

Weaving the Threads: A Theory of Pastoral Supervision

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*Humankind has not woven the web of life.
We are but one thread within it.
Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.
All things are bound together.
All things connect.—Chief Seattle*

The traditional Cartesian, reductionist, mechanical world view has given way to an ecological, holistic systems paradigm, thanks in part to the insights of Chief Seattle, the intuitions of medieval mystics, and recent verifications in new science and cosmology.¹ This new paradigm reverses the relationship between the parts and whole. The old paradigm believed that, by understanding the parts, one could understand the whole. The new paradigm reverses the relationship: the properties of the parts can only be

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understood from the dynamics of the whole. The entire web of relationships is intrinsically dynamic.

Situated within the broader context of poststructuralist inquiry, this new paradigm recognizes that scientific descriptions, formerly believed to be objective, are not independent of the observer and that the process of knowledge may include various forms of knowing. All theories and concepts are recognized as limited and approximate rather than absolute.

The implications of this ecological, holistic systems paradigm and of poststructuralist inquiry are being further elaborated in the human sciences, psychology, theology, sociology, and in practical applications, such as pastoral care and psychotherapy and counseling. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, for example, reframes Boisen's "living human document" as the focus of pastoral care to that of the "living human web."²

The understanding that all living being is interconnected has done more than expand the horizons of our understanding of pastoral care. It has led us to consider how all the various threads comprising the human web impact the individuals and groups involved in the practice of pastoral care, pastoral counseling and psychotherapy, and pastoral supervision. In her historical review of developments since the 1990 *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Nancy Ramsey notes the expansion of the clinical pastoral perspective, the development of the communal contextual and intercultural paradigms, the consequent attention to issues of power and justice, and how the sociopolitical dynamics of engaging differences must be considered in the practice of pastoral care and counseling.³

Within the field of psychology, Michael White, a proponent of narrative approaches notes "it is through poststructuralist inquiry that we can explore the ways in which identity, subjectivity, and relationship are all products of cultural knowledge and practices."⁴ The relational-cultural theory, developed in the writings from the Stone Center at Wellesley College, also highlight the ways in which cultural contexts and the experiences of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and gender influence relationships.⁵ Together with Bowenian systems and feminist perspectives, these theoretical orientations are congruent with my experience and formation and guide my theory of growth and change within both therapeutic and pastoral supervision contexts.

My experience of being immersed for twelve years within the culture of Recife, Brazil, sharing the life and struggle of the poor, has provided a

powerfully formative context that has heightened my awareness of the functioning of social systems, the importance of social analysis, and the roles of culture and historical conditioning. I learned from the poor and saw their perspective. I reexamined my belief systems and developed a spirituality grounded in liberation theology.⁶ Liberation, as the fullness of life—to be able to live with justice and peace in communion with God and with all living beings—is both goal and process. In the midst of the life journey characterized by the paschal dynamics, God's loving presence and activity remain, inviting us to ever-deeper life and calling us to celebrate now the seeds of resurrection present in our midst. It was there, too, that I learned the practice of theological reflection, integrating theory and practice. This experience of an interdependent world provided a vision of reality as the web of life. This vision resonated with the tenets of the paradigm of the new science and poststructuralist thought and practice. Combined with my involvement in feminist studies, psychology, and pastoral psychotherapy and counseling, the web of life became the foundation for my current understandings of the nature of the person, my theory of growth and change, and my theory of pastoral supervision.

FOUNDATIONAL AND THEORETICAL THREADS OF PASTORAL SUPERVISION

Although the focus of this paper is my theory of pastoral supervision, this theory and its inherent operating assumptions are grounded in my view of the nature of the person and the process of growth and change that occurs within the therapeutic context. The common threads of relationality, interconnectivity, and dynamic process that characterize the web of all living being are also present in all three of these domains. I view the self of the person as subject, as relational and interconnective by nature, situated within a matrix of expanding relationships. It is within this matrix of relationships, informed by the cultural practices, systems, and beliefs in which it is situated, that individuals construct and re-construct their identities and give meaning to their lives. Likewise, the dynamic processes of growth and change characterizing all levels of being in the living web occur within the context of the working alliance established in therapy, a relationship, affected by and affecting the web of connections in which the individual or group is situated. Finally, the three threads of relationality, interconnectivity, and dynamic process inform the narrative theoretical approaches,

Bowenian systems, and feminist perspectives that comprise the lens for my theory of supervision.

