WCLTA 2013

Graduate Education and the Cure of Souls

Thomas St. James O’Connor, ThD and Elizabeth Meakes, DMin

Abstract
Cure of the soul is a concept used in Christian pastoral care and counselling through many centuries starting with the Hebrew Scriptures. It involves healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling. Other world religions such as Islam and Judaism have a similar concept. Graduate education in spiritual care and psychotherapy involves learning, guiding and occasionally healing. These are part of the cure of the soul. The workshop will explore the cure of the soul in a graduate educational setting. The workshop answers the question: How does graduate education facilitate the cure of the soul?

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.
Keywords: graduate, education cure, souls.

Introduction: Graduate education and the cure of the soul, some might think that these two terms are contradictory or an oxymoron. For these folks, graduate education breaks the soul and does not cure it. Certainly, graduate work involves long hours of endless reading and researching, in-depth analysis that is never in-depth enough and revisions, revisions and revisions to papers and thoughts. Even the question: ‘why am I doing this?’ gets revised! Finally, there is the thesis or dissertation that often stretches students far beyond anything they have done before...like climbing Mt. Everest. As one of my advisors told me, the key to success is perseverance. The process of graduate studies often produces negative feedback from professors and peers and can far too often wound the student’s soul. For these people, the cure of soul in graduate education is an oxymoron. However, our thesis is that graduate education can cure the soul as well as burden and wound. Our argument starts with a brief description of our standpoints. Second, we describe what the cure of the soul means. Third, there is a description of graduate education in Ontario universities and how the cure of the soul may unfold in them. Fourth, we describe the role spirituality in the cure of souls. Finally, we provide examples of graduate students in our program in spiritual care and psychotherapy that experience the cure of their souls.

1. Our Standpoints. We are a married couple who teach in a graduate program in spiritual care and psychotherapy at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Waterloo is the home of the Blackberry. We are Roman Catholic pastoral theologians teaching at a Lutheran Seminary. We also practice psychotherapy in family therapy and have supervised graduate students in clinical placements from a variety of

Corresponding Author: Thomas St. James O’Connor
E-mail: stconnor@gmail.com
disciplines and faith groups including Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian, social work, occupational therapy, nursing and medicine. Each of us integrates various approaches in psychotherapy that include evidence based, narrative, solution focused and feminist informed. (O’Connor, Koning, McLarnon-Sinclair, Loy, Davis, & Meakes, 2001) Of the students who attend our program, about 60% are Christian and 40% belong to other faith groups. We are trained and educated to work both within ecumenical and multi-faith settings. This presentation focuses on a Christian understanding of the cure of souls. Within Christianity, there are many approaches to this concept. The cure of the souls appears in many other faith groups in various forms but space and lack of expertise do not allow us to address them.

2. Description of the cure of souls. The English phrase “cure of the soul” is a translation of two Greek words and two Latin words. The English word “psychotherapy” arises from two Greek words “psyche” and “therapia” and literally means cure of the soul. (Webster, 1965) The Latin phrase is “cura animarum” and is the one that appears most often in the literature. Some argue (Benner, 1998; Moore, 1991; Meiburg, 1990) that the Latin “cura” can also be translated by care which would be the care of the soul. John McNeill (1951) in his classic A History of the Cure of Souls notes that the cure of the soul predates Christianity and the concept was important to Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. For these Greek philosophers, the pursuit of truth cured the soul especially through beautiful words or rhetoric. (Kolbet, 2010) The term is also present in the Hebrew Scriptures where God was interested in healing both the Hebrews and indeed all of humankind’s broken soul. (Benner, 1998) McNeill (1951) also describes other world religions like Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and their understandings and practices of the cure of the soul. However, McNeill’s presentation of these non-Christian notions of this concept is done superficially as he spends most of the time focusing on various Christian denominations.

McNeill (1951) offers two aspects of the cure of souls: healing and sustaining with healing being the dominant one. However, sustaining is also important especially for persons who have chronic illnesses like diabetes, asthma, depression or anxiety. Sustaining means having God’s help to endure the illness and make sense of it. William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle (1985) in their history of pastoral care argue that pastoral care in the Christian tradition is synonymous with the cure of souls. They use pastoral care instead of cure of the soul in their book. Clebsch and Jaekle (1985) building on McNeill add two more dimensions to pastoral care or the cure of souls. These are guiding and reconciling. Clebsch and Jaekle emphasize four functions of the cure of the soul: healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling. Clebsch and Jaekle provide various documents taken from various historical periods in Christianity that indicate one or more of these functions.

