2010

Martin Buber's “I and Thou”, Pastoral Counseling and Reading Text: A Proposal for an Integrated Approach

David Hawkinson

Luther Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/phd_theses

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Practical Theology Commons

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Philosophy Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.
MARTIN BUBER'S I AND THOU, PASTORAL COUNSELING AND READING TEXT: A PROPOSAL FOR AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

By

DAVID HAWKINSON

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2010
Pastoral care and the biblical tradition are inextricably linked in the minds of Jews and Christians for whom a central human task and calling is healing which leads to wholeness with each other, the world and God. This study explores the possibility of integrating reading the biblical text with a pastoral counseling approach informed by Martin Buber’s I-Thou relation that serves this goal of healing and wholeness.

In Martin Buber’s I-Thou wholeness is understood in relational terms. Healing is accomplished through “meeting” each other in genuine encounter. Buber’s I-Thou dialogical philosophy has influenced a relational approach for the practice of pastoral counseling. There is less secondary literature about Buber’s teaching on how to approach the biblical text dialogically. He taught that the text “a dialogue between heaven and earth” encourages our active participation by engaging the whole person with its “living voice.” Bringing these two elements—dialogical counseling and dialogical text reading—together in the counseling process introduces possibilities for adding to and enriching the healing process.

The study examines both the scholarly theories and the practices of counselors who have integrated Buber’s I-Thou into their work of dialogical counseling and have included biblical interpretation. An integrated model is proposed, several examples of
pastoral counseling cases are considered and two of the author’s cases are presented with verbatim material to demonstrate the model.

The study shows that the essential features of I-Thou relation, the practice of dialogical counseling, and the practice of dialogical biblical text reading are compatible both theoretically and practically. Reading a biblical text with an open and engaged receptivity can be fully integrated into the mutuality of the healing partnership. This enhances the healing partnership without disturbing the nature of the helping process.

For those who practice relational healing, the introduction of the biblical text can add unexpected dimensions and energy into the dialogue and the unfolding healing process. The biblical voice, while addressing presenting concerns can also invite each person into dialogue with God, whom Buber calls the Eternal Thou.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been companioned along the way by a wonderful fellowship of persons. Whenever I looked around, they stood by with encouragement and support. I cannot list them all, but each owns a part of this work and a large part of my heart.

Dr. Sandra and Phillip Johnson, an embodiment of dialogical relation in marital love, have read and reread, then read and reread many drafts of this thesis, guiding, shaping, pushing and pulling this work into the light of day. Their long and enduring friendship and undivided attention during this project has been inestimable. And, our chats by their fireside kept the embers burning.

Ira Gordon, my friend and mentor, colleague, and astrologist also read my words, challenging the ideas and conclusions and engaging with me in the kind of unreserved give and take that Buber encourages each of us to find in our circles. His editing and broad knowledge has imprinted each page of this paper.

Several lifelong friends have also been partners in dialogue, listening and responding over many years. David Goa, my teacher and friend urged me long ago to bring this work forth. With his sustained presence and his depth of wisdom he has guided much of what I have written. Rev. Denny Moon, pastor, composer of musicals, and my dear friend has listened to endless Buberian ramblings ad nauseam and has been a lively and thoughtful respondent. Earl Schwartz first introduced me to Buber’s work on the biblical text. Together we learned to teach in Buber’s dialogical style—Earl the master
and I the grateful student. Tim Regan's deep personal faith in God and his unwavering faith in me has been a sustaining grace in many moments of self-doubt. Tim and Paul Frantzich, musicians of the spirit, have carried me along with song and drum, inviting my teaching into their workshops while urging me to let go of my reserve. Dr. Jonathan Jensen graced me with skill and time in dialogical therapy during many bouts of depression and discouragement. His work bears witness to the healing power of “meeting.” My friend Kathy uncovered a few rare recordings of Buber’s voice, allowing me to listen to hear the living author speaking his own words. Her encouragement over the years has been very helpful. In the very beginning of this journey, Curtis and Lorraine Johnson, in quiet anonymity, provided funds to help meet living expenses while I attended school. Their concrete expression of care and affection from the background continues to astonish me and is witness to how we may support others along their personal way. I want to express my thanks to the Community Covenant Church in Essex Vermont. While I served this congregation between the years 2002 and 2006, they granted me time to return to Luther Seminary to finish the pre-requisites for writing the thesis. And when I knew I could only complete this work in the Twin Cities, they sent me off with their prayers and blessings.

Dr. Roland Martinson, my advisor, has known me in many moods and moments. From his own appreciation of Buber’s work he encouraged me to find the way to express this “next step” of weaving the biblical text with pastoral care. He believed that this was an important endeavor, one worth the struggle. Dr. Dan Simundson, one of my readers, brought his knowledge of the biblical text with his experience of chaplaincy into many
conversations. In addition to many insights, his good will mentored and helped direct the integration of text and care. Thanks to Dr. Gary Wilkerson for joining my reading team.

My sons and daughters-in-law, Karl and Jamie, Erik and Joanna, have been primary cheer leaders over many years. I heard often, “You can do this dad!” What amazing gifts to the world and to me. Their love and interest, their belief and encouragement, and their pride and delight at the conclusion fill me with gratitude and joy.

The only person who has endured more “Buber talk” than Buber’s wife Paula, must be my wife, Susan. I have been speaking and quoting him for more than 30 years. Her good-humor and endurance over this epic venture has been remarkable and expresses the virtue of hospitality which is the heart of her nature. This gift, as the Passover Haggadah sings it, “would have been enough”—Dayeinu. However, she actively engaged me with her intellect and soulful grasp of the world’s wisdom in hours of dialogue. I cannot conceive of any ideas I may have generated that are not the result of our partnership. Dayeinu! And, Susan’s patience and support have become legendary within our circle. So, with all my heart, I give away my thanks.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................... iv

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................... 1

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION TO I—THOU ............................................................................. 4

Basic Notions ............................................................................................................. 4
Will and Grace ........................................................................................................... 17
Distance and Relation .............................................................................................. 19
The Elements of the Interhuman .............................................................................. 24
Being and Seeming .................................................................................................... 24
Personal-making Present ......................................................................................... 27
Imposition and Unfolding ......................................................................................... 31
Genuine Dialogue .................................................................................................... 34
Turning ....................................................................................................................... 35
The Eternal Thou ...................................................................................................... 39
The Name of God in the Biblical Text .................................................................... 40
The Eternal Thou in I and Thou ............................................................................. 44

2. IMPLICATIONS OF I – THOU UPON THE PASTORAL COUNSELING RELATION AND PROCESS .......................................................... 51

The Setting of the Pastoral Counseling Relationship .............................................. 52
The Counseling Relationship .................................................................................. 54
Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counseling .................................................................. 55
Buber and the Healing Relationship ...................................................................... 59
Responsibility ......................................................................................................... 61
The Helper and Responsibility ............................................................................... 62
Diagnosis and Dialogical Counseling ................................................................... 65
Dialogue in the Unfolding Process of Helping ......................................................... 71
Genuine Dialogue .................................................................................................. 75
Distancing and Relating ......................................................................................... 84
Confirmation .......................................................................................................... 87
The Dialogical Dance of Inclusion ........................................................................ 103
A Final Consideration ............................................................................................ 111

3. I AND THOU—THE BIBLICAL TEXT AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF DIALOGUE; IMPLICATIONS OF I – THOU ........................................... 113

The Text and the Helping Relationship ................................................................ 119
Buber and Dialogical Teaching .............................................................................. 122
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. A PROPOSAL FOR A MODEL FOR READING THE BIBLICAL TEXT IN PASTORAL COUNSELING</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Model</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Model in Four Movements</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Movement</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Movement</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Movement</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing the Text</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Case Example</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Case Example</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading the Text</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Movement</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study—Holly</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study—Jon D</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Further Consideration</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalm 38</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Samuel 14</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPY</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEDICATION

To Susan

Tack för allt.
INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Pastoral care and the biblical tradition are inextricably linked in the minds of Jews and Christians for whom a central human task and calling is healing which leads to wholeness with each other, the world and God. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures have voiced this task in narrative and poetry, in prophetic utterance and the counsel of wisdom. These texts have not only been authoritative for law, practice, doctrine, and theology but also a ready source of comfort, guidance, challenge, inspiration, and healing.

The various kinds of connections between pastoral care and the biblical tradition have been explored historically within a variety of theological, hermeneutic, and therapeutic traditions and perspectives. And the relation between pastoral care and biblical text has not been without tension and conflict. Different communities of faith have different perspectives on how the text is meant to be read and what it means. And, in the modern western world our approach to the human psyche and the self is largely the product of psychological theory and practice. Therapeutic practice, including pastoral counseling, has often neglected the place of text, while other religious counselors neglect the fruit of psychological inquiry. Even so, pastoral care and counseling has been at the center of this lively conversation. This thesis will add to this conversation by exploring the vital relation between the biblical text and pastoral care through the writing of Martin Buber and the dialogical insights of I-Thou.
Reflection upon the many layered and varied implications that arise from Buber’s I-Thou relation continues to be a critical dimension of thinking in many fields of human endeavor and encounter: economical, sociological, community organization, ecological vision, educational theory, interfaith dialogue, and in the particularities of human relations. His understanding of I-Thou has been a critical and deeply nourishing source for the practice of psychotherapy and the development of the counseling relation. Buber’s influence upon pastoral theology and practice is also well documented. Further, I-Thou relation has had significant influence upon the growing shift of focus in the West, from the autonomous individual toward the relational self—a shift widely discussed and embraced within the Judeo/Christian traditions of pastoral care and counseling. In addition, I-Thou has been a compelling way for theologians, preachers, pastors, and teachers of spirituality to speak about the presence of God in the mix of a lived life.

Martin Buber has largely been associated with I-Thou in human relationship and in our relation with the Eternal Thou. However, he also spent his life writing about, reflecting upon, and teaching the biblical text to generations of students. With Franz Rosenzweig, he authored a critically acclaimed translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, which was completed by Buber near the very end of his life. Throughout the translation endeavor (about forty years), Buber reflected upon the dialogical relation between the text and the hearer of the text (the reader) and how, through engagement with the sacred text a genuine meeting with the Eternal Thou can occur.

Subsequent scholarship has further examined the implications of I-Thou relation for the reading of biblical texts and other traditional stories from the Hasidic tradition. Contemporary narrative theology and literary criticism of the Bible has found Buber’s
textual insights an important contribution to this significant, emerging, imaginative, and living engagement with the biblical story.

At first glance both the characteristics and the requirements of Buber's dialogical insights [I-Thou relation] suggest an approach to reading biblical text. It is an approach that is in accord with the practice of pastoral counseling that supports both the process of healing and also the yearning for wholeness.

Buber describes the dialogical life as one of encounter with what is real within human experience, human relationship, and the manifold life of the world. In every relation, with text and with our own experience with others, we glimpse and are grasped by the Eternal Thou. In these genuine moments of encounter, we are opened to the Presence of the Holy and the possibilities of wholeness. Presence invites us, indeed compels us, to turn toward the everyday world of our lives, pointing the way to living with authenticity and with our whole being.

This thesis will explore more fully how these two aspects of I-Thou, the counseling relation and the reading of biblical texts, may be fruitfully brought together within the context of pastoral counseling.

In the final section of this dissertation I will develop a model, using case studies, to illustrate how the reading of the biblical text in a dialogical relationship of Christian care-giving can be employed.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO I—THOU

Basic Notions

The development of Buber's philosophy of dialogue has been researched carefully by Rivka Horwitz and Phil Huston. Each points to the formative lectures by Buber called, Religion as Presence which preceded the publishing of I and Thou in 1923. Even earlier influences upon Buber were significant to him and were formative for what became his lasting importance to psychotherapy and, in particular, to pastoral counseling. These formative influences came from both Schleimacher and Wilhelm Dilthy, both of whom were significant in the history and development of pastoral counseling.

I and Thou represents a significant and important statement of Buber's thought. He was only 45 years old when I and Thou was published. He would spend the next four decades writing, arguing, and rooting his idea in the complex soil of the twentieth century discourse, a discourse that encompassed a wide range of disciplines and concerns during an age of violent upheaval.

Quickly, the little book drew a crowd about it. Critics complain that it lacks a consistent and systematic structure. Others express an exuberance that comes when a shifting breeze clears the thick air and freshens the day. Buber wrote at the end of his life:

No system was suitable for what I had to say. Structure was suitable for it, a compact structure but not one that joined everything together. ...I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality. I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the
hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation.¹

The opening lines of *I and Thou* open this window and point toward all that lies ahead:

The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak. The basic words are not single words but word pairs. One basic word is the word pair I-You. The other basic word is the word pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It. Thus the I of man is also two fold. For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It.²

The world is not twofold. The twofold attitude emerges from the word pair we speak. This word pair is either I-It or I-Thou. There is no other utterance. For Buber, the word pair demonstrates that there is no independent and autonomous self. This is the fundamental perspective from which the philosophy of dialogue views human life and the world, including the religious life. It represents a fundamental challenge to the western conception of the self, including the dominant psychological architecture of Freud. There is no individual in the sense that we have come to perceive it—autonomous, separate and


²Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1937), 3. In the preface to his book, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought*, Laurence Silberstein acknowledges the difficulties gender use in Buber’s writing and even in the titles of his works: e.g. *The Way of Man, Between Man and Man* and *The Knowledge of Man*. However, Buber’s use of “Mensch, in contrast to mann, is a gender-free term best translated as person or human being”. Following his advice, I have left Buber’s quotes and titles untouched, but have tried to use gender-free language including the singular pronouns, he or she, and him and her into the text when applicable. Laurence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber’s Social and Religious Thought: Alienation and the Quest for Meaning*, Reappraisals in Jewish Social and Intellectual History (New York: New York University Press, 1989), xvii.
isolated, self-contained, a universe unto itself. We begin and live as a “two.” We live in relation.

That is how Buber himself described the effect on his own life upon reading a remark by Feuerbach written in 1843. This is the statement. “The individual man does not contain in himself the essence of man either in so far as he is a moral being or in so far as he is a thinking being. The essence of man is contained only in the community, in the unity of man and man—a unity which rests upon the reality of the difference between ‘I’ and ‘Thou.’”

After he introduces the idea of the basic word pairs, Buber begins to elaborate. He does this by careful and persistent repetition, by turning the word pair inside out, stretching out the lines and reversing their original places, as a composer will recall the opening theme again and again through variation upon variation, until we have heard it from all sides.

When one says You, the word pair I-You is said, too.
When one says It, the I of the word pair I-It is said, too.
There is no ‘I’ as such but only the ‘I’ of the basic word I-You and the ‘I’ of the Basic I-It. When a man says ‘I’, he means one or the other. The ‘I’ he means is present when he says I. And when he says ‘You’ or ‘It’, the ‘I’ of one or the other basic word is also present. Being I and saying ‘I’ are the same. Saying ‘I’ and saying one of the two basic words are the same.

I cannot say “I” without saying “Thou” or “It.” By speaking, “Thou”, Buber suggests that we begin to intentionally orient ourselves to the other, as other. To hear the word pair spoken is not the same as to think it. “Since such a basic word involves a

\[^{2}\text{Schilpp, Friedman, and Buber, The Philosophy of Martin Buber, 42.}\]

reference to the Other to whom it is 'spoken', it is not an isolated expression but a
relational term, a 'combined word'.”

This also means that when we speak either I-Thou or I-It we are not speaking in
terms of "self-expression in the sense of psychological projection.” In other words we do
not create the relation by our speaking. It is this very point that is pertinent to the
disagreement with Carl Jung as Buber writes in the Eclipse of God. When we speak
“Thou” or “It,” we express our relation to the world. We do not speak about the thing or
the person, but express what is between us. What is between (Zwischen) us! Here, we are
at the heart of the matter. It is toward living in this ‘between’ that becomes for Buber the
grand purpose of life.

Having declared that the world is two-fold, in accordance with the two-fold
attitude within every person, Buber almost rushes to differentiate the speaking of the two
basic word pairs, I-Thou and I-It.

Basic words are spoken with one’s being.
When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too.
When one says It, the I of the word pair I-It is said, too.
The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being.
The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.

Buber has not yet fully distinguished between the relation of “I-It” and “I-Thou”
and has not expressed why one relation requires “one’s whole being” while the other does

---


6Ibid.

not. Buber voices this in terms of a fundamental human question: “In what way shall we become what we are from the very nature of our being?”

We know very little of the particulars—we are only a few lines into the text—except that the relation which flows from speaking I-Thou is the direction; and we know that this way requires “our whole being.” It is both the means and the end. And for Buber, this relation is not lived on some transcended plane, but in the midst of a lived life, the ordinary and concrete experience of being human.

In his introduction to the *Tales of the Hasidim*, he writes to the reader:

The world in which you live, just as it is and not otherwise, affords you that association with God, which will redeem you and whatever divine aspect of the world you have been entrusted with. And your own character, the very qualities which make you what you are, constitutes your special approach to God, your potential use for Him.

We must remind ourselves over and over of these parameters. We are not compelled to become someone other than who we are, even if that were possible. We are not compelled to go to some other place. We are not sent on a mission to acquire what we do not already have. He writes of his own methodology:

I was not permitted to reach out beyond my experience, and I never wished to do so. I witnessed for experience and appealed to experience. The experience for which I witnessed is, naturally, a limited one. But it is not to be understood as a “subjective” one. I have tested it through my appeal and test it ever anew. I say to him who listens to me: “It is your experience. Recollect it, and what you can not recollect, dare to attain it as experience.”

---


9 Ibid.

10 Schilpp, Friedman, and Buber, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 639.
We each know about this as surely as we live the daily round in our relationships in our homes and neighborhoods, among the trees on the boulevard and flowers in our gardens and while we do the tasks that we pick up each day.

Although it is the basic relationship in the life of each man with all existing being, it was barely paid attention to. It had to be pointed out; it had to be shown forth in the foundations of existence. [I had to take people to the window and point it out] A neglected, obscured, primal reality was to be made visible. The thinking, the teaching had to be determined by the task of pointing.  

I do not think that this can be overstated. What Buber lifts into a greater light, is accessible to us, to our perceptions and awareness, if we pay attention and look upon our world with the intent to be fully present. In biblical memory, I am reminded of the Israelites, wondering how they might cross the Jordan without Moses, without his special relationship with God and his considerable prowess. Moses responds to their unspoken fears by declaring that what they need is not too high or too far away. What they need is already in their hearts and on their tongues. They needn’t look elsewhere (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

It is an inestimable gift for the teacher to help the student trust him or herself; in his/her experience, insight, and ability to know what is already known. I know from many years of pastoral counseling, that this is equally important for the professional caregiver. Knowledge and skill, theory and technique are important but are only supplements to aid what is right before our eyes if we are willing to look: “Whoever speaks one of the basic words enters into the word and stands in it.”  

---

upon its return. Both of the basic words must be spoken. However, there is a profound
distinction between speaking “I-Thou” and “I-It”. Buber highlights this distinction in the
following manner:

I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.
I-Thou can only be spoken with one’s whole being.

Each establishes a different mode of existence.

The mode of I-It is experience.
The mode of I-Thou is relation.

From these broad brushstrokes, Buber begins to fill in the details that help ground
the basic notions.

When we speak I-It, we “exist in the sphere of goal-directed verbs”—transitive
verbs. In other words, “I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I
want something. I sense something. I think something.”\footnote{Ibid.} In this mode we look upon
whatever is before us as an object: an object for study; an object for analysis; an object
for contemplation; an object for utility. It does not make a difference what our goal is,
only that our action is goal directed. The goal is the object; we are the subject.

One example of this distinction between the mode of I-It and the mode of I-Thou
comes from Buber sitting in his own backyard at Heppenheim, under the shade of a great
oak. I will quote the passage as a whole because it is enjoyable to read and it gives us an
image we can all relate to. I will also indicate when the shift takes place in the two-fold
attitude.

I contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or
splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground.
I can feel it as a movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air—and the growing itself in its darkness.

I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life.

I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law—those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate. I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it. Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.\textsuperscript{14}

Right through the conclusion of this last verse, Buber is speaking the basic word I-It. The tree remains an object. It is important to notice that he makes no disparaging comments about this way of being or of knowing. This is often misunderstood. Buber will speak often about this important aspect of human activity and engagement with the world. Yet, regardless of how penetrating our examination may be, whatever amount of knowledge we gain from our investigations, whatever poetic and artistic insight we may bring to bear on our description—the tree remains an object, planted firmly in the mode of experience. Our growing knowledge and even the time spent by the tree’s side does not change this. “All this is not changed by adding ‘inner’ experiences to the ‘external’ ones…”\textsuperscript{15}

In other words, our feelings about the tree cannot transform the tree into anything but an object. It is also true that despite our strong feelings of attachment, intense enough to cause us to bind ourselves to the tree, perhaps even to protect its life from the chain saw, even so, we hold ourselves back—we are not present with our whole being. This is not the result of half-hearted commitment. The truth is that we cannot be present with our

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 56.
whole being while we speak the basic word I-It. Passion does not transform I-It experience into I-Thou relation.

Neither does adding intuition: “In addition, nothing is changed by adding ‘mysterious’ experiences to ‘manifest’ ones, self-confident in the wisdom that recognizes a secret compartment in things, reserved for the initiated, and holds the key. O mysteriousness without mystery, O piling up of information! It, it, it!” It is therefore not that some people are especially gifted with certain powers. Nor is I-Thou relation attained by the carefully chosen few. Buber writes:

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.

This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather, is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused.

Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its color and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its entirety.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently.

Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encountered is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.”

Let me lift out the four phrases in the statement that speak to the shift from I-It to I-Thou.

1. “It can also happen…”

2. “if will and grace are joined…”

16Ibid.

17Ibid., 58.
3. “that I am drawn into a relation…”

4. “the tree ceases to be an It…”

The first phrase carries the undertones of a caution. “It can also happen” is written with the knowledge that it can also not happen. This should warn us not to look for the equation or formula by which we can make it happen. It happens, and it also does not happen. It is not enough to have will. It is not enough to have determination.

How then are we to understand this essential meeting of will and grace? What does Buber mean by using the conditional conjunction, if? He comments directly on this matter:

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, it is my essential deed.

The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: an action of the whole being must approach passivity, for it does away with all partial actions and thus with any sense of action, which always depends on limited exertions.

The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one’s whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.

All actual life is encounter.¹⁸

What is required, if will and grace be joined, is that I speak the basic word I-Thou.

But this also happens. I step out of this moment of relation and discover that I am already trying to figure out how such encounters are created. I am filled with questions. “How did this happen?” “Is it necessary to first say I-Thou?” “Is the tree waiting for me?” “Is the tree always open to encounter?” The questions are valid, but do not bring us back into the moment which is now locked in experience. The encounter itself becomes an “It”—an object for analysis and study. Once more, there is value in reflection and

¹⁸Ibid., 62.
careful thought as long as we do not confuse it with the actual encounter. To try to have another encounter becomes another goal oriented action—the mode of experience. Experience among other experiences—a thing among things. Ronald Gregor Smith’s translation is peculiarly modern: “O accumulation of information! It, always It!” I will return to this concern later when we address the eternal Thou.

Let us ask, in true I-It mode, what happened in that moment of I-Thou relation between tree and Buber? “What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.” Not something in the tree or about the tree. Not a tree. Not ‘treeness’ as Plato would have it. The Tree! The unique and specific tree—in Buber’s example, the actual tree growing in his backyard off the main street in the town of Heppenheim, just north of Heidelberg, Germany. This is what he means when he exclaims: “The power of exclusiveness has seized me.”

This exclusiveness does not exist only in the “thou,” but also in the “I.” Only two—singular and unique, distinct and particular beings can meet in true relation. Each presents him or herself fully to the other. “All real living is meeting.”

Let me restate what Buber is pointing toward from this example:

1. “it can also happen”
2. “if will and grace are joined”
3. “that I am drawn into a relation”
4. “the [tree] ceases to be an It”
5. “the power of exclusiveness has seized me.”

---

19 Buber, I and Thou, 5.

20 Wood, Martin Buber's Ontology; an Analysis of I and Thou, 54.
It is clear from the preceding examples of the tree in Buber’s backyard that we move in and out of I-Thou. The “meeting” may last no longer than a single breath. In addition, the transitory nature of I-Thou meeting is not limited to meetings with the plant and animal world, as we shall discover soon enough. This is true of all I-Thou relation. I-Thou, or relation as Buber names it, is not a place where we may build a booth, stretching out the moment to savor the glory before it dissolves back into experience. It is not a ‘state’ of being but rather a ‘way’ of being. Further, there is no implication from Buber that moving in and out of I-Thou represents a failure on our part.

Pamela Vermes speaks about this transience in this way. “Nothing exists that cannot become you for me, but inevitably it will withdraw sooner or later to the separation of an it.” Having said this, we must at least point toward the only exception to this statement. This Vermes does in her next sentence. “The only you which can never become for me an it, for the simple reason that I am unable to scrutinize it objectively, is the You I address to God.”21 For this reason, Buber will call the Thou that is God, the Eternal Thou. We will return to this at the end of this introduction.

If we remain in the world of horizontal relation, in the world where relation, I-Thou shifts into I-It irrelation, where the law of transience rules, we are asked to consider that there is nothing we can do to change this inevitability. We cannot make it happen and we cannot hold onto it when it does. The attempt is itself evidence that we have already shifted into the mode of experience, into I-It. I bear witness to this shift in my own moments of I-Thou. Yet, having acknowledged this movement into and out of I-Thou does raise the question: if we enter relation to inevitably retreat into irrelation, then what

hope can there be for meaningful change? Where does this lead? Are we consigned to a passive role, bobbing like flotsam on the ebb and flow of the tides of irrelation and relation? Are we called to celebrate when it happens and learn to accept when it does not happen, living as those who wait with anticipation for the next moment to occur? As Pamela Vermes makes clear, Buber is adamant that we are not helpless nor should we surrender into hopelessness. Contrary to giving up to inaction, she writes: “It is essential that I have the ability to enter easily and frequently into [I-Thou] relation, even to the extent that my life may be described as one of I-You rather than of I-It.”

What is this ability? Is it part of the human package that is already available to me? Or, if not, how does one acquire it? And, if present only as a seed, can this critical ability be grown, nurtured, even taught and practiced? These are the questions that will generate the primary geography for Buber’s life-long exploration.

Let me rephrase the central inquiry in personal terms: How can I live a life that enters more easily and frequently into I-Thou relation? When I speak these words, the question touches a hunger for a greater portion of what I have already experienced in various moments: that joy that erupts from a “soul united within itself.”—which lives fully and with one’s whole being. The search for relation is the search for the Thou.

He who takes his stand in relation shares in a reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to him nor merely lies outside him. All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself. Where there is no sharing, there is no reality. Where there is self-appropriation there is no reality.

---

22 Ibid.

23 Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, 4.
The more direct the contact with the Thou, the fuller the sharing. All real life is meeting.24

Will and Grace

We turn now to fill out some of the basic notions in order to lay further groundwork for creating a model for pastoral care. Wood, in his analysis of Martin Buber’s I and Thou, speaks to the role of will as “the ability to enter easily and frequently into relation.” He writes, “If meeting is to occur, one’s intention and consequent preparation must surely be involved.” This is not simply a matter of learning a particular technique, as if one might prepare for I-Thou by entering into a kind of meditative state. Neither should this kind of practice be discounted altogether. However, more is required of us than the learning of a methodology. “One must become the kind of person who can enter into relation....”25

Quickly we leave the narrow definition of will as essentially a matter of effort and determination. Something else will be required. And, even as we take up this critical facility of will, we cannot forget that grace is a necessary member of the couplet. Neither exists independently. Each requires the other to come into being. We see the two, will and grace, linked in the following example from Between Man and Man.

Imagine two men sitting beside one another in any kind of solitude of the world. They do not speak with one another, they do not look at one another, not once have they turned to one another. They are not in one another’s confidence, the one knows nothing of the other’s career, early that morning they got to know one another in the course of their travels. In this moment neither is thinking of the other; we do not need to know what their thoughts are. The one is sitting on the common seat obviously after his usual manner, calm, hospitably disposed to


25Wood, Martin Buber's Ontology; an Analysis of I and Thou, 53.
everything that may come. His being seems to say it is too little to be ready, one must also be really there. The other, whose attitude does not betray him, is a man who holds himself in reserve, withholds himself. But if we know about him, we know that a childhood’s spell is laid on him, that his withholding of himself is something other than an attitude, behind all attitude is entrenched the impenetrable inability to communicate himself. And now, let us imagine that this is one of the hours which succeed in bursting asunder the seven iron bands about our heart—imperceptibly the spell is lifted. But even now the man does not speak a word, does not stir a finger. Yet he does something. The lifting of the spell has happened to him—no matter from where—without his doing. But this is what he does now: he releases in himself a reserve over which only he himself has power. Unreservedly communication streams from him, and the silence bears it to his neighbour. In deed it was intended for him, and he receives it unreservedly as he receives all genuine destiny that meets him. He will be able to tell no one, not even himself, what he has experienced. What does he now “know” of the other? No more knowing is needed. For where unreserve has ruled, even wordlessly, between men, the word of dialogue has happened sacramentally.26

Buber tells this story in order to begin a discussion concerning the nature of dialogue and specifically, how silence may be communication. I am reading this story as an unveiling of the mystery of ‘will and grace’. Both are present. One person has “become the kind of person who can enter into relation.” The other cannot even imagine relation. He is under a spell. He is not even aware of his own condition. Such is the nature of spells. Then, it happens. “…imperceptibly the spell is lifted—no matter from where—without his doing.”

I appreciate Buber’s unwillingness to follow further into the source of this lifting. This is not merely a personal decision on his part. We can go no further. We cannot know from where the spell is lifted. Mystery may yield to revelation but deny access to penetration by analysis.

This is the grace. It happens to the man. When the spell is lifted, he releases the reserve that has gripped his life. This is will.

---

Meanwhile, sitting alongside on the same bench is one who is ready for such a moment of meeting. Here is will. When the other person releases his reserve, sending unreserved communication to him, the two meet, silently. Here is grace. The final declaration bears witness to the presence of both: “dialogue has happened sacramentally.” The one who is ready cannot make the meeting happen. The reference to the spell-bound person emphasizes this critical point. However, even if the other were ready, open and waiting, fully present, there—even this would not suffice. Will is not enough. Two wills do not create grace.

Since we cannot penetrate into the source of the grace, let us then be occupied with what knowledge is available to human beings through our experience of living. The one who is under a “childhood’s spell” hints to us that this essential knowledge may, in whatever measure, have something to do with our very beginnings as children. Buber reflects upon this toward the conclusion of the first part of I and Thou.

Distance and Relation

Buber suggests that: “The pre-natal life of the child is a pure natural association, a flowing toward each other, a bodily reciprocity.” Ronald Gregor Smith translates natural association as “natural combination.” A combining that leaves no distinction between the infant and the world/womb that the infant floats in. Indeed this combining is also cosmic, since no part of the universe has been divided or separated from another. It is also the “womb of the great mother—the undifferentiated, not yet formed primal

world.” Buber thus recalls the old Jewish myth that “in his mother’s womb man knows the universe and forgets it at birth.”

Let us underline that in the beginning, for Buber, there is only a Thou the child rests comfortably within. There is no I as yet. That process, for it is a process, begins at birth with separation from the mother. And yet, whatever amnesia occurs when we are uncoupled from natural association through womb and the connected universe, the longing for relation is retained. Buber insists however that this “should not be taken for a craving to go back....” Rather, “What this longing aims for is the cosmic association of the being that has burst into spirit with its true You.”

Here we describe the distinctively human. For the human—in contrast to animals or, for that matter, trees—this process begins with separation, the act of making distance. Buber does not imagine that this separation is an abrupt or traumatic event, in the manner some theorists suggest and some therapists try to correct by re-imaging. In such a view, birth is a radical and abrupt crisis that thrusts the child into an alien world. Clinically, attempts are make to lessen the blow.

To the contrary, Buber suggests that this separation occurs over time. That it takes time arises from an acknowledgeement of the enormity of the work that lies ahead for the child. Time is needed because of the limited capacity of the child to absorb all that would rush in. Buber speculates that the universe was once whole and of a single piece to the infant submerged in waters of the womb. The birthed child is actually “granted time to

---

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.
exchange the natural association with the world that is slipping away for a spiritual
association—a relationship.”\textsuperscript{31} This happens because the world does “not pour itself into
senses that are waiting but deigns to meet those that are reaching out.”\textsuperscript{32} How else could
we stand! Such plentitude of stimulus would stop us in our first breath, overwhelm our
inexperienced finger tips and taste buds, and leave us in an autistic stupor. In truth, to
give shape to the world requires strenuous effort and active wooing on the part of the
child during the whole process of development.

We discover and give shape to our own world by touching, smelling, listening,
tasting, and watching—nothing comes to us ready made and complete. For the new born,
it is only over time, through the repetitive, reaching, awkward and unguided “movement
of the hands [that she] will win from a woolly Teddy-bear its precise form, apparent to
the senses, and becomes lovingly and unforgettably aware of a complete body.”\textsuperscript{33} Or
again: “Little, disjointed, meaningless sounds still go out persistently into the void. But
one day, unforeseen, they will have become conversation—does it matter that it is
perhaps with a simmering kettle? It is conversation. Many a movement termed reflex is a
firm trowel in the building up of the person in the world.”\textsuperscript{34}

What is critical to clarify, according to Buber, is that during this process of early
development the child does not first separate subject from object creating a distance from
which she may enter into relationship. Rather, the longing for relationship comes first—

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33}Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 26.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.
“the cupped hand into which the being that confronts us nestles; and the wordless anticipation of saying You, comes second.” This leads him to this central conclusion: “In the beginning is the relation—as the category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul; the a priori of relation; the innate You.”

This, for Buber, is what it means to have soul: to be related to the world. But the world as world does not yet exist. The world takes shape for the child over time. “The development of the child’s soul is connected indissolubly with his craving for the You, with the fulfillments and disappointments of this craving, with the play of his experiments and his tragic seriousness when he feels at a total loss.” The process is underway, but the separation has not occurred that enables the child to speak the basic word, “I-It.” Indeed, the “I” can only come into being through the “Thou.” We return once again to this central concern of all human relation: “The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one’s whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter.”

Buber will not articulate the timing. Nor will he point to or articulate any particular structure. The separation process is not viewed in terms of a developmental theory couched the in terms of emotional or cognitive growth. It happens. The world


36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 62.
comes to be "woven into a relation, to a You..." Then it "comes closer and closer to the bursting point until one day the bonds are broken and the I confronts its detached self for a moment like a You, and then it takes full possession of itself and henceforth enters into relations in full consciousness."\textsuperscript{39}

An I emerges that is distinct and unique. Once, writes Vermes, we become conscious of ourselves as a distinct I, we acquire an It-world out of which we can step into relation and our "lifelong swing between I-You and I-It has started on its course."\textsuperscript{40}

Thus, we take this central affirmation into all further inquiry: that whatever ability is necessary for entering I-Thou relation, it is present in the way we become a human person. We also discover that this is not naturally a simple or effortless transition, nor is it even a safe and inevitable passage. After all, a spell can be placed on a child which wraps "seven bands" around a young life—preventing this awareness and making future relation nearly impossible, save for the lifting of the spell "no matter from where, but not of his own doing." These spells haunt our family life; they are imposed in families, by school and church, and enforced by popular culture. Buber does not discuss these pathologies \textit{per se}, but they are ever on his mind. For this reason, he cannot envision the development of our ability to move into I-Thou relation without addressing the essential concerns of education and the creation of community. All discussion of dialogical relation should have in mind its continuation into public life.

In addition, I read Buber’s affirmation that "The development of the child’s soul is connected indissolubly with his craving for the Thou" as a welcome and helpful

\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Ibid}, 80.

\textsuperscript{40}Pamela Vermes, \textit{Buber on God and the Perfect Man}, Brown Judaic Studies 13 (Chico, CA: Scholars P., 1980), 194.
undergirding for the resilience of children which we daily witness with astonishment, especially if we have the courage to open our eyes to the evils they must contend with. “In the beginning is the relation.” Buber appears to say that this longing helps us resist the forces of isolation as it urges us to turn and reach out to the world and others. Our ability to enter relation begins with the gift of relation. Grace precedes will. This simple acknowledgement sets all life in the proper context of gratitude and blessing.

With the child growing and grown, we will look into those elements which Buber highlights as indicative of human relation. These elements will be important to have in hand as we look to the very human concerns of care and healing.

The Elements of the Interhuman

**Being and Seeming**

Building upon the basic understanding of the two-fold attitude of human relations, Buber concerns himself with filling the gaps and spelling out the implications that arise from such a highly poetic and condensed text as *I and Thou*. Curious readers, skeptics and critics alike, have asked many questions. These questions have led to many significant essays by Buber and, finally, to an afterward he wrote for the 1957 Kaufman translation of *I and Thou* in which he sought to respond to the most persistent of the questions. In particular this literature provides the enduring influence and guidance needed in the practice of the dialogical life, especially within the helping professions.

For example, in his essay, “Elements of the Interhuman,” Buber ventures into the problems that make dialogical relation between person and person challenging if not problematic and difficult. “The essential problem of the sphere of the interhuman is the
duality of being and seeming." He imagines two people, the "one who proceeds from what one really is, the other from what one wishes to seem." With rare exceptions, these attitudes are mixed within most of us. Further, we should not equate seeming and being as parallel to the word pairs I-It and I-Thou, though seeming is a fundamental obstacle to entering I-Thou relation. If we are concerned about how we want to appear, seeming has already slipped into the relationship. Directness is not possible. The impression we wish to make introduces means into the relation, a purpose, even if its aim is making the good impression we hope for. This mode of existence is I-It. For Buber, truth in the interhuman means that persons "communicate themselves to one another as what they are." The heart of living a real life is to be real, genuine, and authentic. This is of such consequence that the absence of authenticity in relation precludes relation, and threatens "its very existence."

In order to emphasize the complexity of 'seeming' Buber suggests the following humorous example:

Let us imagine two men, whose life is dominated by appearance, sitting and talking together. Call them Peter and Paul. Let us list the different configurations which are involved. First, there is Peter as he wishes to appear to Paul, and Paul as he wishes to appear to Peter. Then there is Peter as he really appears to Paul, that is Paul's image of Peter, which in general does not in the least coincide with what Peter wishes Paul to see; and similarly there is the reverse situation. Further, there is Peter as he appears to himself, and Paul as he appears to himself. Lastly, there are the bodily Peter and bodily Paul. Two living beings and six ghostly

---


42 Ibid., 76.

43 Ibid., 77.

44 Ibid.
appearances, which mingle in many ways in the conversation between the two. Where is there room for any genuine interhuman life?\textsuperscript{45}

This brings Buber to affirm that to “yield to seeming is man’s essential cowardice; to resist it is his essential courage.”\textsuperscript{46}

This struggle to be who we are not only requires courage for particularly threatening moments, but also may require of us endurance and persistence throughout life’s journey. Each day brings new opportunity as well as challenge. Being may be more difficult for some than for others, but it is a struggle never made in vain, even though living from one’s authentic self may require a heavy payment. Further Buber argues that the accretion of appearances does not create the impossibility of yet overcoming seeming. “Man as man can be redeemed.” Buber speaks as the teacher when he says; “I have never known a young person who seemed to me irretrievably bad.”\textsuperscript{47}

Even for Peter and Paul the ghosts can be exorcised when they find themselves “repelled to be represented by ghosts.” He concludes the distinction with this declaration: “In their being the will is stirred and strengthened to be confirmed in their being as what they really are and nothing else. We see the forces of real life at work as they drive out the ghosts, till the semblance vanishes and the depths of personal life call to one another.”\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48}Buber and Friedman, \textit{The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays.}
Personal-making Present

It is not enough to be genuine ourselves. When we turn to another, we speak to a unique and particular person. We want them to be who they are and for our dialogue to reflect the full presence of each. Most conversation between persons, he argues, should best be called “speechifying.” In other words, we are not talking to each other but past each other. This is most evident in the isolation of persons in communities where fear inhibits our freedom to be ourselves and to “…say what we mean and do what we say.”

This withholding, this lack of honest progression from speech to deed is the source of our distress. It seems self-evident that not saying what we mean makes dialogue impossible. However, honesty by itself is not enough. More is required. It is necessary “that each regard his partner as the very one he is.” Included in this awareness is that the other is genuinely other, different, unique, not the object of my projections, but as she/he is. With such regard, I can direct my words to that particular person. This may not end in agreement or even consensus. Honest opposition does not and should not end dialogue. Rather it is an acceptance of the person in who she/he is. “I affirm the person I struggle with: I struggle with him as his partner, I confirm him as a creature and as creation, I confirm him who is opposed to me as him who is over against me.”

While it is true that genuine dialogue depends on the mutuality that is between the two who have entered into dialogue, it is possible for one to intend dialogue as a trust,

49 Ibid., 78.
50 Ibid., 79.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
expressed as invitation for the other to become a partner, irrespective of the other’s level of openness.\textsuperscript{53} This invitation of the inviter requires, by the very nature of I-Thou relation, that he/she experience the other “as a whole and yet at the same time without reduction or abstraction, in all its concreteness.” This means that “to be aware of a man, therefore, means in particular to perceive his wholeness as a person determined by the spirit; it means to perceive the dynamic centre which stamps his every utterance, action, and attitude with the recognizable sign of uniqueness.”\textsuperscript{54}

In the essay, “Dialogue,” we are helped to greater clarity of Buber’s thinking as he distinguishes between different types of cognizance in terms of: observing, looking on, and becoming aware.\textsuperscript{55} I note that the sequence of awareness may also represent a useful choreography that may inform the therapeutic process that moves from I-It to I-Thou.

The observer is “wholly intent” on noting what he/she is seeing. It doesn’t matter if the other is aware that he/she is being observed or that anything of the observer has been revealed. Rather the observer is concentrating on traits and characteristics, “indications” of the other. This observant type of cognizance is employed in most human exchange, but it is also an important aspect of counseling—in the process of diagnosis, for example, when working through a mental status exam. Buber suggests that in this way of knowing, “a face is nothing but physiognomy, movements nothing but gestures of

\textsuperscript{53} Schilpp, Friedman, and Buber, \textit{The Philosophy of Martin Buber}, 171ff.