RELATIONALITY

Relationship is at the core of the supervisory process. David Steere defines supervision:

Supervision is an extended relationship in which supervisor and supervisee agree to meet at regular intervals for systemic reflection upon the concrete practice of pastoral care in which supervisees are engaged in order to focus all available resources on each supervisee's personal growth in the pastoral role.⁷

In their supervisory model, Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea and Joan Sarnat also focus on the relationship dimensions, noting that the supervisor and supervisee "uniquely co-construct every supervisory relationship."⁸ Similarly, Bernard and Goodyear define supervision as an intervention or extended relationship that is evaluative with a three-fold purpose:

Enhancing the professional functioning of the more junior person(s), monitoring the quality of professional services offered to the client(s) she, he, or they see(s), and serving as a gatekeeper of those who are to enter the particular profession.⁹

It is clear that supervision, then, is an extended relationship, a collaborative venture, and most importantly, a formative process that fosters the development of the pastoral identity, skills, and competency of the supervisee.

Supervision provides a sacred space holding the actual co-constructed and internalized relationships of supervisor-supervisee and supervisee-client. As Frawley-O'Dea and Sarnat note, "Relationship and experience are privileged as transformational, while cognitive insight, although still part of treatment, is de-emphasized as the *sine qua non* of growth and change."¹⁰ Within this relational space, supervisor and supervisee explore the client's experiences and stories of relationships that are composed of a mixture of connections and disconnections. Supervisor and supervisee delve into the supervisee-client relationship, which can become the healing connection and relationship that facilitates growth and change in the client.¹¹

The sacred relational space of supervision becomes a catalyst that mirrors narrative therapy practices; the supervisor can engage the therapist in a re-authoring conversation. They are, thus, able to break away from negative truths of identity that have been internalized and, instead,

consider alternatives that enable renegotiation of meanings. This fosters greater freedom and wholeness.¹²

INTERCONNECTIVITY

Another foundational thread in pastoral supervision, closely associated with relationality, is that of interconnectivity. The web of life where everything is interconnected within mutually interdependent systems provides a basis for more easily understanding the realities of parallel process and isomorphism that can be present in the supervisory process. The recognition of the phenomenon of parallel process, in which the dynamics occurring in supervision are a replication of those occurring in the supervisee's therapy, can lead to new understandings and provide a basis for effective interventions.¹³ Isomorphism, a term derived from a cybernetic understanding of systems, moves the concept of parallel process to a higher level of abstraction, whereby:

Two complex structures can be mapped on to each other in such a way that to each part of one structure there is a corresponding part in the other structure, where 'corresponding' means that the two parts play similar roles in their respective structures.¹⁴

An awareness of parallel process and isomorphism makes the supervisor sensitive to feeling responses involved in countertransference and transference processes, as well as to the repeating patterns and structures present in the interlocking relationships that are a part of the supervisory process. During a recent supervisory session, the supervisee described how her client presented with overwhelming anxiety; she, in turn, described feeling overwhelmed, lost in a multitude of details, unsure of what direction to pursue. She was unaware of how she was replicating the dynamics of the therapy until the parallel process was noted when I said, "I wonder if you've noticed the similarities between what you've described as your client's feelings and the feelings you yourself are experiencing." The supervisee's positive response regarding this awareness enabled us to collaboratively explore new possibilities for both herself and her client.

DYNAMIC PROCESSES

Three basic dynamic processes govern the web of life at all levels of reality: differentiation, subjectivity, and communion.¹⁵ We find ourselves in a uni-

verse that is differentiated, where everything is uniquely different from every other thing. Subjectivity is the interior dimension of things; everything has an inside and an outside. Everything reveals itself and hides itself simultaneously. Communion exists whereby each element or dimension of creation is related to one another; everything is related to everything else. Recognizing, valuing, and engaging differences; honoring the reality of each person's interiority; and building upon the essential communion existing among all living beings are mandates for the survival of human-kind and guides for the structuring of the multi-interlocking relationship systems that characterize our lives, including those constructed within the supervisory context.

