted to retain her presidency of the women's group may have taken this very approach.) In any event, resistance to this self-disclosure would likely be present during the beginning phase of the conversation, and it would be incumbent on the minister to recognize the resistance while also recognizing her desire to be self-disclosive (on the matter of resistance, see the "counseling in the wilderness" case in Dittes, 1999b, pp. 139–48).

An implication of what I have said thus far is that the beginning phase of the conversation need not–should not–be idle or random chatter. One should expect that if a good listening environment is created, the beginning phase of the conversation will comprise the disclosure of the situation that prompted the other person to ask for this meeting. (In two earlier works [1979, 1980] I actually refer to this initial phase of the conversation as the "identification of the problem" phase.) Time spent in idle chatter in the beginning phase will be sorely missed in the third

or resolution phase of the conversation, as this summary phase is the one most likely to be compromised by a poor use of time at the beginning. This does not, of course, mean that the minister should be inhospitable or demanding, asking, "What brings you here?" before the other person has even had a chance to sit down. Of course, a few pleasantries will be expressed at the beginning. What I mean by "idle or random chatter" is a five-minute discussion of the weather, the minister's vacation plans, the fact that her mother met his aunt at a national denominational meeting, and so forth. This is also not the time for the minister to provide a detailed commentary on the latest Garrison Keillor show or a film that "you have got to see." In this respect, a meeting in which the allotted time is fifty to sixty minutes differs from a conversation between friends. If the counseling is being done over lunch, there may, of course, be exceptions, but even then, the matter at hand should not be deferred until dessert is ordered.

Let us assume, then, that the woman has revealed in the beginning phase her hateful feelings toward her father, and let us assume that the minister has responded with supportive, understanding, and/or interpretive responses to this self-disclosure. He has either assured her that it is a "very good thing" that she has had the courage to talk about these feelings, or has noted that the "apparent absence" of any good reason for her feelings is really troubling her, or has noted that there seems to be a discrepancy between her portrayal of her father and her feelings toward him and has suggested that they look into this discrepancy in order to understand these feelings better. Quite possibly, he has said all these things, perhaps in this very order (from supportive to understanding to interpretive). In any event, all three comments invite her to talk more about this self-disclosure. They also signal the minister's perception that this is precisely the topic that they should discuss further, that he anticipates this will be the subject that is likely to take up the remaining minutes of their time together, and that this is, in fact, a very appropriate use of their time. (Some counselees wonder if what they are talking about in the counseling session is what they are "supposed" to be talking about in such a situation. Their anxiety about this is comparable to those students who want to make certain that they have not "misunderstood" the teacher's assignment.) Other issues may secondarily or tangentially arise, but this is deemed the focal issue, much as his friend's "vocational ambivalence" was the focal issue in Noyce's illustration of a shared self-disclosure conversation.

The Exploratory Phase

If there appears to be agreement about the focal issue, the conversation now moves into the exploratory phase. The word *explore* has several meanings, including "to look into a matter carefully," "to travel in a previously unknown or little known region to learn more about it," and "to examine or probe in order to make a diagnosis." While I believe that a case may be made for the diagnostic meaning of exploration (this case has been forcefully made by Paul W. Pruyser in his book *The Minister as Diagnostician* [1976]; I have also offered a version of it in Capps, 1980), the best meaning of exploration for our purposes here is the travel metaphor, as the minister and the woman with whom he is conversing are, in fact, going into a region whose character and contours are as yet unknown to them, but which they are open to learning more about. James E. Dittes calls this "counseling in the wilderness" (Dittes, 1999b). This is the region of the woman's hateful feelings toward her father and what they mean or portend. As noted in the introduction, Ludwig Wittgenstein has said, "A problem has the form: I do not know my way about" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 123). In this sense, both are making a commitment to explore a problematic region in this woman's life in order that she may in fact find her way about. (In Capps 1979 and 1980, I refer to this as the "reconstruction of the problem" phase of the counseling session.)