\textsuperscript{55} Buber, \textit{Between Man and Man}, 8.
expression." This is not to disparage the importance of proper diagnosis in care-giving, but it illustrates the type of relation and information that intentional observation yields, as well as illustrate its limitations.

By contrast, “The onlooker is not at all intent.” There may have been an original purpose but the phase of looking on something or someone sees the “object freely,” waiting to see what happens. The onlooker lets go, is not interested in traits or particular characteristics. While the observer will look upon grass as a chemical structure and process having to do with nutrition, the onlooker “lets the sun shine upon it.” This leads Buber to assert, “All great artists have been onlookers.”

Despite their differences, however, the observer and onlooker are alike in not requiring action to be taken in terms of response, reciprocity, or mutuality. Both are aloof, in varying degrees to be sure, and this aloofness does not “demand action from them, nor inflict destiny on them.”

Becoming aware however happens when the other says something to me, speaks not what can be known in an objective way, but addresses me in such a way that what is spoken “enters my life.” It may be something about the person, but it may also be something about me. There may not be words but there is a mutual regard from which something passes between the two, felt as a shared destiny.

In the counseling relationship, becoming aware requires that we ask, “What dealings do we have together that require both of us to be present in this moment?” This leads the helper to such awareness of the other: she or he cannot hide behind professional ‘seeming’, since this awareness asks me to be open and willing to be changed. I will

\[\textsuperscript{56}\text{Ibid., 9.}\]
return to the importance of this when we come to the development of the pastoral care model.

With these distinctions in hand it is not difficult to understand Buber’s objection to the kind of psychological inquiry that divides the person into various parts and dimensions. It is important to note that Buber does find value in the analytical process, as long as the limitations of this quality of relation are recognized. “The perception of one’s fellow man as a whole, as a unity, and as unique—even if his wholeness, unity, and uniqueness are only partly developed, as is usually the case—is opposed in our time by almost everything that is commonly understood as specifically modern. In our time there predominates an analytical, reductive, and deriving look between man and man.” This assessment made more than fifty years ago still rings accurately. The practice of classical analysis has waned in large measure and been replaced by the medical and biological therapies of medication, the cognitive and behavioral modalities of change, and brief solution therapies for solving particular problems. These therapies, which may be useful, are often driven by economics the focus of which regards symptom relief as the measure of success. They rely upon the cognizance phase of observation where one tracks the metrics that can be quantified.

Finally, when we link “becoming aware” and “personal making present” as both awareness and an action to be done, we must note that Buber calls the action, “imagining the real,” “…for in its essential being this gift is not a looking at the other, but a bold swinging—demanding the most intensive stirring of one’s being—into the life of the other.”

---

57Buber and Friedman, The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays, 70.
Imposition and Unfolding

The two basic ways we affect others in “their views and attitude toward life” comprise the third element of the interhuman. The one basic way is by “imposition” and the other by “unfolding.” The distinction between the two returns to the central themes of I-Thou and I-It. Buber refers to the person who imposes himself or herself on the other as the propagandist and the one who seeks the unfolding of the other as the educator.

The propagandist is not concerned with the person as a person. Whatever there is about the other is used as a means of gaining influence. In the extreme, Buber highlights the political ambitions of the party or state that not only disregards the person but actually depersonalizes him/her. This imposition violently interrupts genuine relation for the purpose of growing the collective. The use of this extreme example reveals Buber’s deep concern with the modern crises of human relations as threatened by the rise of the totalitarian state. But the propagandist does not need to be represented as someone sinister or even one who does not wish good for another. It typifies much of our communication with each other. Ideology, personal investment in a point of view, defensiveness, polemics, and argumentation are all ways of imposing ourselves on another. Indeed, the distinction is woven between “imposition” and “unfolding” is woven into the living history of pastoral care as questions such as these are asked: How shall we employ faith, theology, doctrine, and biblical texts? Does Christian care giving require proclamation? How do we use our various psychological theories in the practice of pastoral therapy? In what ways do our preferred therapeutic modalities impose our way upon the helping relationship? As with other elements that inhibit the dialogical relation, there may be occasion when imposition is called for. Often we may not even be aware
that we are imposing ourselves upon the other. This is one of several critical reasons for supervision in which the sharing of case work with colleagues is paramount.

By stark contrast the educator regards each individual as “in a position to become a unique, single person, and thus the bearer of a special task of existence that can be fulfilled through him and him alone.”58 The linking of uniqueness and destiny is an essential combination in Buber’s thought that is rooted in his extensive study of Hasidism. I have not referenced Hasidism as a fundamental influence in the development of Buber’s thought to this moment, but its importance can be felt in this aspect of the interhuman by quoting from The Way of Man: according to the teachings of Hasidism:

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique....It is the duty of every person in Israel to know and consider that he is unique in the world in his particular character and that there has never been anyone like him in the world, for if there had been someone like him, there would have been no need for him to be in the world.... Every man’s foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the greatest has already achieved.59

To this statement Buber adds the famous story of the Hasidic Rabbi Zusya, who said just before his death: “in the world to come I shall not be asked: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ I shall be asked: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

Such a theology does not violate our human unlikeness by imposing upon us the aim of making us more alike. Rather: “All men have access to God, but each man has a different access. Mankind’s great chance lies precisely in the unlikeness of men, in the

58Ibid., 83.

unlikeness of their qualities and inclinations. God's all inclusiveness manifests itself in
the infinite multiplicity of the ways that lead to him, each of which is open to one man.\textsuperscript{60}

With this we see more clearly into the cohesiveness of all these elements that are
essential for true dialogue and how they fold into and out from each other. The call to
authenticity and to the deeper awareness of the other's genuine being in our meetings
with one another is the means of our own becoming who we are. It is a living and
responsive mutuality.

The educator, the helper, is aware of these elements as she/he engages the process
of unfolding. The one who helps must bring his/her uniqueness into the meeting as one
who seeks to live from who he/she is. It is essential in becoming aware of the other, of
inviting the other to be fully present in who she/he is. The awareness of otherness is
founded upon the uniqueness, the particular task of existence each embraces in the
process of coming to know each other. The educator knows of these actualizing forces
from his/her own experience of becoming, recognizes them in the other, and aligns
him/herself with those forces that he believes to be in every person.

I have come to identify these actualizing forces as deriving from the \textit{innate You}. However, Buber is not speaking about self-actualization in the manner of most
contemporary psychological theory. Neither is he referring to individuation in Jung's
theory of becoming a whole person, though he does not discount individuation as a
"personal stamp of all realization of human existence."\textsuperscript{61} Distinguishing these is
important for two reasons. In the first place, Buber wants to hold this innate actualizing

\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{61}Buber and Friedman, \textit{The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays}, 85.
process to creation. Second, we are continually reminded that we come into being through meeting, not by ourselves but with each other and with God, the eternal Thou.

"Men need, and it is granted to them, to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings." We are relational beings. The implications for pastoral caring and counseling are obvious and manifold.

Genuine Dialogue

At the conclusion of the essay, "Elements of the Interhuman," Buber brings his thinking to summary by describing what genuine dialogue is and what it is not. This is a useful contrast and not merely redundant. It will provide a useful conclusion to this general introduction and provide a foundation for the more clinical perspective that lies ahead.

Let me quote the opening paragraph in full as a comprehensive statement of the process and the fruit of what he intends:

In genuine dialogue the turning to the partner takes place in all truth, that is, it is a turning of the being. Every speaker ‘means’ the partner or partners to who he turns as this personal existence. To ‘mean’ someone in this connection is at the same time to exercise that degree of making present which is possible to the speaker at that moment. The experiencing senses and the imagining of the real that completes the findings of the senses work together to make the other present as a whole and as a unique being, as the person that he is. But the speaker does not merely perceive the one who is present to him in this way; he receives him as his partner, and that means that he confirms this other being, so far as it is for him to confirm. The true turning of his person to the other includes this confirmation, this acceptance. Of course, such a confirmation does not mean approval; but no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person.  

---

62 Ibid., 69.

63 Ibid., 85.
Genuine dialogue between two partners overcomes the problems associated with seeming and appearance, whereupon nothing is withheld nor comes between. This does not mean that everything needs to be said, but that which needs to be said, cannot be withheld: "...where the dialogue is fulfilled in its being, between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve and are free of the desire for semblance, there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness which is to be found nowhere else."\(^{64}\)

**Turning**

In "Elements of the Interhuman, we are introduced to the word "turning" as opening the possibility of shifting the relation from I-It to I-Thou. *Turning* is a leitmotif throughout Buber's writing. It is an essential word for the vocabulary of the dialogical life. *Turning* is a response to a question that is addressed to us. In the opening chapter in the *Way of Man*, Buber sets the question within the biblical tradition by way of a Hasidic story. A Hasidic Rabbi is in prison. The jailor is taunting the old Jew, referring to God's question to Adam following the eating of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. How, the jailor wonders, can an all knowing God ask Adam, "where are you?" The rabbi responds by indicating that this same question is being asked of the jailor. Does the guard agree that the bible addresses each person in every generation? What surprises jailor is the idea that God wants to know of him, *where are you?* In all instances, including Adam and the guard, Buber comments, "God does not expect to learn something God does not know; what God wants is to produce an effect in a person which

\(^{64}\)Ibid., 86.
can only be produced by just such a question, provided that it reaches a person’s heart—that each person allows it to reach his or her heart.”  

As for Adam, so for us: “everything now depends on whether man turns—faces the question.” Kenneth Kramer, in Martin Buber’s *I and Thou: Practicing Living Dialogue*, highlights one of many difficulties translators have in rendering the German to English. The word turning is one common translation of Buber’s word—*Umkehr*. In his 1957 version, Ronald Gregor Smith translated *Umkehr* as turning, a change Buber suggested from Smith’s original 1937 choice of “reversal.” Walter Kaufmann’s 1970 translation employs the English “return.” Most scholars favor the word “turn” since Buber means by *Umkehr*, the Hebrew *teshuvah* that is often translated “to turn.” Repentance is too narrow and restrictive to convey the meaning Buber intends. 

*Teshuvah* carries a far more significant cluster of meanings. Pamela Vermes in her excellent commentary on Buber’s writing, suggests that for Buber, “*Teshuvah* is when a person, in anguish and despair, prostrates himself beside the ruins of all that he thought he possesses, and from his loss, fear, isolation, alienation, and dereliction, cries out to his *You* to be there with him.” There are biblical examples that express this emotionally laden experience. But, turning may also be quite simple, a shift or deepening of perspective, as when we pay attention to what is before us. 

Often the turning is prompted by crisis. Something arrests our attention. We hear the question calling us out of our hiding places. “Where are you?” Buber suggests that we


67 Ibid.
may even have had intimations of the question but that the comfort and security we have achieved can deafen us because the “Voice does not come in a thunderstorm which threatens man’s very existence; it is a ‘still small voice’, and easy to drown.” Buber understood this to be the special task of the biblical prophets who “never announced a God upon whom their hearers’ striving for security reckoned.” Rather, their task was to proclaim the “unwished for God...who shatters all security...and who demands that his creatures become real....”

In particular, for Buber, facing the voice, the one who is speaking, turning toward the other with one’s whole being is the response that creates the way to genuine relation. It is not a once and for all event but a turning which must be enacted again and again. Neither is turning limited to the relation between God and human beings; it is also necessary between person and person, between person and the world. While this thesis focuses upon the human sphere of I-Thou relation we should be reminded by Buber’s inclusiveness that all our relations are an invitation to speak the word pair I-Thou. This includes the world of creation we walk through, as well as the creative expressions of the spirit that are found in the great variety of the arts. Vermes highlights this larger more inclusive truth:

Buber’s tehsuvah envisages the Kingdom of God as one in which human beings show loving response and responsibility towards nature, singly and as a whole, with its soil, rocks, seas, rivers, plants and animals; towards fellow-beings, singly, nationally, globally; and towards the things of the mind and spirit—art, knowledge and holiness. If man can learn to live like this, as a helper working hand in hand with the divine Helper, he will not feel a stranger here as now, not


alone, not at the mercy of unseen powers. The son will have returned to his Father’s house.\footnote{Vermes, \textit{Buber on God and the Perfect Man}, 228.}

Indeed, turning in one particular moment to what lies right before our eyes may be the means by which we practice and learn to turn to the fullness that is the world—inclusive of human life as well as the Glory of God. Mary Oliver illustrates this in verse:

\begin{quote}
Praying

It does not have to be
the blue iris
It could be weeds in a vacant lot or a few
small stones: just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don’t try
to make them too elaborate, this isn’t
a context, but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.\footnote{Mary Oliver, \textit{Thirst} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 37.}
\end{quote}

The prophet may shout us to awaken. The poet seduces us to open our eyes to the world through rhythm and meter.

As I will explore more fully, turning is essential in the kind of caring, especially pastoral caring, that regards persons in their wholeness and which seeks the healing that comes from confirmation and presence in genuine dialogue. A simple example of such turning may happen in the moment of marriage therapy when a husband and wife are encouraged to shift their chairs, to look each other in the eye, speak directly to the other as Thou, no longer speaking indirectly through the counselor, but slowing down, listening
carefully not only to what is being said, but who it is who is speaking. Kramer suggests the unified elements of turning that include the following:  

* Being fully present  
* Making the other present  
* Obedient listening  
* Affirming and confirming  
* Imagining the other’s side  
* Withholding nothing  
* Surrendering trustingly  
* Being willing to change

We will use these elements as I begin to formulate a model for pastoral care.

**The Eternal Thou**

A paper that concerns itself with Christian care-giving assumes that the presence of God is vital in that care. This assumption has been explored from many vantage points. For example Wayne Oates integrates pastoral care and God’s presence in *The Presence of God* in which he distinguishes different ways we may experience that Presence.  

Like many other pastoral theologians and counselors, Oates finds a rich diversity of biblical passages that express the many ways we experience God’s presence: in suffering and pain, in fear and isolation and in celebration and joy and how the presence of God may bring courage and comfort, direction and strength and challenge and renewal. This textual diversity of biblical expression reveals the many ways in which the presence of God entangles and mixes in human life and in human history. Jewish and Christian care-giving trust this entanglement to be in the present moment and in many ways of caring.

The care of others is ordained for all persons of faith as one primary response to God’s

---


presence in love and compassion—in the Jewish biblical and legal tradition, [see Jewish care] and for Christians in the Jesus narratives, his teaching, and in the apostolic letters. In addition, from the earliest moments God’s presence calls some to particular ways of caring which we speak about as call and/or vocation, the etymology reinforcing that we are responding to being addressed. We understand this caring to be a partnership with God and for those of us who name Jesus as Lord, we participate in one aspect of the ministry of Jesus through pastoral care.

God as Presence is also the central concern of Buber as he points toward the dialogical life of I-Thou relation. Like others in the history of biblical faith, he grounds his awareness in the biblical text and in the translation of the Bible that he began with Franz Rosenzweig. Buber continued this translation from the Hebrew into German following Rosenzweig’s death into his own final years of life. During this time, he also addresses God’s presence in his biblical essays and commentary. Because the encounter with God’s presence and the engagement with the biblical text are closely intertwined for Buber, we can explore how the way in which we read the text may be integrated into a model of pastoral care. Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation of the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush provides the foundation upon which they integrate the presence of God in the biblical text and Buber’s dialogical approach to relationship.

**The Name of God in the Biblical Text**

The translation for this pivotal passage in Exodus is by Everett Fox. Fox’s translation from Hebrew to English is informed by the Buber/Rozensweig translation of the Hebrew into German.

3:10 So now, here, the cry of the children of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.
So now, go, for I send you to Pharaoh—bring my people, the Children of Israel out of Egypt!

11 Moshe said to God: Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh that I should bring the Children of Israel out of Egypt?

12 He said: Indeed I will be-there with you, and this is the sign for you that I myself have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will (all) serve God by this mountain.

13 Moshe said to God: Here, I will come to the Children of Israel
And I will say to them: the God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they will say to me: what is his name?—what shall I say to them?

14 God said to Moshe:

EHYEH ASHER EHYEH/ I will be-there however I will be there.
And he said: thus shall you say to the Children of Israel:

EHYEH/I-WILL-BE-THERE sends me to you.\(^{74}\)

The revelation of the Divine name in the story presents a number of difficulties in translating and meaning. I have always been struck that at the moment when Moses (and we) hope for the most clarity we are given a riddle enhanced by difficult syntax. Buber begins with wondering why Moshe should want to know the name in the first place. In keeping with many other scholars, one cultural assumption is that the true name of a person is “the essence of the person, distilled from his real being, so that he is present in it once again.”\(^{75}\) Knowing the name makes the person approachable and accessible, unable to retreat into the mists of mystery, unable to withhold because the essence is no longer secret. The one who speaks the name gains access to the person or god.

Rosenzweig thinks that the very syntactical enigma itself sets the name in an intrinsic anti-magic formula. How can you control, implore, or win the favor of a god whose name is nearly impossible to speak, a name that lacks grammatical sense and specificity?


Moshe wants the name so that the people can feel confident that they can do something with it. It cannot be, Buber thinks, that even after years of slavery the Israelites have forgotten the name of God of their ancestors. More importantly, Buber and Rosenzweig point out that the use of “the first person singular of the imperfect tense of *Hayah* = “to be” (not “to be” in the abstract sense of which the Bible has as yet no notion, but “to be” in the sense of “to become,” “to come to be,” “to become present,” “to be there”) is not a simple assurance of God’s presence but holds the clue to the divine name, YHWH.” The imperfect tense in Hebrew covers both present and future. So Rosenzweig and Buber translate the word *ehyeh*: I am there, and I will be there. This conveys a significant difference from the common English translation, *I AM WHO I AM* (NRSV), as a name that describes God as “the Being One or even the Everlasting One.” In fact, there is no way to say “I am” in Hebrew. This is a locution unknown in the biblical world. Buber goes farther to suggest that *I Am* may be taken to indicate an “abstraction of a kind that does not usually come about in periods of increasing religious vitality.” The name that is spoken to an enslaved people, intended to be a name in which one may hope, cannot be a philosophical statement for Buber. Neither is it sufficient for Buber’s time nor in the age to come.

In verse 12, after Moses has been given the job of returning to Egypt, he speaks to the presence in the bush, “Who am I that I should go?” The voice reassures him that “I-will-be-there with you.” This assurance is expressed in presence as companionship and partnership. You will not be alone. We will go together.

---

76 Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man*, 84.

In verse 14 we hear *ehyeh* as part of the name itself, and then a second *ehyeh*; "I will be there as I will be there;" "I will be present as which I shall be present;" "I will be there in such a way as I will be there." Buber writes: "YHVH indeed states that He will always be present, but... He...refuses to restrict Himself to definite forms of manifestation; how could the people even venture to conjure and limit Him!"\(^{78}\) Buber proclaims that the very Name itself declares that the people not only do not need to conjure God up because God is already present with them, neither *can* they conjure him up to act in such and such a way on their behalf because God comes as God comes—in the manner God decides to come.

Buber’s reading of I Samuel 10 offers another illustration of how this sense of God’s presence may be witnessed in other moments of the biblical narrative. Following a disastrous defeat, the Israelite army regroups and determines that the reason for the loss must have been that YHVH was not with them. So they bring out the ark and set in the front where it leads them into battle. This self-assurance is pummeled not only in another defeat, but also in the capture of the ark itself! This leads Buber to notice a persistent problem between humans and YHVH. “You do not have YHVH when you have the ark; just when you think you have Him, you do not.”\(^{79}\)

YHVH’s name eludes capture as it also brings assurance. The word *ehyeh*, is a repetitive pattern throughout the biblical landscape. See for example: Jos. 1:5 ; 3:7; Deut. 31:8; Lev. 26:11-13; Judg. 6:12; 6:13; I Sam. 20:42; Num. 14:41-43; Amos 5:14; 4:12-13; Is. 52:6; 65:1; Zech. 2:11; and Hos. 1:9.

\(^{78}\)Ibid.

\(^{79}\)Ibid., 135.
Gundry hears strong echoes of these passages in the last words of Jesus: “And Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (NRSV Matthew 28:20). Specifically referring to Exodus 12 he writes: “...Jesus assures his disciples the way Yahweh assured his people in the OT.”80 Similarly, and of particular interest for pastoral care and presence are the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:20 “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Name and Presence are one. This confirms what Mary hears in the poetry of Isaiah: “‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:23).

**The Eternal Thou in *I and Thou***

The third section of *I and Thou* addresses the dimension of the Eternal Thou. This terminology is not meant as a substitute for using the word ‘God’. Buber is resolute about the importance of using the word God, however much it has been misused.81 Rather, the language of the Eternal Thou finds its proper context in the language of I-It and I-Thou relations, that Buber has previously explored in the horizontal dimensions of nature, human relations, and various works of the spirit, such as theater and art. Now, he picks up the so-called vertical dimension. Using the same style as in the opening of part one of *I and Thou*, the essential insight into the Eternal Thou is provided in the first highly condensed paragraph.

The extended line of relations meets in the eternal *Thou*.

---


Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou the primary word addresses the eternal Thou. Through this mediation of the Thou of all beings fulfillment, and non-fulfillment, of relations comes to them. The inborn Thou is realized in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the Thou that by its nature cannot become It.\(^{82}\)

The eternal Thou cannot be known or studied as object. The Eternal Thou “…can never become a particular being among many or the sum total of all.”\(^{83}\) God is the Thou of Thou’s, the one who eludes even the most “breathtaking statements about who God may be.”\(^{84}\) Pamala Vermes confirms this when she writes, “The everlasting You can never become an it because it cannot by nature be measured or circumscribed; because it cannot by nature be conceived as a sum of qualities; because it cannot be found either in the world or out of it; because it cannot be thought; because it cannot be experienced.”\(^{85}\)

In his essay “The Love of God and the love of Deity,”\(^{86}\) Buber voices his deep admiration for Pascal who wrote “after two ecstatic hours, and which he carried about with him until his death, sewn into the lining of his doublet… ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob—not of the philosophers and scholars.’” For Buber, these words represented a “change of heart.” “He turned [italics mine], not from a state of being where there is no God to one where there is a God, but from the God of the philosophers to the God of Abraham.”

---

\(^{82}\)Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 75.

\(^{83}\)Ibid. 133.

\(^{84}\)Ibid., 135.

\(^{85}\)Vermes, \textit{Buber on God and the Perfect Man}, 254.

This turning is from the idea of God, of Deity, of the God "...who occupies a definite position in a definite system of thought." The God of Abraham, remarks Pascal, "is not susceptible of introduction into a system of thought precisely because He is God. He is beyond each and every one of those systems, absolutely and by virtue of His nature."87

In Meetings, Buber speaks quite simply about this important distinction when asked if he himself believed in God. "If to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk to him, then I believe in God."88

The central distinction, presented in this opening paragraph is, "the inborn Thou is realized in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the Thou that by its nature cannot become it."89 We can use Kaufman's translation to turn the phrase slightly so we can look upon this from another vantage point: "the innate You is actualized each time without ever being perfected. It attains perfection solely in the immediate relationship to the You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an It."90

---

87 Ibid.

88 Martin Buber and Maurice S. Friedman, Meetings (La Salle, IL: Open Court Pub. Co., 1973), 44.

89 Buber, I and Thou, 75.

90 For those interested in the metaphysics underlying these similarities and differences, I refer you to Woods excellent study, Martin Buber's Ontology. See especially chapter three, 87ff.
In response to the different translation of *vollendet* as either “consummation” or “perfection” we should be clear about what each refers to. Buber does not intend us to imagine that this accomplishment, consummation or perfection means without flaw or fault. Rather, Vermes argues, that the “ideal discerned by Buber at that time was of living in a certain way, turned in a certain direction, and of being able by this means to achieve the integrity and wholeness a man needs to become perfectly himself, or rather, perfectly what he is destined to be.”

The primary reason that our own I-Thou moments, with each other and with the world, may seem insufficient is because they quickly pass. They do not and cannot last. Everything we say “Thou” to, except the eternal Thou, returns to an it. We move in and out of relation. This is part of the melancholy of our human living, in keeping with our human condition, our limitations, and our finitude. We move in and out and back and forth between both primary words. This oscillation lends to one critique of Buber’s dialogical life because the brevity and spontaneity of I-Thou meetings is so effervescent. It can seem that we are deprived of the consistency of an enduring relationship.

Buber is certainly aware that this lack of continuity with the I-Thou relation is a genuine problem which humans want to solve, particularly if the person is “not content with the inexpressible confirmation of meaning, but wants to see this confirmation stretched out as something that can be continually taken up and handled, a continuum unbroken in space and time that insures his life at every point and every moment.”

---

91 Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man*, 141.

This is particularly true in our relation with the Eternal Thou whom humans seem to wish to possess, not merely for reasons of an easier idolatry but because we desire a "continuity in space and time of possession of God." What happens with this desire, Buber suggests, is that God becomes an object of faith supported by doctrine, propositions, and ritual so that the individual can say in the midst of life, "Nevertheless I believe," so that "nothing can happen to him, since he believes that there is One who will not let anything happen to him." This longing for continuity expresses our awareness of separation and isolation in our world and relationships and, especially, with God. Rather than feel the distance, the dynamic ebb and flow of meeting, the person may be willing to give up something of the immediate and combustible nature of I-Thou relation, if in turn, we can be more certain that there is "something" we could depend on, "something" we can see, touch and feel, "something" that might provide security amidst the tumult and conflict within and without. The compromise is significant however.

Another major obstacle to true I-Thou relation arises when feelings of dependence on the Eternal Thou usurp other facets of the sacred connection. For Buber feelings "are part of the soul's dynamics" which exist as opposites, in a polar tension—as love and

---

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 This desire is certainly present in the biblical text: note Buber's comments on the ark of the Covenant. See also Jeremiah 7:4 "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'." (NRSV)
hate. Further they changeable, liable to be overtaken, outdone, or cancelled out by other feelings.

The concern with dependence as expressive of I-Thou relation is not only that feelings change and are themselves inconsistent. Dependence, when not restrained, lacks the second critical element of dialogical relation, the polar opposite, which is freedom as expressed in partnership. “Yes:” says Buber, “in pure relation you have felt yourself to be simply dependent, as you are able to feel in no other relation—and simply free, too, as in no other time or place; you have felt yourself to be both creaturely and creative. You had the one feeling then no longer limited by the other, but you had both of them limitlessly and together.”

From here, Buber addresses us in a most personal manner as when a parent sits at the bedside of a child in the dark night, as when a teacher whispers into the ear of a trembling student, or as a pastor might comfort a frightened parishioner:

You know always in your heart that you need God more than everything; but do you not know too that God needs you—in the fullness of His eternity needs you? How would man be, how would you be if God did not need him, did not need you? You need God, in order to be—and god needs you, for the very meaning of your life. In instruction and in poems men are at pains to say more, and they say too much—what turgid and presumptuous talk that is about the ‘God who becomes;’ but we know unshakably in our hearts that there is a becoming of the God that is. The world is not divine sport, it is divine destiny. There is divine meaning in the life of the world, of man, of human persons, of you and of me.

Creation happens to us, burns itself into us, recasts us in burning—we tremble and are faint, we submit. We take part in creation, meet the Creator, reach out to Him, helpers and companions.

---


97 Buber, *I and Thou*, 82.

98 Ibid.
This is what we glimpse in all our moments of I-Thou, transitory and effervescent though they are. We glimpse this truth in the Thou of the human other and we glimpse it in encountering the Eternal Thou even though one is partial and the other complete. Needless to say, we need to recall from the first part of *I and Thou* that no means or agency can come between us and the other. This precludes turning the I-Thou meeting into a means or for the purpose of entering into relation with the eternal Thou. When the other becomes a means or when we use someone for the purpose of benefiting ourselves, we are no longer in I-Thou relation. On the other hand, when we turn toward the other, with our whole being, then we do catch a glimpse of the eternal Thou. We glimpse when we are there, when we are present with the other.

It is not difficult to see that Buber weaves a tapestry throughout his writing with the text, the world, and the inter-human. The shuttle hums back and forth within the warp and the woof to create this tapestry. He writes:

If I myself should designate something as the “central portion of my work,” then it could not be anything individual, but only the one basic insight that has led me not only to the study of the Bible, as to the study of Hasidism, but also to an independent philosophical presentation: that the I-Thou relation to God and the I-Thou relation to one’s fellow man are at bottom related to each other.  

We have by now clarified the elements of I-Thou as Buber outlines. I will turn next to the more specific focus of how these ideas inform the therapeutic relationship and in particular, pastoral care-giving.

---

CHAPTER TWO
IMPLICATIONS OF I-THOU RELATION UPON PASTORAL COUNSELING

This chapter will begin to integrate insights, features and elements of Buber’s dialogical thinking with the concerns of pastoral care and, more specifically, the practice of pastoral counseling. The influence of Buber on psychotherapy is largely known in its more humanist incarnation. There is a highly visible link between Buber’s writing about the interhuman and what has come to known as dialogical psychotherapy. The rising interest in this approach is evident in the growth of the literature and range of applications employed within various theoretical and clinical frameworks.¹

However Buber’s distinction between I-Thou and I-It relation also “became a standard idea within the pastoral theology movement.”² As I highlight the insights from dialogical therapy, I will pay attention to those areas that can be integrated into a model for pastoral counseling. To facilitate this process, I will use case studies to illustrate how Buber’s insights complement general counseling practice and where his unique imprint may be introduced.

¹See Maurice Friedman’s article “Martin Buber and Dialogical Psychotherapy,” Journal of Humanistic Psychology 42, no. 4 (2002): 7-36. Dr. Friedman is one of the leading biographers and interpreters of Buber’s dialogical theory as it relates to therapy. He teaches at San Diego State University which also houses the Institute for Dialogical Psychotherapy.

The Setting of the Pastoral Counseling Relationship

The distinction between pastoral care and pastoral counseling continues to be a dynamic issue within the pastoral care community. Much of the debate has centered upon whether pastoral counseling can be authentically practiced outside the congregational setting, whether in private practice or in a clinical environment. Part of this discussion concerns the counselor’s accountability, especially the retention of a genuine pastoral aspect that is integrated into clinical and therapeutic identity. In a private setting there is the risk of separating pastoral counseling from its role as one aspect of the comprehensive ministry of the church. Two early proponents representing differing views on these matters were also two founders of the pastoral counseling movement—Steward Hiltner and Howard Clinebell. Hiltner favored the parish setting. The new Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling highlights this fascinating history and follows the continuing debate into the present moment. A more thorough discussion can be found in Holifield’s A History of Pastoral Care in America. The importance of this discussion and the tension involved can be seen in the requirement of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) that certified pastoral counselors be members of and accredited by denominational bodies. John Patton, a major proponent of pastoral counseling and the pastoral counselor as representing the church, reviews this dialogue and offers his very experienced thoughts in Pastoral Counseling: A Ministry of the Church.

Though Buber writes from a conscious awareness of his Jewish heritage, it is important to note that his dialogical thought does not presuppose one particular religious tradition. Neither does dialogical therapy require that one must practice within a

---

community of faith. However, Buber does not discourage this. For him, the helper and
the client both live in the larger reality and context of actual life in a multiplex of
relationships. Further, this context must be invited into the very heart of the counseling
process. The reason is quite obvious. Unlike some analytical theories that understand a
person to be a self-contained individual, dialogical theory is built upon the idea of the
relational self. Hence, analytical theories work with distress as a symptom of internal
psychodynamic disturbance, while dialogical theory understands that personal distress
necessarily implies relational disturbance.

Buber envisions the development of dialogical communities, religious or
otherwise, in which genuine relation is taught, encouraged, and practiced in daily living.
Dialogical communities provide a proper basis for the more personal and focused healing
of therapy to take place. He develops this idea from his study of the communities of the
early Jewish Hasidim. The zaddik (the righteous one) is the spiritual leader of the
community and his relation with the Hasidim (the faithful or devoted ones) is Buber’s
consummiate example of the helper and the helping relationship. I highlight Buber’s
interest in developing dialogical communities in order to reveal some common ground
upon which the practice of dialogical pastoral care and counseling can be nurtured.
Dialogue is personal but not private. As we shall see, its primary concern is with our
relation to the world in its manifold nature.

This shift in perspective, which sets care and healing in the larger communal
context, has been growing stronger in recent years as evident in recent additions to the
literature of pastoral care. Margaret Korneld, the former president of the AAPC—to cite
one example of this shift—understands the counseling role as an integral part of
congregational care and the search for wholeness. She discovers in I-Thou relation the rich soil (to use her metaphor) needed to develop and nurture genuine relationship and wholeness within a religious fellowship. “Martin Buber writes that living community occurs when those in it know and are known as ‘you’ rather than ‘it’. Buber speaks to our time of isolation and loneliness.” This paper will focus upon pastoral counseling as a distinct process within the larger embrace of pastoral care giving.

The Counseling Relationship

Case Study

On a particular fall day I received a telephone call from a distraught wife. She was referred by her pastor. I agreed to an initial meeting to evaluate her distress and to see if I could be of help. In that session it quickly became evident that her desperation concerned her husband. She recently discovered that for the previous two years he had been lying about going to work and that he actually had been unemployed the whole time. A notice of foreclosure upon the family home was the source of the revelation. The financial damage was overwhelming but the relational trauma to one another and to their two adult children was far more acute. The deception left her in great pain, confusion, anger, and fear. However, as desperate as she was, she wanted me to see him! I agreed to her request and that I would await his call. It is not uncommon for one person to come to an initial session for the purpose of making an appointment for someone else, usually for another family member. During that period of waiting, I thought about the matter from time to time, aware that the devastation within the family with respect to financial problems and

the relational impact of his lie would continue and perhaps even increase until he came to
the place of asking for help—by himself.

The reason for my decision to wait for his call highlights one difference between
pastoral care and pastoral counseling, between supportive care and therapy. While this
paper is not intended as an introduction to pastoral counseling, this initial contact with the
distressed wife and mother raises several issues concerning the counseling relation which
bear directly upon Buber’s concept of the helper.

**Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counseling**

*The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* says: “In contemporary
American usage pastoral care usually refers, in a broad and inclusive way, to all pastoral
work concerned with the support and nurturance of persons and interpersonal
relationships, including everyday expressions of care and concern that may occur in the
midst of various pastoring activities and relationships.”5 This definition of pastoral care is
necessarily a broad and inclusive description, a description that includes pastoral care
practiced in such lay ministries as grief and divorce support groups, AA, Befrienders, or
Stephen Ministry. Pastoral care, so conceived, is not limited to the professional clergy,
but is part of the larger ministry of the entire congregation.

A further ramification affecting the distinction between pastoral care and pastoral
counseling is illustrated by the variety of relationships the pastor might have with the
person or group needing help.

Care in many of its expressions is also conversational though briefer and less
therapeutically complex than counseling, as in supportive or sustaining ministries
like visiting the sick. The term is also applied to non-conversational ministries in

---

5Hunter and Ramsay, *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 845.
which a significant caring dimension may be present as in administering communion, conducting a funeral, or pastoral teaching.\(^6\)

Pastoral conversation, as distinct from dialogue (a distinction I will emphasize later in this chapter) takes place in the narthex, in pot-luck lines, in committee meetings, and church events. This range of relationship, vital to pastoral care, is often incompatible with pastoral counseling which calls for a much more limited and focused helping relation including the added structure of place, time of meeting, and, sometimes, a fee. However, this does not mean that pastoral care cannot be the origin of an unfolding counseling relationship nor should any description of pastoral care exclude the possibility of an I-Thou meeting such as may happen in a home or a hospital visit. When Buber points to the places where I-Thou happens, he notices that genuine relation is never limited to a particular occasion, but rather it may appear in all moments of ordinary living.

Nonetheless, it is important for the care giver to recognize when pastoral care stands at the threshold of a more intense and focused counseling relation. The frame, the specific boundaries defined by the more formal helping relation are critical variables because the unique setting provides for the clarity of boundaries within which the intensity and focus of therapy and the possibility of change may unfold. One way this threshold can be marked is by noticing the flow of energy between the caregiver and the one needing care. Pastoral counseling “refers to caring ministries that are more structured and focused on specifically articulated need or concern. Counseling always involves some degree of ‘contract’ in which a request for help is articulated and specific arrangements are agreed upon concerning time and place of meeting;” Further,

\(^6\)Ibid., 849.
“Counseling generally implies extended conversation focused on the needs and concerns of the one seeking help.”\textsuperscript{7} It is this kind of extended conversation that Buber intends when he engages psychotherapists in dialogue concerning how dialogical healing may be introduced into the helping process leading toward wholeness.

The particulars of pastoral counseling are similar to a more general therapeutic framework.

Pastoral counseling:

* Implies extended and focused conversation
* A frame or structure is brought into the helping process (time, place, fee)
* Assumes the relationship is both pastoral and therapeutic
* The energy for the therapeutic process originates in and is sustained by the person asking for help.

This last feature is especially critical for the therapeutic process. The origin of the helping relationship begins in the request for help. This has long been recognized throughout general therapeutic and pastoral counseling practice as defining the helping framework.

It is also common for a person to come to the pastor with a request for help. However, the pastor or lay care-giver can also take the initiative, which means that the origin of a helping relationship can be initiated by the helper. In some cases, a pastoral obligation arises that requires the offer of help as in a pastoral visit. For example, in the above case study, if the distressed wife had come to me as a pastor, I might have taken the initiative to visit with the husband in order to intervene with care and concern

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid.
directed to him and the whole family. In Pastoral Care it would be my hope that by intervening I might help stop the damage from worsening. Upon entering such a complex situation I would also want to offer a referral to therapy with a counselor(s) who could work with the husband, the marriage, and the family. This same bold initiative cannot be taken by the counselor even with the knowledge that the pain within each family member and between them might continue unanswered. In pastoral counseling the request, however hesitant, must originate in the other.

The initiation of a request for help, the vital flow from one to the other with one asking and the other responding, determines the nature of the roles that will be at play. Further, the direction of the energy that begins with the one seeking help is not only expressed at the origin of the counseling relation, but his or her energy provides the ebb and flow of the entire healing process. Recognizing, responding to, and nurturing this directional flow comprise the art of the counseling process; they are embedded in the very nature of the help that is offered.

Carroll Wise highlights what may occur at the opening of a counseling session:

... some persons beginning in the counseling situation will ask for directions as to how to begin. They may say, “Where do you want me to start?” in replying to this the counselor may show irritation or he may show a sense of indifference or he may show genuine understanding and acceptance of the fact that the counselee is in something of a quandary and doesn’t quite know where to start. He might say to the counselee, “Begin wherever it seems natural for you to begin.”

This simple turn of the question may or may not be the right thing to do. Knowing how to respond to the client’s “quandary” is always challenging, since therapy is a living and dynamic process that includes our own response to the person and situation.

---

Rosemary and Alan Balsam in their classic primer, *Becoming a Psychotherapist*, urge us to see the complexities of this energy in terms of the tidal ebb and flow of the ocean.

The sea fills or empties pools, overcoming resistant barriers if they are soft enough or small enough, moving on inexorably. There is nothing one can do to speed up the tide or change the direction of its flow, yet a well-placed touch of a finger or toe will speed the filling or empting of a pool; moving a rock or a log, or smoothing out a hillock of sand, will allow the successive waves to advance or retreat more fully. ...Watching one's patient in psychotherapy is like watching the tremendous power of the sea moving at its own pace: one can observe and describe it but one has no ultimate control over it.⁹

In addition to the complexity of the ebb and flow, evident in many different modalities, there is the complexity engendered by the asymmetry of the helping relationship—which Buber addresses directly.

**Buber and the Healing Relation**

In Buberian terms, this ebb and flow makes possible the living word that is communicated between the helper and the one asking for help in the healing dialogue. The very quality of the dialogue begins in the difference between the one and the other. In conversation with Carl Rogers, whose approach shares much in common with Buber’s thoughts on the counseling process, they discuss the nature of mutuality in the helping relationship:

Buber: A man coming to you for help. The difference—the essential difference—between your role in this situation and his is obvious. He comes for help to you. You don’t come to help from him. And not only this, but you are able, more or less to help him. He can do different things to you, but not just help you. And not this alone. You see him, really. I don’t mean that you can’t be mistaken, you see, but you see him, just as you said, as he is. He cannot, by far, cannot see you. Not only in that degree, but even in that kind of seeing. ...you are of course, a very important person for him. But not a person whom he wants to see and to know and is able to. You’re important for him. You’re—he is from the moment he comes to you, he is, may I say, entangled in your life, in your thoughts, in your

being, your communication, and so on. But he is not interested in you as you. It cannot be. You are interested, you say so and you are right, in him as this person. This kind of detached presence he cannot have and give.¹⁰

Immediately following Buber’s comments, Rogers asks for further clarification of what he means by “detached presence.” It is a phrase that seems odd in the context of Buber’s I-Thou relation, since nothing can be withheld from genuine meeting—no objectification, no observation may intervene. Detachment seems to convey a more formal relationship in which the helper works from an objectivity and neutrality, believing that this “detachment” is necessary for the therapeutic process. The extreme of this kind of detachment is caricatured in traditional psychoanalysis—the patient lying on a couch not even looking at the analyst who is busy making notes. Buber does not intend this. We are “entangled” but our interest in each other is different. This sometimes presents the counselor with a delicate choreography which he explores.

Buber: And, this situation—let us now look on this common situation from your point of view and from his point of view. The same situation. You can see it, feel it, experience it from the two sides. ...You can experience, I would venture to say, bodily, experience his side of the situation. When you do, so to speak, something to him, you feel yourself touched by what you do to him. He cannot do it at all. You are at your side and at his side at the same time. Here and there, or let’s rather say, there and here. Where he is and who you are. He cannot be but where he is. And this, you will, not only you will, you want. Your inner necessity may be as they are. I accept that. I have no objection at all. But the situation has an objection. ...you have—necessarily another attitude to the situation than he has. You are able to do something that he’s not able. You are not equals and cannot be. You have a great task—self-imposed—a great self-imposed task to supplement this need of his and to do rather more than in the normal situation.¹¹


¹¹Ibid.
Again and again, Buber highlights the particular nature of I-Thou in the helping process. There is the helper and the one asking for help. This cannot be a once and for all recognition, but part of the essential dynamic in the counseling relationship. Vigilance is required throughout, as the “great self-imposed task” is picked up again and again. The critical difference between the one who helps and the one who asks lies in the responsibility each must accept.