The power relations dimension is one of the significant variables that affect the processes occurring within the supervisory relationship. A hierarchical relationship and inflexible power relations have often been associated with the concept of supervision. In speaking of these power relations, White notes the dangers of trying to obscure them and the value of making them visible. Visibility opens options for responsible action for both parties.¹⁶ The supervisor becomes more aware of monitoring the real effects of the power relation, and the supervisee is able to initiate conversations about these real effects as well.¹⁷ Numerous authors note that effective supervisors will be alert to the interplay of the dynamics of oppression and issues of gender, race, culture, power, and socioeconomic variables in both therapeutic and supervisory relationships.¹⁸

THE THREAD OF LEARNING THEORY

The learning theory that grounds my methodology for teaching pastoral counseling is informed by my initial professional formation in the field of education, by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, Piaget's cognitive developmental theories, and feminist relational/experiential theories, as well as by my experience of teaching in high school, college, and the seminary.¹⁹ These are all a part of my formation and shape the way I function as a supervisor committed to the growth and formation of my supervisees as pastoral psychotherapists and counselors.

Within the context of all these theories, let me cite what I believe are essential ingredients for a successful learning experience. In an earlier

section, I stressed the importance of relationship. The context and quality of the relationship created between supervisor and the supervisee, the sense of mutuality and co-construction, will affect learning. I believe learning occurs best in an environment where, although different levels of expertise are acknowledged, each person feels that they are respected and that they are engaged in a collaborative venture. The awareness of the individual's developmental level and needs is also integral to the learning process and will be discussed in more detail in the following section. Together with the power relations dimension discussed previously, I also bring an awareness of gender, social, racial, and cultural influences, as well as individual differences and learning styles to my supervisory relationships.

Reflection on experience is another core element of my learning theory—using multiple perspectives, asking questions that invite consideration of another dimension of the story that has been shared, collaboratively exploring images and metaphors, building on earlier experiences, using the feelings and responses that surge up in myself to deepen the exploration, integrating the faith dimension, making connections with earlier didactic learning, considering possible interpretations and next steps. Finally, I view the sharing of pertinent resources as another way of facilitating learning.

DEVELOPMENTAL THREADS OF PASTORAL SUPERVISION

Recognition of the basic laws and dynamic processes governing the universe that were described earlier means being aware that we are caught up in an ongoing creative process, where the rhythms of growth and change form the seasons of life on all levels, individually, corporately, and systemically. This also holds true for supervision.

Supervision has as its focus the growth and formation of the supervisee. According to van den Blink, the purpose of all supervision of pastoral psychotherapy is to achieve a “demonstrable increase in professional competence,” growth that consists of “ascertainable increase in clinical, theoretical and administrative expertise and appropriate use of self,” which he describes as referring “to a whole range of skills having to do with the ability to know and employ one’s own strengths and vulnerabilities to the benefit of the psychotherapy one is doing with others.”²⁰

To be able to meet this goal, supervisors must take into account the development and needs of the supervisee. In fact, Pohly says “an open supportive supervisory relationship that recognizes the student’s developmental pattern is key to effective supervision.”²¹ Both Loganbill’s Developmental Model and the Integrated Development Model (IDM) by Stoltenberg, McNeill, and Delworth provide good assessment tools and frameworks for working with supervisees at different levels of growth.²² Loganbill delineates the three stages of stagnation, confusion, and integration that will characterize development around eight basic issues of supervisees: issues of competence, emotional awareness, autonomy, identity, respect for individual differences, purpose and direction, personal motivation, and professional ethics. The IDM Model considers three levels of therapist growth and corresponding needs (early, middle, and advanced), as well as the three overriding structures (Self and Other Awareness, Motivation, and Autonomy) that provide markers that reflect professional growth within any level of development and that also influence eight specific domains of clinical activity: intervention skills competence, assessment techniques, interpersonal assessment, client conceptualization, individual differences, theoretical orientation, treatment plan and goals, and professional ethics.

