

Embodying Wisdom: Pastoral Proverbs for Reflective Practice

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This reflection on practice has grown out of the fact that for some time now I have been trying to figure out how to be a wise old man. For many years I have thought about the question found in the middle of the book of Job, “Where *shall* wisdom be found?” Recently I discovered one answer to that question that I had never considered. Wisdom may be found not only in reflection upon actual events of ministry, but also in the sayings about practice designed to inform that ministry. Certainly, the essence of the so-called clinical method of learning is its focus on particular ministry events of particular persons, but from those events there emerge repeated themes and repeated sayings for interpreting them. The sayings are not rules for practice. They are challenges to stop and think—to reflect—before you act or speak in order to develop your own particular wisdom and authority for ministry.

The contexts from which these sayings emerged have been clinical conferences, individual supervisory and consultative sessions, and classes about ministry practice. Although I have used all of them at one time or another in my practice, it is clear that they don’t belong to me. They are a part

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of a free and open dialogue about wise practice, to be added to, taken and used for reflection, improved, and passed on to others.

My thesis is that *these sayings or proverbs are a part of a wisdom tradition of pastoral sayings, not unlike the biblical proverbs, that can and should be used as part of pastoral reflection on practice.* This paper presents a collection of them along with discussion and commentary on some of them, how I arrived at my way of thinking about them, and encouragement to the reader to improve on these and to think of others:

- *Competent caring requires being more than your self without getting caught in either the more or the self.*
- *Set limits on your caring so that those you care for can use you when you're not there.*
- *The good news and the bad news are not just part of a joke. Both are in every situation you deal with.*
- *Deal with the "ought" after you have dealt with the "is."*

PASTORAL SAYINGS AND THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

I got into collecting sayings like these at least partly as a result of reading a commentary on the book of Proverbs written by my colleague at Columbia Theological Seminary, Christine Yoder. I was reading the book more, I think, because I liked Christine than because I had had any particular interest in Proverbs. In fact Proverbs has been one of my least favorite biblical books. Rather than offering the inspiration and affective expression of the Psalms, it seemed simply to be telling its reader what to do.

As I read the introduction to the commentary, however, I was reminded that only eight of the first nine chapters are telling a person what to do. From then on, it is as if the speaker assumes that his hearer has grown up and no longer needs to listen to the preaching. Sayings follow one another without any discernible order or instruction in how to use them. The lack of priority among the sayings seems to challenge the reader to give up trying to figure out why they are put together the way they are and simply to reflect upon what is helpful or unhelpful about each of them.

Another interesting feature of the sayings in Proverbs is their often contradictory character. Wealth, for example, is often viewed as good, but it is also seen as a liability. About most things there is more than one point of view, and the implication is that developing wisdom requires dealing with competing points of view. You must address the question, "In what context is this saying valid or important, and where is it irrelevant?" You are lead to

the conclusion that a wise person is one who can hold views that are in conflict with each other and choose to apply one or a combination of the two to the situation at hand. That person is also one who recognizes human limitation in wisdom in contrast to the wisdom of God. That conclusion seemed to resonate with much of what I had been doing and thinking in my practice.

Like the biblical proverbs, wise sayings about the practice of ministry and supervision are not intended as a “pocket guide” or “hints and helps” for care and counseling. They are not final conclusions about the way things are or what should be done in a particular case. Rather, they are intended to help cultivate wisdom as we think about the way life really is for us and our patients and students and what we are doing and representing in our care of them. Moreover, I believe that some of these sayings about pastoral care and counseling can have the same kind of practical and theological value as verbatims and videos.

There are some more things that are important to note about the biblical proverbs:

1. Proverbs are a type of speech that has been polished over the years, an art form intended to cause one to stop and think about the situation in a new way or be reminded of an old way.
2. Their prevalent form is two-part: the first part makes an observation or claim that the second part develops, contrasts, or uses to motivate.
3. They often are used to orient and reorient people as to who they are.
4. A proverb may have several possible meanings, and it is likely to mean different things depending on who says it and how, to whom, and in what circumstances. It conveys the idea that wise persons can differ on most anything.