Responsibility

The person who asks for help begins the relationship with an action, however hesitant. It does not need to be bold and decisive at this point. It is a request often fraught with fear and apprehension. Even so, it is the beginning of a turning that arises when one:

shuddering at the alienation between the I and the world, comes to reflect that something is to be done. As when in the grave night-hour you lie, racked by waking dream—bulwarks have fallen away and the abyss is screaming—and note amid your torment: there is still life, if only I got through to it—but how, how? So is this man in the hours of reflection, shuddering, and aimlessly considering this and that. And perhaps, away in the unloved knowledge of the depths within him, he really knows the direction of reversal, leading through sacrifice.\(^\text{12}\)

Case Study

It took seven months for the husband to call me. Let me call him Scott. His voice full of panic and fear, he asked me if I would see him, though it sounded more than a request. “I need help!” he said. We arranged a time for a meeting. If he came to the session, and I was uncertain if he would, the responsibility would shift to me.

\(^{12}\)Buber, I and Thou, 70.
Buber does not regard the helper as necessarily rooted in a particular profession. Nor does he suggest that it cannot be rooted in a profession. Rather, the helper is one who assumes a particular responsibility, regardless of training and education.

One of Buber’s long time and influential friends, Hans Traub, a Jungian psychotherapist, began to change his therapeutic approach to the dialogical after listening to some of Buber’s lectures. Their correspondence over the ensuing years is an important resource for understanding the influence of I-Thou upon psychotherapy. In one letter (1926) Traub reflects upon a particular lecture Buber gave in the Netherlands. In the following portion, he addresses the responsibility of the ‘helper’:

...when one is aware of the depth of meaning of this word, [responsibility] e.g. when one tries every moment, in which one feels the inevitability of one’s existence, to be aware of one’s meaning, then one reaches necessarily the central formulation of the question as you expounded it at the close of your lecture in Holland. “Are you ready with your whole being to persevere in your vocation? Are you ready, with nothing else but your own person, with your ‘here I am’ to justify your existence?”

Who I am is the most valuable element I can bring into the healing relation. My willingness to embrace “here I am” in the many moments of the unfolding process becomes essential since in dialogical terms, identity and vocation are a single piece, a unity within the person.

The responsibility of “here I am,” also translates an important Hebrew word and concept. “Hinneini,” understood in the biblical tradition, is one response to being called to attention and to task; it is the response to the one asking for help. Often the request comes from God. In Buber’s terms, we cannot separate the human call for help from the

---

Voice which speaks and who also awaits an answer. The responsibility to listen to the voice requires that I am present as I am, not as I want to appear (seeming), or with a particular agenda or theory (imposition). There are, of course, responsibilities accorded to each word pair. The ‘I’ of the word pair I-Thou, does not need to give up what it has come to know through observation and examination and thoughtful diagnosis. Yet, as we have learned, the gathering of information does not create genuine meeting. The ‘helper’ must step toward the person. To meet the person is the ability of the therapist to “make contact that is essential.”

Buber writes: “what is demanded of him [the therapist] is that he draw the particular case out of the correct methodological objectification and himself step forth out of the role of processional superiority, achieved and guaranteed by long training and practice, into the elementary situation between one who calls and one who is called.”

Note the echo of the Buber’s language the origin of the prophetic vocation that originates in call (e.g. Isaiah 6.8). In *Hasidism and Modern Man* he affirms that “true knowledge of the Holy leads to responsibility in the world, that the fundamental relation of the soul to the world is responsibility.”

**Case Study**

Scott appeared. He looked like he hadn’t slept for some time. His eyes were bloodshot, his body agitated and his presence projected an immense effort to remain in control. I thought, “This is a truly a frightened man.” I could feel the shudder resonate in

---


his speech and in his eyes. I could glance into the abyss that was his life. In these first
moments, I had to ask myself if I wanted Scott to become “entangled” in my life. Did I
want to say to him, “Here I am?”

Buber’s question insinuates itself beneath the surface, awaiting an answer and my
own turning. I have to be honest with myself and willing to be with Scott in his condition.
There is an active conversation within me that wants to avoid the hard effort that lies
ahead by arguing—as Moses often did with the same Voice who first called to him from
a fiery bush. I have my own reasons. Foreseeing the work ahead, I feel a dissipation of
confidence in myself—that I am not sufficiently qualified—not equipped with adequate
skill or the experience necessary to address this desperate situation. I think, “I do not
want to fail him,” but in actuality, I do not want to fail.

Each of us must know our strengths and limitations. An honest assessment is
important, because I also do not want to be glib about my reply, as if I am able to help
anyone who comes to me. Scott cannot be just one new client who helps fill up my
schedule in order help me pay the bills, a pressure professional counselors cannot ignore.

However, before I am able to give a whole hearted answer, I must first receive
this broken man as he is in this moment of his crisis. I must listen to his story and try to
hold him like a “bruised reed.” He deserves this level of care as a person. His shame is
thick, and I can feel how close he is to leaping from the chair and running out the door.
Whether Scott and I each decides to enter into relationship or not, this opening session
should offer an invitation for Scott to turn toward me as one who will receive him. He is
feeling me out. I translate what is unspoken but which already exists between us, through
the words of the opening line of the 4th Psalm: “You gave me room when I was in
distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.” The Hebrew word, Rahav, conveys a stretching out the boundaries wide enough to contain what is present. In other words, I imagine Scott wondering, “...is there enough room in this place and within you, for my distress?” The making of room is not shrouded in mystery. It is accomplished both by intent and grace, through active listening which includes a responsiveness that expresses genuine interest and concern in what is being told and, most importantly, in the one telling the story.

**Diagnosis and Dialogical Counseling**

Diagnosis must be integral with the particular helping process that is employed. Nancy Ramsey makes this point by a thorough examination of various theories and paradigms that give rise to the wide variety of diagnostic instruments. Overall, “diagnosis is a process of naming the reality of another’s experience.” Each diagnostic lens can only name a part of that reality. This is intrinsic to all I-It knowledge—all information gathered about something or about someone is partial, however comprehensive the process. This does not discount the importance of skillfully and artfully thinking through the various aspects of the reality of the person who comes for help.

In the case study, just described, I noticed the frantic and fragile state of Scott’s presence. As I indicated in the introduction to the thesis, this is the kind of awareness Buber describes as practiced by the observer. “The observer is wholly intent on fixing the observed man in his mind, on ‘noting him.’” At one point I consciously begin to probe Scott, keeping notes and adding them to the chart: for example, how long has it been

---


since he had a night’s rest? How is his appetite? How muddled is his thinking? Has he had thoughts of suicide? There is a checklist. I cannot be the passive onlooker who is not active in the process but only “awaits what will be presented to him.”¹⁹ This kind of detachment lacks genuine concern.

I need to assess the depth of the physical implications of his burgeoning depression and consider medical intervention if necessary. And, for additional tracking of these symptoms during these moments of potential danger, I need a reference point from which my observations can be grounded. Here is one place where acute I-It thinking is critical. Ramsey describes the importance of this “medical-psychiatric paradigm” as rooting hope in “the reliance on the empirical rigor of science in which psychology participates.”²⁰ However, she rightly understands that this assessment is limited to the individual and it is shaped with a “more hierarchical reliance on the therapist as a representative of the expertise of science.”²¹ In fact, most diagnostic processes pose a challenge to the very quality of mutuality practiced in dialogical care. Before I address this, I would refer the reader to Ramsey’s comprehensive evaluation of different diagnostic processes which woven together, offer a more complete understanding of the reality of the person’s situation. These processes are important to distinguish and each has its place in a thorough examination.

I will now add the dialogical perspective to the larger discussion. Distinct among other psychological theories which focus upon the individual, dialogical theory and

¹⁹Ibid., 9.

²⁰Ramsay, Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms, 16.

²¹Ibid., 17.
therapy originate in the assumption of the relational self. This is different than regarding the self in a relational context. Internal disturbance necessarily implies relational disturbance, not as a consequence but in point of origin. This is not an easy distinction, but it is important to examine.

In *The Healing Between: A clinical Guide to Dialogical Psychotherapy*, William Heard suggests that a diagnosis usually “involves identifying patterns of behavior, those characteristics or traits common to a particular disorder that we perceive as persisting in the client.” He adds, “Presumably, this is important since we assume that our client will benefit from the type of treatment given to others who have presented similar symptoms. In many instances this is true if we are content to treat the symptoms and not the whole client”²² There are two issues that are important to highlight.

First, I-Thou relation is founded upon the uniqueness of each part of creation, including each person. The eyes which look for what is similar between one person and another are different from ones which search for the unique and unexpected. There is a difference between a person among others and the person who is before us. Symptoms may be similar but the experiences of them are always unique. It is the moving out from the similar and into the particular, the prizing of the unique that begins to shape the dialogue and the healing that happens when there is meeting.

Secondly, as with other therapies, dialogical counseling does not view symptoms as needing to be treated and relieved, but as vital communications to the person concerning the more basic nature of the problem. Richard Hycner suggests that problems bear the seed of the answer. They are not obstacles to overcome but expressions that

---

require attention and listening. “A dialogical approach understands psychopathology as an aborted dialogue. It is the residue of an attempted dialogue that was not responded to.”23 One learns to recognize what is hidden behind the presentation of the problem—the personal face of the yearning and the hurt gathered in pursuit of relation. Hycner suggests that this “viewpoint requires a paradigm shift in conceptualizing psychopathology and even diagnosis. This is not a technique, but rather a total attitude of accepting the value of the problem.”24

Case Study

When I think about Scott in his desperate predicament, I wonder how often he tried to tell someone else his truth, hesitantly and indirectly perhaps, looking for help and for any opening or response that granted him ‘room’. At this level of pain, any indication of judgment can lead once again to another “aborted dialogue.” In our initial encounter, I watch the cycles of shame wash across his face like waves disturbing the shore. I follow this impulse to find the source by inquiring into Scott’s family history of relationship. As I ask these questions I become aware that I am now examining him. Once again I am the observer. It is important to be alert to this shift in relationship so that I can return to the underlying purpose of our work.

The purpose of dialogical psychotherapy is to effect a healing of our relational self. Buber has contended that this healing takes place in a special kind of meeting of the therapist with the client. ...The meeting is nestled in the I-Thou relationship seen in the dialogue. The healing occurs in those moments when the therapist and


24Ibid., 123.
the client mutually turn with their whole being and relate, thus creating a new reality between them. It is in this meeting that healing takes place.\(^{25}\)

The helper is not an empty vessel. He/she turns with the whole being, the fullness of his/her life experience and learning. Each steps forward with their thoughts and reflections, theory and practice and, as pastoral theologian, their theology. We remember that as Buber contemplates the tree in his backyard, information about the tree does not need to be sacrificed in order for a meeting to happen between the tree and Buber.

It is important to ground this notion as solidly as possible. Richard Hycner remarks that the therapist does not forget his or her training, but that all this knowledge about the person must be "tempered by a sense of the whole person, and what this unique person needs at the time."\(^{26}\) This also requires that the helper come out from the security that theory and technique may provide when she or he is confronted with the unknown. "One’s theoretical assumptions are only the entree but no substitute for the encounter."\(^{27}\) Every counselor understands (or should be aware) how theory can be used to provide just this kind of protection—from what is undisclosed, from the feelings of helplessness in the presence of the situation before us, or from the anxiety that surges when silence fills the between.

As pastoral counselor, I find myself particularly vulnerable to this tendency of hiding behind both credentials and collar. Some persons come for pastoral counseling because they want to be able to speak about their faith. Some view pastoral counselors,
like clergy, as set apart from the human condition or as persons upon whom a particular authority is placed. It is a curious blend of attributes when pastoral authority, including theological and biblical knowledge, is mixed with clinical experience. It can be seductive to leave the “here I am” behind and step into the helping relationship with the aura “of professional and spiritual superiority.” Knowledge that derives from clinical theory and practice and from theological reflection and biblical study is very important in the healing process. But, if it stands between us, we cannot meet. I am reminded again of what Hans Traub discovered about this aspect of the helping relationship. “… I discovered one day the ultimate meaning of the a priori reality of relationship. I don’t have to create it myself, i.e. we only have to become aware of it. It lies in the dark. I say it as a way which (because of its unknown darkness) is binding us together while lying between us. It is illuminated through the event of the encounter.”

In a dialogue with several psychotherapists, including Leslie Farber and Dr. David Rioch, Buber reiterates:

The deciding reality is the therapist, not the methods. Without methods one is a dilettante. I am for methods, but just in order to use them not to believe in them. Although no doctor can do without a typology, he knows that at a certain moment the incomparable person of the patient stands before the incomparable person of the doctor; he throws away as much of his typology as he can and accepts this unforeseeable thing that goes on between therapist and patient. This change goes along with a ‘medical realism’ which, unlike the ordinary use of the term, is no acceptance of general concepts but accepting this situation as it is in its uniqueness. Although I am not allowed to renounce either typology or method, I must know in what moment I must give them up.

---

28Agassi, Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy, 163.

Dialogue In The Unfolding Process Of Helping

In keeping with most traditional training and therapeutic practice, making a particular diagnosis leads to creating particular treatment goals. In general, treatment goals are established in order to bring focus, direction, and a means of evaluation to the process. These goals may be few or many. They may focus upon the alleviation of physical symptoms of distress such as those often associated with depression and anxiety. They may be directed to resolving a particular relational, career, or personal problem. The goal may be formulated in terms of a desire for personal and spiritual growth. Regardless, these are all features that hold the healing process within I-It relation. Once again, here is the basic notion:

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their object. I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone.

This and the like together establish the realm of It. But the realm of Thou has a different basis. When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. When Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds.

When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.  

For the purpose of this paper I will highlight the differences between the I-It and I-Thou manner of speaking within the healing relationship with the two terms conversation and dialogue. Buber himself uses both terms somewhat interchangeably to indicate I-Thou communication which adds some confusion if we are trying to consistently distinguish one from another. Once more Buber thwarts a systematic reading. I think this does reflect the difficulty of speaking about these differences.

---

30Buber, I and Thou, 4.
Further, since Buber began to ‘point’ toward the dialogical in the early 20th century, significant change has happened within the healing arts. The lines between dialogue and helping conversation have overlapped in considerable measure. Still, I will try to use the two terms in order to highlight the basic notion of I-Thou as dialogue. Therapeutic conversation or, for that matter, pastoral conversation often has a thing in mind, a content to be shared, a point to be made, a goal to be followed. Dialogue happens when no thing intervenes or intrudes in the between. Knowing this difference allows the helper to move back and forth between the two realms as I will now describe.

In his essay “Between Man and Man,” Buber winnows out what he calls, “genuine dialogue” from “technical dialogue” and “monologue disguised as dialogue.”

The kind of monologue that is disguised as dialogue is familiar. For example, someone asks us a question in such a way that it appears to express a genuine interest in hearing about our life and experience. However, quickly the conversation shifts away from our speaking to their speaking. Henri Nouwen describes this shift in terms familiar to all of us and he suggests a simple and very human explanation.

Paying attention to our fellow human beings is far from easy. We tend to be so insecure about our self-worth and so much in need of affirmation that is very hard not to ask for attention ourselves. Before we are fully aware of it, we are speaking about ourselves, referring to our experiences, telling our stories, or turning the subject of conversation toward our own territory. The familiar sentence, “That reminds me of…” is a standard method of shifting attention from the other to ourselves.

This mostly unconscious shift from the other to one’s self underscores the importance of cleaving to the responsibility and the particular kind of mutuality and

31Buber, Between Man and Man, 19.

boundaries that are intrinsic to the helping relationship. In both pastoral conversation and
dialogue we are called to share who we are including our experience of the other in the
process of helping. But, when we share, what we share, and how we share from our own
experience in the helping conversation are critical factors in our way of caring. John
Gunzburg, a seasoned therapist who practices Buber's dialogical approach writes:

With all my self-exploration and self-knowledge, I am never certain how I know
when to reveal some aspect of my own experience to a client. I must not be self-
revealing to the client's detriment. I must pace the client's conversation and listen
carefully to his or her needs at any given moment. But moments of intimacy and
entering an I-Thou position is not willed. It is during such moments, when I and
my client are most connected, that I have found self-revealing will often open up
a new area for the client to explore. I can never be sure. I can only keep
participating in therapy, keep talking to my colleagues, keep writing and keep
reflecting.\textsuperscript{33}

It is true that we can never be sure. But we can learn to become aware when we
have slipped into monologue under the pretense that we are carrying on a conversation or
dialogue. In truth, we can know when either of us has ceased to listen. The eyes of the
other are an immediate indicator, glazed over or darting about the room. The person sits
in the chair, but she or he is no longer present. As a pastoral counselor, I confess a
particular penchant to become 'preachy', a form of monologue that is characterized by
the sound of my own voice using theological or biblical expertise to make a point, resolve
an issue, or punctuate my wisdom and insight.

Counselors and pastors have all experienced persons who take over meetings or
counseling sessions by holding forth. And we have been with persons, couples, and
families who have stopped talking and listening to each other, exhausted by their attempts
to communicate past the lecturing or ultimatum, disguised as a help or clarification.

\textsuperscript{33}John C. Gunsburg, \textit{Healing through Meeting: Martin Buber's Conversational
 Approach to Psychotherapy} (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1997), 32.
When this happens in a session, I witness how each person winces under judgments and incriminations accompanied by the conviction that the speaker holds the truth. The scars of countless attempts to change monologue to conversation are directly in view. Monologue is a nearly hopeless condition, the inborn yearning for relation incarcerated within the formidable fortress of isolation.

For Buber, the purpose of “technical dialogue” is to acquire objective understanding as, for example, during the diagnostic and assessment process. This is the style of communication befitting one who is an observer that can be accompanied by interest, involvement, and responsiveness. I would transpose Buber’s more narrow use of “technical dialogue” into the larger and more general category of any thoughtful and responsive conversation that is bounded within I-It relation. For Buber, I-It conversation comprises the larger part of our ordinary existence. And, there are many useful conversational skills and techniques that need to be acquired, practiced, and used in the helping process. Conversation, I would argue, sets the tone and enlivens and nurtures the relationship which helps create the possibility for dialogue to occur. Since Buber is clear that all I-Thou relation must return to I-It relation, he places high value on the kind of conversation that he calls “the eternal chrysalis” of dialogue. Within personal conversation, the work of relation can be undertaken until the “eternal butterfly” of I-Thou bursts forth. Donald Capps in Giving Counsel, discusses this kind of pastoral conversation. He clarifies various types of conversation and the purposes for which each may be used. He highlights obstacles to good conversation, and he encourages each counselor to develop his/her own style of conversation. Knowing how to begin a

\[34\] Buber, I and Thou, 17.
conversation and nurture its development and reflect upon the understanding received is important. With similar concern, Donald Capps urges counselors to avoid the kind of technical talk that is both formal and authoritative. Rather, his use of pastoral conversation is one that is less formal, more genuine, warm, and mutual, as expressive of a friendship. And as I have indicated, bounding this style of conversation within I-It does not have to empty it of the personal or of authentic and heartfelt caring.

Genuine Dialogue

Having highlighted conversation and monologue as belonging to the realm of I-It, I will now turn to those features that Buber regards as essential for genuine dialogue. As I do this, it will be important to remember that Buber is not creating a new way of speaking with new vocabulary and grammar as if dialogue could be scripted, rehearsed, and then recited in the session. As he reminds us:

I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality, I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside.
I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation."36

In other words we are asked to reflect upon our own experience of dialogue having burst into life for us, because “...real dialogue is here continually hidden in all kinds of odd corners and, occasionally in an unseemly way, breaks surprisingly and inopportune...”37


36Schilpp, Friedman, and Buber, The Philosophy of Martin Buber, 693.

37Buber, Between Man and Man, 19.
The importance of this self-reflection is immeasurable. It will guard against the idea that I-Thou happens only within particular intentional settings or only in the rarified atmosphere of dialogical therapy. The helper who sets out to meet the other in genuine dialogue and healing cannot lay a possessive claim on its appearance.

Rabbi Dennis Ross offers an example of how I-Thou ‘meeting’ may occur in the surprise happenstance of an encounter in a lunchroom setting. His lunchroom experience reminds us how common these kinds of occasions may be—these occasions by which a ‘hallowing’ of an ordinary moment is brought to everyday day life. While visiting a member of his congregation in the hospital, Rabbi Ross relates the following episode.

Like a child without an appetite turning a piece of cold chicken over and over, I read and review the lunch choices. Amid the discordant arrhythmia of tableware rattling on lunch trays and serving utensils striking the aluminum steamer table, out of this unsyncopated cacophony of kitchen rap, I hear, “Rabbi, sitting with anyone?”

It’s a doctor. We know each other from a hospital committee we serve on.

“That would be great. I’d enjoy it.”

I have no idea what we will talk about. I can tell you where our relationship has been but not where it will go. All a person can do is anticipate. We barely pay attention to the food as the conversation sets its own direction. We discuss kids, wives, schedules, and our work, its challenges and rewards. We do not try to convince each other of anything. We listen and respond without impediment; time and space evaporate. With elsewhere somewhere else, we focus on here, now, opening to each other fully and spontaneously. And as we return dirty dishes to the conveyor and stroll to the elevator, I realize the deepening bond between our spirits. We have met as I and Thou.”

My initial response upon listening to his description of the meeting is the impression that this kind of mutual sharing can just as easily be understood as a lovely, warm, and personal conversation between acquaintances. It does not need to be elevated into I-Thou. Before I bring this judgment upon Rabbi Ross’s acknowledgement of

---

meeting it is necessary to proceed with caution. Heard underscores what Buber is careful to point out:

…the experience of this special way of relating is *ineffable* [italics mine]. We may discuss how the experience impacts the partners of the relationship, but we cannot describe the event itself. We are presented with a dilemma that is paradoxical. We are talking about something that cannot be talked about without changing what it is.”

Whenever we reflect upon the personal experience of I-Thou meeting, we are speaking *about* it. This does not negate the importance of reflection, but reflection cannot be confused with the moment itself. In the moment of reflection, we have left the present for the realm of history, the world of I-Thou for the world of I-It. Further, each ‘meeting’ is a unique and never to be repeated event. We cannot return to that which we have left. I-Thou relation happens in so many ordinary moments that we hardly notice, save for the gladness of heart we carry from the encounter.

The moments of I-Thou I have experienced, wondrous to me as a person, become touchstones in my work as the helper. I assume that these moments exist for each of us. I am interested to hear from the one who comes to me for help the stories that tell of her or his own *meetings*—perhaps long forgotten or passed over, hidden in memory as a treasure waiting to be held once again. And, as we know, these moments are not limited to speaking with words. Buber points to the “wordless depths,” the communication of silence, as with a glance or a nod to a passer-by, or “in a frown, or in the library clerk’s wink that says, ‘Forget the nickel fine.’”

At the conclusion of Buber’s re-telling of a Hasidic tale, Rabbi Zusya declares “…the truth is this: if a man speaks in the spirit of

---

39Ibid.

40Ibid., 53.
truth and listens in the spirit of truth, one word is enough, for with one word can the world be uplifted, and with one word can the world be redeemed.\textsuperscript{41}

Case Study

A man came to the clinic where I practice in order to find help in reducing his anxiety. My clinical secretary chose me from the roster of counselors.\textsuperscript{42} He tells me during our first session that he came at the urging of his doctor who also prescribed medication for his anxiety. He hopes the medication will also help reduce his fear which, he confesses, has dogged him most of his life to the extent that his fear has kept him from “really living.” His world was bounded by “what ifs”—the potential consequences of any action always holding him back. Moreover, his wife, who had been the stimulus for all things lively, drawing him into social settings and new adventures, had recently (within two months) passed away. Now he faced a future without his help-mate, no one to grab his hand and lead (drag) him out from safety and into the world. He had both resented and depended upon her. But now, he was alone.

From the first moment he sat in the chair, he rubbed his palms, working them as if kneading dough. He spoke about his anxiety in making the appointment, the anxiety of driving to my office, of walking through the door, and sitting in the waiting room. Each moment was an occasion for either escape or for “turning.” I can’t tell if he is sitting in my office because he has gathered courage and will or if he is at his wits end. Either way, we are together, and I listen to him tell his story. I am making assessments, judging the

\textsuperscript{41} Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, 236.

\textsuperscript{42} I have always been struck by the mystery that seems at play when client and therapist link up. During case conferences at my first pastoral counseling site, we would present each case with the question, “Why did God bring this person into my life at this time.” The question was meant to indicate a kind of destiny in the meeting.
degree of his anxiety in the context of his deep grief. I am the observer, my inquiry and his responses are developing a conversation meant to gather understanding.

Suddenly, he tells me how he and his wife loved to travel to Duluth, a pilgrimage they made several times a year. He describes crossing over the cusp of a certain hill from which the city and the great blue lake come into view. I notice a change in his eyes, his hands stop working. Simultaneously I see the sight he sees because I know that very place. I know the feeling of anticipation and longing at just that very sight when the whole of Superior displays itself in her grand immensity. I tell him, "I know the very spot." Our glance confirms that. I do not need to say anything more. In that silence, we come to regard each other as two who share a bond. In this brief meeting, we meet as persons, leaving behind the roles of counselor and anxious client. As he speaks about the hill-top experience, he continues to feel the relief and joy that flows into the present moment. It was important to limit my speaking further of my own moment of vision. However brief, the mutuality we entered into from that surprising and unexpected moment helped create a partnership from which I thought we could work together to help find direction and new purpose.

Gunzburg acknowledges the "therapeutic dilemma" that I-Thou presents to the helping process:

...the client usually commences therapy with the therapist in the I-It position, with both having some understanding of what they expect from the other, but meeting will only occur within the I-Thou position, which often occurs spontaneously and cannot be willed. Therapist and client can only hope to meet, never demand or will it of each other.43

43Gunzburg, Healing through Meeting: Martin Buber's Conversational Approach to Psychotherapy, 9.
In Buber’s language, “The Thou meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word...[I-Thou]... is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being."\(^{44}\)

A number of features stand forth that further differentiate dialogue from conversation and monologue. Genuine dialogue is the language of I-Thou. And we are reminded that the I of I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole of one’s being. The I of the word pair I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being. This means that when we meet in dialogue, we are present without reserve. That, however, does not indicate that we say everything. It does indicate that we say what we mean or “what we really think about the matter in question.” This includes the overcoming of appearance (being and seeming) so that what is spoken is not for the purpose of making an impression, but is spoken directly from one’s own authentic self. “Because genuine conversation is an ontological sphere which constitutes itself through the authenticity of being, every intrusion of appearance can injure it.”\(^{45}\)

Genuine dialogue is a partnership of equals; it is a shared mutuality where the “experience that is shared is greater than the sum of what either side brings to the relationship and different from either partner’s separate experience. In fact, the experience does not have its origin in the individual realm of either partner but rather in a realm created by their interaction.”\(^{46}\) This is the realm Buber calls, the “between.” In the

\(^{44}\)Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

\(^{45}\)Ibid.

case study just cited, my client and I had individual experiences of anticipating riding up and then rounding the cusp of the hill looking over Lake Superior. In our nearly wordless sharing, there is an interpenetration of each of our experiences, the meaning of which “goes straight to the core of both partners and alters their individual reality.”

It is as if in the vivid present, something passes between us “that is a knowing that neither can acquire by [our] individual efforts.”

Here too, we find another critical attribute of genuine dialogue: presence and presentness. “Presence excludes the experience of time.” In other words, my client and I are not merely talking about the experience of viewing the lake from the top of the hill as something that has happened. The “experience is full and complete in itself without either partner needing to look backward to its beginning nor forward to its outcome.”

Dan Avnon writes “…the fundamental fact of a dialogical person is presence: presence to what is, presence to the other without negating presence of self, presence to the inner voices(s) without excluding the voices(s) from without”. Fully present! This is in stark contrast to our usual reactive self, with only a portion of our mind in the moment. The onlooker and observer can be present only in the limited mode of I-It, because the other, whomever that may be, remains the “object” of my attention and purpose. Buber

---

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
describes the kind of presence we are speaking about as "becoming aware." And, since I-Thou relation is not limited to the inter-human he writes:

It by no means needs to be a man of who I become aware. It can be an animal, a plant ("It may be a weed in a vacant lot"), a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of the things through which from time to time something is said to me. Nothing can refuse to be the vessel for the Word. The limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness.⁵²

"Becoming aware" is letting go of what encumbers our mind, our preoccupations and preconceptions. It means turning to the other with the intent to receive them in their own uniqueness and wholeness that increases the "person’s ability to face the concreteness of the immediate situation."⁵³

Here we find the vital connection between the presence that comes to awareness within I-Thou relation and the Presence we “glimpse” of the Eternal Thou. As I noted earlier, this Presence is not a philosophical or psychological concept, but is rooted in the biblical text, the experience of a people with YHWH, as the God who is present in the midst of the people, in the midst of concrete life. Buber weaves all I-Thou moments with this unpredictable but abiding Presence. “Men do not find God if they stay in the world. The do not find Him if they leave the world. He who goes out with his whole being to meet his Thou and carries to it all being that is in the world, finds Him who cannot be sought.”⁵⁴

---

⁵²Buber, Between Man and Man, 10.

⁵³Avnon, Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue, 139.

⁵⁴Buber, I and Thou, 79.
This Presence lays the claim upon “the people to be present to their God, who is always present...in every now and in every here”.\(^{55}\)

Some of the difficulty rises from confusing presence with feeling such as the feeling of closeness or intimacy, as when two lovers entwined in body feel a ‘oneness’; or when a family gathers in the solidarity of grief and celebration as when a loved one is brought to the grave. Neither should presence be confused with therapeutic or pastoral rapport or even empathy. It is important to tell the difference. Buber clarifies this in *I and Thou* in a manner that translates the difference into the very nature of pastoral care and counseling. It is worth quoting and reading in its entirety.

Feelings accompany the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of love but do not constitute it. The accompanying feelings can be of greatly differing kinds. The feeling of Jesus for the demoniac differs from his feeling for the beloved disciple; but the love is the one love. Feelings are “entertained;” love comes to pass. Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its “content,” its object; but love is *between* *I* and *Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love; even though he ascribes to it the feelings he lives through, experiences, enjoys, and expresses. Love ranges in its effect through the whole world. In the eyes of him who takes his stand in love, and gazes out of it, men are cut free from their entanglement in bustling activity. Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou*. In a wonderful way, from time to time, exclusiveness arises—and so he can be effective, helping, healing, educating, raising up, saving. Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*. In this lies the likeness—impossible in any feeling whatsoever—of all who love, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blessedly protected man, whose life is rounded in that of a loved being, to him who is all his life nailed to the cross of the world, and who ventures to bring himself to the dreadful point—to love all *men*.\(^{56}\)

---


It is clear that Buber’s perceptions provide rich soil in which our understanding of a helping relationship and the healing which may occur can grow. The valuing of the uniqueness of the other and the meeting of the person as she/he is finds a place in many healing traditions. For Buber, it is the heart of the matter.

Distancing and Relating

In *I and Thou*, Buber imagines that the yearning for relation begins in the womb. “The prenatal life of the child is a pure natural association, a flowing toward each other, a bodily reciprocity.” This is undifferentiated relation. “From this it detaches itself to enter a personal life...”57 From here, the child begins to construct a world in which she or he may now enter into relation and conversation, beginning perhaps “with a bubbling tea kettle.”58 The longing for relation is primary: the cupped hand into which the being that confronts us nestles; and the yearning for that cupped hand, often unspoken, brings the other for help. This is a visceral experience that I have come to know through my own asking help from another.

This fundamental dynamic begins the process of healing. For Heard this process presupposes that: “…the ability to gain access to the unique wholeness of the other in our relationship is founded on a pair of ontological givens: distancing and relating. He [Buber] contends that our innate ability to distance and relate provides the basis for our interactions with the world.”59 Distancing sets us apart from the other, allowing us to


58 Ibid., 78.

experience him or her as "not us," not a category, not a collection of traits or metrics gathered from psychological testing. Instead we become able to experience the other as a whole person in their uniqueness. Distance is not about holding the other at arm's length. That occurs when we treat the other as an object. We must remember that the 'I' of I-Thou is a different 'I' than the 'I' of I-It relation. Understanding this and learning to move between the two word pairs is the counselor's responsibility. It is critical to remember that distance allows for relation because it allows for persons to be fully themselves. "When I use the distance to hold the other apart from myself as a separate being, there is the possibility of I-Thou relationship. When I thicken the distance and relate to the other as selected traits, only an I-It relationship is possible."60 Thickening is a useful image to describe that atmosphere when something intrudes into the relationship, clouding the transparency of the direct and unmediated relation that is the gift of genuine relation. "The manner in which we relate after distancing determines whether we will interact with the other as an object (It) or as a subject (Thou)."61

Without distance, there could not be the between and, therefore, no meeting. Further, the lack of this kind of distance easily leads to collusion or enmeshment, the kind of relation that cannot lead to healing because it does not differentiate one and the other. From this kind of "mismeeting," much therapeutic and pastoral abuse can be traced.

Distance and relation highlight the distinction between the two word pairs found in the opening lines of I and Thou. The responsibility I have discussed earlier, the requirement to step out from the theoretical and diagnostic with our wholeness as persons

60 Ibid., 33.

61 Ibid., 11.
toward the other is the essential act. No longer subject-object, I-It, but two separate and unique subjects meeting, I-Thou. "This experience of relating to the wholeness of the other results in the client's inner growth." 62

Understood and experienced in this way, distance is not the terrible abandonment we often feel, the lack of relation which tears at our being. Distance is 'sacred space' which holds us as the whole, unique person we are. It is in this sacred space, the space which allows for us to meet, where we may catch a glimpse of the Eternal Thou.

Case Study

In the opening sessions of our healing partnership, Scott's physical symptoms of distress is evident, his misery visible. "This I-It manner of relating is usually the source of our client's illness even as our I-Thou relating is the source of his healing. When a person is constantly responded to as an object that possesses certain characteristics, he or she tends to reflect those characteristics" 63 Scott is estranged from himself and loving relationships; he is the object of his family's anger and pain; he is the object of his own self-disgust as the failed husband, father, and provider; and he carries the fierce judgment imposed by the myth of the western autonomous individual. In his own eyes, he has failed as a man. He tells me he is ready to accept this verdict and the justice that is his due. He will escape to a small cabin in the boundary waters of Minnesota, remove himself as the object of pain from his family's life, and fish until his end comes. This is partly a sentimental dream woven into a less violent form of suicidal ideation. I confront his illusion that retiring into isolation for the sake of relieving the suffering of others will

62 Ibid., 33.

63 Ibid., 34.
actually relieve their suffering. However, in his plan for escape I also hear something about him—his personal joy of fishing, his longing to take pole in hand, step into his boat, and find some tranquility on the water. It's the first time I have heard something expressed other than shame and terror. Here, for the next minutes, I hear a note of accomplishment and pride—a note that speaks of what he values as special. I make a conscious decision to nurture this revelation, leaving behind the serious and heavy burden of the crisis. I climb into the boat so that he has someone to talk to. He shares with me some stories, the mysteries and challenges of knowing where to cast the line and play the bait. On the water, he feels unencumbered and competent.

This is conversation, to be sure, such as he might have with a friend. In these early moments of our work, I am searching beyond the objectifications that weigh him down, the accruements of worldly judgment. I want to invite Scott to find some of the tranquility he thinks can only be found in escape and isolation. I want him to learn to be himself with me. I want to catch a glimpse of him, help lift him from object to subject, unique and singular. I want him to know that I am genuinely interested in a relationship with him and that, even now in his personal trial, it is still possible for him to turn once again to his family and outward to the world that awaits his company.

Confirmation

One of Buber's critical insights in I and Thou follows upon the elemental principle of distance and relation. "I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou. All real living is meeting." ⁶⁴

---

⁶⁴Buber, I and Thou, 11.
Again, we come to an essential element of healing the relational self. I come into being with another. I cannot do this alone. The idea of the self-made man is a mistaken myth and, moreover, this myth is an oppressive and debilitating illusion. In his essay, “Distance and Relation,” Buber clarifies what he intends when he says, “I become through my relation to the Thou” and names this—confirmation.

Man wishes to be confirmed in his being by man and wishes to have a presence in the being of the other. The human person needs confirmation because man as man needs it. An animal does not need to be confirmed, for it is what it is unquestionably. It is different with man: sent forth from the natural domain of species into the hazard of the solitary category, surrounded by the air of a chaos which came into being with him, secretly and bashfully he watches for a Yes which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another. It is from one man to another that the heavenly bread of self-being is passed.\(^{65}\)

I make the assumption that one underlying reason people come to therapy, whether manifest or latent, spoken or unspoken, is to taste this heavenly bread, the relation which may confirm them in their being. Yet, in what seems to contradict this searching, Buber makes the point I have often alluded to: “The Thou meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being.”\(^{66}\)

If we accept what Buber is saying in the context of counseling, we see that while persons may seek confirmation, conscious or unconscious of their yearning for it, they cannot find it unless the helper turns toward them with the I that speaks Thou, the I of the whole being. This is my essential responsibility and task as pastoral counselor. When I am fulfilling this responsibility, I invite the other to turn and see who it is that steps forward to meet him or her. Buber’s language savor this opportunity, likens this meeting

\(^{65}\)Buber and Friedman, *The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays*, 71.

to eating manna, the pastey fare that daily assuaged the hunger of the Israelites in their empty bellies, and which also brought assurance that they had not been abandoned in the wilderness. The “I will be with you,” the Eternal Thou, drifted down upon them in each morning’s dew. For me, as a Christian counselor, the passing of this heavenly bread from one to another is sacramental in so far as one life is offered to another.

In order to understand more fully what Buber means by confirmation it would be helpful to distinguish it from the word most often used in therapeutic language—acceptance, the term Tillich used to integrate pastoral caring with theological reflection. Neither word nor the meanings they point toward are easily separated one from another. Each carries a significant history and meaning in the realm of existence and relationship. In dialogical terms, they overlap and kiss each other. They are fluid as they move us back and forth between the world of I-It and I-Thou. Confirmation and acceptance point more toward mystery than toward a psychological concept and neither can be reduced to tidy analysis or quantitative assessment. Yet, for the purpose of this paper and for the work of the pastoral counselor in “turning” toward the Thou of the other, it will be useful to set them apart.

Buber and Rogers spend some time trying to do just this—to speak about Rogerian acceptance in relation to Buberian confirmation. Once more I quote from their 1957 dialogue, removing the sounds and repetitions from the original transcript.

Buber:

...by ‘acceptance’ I mean...being able to tell, rather not to tell, but only to make it felt to the other person, that I accept him just as he is. I take you just as you are....well, so, but it is not yet what I mean by ‘confirm the other.’ Because accepting the other is, in this moment, in this actuality of his. Confirming means first of all, accepting the whole potentiality of the other, (knowing that) we can be mistaken again and again in this, but it’s just a chance between human beings. I
can recognize in him, know in him, more or less, the person he has been—I can say it only in this form—created to become. ...in the simple factual language, we find not the terms for it because we don’t find it in the term, the concept, “being meant to become.” This is what we must, as far as we can, grasp, if not in the first moment, than after this. And now, I not only accept the other as he is, but I confirm him, in myself, and then in him, in relation to this potentiality that is meant by him and it can now be developed, it can evolve.  

In the introduction to this paper, I pointed toward the basic notion that our uniqueness carries our destiny. No one else could be who we are. No one else can do what we can do. Buber encloses our uniqueness and our purpose in one essential question: “In what way shall we become what we are from the very nature of our being?” This question, expresses the yearning for the integration of identity and purpose, that “unity of soul” which Buber suggests is necessary for the life of joy—the fruit of wholeness. In writing about the relationship between identity and the direction of the personal life, William Heard suggests:

Confirmation involves the therapist’s struggle with the client to discover and pursue the demands of the client’s uniqueness. One of the basic presuppositions of dialogical psychotherapy is that each of our lives has a unique personal direction. This direction is the fulfillment of our uniqueness, and only as we pursue our personal direction with our totality can we find meaning and purpose in our lives.  

For Buber, one’s particular purpose is not something to be handed to us by another. Personal direction is not a fate that is either capricious or generic. “It unfolds with our encounters with others. We set out on the path of our personal direction when

---


we are open to and accept the uniqueness encountered in each person and respond with wholeness.\textsuperscript{69}

The barriers that prevent the discovery of personal direction are manifold and may occupy a major part of the counseling process. The exploration of these obstacles may include such elements as the relational dynamics within the person’s family of origin, abuse and addiction, social expectations, concerns of health, and many others. In the face of these, counselors should always recognize the courage required for anyone to undertake this process of uncovering. Acceptance is an essential encouragement which also solidifies the partnership in this endeavor.

The helper is not clairvoyant, nor is she/he granted special knowledge or revelation from which purpose can be discerned. And if the helper does presume to know the client’s purpose and to foist that information upon the client, that would be imposition rather than unfolding. When Gregory Mouladoudis compares and contrasts Buber and Roger’s approaches to counseling, he warns that the dialogical understanding of confirmation could “potentially lead to a therapeutic relationship in which the therapist becomes the knower of truth….”\textsuperscript{70} This is always a danger. All that I have written concerning the responsibility of the helper is meant to help mitigate this from happening. However, the helper must remain vigilant and aware of the subtle snares of this possibility by reminding herself that she is fostering the kind of partnership which

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 95.

\textsuperscript{70}For a more complete comparison and contrast between Rogers and Buber see: Grigoris Mouladoudis, “Dialogical and Person-Centered Approach to Psychotherapy: Beyond Correspondences and Contrasts, toward a Fertile Interconnection,” \textit{The Person-Centered Journal} 8, no. 1 (2001).
accepts that “we can be mistaken again and again.” Still, taking the risk to engage with the other in the critical effort is essential. In the end, Buber admits, “it’s just a chance between human beings.”\textsuperscript{71}

With this in mind, the first distinction between acceptance and confirmation may be said in these terms: acceptance is the necessary preliminary condition from which confirmation may follow. Acceptance provides and nurtures the trust. It strengthens the helping relationship that encourages and invites the person to take the full risk and possibility of relationship. Confirmation stretches beyond acknowledgement and acceptance of the other and the current condition of his or her life by becoming involved in the actuality of this development.

