

Chapter 1

THE IDENTITY OF A CONTEMPLATIVE COUNSELOR

Spiritual knowledge comes through prayer, deep stillness,
and complete detachment, while wisdom
comes through humble meditation on Holy Scripture and,
above all, through grace given by God.

St. Diadochos of Photiki

Erin, a forty-five-year-old single mother, walked into my office on a dreary Friday afternoon with her usual gait—her shoulders lifted up, her back slightly arched, and her walk at slow cadence. She sat on the couch, almost in a fetal position, desperately trying to convey through her body what her lips could hardly express. Depression had taken over her life, and counseling was her last attempt at reawakening herself from its immobilizing spell.

We sat together in silence for the next five minutes or so and neither of us felt compelled to fill that gap with words. Then I began to wonder. Was her pain so heavy and beyond words that it rendered us mute? Had we both been touched by an experience that was, for the moment, best left unprocessed, without any forced re-description or quick intervention? Or was the silence a testament to my own sense of helplessness in the face of the enormous suffering that plagued her?

After a short while, she looked at me and in agony uttered the words: “Help, I am drowning.” Something was markedly different about the way she expressed herself this time, I thought. Unlike other

pleas for respite, this strained request seemed to emerge not solely from a place of deep despondency and dependence but also from a place of anger and frustration. Surely, the emotional tone of her desperation and discomfort was palpable given her circumstance, and yet somehow it felt as though there was more. As I began to explore what her request meant for her, it became obvious that a gnawing sense of discontent was beginning to bubble up inside her.

Suddenly she blurted these words: “What else can I do to get me out of this dark pit that I have been in for so long?”

I stopped dead in my tracks and let her anguish fill the space between us. I did not attempt to validate, empathize, explore, or interpret. We were both silent. Deep inside me, though, I felt her desperation and hopelessness. Every part of me wanted so badly to unlock the chains of depression that had held her hostage for so long. But I restrained myself from the urge to rescue and resolved to remain present and connected with her in silence.

We lingered there for a moment and we gradually realized that her cry revealed a place she had not been before—a deeper, primal place, a place of soulful anguish at the very core of her being.

What happened next will be discussed later in this chapter. Now I would like to describe possible scenarios in which the counselor’s identity, relational stance, and theoretical orientation play a significant role in shaping the process and outcome of counseling in cases like Erin’s.

A counselor tutored in and practicing a cognitive behavioral approach (CBT) would focus largely on exploring and challenging both Erin’s maladaptive and negative self-talk and those behaviors she has adopted that inflame her depressive symptoms. Alleviating her symptoms would include increasing her level of awareness of cognitive distortions that reinforce experiences of helplessness and hopelessness through either keeping a daily journal or filling out a dysfunctional thought record. During therapy, Erin and her counselor would then process these materials as a way of disrupting pathogenic beliefs and replacing them with more realistic, adaptive, and healthy thought patterns. They would also develop alternative coping strategies, such as physical exercise, increased social contact, and the expression of needs, desires, and feelings, and would pursue the use of religious resources,

for example, prayer, Scripture meditation, and fellowship, that Erin may find helpful in easing her suffering.

The identity of a CBT counselor can be described primarily as a “task master” who heightens the client’s level of motivation or commitment to change, disputes his or her irrational thinking, and ensures that behavioral and spiritual interventions are carried out in and outside of therapy. The collaborative and educative nature of the therapeutic relationship is utilized as leverage for the adoption of an agreed upon plan of treatment.

A clinician who is using solution-focused therapy (SFT) would try to identify and magnify Erin’s hidden and innate capacity to construct solutions to her problems. Instead of focusing on the problem of depression, the counselor will help Erin single out instances in which she has conquered depression, for example, taking the initial yet important step of seeking help or times when she went for a walk or chatted with a friend. Looking for exceptions would direct her attention away from the problem itself to times when depression was not as intense or not a problem at all. The positive orientation toward individuals coupled with specific solution-based interventions (for instance, miracle questions, scaling questions) that this approach promotes is a way of enhancing her belief in her self as a change agent, reactivating internal resources that are buried underneath and painting a satisfying future that is both promising and achievable.

The identity of a SFT counselor can be characterized as a “coach” who recognizes and makes explicit to the client his or her agency in charting an alternative path to change. This involves joining with the client to retrace steps by which change has already been made and imagining a horizon that is both full of possibilities and within the client’s immediate reach. Like most therapies, a good therapeutic relationship is key in empowering the client to be intentional, proactive, and acutely aware of self-generated resources for constructing solutions.

Based on the examples above, it is evident that what transpires in counseling depends on a constellation of things—the client’s readiness for change, the nature of the therapeutic relationship, belief in the restorative power of counseling, and the counselor’s personal attributes and psychotherapeutic knowledge and skills, among others. The

combination of these common factors in psychotherapy, according to a recent outcome research, is the heart and soul of change.¹

Erin's cry for help seems to indicate her readiness to overcome her longstanding struggle with depression. Despite its debilitating effect, she still manages to show up for counseling and, with a sense of urgency, convey her need to be taken out of this "dark pit," as she calls it.