PASTORAL PROVERBS ARE MORE THAN “HINTS AND HELPS”

In my collecting pastoral sayings and proverbs I found myself thinking about classes with my teacher, Seward Hiltner, and some of the things I had heard from him. One of Hiltner’s major arguments was that actual pastoral encounters should be an important part of theological formulation rather than anecdotal material for teaching the techniques of care. He decried what he called the “hints and helps” books that told pastors what to do with little or no theoretical basis for doing it. With Hiltner I too have questioned the value of the “hints and helps” books. Yet in my collecting and reflecting upon pastoral sayings I have wondered if I was simply bringing “hints and helps” in by the back door.

In my continuing dialogue with Hiltner, however, begun many years ago, I am arguing that, understood as a part of a pastoral wisdom tradition, the most useful pastoral sayings are not merely “hints and helps.” They are a type of clinical material that can facilitate pastoral and theological reflection. The most important likeness to note between the biblical proverbs and pastoral reflection and consultation on ministry is that neither of them are commandments telling you what to do. They are pointed statements designed to help you think before you act—to develop wisdom for practice rather than just reacting to what’s said or done.

Moreover, in contrast with much of the Bible, Proverbs, like pastoral care, is not as concerned with unfolding the salvation story of God and humankind as it is with understanding and responding to the ordinary problems of life. Proverbs seems to assume the salvation story of God’s creation and care for humankind and moves on to deal with the question, “If we really are God’s people, how should we live our lives?”

Like the book of Proverbs, most of us in our practice of counseling and supervision simply assume the faith story and go on to respond to those problems of life that usually are not expressed in explicitly religious language. At times we may touch on some things in the Bible’s salvation story, but the value of what we do doesn’t rest on our doing that. Proverbs suggests that is a good thing. Rather than calling us constantly to use religious language, it directs us to pay attention to deeper meanings in the ordinary language of life.

Not long ago, in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) group where I was one of the supervisors, the group was discussing how ministry so often involves paying attention to possible ordinary language rather than necessarily using the language of faith. One of the pastors in the group told of a time early in his ministry when at the end of the worship service he invited anyone who needed the Lord’s help to come down to the altar. The only one who came down and knelt was a 15-year-old young man. The minister proceeded to do what he said he knew best how to do. He prayed for the young man’s soul and began to unfold the plan of salvation. In a minute or two the boy looked up at the preacher and said, “Reverend, I know all that. I just came down to pray that I could pass the math test I have tomorrow.”

Resonating with this is Christine Yoder’s comment that what makes the book of Proverbs valuable is its “everydayness.” She says that Proverbs “prompts us to think about what it means to live “day after day...”when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch....Sitting with the sages in the heart of the ordinary...we contemplate with them who

we are and what it means to live our lives well.”¹ And this includes things like passing math tests and many other everyday things.

Since I got interested in the practical use of the book of Proverbs, I have enjoyed doing adult Sunday school lessons classes about it. In the classes we have spent some time on the biblical proverbs, but mostly I encouraged the class members to remember and share some of the wise sayings and wise people that had influenced them. One of my favorites came from an elderly member of one of the classes. After commenting a bit about what it was like growing up in the country his proverb was, “Don’t worry about whether or not the mule is blind. Just get on it and ride.” Like the biblical proverbs that saying doesn’t tell you how everyone should live her life, but challenges you to think about whether to go on analyzing the problem or to get on with doing something about it.

Although most of the sayings I have collected about supervision and consultation on ministry are not succinct and focused enough to be called proverbs, they are proverbial in their calling for reflection before action. And again, like the other materials we use for supervision and consultation these wisdom sayings are not an attempt to tell the practitioner how to do it. They are a type of reframing that attempts to challenge how we think about what we do before we do it. They are not to be agreed with, adopted, or approved, but to be used to develop clinical wisdom about life, about ourselves, and about the persons we care for.