This brings me to read further along in the Rogers/Buber dialogue because the following interchange will add an important nuance to the distinction between their uses of these two words. First, here is Rogers’ reply to Buber’s description of confirmation:

I think that [confirmation] sounds very much like the quality that is in the experience that I think of as acceptance, though I have tended to put it differently. I think that we do accept the individual \textit{and} his potentiality. It’s, I think it’s a real question whether we could accept the individual as he is, because often he is in pretty sad shape perhaps, if it were not for the fact we also—in some sense recognized his potentiality. I guess I feel, too, that acceptance of this person as he is, is the strongest factor for change that I know. In other words, I think that does release change or release potentiality to find that as I \textit{am}, exactly as I \textit{am}, I am fully accepted—then I can’t help but change. Because then, I feel, there, then, there is no longer any need for defensive barriers, so then what takes over are the forward moving processes of life itself.\textsuperscript{72}

In other words, for Rogers, acceptance also includes the potential within the other and—not only the person in the moment, but what the person may become. The response

\textsuperscript{71}Buber et al., \textit{The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary}, 91.

\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 93-94.
does not entirely satisfy Buber who finds that Rogers has too optimistic a perspective on the human being and the possibilities of change. Buber’s responds to Rogers’ optimism about this by raising the possibility that the helper may need to challenge the direction of the client.

I’m afraid I’m not so sure of that as you are, perhaps because I’m not a therapist. And I have necessarily to do with the problematic side in problematic man. I have to do with the problematic in him. And I have, there are cases when I must help him against himself. He wants my help against himself. He wants, you see, he—the first thing of all is that he trusts me. Yes, life has become baseless for him. He cannot tread on firm soil, on firm earth. He is, so to say, suspended in the air. And, what does he want? What he wants is a being not only whom he has, he can trust as a man trusts another, but a being that gives him now the certitude “There is a soil. There is an existence. The world is not condemned to deprivation, degeneration, destruction. The world can be redeemed. I can be redeemed because there is this trust.” And if this is reached, now I can help this man even in his struggle against himself. And this I can only do if I distinguish between ‘accepting’ and ‘confirming’.

In their accompanying commentary, Anderson and Cissna mention that Rogers does not equate acceptance with agreement. He understood that the therapist often had to struggle with clients “against the force of their own entrenched problems.” They also think that Buber is splitting hairs and that the distinction between Buber’s and Rogers’ use of terms is primarily a matter of emphasis. Buber himself adds to this confusion by using acceptance and confirmation together in various writings, as in the following passage:

Perhaps from time to time I must offer strict opposition to his view about the subject of our conversation. But I accept this person, the personal bearer of a conviction, in his definite being out of which his conviction has grown—even though I must try to show, bit by bit, the wrongness of this very conviction. I affirm the person I struggle with: I struggle with him as his partner, I confirm him

73Ibid., 94-95.

74Ibid., 96.
as creature and as creation, I confirm him who is opposed to me as him who is over against me.\textsuperscript{75}

**Case Study**

I present two different cases in order to spell this out. The first is from therapist William Heard and the second is from my own case work.

“There are times,” Heard writes, “when confirmation involves disapproval of the client’s response because it is obviously not compatible with the personal direction of his life.”\textsuperscript{76} The client he is working with is somewhat paralyzed with indecision concerning his marriage. He had felt estranged for some time. Recently he had met another woman and could not decide between the two. Over several months, they explored his feelings about these relationships and the nature of his ambivalence. In one particular session the client announced that his wife was leaving for the weekend and that he had decided to spend that time with the other woman. Heard reflects:

As the session progressed, I realized how caught up I was in Jack’s experience. I was not comfortable and felt disturbed about his involvement with the other woman. I began to experience overwhelming feelings of anguish and despair. As I looked into Jack’s face I was compelled to say, “are you sure you want to be with the woman this weekend? Is there not something within you that demands something better of you?”\textsuperscript{77}

Heard was stunned that he actually voiced the question he felt rise within him. He understands the risk he has taken. After all, what gave him the right to impose his own personal values or to imagine that his own view of reality was more valid than the

\textsuperscript{75}Buber and Friedman, *The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays*, 79.


\textsuperscript{77}Ibid.
client’s? Further, even if this were the proper direction for Jack to choose, one commensurate with the personal direction of his life, it was for Jack to find for himself, during the therapeutic process.

With all this in mind, Heard boldly suggests the following. “What in the world prompted me to make such a remark? I attribute it to the ‘enlightenment of the between’. I was convinced at that moment that the client’s decision was contrary to the personal direction of his life.” He expands upon this by saying, “It would have been a betrayal of my experience of Jack had I not admonished him as to the inappropriateness, for him, of his contemplated actions. Inappropriate for him not because it was a breach of someone’s morality, but because it was not compatible with the person who I had come to know in our dialogue.”

78 This seems too fine a distinction in his re-telling of this case and bears cautionary attention. It is not difficult to be self-deceivingly moral. We cannot know if Heard is fully present or not.

If we take him at his word, the freedom to speak what needs to be said, flows out from the lack of reserve that is the essential nature of the “between” and the knowledge that is “created out of the moment when being is present to being.”

79 Heard speaks to Jack from this deep personal knowledge. He voices his concern not because he cannot control or violate his own moral instinct, but because it would have violated the relationship with Jack.

Counselors, therapists, helpers, pastors, friends—everyone who is willing to enter into helping relationships, face similar moments, know the doubts and the fears that are

78 Ibid.

woven into this kind of personal engagement, including the risks that catch in our breath in the moment before we speak.

Case Study

After our sixth session, Scott and I happened to meet in the parking lot of my office. These are usually awkward encounters since the therapeutic relationship is usually confined to a specific place and time. We do not know each other outside of these temporal and spatial boundaries. During the previous hour, we talked about the sale of his beloved home and his anger with his wife for accepting a price he thought too low. The session was intense. Each week he has been confronted with the consequences of his own behavior which have also cost him the power to negotiate. He is helpless, but his anger is palpable. He tells me he has been taking his anger out on his wife by verbally assaulting her.

In the parking lot I see him sitting on the rear gate of the pick-up truck he has been living in for the past two years. He’s having a smoke. He is directly in the path to my car. I make the decision not to avoid him. We exchange a few words and in the course begin some idle chatter about trucks. I reveal that I had some interest in a particular brand. He tells me why my choice would be wrong, since the brand I wanted had a lousy transmission. He had read all the research, knew the evidence, and seemed to be on a mission to convince me. My defenses began to rise. I tried to turn his lecture into a conversation by bringing my own subjective response in, but quickly discovered that I was in a “monologue disguised as dialogue.” There was no easy escape except to begin to edge away, uneasily (an awkward hint of impatience) toward my car.
Over the course of the next few days, I reflected on our encounter and decided that I wanted to speak with Scott about my experience with him in the parking lot. Traditional therapy places limits on what can be introduced into a session especially from outside the counseling framework. This is one of the reasons why it can be difficult for pastors in the parish setting to engage in pastoral counseling, because these kinds of random meetings outside the office are common. My decision rested on a fundamental principle of dialogical care as expressed by Mouladoudis: “Dialogical therapy’s goal is the creation of the I-Thou relationship and strives to help the client reconnect with the world…”

In the parking lot, flushed with my own exasperation, I had an experience of Scott in his world, which helped me understand how he had become so isolated. When we sit together in my office he looks at me with the eyes of one who is lost and who does not know “what is be done.” He had, with unfamiliar contriteness, placed me in charge of his life. In the parking lot, he was the expert, the one who knew trucks better than anyone. I could well imagine he was trying to be helpful in guiding me to the right choice with his expertise, but his refusal to acknowledge my own thoughts placed and held him in charge. His communication was meant to create this very impression (seeming).

I needed to tell him this because, as Buber affirms, “I accept this person, the personal bearer of a conviction, in his definite being out of which his conviction has grown—even though I must try to show, bit by bit, the wrongness of this very

---

The conviction I want to highlight with Scott was not his stand on a particular model of truck, but rather his fierce determination to be “right.” Preventing him from acknowledging the other, in this case—me! This manner of being interrupted dialogue and the potential of relationship.

I began the next session by returning to our moment in the parking lot and my experience of it. At first, he reacted with surprise and disbelief, as if I had completely misunderstood his intention. This was followed by shame. Caught, in another failure! In the office I have an authority he does not grant me in the parking lot. I want neither authority. This is the moment when I hope we have developed enough trust with one another to speak directly. He tells me that most of his relationships involve this kind of one-up-man’s-ship, a fierce competition which sounds to me more like professional sport. He says, “This is what we do in my world of work.” As we trace this way of speaking more carefully, he takes a bold step to confess that he is becoming aware that this is how he has been talking with his children and his wife. He pauses and tears up. This “illumination from the between” of our moment now sheds some light into the darkness that has become his world. He knows bodily that the distance he has felt from his family, the distance he has blamed on them, is actually in part the consequence of his own action—not merely the failure he tried to hide from them, but a more fundamental problem of communication. I suggest that there is another way to speak with his family, his friends, and colleagues, a way that invited relationship and I offer our relationship, our time together, as an occasion to learn and practice this new way.

81 Buber and Friedman, The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays, 79.
Text Study

The distinction between confirmation and acceptance can offer an intriguing lens through which to read some passages in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Many of these texts can help shape and inform the work of dialogical pastoral counseling and will also provide a wonderful assortment of passages that can also be brought into the helping process.

At the opening of the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus is “coming out of the water,” the heavens tear and a voice is heard: “You are my Son, the most Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark. 1.11).

In pointing to a dialogical approach for reading this passage, when I let go of what I have learned about this particular text, the theological and scholarly content that I have studied, many questions rise to tickle my imagination. In the context of the discussion concerning acceptance and confirmation, how do I hear this voice? Is this heavenly affirmation? Can this declaration be framed in terms of acceptance or confirmation, or is it something else altogether? How does the interhuman drama play itself out in the life of Jesus?

Something is initiated. A journey begins, a direction is charted, and a group is gathered to follow along. We can, (Buber would argue, we must!) as readers step into this story as these first disciples without any clues to what is happening or to the implications of our choices. As I quoted above in the discussion concerning uniqueness and destiny,
“We set out on the path of our personal direction when we are open to and accept the uniqueness encountered in each person and respond with wholeness.”

It appears to me, that the first part of Mark’s gospel is an example of how uniqueness and destiny unfold. We watch the life of this original and singular Jesus unfold before our eyes, encounter by encounter, village by village, person by person. In each unique moment, we are learning about the uniqueness of Jesus. Isn’t it possible that this learning is also taking place within Jesus, this same fundamental human process that is essential for living our lives from the nature of who we truly are? The question that grabs at my attention is this: if the divine nature is affirmed at the Jordan, what of the human being, Jesus?

Others have written about this question from the whole gamut of human disciplines. I’m bringing to the text a dialogical question to see if it might illumine something about Jesus and ourselves as human beings. If Buber is pointing toward something that is an essential component of our own experience, our humanity, couldn’t this aspect of our humanity also be evident in the human Jesus whom we confess by faith is the embodiment of our human nature? We cannot confirm ourselves. We are relational selves. We must take a step toward another and ask: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8.29).

It seems fitting that, in Mark, Jesus asks the question after healing the blind man. Twice Jesus has to apply saliva to the eyes, since the first time allows the man to see people only vaguely, as “moving trees.” Even Jesus must ask this. Like us, as the helper, he is not clairvoyant nor a magician. Healing is a partnership. Perhaps it is this

---

recognition that opens him to ask the question that he perhaps has been quietly voicing to himself: “Who do people say that I am?” Perhaps, the question is not a test (as often thought) but a real question. He really wants to know. He listens to the list of names the disciples have been picking up from the crowds but does not find himself on it. So he personalizes the question: “But who do you say that I am?” No doubt all the encounters since the Jordon have been sculpting an image that is taking shape in his heart and mind. James Sanders suggests that this an underlying question of canonical hermeneutics: “Who am I and what am I to do?”

“Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah!’” It is the first time the word is spoken in the text. The sound of the word carries various resonances with a range of timbre, from the ominous to the hopeful. It is a complex term and fraught with background. It is an ancient word, rooted in monarchies and prophecy. It must pluck some of the deepest strings within Jesus’ heart. He appears to hear the word and recognize the truth of it. It probably had crossed his mind before, but like all human beings, Jesus “wishes to be confirmed in his being by man and wishes to have a presence in the being of the other. The human person needs confirmation because man as man needs it.”

No matter that Peter did not understand the terrible meaning that lay within his choice of words. There was confirmation and Jesus recognizes what ‘claim’ this will lay upon him. “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed,


84Buber and Friedman, The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays, 71.
and after three days rise again” (v. 31). From this moment, the tenor of the story deepens and the plot, now clarified, abruptly changes direction. No longer moving away from the center of Jewish life, Jesus turns with profound intent toward its heart, Jerusalem. This is the moment of the great turning, when Jesus embraces his authentic self with all its tragic possibilities and stunning achievement. In dialogical terms, Jesus has been confirmed in who he is and now must embrace the fulfillment of his life. The time has come. Poor Peter wants to take it back. There is always a risk in living from one’s true being. Peter will discover this later.

This story becomes more than illustrative for my work as a Christian pastoral counselor. When I see Jesus turn toward Peter and place the question of his meaning into the hands of this fisherman, I am astounded by same risk we must all take when we speak this same question to another human being. We wait to hear the response from one who knows us, truly knows us. In this moment, we find ourselves confirmed, and we take a bite and taste the warm yeasty joy of freshly baked heavenly bread.

Unfortunately, on many occasions when we ask this same question, we do not find ourselves confirmed in the “very nature of our being.” We are not met. The resolute desire for relation, however, is powerful and enduring, kept alive by hope that there yet may be a chance. Biblical faith suggests that this hope is part of the earth from which we have been created, for we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139.14). The longing for confirmation initiates the process of healing. It is the very hunger which pastoral dialogue wishes to help satisfy.
The Dialogical Dance of Inclusion

Finally, I introduce the important term *inclusion*, which Buber uses to express an essential movement in the process of healing the relational self. *Inclusion* also provides a useful opportunity for summarizing the central aspects of dialogical healing that I have included in this chapter.

“The act of inclusion occurs when one imagines what the other is feeling, thinking, and experiencing without giving up the felt reality of one’s own activity.”

Inclusion is so elemental for Buber that he states: “A relation between persons that is characterized in more or less degree by the element of inclusion may be termed a dialogical relation.” Mouladoudis transposes “inclusion” into the terms of therapeutic relation and process.

The therapist experiences simultaneously her own as well as the other’s part, is open to being changed by the client and tries to understand the meaning that the relationship has for the client, but never loses her own uniqueness. When in this difficult process the therapist is facing life and seeing through the eyes of the other, the therapist does not cease to experience the relationship from her own side, does not give up the ground of her own concreteness, nor does she cease to see through her eyes.

Kramer, using Maurice Friedman’s language, describes inclusion as a bold swinging which “involves two nearly simultaneous movements: (1) swinging over to the other’s side, and (2) then bringing back to my own side as much of the other’s situation as I can glean not as detached content but as a living process. Though I cannot become

---


86 Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 97.

another person, I can go as far as possible to experience the relationship from the other person's perspective." In my personal practice, I have come to experience this 'swinging' as a form of relational choreography.

The movement requires something more than empathy as Buber understands it. Without minimizing the importance of empathy, especially as it grounds the helping relationship in acceptance and personal care, Buber views empathy as offering only a one sided participation. "...it means to 'transpose' oneself over there and in there." Further:

...empathy allows me to stretch forth and understand the situation of the other, but in so doing, I may lose my own "concreteness," the extinguishing of the actual situation of life, the absorption in pure aestheticism of the relation in which one participates. Inclusion is the opposite of this. It is the extension of one's own concreteness, the fulfillment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates.

He sketches out inclusion in the following steps:

1. a relation, of no matter what kind, between two persons
2. an event experienced by them in common, in which at least one of them actively participates
3. the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other

---


89 Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 97.

90 Ibid.

Given Buber’s foundational insight into the relational self as the “actual situation of life,” we understand why this must be so. The loss of the two by empathic absorption, a merging of one into the other, excludes the dialogical.92

Whatever terms we come to use to express the “real situation”—genuine relation, I-Thou, real life, the dialogical—all these elevate our uniqueness which is called into being and confirmed by the uniqueness of another. It is our uniqueness which we bring fully into the helping relationship in order for us to help “confirm the inmost self-becoming of our partner in dialogue.”93

Buber’s inclusion is more than a theoretical requirement for meeting to happen. Inclusion lays a great claim and responsibility upon the helper, who may find him or herself having to swing into the darkest of places where chaos and pain may be carried deep within the other. If the helper avoids these places, healing cannot take place. This capacity and willingness to enter into the full world of the other is more or less important within different therapeutic modalities but in the dialogical it is essential. Nick Watson emphasizes this in his article concerning the implications of Buber’s I and Thou for Christian psychotherapy. He writes, “Integral to ‘being-with’ is ‘suffering-with’; that is,

---

92 In theological terms, this process of absorption or merging is what Buber came to regard as mysticism. In his earliest writing, before the lectures, “Religion as Presence” which led to I and Thou, Buber explored mysticism through the works of Jacob Boheme etc. Buber’s drama, Daniel, is an expression of this period. But under the influence of the dialogical perspective, it is clear that absorption into one, as for example, between persons, or into the One as with God no longer expresses what “the real situation” is.

93 Kramer and Gawlick, Martin Buber’s I and Thou: Practicing Living Dialogue, 197.
entering into the depths of sin and brokenness of our clients.”

Buber speaks about it in this way:

…the abyss does not call to his [the therapist’s] confidently functioning security of action, but to the abyss, that is to the self of the doctor, that selfhood that is hidden under the structures erected through training and practice, that is itself encompassed by chaos, itself familiar with demons, but is graced with the humble power of wrestling and overcoming, and is ready to wrestle and overcome thus ever anew.

The helper must swing over and become fully present. As I have mentioned previously, this requires a stepping out from theory and methodology. Hycner notes, “In confronting the naked abyss of man no human being can long look into this fissure without feeling overwhelmed. Certainly one’s existential knees begin to buckle. The temptation to hide in theory or processional decorum is surely understandable. But it is a false promise.” This recalls the words of Hans Traub, “Are you ready with your whole being to persevere in your vocation? Are you ready, with nothing else but your own person, with your ‘here I am’ to justify your existence?” And again, Heard:

She [the helper] must be willing to place herself in harm’s way by accepting the burden and pain of the client’s psychic state. When she has accomplished these concerns, she has offered the client the gift of inclusion. If the client is able to accept the therapist’s inclusion, there is an interaction, a therapeutic dialogue that may produce a new reality between them. In the context of this reality, both the

---


95Gunsburg, Healing through Meeting: Martin Buber’s Conversational Approach to Psychotherapy, 95.

96Hycner, Between Person and Person: Toward a Dialogical Psychotherapy, 19.

97Agassi, Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy, 163.
therapist and the client are empowered to respond in ways that were not previously available to either.98

The prerequisite for entering with someone into their pain and fear requires that we have faced our own and struggled with another (perhaps one who has helped us) to find the way through. Henri Nouwen writes about this in terms of the "wounded healer." Our wounds, our personal experience of suffering are essential to helping another.

Case study

William Heard tells a story from his own clinical experience. It concerns a young man whose mother has died and whose father moved in with him and his young wife. After some months, the father became increasingly difficult and dependent, demanding more and more of his son's time. Month by month the tension in the house-hold grew until the demands of the aging father began to affect the young man's marriage. His wife wanted children but did not want to bring them into this difficult situation. The young man—he names him Harry—feels in an emotional and psychological bind. He doesn't want to place his father in a nursing home, but it is clear that this situation cannot continue. He goes for help.

As Heard reflects upon the unfolding therapeutic process, he highlights for us the emotional difficulty of holding his [Heard's] own pain, making it impossible to take the risk of 'inclusion':

As Harry sat before me I began to imagine what it must be like for him. In the ensuing moments I was caught up in his dilemma. I could feel his guilt over wanting to care for his father at the same time he wanted to send him away. Yet, I could also sense his desperate desire to support his wife and start a family of his own.

Heard continues:

In those moments, as he sat before me weeping, I found the pain of his frustration unbearable. I could not hold back my own tears. It was more than I could stand. The feelings I was having were totally unexpected. I was not prepared for the devastating effect that sharing Harry’s reality would have upon me. I am sorry to say that at the end of the session I withdrew from the situation. I told him there was no way I could be of help to him. He had a practical problem and not a psychological one. Because of my unwillingness to share his pain, I failed him as a therapist and myself as the person I was intended to be.99

Heard’s empathy was considerable, so much so that he made a profound identification with Harry’s pain but could not swing back to the solid ground of his own experience. He had become absorbed in Harry’s experience and so he could not be with him. Recognizing this failure, Heard dismisses Harry, because ethically he cannot continue therapy with the pretence that he could be present. Harry must have been quite taken back with this abrupt turnaround.

Maurice Friedman, Buber’s principal biographer and commentator and one of the founders of dialogical psychotherapy, once commented to Buber that this kind of bold swinging must be very difficult. Buber responded, “It’s not difficult at all, it’s a grace.” When I read about inclusion I feel the weight of the difficulty. Yet inclusion is not a concept, an idea—but a practice. In this regard “grace” does convey a deeper awareness, because if I try to think about what side I am on or if I’m conscious of to getting the dance right, I over analyze my role in the situation and the relation dissolves into I-It. When I turn toward the person with only “Here I am!”, the risk of becoming overwhelmed is present, as it was for Heard. There is no way to avoid this. In the

99Ibid., 82.
unpredictable present, I cannot know for certain what claim will be laid upon me when I step “into the air of the world where self is exposed to self.”

Case study

William, a gentle and affable man, fights back tears as he tells me the story of his wife’s recent death. They had lived the “dream marriage.” The clarity of his eyes and the tone of his voice both urged me to accept the truth of this assessment. He was not idealizing, as happens during the grieving process. He and Joan had roamed the earth, played on mountain summits and in surging oceans, walked exotic jungles, and enjoyed every minute of their 39 years of relationship. I would quickly learn that this was more than sharing adventure. He spoke about being together as if each was a partner in a wondrous dialogue. I remember C.S. Lewis, following his wife’s death, writing about his own marriage in a very similar manner: “The most precious gift that marriage gave me was this constant impact of something very close and intimate yet all the time unmistakably other, resistant—in a word, real.” Holding this inestimable treasure in memory, Lewis cries out with grief, “Is all that work to be undone?”

As I listened to William, grief began to wash upon me in successive waves from the depths of loss I have lived with. Moreover, in this particular moment beyond the pain of past losses, an unexpected awareness of the future poured into my present awareness as if I could feel the death of my own wife, not as a premonition but in the reality of inevitable separation. I began to weep with William. I stood with him in the present situation of his life. I stood with him in the place where he stood. I felt the shudder in me

---

100Buber, *Pointing the Way; Collected Essays*, 97.

that held him in firm grip. I faced the same crisis as Heard. I did not know if I could continue to see William, because I also wanted to turn away from what was assaulting my own wellbeing.

I cannot say what allowed me to swing back to the ground of my own existence and back into my chair as pastoral counselor. Buber calls it “grace” and I do not dispute it. This mystery is best received with humility and gratitude and not triumph. Dialogical help does not isolate our moments of meeting from the embracing relationship that is the Eternal Thou.

I understood from those moments with William that when Joan died, he lost the ‘Thou’ of his life. Absent her warm presence, William was estranged from his own ‘I’, the real I of true being. This additional loss made the earth he walked upon less than real. Death is the most decisive cause of “interrupted dialogue,” the one tear we cannot heal within the limitations of human I-Thou. The knowledge I had gleaned and brought back was an intensely personal knowing of William. I feel a bond between us that I hope may help us take our first steps into growing a dialogue. I know our relation cannot be a replacement, nor even grow into a full mutuality. But faith and experience teaches me that even these wounds that have so exposed his relational self, even these can be healed. William may turn and find relation with the world, even the world without his beloved ‘Thou’.

We see here how Buber’s use of inclusion recalls the earlier discussion concerning the particular kind of mutuality found in the helping relationship of I-Thou.
“Every I-Thou relationship, within a relation which is specified as a purposive working of one part upon the other, persists in virtue of a mutuality which is forbidden to be full.”\textsuperscript{102}

This means that in fostering my relationship with William, while I try to experience \textit{him} as fully as I am able, this cannot be fully reciprocal. William has not come to experience who I am and so he cannot participate in the same relational swing. I am aware, from time to time, of my longing to ask my client to swing my way. The reasons are many. Sometimes, following these intimate moments, I see someone with whom I would like a friendship. I feel a touch of melancholy when I know that this cannot happen.

The counselor confirms but is not confirmed. This is different from the kind of affirmation that we experience when we feel validated in our work which is necessary to support and strengthen us in our personal direction and vocation. Hyscner prefers using the term “paradoxical profession” to describe the balancing act, the seeming contradictions that inclusion requires. Buber speaks of this in terms of “walking the narrow ridge.”\textsuperscript{103}

\section*{A Final Consideration}

In this chapter I have highlighted the responsibility of the helper, the use of distance and relation, confirmation and acceptance, and inclusion in individual pastoral counseling.

\textsuperscript{102}Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner, 1958), 133-34.

\textsuperscript{103}Buber, \textit{Between Man and Man}, 194.
Briefly, I want to acknowledge that Buber’s thinking is also essential in marriage and family counseling as well as in the development of dialogue within groups. General systems theory is quite amenable to Buber’s dialogical thinking.

For example, Mona Fishbane who has written about family and marital therapy in dialogical terms does not use Buber’s term “inclusion,” but rather “readiness for the relational” in the process of teaching couples the way of I-Thou. Notice the similarities between her description and Buber.

By ‘readiness for the relational’ I mean a willingness to be moved by the other, to see and be seen, to stay connected even through conflict, to hear the other’s narrative even while articulating open’s own, and to negotiate differences without resorting to ‘power over’ tactics. Readiness for the relational also entails relational accountability to the other, and an openness to be affected by the other’s response.¹⁰⁴

We see that Mona’s interest is that each person learns to practice from the dynamics of the relational self, to accept and confirm one other, to know the other in his or her experience without losing one’s own grounding and to do so with an openness to be changed by the other. This is entirely within Buber’s vision for the development of dialogical communities and it is why he sets his discussion of inclusion within his important essay on education.

The correspondence between the helper and educator is also an essential one for Buber. In the introduction I have highlighted the distinction Buber makes between the “propagandist” and the “educator,” and their differing methods. This correspondence will be of great value as I open the helping relationship to receiving the biblical text in the healing process.

CHAPTER THREE
I AND THOU—THE BIBLICAL TEXT AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF
DIALOGUE: IMPLICATIONS OF I—THOU

Introduction

In the opening lines of Donald Capps very helpful and comprehensive examination, *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling*, he states this simple recognition: “Christians have always looked to the Bible for help in solving their problems. Yet the role of the Bible in pastoral counseling is a controversial issue.”1 The controversy has included the basic questions—should the biblical text be brought into the counseling process and, if so, how and when should it be used? The diversity of responses to these questions reflects a variety of theological and biblical traditions and a variety of therapeutic theories and counseling practices as well. These questions have been asked throughout the history of pastoral care and especially within the modern development of pastoral counseling as a specialized ministry. The use of the biblical text has often been one of the distinguishing features between pastoral care and pastoral counseling. As I indicated in chapter two, the helping relationship in pastoral care and in pastoral counseling can be differentiated by the framework and purposes of each, and the use of the biblical text must take this difference into account.

During my first clinical training in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), at midpoint in the 1970s, the biblical text was often used for reflection following a counseling session

---

or during supervision but generally was not used or even encouraged within the
counseling process, unless initiated by the client.

Capps' brief survey highlights a conservative response to what some argued had
been a neglect of essential aspects of the pastoral vocation in favor of more secular
counseling theory and therapeutic method. This reaction included many voices from
differing traditions who shared a desire to renew traditional pastoral practice and to
recover the resources of the pastoral office such as intercessory prayer, the use of the
biblical text, and the moral accountability rooted in scriptural principles among others.

This so-called conservative response, which did value the use of the scripture as
an important feature of Christian care-giving was also diverse. For example, Capps
indicates the work of Gary Collins as one voice who does acknowledges the importance
of psychological theory and practice but who also argues for a proper time and place
where scripture may become a significant resource for the counseling process. On the
other hand, Capps observes that Jay Adams in *Competent to Counsel* and *The use of the
Scriptures in Counseling*, rejects this more integrated approach. For him, the Bible is the
primary guide and authority for counseling, “founded propositionally” by the “goals and
objectives of the Scriptures...and developed systematically in terms of the practice and
principles modeled and enjoined in the scriptures.”

Another stream within the pastoral care and counseling movement also
encouraged a dialogue between pastoral practice and modern psychotherapy but with a
different starting point. Capps calls this stream, the “moderate resurgence.” He includes
in this diverse group, Seward Hiltner, John Cobb, David Switzer, and William Oglesby

---

2Ibid., 32.
Jr. I would add to this group my personal mentors, William Hulme and Dan Simundson. Different from the more conservative approach which, I would argue, generally brought the bible and its content to the client, these latter clinicians, scholars, and theologians tried to bring the bible and client into a relationship of mutuality and conversation with the client. Their writings focus upon the common experience of being human as expressed throughout the biblical fabric and meeting the person in the present living context of faith, with its struggle and pain, its profound questions, inspiration, and accomplishments. Within this stream of the pastoral counseling movement, I find the kind of collegiality of mind and approach that has nourished my counseling practice and the purposes of this paper.

Ogelsby identifies the manner of using a text by distinguishing counseling aims as knowing, doing, and being, each derived from different counseling theory. It is important to note that he is not beginning from a particular theological doctrinal stance but from various theories dealing with what makes for change. Here we find one difference between the more moderate and the conservative reaction. Though Ogelsby works with very broad brush strokes in differentiating these categories, I find them helpful in connecting practice with theory.

He associates “knowing” with insight oriented counseling posits that in the process of becoming aware of our own inner emotional and psychical dynamics and conflicts, often previously hidden or unconscious, we regain a new ability to resolve and re-orient our generative energies into creatively living.
“Doing” roughly derives from behavioral theory that believes we need to refashion our actions, our cycles of conflict, and our many interactions so that we may learn and practice healthful patterns of living.

“Being,” Ogelsby contends, is influenced by the relationship-oriented therapies that view the encounter in counseling as a new way to experience relationship that is affirming and accepting. This releases the potential and desire for a more authentic and genuine life. All three aims are intrinsic to addressing the wholeness of the person, and each needs to be woven into any comprehensive helping process. However, he asks the pastor to make a determination as to which of the approaches is primary and which derivative. He writes: “...it can be argued that the question of focus turns not so much on principle as on the situation of the person, that one approach is better for this person while another is better for that.”

All caregivers working from insight oriented or behavioral counseling methods value the helping relationship. But in each of those methods the relationship provides the means toward a particular end, which Ogelsby terms “right thinking” or “right doing.” Deciding what approach to take by connecting the right theory with the particular case tends to “obscure the fundamental presuppositions regarding what constitutes help for the person in trouble.” These presuppositions bear directly upon the counseling relationship and process including how the biblical text may be employed in the counseling process.

But, he points out, a “primary focus on relationship (being)...does not view the experience of encounter as a means to a more significant end; rather it is seen as an end in

---


4Ibid.
itself, although as noted above, better knowing and doing will emerge from better being.”

Ogelsby is very close to a dialogical understanding that underscores that “means toward some end” cannot enter I-Thou relation without disturbing the nature of meeting without an agenda. Meeting without an agenda is one of the decisive features of genuine relation. The purpose of dialogical counseling is to provide the opportunity, if “will and grace are joined,” for the whole person to be fully present in meeting. It is in meeting where the healing of being occurs, when self is exposed to self.

This does not exclude the importance of insight or behavioral change, but it does affect the nature of the helping relationship. This is important to emphasize. Ogelsby draws differing approaches for using biblical texts from each of these three categories of counseling and their presuppositions. In general terms, in emphasizing insight or behavioral practice whose aims are “right knowing” or “right doing,” the biblical text is used for instruction.

Biblical instruction as witnessed in the Hebrew bible, the Gospels, and Epistles is intrinsic to the biblical tradition. It is sufficient to simply acknowledge the rich history of biblical teaching throughout the history of church and synagogue. Biblical teaching continues in great variety and vitality. It is practiced by very diverse Jewish and Christian communities of faith. The instructional method may vary with different pedagogical theories or different views of the text and its purpose. Biblical scholars and pastoral theologians remind us that the differences of approach and interpretation rise from the diversity of the texts we are trying to read, the contemporary contexts within which we are reading, as well as the contexts we are asking the Bible to address. Ogelsby points out
the common dilemma all pastors and counselors face when looking for guidance from the text.

My own Presbyterian tradition has firm roots in biblical authority as attested by the confessional documents that see the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as “the only infallible rule of faith and practice,” principally teaching “what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.” However doctrinally clear these statements are, a minister, Presbyterian or not, who has attempted to translate them into the conducting of a counseling conversation can attest that the translation is complex indeed.5

One way to attend to the diversity of biblical understanding and pastoral practice is to accept Capps suggestion that “there is general agreement that any use of the Bible in counseling should not violate the principles on which the counselor normally operates.”6 This critical consideration makes it clear that use of the biblical text must support the integrity of the counseling process.

This raises the underlying question that I think Ogelsby has left us to examine: if biblical instruction serves the aim and intent of insight and behavioral theory and practice, how may the biblical text be welcomed into the service of a counseling process based on relation and being?

---

5Ibid. Acknowledging this complexity may be an issue primarily for those whom Capps includes in the “moderate resurgence,” since these theologians and counselors tend to welcome the insights of psychological theory and practice more fully into their own particular biblical and theological tradition. For example, I include in this critique Howard Stone’s The Word of Pastoral Care. Stone’s writing is helpful in re-visioning pastoral practice within more traditional pastoral features and recovers much that has been set aside. However, he sounds dismissive of pastors and pastoral counselors who use various psychotherapeutic theories and modalities not founded upon what he calls, a “sound theological perspective.” See the first chapter of Returning to the Roots, 28. He disparages Tillich’s methodological practice of correlation as one way to integrate the various disciplines including the psychological and theological. When he asks various questions such as: “Who owns the correlation enterprise? Which ‘side’ gets to speak first—or last?” we quickly become aware that he does intend the conversation to be one of mutuality and dialogue.

6Capps, Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling, 43.
Capps’ analysis provides a place to develop this particular question. He builds his model upon the earliest writings of Seward Hiltner, a founding figure in the pastoral counseling movement who steadfastly urged pastors and pastoral counselors to use the biblical text as a vital resource in the helping process. However, he also warned us to be aware of how the introduction of the Bible can change the whole tone of a session; how the nature of the helping relationship may shift with its introduction; and how the text may become a diversion from the issues the person has come for help to solve.\(^7\)

With these considerations in mind, I will examine how Martin Buber’s dialogical approach to the biblical text may be brought into the dialogical helping relationship I have described in the previous chapter. This examination will be measured against the criteria highlighted by Hiltner and Capps that the text should be used in keeping with the manner in which the counselor practices. This includes the counseling relationship, the counseling process, and the purpose for which the help is offered. These three may be translated into the following dialogical criteria.

**The Text and the Helping Relationship**

Capps describes a counseling session between a Pastor Weems and a Mr. Arkwright, wherein the 38\(^{th}\) psalm is read and discussed. This encounter is used by Hiltner as an example of using scripture in the counseling process. The present relevance of this reflection is underscored by Capps who makes considerable room to rehearse and reflect upon this encounter, including Hiltner’s critical responses. It will be helpful to be reminded of this meeting, since Hiltner’s counseling method is within the general framework of the client centered approach of Carl Rogers—the approach most closely

---

related to Buber’s dialogical method—which may provide a way to highlight the
particular imprint of Buber’s dialogical thought concerning scripture.

The session begins when a distraught Mr. Arkwright, a long time member of Dr.
Wheem’s congregation, comes to discuss a personal and disturbing reaction to his
reading of Psalm 38. The men know each other well. Wheems officiated at the funeral of
Mr. Arkwright’s wife and has been involved with him during the grieving process.
Arkwright is a pillar of the church, and so his relationship with Wheems is multifaceted.

It is significant to Hiltner that Arkwright has a solid background in biblical
knowledge, because his textual seasoning enables him to readily engage the passage, its
meaning and depths. In addition, when both persons are experienced in textual study, the
kind of mutuality that Wheems wishes to encourage comes more easily into alignment
with the kind of relation practiced in client centered healing.

Introducing a biblical text with someone of limited biblical experience may create
a disadvantage such that it undercuts former mutuality and grants authority and power to
the counselor. And even when a person confesses the importance of the Bible in their
personal and religious life, it does not mean that knowledge of the biblical landscape has
been explored beneath its surface layers. Hiltner laments that while biblical stories may
be part of our common American culture, the religious meaning of a story such as that of
David and Goliath may carry no further weight than “Popeye and a giant.”8 Clearly, the
lack of biblical experience adds to the problem of using the text in the counseling
process, a problem that has grown since Hiltner wrote these words in 1949. I will have to
consider this issue in the development of the model.

8Ibid., 202.
Hiltner notes that during the reading, Wheems “does some expounding,” but he “does not moralize, generalize, coerce, or divert. Instead he understands, accepts, clarifies, and helps to consolidate. He takes the entire situation into account.”\(^9\) In working with the text in this manner, Hiltner affirms that Wheems has maintained the integrity of the counseling relationship by engaging with Arkwright’s experience and readiness to engage the text and by withholding the urge to preach, exegete Hebrew vocabulary, slump into a discourse on literary genre, lecture upon the form and structure of Hebrew poetry, or offer his own theological interpretation.

Wheems affirms that his parishioner shares a “companionship of feelings” with the biblical poet who expresses isolation and the similar sense of being deserted by others and by God. Further, as he listens carefully to Arkwright’s responses, he finds a new and valuable diagnostic lens, different from the psychological/medical one, enabling both counselor and client to discover a new perspective into the intense and personal struggle he is experiencing.

Hiltner points out that when Dr. Wheems begins to diagram the structure of the psalm, he shifts into an “educative” process. He becomes a teacher, an instructor. When this happens during the session, Hiltner wonders: “Is this counseling or education or both? It could be called both, but it is really pastoral counseling.”\(^10\) He concludes that it is pastoral counseling because two essential resources of the pastoral office, scripture and prayer, are woven into a caring process that still places the client at the center of the process. As far as Hiltner is concerned, the criterion of integrity has been met.

\(^9\)Ibid., 207.

\(^{10}\)Ibid.
Finally Hiltner introduces an important note of caution. Some texts such as Psalm 38 can, under some conditions and with certain people, be too dangerous to read. He has heard anecdotal stories of some who committed suicide after they encountered the despair of this particular psalm. Any religious impulse, expression, or resource may be twisted within certain pathological disorders and care must be taken to be aware of that possibility.\(^\text{11}\)

Buber would not ask the question, "Is this counseling or education or both?" He held that counseling and reading the text, and instruction and education, could participate in the same dialogical process. It is this integration that I will now explore.

**Buber and Dialogical Teaching**

I have indicated the influence of Buber upon the practice of psychotherapy and in particular upon pastoral counseling. Buber was not a professional therapist, though he counseled many. He was, however, a teacher throughout his life, a teacher of all ages and in differing settings. With his friend and colleague, Franz Rosenzweig—the founder of *Lehrhaus*, Buber taught many subjects and he wrote about how invaluable Jewish education was for Jewish identity and how critical it was to strengthen Judaism to face the crises of modernity.

Education of the person—as person—was the singular force that could resist the dehumanizing infection of the rising totalitarianism and ensuing collective identity that gripped his time. He remained the director of *Lehrhaus* until his emigration from

Germany in 1938. In Israel, he continued teaching both formally and informally with students who gathered around him.\textsuperscript{12}

Buber’s curriculum was wide and varied, but his particular interest remained teaching a way of reading the biblical text that he called \textit{Bibel Lesen}. With others in the Jewish community, he felt a profound concern with the growing gap between the person, the community of faith, and the lack of knowledge of the biblical tradition. Clearly, the development of Buber’s dialogical thought is bound up with his personal struggle with the various crises of modernity, but the disconnection between people of faith and the Bible was his essential focus. It was for this purpose that he undertook with Rosenzweig the enormous and daunting task of translating the Hebrew Bible into German. It is impossible to separate the maturing of his thoughts about I-Thou relation from his life-long and deeply personal effort of translation and bible reading.

Buber does not view the helping relationship between counselor and client as different in quality from the relationship between student and teacher. He makes this explicit by including the teacher-student relation as sharing the particular nature of I-Thou that we find in the helping relationship. The teacher-student relationship has the same limitations with regard to the full mutuality that is present in most I-Thou

\textsuperscript{12}The \textit{Lehrhaus} or “House of Learning” of Frankfort was established by Franz Rosenzweig following World War I as a place for adult Jewish education. In 1922, having met Buber a few times, he invited him to teach a class, and Buber, “to his own astonishment, accepted, despite years in which refusing such requests had become a matter of course” (295). This began a brilliant and intimate relation as friends, gifted philosophers, and teachers. This flowered in their collaboration in translating the Hebrew biblical text into a new German version. A detailed description of the importance of \textit{Lehrhaus} and the relationship between Rosenzweig and Buber can be found in the first volume of Maruice Friedman’s epic biography of Buber, \textit{Martin Buber’s Life and Work, The Early Years, 1878-1923}, 282-302.
relationships. Nevertheless, both teaching and counseling may be practiced in a dialogical manner. He writes about this in the Postscript that is included in the 1958 edition of *I and Thou*. The language he uses reminds us of the responsibility, presence, and intent of the counselor within the helping process.

