

40. J. Gurin, "Remaking Our Lives," *American Health* (March 1990): 50-52.
41. J. Metzloff and M. Kronreich, *Research in Psychotherapy* (New York: Atherton, 1970), 357.
42. H. W. Stone, *Theological Context for Pastoral Caregiving* (New York: Haworth, 1996).
43. See Stone, *Brief Pastoral Counseling*, 155-66.
44. See Stone, *Crisis Counseling*, 2nd ed., rev. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

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The Power of Valuing in Brief Pastoral Counseling

Jan James

ALL PEOPLE—whatever their race, nationality, gender, social rank, employment, lifestyle, sexual orientation, appearance, intelligence, beliefs, attitude, morality, skill, knowledge, health, wealth, or any other characteristic—are infinitely valued children of God. There are no exceptions. The valuing of individuals is a distinguishing feature and a central tenet of Christian faith. Christ saw beyond humanity's limited perception of self and gave us the model of persons as beings of eternal worth.¹

Jesus deeply valued every person with whom he came in contact. Augustine wrote that Jesus cared for everybody he met as if there was none other in all the world to love, and he loved all as he loved each.² Such unconditional love has transforming power and therefore is a critical dimension of pastoral ministry. This is doubly the case in brief pastoral counseling, where limited time is available for mere listening to the parishioner's story, and indeed where the whole counseling enterprise is short in comparison to ongoing pastoral relationships or traditional psychoanalysis. Ministers ought never focus so intently on helping troubled people achieve expeditious results that they neglect the importance of valuing and accepting them. (Likewise, counselors doing long-term therapy ought never focus so intently on the problems of a troubled past that they undervalue counselees' strengths and potential for growth.)

To value counselees is to accept and prize them for who they are and, sometimes, in spite of what they do. We represent the love of God by conveying the message: "You are a person of great value, and I will stand with you no matter what." Howard Stone puts it this way: "Probably nothing has a more powerful influence on your life than to know that someone is for you—through thick and thin, whether you act appropriately or not. Such acceptance serves as a center, a home base out of which all of life can flow."³

Valuing Self and Spirit

It is a common misperception of brief therapies that their practitioners are mechanical, results-oriented, superficial, and sometimes even uncaring. Nothing could be farther from the actual practice of brief pastoral counseling ministry. Not just the attitudes of the caregiver but the methods themselves support the ultimate value of the person in need. The minister or layperson doing brief pastoral counseling brings to the relationship an attitude of acceptance—of who we are and what we can be. Stone maintains that the mission of pastoral counseling is “not only to affirm the person who is, but also to appreciate who that person can become in Christ.”²⁴ Truly valuing another person also requires that pastoral caregivers be keenly aware of their part in this transforming process.

Brief pastoral counseling, and particularly brief solution-focused counseling, honors and validates people’s experiences as well as the context of their experiences, their perceptions, and their life stories. No circumstance of the troubled person’s life is meaningless or unimportant. God works through the ordinary events of every life to transform the self into the likeness of Christ. As Lynn Bauman writes, “The spirit presupposes and works with the abilities and attributes we have and enhances them; it does not negate the structures of selfhood, but provides them with a capacity that they hitherto lacked, namely, a certain possibility for life in God’s Spirit.”²⁵ This understanding assigns value and significance to everything that happens in people’s lives.

The task of brief pastoral counseling, then, is to help people discern how best to value their strengths and abilities, using them in cooperation with this transforming process. One tool for the process of transformation is reason, our unique gift. The ability to reason, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, gives human beings the capacity for self-transcendence. Furthermore, God’s image is seen within our potential for self-transcendence:

The spirit in its depth and height reaches into eternity . . . and this vertical dimension is more important for the understanding of man than merely his rational capacity for forming general concepts. . . . It is the quality of the human spirit . . . to lift itself as living organism and to make the whole temporal and spatial world including itself the object of its knowledge.⁶

Through reason, human beings have the ability to examine experience, to rise above natural processes, and to choose with our limited freedom many of our own actions and outcomes. One important part of self-determination is the ability to exercise control over our perceptions of whatever happens to us.

When we value ourselves, we do not have to react passively or in a reflexive, “knee-jerk” manner; we have the capacity to decide how we will respond to the circumstances and events of our lives.