In my supervisory practice with beginning level-one trainees, I am aware of their high motivation and desire to learn as well as their greater self-focus, their high level of anxiety, and their tendency to greater dependency upon me. Within this context, my initial goals consist of creating a hospitable environment to foster a beginning relationship with the supervisee; to clarify expectations, needs, goals, roles, and responsibilities; to determine how our sessions will be structured; and to formulate a summary learning plan or contract.

With level two trainees, the fluctuating motivation, a greater capacity for focus and empathy with the client, increased clinical competence, a growing capacity to utilize the self more appropriately, and the dependency-autonomy conflict described in the IDM Model characterize our journey in supervision. While I find, that these supervisees may still need help conceptualizing and formulating a case summary, elaborating a treatment plan, or developing skill competencies, it is the appropriate use of the self and the focus on transference and countertransference dynamics that receive the greater attention in supervision. The need for supervisees to continue work on their own personal issues also becomes clearer when

countertransference begins to affect the therapist's use of self and, consequently, their work with a client. In a recent example, a supervisee with whom I have worked for two years recognized how a client's comment that the supervisee/therapist hadn't been emotionally available to her during a particular session triggered an especially strong reaction in her. When I asked her what she thought that might be about, she explored further her reaction and was able to make the connection with a suggestion she had received during her last evaluation with the faculty that she might try to use her affective self more during her clinical work. In this case, she was easily able to recognize how her countertransference issues had been triggered and affected her response to the client.

Level three supervisees have a more reflective self-focus, an insightful awareness of themselves, based upon a greater self-knowledge; their motivation remains at a consistently high level; and they have achieved a solid sense of autonomy and belief in their professional judgment. They have developed the capacity to integrate information received from the client, to write treatment plans, to monitor their own responses, and to separate themselves from the process so as to reflect more fully on what is happening and to make effective interventions.

ETHICAL THREADS

The formation of supervisees includes the task of assisting them to develop their ethical sensitivities and a professional practice that is grounded within their respective code of ethical guidelines. At our center, in addition to the American Association of Pastoral Counselors code of ethics that informs the practice of all staff, individual clinicians are bound by the codes of their respective licensures (American Counseling Association (ACA), American Psychological Association, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and the Association of Art Therapists). Although I am a licensed psychologist, I have found the ethical guidelines adopted by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision to be most helpful in guiding my supervisory practice.²³ This code succinctly describes the responsibilities inherent to the role of supervisor to be those of:

Monitoring client welfare; encouraging compliance with relevant legal, ethical, and professional standards for clinical practice; monitoring clinical performance and professional development of supervisees; and evaluating and certifying current performance, and potential of

supervisees for academic, screening, selection, placement, and employment and credentialing purposes.²⁴

When structuring the initial contract with supervisees, I discuss the issues of informed consent, confidentiality, and the structure of supervision, including expectations, roles, and responsibilities as well as articulation of goals appropriate to the supervisee's level of development. We also discuss processes and procedures of evaluation. Supervisees within our training program are aware that they will be engaged in evaluative processes with both their individual supervisor and with the program faculty. In view of due process considerations, I have included in our student handbook, an explanation that automatic passage from one year of the program to another is not guaranteed but is determined following the student's annual faculty evaluation, which is comprised of four categories: coursework, clinical experience, supervision, and participation and relationships at the center.

In working with ethical issues and dilemmas that surface in supervision, a primary focus I have is to assist the supervisee to develop competence in ethical thinking and ethical decision-making that result in ethical behaviors. *The Dictionary of Pastoral Counseling* also highlights this task, "The necessary reflection on the moral meaning of professional behavior needs to be informed by a process of ethical reasoning and by a system of belief and values that allows normative judgment."²⁵