The teacher who wants to help the pupil to realize his best potentialities must intend him as this particular person, both in his potentiality and in his actuality. More precisely, he must know him not as a mere sum of qualities, aspirations, and inhibitions; he must apprehend him, and affirm him, as a whole. But this he can only do if he encounters him as a partner in a bipolar situation. And to give his influence unity and meaning, he must live through this situation in all its aspects not only from his own point of view but from that of his partner. He must practice the kind of realization that I call embracing (Umfassung). It is essential that he should awaken the I-You relationship in the pupil, too, who should intend and affirm his education as this particular person; and yet the educational relationship could not endure if the pupil also practiced the art of embracing by living through the shared situation from the educator's point of view. Whether the I-You relationship comes to an end or assumes the altogether different character of a friendship, it becomes clear that the specifically educational relationship is incompatible with complete mutuality.\(^\text{13}\)

In the same way that the counselor is present *for* the person who seeks help, the teacher is present *for* the student who seeks to know. Aubrey Hodes, speaking from intimate personal experience with Buber as his teacher, helps fill out this image of Buber as educator with concrete features. These may be outlined in the following way:\(^\text{14}\)

1. Buber taught without imposing "a self-evident formula upon his pupils, but posed his own questions which forced them to find their own answers." He did not want followers, but persons who took their own paths. In teaching, as in counseling, "distance and relation" are essential elements in the relationship. In

---


similar fashion to the counselor who turns toward the unique person as "other," the teacher desires to know the student in her or his unique self.

2. The teacher must be personally present in such a way that the unexpected, surprising, and spontaneous may arise. This essential contact, from one who steps forward in wholeness toward the other and who then receives the student as a partner in learning is a process that may lead to "confirmation." Trust and acceptance are critical. Gaining the pupil's confidence "he can convince the adolescent that there is a human truth, that existence has a meaning. Then, his resistance against being educated gives way to a singular happening: he accepts the educator as a person. He feels he may trust this man, and this man is taking part in his life, accepting him before desiring to influence him. And so he learns to ask..."15

3. The teacher steps out of a particular pedagogy, setting aside the securities of notes and "syllabuses, methods, and examinations," into the same uncertainty as when being meets being. Teachers, like counselors and therapists, know the anxiety of leaving expertise and the securities of theory behind whenever we step forward with only "Here I am!" Buber writes:

It is not the instruction that educates but the instructor. The good teacher educates by his speech and by his silence, in the hours of teaching and in the recesses, in casual conversation, through his mere existence, only he must be a really existing man and he must be really present to his pupils; he educates through contact."16

We see again, through Buber's eyes, how similar the helper as educator and the helper as counselor may be. Buber indicates where the teacher is able to connect on this

15Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 106.

essential level and he highlights the inestimable gift that this offers when it happens. The formidable scholar, Eugene Borowitz, speaks about the teacher Buber has in mind in this way: “The most important thing the educator can do is create genuine human encounter. In an anti-human time, he is a healer.”

Every one of us can speak the name and see the face of the teacher(s) who first really saw us, accepted us for who we were, where we stood in our lives and learning and whose embrace conveyed to us a concrete awareness of what we could become.

We also know from personal experience the style of teaching—including biblical instruction—that kills the spirit, the style that reminds the student of what they do not know—a form of pedagogy which understands learning as giving back the information and content of the instruction. Giving back what has been handed out, for Buber, denies the essential nature of communication and dialogue. This “contributes to killing in young men the glimpse of the spiritual world, in which the one thing needed rules and no word can take the place of another, and it allows to grow to a power of perversion the lawless swarm, the unholy band of dwellers in a spectral realm between the objective and subjective world…” This manner of instruction is clearly one of imposition, representing a relation in which one person has power over the other. In its most extreme and perverse form, Buber calls it propaganda.

However, as I have indicated previously, Buber does not discount the importance of any subject and its content. Borowitz addressed a contemporary tendency (prevalent during the 1970s when this address was given) of regarding relationship as the content of

---


education, a misuse of Buber’s intention. “One gets the impression that for some people, ignorance is to be cultivated to keep creativity uninhibited. They think Buber taught that the I-Thou relationship was all one ever needs. It somehow does not occur to them that a mindless thou is as little a person as someone who is all mind and method.”

Finally, Borowitz argues that for Buber all genuine education is “religious education.” This is in keeping with Buber’s underlying belief that the religious was not a separate and isolated dimension in life but part of the everyday in which the dynamic reality of I-Thou may be encouraged and found.

Based on Buber’s writing and the accompanying literature, I conclude that a strong case can be made for kinship between the quality of relationship present in dialogical counseling and the quality of relationship in dialogical teaching. This kinship illuminates how the biblical text can be integrated into the helping process. From this agreement, I will introduce Buber’s perspective on the biblical text and also on a dialogical manner of reading that expresses a relationship with the biblical text that is in keeping with I-Thou.

Buber and the Bible

In his introduction to the Buber/Rosenzweig biblical translation, Buber writes: “I grew up in my grandfather’s house and as a child had known the original text for years before I ever saw a translation.”

---


20Ibid.: 330.

scholar of considerable reputation. His grandmother was gifted in many languages. Not only did these grandparents embrace him with love and attention after he was abandoned by his mother, they also provided a household where ideas and culture, music and art, poetry and philosophy filled the air that Buber’s young and curious mind inhaled. His relationship with the text was not casual or primarily academic. When he first began to read translations of the Hebrew, he discovered that he had become angry at certain texts: “Stories that I had previously received as self-evident became unbearable; the story of Samuel’s killing of Agag I bore for a long time like an open wound, and even today that wound is only scarred over and not healed.”

He describes his reading of Luther’s German Bible as casting

…the charm of the language [which] reigned in my anger; but soon after—shortly after my Bar Mitzvah—I suddenly noticed that I was reading the Bible with literary pleasure, and that fact so shocked me that I did not pick up a Bible translation for many years. I tried to return to the original text; now though, it seemed to me hard and alien, the words had lost their easy and familiar movement, they darted before my eyes, and again and again I had to marvel that there was a book like this on earth and that I had been forged at it.

I mention this biographical vignette because Buber’s relationship with the biblical text was, from the initial encounter, intimate and personal. He felt the text address him in the most personal of ways and he learned to engage this text with his whole being. This relationship was deepened and intensified when he received the commission to bring forth a new translation of the Hebrew into the German. Two critical elements of this development help us understand how important this enterprise was for Buber personally and for the development of his dialogical thought. The first element we find in a poem he

---

22 Ibid.

23 Buber, Scripture and Translation, 208.
wrote in 1945 that points back to his decision (1925) to undertake this project in the first place.

Confessions of the Writer

Once with a light keel
I shipped out to the land of legends
Through the storm of deeds and play,
With my gaze fixed on the goal
And in my blood the beguiling poison—
Then one descended to me
Who seized me by the hair
And spoke: Now render the Scriptures!

From that hour on the galley
Keeps my brain and hands on course,
The rudder writes characters,
My life disdains its honor
And the soul forgets that it sang.
All storms must stand and bow
When cruelly competing in the silence
The speech of the spirit resounds.
Hammer your deeds in rock, world!
The Word is wrought in the flood.  

Grete Schaeder, interpreting the language and symbols of this poem, suggests that we might read, “Now render the Scriptures!” with special emphasis on the definite article—“the Scriptures.” She reads these words as revealing the transformation of Buber’s original “vision of acquiring the power and authority of the poet...[into the awareness] that he was to dedicate his poetical talent to God’s Word and not to his own ‘honor.’” Buber also speaks as one “seized by the hair”—as a Hebrew prophet called to render/translate the Word as spoken by the God who first spoke it. His acceptance of this

---


task is an embodiment of an essential feature of his dialogical thought—our personal uniqueness carries our God directed destiny. "...your own character, the very qualities which make you what you are, constitutes your special approach to God, your special potential use for Him."26

Buber’s childhood, subsequent study of Hasidism and philosophy, his teachers, and the many personal encounters along the way had prepared him to begin this epic venture. However, destiny and direction must be wedded with resolution and determination, a doing "what (we) must do at this moment—no matter what it may be!—with (our) whole strength and with kavanah."27

The project takes 40 years to complete. He begins with his friend and colleague, Franz Rosenzweig and finishes alone. In order to understand the concrete nature of the kavvanah he summoned, he reveals the ongoing process in these words:

In the quiet of my new residence in Heppenheim, I read the Scriptures all over again, in order, not skipping a single verse even when it appeared unimportant. I let no obsolete word by without thinking of its original power; I took no abstract words as merely abstract, but tried to trace the physicality at its root, and then of course its change in meaning; I penetrated into the construction of the sentences, till the whole sentence in the peculiarity of its structure said something to me that could not be discerned in the sequence of its words alone; and with the aid of my assisting voice I presented to my ears and my wondering heart that rhythm in which alone the biblical message could attain complete expression.28

Buber takes such care with this Word. He holds everything as vital: word, the space between the letters, the rhythm and meter of the phrase. His personal struggle with each stroke of the pen, each sound the letter made, was not only creating a critical

---

26Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, 4.

27Kavvanah is the intention directed towards God while performing a deed.

28Buber, Scripture and Translation, 210.
translation to be read by others, but was warp and woof of the weaving of Buber’s life with the biblical fabric.

There is a second respect in which Bubers’s acceptance of the translation task was to have far-reaching consequences for him. Buber’s relationship with the biblical text is brought to new vision and purpose by his friendship with Franz Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig’s powerful intellect and spirit were met by Buber in I-Thou relation. It was a genuine living relation that validated and encouraged Buber as he explored the realm of the interhuman. I will have occasion to mention other ways Rosenzweig influenced Buber, but it is the personal nature of their relation that stands out as an essential element in deepening each scholar’s personal encounter with the text.

A few years before they began the translation, Rosenzweig was diagnosed with a degenerative disorder that quickly began to impair and disable his body. Roy Oliver writes that from 1923 he could “only communicate with a special typewriter which would print a single letter after each turn of a dial.”

Yet this is the one person who Buber insisted be part of the translation project. “It may be supposed that he (Buber) thus helped to prolong and enrich Rosenzweig’s life until nearly the end of 1929, five years in which the friends produced between them ten books of the Bible.”

Here is how Buber described this personal collaboration during the translation process. I record his complete description in order for the reader to imagine something of the fullness of their relationship, as they struggled with the words on the page:

---


30 Ibid.
Our work could only be accomplished by two; one who wrote and one who read. This second translator, moreover, who read and tested and altered, needed the qualities Rosenzweig in fact had in this last phase of his life: the daring of the man who in his translations of poetry had ventured to the limits of his language; the devotion of the man who in his belief sought nothing else than to serve the object of his belief with all his strength, till the day he would enter into the eternity he believed in; and the infinite patience of the active martyr. Through these qualities the impossible became possible. The man who could not hold his head up unassisted read with awe-inspiring strength and diligence all the sketches, fair copies, and corrections I sent him. The man whose tongue had been struck dumb, whose arm lay inert in a sling, whose hands could not reach out, whose fingers could barely move—he with the aid of his wife, who had become, in a way, his second and functioning body, filled page after page with his remarks; objections, suggestions, proposed alterations. Often the exchange of opinion over a single word went on for a week. But the most miraculous thing was that he wove into these remarks not just considerations on eternal matters and accounts of daily matters but also poems on various occasions, and even anecdotes and jokes; over the pages there always hovered the smile that again and again shone from his inert head into his eyes, and sat poised on his lips. In his soul the power of belief was made kin to the power of humor. If the former let him feel that the hand that struck him, also cherished him, the latter let him stand in the air as if on solid ground. It was from him that I ultimately learned my life's teaching: that belief without humor is a fearful thing, that humor without belief has no foundation, but that both together, let us bear the pain that there is to bear.\footnote{Buber, \textit{Scripture and Translation}, 216.}

These words have created an indelible image in my mind and heart. The way we care and the way we read the text together should capture something of the glow that continues to emanate warmth from their friendship. Their personal attention to each letter, phrase, sound, and meter, joined by their warm personal relation, sets the framework for exploring how the text can be brought into the counseling process.

\textbf{Buber and the Biblical Text}

The fruitfulness that was harvested from the process of translation—their personal relationship with each other and with the text—resulted in a critically acclaimed and influential opus. In personal terms, their work transformed my way of reading the
Hebrew Bible and the Gospels. I remember, 30 years ago, taking my first bite and tasting the crisp freshness of Buber’s approach to the biblical text. It was his essay, “The Burning Bush,” where I first came alive to the dialogue between Moses and YHWH and to the deeper awareness of the God “who is there as he is there.” My colleague Earl Schwartz helped to deepen this relationship by his own reading and appreciation of Buber’s insights into the text. In the past years, I have watched fresh shoots blossoming on the vine that is rooted in the Buber- Rosenzweig translation, invigorating a renewal of Bible reading and encouraging textual dialogue in inter-faith study.

For the purpose of this paper, I will begin to explore how some of the features that derive from this translation may open another way to bring the biblical text into a working session of pastoral counseling.

The Primacy of the Text

Of highest importance is how carefully Buber and Rosenzweig took account of every letter in the Hebrew text, much like a conductor attends to every note and beat in a musical score. Interpretation and translation must be in keeping with what is on the page. “This attention accords with Jewish tradition, which considers that every letter and every word in the Bible has been carefully chosen and that no word or sound is coincidental or

---

32 Buber, On the Bible; Eighteen Studies, 44ff.

unintentional, including instances in which the text may seem unnecessarily repetitive or obscure."\(^{34}\)

This focused attention on the text requires careful reading, with eyes concentrated on what is written and ears alert to what is spoken. This sort of careful reading and rendering that Buber and Rosenschweig deployed in their translation also resulted in a number of discoveries giving rise to some hermeneutical principles that have offered fresh insight and surprising moments for both the novice and the veteran reader.

Many scholars of Buber’s dialogical thought point to the process that brought him to the pivotal insights of I-Thou and to his biblical translation. It is a movement that can be traced from mysticism to dialogue which includes his concept of religion as presence. This development also had attending hermeneutical shifts—from the more romantic and subjective method of Schleiemacher, through a succeeding development influenced by Buber’s teacher Wilhelm Dilthey, and finally into dialogue.\(^{35}\)

This shift illustrates that “Buber became less interested in perceiving the mind or life experience of the author behind the text and more interested in the integrity of the text itself.” This opened up a different kind of relationship between the text and the reader, which he understood in the dialogical terms of I-Thou. I will return to the implications of this in the section exploring dialogical reading.

1. The Living Voice and the Biblical Text


Buber regarded the biblical text as the witness of a living dialogue between heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{36} Speech marks the origin of the universe—cosmos called into being by the word. “Speech is thus a dynamic, divine reality, an ever-renewed power that lies at the source of creation.” Further, the speaking continues throughout the biblical text, which becomes a “collection of speech-acts” woven into a wondrous, textured, and unified fabric of literary expression.

To be open to the speech of the Bible is thus to be attentive to our inescapable participation in this dialogue—to its great responsibilities and demands. Accordingly, the urgency of Bible lesen [or “Bible reading” as Buber’s enterprise was often called] is nothing less than a world-renewing event. For to engage in authentic Bible Lesen is to pass from mere lesen to the Geschprochenheit, or ‘spokenness’, of the text—and thence to the Geschprochenheit of our own life. And this is a new human beginning—in and by the word.\textsuperscript{37}

In an essay concerning suggestions for Bible courses, Buber himself writes about the relation between text and ‘spokenness’:

The biblical word was never merely the ‘expression’ of an intellectual or spiritual concern, whether ‘ethical’ or ‘religious’ or of a historical or legendary transaction; rather it is a transmitted and traditional word, a word once spoken and then transmitted in its spokenness—spoken once as message, as law, as prophecy, as prayer, as narrative, as instruction, as confession, as conversation, and entrusted as such to the organic memory of generations, preserved there, and maintained, forever anew, in living speech, not noted down or at any rate still existing in company with its own notated form, and ready, even after everything has been noted down, to arise again from the written Bible in its original spokenness.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{37}Ibid. Buber’s understanding of language was influenced considerably by Rozenzweig’s \textit{Sprachdenken} (Speech Thinking). The influence is documented by Rivka Horwitz in, \textit{Buber’s Way to ‘I and Thou’}, 201ff. Greta Schaeder references this influence and its significance in \textit{The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber}, 342-345. Steven Kepnes also develops this influence in \textit{The Text as Thou}, 21.

\textsuperscript{38}Buber, \textit{Scripture and Translation}, 173.
This applies to the whole range of biblical literature. Buber highlights how listening to the text as one addressed shifts the reading process into a living dialogue. For example, listening to a command is different from reading one as historical document. He writes, “A command is not a maxim or a principal—but an address. We are addressed as ‘Thou’, as a particular person, in our particular moment. To transform it into a ‘maxim’ removes it from the second person to the third, from the obligatory relation of hearing to the optional relation of interested reading.”  

In the same manner, prophecy “is the speech of a man speaking under a commission to a human group at a particular moment, in a particular situation; its effects depend on the decision that the group will take in response to it at this moment—or not take. Precisely in the held breath of this vastly decisive moment lies the secret of the eternal validity of the prophetic word upon the response of the group.”  

This is also the case with biblical narrative. “Biblical stories are only to a small extent mere transcribed chronicles; in most of them we hear still the voices of their storytellers, exhorting, compelling, exemplifying, warning.”

The Hebrew poetry of the Psalms has historically been a primary resource for pastoral care because of its wide range of human emotion and condition, from joy and celebration to anguish and lament. For Buber, many Psalms exhibit the character of liturgical poetry, some the character of ‘litany;’ but the fundamental tone is that of the lived immediacy of cries of need and jubilations of thanks, the speech of personal speakers who precisely when and

39Ibid.

40Ibid., 173.

41Ibid.
because they mean the ‘I’ of the genuine person, can, as choral leaders of the
community, speak of the fate and salvation of that community in their song.”^42

As I have indicated in the preceding chapters, I-Thou relation does not lift us into
another dimension. Rather, it penetrates into the concrete everyday, into the ordinariness
of a lived life through encounter. For Buber, this concreteness is also essential in reading
or, more accurately, in hearing the text. “The concreteness, born of the situation and
fitted to it, must be retained for the biblical text. The text must be taught not as pieces of
a literature but rather as parts of a vast, multi-vocal conversation, arising from the first
cause of the creating and revealing word and issuing back into that first cause again in the
form of prayer.”^43

Here we must once again differentiate I-It knowing from I-Thou knowing. The
knowledge gathered from study and examination about the bible, including history and
geography, linguistics and various source and literary criticism, comparative religion and
extra-biblical sources all yield important information. This knowledge is not discouraged
nor devalued. But, as in the case of human I-It relation, whereupon the person is an object
and the client a diagnostic category, so the text in I-It examination remains an object.
Learning about It is not the same as learning from Thou. Even historians are “confined to
the realm of the mediated, and restricted to the means that realm offers. The important
thing rather is to learn from the text itself the things concerning its particular situational
rootedness that it and it alone can tell.”^44

^42 Ibid., 174.

^43 Ibid.

^44 Ibid.
In keeping with I-Thou knowing, the shift from reading what is written to hearing what is spoken, the shift from what the eye has seen and contemplates to what the ear hears in the concrete moment is what Buber is searching for. “Buber’s task as a teacher (as I previously described) of the Bible was thus to make the ‘immediacy of spokenness’ of the Bible manifest, so that its primal powers might address the person and renew him as a Bibelmensch (a Bible Person) for the tasks of life.45

Here we see the integration of the dialogical responsibilities of the educator/teacher with the dialogical responsibilities of the helper/counselor. For Buber, the biblical text was of particular value because, as Fishbane argues:

The words of the Bible, as events of spokenness, thus instruct us in the dialogical character of reality. And the human and historical events reported in the Bible teach us correspondingly. As the great witness to the “Dialogue between Heaven and Earth,” says Buber, the Bible records both the impact of the unconditional upon the life of Israel and Israel’s response.46

The response God wants is the unconditioned totality of our life. God addresses us, calls us to attention, to turn and bring ourselves into relation, to speak “Thou!” with our whole being!

For example consider the single verse of Deuteronomy 18.13.

In Hebrew we read: נֶאֱמָנָה לְמִיַּה הָאֱלֹהִים לִשְׁמוֹ לְיָדָיו

The Buber/Rosenzweig Bible: Ganz sollst du mit IHM deinem Gott ein!

Everett Fox: “Wholehearted shall you be with YHWH your God!

NRSV version: “You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God.”

---
46Ibid., 85.
Fishbane suggests that Buber heard this verse, as if to say: “You who are addressed and singled out as a ‘Thou’, live authentically with your God through an unconditioned response to His words which, (through the mouths of persons), create the world anew every day; and live without self-serving idolatries. For, ‘Hear, Israel! Our God is One Lord.’"47

The German translation is forcibly sculpted in order to create “spokenness” but, in Buber and Rosenzweig’s estimate, their choice was as close as they could get to how the words were spoken. In other words, their translation did not merely serve the interests of Buber’s dialogical agenda. The sound should derive from the word so that it can be spoken authentically. Comparatively, when the verse is spoken out loud in the various versions, the oral quality that is expressed in the German and in Fox’s translation is considerably more engaging than the sentence rendered by the NRSV, which, for me, leads to contemplation rather than response.

The Limitations

This illustration, however, also demonstrates a significant limitation for the pastoral counselor. One has to be well versed in the Hebrew to read according to the terms Buber employs or develop facility in German in order to read his translation. Goethe suggests that a good translation ought to give us an insatiable taste for the original, but longing does not grant skill without concomitant determination and devotion. In his preface to his translation, Fox writes about the difficulty of moving from ancient Hebrew to English, especially when the “premise of almost all Bible translations,

47Ibid.
past and present, is that the ‘meaning’ of the text should be conveyed in as clear and comfortable a manner as possible in one’s own language.”

Buber and Rosenzweig however were not interested in a translation that was “clear and comfortable.” They wanted to “come as close as possible to the grain of raw spokenness. Indeed, these translations deliberately go against the grain of common chitchat in order to awaken in the reader the mystery of speech and its transforming effects.” In fact, it was the reader’s comfortable familiarity with the text (a familiarity which brings comfort and blessing in many moments of need) actually closes the ears to hearing something new, something surprising. The reader always needs to be awakened from the sleepy awareness “that I have read this many times before and know what I am reading.” The counselor will understand how this same assumption may play out in a session when we listen to a person relate a story which we drowsily admit (to ourselves) we have heard before. No dialogue can occur when we are not open to the new, the unheard and not yet discovered singularity of person or text in the particular moment we stand in.

Fox, working from the original Hebrew, and translation followed the Buber/Rosenzweig intention. “Accordingly, I have sought here primarily to echo the style of the original, believing that the Bible is best approached, at least at the beginning, on its own terms, so I have presented the text in English dress but with a Hebraic voice... (so

---


that the reader) will hopefully be encouraged to become an active listener rather than a passive receiver.”

However, even this resource is significantly limited. Fox has only translated the first five books of Moses (Torah) and 1 and 2 Samuel. Therefore, we are largely bound by the translations available and we must make do with them. Certainly, some acquaintance with the original language will bring help in the endeavor, an augmentation to help enrich the experience—something the pastor understands when it comes to preparing the text for study or homily. The growth of the dialogical reading of biblical texts in counseling hopefully will encourage students studying pastoral care and counseling to take their course work in biblical languages to heart and will call present pastoral counselors working in the fields of care not to neglect their dusty Hebrew and Greek lexicons.

Nevertheless, if we accept the importance of each word in the verse, it is important to choose a text that attempts a faithful rendering of the Hebrew or Greek into English. For this reason and others, I will usually use the NRSV. The living word is facilitated by some translations and restrained by others. But the word is God’s, sovereign and capable of speaking to us in our moment of need, in the enormous variety of human tongues. At the same time, there are some strategies that may help make the tools we do have more amenable to the spokenness that Buber strives for. I will discuss these in the construction of the counseling model of chapter four.

---

Reading Bible and the Dialogical process

In his essay, “The Biblical Dialogue of Martin Buber,” Michael Fishbane asserts that “Buber considered it a hermeneutical imperative to hear the words of the ancient texts and transform them through the power of a personal and engaged receptivity.” In Buberian terms, this personal and engaged receptivity is the living ebb and flow of dialogue. Dialogue is a speech event; it occurs when will and grace are joined, when we speak Thou to each other. Buber also suggests that it may happen when we speak Thou to the biblical text and open ourselves to be addressed as Thou by the voice which speaks through it.

There are a variety of ways to encourage and practice this kind of reading. I will briefly point to three of these, each appropriate for its particular setting. Each of the first two will offer features that I will use to build a third way, a model for using the biblical text in pastoral counseling.

Bibliodrama

The most imaginative way is practiced and taught by Peter Pitzele. It is a very interactive process he calls, “Bibliodrama.” Pitzele uses the dialogical language of Buber but does not cite him directly. For example, on the one hand, he identifies a manner of reading the bible text that uses many tools employed by tradition and scholarship, a manner which approaches the text as an object to be examined. This is the relation of I to It.

In Bibliodrama, on the other hand, I confront the work as an I to a Thou.

(All bold and italics are the author’s) Our fundamental hypothesis is that the biblical narrative has more life in it, more voice in it than is captured by the words on the page. I, the reader, meet the biblical narrative as if I were meeting a living

---

being. I speak to the images and characters in the Bible in an unmediated address. The questions that I ask of the text I ask as if the text could answer me back directly in its own voice. The move from commentary to Bibliodrama occurs when the text is given a voice and answers me back. This answering occurs when I, as reader, step into the story; I become the biblical character, speaking as that character, not about him or her. I imagine and tell his or her story as if it were my own. In Bibliodrama, passive readers become active players: we assume roles.  

Pitzele’s method begins with imaginative speculation about what a biblical character might be feeling and thinking, then consciously speaking from the “first person singular,” a movement he terms, “voicing.”

The importance of this shift highlights a fundamental element in the dialogical realm of relation, presence. He writes,

...voicing takes place in the immediate present: the character is speaking here and now. Underpinning all bibliodramatic play is this simple formula: The readers go into role (by voicing and acting) and become players, and the story unfolds in the present tense. The primary task of the facilitator is to help people stay in role and to keep them speaking in an unfolding present.

This shift can be briefly illustrated with his example of Eve standing before the Tree of Knowledge, contemplating the fruit. If we try to imagine what that moment was like for her, what she was thinking and feeling, we begin to see dimensions in the narrative that are not expressly stated in words but must be present, if indeed we are to read this as a story about human beings. The text urges us to explore these dimensions, in part by leaving them to our imagination. The condensed nature of the text creates the space we need to enter with our own life experience. Pitzele suggests that the

---


53 Ibid., 29.

54 This condensed style of narrative writing, exemplified in the Hebrew Bible is drawn out in Erich Auerbach’s first chapter of Mimesis. In comparing Homer’s Odyssey
imagination is opened when we dare to ask the question, “What was this like for Eve?” This simple urge to ask captures something of the Jewish reading process known as midrash—from the Hebrew darash—sometimes translated as “inquiry.” The biblical word remains flat and two-dimensional if we hesitate to take this first step into the text, toward the person on the page, onto the stage where the drama is played out. We sit safely as a passive audience but must remain disconnected from the life it offers.

The imagination once opened by the text may find pleasure and new layers of meaning, but we do not yet hear the word addressed to us in the present. The eye is looking upon the person, contemplating the person, learning about the person. “But once the same questions are answered in the present tense and answered as a form of dramatic soliloquy, as voicing, the Bibliodrama occurs.” He offers this example of someone becoming Eve: “I listened to the serpent. I thought for a while. I went away and returned to the tree many times. Each time I went away and came back I was that much closer to touching, to plucking, to tasting, to eating”...and so on.55

For “voicing” to be genuine, as in the example above, the reader must locate and speak from that place within, where, for example, desire dwells and the voice of seduction is heard. The effect can be quite revealing and powerful. I have been a

with the Akedah—the binding of Isaac—he concludes: “The decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole is permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal, (and to that extent for more of a unity), remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background’. Erich Auerbach, Mimesis; the Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 11-12.

55Pitzele, Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama, 29-30.
participant in a number of Pitzele’s workshops as he invites, encourages, and models an entire congregation to discover the pleasure and vulnerability of speaking out loud, in the company of friends and strangers, the word that waits to be voiced from within, the word that responds to what has been heard.

The experience of vulnerability of others hearing what we want to say, what we usually withhold, reminds us of a central concern in all the variety of dialogical relations including dialogical helping and dialogical teaching. Trust is essential. The responsibility to foster and nurture trust is the essential responsibility of the helper or teacher. The seeds of trust are planted when we first open ourselves to the person who is before us, when we listen to the person and not only the content of what is said. Confidence grows through the gift of acceptance, genuine interest, and an open receptivity to the person. When this happens, Buber writes, the person “…feels he may trust this man, and this man is taking part in his life, accepting him before desiring to influence him. And so he learns to ask…”56

My experience in teaching and reading the Bible in many different settings and with different ages of readers reminds me to always begin with this in mind. Many people are hesitant to raise their hands or respond with their own suggestions or ask a question until they know it is safe, that what they have to say will be received. This hesitancy will block any possibility of dialogue. We cannot meet with a portion of our being. But, a warm and receptive hospitality can dissipate the fear like the morning sun lifting the heavy dew.

56Buber, Between Man and Man.
Once the atmosphere feels safe and trustworthy, the possibility for a reading of “engaged receptivity” bursts the bonds of timidity into a liveliness that the biblical text was written to create. Alter makes the point at the conclusion of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. “This, I am convinced, was at the heart of the authors’ intentions: the Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for a hundred generations of readers.” His final word is of particular consequence.

Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.  

I find in Pitzele’s Bibliodrama, a wonderful means to help persons discover how to bring a story to life, especially those stories we thought we knew—the ones we usually read quickly with voices lacking emotion or passion. His invitation to take the risks of imagination and personal vulnerability in an environment of openness and inclusion carries the potential of genuine dialogue.

Pitzele, however, does not intend a meeting with the text itself, with the words on the page, their placement and meaning. The text presents the situation and the characters, prompting a personal response from the reader, a practice he describes as “an extension of literary interpretation in the direction of an original and dramatic creativity.” Yet, he does not use the literary devices that are imbedded in the text as one important guide for the reader’s imagination. We may begin with an open imagination and speak all kinds of

---


possibilities to the characters in the narrative, but the text also has a say, a voice, in shaping the dialogue. For example, we may say whatever comes to our mind about Saul’s intentions when he casts a spear at David’s head (I Sam. 18.12). But, the voice in the text speaks: “And Sha’ul was afraid before David, for YHWH was with him, while from Sha’ul he had turned-away.”59 Now we may respond, “what is this fear that drives Saul to murder?” A dialogical reading requires an I and a Thou. When I speak Thou, it is to an “other,” not someone I create out of my own experience. When I speak as Eve, it is not Eve I am meeting, though I may gather insight into myself and discover fresh layers of meaning from the way I am presently reading the narrative. It seems to me that this is more projection into the text than a dialogue with the text. A similar kind of dynamic happens in the helping relationship as well. Therapeutic language refers to it as counter-transference. In counseling it is unavoidable, but it can be set aside so that the otherness of the person is fully present. As I have indicated earlier, this is what Buber means by the couplet “distance and relation.”

Dialogical Text Reading

Dialogical reading, in the sense that Buber indicates, requires that we read the text carefully and slowly, voicing each word, listening to the artful placement of each phrase.

Michael Fishbane understood how Buber’s personal relationship with the biblical text entwined with the development of his dialogical thought. “Buber’s biblical work manifests a deep relationship between study and personal transformation.”60 Bibel lesen

59 Translation from Everett Fox, Give us a King! (New York: Schoken Books, 1999), 94.

or Bible reading did far more than develop knowledge of the biblical text. It was “training for human listening. As we read-hear more profoundly, he (Buber) believed, so shall we attend to the tasks of life more authentically.”

...we enter a text as we enter dialogue—piecemeal; and we build up an interpretation dialectically—through corrections, queries and responses. This process, of course, is the famous hermeneutical circle; and its living dynamic, as we now see, is dialogical. In cases, (living and study), only readiness is a prerequisite: a readiness to hear and to be changed, to reject and to debate, to find oneself and to find another.

The most extensive and methodical treatment of Buber’s biblical hermeneutics is offered by Steven Kepnes in *The Text as Thou*. The significances of this work are manifold.

The idea of a dialogical relationship with the text is rooted in Buber’s interpretation of art which he developed in *I and Thou*. “Like the work of art, the Bible can be regarded as a Thou and the process of interpretation phrased as a ‘dialogue’ with a text.”

Leora Batnitsky, in her review of Kepnes book, argues that connecting the biblical text with a work of art actually keeps Buber “tied to the neo-romanticism of his youth.” However, her criticism does not account for the continuing development of Buber’s interpretive methods throughout the life of the translation project.

---

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 89.

63 Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*, 58.

64 Leora Batnitsky, *Koinonia*, Princeton Theological Seminary Graduate Forum 7.1 (Spring 1995): 79-82. I’m not sure what she means by her term “neo-romanticism” other than to suggest that the idea of dialogue with a text is a disguise for an unacknowledged projection of the reader as some romantics understood art to be. One challenge to this interpretation of romantic art can be found in J.W.N. Sullivan’s *Beethoven*. Written in 1927, the opening chapter on “Art and Reality” provides a useful
Kepnes traces Buber’s hermeneutical development and then interweaves this stream with the interpretive thought of Gadamer, Ricouer, and Bakhtin. With these, he sets a dialogical hermeneutic in the following four steps.

1. The first points to an initial meeting in which the reader takes a more “passive attitude of receptive waiting.”65 This passivity is not the kind that characterizes the "onlooker," the one standing aloof and waiting for something to happen. Rather it shares the quality of Buber’s “observer,” the one who is intensely interested. “It is a stage in which the reader only develops ‘hunches’ as to the meaning and significance of the text.”66 I prefer Buber’s description of starting with an attitude of open receptivity at the initial meeting, the kind of preparation that welcomes the seeds of dialogue to blossom. He speaks to each person, regardless of her or his familiarity or expertise with the Bible, to begin, each time, at this same original openness.

The man of today has no access to a sure and solid faith, nor can it be made accessible to him. If he examines himself seriously, he knows this and may not delude himself further. But he is not denied the possibility of holding himself open to faith. If he is really serious, he too can open up to this book and let its rays strike him where they will. He can give himself up and submit to the test without preconceived notions and without reservations. He can absorb the Bible with all his strength, and wait to see what will happen to him, whether he will not discover within himself a new and unbiased approach to this or that element in the book.

But to this end, he must read the Jewish Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar, as though it had not been set before him ready-made, as though he has not been confronted all his life with sham concepts and sham statements that cited the bible as their authority. He must face the Book with a

---

addition for Buber’s consideration of art and text as Thou. J.W.N. Sullivan, Beethoven: His Spiritual Development (New York: Random House, 1927).

65Kepnes, The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology, 78.

66Ibid., 72.
new attitude as something new. He must yield to it, withhold nothing of his being, and let whatever will occur between himself and it. He does not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm him and mold him, from where the spirit will ferment and enter into him, to incorporate itself anew in his body. But he holds himself open. He does not believe anything a priori; he does not disbelieve anything a priori. He reads aloud the words written in the book in front of him; he hears the word he utters and it reaches him. Nothing is prejudged. The current of time flows on and the contemporary character of this man becomes itself a receiving vessel.67

We immediately can identify this statement about starting afresh with the text in very similar terms to the helper who is meeting a person who has come for help. We begin each encounter with openness to who is present. We withhold judgment. No person is the same, and no reading or re-reading of a text can be the same.

Of course, in the immediate moment of greeting, there may be hunches. But these can be set aside for a greater receptivity. Kepnes suggests that from a “...Gadamerian perspective we may say that Buber is naïve when he asks the interpreter to read ‘without any preconceived notions.’” Yet Gadamer, too, suggests there is an initial, passive stage in the hermeneutical process where interpreters are not yet concerned to make their prejudgments and their cultural presuppositions conscious.68 This is not a stage one passes through but one we must return to again and again, often during a single session of counseling or while reading a particular passage of scripture. One way to activate this kind of openness is by cultivating an inquisitive ear for what has not been heard before—a readiness to be surprised by “what I do not yet know.”

67Buber, On the Bible; Eighteen Studies, 7.

68Kepnes, The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology, 72.
2. Quickly, Kepnes suggests, the reader moves to a “more active give and take dialogue” with the text.\(^69\) The text stands forth from our own mind, separates into something other, something that has its own life, its own language and meaning. It calls forth a response, which “does not occur unconsciously but requires a high degree of awareness.” In dialogical terms this movement begins to enact Buber’s couplet of distance and relation. “Reading a book, like meeting any Thou, is the experience of otherness, of alterity and difference, which makes readers aware simultaneously of another and of themselves.”\(^70\) The biblical text, so alien in many ways, so “fraught with background,” challenges us to us to turn; lays claim upon our imagination, our inquisitive nature, to intimate, explore, and ask questions or struggle against.

As I have frequently noted, Buber is not inventing something new, but pointing to what he sees and experienced, often within his own Jewish tradition. He learned midrash, as living process and literary product, from his grandfather. Barry Holz describes this tradition in this way.

The rabbis throughout Jewish history were essentially readers. The text was the Torah; the task to read that text. We tend usually to think of reading as a passive occupation, but for the Jewish textual tradition, it was anything but that. Reading was a passionate and active grappling with God’s living word. It held the challenge of uncovering secret meanings, unheard-of explanations, matters of great weight and significance. An active, indeed interactive, reading was their method of approaching the sacred text called Torah and through that reading process of finding something at once new and very old.\(^71\)

There is another dimension to Kepnes’s second step. As we become conscious of the text as “other,” we also become aware of ourselves as “other,” which includes our

\(^{69}\)Ibid.

\(^{70}\)Ibid.

“presuppositions and those of the cultural traditions from which they (we) speak and interpret.” Since Buber does not expand on this particular aspect, Kepnes brings Gadamer into the discussion with this formulation: “The reader’s activity, the reader’s response, must include then, a dialogue with his or her own language and culture. The question ‘Who is this text?’ elicits the question ‘Who am I?’”

3. Kepnes suggests we may then add to this heightened awareness of distance, the introduction of literary and historical critical methods. Buber encouraged the use of these tools. In fact, Buber and Rosenzweig’s careful attention to the text during the translation process elicited some literary features which encouraged this kind of careful reading. Kepnes provides an excellent introduction to these features as he integrates them into his development of Buber’s dialogical interpretive methodology.

We should notice that when the tools of critical scholarship are brought to bear, we are treating the text as something to be examined. This conversation with the text is in keeping with Buber’s suggestion that the reading process includes moments when we step back and reflect upon what we have been reading. Kepnes quotes from Buber’s

---

72 Kepnes, The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology, 72.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 41-60. For additional descriptions of these features see: Chapter 7 in Schaeder, The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber; Benyamim Uffenheimer’s contribution to Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume, “Buber and Modern Biblical Scholarship”; Chapter 3 in Dan Avnon, Martin Buber: The Hidden dialogue; Yairman Amit’s article, “The Multi-Purpose ‘Leading Word’ and the Problems of its Usage” in Prooftexts 9, no. 2 (May 1989): 99-114; Mara Benjamin’s article, “The Tacit Agenda of a Literary Approach to the Bible,” in Prooftexts 27, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 254-274. This article sets Alter’s The Art of the Biblical Narrative in relationship with some of Buber’s literary constructs.
“Advice to Frequenters of Libraries,” referring to this shift as a “pause” which allows “for reflection, for deliberating on what you have read, for looking at the author, for re-concentrating your thoughts.” These kinds of pauses reflect the dynamic flow of I-It and I-Thou relation as an existential dance that moves back and forth. Crossing the threshold between I-It and I-Thou in this manner moves in the fluency of mystery.

Kepnes highlights the importance these kinds of pauses, because they further the critical distance necessary for I-Thou relation. Referring to Ricoeur’s “explanatory exercises,” he suggests this may actually help us listen to the author. Buber puts it this way: “If the relationship (to the text) is a true one, it will only be enhanced by pauses.” Many readers understand that the use of critical tools does not have to suppress the vibrancy of the dialogue, though it often does. Alter confirms that reading the biblical text requires that we “perform all sorts of operations of linkage, both small and large, and at the same time...make constant discriminations among related but different words, statements, actions, characters, relations, and situations.” This most pleasurable mining reveals rich veins of treasure.

As one discovers how to adjust the fine focus of those literary binoculars, the biblical tales, forceful enough to begin with, show a surprising subtlety and inventiveness of detail and in many instances a beautifully interwoven wholeness. The human figures that move through this landscape thus seem livelier, more complicated and various than one’s preconceptions might have allowed.

---

75 As quoted in Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*, 74.

76 Ibid., 81-82.

77 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 188.

78 Ibid., 188-89.
Similar pauses happen within a counseling session, as the counselor listens and ponders what has been said. For example, the biblical reader may stumble upon a word or phrase, listen and voice it in different ways, and explore its meaning in its historical and narrative context. In a similar fashion, the counselor hears a word spoken, wonders about its meaning and its place in the flow of conversation, and then may ask the person for clarification.

However, it is important to underscore that the harvesting of information, however lovingly gleaned during a pause does not transform the text into a Thou. This recognition is built upon a fundamental element of the dialogical principle which grounds all varieties of I-Thou encounter. I-Thou relation happens when will and grace are joined, we turn with our whole being and say Thou.

Buber identifies a universal desire to take control of the encounter, an urge that may easily seduce scholarship into a presumption that educates by “imposition.” He writes, “How confident is that wisdom which perceives a closed compartment of things, reserved for the initiate and manipulated only with the key. O secrecy without a secret! O accumulation of information! It, always It!”

Entering into dialogue with the living word of God is not a privileged status won by study or ecclesial authority. This truth, that the word is available to all, is embedded in the history of the Jewish and Christian experience. The sovereignty of the spoken word bursts out in the cry of prophets in their address to the community in crisis. The struggle for access to the word is registered in the upheavals and schisms of Christendom.

Scholarship may provide a valuable addition to the interpretive process, but the word can

---

79Buber, I and Thou, 5.
not be sequestered in the hands of the experts. All, if they are open, may hear the word that is addressed, and respond to what they hear.  

Finally, I-Thou relation requires respect for each Thou. Respect for the other is one of the responsibilities laid upon the helper/counselor or teacher. As Kepnes notes, the dialogical “principle offers a nonhierarchical, egalitarian model for the relationship between the reader and the text and between different interpretations of the text…” All voices must be heard and deserve an honest and whole-hearted response. This is the intrinsic dignity of dialogue.