THE USE OF PASTORAL PROVERBS IN SUPERVISION

The remainder of this paper is a listing of many of the pastoral sayings or proverbs and a discussion of several of them. Since I have already been in dialogue with Hiltner in this paper, I will begin with one of the proverbs that I heard from him. It has guided me in the way I have functioned as a supervisor of CPE and pastoral counseling, although I regularly forget to make use of it. Like a good proverb it is neither true nor false, but is a guide for reflection about how to do supervision. As you consider this one and others, I encourage you to think of some sayings of your own and, perhaps, something about the person from whom you first heard them.

CPE is Not the Study of Cases. It’s the Study of Your Case

Like most helpful proverbs this one overstates the case to make it’s point. CPE is about cases, but if you generalize and think of it only as case study you miss the most important point about CPE. It’s about you. I heard this

one from Seward Hiltner, and because I had been a CPE student before I heard it from him I knew something of what it meant.

Seward Hiltner's own concern with particular cases grew, at least partly, out of his experience as a graduate student in theology at The University of Chicago with Henry Nelson Wieman and others who were concerned with developing an empirical theology. During that time as a student Hiltner became convinced that Wieman was not empirical enough. Wieman liked to talk about experience—about cases—but in ways that seemed abstract. Hiltner wanted theological reflection on the cases of particular persons.

I can't say that his concern for particular cases was the direct cause of Hiltner's leaving Chicago without finishing his PhD, but instead of doing that, for a number of years he became deeply involved in the early development of CPE. When he came back to Chicago as a professor, he completed his PhD in theology and moved on to develop a pastoral theology that was based on the study of particular persons and situations. He argued that such a theology could be genuinely theological and not simply the practical knowledge of how to do ministry. Reflection upon a particular person's case or pastoral event, in relation to sound theoretical material used to interpret it, was a significant move beyond the "hints and helps" about ministry found in books produced by pastors who seemed to have had an effective ministry.

In my own practice of supervision and consultation I deal constantly with what the proverb "about your case," is getting at. For the student or supervisee talking about cases in general, it is most often a defense against the student's reflection about herself and how what she did or said is related to her person and history. It's easier to get into talking about what 's out there instead of what's in me. For the lay ministers I work with it's so much easier to talk about the people in the church that they try to minister to than to reflect upon themselves as persons and ministers—and for both of us it's easier to let it go at that. For me, whether with the lay ministers or with my CPE students, I'm always tempted to tell them how to do it rather than hold them to discovering the most effective way for them.

PASTORAL PROVERBS AND HOLY COMPLEXITY

The "right answer" about how to supervise or consult is not on either side of this tension between cases and my case, but in developing an appropriate balance between them. The proverb overstates it in order to make the

point that the most common ‘cop out’ is to talk cases rather than respond to persons.

- *Embrace complexity, but don't get lost in the details.*

This is another saying that comes from a particular person, Joseph Sittler. I never heard him say this *per se*, but I claimed it for pastoral reflection from these words in one of his sermons, “Peace and Rest and Peace as Movement.” I believe they express one of the major assumptions of a competent clinician and carer:

Nothing is simple!...Dig in anywhere and things get complicated...This is true of the effort to understand historical fact, physical fact, social fact, psychological fact...Nothing is simple. But this holy complexity excites the too-simple reason to the suspicion that it may be wrong!

Both the surface and depth of human experiencing are important, and in that complexity one can find an expression of both human possibility and human problem. The good carer is one who respects the “holy complexity of life” with awareness of the choices it presents and with the ability to resist the “too-simple reason” and wait.

A good deal of the early clinical training in care and counseling came from psychoanalysis. Although what is most familiar in the psychoanalytic heritage is the search for a truth beyond that which is immediately obvious, psychoanalytic theory also taught us to question static conceptions of reality. In order to escape from the anxiety that freedom brings, Eric Fromm argued that the human tendency is to rigidify things and hold them static rather than digging deeply into the dynamic richness of real life and history. This is quite evident in contemporary life and culture, and the competent carer is one who stands over against this rigidity and demonstrates the belief that there is more to life than what is immediately obvious.