Certainly, each of these four functions has multiple meanings. Healing is most often associated with curing of the body and the healing miracles of Jesus show that. It also refers to curing the mind, soul, emotions, the unconscious or whatever causes it distress. The Greeks believed that there was the cure of the body and the cure of the soul. Both are intimately connected. The physician of the body is the doctor and the physician of the soul is the philosopher, priest or pastor. The practice of psychotherapy today deals with curing and caring for the mind, emotion, the unconscious, the inner life of the human person. Contemporary psychotherapists do not often use the word “soul.” Most often today, psychotherapy is not done by philosopher, priest or pastor but by another professional. Guiding is also an important function of the cure of the soul. People, who are confused and lost, need guidance. Dante (1978) in the Divine Comedy notes in the opening lines of the Inferno that he was lost in a darkened wood, far from the path. Virgil appears and guides him on a long journey which cures Dante’s troubled soul. Sustaining is receiving help for the soul to persevere challenging situations and can involve words of comfort and affirmation and finding hope in the midst of adversity. (Capps, 2005) Some graduate students need sustaining as they continue along the road of scholarship. In Christianity, Jesus urged his followers to take up their crosses every day and follow Him. (Mt. 16: 24-28) Sustaining is the strength and wisdom to take up one’s cross every day, to accept what is unchangeable. Reconciling is the experience of forgiveness. Reconciliation means receiving forgiveness from God for one’s sins, from others for the hurts one has caused and within oneself for our weaknesses and failures. Clients often need some form of reconciliation when they come for psychotherapy. Meakes and O’Connor (2013) also note that underlying each of these four functions is transformation. The cure of the soul transforms the client and often the psychotherapist or priest as well. This is also a process and not an end point. Cure and care of the souls is better described as curing and caring for the soul. (O’Connor & Meakes, 2014) This process does not end.

Most of the world religions agree that the cure of souls is not achieved through human power alone. The Divine is the healer, guide, sustainer and reconciler. In Christianity, Jesus cures the soul. (O’Connor & Meakes, 2014) Jesus is the one who transforms humans. The power for curing and caring is Divine. Most world religions
agree that the Divine can work through human beings in curing and caring for another person. Often there are sacred rituals that enable this. Meeting with another and unburdening one’s soul can be healing and guiding. This is the basis of modern psychotherapy. Prayer and meditation can also facilitate curing and caring. Nature is also a means. Cheryl Strayed (2012) in her book, *Wild*, describes her walk of 1000 miles along the Pacific Coast from Southern California to Washington State in the United States. She starts as a troubled soul addicted to drugs, grieving the loss of her mother and marriage. Her walk is like a pilgrimage although not motivated by religious reasons. However, the long walk through nature, meeting many adversities and getting support from other travellers over the course of four months bring healing and guidance to her soul. Many times she was ready to give up and yet something sustained her. By the end, she is a transformed person. In Spain, walking the Camino often has a similar transforming result.

There are other notions of cure of the soul. The Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila (1946) in the *Interior Castle* believed that health and growth of the soul took place through self-knowledge. This is an interior journey in which a person enters the castle or their soul and discovers Christ. Teresa does not use the term “cure of the soul” but Carolyn Myss, (2007) an American psychotherapist, argues that Teresa’s description of the interior journey is indeed healing, indeed psychotherapy. For both Teresa and Myss, the spiritual journey is a process of caring for the soul and discovering God in oneself. Myss (2007) argues that Teresa has a three step process in self-knowledge: purgation, illumination and union with God.

3. Graduate Education in Ontario. Graduate education in Ontario refers to university education that includes both Master and Doctoral programs. Ontario is a province in Canada. Canada is a multi-cultural society which has three founding nations: First Nations, English and French. (Saul, 1998) Within Canada, there are two official languages: French and English. Ontario since the 1950s has experienced a diversified ethnic population based on immigration and includes cultures from Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and the Middle East. Students in our graduate program in spiritual care and psychotherapy come from any of these countries and see clients from these diverse ethnic groups.