4. Following the phase of examination, Kepnes suggests that one shifts from the strokes on the page to the living voice that speaks by directing “…[his or her] attention toward the author of the book…not out of romantic concern for the ‘inner life of the artist’ or, for the author as ‘the subject of a biography,’ but, rather, as a concern with the author as the figure out of whose dialogue with other human beings the work was

---

80 My own religious tradition flows from the stream of Swedish Lutheran Pietism that embodies this open invitation to encounter the Word. The peasants who gathered in conventicals (as they called it) were called “readers” (lasare), because the Bible was placed in the center of the circle. My grandfather Rev. Eric Hawkinson describes this relationship with the text: “The Bible was in their hands and used faithfully. Nor should we forget that this was largely a lay movement. There was no thought but that the common man could understand what was necessary for his salvation and the nurture of his life was found in the Bible. Personal and family devotions were common. They spoke of themselves frequently as gathering around the Word as if to encircle it, like gathering around a campfire on a cold day or a dark night. …The ‘readers’ did not come to the Bible because they had been convinced by theological and dogmatic discussions of its inerrancy or infallibility. The came and continued to come because they had found life and inspiration for themselves. They knew that speaking about food could not satisfy hunger and that speaking about thirst could not quench thirst” Eric G. Hawkinson, Images in Covenant Beginnings (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1968), 109-10.

81 Kepnes, The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology, 76.
produced.” These distinctions remind us that we are speaking to and hearing from a living being. We are reminded not to “cut the written text from the spoken word and the spoken word from the human being who speaks.” Rosenzweig observes, when the biblical voice is silenced into words on the page, it becomes Holy Scripture. Wonderfully, the inexorable and inexhaustible liveliness of the gessprokenheit, original spokenness of the text is insuppressible, bursting forth within the interpretive process.

Where there is a curse, people necessarily seek to be delivered from it. When what is written becomes Scripture, at once there arises everywhere an oral teaching joined to it. This teaching—however dubious in itself, like the pilpul of the Talmud [a method of studying the Talmud through intense textual analysis], the dialectic of the scholastics, the lecturing at modern universities, the administrative control of the word in Protestant humankind. However merciless a mouth may be, it is still of flesh and blood and not of paper; it becomes weary, and so accepts the alternation of day and night; it must eat, and at least then it will find a moment to chat.

Barry Holz says this more sweetly: “Thus the texts are ‘interactive’ in two senses: in the way reading is lively and dialogic; and in the way we get to speak to our companions when we study, debate, and ponder texts aloud.”

We might ask Buber and Rosenzweig, how is it possible to address the author of the biblical text as Thou, when we do not know who the author is? Long standing text criticisms indicate that much of the biblical text, particularly the Torah, is a patchwork of

---

82 Ibid., 75.
83 Ibid.
84 Buber, Scripture and Translation.
85 Ibid., 41.
86 Holtz, Back to the Sources, 19.
sources and authors. Rosenzweig does not discount these findings or the processes that lead to them. Nonetheless, he and Buber respond to the Bible as a unified text. He writes:

We translate the Torah as one book. For us too it is the work of a single mind. We do not know who this mind was; we cannot believe that it was Moses. We name that mind among ourselves by the abbreviation with which the Higher Criticism of the Bible indicates its presumed final redactor of the text: R. We, however, take this R to stand not for redactor but for rabbenu. For whoever he was, and whatever text lay before him, he is our teacher, and his theology is our teaching.87

Finally, then, in this fourth and last of Kepnes’s steps, standing in our particular concrete moment and listening to the living voice as word addressed to us, we are called to respond. Dialogue requires a give and take, a genuine sharing from our authentic being. Here, the interpreter seizes upon the meaning that has passed “between” with the intent to incorporate this into her or his personal life. Application is not fixed or finalized only at the end of the interpretative process. Meaning and the potential of response and application occur and develop during the reading process. Sometimes there are intimations that need further reflection and conversation. We process the whole gamut of insight and experience in unpredictable ways and in the stream of living time. Dialogue anticipates change and must include the willingness to be changed. But the change cannot be forced or preconceived. The teacher and counselor have to be very careful at this point. Buber speaks about what ‘passes between’ in the language of revelation, but he is careful to respect this encounter in terms of mystery. He writes:

My own belief in revelation, which is not mixed up with any ‘orthodoxy,’ does not mean that I believe that finished statements about God were handed down from heaven to earth. Rather it means that the human substance is melted by the spiritual fire which visits it, and there breaks forth from it a word, a statement, which is human in its meaning and form, human conception and human speech, and yet witnesses to Him Who simulated it and to His will. We are revealed to

Buber, Scripture and Translation, 23.
ourselves—and cannot express it otherwise than as something revealed (italics mine).\textsuperscript{88}

Kepnes quotes Ricoeur who “suggests that through this process of application the text becomes ‘the mediation by which we understand ourselves.’”\textsuperscript{89} I would put this mystery in terms of Buber’s description of confirmation. “Men need, and it is granted to them, to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings. But beyond this they need, and it is granted to them, to see the truth, which they should gain by its struggle, light up to the others, the brothers, in a different way, and even so be confirmed…”\textsuperscript{90} In other words, what presents itself as revelation happens \textit{in} relationship, as something \textit{between} us. What is revealed is personal but not private. Because it is relational it takes place in the hearing and presence of others; it begins at the outset of dialogical reading; it begins when we open ourselves to the text and to each other as readers. This requires “a morality of mutual respect” that allows for different interpretations.\textsuperscript{91}

The awareness of the community is an additional aspect of Kepnes’s fourth methodological step of application. The practice of this kind of mutuality in reading, of listening and caring for who is speaking, establishes a community of dialogue. Any “application should bring along with it a reorienting of the interpreter’s perception of the


\textsuperscript{89}Kepnes, \textit{The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology}, 76.

\textsuperscript{90}Buber, \textit{Distance}, 103.

\textsuperscript{91}Kepnes, \textit{The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology}, 76.
world."92 We are advised by Buber that dialogical life should always turn us outward, to our neighbors and to the world.

This is the change that I-Thou relation purposes as God’s world destiny. The invitation and challenge of dialogue is to hoist us out of our sequestered isolation into the fullness of genuine and authentic life, because “all real life is meeting.” Thus, even in our most particular moments of hearing, we discover that, “God speaks not only to the individual and to the community, within the limits and under the conditions of a particular biographical or historical situation. Everything, being and becoming, nature and history, is essentially a divine pronouncement, an infinite context of signs meant to be perceived and understood by perceiving and understanding creatures.”93

The work of Kepnes and others has helped rejuvenate Biblical study within some religious communities and interfaith circles. These studies have embraced the challenges of post-modern interpretation without succumbing to the hermeneutics of suspicion. “Dialogical hermeneutics requires that we listen to a variety of interpretations and that we converse on the validity, adequacy, even ‘truth’ of different interpretations in an effort to critically refine, separate, and judge their merits.”94

A Middle Way

I suggest that Pietzele and Kepnes stand at two poles on a dialogical continuum. Pietzele uses imagination in a dramatic and existential manner. Kepnes uses imagination in a more rigorous and methodical process regarding the actual text. Each approach turns

92Ibid.

93Buber, *Turning*, 57.

94Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*, 78.
to the text as “living word” which calls for an active engagement with what is on the page. Each requires the reader to step out from the shadows of isolation and fear and into the openness that excites vulnerability and the possibility of change. Each sets dialogue in the world of fellowship and respectful relation. Each is appropriate to the setting and purpose of his method. In true dialogical fashion, something may be heard from each approach as I proceed to examine how a dialogical reading can be brought into a session of pastoral counseling.

Pietzele’s method does not read the text as Thou. Yet his imaginative approach can quickly bring a text alive and in a fresh manner. I have used his method of ‘voicing’ to help persons reveal their inner life with less inhibition. Speaking for a character in a story is sometimes easier than speaking for oneself.

Kepnes grounds his method more fully in Buber’s priority of the text by using the critical binoculars of literary and historical criticism. I have participated in these groups and believe they bring a level of reading that will continue to nurture a renewal of bible reading in religious and inter-faith gathering. However, the pastoral counseling setting is an unlikely context for the kind of rigorous study he places in the center of the study circle. Most people coming for pastoral counseling will not be acquainted with the critical skills that are used in his third hermeneutical step. And biblical study is not the primary purpose or focus of the pastoral counseling process, though it may from time to time employ it.

I think it is possible to strike a balance between these two approaches, one that will be more easily integrated with the pastoral counseling process of dialogue—the critical criterion we established at the beginning of this chapter.
Kenneth Kramer points in this direction in the way he expands Buber’s “Postscript” to the 1958 version of *I and Thou* from which he elicits:

...Reader-oriented strategies that involve treating a text not as data, not as an object or an *It*, but as a *Thou*. To enter into a meaningful dialogue with a text, Buber proposes making the words immediately present, as if hearing the voice of the speaker; turning with one’s whole being toward the speaker; adopting a ‘saying of Thou’ attitude toward the text; and receiving the indivisible wholeness of something spoken.\(^{95}\)

He outlines this process in “four dialogically oriented pointings,”

1. The text should be read with “open receptivity, to hearing a ‘living voice,’” which quickly moves readers to enter into active give-and-take dialogue with the author’s voice.”

2. The “otherness of the text reflects back the reader’s own historical and cultural presuppositions.”

3. The reader then reflects upon “the meaning of the text.”

4. The “reader then applies the text by sharing interpretations with a larger community of readers.”

We notice at once how Kramer’s “four pointings” are similar to Kepnes “four hermeneutic steps.”\(^{96}\)

It should be noted that Kramer is not suggesting this kind of reading for the purpose of engaging the Biblical text. He actually uses Buber’s suggestion in the “Postscript” as providing a way to read *I and Thou*, a book that is not without its

---


\(^{96}\)Kramer does not cite Kepnes as influencing him, but it is difficult to understand how that is possible. Kepnes writes in 1992 and has been a central resource for Buber scholars working in the area of dialogical hermeneutics. Kramer’s book is focused more on the practice of dialogue and was published in 2003.
difficulties. In other words, Kramer asserts that Buber invites us to read his own treatise on dialogue in a dialogical manner—a manner that enables the reader, “through faithful openness and by returning again and again to the text with new questions...to grow through ever-new dialogues with the unique person’s words, thoughts, and feelings addressing him or her.” Thus “a fruitful reciprocity exists between I and Thou, Martin Buber, and the reader, with understanding located in their interplay. By entering into dialogue with I and Thou, as with each Thou, the reader’s own voice becomes articulated more clearly.”97

Kramer’s description of a vigorous and personal interaction with the text is more reflective of a counseling session that is dialogical. The text, as one voice in the gathering is referred to and listened to as an active participant. The responsibility for this begins with the counselor. However, as in group therapy, the counselor nourishes a process where each voice learns to take the initiative to invite the other(s) to be fully present. The counselor is also a reader, a participant, but one who carries the additional responsibility for understanding how the steps/pointings of the interpretive process are at play. However, the purpose of dialogical reading is not to follow the method to get it right, as footprints on the floor are used for dance instruction. This is an interpretative dance, a choreography that values the unpredictability of impulse, risks spinning out of control and taking wild leaps into the air. It means learning to dance, “with one’s whole being.”

The model I will propose will draw upon features from both Pietzele and Kepnes as they fit the particular person(s)’ comfort and experience and the nature of the problem they have come to solve. This quality of flexibility is in keeping with the process of

97 Kramer and Gawlick, *Martin Buber’s I and Thou: Practicing Living Dialogue.*
dialogical counseling. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will build the model for reading the biblical text in pastoral counseling from Kramer's outline.

**Case Study and Dialogical Text Reading**

Dialogical text reading, as with all dialogue, enters quite naturally into many different moments and settings, even when a dialogical process is not consciously intended and even if we do not use the language of dialogue. It may be a rare and surprising occurrence, but we are familiar enough with its appearance to know when it happens. It is helpful to recall that this is Buber's pivotal insight about I-Thou relation.

I must say it once again: I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality, I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation.⁹⁸

In the following two case studies, I will peer out Buber's window and look for signs of I-Thou text reading. When it does not appear, I will offer some practical suggestions to enhance the possibility of it occurring. It is not my intention to present this as a fully integrated illustration of dialogical pastoral counseling and text reading.

The first study comes from a classic encounter, presented by Hiltner, which I refer to in the opening of this chapter. The pastor, Dr. Wheems, does not intend his meeting to be dialogical, and so my critique is not about the value of their pastoral encounter. The purpose of re-reading this case with a dialogical lens is to overlay some of the theory of textual dialogue upon an existing conversation. The second

⁹⁸Schilpp, Friedman, and Buber, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 693.
case is presented from my personal practice, one I intended to read dialogically.

Both cases involve a reading of Psalm 38.

First Case Study

I introduced the context of this case in the beginning of this chapter. The full verbatim is in the index of this paper. I begin with Mr. Arkwright's opening statement.

C1 You know, what I want to talk about tonight is the thirty-eighth psalm. I read it last night, and I had the most peculiar reaction to it. Does it make sense or doesn't it? Is it me or isn't it? I'd like very much to go over it with you and see. I think it would help me if we did.

The choice of the text is made by Mr. Arkwright. He is actively engaged in an intensely personal, disturbing, and lively discussion with the psalmist, a conversation he invites his pastor to participate in. The opening questions—"Does it make sense or doesn't it?" "Is this me or isn't it?"—point toward the dialogical dynamic of distance and relation. The dialogue begins the previous evening when he is by himself reading, with an "open receptivity." He feels addressed which moves him into an "active give and take dialogue with the author's voice." The dialogue creates a "peculiar reaction;" it is also surprisingly and alarmingly familiar. The words appear to illuminate the nature of his condition and these similarities make it difficult for him to distinguish himself from the poet. He needs another voice—another perspective. At the beginning, the text is read aloud which always encourages the living voice of the poet to participate in their present dialogue.

C3 There, now you can see what I mean. If I understand the psalmist, he feels the forces of evil are sneaking up closer to him. It's getting harder and harder for him, and he doesn't know what to do except call on the Lord to help him out.

P3 You mean he feels as if he were going under for the third time?
That's about it. And, you know, it's disturbingly how I have been feeling sometimes lately. Oh, I don't mean in the sense that certain people are ganging up on me—I don't have a persecution complex—but it's as if life were ganging up on me. You know what Sara's death meant to me; we've been over that, and you've been very helpful. But you know, the loneliness doesn't get any better. It isn't a matter of keeping busy. It makes no difference whether I'm out in the evening—at the church or at some friend's home—or not; I still feel it the minute I walk in my door. If I didn't read the Bible and pray then, I don't know how I could get through at all.

Sometimes it's pretty hard to take.

This ancient text has burst into the present as it illuminates his concrete situation. The biblical word helps lift his voice in a heart rending personal description of inconsolable loneliness and grief. "The loneliness doesn't get any better." Wheems is listening and responding to Arkwright's plight in the light of the psalm, but he does not actively engage with the text. To facilitate this, I might offer a simple confirmation of what I have heard. "From what you are going through I understand why this poet has grabbed your attention." Or, "Can you speak to me some of the words or phrases in the text that speak to you."

Last night I turned to this psalm in the readings I've been following. When I read about the Lord's arrows sticking fast in me, it touched something; that's the way I felt. I got to feeling worse and worse. And when I got to that place about being feeble, that's exactly how I felt.

Arkwright does not need to be prompted. The dialogue is alive in him, it has momentum and is energized by how intimately the poet is speaking to him; he makes a direct connection to some specific language that articulates the physical distress he feels. He is not just thinking about suffering. This is a challenging moment in counseling, but it may be very fruitful if the physical experience of suffering may be included in a healing that addresses body, soul, and mind. This is what Buber intends when he says that the I of the I-Thou is the I of "one's whole being." A co-reader might pause here and wonder how to invite this dimension into a more embodied dialogue. Some colleagues would use
actual physical movement, as in dance. It can be helpful to use guided imagery, reading the text again carefully, encouraging the person to speak into the words the emotion of their impact. The will that intends dialogue is intent to nurture the relationship between the psalmist and the reader(s). The following questions come to me as I consider how this might be done. “You feel the ‘arrows sticking fast’ in the poet and in yourself. The phrase is terrifying to me. It sounds like a hunting term, as if you’re being stalked!” “Can you tell me how you feel those arrows or perhaps where in your body, they ‘fix’ in you?” “Are you feeling these arrows even as we speak together?” “This word, ‘feeble’, expresses ‘exactly’ how you felt. For you and this poet, all the suffering and distress appears to drain all your strength. The journey of grief can be so exhausting it’s hard to know how you can get through this.”

Arkwright’s physical association with the text is significant because it is significant to him. In dialogical terms, the text not only expresses his pain, but that pain may also be refracted back to the psalmist in order to enhance the reading. In other words, taking account of Arkwright’s pain may help us understand something of the role pain occupies in the psalmist’s plight, which in turn may be brought back again to Arkwright. This is the active give and take of an engaged receptivity. Arkwright’s pain—as all our experience—can be an interpretive tool.

C7 Yes, and I’d also like to be sure I know what this fellow in the psalm really meant.

P7 Well, the first thing I see about it, besides what you have said, is that the writer was really experiencing trouble and isolation and loneliness and a sense of being deserted. It’s not just rhetoric; he’s going through something. And he says so—a little oratorically perhaps to our ears, but in the accepted style of Hebrew poetry. When you read that first part and felt moved by it, it must have had something to do with a companionship of feelings.

C8 That’s right. It was like coming across a diagnosis in a medical book that fits your case—allowing for the exaggerations you speak of. I thought: This fellow knows. But then I felt sorry for myself. What about that?
Wheems affirms what Arkwright has already understood. The poet is in real distress, though Wheem’s indicates that the language of suffering is framed in an oratorical style that is alien to “our ears.” Arkwright appears to interpret this statement as indicating that these expressions convey poetic exaggeration. It is true that the King James Version they are reading does use oratorical flourish. But as a co-reader I wonder what Wheem’s means to indicate by pointing this out. It is important to keep in mind, as co-readers, that what we say about the text can influence how it is listened to. Prior to this moment, Arkwright does not feel the language exaggerated his own experience of suffering. The observation may prove useful and instructive but only as an observation and not as a statement of fact. When I am co-reading, I will try to ask the other reader, for example “How do ‘you hear this’?

Statements like Wheem’s “oratorically to our ears” remark, when conveyed by the privilege of authority, can impose a meaning and shift the dialogue away from what may be unfolding between readers and between the readers and the text.

P8 Not so strange, perhaps, when you're reading one of the saddest songs ever written. But as I look at this, there’s something that strikes me that might get us along. Do you notice the various steps he takes as the psalm proceeds? First he faces the fact of how he feels. He doesn’t just say, “I feel bad, but I know I shouldn’t; therefore I don’t.” He admits it. He even tells himself that he had tried to overlook the facts for a long time; he was like a deaf man or a dumb man. He had thought he could get along by being perfect, never letting his foot slip. But that didn’t help. So next he realizes there must be something about himself, his own sin. So he tells the Lord he is a sinner. But in the next breath he says his enemies follow evil, while he actually follows good. He asks the Lord not to forsake him. He feels he is a good man, though a sinner, but he still feels alone. What can he do? He doesn’t know, except call on God to hurry and help him.
Wheems highlights “various steps,” a structure which creates movement, one that may help “get us along.” The use of literary criticism can be very helpful during a pause, as Buber suggests. Highlighting the poetic structure may indeed help establish a course, a direction, a sense of forward progress and hope for one who feels stuck. Wheems also uses his outline as a means of creating a more coherent and unified text, as he paraphrases the poet’s suffering into a narrative form that leads toward a conclusion.

In Hiltner’s terms, Wheem is using an “eductive” approach. As I have noted earlier, teaching, counseling in dialogical relation, and reading share many features that maintain the quality and mutuality of relation that have been established. In this regard, if I intended a dialogical reading process, I would invite Arkwright to participate in developing the poetic structure. This might encourage Arkwright to identify, or not, with any movement he may recognize within his own grieving process and the structure of the psalm.

C8 That's certainly the way it goes all right. I hadn't thought of that. There is a regular series of steps he takes. But he doesn’t really get anywhere. He may be courageous in admitting how he feels, but what good does it do? He feels just as bad at the end as he did at the beginning, doesn't he?

Arkwright agrees with Wheem’s outline, but he brings back a challenge in the form of a question: What difference does it make? This is a bold, honest, and provocative response to Wheem’s interpretation and to his personal experience. He has also been praying and reading his bible every night, but he doesn’t feel any better. What difference does it make?

P9 There seems to be something missing
C9 Yes, he’s honest and he has courage. But he doesn’t get anywhere.
And if we could see why he didn't get anywhere, it might have a message for you.

It might. What else do you see?

As the session proceeds, Wheem’s addresses Arkwright’s feeling that things are “not getting better” by offering two interpretations for what he finds ‘missing’ in the poet’s lament.

First, he argues, the poet has been so general in his confession that his sin is undifferentiated, lumped into a common hamper. If he was more specific in his confession, “he wouldn’t feel so bad in so many ways” (P10-P11). This may be helpful advice, but the lack of specificity is characteristic of many psalms and this does not have to be taken as something missing. The general nature of the complaint, in fact, allows the reader to bring her or his unique and specific concerns into dialogue with the psalmist.

Second, Wheem’s suggests that as he reads the text, the psalmist “doesn’t really have faith in God.” At least it is not real faith, maybe in-the-head faith but not in the heart-faith. “He seems to turn to God, not with confidence, but because he doesn’t know what else to do.” The psalmist is not getting on, because his faith is not adequate. His lack of confidence in God holds him fast in his suffering. As I read this verbatim, this statement severs the living relationship with the poet. Wheem’s interpretation implies a judgment on the quality of faith of the poet and of Arkwright. There are verses in the psalm that may support such a reading. However, Kristin Swenson, in her close reading and commentary on this psalm, urges us to hesitate.
Psalm 38 warns readers both against interpreting another’s pain and against prematurely ‘correcting’ interpretations that may seem inappropriately damning.\textsuperscript{99}

At the end of the session, in response to Arkwright’s wondering if he is visiting the cemetery too much and shying away from friends, Wheems returns to the text with an additional interpretation of the poet’s life.

It’s interesting that in the psalm it never occurs to the writer that there’s any way out except to go it alone. He says his friends—I suppose he means his former friends—stand aloof. Perhaps those particular friends do, he may be right. But it doesn’t occur to him that maybe he seems aloof to potential friends. In other words, he doesn’t think that the right road may be through any kind of social channels, association and friendship with other people, but only through isolation and loneliness.

We may imagine, with Wheems, that this poet is stuck in isolation because it never occurs to him that he doesn’t have to “go it alone.” Or we may challenge this interpretation, create distance by turning to acknowledge our own preconceptions embedded in our culture. The challenge of reading any text from the place and time where we stand requires that we become aware of our own preconceptions. As Kepnes and Kramer (and many others) indicate, this is a necessary ingredient for any dialogical reading, scholarly or otherwise. With this awareness, we are reminded that no one has a privileged viewpoint. The isolation of the poet does not need to be read as another defect. Isolation and grief accompany each other through the process. The psychodynamics of Arkwright’s loneliness may have many different explanations that are yet to be explored within the healing process and with the aid of the text. I might say, “In our world, men are often told they have to ‘go it alone’ and be self-reliant. I don’t know if that’s true for

you, but I’m glad you came to talk with me.” I-Thou relation is a turning outward toward
the world. But this is not an easy turning.

Second Case Study

Background

Kevin was suffering a deep and entrenched depression. His world had been
shattered by a series of losses that touched everything that had given him meaning. He
recently was fired from a “dream job” on the east coast. Without work, the family
uprooted and moved halfway across the country in search of another position. His wife
found a job. Kevin, a gifted and creative man, could only find work that paid little more
than minimum wage. Most importantly, his 15 year marriage to Jodi was coming to an
end.

At the heart of their struggle I was told by Jodi, was that Kevin was sexually
confused. She was starving for affection and physical intimacy and angry with him for
not responding to this basic need to be loved in this way. This was not a surprise. They
had discussed this issue before they wedded, believing that it would be resolved through
the resources of their fervent evangelical faith. They prayed and attended support groups.
Kevin entered various treatment programs and devoted himself to therapies that offered
to resolve his “confusion.” They were also the parents of two elementary age daughters
whom they dearly loved.

During the joint sessions I conducted with both Kevin and Jodi, focused on
improving communication, I noticed Kevin’s depression continuing unabated, and he
seemed to be running out of energy to continue the struggle with Jodi. In a stunning turn,
he told Jodi that he had come to accept that “this was not going to work.” In tears, he
confessed that he could not give to her what she wanted and that it broke his heart to see her angry and sad. He understood her need and he thought they should consider ending the marriage. Jodi quickly filed for divorce.

Kevin wanted to continue in individual counseling during this time of transition. During our following meetings, I grew in concern that his life was becoming thinner, less substantial; the vitality of his deep faith, a genuine life source for him, began to dissipate. The volume and intensity of emotion were present; his despair was greater, but it was less articulate and direct.

As I thought about this, I decided to ask him if he would be open to picking up the fraying edges of his personal faith. Knowing that Kevin was an experienced reader of the Bible, I suggested that we read a text together in our next session. He agreed.

I considered a variety of texts to read, listened to each, and settled on Psalm 38. This is one of the more difficult and agonizing expressions in biblical poetry. I wanted to invite a biblical voice into our dialogue, not to impose a challenge to Kevin's reality but to speak from an experience that offered, as Hiltner suggests, a "companionship of feelings." Buber expresses something similar in the words of Rabbi Pinhas who said: "When a man is singing and cannot lift his voice and another comes and sings with him, another who can lift his voice, then the first will be able to lift his voice too. That is the secret of the bond between spirit and spirit."100

Introduction to the session.

Kevin, I chose to bring Psalm 38 to read with you. I chose it because I could hear some of the words and feeling when we spoke last week. You’ll see that I separated the phrasing into two parts, as the Hebrew bible suggests, so that we can read antiphonally.

100 Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, 126.
Will you read part A and I'll answer with part B? We'll see where this reading brings us. (The psalm, antiphonally rendered, is in the appendix).

Reading the psalms antiphonally is based on a primary structure of Hebrew poetry. There is an inherent dialogical quality in this poetic style, creating a lively back and forth dynamic. Alter calls this "poetic parallelism."\(^{101}\)

I usually suggest we read the text several times out loud. And when reading the psalm in this antiphonal manner, I suggest we change parts so we are able to speak and listen from each side of the poem.

PC1 Let's sit for a moment and let these words settle in both of us. (Pause)
We read it together without the emotion of the session we had last Thursday, but I heard a lot of the feeling you expressed last week in this psalm.
C1 This is certainly relevant, that's for sure. It mirrors a lot of the feelings that I am experiencing, for sure.

PC2 Which feelings mirror your experience?
C2 I don't know if the word is actually in the text but when I think about the whole thing, injustice comes to mind. Punishment, longing, attempting to trust in a truth as opposed to trusting in something that is tangible—that's what comes to mind—I don't remember if those words are in this translation but it's what I think of.

PC3 Do you mean trusting in a statement you're supposed to trust in—but there is no concrete witness or...
C3 Not enough, that's for sure. You know the truth, that God ultimately wants my good, and that all things are working for good, and that the whole notion of faith being based on something unseen and a promise and examples of people of faith who didn’t necessarily have the tenacity to stay with God because they couldn’t see the evidence before them but it was trusting in a promise. And, in the past I was able to really believe and say that and it brought me comfort and a sense of placement but as of late its becoming something that—something that is harder to believe in—and I’m, surprised that I find myself at this place because I never anticipated that I would go through experiences that would stretch me that much...and rather than drawing me closer this time, those questions and that uncertainty is more cause for me to feel like there isn’t anything that is really solid because if I was a person who had the character of someone who had the faith that could withstand the storm, I wouldn’t be questioning so I wouldn’t even try to trust in something that I once, I wouldn’t say took for granted, but was just a

companion part of my being and part of my daily experience and it scares me that I feel that my connection with God—it feels like its slipping away...

PC4 What you’re saying leads me to wonder if the psalmist had a similar experience of disbelief? How did things get to be so painful? How did his relationship with God get to this place, where he is feeling confused and abandoned?

I consciously decided to weave Kevin’s response to the psalm back into the text. I did not want to use the text as a springboard only to open up Kevin’s inner experience in order to deepen our dialogue. I wanted to encourage the biblical voice to remain with us in our present moment, as one way to engage Kevin’s connection with God which he feels is “slipping away.”

C4 I’m just really stymied by what our relationship is right now and what He is expecting of me, like, what am I supposed to do? What steps am I supposed to be taking that will show Him that he needs...that I’m worth investing in? It’s really scary to be questioning your inherent worth and all the things I’ve been taught as absolutes and now, I really don’t trust my questions, like I was saying to my friend Kim, I feel like there’s a big part of how I’m living right now that’s driven by emotion and experience and I feel that truth can be mired in emotion but that’s not necessarily the basis for truth.

PC5 But there is a truth that is expressed by this poet—this poet’s truth—this poet’s plight is intense and I hear it in his descriptions and I hear it in you when we talk together; and, for him, it has become extraordinarily physical—he feels it in his bones—he feels it when his heart thumps, he feels it in a growing blindness and deafness, and expresses it as arrows coming at me- heavy hands lying on me, the wounds, the sense of wounds growing foul and festering, suggesting that they’ve been there for a while and they’re getting gangrene, for God’s sake!

The physical distress of the poet is an essential part of the poem—an embodied cry. Kevin is also standing in a torrent of emotion and physical symptoms. Kristin Swenson reminds us that when we read the poetry of suffering, “we witness the engagement of a whole person—body, mind, spirit and community, in the dynamic of pain. In so doing, we engage in process—the process of candidly recognizing the reality of one’s pain and responding with the authenticity of unique, multifaceted, whole
persons.” By emphasizing the language of pain in the text, the full experience of physical and emotional tumult may be integrated into our healing process.

C5 There are things that are expressed here though, similar to what I’ve experienced because in the midst of all this pain, the verdict that comes out is injustice, but then there are phrases like: because of my foolishness, “I’m sorry for my sin” which to me says, he’s going through something really horrible but its consequential. It’s not just a Job thing where it seems to be precipitated by actions that bring about a consequence.

PC6 But we never hear what his sin is—only that he’s sinful, so this isn’t like Job who argues that he’s righteous and doesn’t deserve the suffering he’s going through. Are you asking the question, what sin have I done to warrant this injustice?

C6 Definitely!

PC7 Are you looking for the cause for all this pain?

C7 Yah, I am.

PC8 Kevin, are you saying to yourself, like one of Job’s friends that “you can’t say you’re righteous...”?

C8 Sometimes, but then in verse 20—I read: “Those who render me evil for God are my adversaries because I follow after good”—and that’s another kind of causation.

Kevin identifies with the suffering of the psalmist, which he distinguishes from the questions of theodicy in Job’s situation. Neither he nor the psalmist claims innocence. Both acknowledge sin. Neither specifies any particular sin as the cause of his pain. When Kevin re-reads the 20th verse, he brings his attention to bear on a critical element of the psalm. Both acknowledge the goodness in themselves, in their intentions and desires. The presence of good intention clashes with the amount and duration of their pain and the lack of consolation. Kristin Swenson writes:

Twisted and bent, disconsolate and on the verge of utterly breaking down, the author of Psalm 38 cries out. Yet despite this miserable condition, appealing for relief is not the primary expression; rather, telling the real conditions of his pain dominates the psalm. …That is, the psalmist interprets the genesis and purpose of

---

his pain as corrective for wrongdoing, but tells the horrible effects of it in a manner that finally undercuts the appropriateness of such punishment.¹⁰³

PC9 Your first response to reading the psalm was that it expressed that a kind of injustice was happening here. And for you, there’s been very difficult years of transition concerning career and jobs; and there’s been a lack of acceptance because you long for a community that will receive all your creativity; but it also goes deeper: What about my desire and dream for a family and for children and to be a husband and to love the way a husband is supposed to love?

C9 Yes. The things that are going through my mind—some of the contradictions I spoke about last week—our coming together wasn’t something that just happened—it took a lot of investment and it happened in an unorthodox way and it took a lot of logistics and physical obstacles to overcome in order for us to come together as husband and wife and we could just—like in the Messiah, “the crooked places became straight and the rough places became plain;” I mean, even the move to the coast—these things that have been steps of faith that I’ve seen honor and bless so I say to myself: “God you knew, when I committed to Jodi as we came together as husband and wife I had lots of questions and concerns based upon what I knew about Jodi and what I knew about myself and what I knew about how we were when we were together. And if I was being honest about that and felt that I was walking into it with my eyes open as much as I could at that point then: “Why did you bless this if you knew that it was going to become a train wreck—... So, “You knew that was a desire of my heart. You seemed to be on our side in making that happen—so did you want that or was it just our bull-headedness and tenacity that made it happen. And even if you didn’t want it, it would have happened anyway because we were determined to make it happen.”

PC10 You’re saying to God, “everything seemed to be moving along,” but now you wonder if God has really been behind your life, or not. And, if He has been, why is this happening? You’re re-reading your past life from this very painful present.

As Kevin begins to tell his story, the unique and particular nature of his personal life, he begins to create distance from the psalmist’s experience. They share a mutual experience but each is different. In the dialogical process of reading, this allows for the otherness’ that encourages dialogical relation. In addition, he begins to raise his own questions about the suffering he is enduring. He bears witness to God’s blessing and direction in their family’s unfolding narrative and wonders why God should be so diligent over the years in working on their behalf, only to have it collapse into this desperate state? His intention has been to “follow after good.” Now he asks God directly

¹⁰³Ibid.
about God’s intention. He gets up from his chair and addresses God, very personally, passionately and directly. He addresses God as Thou. He addresses the God who is silent. I am witnessing an astonishing act of faith! I am shaken by the dimensions of Kevin’s cry and the inaudible response. I restrain my instinct to break the silence with my own comforting words. The difficult truth of this moment reverberates through many psalms, many narratives, many prayers of people just like Kevin. Their voices have been integrated into the sacred liturgy of Israel’s faith.

These kinds of questions indicate that we are moving about in the interpretative phase of reflecting on the meaning(s) of the text. Kevin is not actively engaged with the text in the quest to interpret the plight of the psalmist. He is more occupied with his own existential crisis. The text has helped him explore his situation in a way that is still unfolding. It is not his responsibility to hold onto the psalm during this intense search. Nor can it be a requirement for us to keep to the text regardless of the flow of dialogue. Kevin’s personal struggle is the reason we our reading this psalm together. When the occasion feels right, I will nudge the text back into awareness.

C10 And so I will not be surprised if in the next year or two she will probably get remarried and have a really wonderful life, but what about me? I’m neither fish nor fowl. (Speaking to Jodi as if she were sitting in the vacant chair) “If I can’t love you, who am I going to be able to love? The fact that you knew my sexual confusion and you loved me anyway and you trusted me to be the father of your children as someone who you wanted to be with the rest of your life—and you gave up a guy that seemingly had it more together, because you wanted me, and wanted me to be the father of your kids—because you wanted to grow old with me.” Kevin begins to weep

PC11 The questions and the pain you are feeling right now remind me of verse 9: “O Lord, all my longing is known to you, my sighing is not hidden from you.” You’re saying: if you know this, if you know my longing and desires, and my condition, how can you tolerate this, this amount of pain, for this long, to watch me struggle this hard?

Tears begin to flow readily. Kevin holds his face in his hands.

C11 Yes. And I want to say to Jodi, “Who am I going to find? And go through this all over again...in a couple of years just to have this disappointment. But everything I know
about God’s plan for humanity and things I’ve been taught and learned—that it’s not going to be fulfilling and I’m going to come to a lot of disappointment and heartache if I pursue a relationship with a man. So what am I supposed to do? Just be alone for the rest of my life? Just be a celibate monk who finds joy in friends and in my kids because I want relationship and why can’t I have it?”

PC12 So even when you look into the future you don’t see any hope. You’re grieving what you don’t think you can ever have. Do you feel with this poet that God is intentionally doing something to make you suffer?

C12 I don’t know. I’m really angry at God. I don’t want to win the lottery. I feel that the things I desire are things that other people desire and, I know everyone’s got stuff, but I just don’t feel like I can count on anything, like just the stuff that people take for granted. And I don’t know if it’s because of the choices I’ve made—and that God wants me to do a 180, then things will start coming...when God blesses us, we can really see the writing on the wall—it’s so apparent that his hand is upon us.

PC13 It should be that apparent?

C13 Then if not, then all of our friends in the church we knew, who saw us move to the coast, and the provision he’s given us, and all the good things that we have, then they’re really naive. So even if that isn’t true, even if those weren’t things that God intentionally gave us. Those are things we would have gotten anyway, it still doesn’t help me deal with the fact that right now, I feel that all the things that are kind of elemental, are things that are elusive.

Kevin’s anger and perplexity are based on his deeply held faith that: “God ultimately wants my good,” that his intention has been to seek and do God’s will and, that he is worthy of God’s personal investment. This upheaval and enormity of loss has challenged the foundation upon which this meaning has been built and supported over the years. I listen to his bewilderment like a character in a Kafkaesque parable. While Kevin does not plead with God on the basis of his innocence, he does not let God off the hook for what is happening to him. Is there a meaning? Is some purpose being served by taking away everything he thought God had given him? I missed much of this content in the midst of our session. On reflection, I was overly focused on the psalmist and not on Kevin’s unique expression. This is an observation I want to remember and check out with him in an upcoming session.
At any rate, in her commentary on Psalm 38 Swenson listens carefully to the poet’s expression of suffering as a warning against simplistic explanations of pain which may impose a “tyranny of meaning.” I do not know when or even if, Kevin will hear a response to his inquiry.

I don’t hear much hope in the sounds or words you are speaking. Do you hear any sounds, any tone in this poet’s voice that speaks of hope?

Once again, as I listen to Kevin’s impassioned complaint, I want to return to the text to see if there is something that we may bring with us into our evolving dialogue? I am, quite consciously, initiating the final reading phase, phase of application, with the implied question: “what does this text offer to my life and experience?” I remind myself that this is a moment when it would be comfortable for me to impose a meaning or resolve the text in some manner that would be more upbeat and hopeful. Sometimes this kind of intervention might be called for, but I do not want to presume that this is what Kevin needs. He answers.

One or two lines. But I can also read these lines like, “Well Lord, things aren’t going my way, but I know there’s no where else to go but to You, and so I’m going to hope that You’re going to deliver. “That’s in verse 15: But it is for You, O Lord, that I wait; it is You, O Lord my God, who will answer.”

...and the second half of line 22, “O Lord, my salvation.”

So, that’s all. A line and a half. The second half of 22 doesn’t have a qualifier, but in line 15—the context of this utterance doesn’t necessarily mean he’s based hope on things he’s experienced from God in the past but things he believes to be true, and it’s not necessarily experientially based. Wishful thinking.

I wonder sometimes when I say, “I’m waiting for you God,” if its wishful thinking or this is what I have to say because that’s what a person of faith should say...you know, I don’t want to appear to be doubting.

Right. It’s very interesting because I feel that the 15th line is very qualified so that the only thing that doesn’t seem to have a qualifier on it—the way I read it right now from my perspective is—half a line. So I guess, that’s the knot at the end of the rope.

104 Ibid., 131.
Kevin’s search of the text reveals only a few morsels. His response, “So, that’s all. A line and a half” was delivered with wry humor and a smile and shrug of his shoulders, as if to say—not much here.

PC16 What do you imagine this poet wants?
C16 Relief.
PC17 And, Kevin, what do you want?
C17 To see evidence in my life that comes from my deep desires, that God wants to give me those. Because right now, I feel for the longest time, a couple of years, I’ve just been existing. And, life’s too hard just to exist. I don’t feel like investing in it, if that’s all there is.

PC18 Kevin, our session is coming to an end. What was it like for you to read this psalm with me during this time?
C18 Well, if it’s David that wrote it, I can say hindsight helps—obviously this person is dealing with extreme unhappiness and nothing is going well, and I can really identify what they are expressing, but if it’s David, it doesn’t stay that way.

David is the identified poet of the psalm. Kevin reads David’s experience into the text by suggesting that David’s life improved (perhaps) from the painful moment he is writing from. This may have provided a valuable insight into our reading dialogue, but it was coming at the end of session and I did not feel we could integrate it into our ending.

In retrospect, I think it could have been a useful word to Kevin offered as a simple recognition based on David’s life that he would get through this period of suffering. As I respond below, I wanted to keep the voice of the poet anonymous. On reflection, this may have made it more difficult for Kevin and I to speak with the living voice of the author.

PC19 So we could read it differently if we know the story ends in a better place. But for now, let’s leave it that the poet is nameless. What is it like this evening to read this with me—to hear these words from the psalm, to find yourself sharing similar feelings?
C19 That what I’m experiencing is not something that I have a monopoly on, that what I’m experiencing is universal—but that doesn’t help. I can’t take that and use it as a salve on anything. It’s not a balm.

PC20 You said this at the beginning of our reflection on the psalm. The awareness that other people feel this kind of pain does not ease your pain.
C20 No. I know that people are in greater pain than me—and that doesn’t ease my pain.

PC21 Does it make any difference that somebody knows about your pain? You talked earlier about making a connection with a friend.

C21 Yah. She said that she was going to be praying for me, and that’s an encouragement for me. I know I get some release just by having someone hear my story and not try to have a solution.

PC22 Would you have preferred if the poet had a solution in this psalm?

C22 No, whether or not that person has a positive resolution doesn’t diminish or heighten what they’re experiencing—that’s the state that they’re in—and regardless of whether or not it was resolved happily or unhappily is inconsequential to the reality of this person’s condition. It’s what it is.