I agree with Kitchener's assessment that ethical codes are inadequate and that ethical principles need to be considered when ethical dilemmas surface.²⁶ I have found his five principles quite helpful: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity. These have since been incorporated as the foundational principles in *A Practitioner's Guide to Ethical Decision Making* that is intended as a supplement to the ACA Code and which delineate a simple ethical decision making model based upon the model elaborated by Corey and others.²⁷ I used this model most recently with a supervisee who is working with a woman who after some time in individual therapy began to focus on her marital relationship. The supervisee referred the woman and her husband to another counselor for marital therapy. There was a signed release that the two counselors could exchange information. A couple months later, the woman revealed in individual therapy that she had begun an affair that she did not want her individual therapist to share with the marital counselor. In our super-

vision, we considered the dimension of the dilemma, ethical issues of confidentiality and privacy, potential courses of action and their possible consequences and decided upon the course of action of the supervisee that included discussing the issue with the client, assuring her of her privacy rights, and encouraging her to reveal the affair to the husband so that it could be discussed as part of the marital therapy. The client was initially reassured and did later reveal the affair to her husband. Learning to engage in ethical decision-making ensures that ethical practice becomes "a way of pro-fessional existence, not a command of a body of knowledge."²⁸

THE THREAD OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Townsend notes that for pastoral counselors, supervision "must create a context in which learning the language, methods, and procedures of theological reflection stands on equal footing with learning the language, methods, and procedures of psychotherapy."²⁹ The reflection on *praxis* model he suggests as a vision for reflective supervision is grounded in the hermeneutical pastoral circle in which I was formed during my ministry in Brazil and that has informed my practice of therapy and supervision more as a result of that formation rather than as the application of the deliberate, explicit reflective methodology he describes.

Engaging supervisees in theological reflection about their clients' experiences and stories, exploring spiritual themes that surface, images of God and using faith traditions, theological documents, biblical texts, and spirituality resources is integral to the development of their ability to integrate the resources of the client's spirituality and faith with the theory and techniques of psychotherapy. With some of my supervisees, I find that they are more adept in doing the second-level theological reflection in supervision. They can use Clinebell's criteria in considering the client's religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, or Fowler's stages of faith development.³⁰ They need more assistance, however, in engaging the client in conversing about their spiritual journey and spirituality and to integrate the spiritual dimension once they move beyond the initial spiritual assessment phase. I tend to encourage the use of existential questions, like those proposed by Griffith and Griffith: What has sustained you? From what sources do you draw strength in order to cope?³¹ It is a way of opening the door to integrate

the spiritual dimension, to assist the client to articulate and nourish their spirituality, and to connect with a significant spiritual energy that will move them in the direction of healing and wholeness for it is the spiritual dimension that is foundational to all the other dimensions of human experience.³² Witmer and Sweeney's model for wellness and prevention over the life span also places spirituality in the center as the primary life task.³³ Finally, within the narrative of the client's faith journey, the client and supervisee can explore significant spiritual themes, issues, and needs and identify deeper levels of meaning associated with the story. Thus, they find hope and deepen their human capacity for relationship with self, others, world, God and the whole web of life.³⁴

PASTORAL SUPERVISION: WEAVING THE THREADS

The effective practice of pastoral counseling supervision involves the weaving of all of these threads. Similar to the living web that is the paradigm of the new cosmology, pastoral supervision is grounded in the foundational threads of relationality, interconnectivity, and dynamic processes. It is grounded in the supervisor's learning theory and psychological theoretical orientation. It must recognize the developmental level and needs of the supervisee. It is framed in the context of ethical principles and guidelines, includes theological reflection, and integrates the spiritual dimension, faith journey, and spirituality of the client. Weaving together these threads enables the supervisor to fulfill their responsibilities to clients, supervisees, the profession, and the public at large. It is a wonderfully enriching and rewarding ministry that invites and also challenges one to ongoing personal, professional growth and development. The intertwining threads of pastoral supervision lead both supervisor and supervisee to an ever-deeper awareness of being caught up in the ultimate Mystery of Life.

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I am a firm advocate of rubber cement, a glue that allows two glued surfaces to be separated without damage. That is, if you have not put the glue on both surfaces and allowed it to dry slightly before putting the two surfaces together.

Our faith is like that glue. When two of us have faith, we can hold together despite the differences between us. When only one of us has faith, we will continue to focus on our differences and be unable as disciples to live out that unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17:11. It is our challenge to recognize differences but never to make them the source of division.

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