On the basis of what we know about this case from the single excerpt provided by Clinebell, we may assume that the exploratory phase will focus on the woman's feelings toward her father, and especially on the question of whether and in what sense her father has related to her in ways that have provoked these hateful feelings. Has he mistreated her (perhaps not physically, as she has pointed out, but verbally)? Or has his kindness toward her actually made it difficult for her to develop an independence of her own? These and other possibilities call for further exploration—this is the unknown or little known region that we want to learn more about. The primary issue, however, is not "getting at the facts," though this is certainly important, but to explore the counselee's own experiential world in relation to these facts. Her experiential world is the region to be explored. If, for example, he *has* mistreated her verbally by saying things that are demeaning, the issue is not primarily whether he has done this only once or twice or many times, but how she experiences these demeaning comments. A single demeaning statement may have been enough to confirm what she had long suspected, that

her father had little respect for her. If so, the minister would not say, "Could it be that you are making a mountain out of a molehill?" or "Maybe you should cut him some slack. We all say stupid things once in a while." Instead, he would say, "What he said that night confirmed your suspicions that he never had much respect for you." (If she seems more tentative about her suspicions, he would say, "seemed to confirm.")

Although this would be an understanding response, we would anticipate that in the exploratory phase, the minister might also venture responses that are probing, such as asking her to reveal more about what she is thinking when these hateful feelings well up in her, or evaluative ones, such as suggesting to her the possibility that her father *has* said or done something that makes her feelings–some of them, at least–warranted. We cannot predict where this exploration might lead, but we would hope that out of it would come greater congruence between her perception of her father and the feelings she has toward him. As Carl Rogers points out in *On Becoming a Person* (1961), a shift from incongruence to congruence is a major goal of counseling. Congruence is reflected in an accurate matching of experiencing, awareness, and communication. Rogers suggests that the simplest example of such congruence is an infant. If an infant is experiencing hunger at the physiological and visceral level, her awareness appears to match this experience, and her communication is congruent with it. She is "a unified person all the way through, whether we tap her experience at the visceral level, the level of her awareness, or the level of communication. Probably one of the reasons why most people respond to infants is that they are so completely genuine, integrated or congruent. If an infant expresses affection or anger or contentment or fear there *is* no doubt in our minds that she *is* this experience, all the way through" (p. 339).

An example of incongruence is a man who becomes angrily involved in a group discussion: "His face flushes, his tone communicates anger, he shakes his finger at his opponent. Yet when a friend says, 'Well, let's not get angry about this,' he replies, with evident sincerity and surprise, 'I'm not angry, I don't have any *feeling* about this at all! I was just pointing out the logical facts.' The other men in the group break out in laughter at this statement" (Rogers, 1961, pp. 339–40). Rogers asks, "What is happening here? It seems clear that at a physiological level he is experiencing anger, but this is not matched by his awareness. In addition, his communication is actually ambiguous and unclear. In its words it is a setting forth of logic and fact, but in its tone and

accompanying gestures, it is carrying a very different message–'I am angry at you'" (p. 340). Rogers indicates his belief that this ambiguity or contradictoriness of communication "is always present when a person who is at that moment incongruent endeavors to communicate" (p. 340).

One may argue that the woman in the case we have been discussing *is* experiencing incongruence between her visceral experiencing, her awareness, and her communication. The major absence of a match is between her experiencing of hateful feelings and her lack of awareness of any reasons for these feelings. Her communication reflects this disjuncture. On the other hand, there is a level of her experiencing of which she also seems unaware, and this is her apparent need to view these feelings negatively, as inappropriate or unwarranted. A major source of incongruence in her case, then, is her experiencing of hateful feelings toward her father and her judgment on this experiencing. This is an even deeper level of incongruence than the discrepancy between her portrayal of her father and her feelings toward him, as the incongruence here is between the feelings she has (and her awareness of them) and her tendency to view these feelings as ones she shouldn't have. She marshals support for this judgment by invoking the Bible, pointing out that "the Bible says to love and honor your father, that hating your father is therefore a sin."