The session ends without a clear resolution or application. I trust that something has happened between us and that this psalm and our reading will percolate in both of us in the coming days. I did not choose this text to make him feel better, or worse for that matter. I would have to be patient and listen carefully to any signs or indications of what this reading may have stirred up. As it happened, during the next two weeks, Kevin re-invested himself in the life of his congregation. He volunteered to participate in developing a new program that allowed him to use his creative talent. This investment in others represents a “turning” from the intense inward focus outward to the world. In Buber’s terms, dialogue encourages us to meet our neighbor. I do not know what role our reading played in his decision. I do not need to know. I am glad that as he continues to suffer and question, he is surrounded by people of faith.
CHAPTER FOUR
A PROPOSAL FOR A MODEL FOR READING THE BIBLICAL TEXT IN
PASTORAL COUNSELING

Introduction

In his essay The Question to the Single One, Buber refers in simple terms to the basis of placing the dialogical principle on a universal footing. "We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow-creature, by means of them and with them find the way to God. A God reached by their exclusion would not be the God of all lives and in whom all life is fulfilled."\(^1\) The primary direction is outward—a turning to the world. To be fully present to each unique facet of creation, to speak "Thou" with one's whole being, is to step into genuine relation.

In the realm of the inter-human, this wholeness is realized "between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve and are free of the desire for semblance..." And, when will and grace are joined, "there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness which is to be found nowhere else."\(^2\)

This paper has indicated how the different features and elements of Buber's dialogical thought have been integrated into a process of dialogical counseling and into a process of biblical text reading. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how these two

---

\(^1\)Buber, Between Man and Man.

\(^2\)Buber and Friedman, The Knowledge of Man; Selected Essays, 86.
expressions of dialogue may be introduced to each other, providing a model that may 

enhance this “common memorable fruitfulness” from which wholeness may derive. This model will be sketched out and illustrated with two case studies from my pastoral counseling work.

The Model

Overview

When Buber confesses that he doesn’t have a “teaching” but that he carries on a “conversation,” he is not minimizing the depth and volume of what he does offers us. Rather, he accepts that I-Thou relation does not yield to a systematic structure or methodology. Method and system are limited to the realm of I-It relation. I-Thou relation requires, for example, the counselor to step outside her or his methodology in order to meet the person in the present concrete moment with her or his whole being. Dialogical teaching requires that we step out from curriculum and syllabus toward the student. Dialogical text reading requires that we leave our critical apparatus behind and turn to the voice that addresses us. Method and technique, skill and experience can take us only so far.

If the dialogical life cannot be systematized, we may consider a model in terms of practicing a way—a way to encourage, prepare, and welcome the possibility of genuine relation to occur. The awareness of what makes for dialogue should also include how we may discourage and block dialogue from happening. Since this way is practiced in the realm of I-It, the intimate association between I-It and I-Thou is underscored. This is in keeping with Buber’s metaphor of I-It as the “eternal chrysalis” and I-Thou as “the eternal butterfly.” The chrysalis offers the space and time, the care and nurture which
allows the transformation to occur. The transformation begins in the opening moments of the first meeting and is carefully tended as the relationship develops. Trust, acceptance, and affirmation help provide the husk within which the potential of genuine relation grows. Thus, from the first moment of our meeting, the thoughtful and personal nurture of the relationship is essential. The introduction of a text and its reading must be in keeping with what has been established.

I experience and envision this way, not in terms of steps that are sequential, but as various movements which flow in the direction of I–Thou—something like a musical piece that weaves the development of central themes and their variations into a whole work. However, in dialogue there is no prescribed score to follow. The themes are present, but each relationship requires the risk and the willingness to improvise. The basic themes are the essential features that dwell in dialogical relation. They are present in each movement, sometimes consciously introduced by the counselor, sometimes unconsciously by the client; sometimes the themes can be anticipated; sometimes they surprise. The music of dialogue is always live.

A Model in Four Movements

First Movement

The initial sessions begin with the basic theme of open receptivity to the person(s) who come(s) for help. Active listening with genuine and caring responsiveness to the person sets the tone, relieves anxiety, and allows each one to experience the other in a living context, even if in a limited way. I am aware that the first session may likely be the first time the person has come for any counseling. I listen to the presenting problem and the emotions that carry the concern, and I reflect back what I hear so that the other person
experiences understanding. During this time of introduction, I also indicate that I am a pastoral counselor and am willing to invite personal faith and spirituality into our endeavor.

During this time, though not limited to this movement, I begin to gather information that will help provide me with the context of the problem, including the current living situation of the person(s). The gathering of information in terms of Buber’s “observer” is not merely collecting data but flows from engaging in mutual exploration. My personal practice is not to offer written questionnaires which impersonally collect a wide swath of information. I prefer to invite the person to reveal what he or she wishes when they are ready and from the transparency that feels safe. This requires establishing confidence and trust. As trust develops, usually more is revealed.

Different counseling modalities search for different kinds of information. For example, family systems counselors may prefer to develop a “genogram” early in the process to map out the dynamics of the family of origin. Sometimes the presenting problem requires a careful diagnostic assessment that may lead to a medical intervention. What is important is not to separate the content of what is heard from the person who is opening her or his life to the care of another.

During this first movement, I will also begin to formulate a dialogically focused perspective on the presenting concern in order to be alert for the possibilities of integrating dialogue into the helping process. In particular, I listen to those signs that indicate the “inborn yearning for Thou” which Buber suggests feeds our desire for relation. “For it is life we want,” writes the poet Bill Holm. “We want the world, the
whole beautiful world, alive—and we alive in it.”

So, I listen for indications of how it feels to the person in front of me to be in the world where this yearning has met with response, where it has been blocked or the dialogue interrupted. From these inquiries in this opening movement, I compose a dialogical narrative, which helps me discern where and how to strengthen each person’s “readiness for relation”.

Second Movement

The second movement originates in the first but introduces and develops the central themes of genuine dialogue as practiced in dialogical counseling. These are the themes and practices I described and illustrated in the second chapter of this paper.

* Directness; not withholding; genuine and full presence
* Awareness of the back and forth flow from I-It to I-Thou
* Distance and relation
* Stepping out from method to meet the unique person
* Confirmation and acceptance
* Inclusion

During this movement, if the person(s) has indicated an interest in bringing her or his personal faith and spirituality into our dialogue, I may refer to a biblical text as it comes to mind during our conversation. I stay alert to indications that even a brief reference can change the tone of the session. And yet, linking a variety of biblical texts

---


4 This is the language of Mona Fishabne, who has developed a dialogical approach to individual and couples therapy.
with the present conversation may help the counselor cultivate a readiness for reading should the occasion arise for a more complete dialogical reading.

Third Movement

The third movement introduces the reading of the biblical text into the established dialogical process. The theme of imposition and unfolding strengthens and becomes more urgent when I begin to consider reading a biblical text into the helping process. If I have the time to prepare, I ask myself two basic questions: “Why now” and “Which text?” This requires some elaboration.

Choosing the Text

Pastoral counseling, in terms of the dialogical process I presented in chapter two, originates in a request for help. The dialogue begins when the counselor turns toward the person, as person, in the present moment. This is the kind of I-Thou relation that Buber calls “purposive,” a relation that is not equally reciprocal. This fundamental awareness grounds the responsibility of the helper and also guides the ebb and flow of the dialogical process. To say that the relationship is purposive does not mean that the counselor bends the process to one outcome or another. Purposive indicates only that there cannot be a mutual reciprocity. This is important to clarify, because I-Thou relation and the healing of being occurs when means does not intervene between the two. It is critical that the introduction of the biblical text into the dialogical process not violate this basic criterion.

When the counselor chooses the text, it would appear that the reason for the choice would, necessarily, introduce means or strategy into the process. I choose this text for a reason; to provoke, comfort, inspire, diagnose. Choice implies there is a purpose/reason for the selection, even if the text rises out of impulse and not careful
deliberation. Once a choice is made and a time is set, it becomes critical that the counselor not force the reading to a prescribed outcome nor hang onto the choice at all costs.

In *Using Scripture in Pastoral Counseling*, Edward Wimberly supports this approach. He writes that the choice of which biblical text to use often arises spontaneously to the pastoral counselor during the interaction with the person who has come for help. “Such stories arise from imaginative intuition or empathy, which generates the story-making process within the pastoral counselor as a response to the needs of the counselee.” And further, “…these stirrings are related to the so-called contagion or contagious therapeutic ideas, which go to the heart of the needs of the counselees.”

The kind of intuitive process Wimberly embraces is not only spontaneous and impulsive. His model begins with the counselor listening to the personal stories, “the personal mythology,” of the one who has come for help. He/she conducts a comprehensive interview in the style of Anton Boisen so that the choice of narrative is founded upon a significant connection with the person, the context of her or his life, and particular concern. In dialogical language, Wimberly engages in a conversation and gathers information as an interested observer. He also inquires if the person has her or his own particular bible story, one that is particularly important, one which has special meaning. Once identified, his creative method brings the story into the counseling process. The biblical story is overlaid upon the personal mythology of the client, in order

---

to re-author a new narrative, one that leads to greater personal growth. The text and its role in the counseling process is clear and is agreed upon in advance. One story may shift to another as the counseling process advances. This allows for a cohesive series of narratives to weave, one to another, into the developing personal growth of the counselee.

Significantly, his method grows organically from his particular experience as an African American Pastor rooted in a religious tradition that has a unique intimacy with the biblical narrative. "Again, the concern in this book is with counselees who come from Bible-rich traditions and who use Bible stories as a basic means of bringing meaning to their lives."6 Certainly, the effect of reading biblical stories within the helping process is clearly affected when the person has been raised in a story formed community, where the biblical story is absorbed into the historic and personal experience of a people.

However, this is not the setting many of us practice in, even those who counsel within a congregational setting. Many of my clients have some notion of the biblical tradition, but it is usually sparse and undeveloped. From a dialogical point of view, this is not necessarily a handicap, something that cannot be embraced and even valued. Buber’s attitude about the text recognized that the Jewish community of his time suffered a thin relationship with the texts which traditionally had been formative for identity and even survival. And yet, for Buber, the blessings of familiarity notwithstanding, even the expert and well seasoned reader:

...must face the Book with a new attitude as something new. He must yield to it, withhold nothing of his being, and let whatever will occur between himself and it. He does not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm him and mold

6Ibid., 10-11.
him, from where the spirit will ferment and enter into him, to incorporate itself anew in his body. But he holds himself open.\(^7\)

This open receptivity is also mutual. Both counselor and client stand in the same relation to the text even if the counselor has used the same text hundreds of times. This openness parallels the claim of meeting the other *person* in his or her uniqueness and wholeness, in the present moment. The counselor as participant in the reading is also addressed and must remain open to the claims that I-Thou encounter presents.

To help bring some fine tuning into the process of choosing a biblical text, Wimberly highlights three methods of using the bible elucidated by Donald Capps. Broadly speaking, these methods “...include the dynamic use of the Bible, the moral instructional use, and what is referred to as the disclosive power of the text.”\(^8\) A counselor, using the dynamic method, may choose a text, because the counselor associates a “relevance to the psychological dynamics” of the person who is seeking help. The moral instructional method might select a text to “influence the moral behavior of counselee” that may be outside of prescribed norms of faith and scriptural principle. The disclosive model “refers to the text’s ability to reveal its meaning,” which may provide new insight into the problem to the counselor or directly to the reader. Because Wimberly’s counseling style leans more toward the client centered approach, he defers using the moral instructional method in favor of a blend of the dynamic and disclosive approaches. All three may provide a lens that assists the deliberative process.

Within these three approaches, two questions rise for consideration. The first reflects on the timing of introducing a text: Why am I thinking about reading a text now?

---

\(^7\)Buber, *On the Bible; Eighteen Studies*, 10-11.

What is happening in the counseling stream and/or in the present moment that elicits the thought that reading a text together may enhance our dialogue and lead toward greater healing?

The second question begins to wonder about the choice of the text. Do I want to choose a text that challenges the person's point of view? Perhaps at this moment, it would help for the person to hear a voice may offer a companionship of feelings?

The themes of imposition and unfolding are helpful in reflecting on both timing and the choice of the text. I do not want to interrupt the counseling relationship or the flow of our dialogue. Therefore, when I offer a suggestion for reading, it is always a suggestion, and it is because I have come to believe that the helping process might benefit from the participation of the biblical voice.

Of course, these two categories, the disclosive and dynamic often overlap. One text, chosen for its dynamic potential, often releases insight and change within the reader. The following brief clinical examples will help illustrate this though in each case the choice of the text was an intuitive response, a spontaneous gesture offered to a particular person in a particular moment.

First Case Example

In chapter two of this paper, I cited the case of William who was grieving the death of his beloved wife. William, who is Jewish went to his spiritual advisor for counsel. The intensity and depth of his suffering was profound. The advisor suggested he read the book of Job. I do not know the reason for this choice. Perhaps it was to gain another perspective on his personal loss. Perhaps, as Wheems suggests to Arkwright, it was hoped that William might discover a companionship of feelings with Job. It was not
difficult to see that William was not very interested in this task. I understood. Reading the book of Job is a complicated endeavor at best and one I would not recommend to persons suffering some cognitive fogginess of depression. More importantly, Job’s suffering was not William’s. Job’s questions were not William’s. It never occurred to William that he was righteous and therefore undeserving of his wife’s death or his personal suffering. He understood death and grief to be a part of everyone’s experience. He was not questioning God. He felt blessed for all the remarkable years they had together. However, he was quite clear that he didn’t find the world a place where he wanted to be if she wasn’t with him in it.

Since, William was also devoted to his Jewish faith. My intuition led to Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down
and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land? (NRSV)

My personal experience with William was of a person in exile. Torn from his beloved, he seemed like an Israelite, uprooted and carried off into captivity. Even if he wanted to sing, how could he? What notes, what melody can express what he has never known, in this new and foreign land?

It becomes possible to see both the dynamic and disclosive methods of using the Bible in the same reading. On the one hand, our reading the psalm together confirmed William’s particular suffering and helped to provide some language he understood from his religious identity and experience. I was very aware that he was hearing this poetic lament in tones that were unavailable to me. This psalm, the Babylonian exile, and the
twentieth-century diaspora that has followed are formative in Jewish self-identity. These words spoke to his present condition. I remember the tender and heart breaking moment when he whispered the words of the poet—to his beloved wife: “Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you” (Psalm 137:6).

On the other hand, the idea that death had forced him to emigrate from a world that was their playground helped him gain insight into what he was experiencing and what he needed to do. At this moment, it was to sit down and weep, hang up his harp, and wait.

I trusted and acted on my intuition, knowing that no text is the correct one. Each counselor will have a different intuition or deliberative process, and each will choose from the textual library they are more familiar with.

In either case, the counselor necessarily takes some risk by introducing the text he or she has chosen, however the selection was made. This is illustrated by a colleague who uses a dialogical approach in her work as a grief counselor for hospice. On occasion and when appropriate, she also uses the biblical text with those she is working with. The following case comes from her case notes and peer supervision.

Second Case Example

Here is my colleague’s description of her counseling with her client Arthur.

Arthur is an 89-year-old Caucasian male whose wife of 60 years died recently. A Christian minister, Arthur served many congregations during his long ministerial career. Beyond his profound personal loss, he wanted to see a grief counselor because he was having difficulty resolving several significant internal conflicts. During the course of a lifetime of ministry, he had always thought himself to be a caring and responsive pastor.
He had not realized, until his wife’s passing, the depth of pain others must have felt when they experienced the death of their partner. Now, in his own moment of crisis, he judged himself harshly for failing to understand how difficult it had been for them. He wished he had responded to them with more understanding.

In addition, Arthur was also struggling with his role as a single parent, even though his children were grown and had lives of their own. He stated that his wife “took care of the family matters.”

During our counseling sessions, Arthur began to describe a growing concern with his daughter’s choice of a boyfriend (John). She had divorced many years ago and was now seriously considering remarriage. Arthur’s concerns compelled him to investigate John’s background including a criminal background check, banking records, marriage certificates, and anything that he could find in the public record. He also hired a private detective to dig deeper to find out all the “dirt” on John that he could. He discovered a record of multiple marriages, deep financial debt and many lies, information that entrenched his hatred for John. Increasingly, I began to feel his obsession with gathering information was one way he was avoiding the pain of his wife’s death.

After weeks of deepening distrust and the growing evidence of John’s misrepresentation of himself, he presented what he had discovered to his daughter who surprised him by revealing she was already aware of these things; nevertheless, she loved John and said that they planned to be married. Arthur’s agitation increased. He felt helpless, stating to me that his wife “would have known what to do about it all.”

Arthur had shared with me his love for the Bible, and we often referred to a biblical text during our counseling sessions. As I was listening to Arthur list the many
faults of John, a text came to mind, and I asked Arthur if it he would be willing read it together with me. I told him that it was one that he was probably familiar with and that it might help him in this situation. He agreed. We began to read John 4:15-26, the passage where Jesus addresses the Samaritan woman who asked him for water. In the midst of their conversation, Jesus reveals to her what he knows about her life, including her many husbands and the one she currently was living with. To this woman he offers “living” water.

Arthur was familiar with the story. He responded at once, tearfully, “Oh my, oh my. This is very hard to hear.” I said, “Arthur, Jesus has all this information about the woman, but what does he do with it? Now, you have all this information about John. What do you want to do with it?”

Arthur became quiet and thoughtful, a considerable contrast from his prior intensity. He appeared to relax and in our conversation came to the realization that his relationship with his daughter was more important than being right.

When my colleague and I discussed this session and her use of the biblical text during peer supervision, we agreed that her intuition had encouraged her to take a bold and decisive risk. Her choice of the text became a voice of intervention. This kind of direct speaking happens in a living dialogue “between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve…” Arthur was already toiling under his own harsh judgment for failing to express the kind of pastoral care that consoles the sting of death—the kind of care he was receiving from his counselor. His desperation about his daughter increased, because his wife’s death amplified her absence and his isolation, helplessness, and panic. “She would have known what to do.”
The faith the counselor had in her intuitive choice of the text, was strengthened by the months of dialogue in which Arthur revealed his fears, disappointments, and suffering. There were several moments of meeting, of I-Thou encounter. These moments helped her come to know Arthur, not just Arthur the griever, but the whole person. And so, she knew that he did not need someone to step into the place of his wife to offer parenting advice. Neither did he need someone to apply the surface salve of a weak blessing, such as, “Arthur, you did the best you could do when you were a pastor.” He needed help to turn outward, from isolation to relation, to one who would accept him as a partner in dialogue. From this embrace, a single text could be introduced which spoke directly to both of his conflicts—in both a dynamic and a disclosive manner. The words Jesus spoke to the woman, he heard addressed to him. “Arthur, I know about your life. Here, drink this living water.” And, he had been given words to speak to his daughter and soon to be, son-in-law. This speech event brought healing to his self-recrimination and alleviated his fear of failing as a father and husband.

**Reading the Text**

The dialogical process, which is already underway, expands to include the biblical text as an active participant requiring from each reader vigorous, open, and engaged receptivity. Above all, the reading is brought into the dynamic of the already unfolding personal relation. Buber writes, “…there is no single God’s Word which can be clearly known and advocated, but the words delivered are clarified for us in our human situation of being turned to one another.”

---

I present a less sequential variant of Kramer’s brief outline for reading a text in a
dialogical manner. These are not stages we complete as we move to the finish line but
motifs which grow to prominence, only to recede at the advance of another.

*The first and underlying motif is reading with an open receptivity which moves
into an active give and take with the text, the author’s voice and between each
reader. This give and take can be greatly enhanced by using a combination of
narrative/literary tools as we read the text closely. Pietzele’s technique of
“voicing” can also be called upon to open the imagination and for identifying with
the various voices and actions within the text.

*As the text is engaged, the counselor as co-reader helps guide the text reading
back and forth from the original situation of the text to the present moment of
reading and directed toward the particular concern of the person. This ebb and
flow helps carry the important theme of distance and relation.

*The readers participate in reflecting upon the meaning of the passage during this
active engagement. First thoughts will usually be qualified, enlarged, or deepened
as the reading moves back and forth from the text to the readers.

*The readers participate in sharing and reflecting upon the meaning of the text
and its applications. This may or may not begin in the reading session. The sense
of the effect of the text’s voice may be strong or tentative. Application does not
necessarily result in immediate practical action. More often, I think the integration
of meaning into the presentness of life requires meditation, reflection, and perhaps
experimentation.
Fourth Movement

This movement resembles a musical recapitulation that reprises the themes and movements for the purpose of an assessment of the experience and the process. I initiate this with the person at the conclusion of our time together. I invite their personal response to our session and to the process of reading together if the text was included. I often bring this reflective pause to sharper focus by asking what the client may have received that she/he may want to bring along when stepping back into his or her personal world.

While the “music” still has resonance, I review the encounter for myself. I ask myself the same questions. “How did it feel to be together in the previous session with this person? What did I receive from our encounter, and what requires additional reflection? Did I remain open to what was spoken? Did I facilitate dialogue or not? What new insight or surprise did our reading of the text bring? Did the choice of the text and the timing of its introduction encourage and benefit the person and her or his presenting problem? Did we meet, and did we glimpse the presence of the Eternal Thou?”

The following session should pick up some of these questions so that the description of the helping process conveys some of its flow and cohesiveness. Further, this can provide the counselor and the client an opportunity to learn how to talk about matters that are often difficult to find words to describe. And it helped each person reflect on where the process was heading and perhaps which text might be read in a following session.
Case Study—Holly

First Movement

Presenting Problem and Historical Context

Holly and her husband, Gary, came to counseling to address the growing conflict and emotional distance between them. This is Holly’s second marriage and Gary’s first. Holly has two sons, 14 and 16 from her first marriage, and a 3½-year-old daughter, Macy, with Gary. Holly’s relationship with her first husband feels genial and supportive. The stressors for Holly and her marriage are considerable. Their daughter Macy was diagnosed with a chronic medical condition within two months of her birth. The younger boy, Chris, has been diagnosed with ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder. Four months prior to our first session, Holly and Gary discovered that Chris had sexually abused Macy. The abuse was reported to civil authorities and has been moving through the legal system awaiting disposition. Chris is currently living with his father, but Holly is homeschooling all three children. Holly also works part time as a phlebotomist. She enjoys her work but she always feels “maxed out,” overwhelmed, and depressed which increases her volatility.

Midst all the emotional concerns that Gary and Holly were dealing with, they acknowledge their Christian faith to be a vital part of their family. Holly attributes her conversion to personal faith to meeting Gary. They attend regular worship and bible study and are active in the life of their congregation. They had made vows to each other and they felt obligated to try. I asked them to bring their vows the next time we met, so that I could hear what they said to each other on their wedding day.
Dialogical Interpretation of Concern

During the opening moments of the first session both Holly and Gary spoke in competing monologues: "Listen to me!" "He doesn't care!" "She's always angry at me!" "He won't do what I ask!" Each was an *It* to the other, the cause of the relational pain. He withheld and withdrew. She exploded in anger and open hostility. This was the emotional script they rehearsed on a regular basis until their desperation brought them to seek help. It seemed to me that each one bore such personal pain that they were unable to accept the other, listen to the other, understand the other.

They wanted it to change, but they were paralyzed in mismeeting.

Second Movement

Things are not always as they seem at first glance. I wanted to explore what lay beneath the surface, to feel their resilience and readiness for relation, by establishing a flow of conversation that first led back and forth through me and then to each other. Toward the end of the session, their initial reactivity had diminished. As Gary settled down, he began to reveal to me the terror he felt following the birth of Macy. He described an intense reaction to holding his defenseless daughter in his hands and felt burdened with a life changing diagnosis. He had never felt so vulnerable. He over-protected her, and he also closed off from his feelings of vulnerability with a thick membrane of self-protected isolation, which increased after the discovery of the abuse. It was in one of our sessions that he consciously made this connection for the first time. He looked at Holly for the first time in the session and confessed how he understood that he had also withdrawn from her.
Gary’s significant insight and admission of his fear and its effect on his relation with Holly came as a surprise to me. There was an immediate change in the atmosphere. He turned toward Holly for the first time in years and opened himself to her, listening and responding to her complaint and concern. Mona Fishbane describes relational therapy as facilitating “an openness, a ‘readiness to be surprised,’” between the partners and between the couple and the therapist. For this to happen, the therapist must hold a stance of ‘obedient listening’ or ‘not knowing’.”

Holly, relieved by hearing Gary’s confession, responded with softened eyes, a few tentative smiles, and good humor. She was presenting the kind of charm and warmth that was part of their original bond. Forty minutes after the initial level of reactivity and defensiveness, I became encouraged by how quickly they settled into this new way of being. They demonstrated considerable care for one another. A very meaningful and healing dialogue could grow between them. Prepared to divorce, they discovered how much they wanted to remain together.

I anticipated that the cycle of conflict would return during the week but was delighted to hear in our next meeting that, for the most part, the change that occurred in the first session not only continued but seemed to grow some roots. In the midst of all the difficulties of ordinary daily life and with all the significant additional concerns they faced, Holly and Gary turned toward each other and began to partner, as parents and as a couple. Gary had begun to “turn” from his isolation to, from Holly as the cause of his withdrawal, as object (I-It) and toward her as one whom he loved and wanted to be with. They were beginning to enter the dance of distance and relation—but not the distance

10Fishbane, “I, Thou, and We: A Dialogical Approach to Couples Therapy,” 44.
they had been living with—a self imposed isolation in which they never turned to the other. They were learning to respect their differences, which granted more room for each to be who each was. Each day, they practiced active listening. They felt things were changing for the better, and they even began to take the risk of hope.

In order to help nurture this new beginning, I suggested they take the Myers Briggs Temperament Inventory (MBTI) in order to deepen their understanding of themselves and each other. I often use this instrument to build relational vocabulary for the unfolding dialogue. In Buber's terms, this kind of conversation and learning is in the manner of technical dialogue, which seeks understanding. Many couples lack the basic language of the self and of relationships. I want to encourage them to be active and interested observers as they come to know each other.

During the session in which we discussed the results of the MBTI, I noticed how Holly quickly grasped the validity of her type. She saw herself in the portrait of her preferences but she did not like what she saw. Indeed, she did not like herself. She did not like herself as she was in the world. And in her experience, the world did not respond to her with acceptance or confirmation. She left the session, affirmed in who she “was”—and she did not like it! Her intense reaction caught me off guard and gave me a vision of what lay beneath their relational tumult.

When we met the next time, Holly was nearly catatonic. She called it, “being tapped out”—overwhelmed, not sleeping well, yelling at the kids, and struggling with home schooling. She felt discouragement and failure; she felt out of control and miserable in herself; she wanted to “run away” and “leave it all behind.” There was a hint
of suicidal ideation in the thinking as she accepted her hopeless belief that life could never be different for her.

These were old and hostile demons she felt from her early childhood. Her mother was an angry alcoholic who screamed at her children; her father was mostly absent. There was little direct speech. No one trusted the other. When I asked her if she wanted me to refer her to someone in order to focus on these profound personal concerns, she slumped in her chair and groaned out the many times she had been in therapy, with two hospitalizations and a considerable list of medications she had consumed over the years. Nothing had changed. Nothing would change. Like her son Chris, Holly had been diagnosed with ADHD, bi-polar disorder, various grades of depression and personality disorders. Holly had hoped that renewing her relationship with Gary would have helped her find some peace and contentment within. Gary’s emotional presence brought relief but it did not solve her self-loathing.

I heard from within her a deep sigh from the depths of her existence voiced by the words of the Hebrew poet:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul?
and have sorrow in my heart all day long? (Psalm 13. 1-2)

I asked, “Holly, you speak often of the new life you have found in your faith. Have you found something in this that offers you some help; some comfort in the chaos of your growing up; with how you look upon yourself?” She replied that her faith could not help her. She declared that she “understood that you can only be forgiven if you also forgive, and I cannot forgive others. I hate them. And so, I will never be forgiven!”
We discussed the possibility of a one-on-one session with just Holly and me. Their relationship was strengthening, but clearly her stress and intense suffering was spilling and affecting the whole family. I did not want to begin individual psychotherapy. But as a pastoral counselor, I offered the option of reading a biblical text to see if we could help find a healing resource in her faith.

The occasion came during the joint session when we talked about the coming court crisis with Chris. Holly was furious with him, his lack of attention to the pre-court assignments, which were structured to help the judge understand that Chris had taken his behavioral misconduct seriously and that he intended to address the concerns of therapists and social workers. In particular, Holly had been told that lacking this concrete evidence of progress, Macy would be called into the court proceedings to describe what Chris had done. Holly and Gary had prayed that this trauma would not happen to their 3½ year old daughter. If it did, Holly told her son Chris, it could end their relationship. At the end of this session, I invited Holly to meet individually.

Third Movement

Choosing the Text

Given the complexity of the concerns she was addressing, many texts came to mind, but over the week the one which caught me and held me by “contagion” was Psalm 139. In part, my desire was for Holly to hear these words as an antidote to her entrenched negative self-image. I wanted her to celebrate that she had been “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Recognizing this and the perils of imposing this upon her, I prepared to begin with an “open-receptivity,” consciously letting go of the outcome so that I could listen to how Holly heard these words, how she would respond when she heard herself
speak. Psalm 139 is also a complex poem, fraught with background and complex undertones. We are touched deeply by it. Dan Simundson writes about this psalm, “in times of deep trouble, when hope wanes and trust in God is shaken, even the assurance of God’s presence can take a negative turn.”

The session

The session began with a brief update on the family and how things had been with Chris. The previous week’s anger had churned into fury and hopelessness. Chris was out of control. We opened the text, and I asked her to read the first five verses.

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. (NRSV)

PC1 Have you read this psalm before?
C1 Yah—quickly, you know. A lot of times when I read the Bible, it’s quickly.
PC2 Okay. Lets read it once again. Listen to your own voice as you read this—as if you’re the poet.

Holly reads again

PC3 You are speaking ancient words in your own voice. What do you hear?
C3 He’s there, around me, always. What stood out is “you know when I sit down and rise up”—even when I was reading ahead my eyes kept going up to that area.
PC4 “you know when I sit down and rise up”—
C4 I don’t know why it’s catching me, but it’s catching me right now: “You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.”

pause

It just blows my mind to think that he’s written this for everybody, from an aspect of “He knows when I sit down and when I rise up”—but He also knows that about you and every other person out here and that’s where, and that’s where my faith is challenged—like there’s this God but he’s way too big—that’s where I start to get lost—yes I’ve read this

quickly, but to really think He knows that—but he’s waiting for the next step which He already knows I’m going to take.

Holly has engaged this text very quickly. A few words strike her and hold her attention. She responds to what she has heard by sharing the perspective of the poet. I am very encouraged by how affected she is by reading this line carefully. She has begun with an open receptivity to what she is hearing.

PC5 Holly, can you read one verse farther than where you stopped?
(My request was not clear. I intended she read verse 6, but I follow her lead)

C5 “And are acquainted with all my ways.” I don’t like that He’s acquainted with all my ways—and that’s what I struggle with every day.

PC6 What do you mean when you say, “I don’t like that!”

C6 Cuz, I think I’m evil. Like ultimately my desire is to live and walk according to God’s desire and according to God’s plan, but I feel there is too much evil inside me that’s taking over—you know, it’s like it’s a constant battle field inside me—on a good day, on a bad day, on any day. And so when I read stuff like this—if this is God and this is me, and I have such a desire to live for him, as he plans—why am I going down the path that I’m going down—and I don’t want to say it is a path I’m going down, I look back, you know, why has my path been so crooked? His path is here and my crooked path is over there somewhere—it doesn’t make sense to me—so when He says that He knows all this stuff about me, part of my brain is saying “You know Holly, that He knows you—everything you have studied since you accepted him has told you about his existence but then I see this evil side of me, that’s like, it’s just a joke.”

PC7 You mean, you don’t want Him to see that side?

C7 I don’t want Him to see that side, but also, why do I have that side —like both—like “God, I shouldn’t say if you love me as much as you say you do,” I should say, “I know he loves me, and I know all this stuff is true.” I don’t want to say I don’t believe it, but like, “Why am I such an evil person”—you know—I sit down and do a bible study with my kids and five minutes later I’m telling them to sit down and shut up so that we can pray.

Holly has initiated a give and take with the text. She is not responding in a way she thinks she should respond, as in giving a “right” answer. She’s not looking at me for approval. She is bringing herself, her personal struggle, into a discussion with the psalm. Holly and the text are engaged with each other as other. She has her own questions and
pre-conceptions. This is not an intellectual distance, but a personal experience of distance and relation.

PC8 You remind me of the poet of this psalm—can you see just under the heading of Psalm 139; it reads—to the leader. Of David. You’d like to say that God loves you as much as He does, but how can He when there is this other side? David certainly had another side. Remember? He commits adultery and tries to cover it up by murdering her husband. So you are here with David and frankly as I am, speaking these same words: “You know it all!” How does it feel to have it all known?

C8 I don’t like it.

PC9 You also said earlier that this kind of complete knowing “blows your mind”—makes God so big that you can’t get it—and it’s where you start to get lost. Can you speak the words of the sixth verse.

C9 uh-huh “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.” Humm. That’s how I feel.

PC10 Once more you stand on similar ground with David—the knowledge God has of me is uncomfortable—and, it blows my mind. You’re right. Both are true. We’re trying to make sense of things that don’t make sense to us.

Pause

Holly, I wonder, if you can see and understand yourself along with this poet, maybe like David, it may also help you understand Chris?

C10 What do you mean?

PC11 I’m not certain. It just came to me as we were reading that we began this session with your anger and frustration at Chris. He is very present in your mind and heart. Maybe we should invite his struggle and yours with him into our reading. I’d like you to read these words again—but this time, I want you to hear them in the voice of your son, Chris.

This was a spontaneous and impulsive response. Upon reflection I’m aware that Holly’s personal struggle is intimately connected to Chris’s. With a single question and my suggestion to read the lines in Chris’s voice, I’ve changed the tone and direction of the reading.

Reads verses 1-5 again- begins to weep as she reads- long pauses

C11 So then again, I ask myself, why does he have such an evil side?

PC12 Holly, you’re weeping—what are the tears expressing?

C12 Just reading that bothers me, because Chris is going through some major pain right now, and I should be there and I don’t know how to be there. I feel like I don’t know how
to be sincere with him—to understand where he’s coming from even though, if I were like one of his buddies, I could totally understand what was going on—because I was there twenty years ago. But as his mom, I don’t want him to go down that same painful path—just as any parent would say—and I fear the path he’s going down, that God spared me what could have been a more painful road that I’ve gone, and I almost feel that he’s not going to spare Chris.

PC13 It would be frightening to feel that my son was not going to be spared.

Chris opened both of us to very difficult emotional depths and conflict. Holly’s deep mothering instinct drew me from the safety of merely listening to her read—and into a very different world. I began to be aware of my many sleepless nights and terror filled moments as a father watching over my children; began to be aware that our lives are embedded in family relationships; that we are inexorably bonded. And, it could be a hard world for children. Increasingly we are reading this poetry in the thick of crisis and fear.

C13 What helps me grasp my relationship with God right now is my relationship with my kids—looking at Him as a Father, you know. Like, if I step outside His umbrella, I’m going to get rained on, and until I step back under his shelter, it’s going to be painful and I’m trying to teach that with the kids: I want to protect you, but if you step outside of my shelter I can’t protect you, and that’s where I’m at with Chris right now. It says, “You search out my path”—well if He searches out my path then why?—I ask God why I went down this path, and I guess it’s from the choices I made.

PC16 It’s so true. We want to protect, and we can’t always do it. Something happens. I still feel that with my grown children. But I wonder if there really is a place, with God, where we really can step out from the shelter. The psalmist wonders the same thing, I think. Would you read the next several verses?

C16 Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there  
If I take the winds of the morning and settle at  
the farthest limits of the sea, even there, your  
right hand shall hold me fast. (vs 7-9)

(Holly stops at the word Sheol and asks me what this word means. I give her a brief description.)

In reading those two sentences, I ask myself—where can I go sometimes just to be my evil self but instead of that, I’m under the conviction.
PC17 You often talk with me as if you are under conviction; living under the weight of your own verdict that you’re evil.

C17 uh-huh.

PC18 I heard that in an earlier session, very strongly. The psalm says something like, “In your presence I am known thoroughly—where can I go from your presence where I’m not known.” You described how it feels to you, that you don’t like all this known about you. Sometimes when I read this, I also feel this way—frustrated—there must be someplace I can go, someplace where I can hide, there must be some pillar, like the pillar you told me about, the pillar you can stand behind—so that you can’t be seen...

C18 uh huh.

PC19 Because I know what’s in me—and I want to run from it, hide from it...

C19 Do we want to hide it—or are we just afraid to change it?

PC20 Good question. I don’t always know...maybe some of both.

Holly is an active partner. We are both wrestling with some of the profound human dynamics that haunt and create our relational crises. She acknowledges one reason for her own resistance: fear of change; fear of what it will require to change.

C20 uh huh

PC21 And maybe it’s like you said earlier—being known this well blows my mind and I don’t like it—you know. I don’t want to be known this well, and yet what I really want is for someone to know who I am—really know me...

(pause)

What I heard in your voice as you read these verses in Chris’s voice is that Chris wants someone to know who he really is—not as a diagnosis, not as a disorder, not as an abuser, but as a person.

C21 uh huh!

PC22 And he’s making that very difficult—that’s the challenge.

C22 Totally.

PC23 Over time, I have come to believe even if we can become more self-accepting, self-acceptance is not enough; I think we learn to accept ourselves when we discover that we are accepted by another. Does that make any sense?

C23 Yah. I can say it, but when it comes into practice on me, no. I wish that I could accept—and know that I know that I know—that God loves me, right now, the way I am—even though I have that evil side or the bad side—or whatever side it is, the side I don’t like. It’s easy for me to sit here and say, yah, I know he does. But on an everyday basis—when our skeletons kick us around...

PC24 Right.
I can’t. And I don’t know how to.

I think this is also Chris’s crisis of faith. David never said: I feel really bad about this thing that I did, I think I’ll confess, He had it stuck in his face by a prophet—who told him a story about a guy with a lamb. I don’t know if you remember that story. But he gets called out—you know—because he’s afraid, and in such denial he can’t see it, won’t see it. But at some point, when David’s life becomes fully exposed in front of the entire community, he knows he’s known and all that’s left to say is—this is what I did.

I’m not afraid to say to the community, this is my life, this is why I am who I am, but what kills me is that as soon as I turn my back—there’s all the whispering—that’s what keeps me from being who I am.

The gossip that follows afterwards?

People will say, it’s so great that she spoke up, but as soon as I turn my back, we all forget the stones we carry in our pouch, and that’s what weighs so heavy on me. Does that make sense? And that’s where I struggle with Chris. I want him to be who he is. I want to accept him and love him for who he is. But when we get out in public, I don’t want him to see all the stains.

You don’t want him...?

No. The one thing that I want for my kids is to accept them—for the way they get out of bed every morning. But before I take them out in public, I’ve got to wash and scrub them up and make sure all the stains are clean, because I don’t want anybody else to see them. You know what I mean? Which in turn goes back to the way I feel. So I need to be all cleaned and polished up before I go before God or anybody else.

When I reflect on this portion of our reading, I notice how Holly has placed God in the public domain along with everyone beyond the safety of her nest. In the quiet of her home, behind the pillar, she has some relief. She can be herself—though it is a self in hiding. Her passionate and earnest desire to be her genuine self, to love her children as who they are, and the realization that others, God, want something “cleaned up” and “polished up” creates a powerful and irresolvable conflict. I hold in my mind in this present moment, not yet public, but nearer to the world in which Holly is truly present—not a polished and whitewashed image. Over time, while we have been reading, her trust in our relation has grown.

Holly, lets go back to the psalm. Read now from verse 13, and, as you did before listen carefully to the words you’re speaking.
C28 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. (verses 13-18)

pause

We hear verses 13 and 14 way too much, and never take it deep inside, cuz once again, it gets too overwhelming.

long pause

PC29 What are your feelings Holly?

C29 Anger. Because I feel like I’ve taken Chris’s life for granted.

PC30 How have you taken his life for granted, Holly?

C30 In a silly way, the first child comes along, they drop their knuckker (pacifier), I pick it up and sanitize it. Then the second child comes along and oh, I dust it off. And then the third one comes along and you don’t even dust it off and stick it back in their mouth. Except, when (first son) came along, my world literally stopped, and he was the most important thing to me, and then Chris came along and I had two children. And I remember saying when I was pregnant with him, I don’t know if I can ever love him as much as I love John, because I don’t have that much love. And when Chris came along, I had so much struggle with him. And, because of the guilt I felt, I feel that God gave me another chance with Macy, and I’ve just been trying so hard to raise her, pushed and honed, try to teach the right values and morals—instead of an immature way of having fun with a little baby. And I feel that Chris has totally gotten lost. (Tearfully) I look at John’s baby book—everything was saved and everything was written—and Chris, he was lucky to even have a baby book. And Macy came along and everything was saved and everything was written. And I look upon their boxes that I’ll pass on to them when they get older—and John has a tub about this deep—this wide and this long (arms in wide gestures), and Macy has a huge tub and Chris got something not much bigger than a shoebox. And somehow, someway, he’s lost his importance. And I don’t know how to gain it back. So instead of trying to gain it back, he’s acting out because of his lack of importance, which in turn makes me angry—so it just continues to get worse.

PC31 That’s the cycle you’re in?

C31 And that’s the pillar I’m talking about. I don’t know what it is; I don’t know what it’s made out of.

PC32 Holly, do you know what Chris wants?

C32 Love.
He's making it hard. And you feel responsible?

Totally. I can't even watch videos of when he was little, because it just kills me. I just feel like I missed out on him.

(long pause)

Holly reads these verses—"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made," etc., not addressing her unique person, but her son Chris. She looks upon him and confesses a depth of remorse and guilt that brings me to tears. I feel David standing alongside us in this moment, as he perhaps stood beside his dead child, racked with guilt, pleading with God. The poetry has carried us to this most difficult awareness. Buber speaks about existential guilt as the inward evidence of our disturbed and interrupted relation with the world. Healing what does not address this guilt, cannot lead to wholeness; it can only cover over the symptoms. He writes:

Original guilt consists in remaining with oneself. If a form and appearance of present being move past me, and I was not really there, then out of the distance, out of its disappearance, comes a second cry, as soft and secret as though it came from myself: "where were you?" That is the cry of my conscience. It is not my existence which calls to me, but the being which is not I.¹²

You can't look upon Chris without being angry at yourself—and terrified at his future.

Uh huh. Terror's the right word. I just don't understand how... You know I've had my bumps, literally just bumps with John (first son), but they were so easy to overcome; and they were mountains with Chris. Even when I was pregnant with him. So, how do you accept him yet...