Every aspect of a person’s life is of great worth because it can be used for the transformation of the self into the likeness of Christ. This is the Christian’s ultimate concern. Every difficulty and circumstance in life occurs within the context of this ultimate meaning. Bauman writes that when we take this view of our lives, “the meaning of life begins to emerge from the most commonplace things, which we perhaps previously disregarded as meaningless.”²⁷

Unfortunately, many people remain unknowing or unconcerned that all of life occurs within the context of ultimate meaning, and thus fail to be fully aware and intentional about the way they live their lives. The pastoral caregiver’s task is to help parishioners appreciate the meaning and value of their circumstances and discern how God can use those experiences to transform their lives.

Valuing in Brief Pastoral Counseling

In brief pastoral counseling, helpers prize their parishioners’ uniqueness, engaging them in dialogue about whatever caused them to seek help. They do not presume to know what changes would be best for parishioners, but rather address what the counselees want to change.

Bringing about the changes that parishioners say they want is a collaborative effort (see chapter 3). The troubled persons themselves, not their pastoral caregivers, will make the needed changes in their lives. Ministers acknowledge the suffering, pain, desperation, and confusion of people in pain, and at the same time affirm and respect their strengths, capacity for endurance, and willingness to see and understand themselves. This is active valuing—not a passive absorption of endless data from the past, but a willingness to join forces with parishioners in working toward their own vision for the future.

Focus on the Future

People often define themselves by their limitations and by what they view as flaws in their nature. They focus on what is not working. Often they do not sense their own value and may even believe they are not good enough to approach God. On a larger scale, humanity’s sense of value is often misplaced and misdirected. Our culture fosters the belief that, given an accurate analysis, the right technology, and adequate intelligence, strength, and will, we should be able to fix whatever problems arise. As a result, we think we need to get our lives together (and get it right) before we can be considered good and valuable people.

Even so, all human beings long to experience themselves as good—even if our understanding of good is distorted. Some part of us yearns to become what God means for us to become. God intends that we be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Sadly, our failure to be so transformed may bring us pain and shame.⁸

It is important, therefore, to understand that God does not start with perfect human beings. We go to God with all our flaws and broken lives. Jesus' intimate relationship with his disciples, who were human beings as imperfect and broken as we are, reveals that God is more interested in the future—in what we can become—than in what we used to be. We do ourselves a great disservice, Bauman believes, "if we spend all of our energies lamenting the ways we've done it so imperfectly in the past," forgetting that God's grace draws us to a future and makes more of us than we imagine we could be.⁹

Pastoral caregivers doing brief counseling value parishioners by showing respect for their life experiences and worldview, in all their incompleteness. This does not mean that they approve of all the parishioners' past behaviors, but that they are more interested in the future—in what can be rather than in what was (see chapter 4). When parishioners come to believe that they are valued despite their problems and failures, a deep trust develops in the counseling relationship. This experience of valuing, of love and acceptance, frees parishioners to explore their future in new and creative ways. It allows them to be vulnerable and totally themselves. They are able to bring the circumstances and events of their lives into dialogue with God, the comforter who attends to them, who will never leave them or let them go. It is a nourishing environment where growth and learning can flourish.

In brief pastoral counseling the helper conveys to parishioners—not only through attitude and words but also through methods and concrete deeds—that they are not condemned for their past or doomed to repeat its failures. Little attention is paid to problems and pathology. In this model, pastoral caregivers seek to empower troubled people to gain a realization of their larger selves.

Building on Counselors' Strengths

It may be difficult for counselees to see that they have anything going for them. They may even experience complete hopelessness. In contrast, pastoral caregivers begin the counseling process with the assumption that parishioners have strengths, positive qualities, abilities, and courage that may have been minimized or completely overlooked in their sense of shame and despair.

Working from the assumption of strength, attention is given to *exceptions to the problem*. This brief counseling method, addressed at some length by several authors in this volume, focuses on those previously unnoticed times when the problem was diminished or absent. Even in a painful past, there are

strengths to be found. Parishioners may have a hard time at first discerning periods when they are not troubled by the problem. With exploration, however, most will be able to identify at least a few such times. Once exceptions are identified, it is important for parishioners to note what is different about those times when the problem is absent.