From the perspective of Rogers' client-centered counseling approach, the goal should not be to try to get rid of these feelings, but to try to understand them and for the woman to be more accepting of them, thus admitting them into her perception of herself. No doubt the man in Rogers' example is unaware of his anger in part because he cannot admit into his perception of himself that he is a person who is no stranger to anger. The woman in Clinebell's case *is* aware of her hateful feelings, but she has not accepted them into her self-perception. She cannot say, "I am a person who has hateful feelings toward my father *and I can accept this fact about myself.*"

In short, we may view the discrepancy between this woman's feelings and her view of her father and the incongruence between her experiencing and her view of herself as two related, but different issues. Following Heinz Kohut, we might call the former a self-other issue, and the latter a self-self issue (Kohut, 1984, pp. 51–52), but the terminology we use is not the important thing. What *is* important is that the exploratory phase of the conversation should not become so focused on the issue of her father that the issue of her self-rejection is neglected. Or, if the exploratory phase *does* center only on the former, either

because time does not permit exploration of the second issue or because this second issue is one whose exploration would take the conversation into terrain that requires a more experienced guide, the minister should make a mental note of this fact. This mental note will then have a significant place in the *resolution* phase of the conversation.

It should be noted that the exploratory phase is not merely one in which the minister would attempt to get the woman in this case to make more self-disclosures. Rather, the exploratory phase is one in which the various facts and meanings of the self-disclosure that have already been presented are themselves explored. More self-disclosures, such as her feelings toward her mother, would only add breadth to the conversation. Instead the goal in the exploratory phase is to achieve greater focus, to be both intentional and attentional. This is where the minister's constructive efforts are especially important, because what the conversation in the second phase is attentive to is, to a large degree, a matter of choice, and the minister plays a very important role in this choice.

Family therapist Jay Haley was once asked to be a consultant for a therapist in training who was having an especially difficult time with a particular family. Haley asked the trainee what the problem was, and was told, "The symbiotic relationship between the mother and daughter." Haley responded, "I wouldn't let that be the problem" (O'Hanlon and Wilk, 1987, p. 70). What he meant was that the problem, as stated, was much too global, and that it needed to be sharpened, more narrowly focused and circumscribed. What he also implied is that the therapist plays a major role in determining what will in fact be taken to *be* the problem. We usually assume that the problem is already known to the person who has come for counsel, that she may or may not reveal it right away (she might, for example, talk about something else entirely or offer what is sometimes called the "presenting problem," i.e., a problem that is likely to be related to the "real" or "deeper" problem, but is not in fact that problem), and that the minister's task is therefore to "figure out" what the problem is from the clues that the other person provides. In this view, the minister plays amateur detective, and it is therefore no wonder that the minister feels herself to be under considerable pressure and fears that she may not be able to rise to the challenge.

If, however, it is the minister's role to *participate* in the defining or framing of the problem to be explored, she is less likely to feel overwhelmed. It is *not* the minister's task to penetrate a mystery, but it *is* her task to help focus the conversation so that it does not become

diffuse and go off in too many directions at once. This is not a privileging of "male-linear thinking" over "female circular or weblike thinking," nor is it a violation of what Mary Field Belenky and her coauthors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* call "connected knowing" (Belenky et al., 1986, pp. 101–3), for the point is not that the conversation is either linear or circular, but that it has a focus, providing both persons the sense and assurance that they are talking about the same thing, that they are not engaged in "parallel talk" (the adult version of the "parallel play" of two-year-old children).

By focusing the conversation in this way, the minister will be fully aware that there are other concerns or problems worth talking about, including issues that have direct or indirect bearing on the one that *is* explored. In this sense, the minister is fully aware that this conversation is limited in scope. This awareness, however, should not be cause for despair, for the hope is that in helping this woman explore the focal concern or problem (i.e., her hateful feelings toward her father), she will become more adept at exploring other concerns and problems, whether these are ones that she currently has, or ones that she will have in the future.

In emphasizing the importance of congruence, including the hope that this woman would experience greater congruence between her awareness of her feelings and her self-perception as one who should not have such feelings, I am aware of the fact that I have not yet had anything to say about her view that the Bible says to love and honor one's father and that hating your father is therefore a sin. The exploratory phase of the conversation may well include consideration of this view. If so, I would assume that this will have the same exploratory feel to it as their travels into the world of her feelings of hatred would have. This is perhaps a region about which the minister has greater technical knowledge than the woman does, but, at the moment, it is an experiential matter for her, and the minister should respect this fact. He should also be sensitive to the fact that, because she is the daughter of a minister, her father's voice and the "voice" of the Bible are both emotionally and cognitively interrelated. It is, therefore, not altogether surprising that she would invoke the Bible in support of her judgment that her feelings toward her father—especially her father?—are wrong.