Chris isn't John. And he must know in some way that he never will be able to be John. You know: however it is that kids look at these things—because kids look at us and the way we respond—and see and interpret the differences.

That's well established. Because there are things that he started, that he loved, and John doesn't and then he's done...

Two different sons—not unlike Rachael's two boys, Jacob and Esau—both knitted in secret—each wanting to be known, valued and loved, just like you wanted from your own parents, but which you feel you never got. That's a story we should read together sometime.

---

¹²Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 166.
But this is where I sometimes feel I lack—when it comes time for me to get down, on his level and just talk with him, I don’t know how to. Because I feel that when I do that—I hear a voice inside me that says, “You’re full of shit, don’t even try to pretend.”

I know. That early session, when I told you how I enjoyed your presence in the room, you didn’t believe a word of it; like you said about some of these verses in the psalm—they’re easy to say “yes” to, but difficult to really believe.

Well as much as I say I do, the other voice says, “No you don’t!” But the other voice says, “You know you want to believe it.”

Some people would say that this last voice in you is the voice of longing. It’s the longing for what is real and loving and hopeful; and it’s the voice that you should trust because that’s what Chris also wants, it’s what we all want. You took a big step toward that tonight. You stepped out from behind the pillar and let me know—even the parts you wanted to hide. I see how much you want to help Chris, and your family, by your courage and fierce love.

I’ve read this before, just last month. But I never listened to it.

(pause)

I was afraid that you would ask me to read this in Chris’s voice and then it became painful.

I didn’t know until the moment. But I could hear your pain and see it in your tears. I think your pain, when you read these words, are similar to what Chris feels—you are closer to each other than it seems. And as this psalm has been speaking to us, so is God present.

Fourth Movement

The great themes of dialogical thought were present in our first moments together. Isolation and monologue and the deepest desire for relation seemed at stalemate. The dialogical process began when Gary turned to Holly and accepted his responsibility to be present. His turning, his speaking “Here I am” to Holly was like warm breath moving over the icy hardness that had become their relationship. Her receptive openness to his touch encouraged him to continue in this new way of relating. He became more active in his daughter’s life, drawing closer to her as his real child and not one who was disabled. This relieved Holly of feeling isolated and solely responsible. This surprise of his move happened because “will and grace were joined.”
During these opening sessions, the flow of conversation gradually developed into an active back and forth between one another. As their communication strengthened, they were able to attend to the other crisis concerning her son Chris and the impending legal case. At the same time, once the marriage began to thaw, Holly’s life-long inner struggle became more exposed. Her marriage, her new found faith, and her beautiful daughter could not heal these deep wounds. And the healing in the marriage took away a distraction which had helped her avoid her personal discord. She still did not know how she could be healed, nor did she feel worthy of healing.

Psalm 139 is often read as a celebrative shout about God’s creative artistry in the formation of the human being and his complete and comprehensive knowledge to be received as blessing. I used to only see “fearfully and wonderfully made” in the image of a ballet dancer—body leaping in the air, arms and legs posed in astonishing expression. But, as Simundson notes and as Holly discovers, this poetry can also be revelatory and disclosive of our darkest places.

Holly did not hold the text at arms length with pious awe, as something sacred which only speaks but cannot be spoken to. In part this readiness to engage the text seemed to flow from her urgent and uncompromising struggle with life. She would tolerate no cliché. And her relative newness to the biblical landscape allowed for less gathering of pre-conception and theological conclusions.

From her first response I did not know where these verses would bring us. I wanted to read a few verses at a time so that we were not overwhelmed with the whole. We followed what I felt was the poetic development. This enabled our dialogue to flow in a direction with the poet, even though Holly’s final thoughts were not necessarily those
of the poet. I included David as a reference to the author in order to enhance the living voice with a name and a personal condition. On reflection, the “voicing” of Chris into the psalm helped bring us to the most profound moment between us and, I think, between Holly and Chris—her guilt and remorse. This was the first time she confided in another person her feelings of failing as a mother. She didn’t know if she could be forgiven, and his behavior was making it difficult to see him differently. In that moment of pause, we looked at each other, and she saw me as one who knew her, as one person to another person.

There was, to be sure, an immense amount of material engendered by our reading that could occupy many months of counseling. In the next session, we spoke about how to approach this. She was surprised at how challenging the reading was to her. She expressed it as feeling “deep in the Word” for the first time. She wanted to continue to read some texts. I told her that I had rarely been with someone who had such trust in the Bible. I recalled the last moments of our conversation about her guilt and remorse. We began to explore possibilities to address this, including the Gospel text (John 8) she alluded to in our reading of Psalm 139 about the “stones we carry in our pouch.” (C26)

Case Study—Jon D

First Movement

Presenting Concerns

Jon, a 33-year-old man, was born in a rural, upper Midwestern city, the oldest son of two boys. His parents are both alive and his father is an active Christian pastor. Jon came to counseling, because his wife, Amy, was dissatisfied with their relationship and in
particular with Jon’s emotional distance and reserve. They’ve been married for seven years and do not have children. Jon is dutiful and responsible in the relationship but was not very engaged in the way Amy longed for. She was frustrated and withdrawing, and Jon was frightened. He didn’t understand what was happening or what to do. He was also shrinking under the weight of the shame of his inadequacy to ease Amy’s pain. The more emotional she became, the more he withdrew into himself.

**Dialogical Interpretation**

Jon’s description of his marriage is common, and yet in each instance it’s still painful to hear. It appeared to be their own variation of the relational dance of intimacy where one pursues (leads) and the other distances. Usually, after many attempts, promises, and failure, the pursuer begins to give up. Jon was also exhausted and angry, though he kept his anger locked behind his reserve. He had a genuine desire to meet Amy’s needs, but he did not know how.

He describes his life as uneventful, “...nothing much to say about it.” He lived the role of the pastor’s kid during the light of day and partying with friends in the night hours during high school. He had learned how to hide this from his parents as he had learned to withhold his feelings from them and from his friends. In Buber’s words, he had become adept at seeming—a life of appearance meant to create an impression. As we explored this dynamic and its effect upon his life, he readily understood how he had come to lose himself in the process. He had learned to be “whatever anybody wanted,” convinced that if he opened himself, revealed his feelings and thoughts, he would no longer be accepted. He could also understand that Amy didn’t want an apparition for a husband. She wanted the real and genuine person she thought she fell in love with.
Jon had also avoided several job changes, because of his fear of speaking with supervisors about his desires and his competence. He brought enough of himself to make an impression with his co-workers, but felt dead ended from advancement. More importantly, in one of these sessions, he told me how he felt that God had been trying to speak with him and that he did not want to hear what the voice wanted. Jon’s religious life, his spiritual being, is very important to him and to their marriage. He loves to sing with a full voice during worship, but does not want to listen to the Voice that addresses him in his being. All the vital elements in his life—Amy, God, friends and work—are calling out to him, in Buber’s terms—to turn with his whole being outward to the world and into genuine relation.

Second Movement

These themes occupied several months of our initial working together. Jon was slowly opening up to me and I felt a more lively presence emerging in our conversation. Then, abruptly, he stopped making appointments. One day, many months later, he returned. Jon thought that our work had opened him up enough for Amy to have confidence that things would be better between them. So he was startled one evening when an angry Amy blurted out, “Nothing has changed! You don’t get it!” He told me with heartfelt discouragement, “I felt I had changed. What’s wrong with me?” He had taken a few tentative steps and thought these would be enough. Buber writes concerning this:

Each of us is encased in an armour whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive. But the risk is too dangerous for us, the soundless thunderings seem to threaten us with annihilation, and from generation to generation we perfect the defense apparatus. All our knowledge assures us, ‘Be calm, everything happens as it must happen, but nothing is directed at you, you
are not meant; ... Each of us is encased in an armour which we soon, out of familiarity, no longer notice. There are only moments which penetrate it and stir the soul to sensibility."\textsuperscript{13}

Jon was feeling better, but his fear of Amy's response enclosed him in reserve with her. If his attempt was less than genuine, she'd react with disappointment and frustration and he retreated into isolation. His fear strengthened his self-protective resistance. In dialogical caring and counseling, the "initial task...is to appreciate the wisdom of the resistance. This is a shift in attitude from the traditional perspective. It is a radical recognition of the betweenness of existence."\textsuperscript{14} I remember stepping more fully into Jon's dilemma, experiencing both his and my fear when the "thunderings" threaten and demand that we become real. In this moment of inclusion, I also know that his resistance is evidence of his yearning for relation, his yearning to be whole. The challenge for me is to "be able to meet the client at the point of his resistance."\textsuperscript{15} Often this is accomplished by embracing his way of defending against the insecurity that arises from real life.

I am aware that I have strengthened Jon's resistance by asking more from Jon, pursuing him to open up in ways similar to Amy. During this period of the healing process, I offered encouragement when Jon took a few steps toward revealing himself to me. But when I let go of assuming responsibility for keeping our conversation moving along, we came quickly to silence. There were long awkward moments of stillness

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 10-11.

\textsuperscript{14}Hycner, 142.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 151.
looking at each other, Jon wondering what to say and do. Rather than work through these awkward moments, and my own unacknowledged frustration, I suggested some reading for his personal reflection that might help open up some new areas of self knowledge. One of these books was Bly's *Iron John*, a book I have found useful for many men who want to understand relational dynamics from a male perspective within rich imagery of myth and story. I lent Jon the book. We had one brief discussion during our next session. Then, once again, Jon stopped coming.

Third Movement

Part One

After several months, Jon returned under a dark and looming ultimatum. Amy had escalated her demand. She had decided to move out of the home for three months, during which time Jon had to find a way to respond to her. She had decided that she could not accept a life in which relation was so limited and bland, a life in which “nothing is required of you, you are not addressed, all is quiet.” I could see panic in Jon’s eyes as one desperate for help. At the beginning of the session, he began to weep as he described loading Amy’s car with her personal items as he helped her move into a friend’s home. His tears touched me and helped me to swing more fully into being present with fear of losing everything he loved. He looked upon me as a final hope. He had to do something, but what? How? It came to me, that we could read a text from the Bible. We had talked about doing this in previous sessions, but I waited for an opportune moment.

---

16 *Between Man and Man*, 10-11.

17 Loc cit.
He responded positively to my invitation. I gave him a copy of the NRSV and asked him to find Deuteronomy 30, 11-14. I briefly introduced the setting of the passage as a portion of the last words of Moses to Israel before he left them to die as they are about to cross the Jordan into the land they have been promised. Without discussing their plight further, I invited Jon to read the text out loud. The following is the transcript of our dialogue with the text:

(Jon reading slowly and carefully in monotone):

_Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe._

PC1 Jon, I'd like you to read again as hearing the words spoken to yourself—as if the speaker means you—in this situation of your life—in this very moment of our session. You asked me at the beginning of the session: how can I do this? I don't know how or what to do? This voice is addressing your question.

C1 Jon reads again

PC2 What do you hear in these words?

C2 I hear that I can't ask anyone to go get it for me. What I want is in me. And I need to go get it. I can't ask anybody else to go find it for me. I can't ask anyone to go up to heaven or across the sea.

PC3 It's interesting to me that you use the word can't... because the word can't is not in the text but your response is so strong it feels very real to you. What does can't mean to you in this moment?

On reflection, my hurried response to his use of "can't" may have been preemptive. I interpreted what he meant by “can’t” before he told me. Rosenzweig suggests that all relation is translation. However, I wanted to help Jon learn that the text has a voice, a voice which responds to how and what we hear. Something like: “Jon, I didn’t say ‘you can’t.’”
C3 I would have never noticed it, but I think when I say the word it means that it is very hard for me to ask—or I don’t even view it as an option to ask anybody for help. And so for me to say that I can’t ask anybody to find it for me, I could easily have said, “no one else could find it for me”, I have to find it myself—but I choose to not include anyone else.

PC4 Because you have to do this by yourself?
C4 Uh huh.

PC5 “No one else could find this” for you because...
C5 It’s in me.

PC6 But you don’t know this Jon, do you? You don’t know that’s where it is
C6 (Jon begins to tear up for the second time)

When Jon responded to me, pointing to himself and saying, “It’s in me,” I felt he was trying to give me the correct answer. This was typical of our early sessions, and I wondered if, with the text included in our conversation, he transferred to me the authority of one who knows. I decided to be direct and to trust that he was hearing something very challenging from the passage, something he wanted to believe.

PC7 I see your tears once more
C7 I don’t even know what the feeling is. When you say that it’s in me, I don’t know—it makes me feel good because I never believed that it was

long pause-
Wow-twice in one session!

PC8 Are they the same tears as before?
C8 No—this time it’s different.

PC9 Can you describe this feeling?
C9 It’s like someone has faith in me. Someone thinks I have it in me and it feels really good.

(pause)
Which is really weird for me because I can’t believe I haven’t thought that about my parents—you know what I mean. I can’t even believe I haven’t felt that way with Amy. It makes me think that even she doesn’t believe it—I don’t know—it makes me think that nobody believes in me except you right now—or that I have it in me.

PC10 Yes, Jon, I do believe in you.
In this brief moment, his eyes brimming, he looks at me differently than ever before. And I see him, not the inadequate man or the man who does not know. In this brief moment, we meet as I and Thou. Jon’s tears express that he has felt confirmed in his being by another. I have been saying, “It’s in you Jon…” for months and in myriad ways. It felt as if the text addressed him in such a way as not to trigger his resistance. It was the grace that made it possible to become partners in dialogue.

PC 10 You believe that Amy doesn’t think you have it in you to do this?

C 10 I don’t know if I want to go that far—because I almost feel that what I want to say is that I don’t want to believe that they believe it in me. I think she does believe that I have it in me, but I have no idea how to find it and I’ve never shown it to her. But I feel like she knows it’s there, but she doesn’t know how to get to it or to get me to show it and doesn’t know what I need to do to find it.

PC 11 But here the word “can’t” comes up again for me. I’m not sure she can do it for you—that’s the difficult struggle you both have been in for some time. You want Amy to do something, and she’s run out of ideas and suggestions and now has actually separated from you hoping—you say, that you will do something. It’s like she left you alone...maybe like the people of Israel, who feel abandoned and are wondering what to do with Moses gone. You speak tonight as if you are in a wilderness—without direction and without a guide.

Let’s read it again and this time I will read and I want you to listen to the words that are spoken.

“Surely this commandment…” (I pause) Jon it occurs to me that this may be a strange word in the context of our reading even though you are coming tonight with the question: what do I have to do and how can I do it? That’s sounds like you feel this thing is like a command, as if there wasn’t an option for you.

C 11 I have to do it in order to get Amy back.

PC 12 Is Amy the one doing the commanding?

C 12 I like to think it’s something I have to do for myself.

PC 13 Sounds a little like both, but, either way, tonight it’s an obligation which you are accepting as your own? You heard from the text that what you need is already in you—in your heart and mouth. Knowing that changes things—you felt the lift in your spirit through your tears. I could feel it because you became more present.

C 13 I could probably substitute the words I would use like what book you will read so that you will hear it and observe it, what activity will you do that you’ll hear it and observe it? None of them.

PC 14 Right.
C14 You can do them, that's fine, but it's not going to bring you any closer to what's in here. (pointing to his chest)

PC15 I think that's right Jon. It's time to cross the river.

Fourth Movement

I learned in the following session that Jon had passed through a crisis. Amy experienced a major panic attack and reached out for Jon. Here was the test. As he drives to meet her, he describes how he is driving, white-knuckled hands on the steering wheel and speaking to himself: "Jon you can do this! It's in you Jon. You can do this!" Fearful of what he would find and uncertain about what to do, he turned to Amy and spent the day comforting her. She asked if she could move back home. Jon was delighted with himself.

Second Movement

Part Two

Over the next sessions, we reflected on our reading together, using the metaphor of crossing the river. Our relationship had been changed by our meeting. He no longer saw me as someone who had the answer, but as a partner in his unfolding determination to become more "himself." His courage and adamant desire to love Amy was very moving. This was a more buoyant Jon, but once again he wondered what he should do next. Amy was concerned that he would take this recent advance as another occasion to be satisfied with how things were and slump back to the way things had been. She was glad for the changes she felt in Jon, but she wanted him to keep going. I was encouraged that Jon did not see this in terms of the old judgment, nor did he collapse into the discouragement of knowing that he could never satisfy Amy. He wanted to move on.
Buber writes, the “I is real in virtue of its sharing in reality. The fuller the sharing the more real it becomes.”¹⁸

We picked up the thread from the Deuteronomy text and came to agreement that while crossing the river was huge, this was only the beginning of the challenges the Israelites faced. They had to establish themselves as a people in a relationship with each other and with God who had brought them this far. Jon and I began to develop a plan for nurturing the changes he was enjoying and bringing them more fully into his life.

I suggested he follow a schedule of daily readings that spurred some thought and reflection he could bring into his day. He decided to add a disciplined exercise program. His plan was based on creating a life that did not settle back into the comfortable parameters and take things too easy. Over the next weeks, he awakened early, practiced meditation, and went to exercise at his gym. On the way to work, he read his daily reflections and when he and Amy met up at the end of the day, he initiated their conversation from the substance of his day and from his thoughts and feelings.

During one session, he talked about the anxiety of talking with his father on the phone. He was always nervous when his father called, because he and Amy had not been going to church. In fact, Jon wanted to go to church, but he knew that Amy wasn’t interested any longer and he didn’t want to bring something up that would upset her. This was the old struggle still hanging on. When I asked him to imagine talking to his father, he tightened up and felt that a band wound tight about his chest. He immediately drew the connection between talking with his father and talking with Amy. We both agreed that we were at another important moment. I asked him if he wanted to read another text, but

¹⁸Buber, I and Thou, 63.
this time, I invited him to reflect upon which text he would like to read. His choice was I Samuel 14.1-23, Jonathan, the Warrior. He had read it recently in bible study, and it caught his attention.

Third Movement

The session began with an update of concerns. His mother and father were actually coming in two days. And, he had been doing a lot of thinking about the text in his daily book of morning reflection. The writer was urging the reader to face a “big thing” and think “something big.”

PC1 I’m going to introduce you to what is probably going to be a new translation. I like it, because it’s probably the closest translation we have to the original Hebrew and also, because it’s different from our usual English translations, it sometimes kicks up some new insight...

I ask Jon to read it two times

C1 It takes a little getting used to, but I like it.

PC2 What did you like about it?

C2 I thought it was much more descriptive—the language of the cliffs on each side when I first read it in my translation—I thought it was just a valley that they walked up and down. But when they describe it as a cliff tooth on one side and a cliff tooth on the other side—it’s not an easy obstacle to overcome

PC3 It’s more rugged, more sharp and angular.

C3 And even how he describes it—that they crawled up by their hands and feet—helps me realize that it’s not that easy to crawl up there—that sucker—almost like tooth and nail, it’s like rock climbing—it’s not easy.

PC4 The setting makes a difference for our imagination—seeing all this craggy and cliff tooted rocks on each side.

C4 Yes, it does because it helps me realize that this wasn’t easy. They could have seen these two cliffs and decided that it was just too difficult to do this. I mean...we have to get up there and then we have to fight these guys—it speaks to their resolve or determination—they’re going over there no matter what—he’s set on his way.

The Fox translation is more vivid in description and Jon quickly integrates this into his sense of the story. Focusing on the details of the set, carefully laid out by the
writer, highlights the importance of every facet of the story. This adds dimension and levels of understanding that we miss if we pass by too quickly. Since our first reading, Jon is jumping right into the text.

PC5 He's got a big idea. What is the big idea?

C5 My first thought is that he wants to slay the Philistines, but more than that, I think he wants to act on behalf of God—that God's going to tell him what to do. He's going to get over there—and not say he's going to kill everybody—but we are going to get over there—but then there's another choice—so whatever happens there, we will know which way to go, which is interesting to me because I think of a plan as, we'll go down—then up and we're going to go kill them all...and I rarely think of a point in between when there's another decision point. Maybe the goal was to get half way and decide from there.

PC6 So, Jonathan may be saying, "This is what I want to do. Let's go this far and see what happens, whether we're going all the way or not. We'll test this out." Do you read anything in the text that helps us understand what's motivating Jonathan?

C6 I don't think so, other than his faith—that he'll be told what to do—and it'll be there before him. But it just starts out with his weapons guy, "Hey, let's go over there."

PC7 The narrator doesn't tell us anything explicitly—except this funny line: "but he didn't tell his father."

C7 Why not? My thought would be, his father was going to tell him "no."

PC8 Could very well be. There's a lot of reasons why we don't tell our fathers what we want to do. (I look at Jon and raise my eye-brows. He smiles back) Where is his father?

I don't want to leave the momentum we are building in the unfolding story, but I wanted to remind both of us that Jon’s own hesitation to speak with his father was also in the story he had chosen. Jon’s reasons may not be Jonathan’s. Yet one moment speaks to another, and something deep in our awareness as children and as parents is touched.

C8 Isn't his father back at camp?

PC9 Sitting under a pomegranate tree.

C9 Yah—so he wasn’t involved in the fighting—like the general who leads from the back of the army.

PC10 Of course, we started in the middle of the action. If we take a step back into the story, we may remember how we got here. In the last chapter, Saul had a bad time of it. Remember?

C10 Yes, he was supposed to wait seven days, and he freaked out and sacrificed everything before he should have. Before Samuel showed up and said, "What the heck
are you doing? I told you to wait for me”—and he didn’t wait—because he was scared, because they were totally outnumbered.

PC11 And the Philistines were starting to muster.

C11 Like they were gathering up their army.

PC12 When this is all going on, I always want to say, “You know Samuel, this would be a good time to show up.” What’s with this waiting stuff?”

C12 It sounds to me like Saul doesn’t really have a plan. He’s waiting for Samuel to show up, and that’s his only direction—but when Samuel doesn’t show up he thinks, “Oh Oh, we’re going to get our asses kicked and we can’t wait any longer for Samuel to show up.”

PC13 Yet he’s also trying to do something. He’s offering a pre-battle sacrifice—saying to YHWH, don’t forget you’re on our side. But when Samuel sees the fire, He tells Saul that because of what he did, he’s going to lose his monarchy.

C13 Yah—and all of Saul’s men started to hide when they saw them gathering.

PC14 Now he’s sitting under a tree. I see him sulking over there (we laugh together). Nobody can sulk like Saul—but the Philistine problem is still out there.

C14 Jonathan takes it on. Maybe it’s like when you’re dumb and young you don’t care? You just go for it. No, I think it’s more than that, but he’s not sitting around wondering about all the “what ifs.”

PC15 Saul looks on the Philistines gathering, and he seems frightened and unsure because they are out numbered. How does Jonathan see it?

C15 “Perhaps YHWH will act for us, for there is no constraint for YHWH from delivering by the many or by the few.” Being outnumbered doesn’t make any difference. He can still deliver.

PC16 It calls to my mind a short poem by Rumi:

If God is present, nothing matters
If God is not present, nothing matters

C16 Like, if God is in this battle, it doesn’t make any difference. If God isn’t in this battle, it doesn’t make any difference.

PC17 What happens to our fear?

C17 We face it.

PC 18 And, like Jonathan, we test it out.

Jon and I are having a joyful romp through this text. There is a lot of give and take. We interrupt each other in order to add a comment. Once again I am reminded that the seriousness of counseling can also erupt into play, just as we may bounce the words
of the text back and forth as we come loosening up and welcoming ourselves to be more a part of the action.

C18 This is the first time I heard the word "perhaps." Perhaps YHWH will act for us, but he's really not sure. It's like, fifty-fifty.

PC19 What does it depend on?

C19 It depends on whether or not YHWH wants to help

PC20 That's the kicker. In the surrounding cultures, you manipulated the gods by offering sacrifices but not YHWH. In fact the name YHWH—the name given to Moses at the bush literally means, "I will be there as I will be there." I will be there but you can't expect that I'll be there in a certain way.

I take one of Buber's pauses to do some teaching. Jon has focused upon the word "perhaps" and arrives at a critical theological and psychological insight. I underscore this by my response with Buber's translation of YHWH. It seems to me that in this moment, Jon is challenging his childhood faith with something new, unfamiliar, and exciting, but it comes through story and not through doctrine.

C20 You mean, YHWH can't be boxed in. That's why you have to say, "Perhaps." I don't know if Saul knows that.

PC21 I don't either. He's trying to conjure him up with the sacrifice. Jonathan can't simply say, "I'm going to do it and because I'm the king's son, I'm going to be blessed with a victory." But somebody's got to do something. It's like facing the 'big thing' we talked about from the other reading.

C21 Maybe it's not such a big thing after all.

PC22 I suppose it depends on how you look at it, and who you think is by your side.

C22 Like starting a company—maybe it will happen, maybe it won't. We can start somewhere, like raising some money and see what happens then. It seems here that Jonathan is not attached to the outcome.

PC23 That's a nice insight. It is a wonderful story about the mix of planning and faith and letting go.

C23 It's about taking a step and checking it out.

PC24 Even so, it's not without risk. Maybe Jonathan and the armor bearer can get down without being seen, but sooner or later their gonna' be exposed.

C24 Where it says, we're crossing over to the men but we will be revealing ourselves—no hiding anymore but he's not going up until he knows how this might go.
PC 25 You mean—it's risky but not fool-hardy.

C25 Yah—it's not just an impulse.

Jon’s reading is evoking a re-evaluation of how to think about whatever big thing he faces. I am enjoying how he is finding what he needs in the narrative, rather than in talking points from a self-help book. The living voice of the author seems especially vivid here, as if Jon and the narrator were discussing how one goes about an adventure.

PC26 How do you feel about this weapon’s bearer?

C26 Very loyal—he trusts Jonathan 110%.

PC27 Where in the text do you find this loyalty you’re talking about?

C27 Verse 7: “Do whatever your heart inclines to—here I am with you, according to your heart.” He knows what Jonathan is about. Down to his core. He trusts all that Jonathan is.

PC28 So, he’s not just being obedient like a good servant, but he sees him because Jonathan is open and genuine—someone who allows himself to be seen and known. Like you Jon. I think that as you’ve been opening yourself up, Amy is learning to trust you. She’s beginning to see into your heart. (pause) How does that feel to you?

C28 It feels good, like I’m not as afraid of saying something or feeling something that would be “wrong.” I guess it just feels more natural.

Once again, I briefly bring the text back into his personal situation. Jon is not one character in the narrative. We rarely are. Here we can identify with both men, one who wants to know, and one who is willing to be known.

PC29 I’m so glad for you. Opening up and revealing who you are to someone else is risky, even when they love us. It takes courage. And it’s no fun with our enemies. When Jonathan and his weapons bearer are in the open, the Philistines call out to them—“Look the Hebrews are coming out of their holes...” How should we hear the tone of their shouting?

C29 It’s like they’re taunting them—like they’re saying they’re animals—so come up! What are you going to do to us?

PC30 Why do they do this?

C30 To beat them down. Discourage them.

PC 31 So let’s get the picture again. There over by the pomegranate tree sits Saul with his army—the might of Israel—and out there...?

C31 Jonathan and the armor bearer crawling up the cliffs.
PC32 Where’s YHWH?
C32 He’s with Jonathan

PC33 Climbing up this craggy hill—it’s just such a stunning contrast. You know—it makes me ask the question: What really is might? What is real power?
C33 I just realized where this speaks to me a lot. It’s where they’re ridiculing them. “Come on you little wimps, come up here, we’ll show you.” It brought me back to when I played college basketball—here we’d go, a team from this (upper Midwest town) to California, playing all these teams where everyone is over six-feet. And this is exactly what we’d hear. And then, we’d beat them. When I hear the Philistines: when I walked into the gym for the first time for warm-ups, “Who are you guys—we’ll show you how we play basketball.” I mean, it’s cool. No wonder why this story stuck with me when I read it—and I had no idea about this connection.

Jon makes a wonderful association here. He is delighted with the idea that he made an unconscious connection with the story because of his experience of being ridiculed for his size and his bold response to the jabbing.

PC34 Well, Jon, I could use a similar voice and talk down to you. Who are you to think big? What big thoughts can someone like you even have?
C34 Yah, I hadn’t thought about that I can still feel that way. Makes me want to say right now, “Well I’ll show you what big thoughts I have!”

PC35 And even now we are rethinking what big is—it depends on how you see it, whether or not is overwhelming and you get scared, or don’t even allow yourself to imagine something big—because you’ve already convinced that you can’t do it. Does that make sense? We’ve talked about this over the past months. So, big or not, the question you’ve been asking for many weeks is, “what do I want to do?”
C35 I didn’t see all the connections before. I just like the figure of Jonathan the warrior.

PC36 Well—Two Jonathans facing a big thing. (pause) At the very end of the passage we hear these words, three times: trembling, trembling, trembling—the earth shuddered.
C36 There’s something going on. This would make a great scene out of a movie like—“Shit! He’s here and we’re done.” The Philistines certainly weren’t afraid of Saul’s army; they were making fun of them.

PC37 Trembling...trembling...trembling. As you say, something is going on.
C37 There’s some kind of trembling going on in me—though I don’t feel like I’m trembling physically. It’s more like, shit, here it is. Open to it, but still hesitant, like, Oh-Oh. It’s not like something is here, it’s like something is coming. Or I’m getting closer to it, whatever way you want to see this.

PC38 Which way do you see it?
C38 I want to look at it like I’m getting closer to something
And you know you’re getting closer because, you’re beginning to feel a tremor. You once said some months back that God has been trying to talk to you, and you’ve been turning away from the voice. I wonder what this voice wants to say. Can you feel some shaking right now?

The trembling is getting closer, or I’m going to it. The first thing I said is that it’s getting closer, because that’s the way it’s always been—let’s say I’ve been chased by something, whether its Amy making me come here or whatever. I’ve been chased. I haven’t been actively going toward it and I want to be going toward it.

Even though you don’t know what that might be right now—you can turn and trust the voice; you can open yourself so you can listen even if you’re scared. Remember the words of Moses we read last time? Jon, “You can do this.”

Reminds me of the saying, “God helps those who help themselves.” It’s better to be active than reactive like I’ve been.

And, like you’ve said to me, if you love basketball, better to be in the game than sitting on the bench.

Fourth Movement

In our next session Jon flew into the room. He had three things to tell me. He went to breakfast with his father and told him that he and Amy were not going to church at the moment and that he had been afraid to tell him that. His father was receptive and not critical. Jon’s ability to speak about this with his father was the real indication of the changes he was experiencing. Jon added, with humor, that he told his father he was reading the bible with his therapist, then looked at me and said, “I think I said that to throw my Dad a bone.” He relished this insight. He also talked with Amy about his hesitancy to talk with her about his interest in finding a church where they could both feel comfortable. Worship was important to him even if he wasn’t sure where he was going with his faith. Amy said she would be willing to explore some options with him. Finally, he told Amy that he wanted to go on an adventure with her. Not to a resort. Somewhere off the beaten path. Somewhere they had never been. Jonathan the Warrior! Jon had taken these texts into his life and was applying their meaning in bold and creative ways.
In this case, the texts followed the flow of personal dialogue and growth. Once Jon really believed he could do this, he began to do this. The underlying obstacle to dialogue, the withholding of ourselves in relation, is a central theme in I-Thou. Once we begin to lose our grip on our reserve and we taste the fruits that come from being genuine and open, the challenge remains, but the butterfly is beginning to work its way out of the chrysalis.

As one who is called to help in this transformation, it is a wonderful experience to begin in the darkness of pain and isolation and behold the blossoming of a soul into a fullness of being and the joys which flow from wholeness.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

This paper set off to examine the integration of reading biblical text with a style of counseling informed by Martin Buber’s I-Thou relation. I explored this in terms of both theory and practice.

Throughout a lifetime of teaching and writing, Buber expressed a personal and passionate concern for the healing of human relations and also for the reading of the biblical text. These two concerns are woven together within his mind as a tapestry of a single piece. What he learns from translating and reading the biblical text informs the development of his I-Thou relation and vise versa. Lowell Streiker in, The promise of Buber, suggests that while some may wish that Buber’s I-Thou relation offers:

...salvation from the repudiated, repressive, self-alienating social, cultural, and religious forms. But instead of promising us a new community arising from the ashes of the old, Buber attempts the annoying and perhaps impossible task of demonstrating the relevance of the ancient faith, to which he had committed his life and destiny, to the contemporary situation.”

However, Buber does not reflect upon how the text may be employed within the style of counseling that he called for—one expression of which has come to be known as dialogical psychotherapy. Even in the so-called “interpersonal context” of pastoral counseling, influenced to a considerable degree by Buber’s thought, did not explore how the Bible may be used in relational counseling. This paper addresses that need.

---

In chapter one, I introduced the basic notions of Buber's dialogical thought. These became the framework that provided the basis for examining the two distinct disciplines of counseling and of biblical text reading.

I have shown that the literature of dialogical therapy intentionally integrated Buber's dialogical theory, including his vocabulary and especially his development of the elements of the interhuman. The clinical experiences discussed in this literature highlight how these terms describe a lively dynamic that cannot be narrowly defined. Further, this literature indicates that dialogical counselors do not follow a fixed or a rigidly defined method. Each works from his/her own personal uniqueness with the understanding that authentic and genuine relation is the heart of the healing process. Thus this counseling approach can flow into the framework of pastoral counseling. The individual elements, such as distance and relation, unfolding and imposition, confirmation and inclusion, are earnestly drawn upon as central features of the process of "healing by meeting." These elements are integral to subsequent reflection on the counseling process. I also used clinical examples from my personal practice and from other clinical literature to illustrate how this may be viewed in the counseling process. When we lay this discussion of dialogical counseling over the light of the basic notions, we find much correspondence.

There is less literature about reading the text in a dialogical fashion, but it is not less compelling. Just as I-Thou relation is not an invention of Buber, his urging of an active engagement with the biblical text is not novel either. A vigorous engagement with the biblical text can be found within the history of the Jewish and Christian tradition and is actively practiced in various contemporary places and settings. A number of scholars find in Buber's biblical translation and biblical essays a source of encouragement for a
reading style that supports the building of genuine relationships. They use Buber’s
dialogical language in their investigations and several place Buber’s biblical
hermeneutics in the stream that runs from Schleimacher through Ricoeur. This stream has
nurtured pastoral theology and practice. Others have found Buber’s hermeneutical and
textual insights a rich vein for both narrative and literary criticism of the Bible. The
overlay is less precise, because reading the text as Thou is not the same as dialogue with
a living person. I agree with Rosenzweig in this regard. Nevertheless, Fishbane and
Kepnes find considerable agreement between themselves as to how one might read the
biblical text in light of Buber’s comprehensive vision of dialogical life.

It has been my purpose to show that there is sufficient correlation between the
practice of counseling and biblical reading to suggest that we can bring these two into an
active partnership in a model that may add considerable dimension to the healing
relationship and to the process that leads toward wholeness. This model meets the
requirements outlined by Donald Capps—that the use of the text should be in keeping
with the counseling process.

I encountered a difficulty in that Fishbane and Kepnes do not intend to apply their
exploration of Buber’s hermeneutics to the counseling process. They follow a more
rigorous path (though not necessarily less dialogical one) by using various types of
biblical and literary criticism aiming for a consensus of meaning. They embrace the
essential feature of dialogue which encourages mutuality among readers and respect for
each other’s differences. It is a very hopeful venture and can inform the counseling
process but it does not address the particular needs of a counseling session.
Therefore, I used Kepnes’s four hermeneutical steps to fashion as a way of reading that can flow within the mutuality of the helping relationship and guide the persons in listening to the living voice of the text. These “four movements” also consider the dialogical features of “openness,” “distance and relation,” “imposition and unfolding,” and “confirmation.” I have pointed them out in the two clinical cases, and have shown how they can provide a guide for the text reading. I find in Buber’s description of the helper and the educator the theoretical and practical connection from which to build a model that employs both. The high view of the text requires an active give and take with the words on the page, a give and take that enriches the dialogue and the reading partnership. Into a gathering of attentive and awaiting hearts, the surprise can happen, the voice heard, and the presence of God felt. The two cases demonstrate an integrated approach and include moments when I did not enhance our reading. From these case vignettes I suggest the following considerations.

1. Both case studies demonstrate how the biblical text can become as active a participant as a “living voice” distinct from the readers. The biblical text addresses each reader, including the counselor, with a voice that calls for response. Reading the text in this manner begins the give and take that is the heart of dialogical relation.

2. Each reading is unique as ancient words meet the person in the present moment. The helper must remain open and receptive to the surprise and to the unpredictable nature of the living word. The biblical text has a remarkable ability to speak to the person at the place where they stand, in the condition of their life in the present moment. This voice can encourage and challenge, comfort and hold
accountable the life it addresses, leading to new awareness and deeper, more focused disclosures.

3. Reading the text together can, (and I trust does) open up new areas for dialogue between the counselor and the client. The text encourages another way of listening within a receptive engagement that allows for hearing something new, and/or in a manner that becomes more direct and concrete. In both clinical cases, reading the text together helped invigorate the give and take in the counseling relationship.

4. Reading the text closely and out loud opens the person to another way of reading and hearing. This complements the teaching of dialogue as one aspect of the healing process.

5. Careful attention to the words on the page helps address preconceptions and fixed opinions. This opens dialogue that can lead to different perspectives on the situation the person is facing.

6. Reading carefully and listening to the words as they are spoken deepen the bond between the client and the biblical text and open up the possibility of a renewed, lifelong relationship that may grow and develop into a vital connection with the Word.

7. The vocational integration of counselor and educator offers intriguing possibilities for broadening the helping relation.

8. Reading with an energetic and engaged receptivity encourages a living dialogue with God who addresses us in the text. This style of reading encourages an active give and take and a heartfelt relation with God. It is a dialogue that is different
from passive listening. This style of dialogue invites new understanding of the
authority of God and the Word which encourages the partners in dialogue not to
withhold what each wants to say from God or each other. This in turn, prepares
one for a meeting in genuine relation “with our whole being.”

For Further Consideration

1. This integrated model, grounded in theory and practice and illustrated by the
two case studies, is also a personal statement of my counseling approach and the manner
in which I teach and read the biblical text. The next step in this endeavor will be to create
a teachable model for pastoral counselors and caregivers. The model needs to be clarified
such that personal uniqueness is preserved within the general dialogical framework.

2. There are some genres of the biblical text that need to be explored and
welcomed into a dialogical framework. I am thinking, in particular of the wisdom
literature of the Hebrew Bible and the apostolic letters of the Christian Testament.
Though they offer challenges to a more active give and take dialogical reading, both are
critical dimensions of the biblical landscape. This challenge reflects my more limited
experience of working with these kinds of biblical literature.

3. Buber and Rosenzweig have a number of biblical hermeneutical tools that they
derived from the translation process. I did not explore them here, but they bring insight
and new awareness to the art of the biblical writer and they enhance the beauty and
meaning of many passages. Dovetailing these tools, and other literary insights into
reading the text in counseling would yield valuable resources.

4. Building upon Mona DeKoven Fishbane’s work on using a dialogical approach
to couples counseling, integrating biblical text reading in couples and family counseling
would provide a wonderful opportunity to encourage families to engage more fully with each other in terms of genuine and authentic relation and for teaching mutual respect and the prizing of each person’s voice.
APPENDIX

Psalm 38

1 O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath.
2 For your arrows have sunk into me and your hand has come down on me.
3 There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.
4 For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.
5 My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness:
6 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning.
7 For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.
8 I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.
9 O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you.
10 My heart throbs, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.
11 My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off.
12 Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all day long.
13 But I am like the deaf, I do not hear; like the mute, who cannot speak
14 Truly, I am like one who does not hear, and in whose mouth is no retort.
15 But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.
16 For I pray, “Only do not let them rejoice over me, those who boast against me when my foot slips.”
17 For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever with me.
18 I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.
19 Those who are my foes without cause are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.
20 Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good
21 Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me;
22 make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation.
1 Samuel 14

14:1 Now it was on a certain day that Yonatan son of Sha'ul said to the serving-lad, his weapons bearer: “Come, let us cross over to the Philistines' garrison, (the one) that is across, over there!”
   But his father he did not tell.

2 Now Sha'ul was staying at the edge of Geva, beneath the Pomegranate (Rock) that is in the Migron; and the fighting-people that were with him (were) about six hundred men.

3 And Ahiya son of Ahituv, brother of I-Khavod, son of Pin'hasson of Eili, priest of YHWH at Shilo, was wearing the efod. But the people did not know that Yonatan had gone.

4 Now between the crossings that Yonatan sought to cross, to (get to) the Philistines' garrison, was a cliff-tooth on one side and a cliff-tooth on the other side: the name of the one was Botzetz, and the name of the other was Senne.

5 The one tooth was shaped on the north, in front of Mikhmash, while the other was on the south, in front of Geva.

6 Yonatan said to the lad, his weapons bearer: “Come, let us cross over to the garrison of these foreskinned-ones! Perhaps YHWH will act for us, for there is no constraint for YHWH from delivering by the many or by the few!”

7 His weapons bearer said to him: “Do whatever your heart inclines to—here I am with you, according to your heart.”

8 Yonatan said: “Here, we are crossing over to the men, and we will be revealing ourselves to them;

9 if they say thus to us: ‘Halt, until we get-close to you’—we will stand in our place, and will not go-up against them.”

10 “But if they say thus: ‘Come-up to us’—we will go up, for YHWH will have given them into our hand, and this (will be) the sign for us.”

11 The two of them revealed-themselves to the Philistines' garrison, and the Philistines said: “Here, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they were hiding-themselves!”

12 The men of the garrison yelled out to Yonatan and to his weapons bearer, they said: “Come-up to us, and we will show you something!” So Yonatan said to his weapons bearer: “Come-up behind me, for YHWH has given them into the hand of Israel!”

13 Yonatan climbed-up by his arms and by his legs, with his weapons bearer behind him. And they fell before Yonatan, while his weapons bearer dispatched (them) behind him.

14 And the first striking-down that Yonatan and his weapons bearer struck-down was some twenty men, (over) about half a furrow (that) a brace (of oxen might plow) in a field.

15 And there was trembling in the camp, out in the open-field, and among all the fighting-people—the garrison and the ravagers fell-to-trembling, even they, and the earth shuddered; it was a trembling of God.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