My late friend pastor-psychoanalyst, Joachim Scharfenberg, argued that in spite of Freud’s passionate critique of religion, he was closer than Jung to biblical faith and a more important resource for understanding human beings. Freud’s method of treatment, according to Scharfenberg was taking “ahistorical” persons who cannot be open to the future because of their compulsions to repeat the past and helping them return to history. Freud understood humanity’s most important task as education to life as it really is.

Learning to accept historicity and live in the real world is another way of recognizing the “holy complexity” of human life and looking deeply and honestly, yes, clinically—at the way things really are. That’s one of the important things that reflective practice attempts to do. A comment about CPE

that has been attributed to Ruel Howe pointedly expresses this. "CPE at its best immerses students so completely in the human situation that they cannot fail to experience it as a predicament rather than a problem."

AVOIDING MISPLACED CONCRETENESS: THE VALUE OF PROVERBS

In order to carry out pastoral supervision and consultation effectively the reflective practitioner makes use of this immersion in encouraging supervisees to "dig in anywhere" and look for complications that may not be immediately revealed to those who look for a quick way to solve the immediate problem. The quick problem solver is usually a victim of what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. That fallacy, according to Whitehead, occurs when in the process of generalization or theorizing about an issue, person, or event one prematurely limits the description to the most familiar categories of thought, thereby reducing its richness to what is most familiar. In Whitehead's words, "the aim at generalization is sound, but the estimate of success is exaggerated."

The major thrust of this pastoral saying is upon the richness of human life and experiencing, but the warning, "don't get lost in the details" is a cautionary reminder that it is easy to lose the person by getting too caught up in the story. Most any experienced counselor or supervisor can remember times when he got so fascinated by a person's story he lost sight of the person's central concern and in the developing therapeutic or consultative relationship. The simple but important question becomes, "Amid all this interesting stuff I am experiencing, can I respond to this person as an ordinary human being with ordinary needs for care. Or if it is a person that the carer knows in other contexts, is she able to bracket out that knowledge so that it won't over-influence how she responds to what occurs in the relationship now? A good helping relationship requires that a helper keep in balance the fascinating particulars of a person's life with his ordinary personhood. That's part of the complication that comes from "Digging in anywhere..."

- *In order to care you must know what it means to be cared for.*

or

- *In order to have patients (and patience) you need to have been one.*

This is another saying that that for me is related to a particular person. The summer before I was leaving to go to graduate school to study for a PhD degree in Religion and Psychological Studies a friend arranged for me to meet and have lunch with a noted Atlanta psychotherapist who was a member of

our church. My friend said that this person was someone I needed to know. She was right. In fact everyone needs to know someone like John Warkentin. I'm not sure that I've known anyone else like John, but the kind of person I'm talking about is someone who says exactly what he thinks and feels even with a first time acquaintance over lunch. I don't remember much that we talked about. I suppose it was about schools and preparation for a career as a therapist. What I do remember is that he said—in these exact words—"I believe that in order to do what you propose to do that you will have to become a patient."

It took me four years to act upon John's words. While in graduate school I was serving as pastor of a small inner city church not too far from the university where I was studying. It was a valuable experience because I was forced to get away from some heavy intellectual stuff and try to lead a congregation in which no one had been to college. The precipitating event that got me into therapy developed after a planning committee in the church decided on a Wednesday evening to carry out a particular program. At this point in time I forget what we had decided, but when I got to church the next Sunday, the lay leader was proceeding to do something entirely different because," the Lord had told him that what the group had decided was wrong." There were some other things going on that probably had to do with who was really in charge in that church, but it was this particular event that uncovered my rage and helped me decide to become a patient. I spent close to two years with a very good senior therapist at the counseling center where I was a student in the counseling practicum.

I had more therapy later on when I was struggling to finish a PhD dissertation while working a full-time job as a chaplain and finishing the process of getting certified as a CPE supervisor. I was never John Warkentin's patient, although I was a patient of one of his colleagues. I did, however, have the opportunity of going to him for supervision of some of my work and later was honored when he agreed to write a journal article with me, "A Dialogue on Supervision and Consultation."