The Resolution Phase

As Louis L. Martz points out, the mind has a natural tendency to work toward "some sort of *resolution* of the problems which the situation

has presented" (1954, p. 39, my emphasis). The third, or resolution phase, of the conversation begins when both the minister and the other person begin to have a sense that their exploration has borne as much fruit as it is likely to bear on this occasion. It is the point where, as in my illustration of my first fumbling efforts to counsel parishioners, the other person looks at the minister with querying eyes. This query could be a simple "So what's next?" or it could be a more searching "So what do you think? Am I a despicable daughter?"

One definition of the word *resolution* is "a decision as to future action." The simple "So what's next?" question indicates that a decision *does* need to be made regarding future action, and this needs to be a mutual decision, one which both persons fundamentally endorse. If there is to be another scheduled conversation, the minister should indicate why he believes this *is* the "future action" to be taken. This is the point at which our earlier analogy between the pastoral conversation and worship breaks down, for there is no need at the end of the worship service to announce that there will be another one next week, much less to provide a reason why this will be the case. A second conversation between the minister and the person who has requested a meeting is optional, and because this is true, some rationale for scheduling a second one needs to be indicated. This rationale should also be agreed on by both parties.

In turn, this rationale gives the other person something to think about in the meantime. This is not "homework" in the sense that some therapists employ it, but it does sound an anticipatory note: "Next time, let's continue our exploration here, at this point." The most valuable exploratory work often occurs between conversations, and this may be as true for the minister as it is for the person who has requested a listening ear. An insight or discovery may be made by one or both as they review their earlier conversation in their minds. Often, the next meeting together begins with one or both reporting on what has been "discovered" in the meantime, and this frequently becomes the focus of conversation: "I've been thinking about why I have assumed that my hateful feelings toward my father are wrong. I have never questioned this assumption. This got me to thinking that I often make assumptions and then draw conclusions from these assumptions. Now I'm wondering what would happen if I looked at the assumptions themselves." Or, the discovery could be: "I thought that by talking about my hateful feelings toward my father I wouldn't be able to hold my head up in his presence, that I would go skulking around, feeling ashamed about what I had done,

as though he would know that I had done this. Instead, I felt more free around him. I was actually less guarded than before. It was just the reverse of what I anticipated."

The insight or discovery might also be one the minister introduces: "Since we last talked, I've been wondering to myself why I didn't pick up on what you said about how you shouldn't have hateful feelings toward your father because he's a minister. This implies that the daughter of a minister can't allow herself to have the same feelings that the daughter of another father may have. I guess it was the special burden that you carry that I wasn't hearing, probably because of my own anxieties about this, being a minister myself." This discovery should not lead to a focus on the minister's struggles, but to the "invitation," as it were, for the woman to explore this "special burden" if she feels this would be helpful to her.

In light of the likelihood of these intervening discoveries, is a second conversation always warranted? This is not discussed much in the pastoral counseling literature, for even those who are advocates of "brief counseling" approaches and methods for ministers recommend three or more sessions. Because I will discuss these recommendations in greater detail in chapter five, I will not comment further on this issue here, except to note that a psychotherapist in New York City has a practice based on one session per client. He developed the approach as a result of a study he conducted in which he interviewed clients who did not return, as promised, for their second session with the therapist. While the therapist involved had assumed that the initial session must therefore have been a "failure," he found that two-thirds of the persons he interviewed felt that the session had provided them with the clarity they needed in order to deal with the concern or problem on their own. To them, the session had been a "success."