Graduate education in Ontario has been influenced by a number of philosophical beliefs and traditions. Three of the most relevant are the Western liberal, the progressive and the humanistic traditions. (Elias & Merriam, 2005) In Ontario, the Western liberal tradition of education is based on the British system developed in the nineteenth century when many universities were founded. In this tradition, the pursuit of truth is paramount. (Newman, 1962) This is done primarily through cognitive development which includes reading, analyzing, and discussing relevant texts. (Elias & Merriam, 2005) Understanding theory and empirical research are both essential. Developing critical skills based on reason and logic is important especially in examining the underlying assumptions of theory and research. In our program, graduate students are expected to learn a body of knowledge that is necessary for the practice of spiritual care and psychotherapy. A second important approach to education was developed by John Dewey an American educator. Known as progressive education, this approach is practical and the student learns from experience. (Elias & Merriam, 2005) In the case of psychotherapy, students after their first year in their MA program, begin to see clients under supervision. Students learn the world of the client and allow that world to shape the practice of psychotherapy. This practicum helps the student to integrate the theory and research with the practice. In this approach, the focus is on practical wisdom and learning from experience. Developing judgment in psychotherapy is best learned by experiencing many and diverse clients. The third approach is the humanistic one. (Elias & Merriam, 2005) This approach focuses both on the professional and personal development of the student and seeks to integrate the two. It is student-centred. The person of the therapist is key to psychotherapy and humanistic education. One goal is helping the student become more aware of his/her unconscious forces, fears, strengths and weaknesses, attitudes, values and assumptions so as not to project these onto the client.

A development in graduate education in psychotherapy in Ontario is the formation of the new College of Registered Psychotherapists. (College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, 2013) This college which was created by a bill of the Ontario legislature in 2007 is designed like other colleges, such as medicine, to protect the public from harm and from incompetent and unethical therapists. The College will be opened in April 2014. To become a certified member of the College, the applicant must have 10 graduate courses related to the practice of psychotherapy and 1000 hours of supervised clinical work in psychotherapy. The College has produced over 120 competencies in which students must demonstrate ability before they can be licensed by the College. Competency is defined as the knowledge, skills and judgment in order to practice psychotherapy safely and effectively. These competencies and the other regulations of the College are similar to commandments. They offer the practitioners a base line for their practice much like the Ten Commandments offer Jews and Christian’s norms for living. The College also encourages members and prospective members to receive personal psychotherapy but this is not a
requirement. However, a number of the competencies relate to the self-awareness of the psychotherapist so that the practitioner does not project his/her issues onto the client.

4. Role of spirituality in psychotherapy. Spirituality is an overarching term that includes religion. One can be spiritual and yet not practice in a religious faith group. Both religion and spirituality acknowledge that there is a Divine dimension that can be helpful in the cure of the soul. There is empirical evidence to indicate that spiritual and religious care can help in healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling. (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001) Up until the modern era beginning with Freud, religious care was an important part of psychotherapy. Freud removed the religious and spiritual from psychotherapy because he believed that God was an illusion and a belief in God was not needed for psychotherapy. (Stokes, 1985) In fact, his experience taught him that religion could be harmful to the psyche. There are examples of one’s spirituality and religious beliefs and practices that trouble the soul of the client and lead to harm. (Koenig et al, 2001) There are destructive spiritual and religious beliefs. However, empirical research indicates that many people have experienced healing, guiding and sustaining through their spiritual and religious faith. Many clients want their spiritual and religious orientation acknowledged and included in their psychotherapy. (Koenig et al., 2001) Curing and caring can include this spiritual and religious dimension; however, a psychotherapist needs to be competent in this area.

Certainly a graduate program in spiritual care and psychotherapy is more than learning theory, research, knowledge, skills and judgment. It also means the development and awareness of the therapist’s self. The self of the student is not usually a big part of graduate education. Brita Gill-Austern (2005), a feminist pastoral theologian, notes that the awareness of self and use of self challenge some of the values of graduate education. The academy values analysis and objectivity. Within the academy there is an emphasis on empirical evidence and reason. Subjectivity, feeling, intuition and imagination are often less valued. There is a strong emphasis in graduate education on developing a good argument rather than developing empathy. Yet empathy is essential to psychotherapy, more so than argument. Thinking and writing in the academy are often linear whereas working with clients requires circular thinking. In psychotherapy, there is an emphasis on integration of thinking with feelings, experience and imagination, and understanding the whole; whereas the academy often values breaking things down into compartments, and dissecting everything. For Gill-Austern, the cure of souls needs to be experienced by students and professors in the classroom. In the tradition of Augustine and Plato, education in spiritual care and psychotherapy requires an experience of beautiful words. (Kolbet, 2010) This means including the less dominant values of the academy in the classroom and seeking a balance.

