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PREPARING FOR COUNSELING WITH THE DEAF CLIENT IN THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING SETTING

GLENN MATHEWS

I approach this subject from the premise that counseling is axiomatic to a client's success in a vocational training setting. While it is true that "a client does not live by counseling alone," it is the basic ingredient in the rehabilitation process. (In fact, it is comparable to the story of the speaker who was to speak at a medical meeting on the subject "The Antiquity of Genes." Unfortunately, the first speaker had used up all of his time, and so he simply stood and said "My subject is the Antiquity of Genes. My speech is this—Adam had 'em," and sat down. Whether Adam actually had 'em is questionable. But counseling, like genes, goes back a long way. In fact, it probably goes back to the birth of the second man. For I feel reasonably sure that the first man—in addition to passing on his genes—also counseled the second man.)

In reality, counseling evades a satisfactory definition. In the book, *Counseling With Deaf People* (1971), C. H. Patterson and Larry Stewart discuss counseling in these terms;

Counseling is concerned with changing behavior by providing a situation in which the client who desires to change can become more responsible, more independent, more in control of himself and his behavior. (1971)

In a recent article, Dr. Donald G. Martin cites Carl Rogers' definition of counseling "as a series of direct contacts with the individual which aims to offer him assistance in changing his attitudes and behavior." A counselor is defined as "anyone who deals with individuals who are

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maladjusted, perplexed, or failing" (Martin, 1971, p. 83).

Dr. Martin also cites the definition given by The American Psychological Association in 1956. That definition says that counseling is a process "designed to help individuals toward overcoming obstacles to their personal growth, wherever these may be encountered, towards achieving optimum development of these personal resources" (1971).

There are many other definitions available, but still counseling is difficult to define. It is a little like trying to define "faith."

The writer of the New Testament book, The Epistle to the Hebrews, begins his discussion of faith with the definition: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). It is as if he stopped writing, thought about his definition, and then decided to forget trying to define faith. He then devoted a lengthy section to giving examples of what faith *does*. It is far easier to tell what counseling *does* than to tell what counseling *is*. But whatever it is, counseling, like faith, is active, personal, involved, and ongoing. In fact, counseling could be said to involve or be characterized by such words as—accepting, beneficial, comprehensive, decisive, empathy, fairness, genuineness, helping, individualistic, juxtapositional, knowledge, listening, meaningful, natural, overcoming, patience, questioning, reasonable, syzygial, therapeutic, unique, vigilance, warmth, xaxical, yeomanly, and zealous.

Just in case you may not know, syzygy (in addition to being the last listed common noun in the S's of the dictionary) is "the nearly straight-line configuration of the celestial bodies in a gravitational system (as the sun, moon, and earth during a solar or lunar eclipse)." The word "Xaxis" is used to identify any of the three axes in a rectangular coordinate system (such as the agencies of Vocational Rehabilitation, Vocational Education, and Special Education).

I am not engaging in gymnastic semantics with the words SYZYGY and XAXIS. They are at the crux of the premise of this paper. If you accept the definitions of the relationships, whether they be horizontal or rectangular, whether they be celestial bodies or axes, you can see the words SYZYGY and XAXIS apply to the relationship between the client, the counseling, and the Vocational Training Setting. Thus the subject can be studied in this way:

- I. The Deaf Client and the "Problems" that he brings to the Setting.
- II. The Vocational Training Staff and the "Problems" that they bring to the Setting.
- III. The "Problems" that arise as a result of the meeting of I and II.

I. THE DEAF CLIENT

When he comes to the Setting, he does not come as the proverbial *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, he comes as an "I am." He is separate from

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and yet similar to all others of the same species. He is past, present, and future. He is becoming. He is what he has been becoming. He is independent, dependent, and interdependent from others and upon others. He is both created and creative. He is living and yet constantly being born—and constantly dying. He is both success and failure. He is animal and spiritual. He is philosophical and pragmatic. He is more than the sum of all the pressures, teachings, impressions, and influences that society has either forced upon him or filtered into him. He is even more than his reaction to them.