Of course, it could be argued that their expectations of what therapy could do for them were too minimalist and that if they *had* continued in therapy, they would have experienced growth in ways unforeseen to them. Still, this illustration supports my basic point that there should be a rationale for scheduling another conversation, and that this rationale should be made explicit and be endorsed by both persons. The minister assumes too much responsibility for the conversational process itself if he says, "In my considered judgment, we need to talk further," and does not reveal what this judgment is. The other person may be too timid to ask, but she has a right to know why another conversation is being recommended and should have an opportunity to indicate whether she

endorses this reasoning or not. After all, in the vast majority of cases, it is the other person who initiated the conversation in the first place. The initiative should remain with her.

The converse is also true. The judgment that one conversation has been sufficient also should be supported. This should not be an arbitrary decision by the minister, and he should be aware of anxiety (for any of the reasons discussed in chapter 1) that may be inordinately influencing this decision. The woman in Clinebell's case might conclude on her own that she had reached sufficient clarity about her feelings toward her father that she does not need to have another conversation with the minister. Or she may decide that she simply cannot allow herself to explore these feelings further–they make her too anxious–and that this conversation has enabled her to see this. Her decision should, of course, be respected. But because this was a very troubling concern for her, the minister has every reason to suggest that they talk again. A two-week interval may be preferable to a one-week interval, however, as there is no pressing decision to be made.

Thus, if one meaning of the word *resolution* is "a decision as to future action," this particular case essentially raises the rather standard or routine question of whether a second conversation should be scheduled. Other cases would raise other decisional issues, such as what action should be taken to protect an abused spouse from further abuse, or whether the parishioner should be referred to another professional. These and other related issues will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5. For now, the point is that a decision as to future action, and rationale for this decision, is an important consideration in the resolution phase of the conversation. This is true not only of the initial conversation but of subsequent conversations as well.

Another meaning of *resolution* is "the passing (in music) of a dissonant chord into a consonant one." While this is a musical term, it has relevance for the conversational context as well. The desire to end the conversation on a consonant note is reflected in Noyce's illustration of his own *turning-point* counseling and his *shared self-disclosure* conversation with the friend who was experiencing vocational ambivalence. It may be too much to say that, other things being equal, a conversation between the minister and the counseled person should always end on a consonant note, but one important aspect of a "good" conversation is that both parties involved feel encouraged by what has transpired between them. Some years ago, I occasionally conversed with our academic dean in his office. After two or three of these conversations, I realized that, though I had anticipated these talks with considerable

expectation–usually because I had some ideas I wanted to present to him or because I was flattered that he had summoned me–I left them feeling beleaguered and not a little demoralized. These, of course, were conversations about institutional, not personal matters, and are not entirely comparable to conversations between ministers and persons who have asked to talk with them. I believe, nonetheless, that pastoral conversations should be inherently encouraging. As I have argued in a previous book, ministers are "agents of hope" (Capps, 1995), and hope, in essence, is the anticipation that what is desired will happen.

Thus, in the case of the woman with hateful feelings toward her father, the resolution from the dissonant note struck earlier in the conversation to the consonant note near its conclusion need not be anything as premature and artificial as, "You have helped me rid myself of my hateful feelings," but it could well be, "I am not as troubled about these feelings as when I came in," or "I am not feeling as down on myself for having these feelings," or "I am beginning to realize that these feelings *do* have an explanation and that they are not entirely unprovoked." These resolutions, whether verbalized or simply expressed in her overall demeanor, are comparable to Noyce's feeling in his turning-point conversation of a burden having been lifted from his shoulders. It is perhaps too much to expect that she will leave whistling a happy tune, but there may be a certain spring in her step based, in large part, on her sense that she *can,* at least to a degree, "own" these hateful feelings and not see them as necessarily evidence that she is a despicable, ungrateful daughter.

A third meaning of *resolution* is "the act of solving a puzzle." As persons who are addicted to jigsaw puzzles well know, the "resolution" comes when all the pieces have been placed in their proper positions. As children, we would try to force the pieces to fit, but we found, in the end, that these efforts were counterproductive because it meant that the piece that was supposed to be in that position would have to be forced to fit somewhere else. If the conversation between the minister and the person who has sought her counsel is analogous to putting the pieces of a puzzle together, the attempt to "resolve" the concern or problem should not be "forced" on the other person. This is precisely where controlling, impatient, and even moralistic responses are most likely to arise, as the minister will be anxious to force a premature resolution or one that seeks to sidestep the problem's complexities.