5. Example of the cure of souls in graduate education. As students go through our Masters program, many report that they experience healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling. Sometimes as they study various family therapy theories, the theory offers them insight into their own family struggles. There is a family-of-origin course where students develop a genogram to explore the previous three generations of their families. Here, they examine legacies both good and bad, cut-offs, alliances, loyalties, secrets, etc. These insights can bring healing and also guide the students in ways that help with some of their own clients. Sometimes the family of origin class helps a student reconcile some hurts from within his/her own family.

Each student has a faculty advisor who guides the student in course selections and often is a listening ear for frustrations and struggles both within the program and outside of the program. The program is demanding in combining a Masters degree of 16 courses with a 150 hour clinical practicum. Ten courses are taken in psychotherapy and six in theology and spirituality. Students beginning their practicum are often anxious and spend a lot of energy and worry dealing with their own performance let alone the concerns of the client. This takes an emotional toll on the student. Many also find working with clients to be energizing. With the new College, students are anxious about the requirements and need help and support in sorting this out. Guiding and sustaining are important.

One written assignment that facilitates the curing and caring for the soul takes place in a course on Gender in Psychotherapy that we co-teach. In the exercise, we seek to facilitate students’ self-awareness especially around their own values attitudes and assumptions concerning gender issues. Students do a number of reflective papers. The reflective papers have three parts. First, students read an article or chapter that we assign on gender, summarize the reading and present the strengths and weaknesses of the chapter. This requires skills of analysis and critical thinking. In the second part, the student identifies some emotion that surfaces for him or her as he/she reads the text. Students are to be curious about the emotion and seek to discover what value or assumption is associated with the emotion that arises. Here, curiosity and empathy are required. For example, if the student feels frustrated while reading the text, what value or assumption is the text challenging? If the student feels excited by the text, which value or
assumption is the text endorsing and supporting? This is the hardest piece for most students. There is a movement from the written text to the student as text. (Gerkin, 1982, 1990a; O’Connor, 1998; Boisen, 2005) The written text mirrors the human text just as Harold Bloom (2005) claims that Cervantes’ classic novel Don Quixote mirrors the reader. In our exercise, students reflect on the strength and limitation of their personal values that they identify. Finally, in the third part, students reflect on how the self-awareness of their values or the content of the chapter will help them in the practice of psychotherapy.

Most students are used to analyzing and critiquing texts. Here, we are asking them to use the text as a mirror to help them in their own self-awareness of their values, attitudes and assumptions. We have to do a fair amount of coaching and guiding in helping students move into this area. We ask them to suspend their critical reason, use empathy in exploring their own values, and assume a non-judgmental understanding as they would with a client. These are the values that Gill-Austern believes are not dominant in graduate education and yet very necessary for education as a psychotherapist. As students become more comfortable with this process, many share personal experiences that the text uncovers for them, that lie underneath the identified value. They begin to trace from where their values originate and how the text offers them a mirror. Students share their papers in groups and we encourage them to share only what they are comfortable sharing. Many develop bonds with group members and mention the sacredness of the experience in our debriefing afterwards. A number mention that they find the exercise to be helpful to self-awareness and also healing, to some extent, of unresolved struggles and values.

Certainly, the program does not just produce curing and caring for students’ souls. Some students are wounded within the program. Often previous wounds will arise to the surface during the education and students at some point need to address those wounds. Others are wounded within the program through negative feedback from peers and professors, inability to complete work, lack of funds to sustain themselves, health issues, loss of interest and many other causes. Sometimes, a student needs to drop out. This can be guiding and caring for the time is not right for the student. There is a university counselling centre where students are offered free sessions of psychotherapy. Some take advantage of that; some seek their own psychotherapist. Students report that the program is more curing and caring than wounding.

Conclusion
The cure of souls in graduate education is articulated in the following poem co-written by the authors of this article:

Beautiful phrases given through melodic feeding,
Ground for the energizing Word among words
Enticing the soul, teaching and caring
To new life, with four flying birds
Healing, guiding and sustaining
To broken souls, searching, lost within
Offering forgiveness and reconciling
Through, with, and in her and him

References