It is also empowering for parishioners to note instances when they have successfully dealt with the problem. Again, initially they may not be able to recall any success in coping with their problem, for they most likely have undervalued not only their strengths but also their efforts. A positive accomplishment may have been short-lived or perceived as trivial. But there is no trivial success. It is important to pay attention to even the tiniest victories, because they point to areas of resident strength and skill that counselees may have overlooked. Success breeds success.

In these and many other ways, pastoral caregivers value parishioners by facilitating the recognition of their abilities and courageous behaviors and guiding them to exercise those strengths. When pastoral caregivers use brief counseling methods to convey that parishioners do have the resources necessary to deal with their problems, those individuals often come to prize themselves and even to look creatively at their problems and possibilities.

Brief approaches to pastoral counseling presuppose a deep trust in counselees' potential for change and growth. Pastoral caregivers collaborate with parishioners to find new ways to view, respond to, and experiment with their circumstances in order to begin moving into a future of greater meaning and purpose. Small changes inevitably have ripple effects in other areas of parishioners' lives. They begin to take responsibility for their learning and to be more intentional about the direction of their lives.

Brief pastoral counseling joins parishioners on a journey; it does not travel the whole journey with them. It does not demand that all of their problems be solved. Viewed in this way, small steps taken toward resolving a difficulty have great value because of the assurance that they will have an ever-widening effect. It is the pastoral caregiver's job to point out and amplify the significance of these small steps. The pastoral caregiver acts as a good mentor, best friend, and cheerleader, encouraging parishioners' every positive movement toward change.

The Counselee as Expert

Seward Hiltner once wrote that the pastor doing counseling "needs to guard against being blinded by the immediate situation."¹⁰ To the contrary, brief pastoral caregivers see it as extremely counselor-centered, even arrogant, to dismiss the parishioner's presented problems as unimportant rather than allowing them to set goals. How highly do we value parishioners when we ourselves set

the goals and expectations for their progress? When we interpret their experiences and shape their feelings for them? If ministers work with the premise that each individual is a child of God of infinite worth, then who ought to be the expert about that person's experiences and needs? And who decreed that we must delve into the dark secrets of a troubled person's past? In fact, it is not necessary for pastoral caregivers to have much knowledge of the cause of parishioners' problems in order to help them achieve positive outcomes. This is so in part because of the very nature of growth and change and in part because of parishioners' resident strengths and abilities. It is so because we prize them for who they are and who they long to become.

Pastoral caregivers possess knowledge and skills to help people cope with difficulties and make changes in their lives. They have a prophetic role as well and may need to speak out in the face of sin and moral issues. But at no time do they usurp the parishioners' rightful role as experts in their own affairs. The minister who truly values the other is collaborator, not boss; guide, not director.



Brief, solution-focused therapy can be effective even in the absence of a theological understanding of valuing as described herein, because the prizing of the counselee is implicit within its methods. Explicitly embracing the theological dimension will further enhance the transformation of lives. Practiced within this Christian understanding of the ultimate value of persons, brief pastoral counseling provides an opportunity for troubled people, with all their limitations and faults, to experience acceptance by God and by another. It gives them a reason to grasp their own inestimable worth.

When acceptance of the other as an infinitely valued child of God underlies the brief pastoral counseling relationship, counseling becomes not only highly effective, but a joyous experience for both parishioner and pastoral caregiver as they journey into the future to which God calls them.

Notes

1. Portions of this chapter are taken in modified form from my article "The Power of Valuing in Brief Pastoral Counseling" in the *Journal of Pastoral Care* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 81-86.
2. J. Claypool, from tape of 1995 Perkins Lecture Series, "The Ones Jesus Chose: Reflections on the Disciples," given at First United Methodist Church, Wichita Falls, Tex.
3. H. Stone, *Theological Context for Pastoral Caregiving* (New York: Haworth, 1996), 116.

4. Ibid., 120.
5. L. C. Bauman, *A Handbook to Practical Wisdom: A Study Guide for a Short Course in Practical Wisdom, a Component of the Centerpoint Parish Pilgrimage* (Cedar Hill, Tex.: Centerpoint Parish Pilgrimage, 1992), 6.
6. R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 157.
7. Bauman, *Practical Wisdom*, 32.
8. Ibid.
9. Claypool, "Ones Jesus Chose."
10. S. Hillmer, *Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Abingdon, 1949), 20.