PROVERBS INVITE US TO LIVE THE QUESTIONS

Now if my story has something to say about the saying, "In order to care you must know what it means to be cared for," it also may raise as many questions as it answers. Does everyone need to be a patient in psychotherapy before they can become a caregiver themselves? Do they need to decide this themselves, or should therapy be required if they are to become a thera-

pist? Anyone who has done therapy with someone required to be there has some opinion about the question. Is thinking about oneself as a “wounded healer” normative for care, counseling, and consultation? These are questions about practice that are strongly related to both to psychological theories and theological convictions. Proverbs don’t generally answer these and other questions, but they do help to live with them.

Here is my current list of the rest of the sayings:

- *The best case is the one where you both failed and succeeded and learned from both.*
- *What CPE teaches us is that we’re hungry and will be hungry the rest of our lives.*
- *Stay out of the middle, but if you’re already in it, get out as soon as you can.*
- *Pastoral counseling is more about listening to stories than solving problems.*
- *Don’t try for pastoral cure. Pastoral care is probably enough.*
- *Set limits on your caring so that those you care for can learn to use you when you’re not there.*
- *Unlike the detective, the good carer is not there to get the facts but to get the feelings.*
- *Responding to feelings requires respecting and learning from the defenses against them.*
- *A good therapist helps people discover the choices they have and learn to live with them.*
- *Effective reassurance is based on observed strength, not desired outcome.*
- *Look for the silver lining, but respond to the dark side first.*
- *Therapy is less often coping with crisis than dealing with the ordinariness of life.*
- *Most emergencies aren’t, but pay attention anyway in case they are.*
- *Pastoral counseling is not listening to a confession of particular sins or personal achievements, but a dialogue about a person’s whole life.*
- *Family care requires response to all of the family’s generations.*
- *The “magic questions:” for care and counseling are: what are you looking for? Why now? And why me?*
- *Knowing too much about what’s going on can blind you to the main thing that is.*
- *Pastoral care and counseling don’t require religious language, just a respect for the symbols of ordinary life.*
- *The value of religious spiritual language is that it may help persons think more deeply about their lives and find respect for them*
- *Healing broken relationships is more likely to occur when a person has given up trying to forgive and just gone on with life.*
- *Sin is often an attempt to escape from the ordinariness of life; grace a means of living with it.*

- *Good care involves at least three things: responding to the immediate situation, the larger story, and how both are affecting the carer and the cared for.*

As I was putting this paper together one other saying occurred to me:

- *Notice what comes after the “but.”*

I’m not aware of having heard this one from anyone else, but I have said it repeatedly in seminars and individual supervision. It’s related to several of the other proverbs, and its major concern is to challenge us to pay close attention to the words of those to whom we offer care. The rationale for it can be seen comes very early in CPE verbatims. The caregiver begins the visit asking, “How are you doing today.” The most common response is some variation of “I’m doing okay.” But then comes the “but,” and the patient modifies the “okay” with something beyond his conventional social response to the question. The patient gets closer to the rest of what he is feeling, and I’m amazed at how often good students and pastors ignore what comes after the “but.”

This saying is, obviously, a practical implication of the saying “The good news and bad news are not just a part of a joke. Both are in every situation you deal with.” There is an assessment of the human condition in this kind of noticing and a pastoral concern to respond to both sides of the “but.”

I believe that proverbial sayings like these are part of a wisdom tradition of pastoral practice that can contribute significantly to the way that we offer care, counseling and supervision. The ones that I have presented here are some that I have used in my work again and again. I encourage you to do three things with them:

1. add to my list some of your own wise sayings, remembering if you can the person you heard them from;
2. reflect proverbially on them, noting in what ways they get to at least two sides of an issue in ministry; and;
3. consider how the sayings are informed by theory or themselves inform or challenge theory.

I believe that doing some of this can contribute to the type of reflective practice necessary for pastoral wisdom at whatever age you may be.

NOTE

1. Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs: Abingdon Old Testament Commentary Series*, Patrick D. Miller, ed., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009). Yoder’s comment includes a quotation from Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000).