

THE LANGUAGE OF COUNSELING

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The language used by psychologists can be a weapon and should be used judiciously. It must be cohesive, coherent, accurate, meaningful and true to its described activity. It must translate and convey the intensity of the lived experience of the person's meaning. In counseling it is imperative that the language used describe the style of one's way of being in the world.

To describe what does this mean? To describe is to convey an image in words revealing, that which is observed. This calls for, actually demands, a lively, vivid image of a life situation. The philosophical presuppositions of the named approach dictate the language used. To describe the image a person is experiencing, our language must clearly and vividly communicate the contextual matrix, as it unfolds, as well as the personal and uniquely lived through experiencing of that situation. Through the situated experience and its meaningfulness to the client, together the counselor and client are able to work out suggestions for future activity. Language displays reality for each and every one of us. It is alive, externalizing internalized modes of existence.

Our language must describe the constant flux, movement and change of the client. A person's lived reality is not obvious and discoverable by overt methods of investigation but is latent and subtle. Basically, we move in an implicit world, one full of tension, with choices of differing life options. In counseling this tension is displayed through our use of language. Together the counselor and client explicate the implicit, to develop a mental-visual image of the individual style of this process. This expands the client's viable life options.

Often the language found most suited to the descriptive approach is metaphorical. Metaphor is a process of tension and energy, which is in the process of language. Life is tension, in constant flux and fluid change characterized by simultaneity and lived in a contextual matrix. It is a dynamic process and demands the use of language with depth and free movement. Openness is indispensable. The etymology of the word metaphor implies motion (*phora*) that is also change (*meta*). The use of metaphorical language allows for the possibility of free movement and change in the counseling process through the transcending nature of the client's expression. The metaphorical sphere transcends the many and realizes an indivisible unity. Presuppositions regarding the nature of a descriptive approach require a free, open and moving language explicated by the linguistic movement afforded by metaphor.

This approach moves in opposition to static, fixed and partial views which breakdown the unity and freeze it in a moment of abstraction. Here we no longer have a living, experiencing person but a set of haphazard disconnected variables. For example, a person accused of a crime may be examined by a thoroughly professional psychologist and be labeled passive-aggressive or hostile with latent violence potential or given to various need conditions. What does this mean? How is this to be interpreted by the judge? The public? And more importantly, the client? What does the psychologist do to explain this label? In the end, the client gets lost in the semantic shuffle and is left holding the tag, a labeled tag. This offers a one-sided view, the psychologist's, through the use of language. The client is treated as an object to be labeled and stuffed into a box.

By contrast, with a descriptive approach, the client remains in constant open dialogue with the counselor. Description, subject to and in a constant dialogue with a self-responsible, free and unique person is the approach. In counseling situations we are concerned also with the client's embodiment, movement through, to, away from and toward what? How do we describe this movement and its meaningfulness? How do we recognize it?

Metaphor is a vehicle to bring to the client's attention other aspects of life. It is a process that resides within our own experience. Metaphor is a contextual expression in that it takes into account the context in which a process occurs. An image does not mean a fixed, static or isolated subject but rather an experiencing, moving and open possibility. For example, life is growth and becoming. This implies acceptance of the fact that one's personality will never be finished or totally understood or even without mystery or struggle. We are travelers. As we grope around in our repertoire of vernacular to translate as near as possible, as well as words allow, we arrive upon an externalization of a process that resides within.

How do we come to metaphor? What is its function? Where are we going with it? When is it applicable and in what context? Our language used by the descriptive approach must provide a moving flow to describe what we see and show new avenues for the client, other modes of existence. If the client's self-image is static, fixed like a label, one cannot hope to grow. Then the client has an immutable label to wrangle with. In metaphorical language, as with life, the creative, dynamic aliveness is stressed. This provides a perspective for enhancing self-responsibility. A poetic image bears witness to a soul, says Gaston Bachelard, which is discovering its world, the world where it would like and deserves to live.¹

With metaphors we provide a mental-visual image for the client to see a way of living life. The client is allowed the freedom from restriction of labeling and at the same time given an area for concentrated effort to

complete the picture. This provides something for the client to move with during the counseling process, a picture to pull the client along, a picture which stays close to a personal way of experiencing, wrapped gently into a mental-visual image.

How do we come to metaphorical description in counseling? In what stance must I as counselor reside to recognize it and its power is derived from where? Through the counseling situation the client gives the counselor pieces of a puzzle. A picture begins to form in the counselor's mind, the pieces organize in a mental-visual image along with the client. One does not come to conclusions by just jumbling a bunch of bits together. Each piece is slowly woven into the implicitly forming pattern of activity. Together we organize as we go. Each new discovery contributes to the overall formation of the contextual matrix. It is a process of discovery. Metaphorical language is a process. It is a literal translation of experience found within ourselves. It develops in the process as we recognize similar processes in the client's life. All our experience as counselor is sorted through, together we delve into the expressions of the client and recognize bits and pieces of meaning from our own experience in order to comprehend the meaningfulness of the client's described experience. We think in metaphors. Metaphorical language is a process to express and vivify a process. We derive our organizational knowledge from metaphors in everyday situations.

How does one explain concepts concretely? Only through use of everyday processes recognizable to others if it is to be understood. Our own experience provides us with the meanings of the activities of others. I can comprehend what one's meaning is because of my stock-of-knowledge and openness to the feel of that meaning: I see how you feel, how you view this, I recognize your perspective, your attitude, I see where you are coming from. This is gathered and communicated in the counseling situation. The way one comes into grasp of a metaphor is through discovery within oneself of the implications in a situation that illuminate the client's mode. The client rejects or affirms this through dialogue with the counselor. In this way, each participates in the forming of the intended image.

The way, says Chuang Tzu, has its own root.² Although the way is without action and cannot be described an evocative image such as a root metaphor allows for the possibility of a call to action. Metaphor illuminates one's possibilities while at the same time calls one to act. For example, the light at the end of the tunnel which brings one forth out of the darkness. Discovery and creativity are the processes that reside in human beings. Metaphor allows for the possibility for lining up one's natural expression with one's future choices. The transcendent nature of being human is given only by a language of a transcendent nature, metaphorical speech.

Metaphors:

- 1) Are a way to bring things into a wholeness, to be looked at. This allows for the client and counselor to work at and on the client's self-world-relation. It is a way of calling one to action.
- 2) Provide a fresh view by making it possible to see one thing in terms of something else. The counselor should be aware that metaphor also carries with it the possibility of generalization, being too far removed from actual experience. But then again, metaphor leaves room for growth.
- 3) Show just how the client is received by another in the world. They provide a way of looking at one's mode of existence, one's movement through the world and perceptual place in it.
- 4) Allow for new possibilities, future situations that the client may encounter. Metaphors expand horizons, point out new paths and activate new images.
- 5) Can convey intimate information without being offensive. They can awaken recognition to what was only previously noticed.

Language swings like a pendulum, carrying force in both directions, potentially and potently either positive or negative, all subject to the client's examination, evaluation and affirmation. In this way, language is embodied thought that points beyond itself. Many Chinese philosophers, says Thomé H. Fang:

Have got to the bottom of the beauty concerning the universe and human life, which is too profound to be adequately expressed by mere words but which is too important to be kept out of account altogether. And, therefore, they not infrequently make use of a metaphorical language, which is subtle and wonderful, in the expression of what is essentially beautiful, putting our power of understanding to the test.³

Notes

- 1) Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, trans. Daniel Russell (New York: Orion Press, 1969), p. 13.
- 2) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 81.

- 3) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 124.