Much is written in the pastoral care and counseling literature about the dangers of psychological reductionism, but there is also the danger of theological and moral reductionism, where complex psychological

matters (such as the woman's hateful feelings toward her minister father) are reduced to ready-made theological formulae or simple moralisms. It is far better to confess to the other person in the concluding phase of an initial conversation, "I remain puzzled about some things," than to act as though one knows how it all fits together. As art historian James Elkins points out, one of the most anxiety-inducing experiences we have in life is when we are confronted by experiences or phenomena whose meaning is not readily apparent, or which may, in fact, have no particular meaning at all (Elkins, 1998, p. 16). He believes that he and his own colleagues have ascribed so many meanings to paintings–explaining every little detail–that the painting can barely stand up under their interpretive weight. Some paintings, in fact, do not need to be "understood," but simply "beheld." Thus, of the three meanings of *resolution* thus far discussed, "solving the puzzle" is the one that we should be most wary about. The minister especially should be aware of the sense of incompletion that he feels within himself and accept this ambiguous state of affairs for what it is. This very acceptance may be, in fact, his best means of entry into the counseled person's experiential world.

A fourth meaning of *resolution* has medical connotations, referring to the "subsidence or disappearance of a swelling, fever, or other manifestation of disease." While this use of the word is a relatively unfamiliar one to most of us, the idea behind it is not. We know the relief that comes when a child's high fever begins to break, or when the symptoms of a disease begin to disappear, indicating that the patient is on the road to recovery. A minister is not a doctor, but she is one whose impressions and judgments matter to the person with whom she has been conversing, and, therefore, she should be aware that the other wants these impressions and judgments to be verbalized. Since client-centered therapy came on the scene, considerable debate has ensued in the psychotherapeutic literature about "diagnosis," whether it has a place in psychotherapy and, if so, in what sense. Carl Rogers opposed it if it meant that the therapist would be making judgments from an external frame of reference, but allowed for its qualified use if the "diagnosis" derived from the therapist's empathic participation in the client's experiential world (1961, pp. 223–25). Because he believed that the word *diagnosis* would invariably connote the assigning of a label or description deriving from a more general population, he discouraged its use. I have argued that the "theological themes" that Paul W. Pruyser views as diagnostic (see Pruyser, 1976, pp. 60–79) may be useful for understanding and interpreting the deeper dimensions of a person's

experiential world (see Capps, 1979, 1980), so I am more disposed to take a positive view of diagnosis. In fact, the theological themes that Pruyser sets forth have evident relevance for the case of the woman we have been discussing throughout this chapter.

Even so, we should not be distracted by the medical term *diagnosis* from the other very important fact that the best doctors attempt to be reassuring and understanding when they present their impressions and judgments at the conclusion of an exploration into the patient's problem. For the conversation in which a minister has been asked for counsel, this means that the types of responses that were predominant in the two preceding phases of the conversation–supportive, understanding, interpretive–should continue to predominate in this third phase, even if there has been a noticeable shift toward some offering of advice. In fact, though in some situations advising is especially appropriate, the conversation should not be judged a failure if it does not conclude with a word or words of advice. As previously noted, in Noyce's turning point conversation, his friend did not advise him on which course to take. If there ever was a perfect opportunity for giving advice, this was certainly it, as it was clear that there were two courses of action that Noyce could take. His friend could have weighed the merits of both in his mind and could have advised Noyce to take the one that he himself would have taken: "If I were you, I'd stay put. You have too much to lose by leaving, and new situations always look rosier than they really are." Instead, the friend offered an observation that was supportive, understanding, and interpretive–"either way, you will be happy"–and demonstrated his respect for Noyce by recognizing that Noyce was capable of making his own decision.

Some readers may ask: Why this caution against giving advice? Some reasons for this have already been noted in my comments on the supportive-advising-controlling continuum, but another very practical reason is that the other person may decide *not* to take the minister's advice and, as a result, may feel reluctant to talk with her again about this and perhaps other issues as well. Put otherwise, if the minister *does* offer advice in the resolution phase of the conversation, it should be expressed in a sufficiently tentative way that the other person will feel free to raise questions about it (preferably at the very time it is offered), give reasons for why he has misgivings about accepting it, or propose some modifications while accepting the basic idea.