He is apt to be characterized by a multitude of traits, characteristics, and tendencies. In any event, he will probably be characterized by (1) educational inadequacy, (2) environmental isolation, (3) emotional immaturity, and (4) employmental ineptness. All of these accompany him to the Vocational Training Setting. He *can* cause problems.

II. THE STAFF

The staff brings with them a plethora of attitudes and characteristics that may produce problems. Hearing professionals in the field of deafness are quick to talk about the problems of deafness, especially of the deaf rehabilitation client. We are, however, reluctant to confront our bias, our jaundiced outlook, our attitudes and how they may relate to the deaf client. Surely, a large percent of the problems of the deaf client must have their origin in the hearing person who is working with him.

For every person fortunate enough to be enrolled in a properly developed and properly staffed program, there are many others who must try to achieve success in a program not planned for them, staffed with personnel who are not ready to work with them.

Generally speaking, the staff will not be knowledgeable in the area of deafness. The workers may be characterized by varying degrees of ignorance, disinterestedness, or reluctance. They may see the deaf client as a threat or as a disruptive element in the class. Invariably, the staff will think of the deaf client from the viewpoint of extra time and effort required to work with him. At best, they will be uncomfortable and frustrated. On the other end of the spectrum, they may be characterized by fear. Fear, for the most part, is learned; but by the time we are grown, it becomes an integral part of our personality. The worker, rather than admitting and dealing with his fear, is likely to react in one of the following ways; (1) he may deny its existence, "OK, I'll be glad to have him in the class"; (2) he may reject it as a problem, "He will fit right into the class—he'll be no problem"; (3) he may ridicule it (as in the statement I've heard), "You know, that deaf client"; worse yet (4) he may ignore it, "What deaf client?" or hopefully, he will react in a more positive vein, by (5) becoming involved, observing, learning, and working.

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It is ludicrous to assume that the staff will come to the setting without their "problems" coming with them.

III. THE PROBLEMS THAT ARISE AS A RESULT OF THE MEETING OF I AND II

It is easy to see that the combining of the "Problems" of the client and the "Problems" of the staff will produce a multiplicity of new ones. These hybrids make the counselor—and the counseling—essential. As the counselor works with the client, he must also work with the staff. In fact, they may need his services, at times, more than the client. The identification of specific problems can be left to your experience or imagination. It is sufficient to say that they do occur and in all probability will continue to occur.

What counseling is needed in this situation? In *Counseling With Deaf People* (1971), self-actualization is identified as the goal of all counseling. Genuineness, warmth, and empathy are stressed as conditions essential to creating an atmosphere conducive to the achievement of the goal. Counseling then, is not a system of techniques, but a relationship. While it may be studied scientifically, and applied professionally, it is in reality a "happening." I am not overly concerned with the methodology used. I am concerned that it "happens." Regardless of how it is done, the clients and their counselors will work together through orientation to the program, rules and regulations of the facility, and the clients' expectations. They may concern themselves with personal, social, and vocational adjustment, client dependency, motivation, classwork, shopwork, self-image, failures and successes, fantasies and realities, job considerations and information, employment exploration, applications, interviews, employer/employee relationships, and any number of other topics. Their time spent together will doubtlessly be profitably used.

CONCLUSION

What I have tried to convey is that the deaf client, the counseling, and the Vocational Training Setting exist as a tripod, each dependent upon the other, each assisting the other.

The road that the deaf person must travel in a Vocational Training Setting is nearly impossible if it is traveled alone. Even if the road is engineered as a well planned program, paved by a well trained staff, and marked with signs and guidelines provided by skillful counseling, the road will still have curves, hills, frustrations, detours, and barriers. It is not an easy task for the client or the workers. But as John Gardner has stated in *No Easy Victories*, "what could be more satisfying than to be engaged in

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work in which every capacity or talent one may have is needed, every lesson one may have learned is used, every value one cares about is furthered?" (1968)

We must remember that the road the client travels is *his* road. It is our responsibility to seek to straighten the curves, flatten the hills, minimize his frustrations, help him find the way through the detours, and remove the barriers that he is certain to face.

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