If, for example, the minister advises the woman with hateful feelings toward her father to talk with him about these feelings in order to get

them out in the open, she should be given the opportunity to raise questions ("You mean, just go up to him and blurt it out?"); give reasons why she does not think this is a good idea ("He will simply tell me what I already know, that the Bible says to love and honor your father"); or accept it in principle but with modifications ("What if I suggested that we go to a restaurant, just the two of us, so that we can talk about my future? This way, we might be able to have a conversation that builds a better relationship between us, which in turn will help to reduce my hateful feelings toward him"). In other words, advice should not have a "You must do this and do it this way" tone to it, but should instead provide a basis for further discussion. In this sense, it may contribute to the ultimate resolution of the concern or problem, but in a way that communicates respect for the other person and for the problem-resolving capacities this person already possesses. The "modification" that she proposes grows out of the idea that she should "try to get rid of her hateful feelings," but does so in a way that takes account of the facts that arise out of her relationship with her father.

Concluding Comments

We have seen that certain *types* of response can be especially helpful in moving a conversation through the tone-setting and exploratory phases on to the resolution phase. The reader may have noticed that, in all the illustrative material employed in this chapter, the minister did not make use of what might be called "psychological jargon." Students who enroll in courses in pastoral counseling often assume that they will be encouraged to use "psychological" words and phrases, and some of these students are already prepared to mistrust such a class because they have been warned that the professors who teach these courses want to replace faith language with psychological language. This chapter makes clear, however, that the minister does not need to adopt a special form of discourse when adopting the counselor role. Instead, he should use the same conventional language that he uses in other contexts.

Interestingly enough, I have often found myself in such conversations being the one who uses *more* conventional language because the other person has adopted the psychological jargon of our society to a greater extent than I have. (Note that Noyce's friend speaks of his "vocational ambivalence.") The use of such jargon has often meant that I have needed to ask for clarification: "When you say that your parents are 'codependent,' what do you mean by this?" Or, "Could you explain to me what you mean when you say you suffer from 'low self-worth'?" It

is not that I do not have any understanding of these words, but that I want to know what they really mean for this particular person, how *she* understands or experiences them. For this, a more conventional descriptive statement is needed, which is typically provided in the form of a "for instance" that can then be discussed in more detail.

I realize, of course, that we all have our "specialized" vocabularies or ways of speaking that derive from the ways of life we have chosen and that the minister, as part of his concern to be understanding, should try his best to enter into the "language world" of the other person. In a recent conversation with a friend who has "made it big" in the corporate world of finance, he related how his son wanted to go to Venezuela for a year after college graduation rather than enter immediately into the profession for which he had been trained. With a note of resignation in his voice, my friend said, "So, once again, 'deep pockets Dad' anteed up." I realized I rarely heard these words–"deep pockets" and "anteed up"–in the academic setting where I spend my working days. In my professional world, a father might have said, "We knew it would be an expense we could ill afford, but we felt it would be a broadening experience for our son, as it would deepen his understanding of other cultures."

To the extent possible, the minister should enter into the "language world" of the other, as language is the primary means by which the other communicates what it is like within his own experiential world. This does not necessarily mean, however, that she needs to be able to use it herself as a way of demonstrating her concern to know the other's experiential world from the inside. In the actual conversation mentioned above, I said something like, "You say that with a bit of resignation, as though you preferred that Jack would get on with his career." He answered, "Yes, but that was then. Now, I realize this was just what Jack needed." Thus, what I had taken to be "resignation" in the here and now–the immediate–was actually "resignation" as he reflected back on the experience. What I had missed was the current note of pride in his voice, that "deep pockets Dad" was instrumental in enabling Jack to have this invaluable experience. As he concluded, "It was money well spent," I responded, "And Jack was grateful?" "You bet your life he was!"

In the next chapter, I will discuss the background thinking that a minister should engage in during the types of conversations we have considered in this chapter.