Half of the battle has already been won when a client like Erin shows motivation to change. The other half pertains to the therapeutic relationship itself which, according to the above research, is correlated with change.² The client's perception and felt-sense experience of the counselor is critical in determining the outcome of therapeutic work. Erin's bold request and openness to participate in the treatment regimen, when met with the counselor's empathic attunement, reflective listening, and validation, will intensify trust, safety, and security in herself, in the process of change, and in the therapeutic relationship. Consequently, the attempt at building and strengthening an alliance with her facilitates an active follow-through of treatment strategies.

USE OF SELF IN COUNSELING

Our personhood, or use of self-as-facilitator-of-change, plays a vital role in all of this. Our attitudes toward our clients, the lens that we use to filter and make sense of information or stories gathered, the therapeutic technologies we adopt and the lingering thoughts, feelings, and reflections we have before and beyond the therapeutic hour are heavily dependent on our self-perception and professional identity. Interestingly, a well-defined identity is not that easy to construct, define, and embody.

The therapeutic culture is in flux, and with it comes an array of possible options available to those trying to define who they are and what they do in counseling. For the most part, the formation of the counselor's professional identity rests on his or her accumulated knowledge and experience in providing care and counseling over the years. In other words, there is a certain degree of personalization involved in the process of establishing an authentic professional identity, but the emphasis remains on the counselor's demonstrated skills and competencies in providing treatment to clients.³

In the various therapeutic scenarios suggested for Erin's treatment, the counselor's identity is tied closely to a particular theoretical approach utilized in a manner that will reflect his or her unique personality and level of psychotherapeutic skills and abilities.

The formation of the Christian counselor's professional identity has a different entry point and is not solely based on acquired therapeutic knowledge and practices. When asked about their motivation for pursuing a career in counseling, most, if not all, of my students traced it back to an experience of being called by God to this specific Christian vocation. According to them, discerning their call involved an experience of congruity between their inner life and outer life.⁴ That is, their personality traits and temperaments, interests, and motivations seemed to complement the core attributes and skills related to the task of counseling. As such, the learning and practicing of basic counseling skills may be seamless and natural rather than forced and inauthentic.

Fundamentally, the religious character of their vocation is grounded not in the profession of counseling but in their Christian identity. Their identity as a Christ-follower is the ground of their personal and professional formation as a counselor. In that formation, the Christian counselor experiences "a dynamic of freedom and response in [his or her] relationship with God . . . [an experience of living] one's life to the fullest, being open to change, and experiencing God's presence and blessings in the place, time, and work that occupy life."⁵ Simply, the Christian counselor experiences no dichotomy between his or her core identity as a Christian and the profession of counseling. The work of the hands emerges from the state of the heart, and together they form a compelling case for incarnating Christ in counseling.

In a culture that expects quick fixes, advertizes self-focused makeovers and self-assertion, and offers a buffet of treatment modalities, the formation of a solid identity as a Christian counselor is often a challenging endeavor. Additionally, the voice of the larger culture, which is biased toward forms of spirituality other than Christianity and the proliferation of models of psychotherapy that are heavy on humanistic values, can all too easily drown out the counselor's inner spiritual convictions.

Some Christian counselors become disheartened and cocoon back to what is safe and familiar, while others are so easily swayed or

influenced by all the spiritual and therapeutic options that they end up losing their bearing as Christian practitioners. Yet there remain those who are deeply anchored in their spiritual calling but are also curious and open to exploring other forms of healing. For these counselors, the challenge lies in knowing how to navigate new pathways to healing without eroding their core identity as a follower of Christ. Integral to this process is affirming one's Christian identity as the motive power and norm for seeking collaborative work with other disciplines, spiritual traditions, and healing practices.

Gifted psychoanalyst Carl Goldberg echoes the importance of the examined life, which is an internal journey, in the formation of the counselor's identity:

For many practitioners deeply committed to meaningful therapeutic work, psychotherapy is not a conscious and rational vocational choice. It may sound unscientific, but in many ways I believe that it is accurate to regard the choice of practicing psychotherapy as a spiritual calling. As a spiritual calling, it imposes certain concerns, problems and hazards in the course of the practitioner's pursuit of a commitment to a way of life that transcends his/her professional hours. The practice of psychotherapy has as a foundation and basic tenet the pursuit of the examined life.⁶

For Goldberg the spiritual dimension of the practice of psychotherapy rests on the practitioner's descent inward in search of self. In that internal journey, the counselor is afforded the opportunity to examine openly his or her beginnings and to enter courageously aspects of self that are wounded and broken. Examining and embracing the "endless series of developmental challenges and frequent crises"⁷ leads the counselor both to a deepened understanding of the nature of the human condition and to greater compassion and empathy for those who "petition us with their suffering."⁸

The counselor as a wounded healer derives his or her capacity to hold the pain and suffering of another by confronting his or her own adversity. Here lies both a paradox, "those who cure may remain eternally ill or wounded themselves,"⁹ and a realization, "that illness can be a passageway in which one's real powers can transcend a given state

of affairs . . . that his/her power to heal comes from the transformation of vulnerability into sensitivity, vision and compassion.”¹⁰ The counselor’s identity, at least from Goldberg’s perspective, is formed by accepting the call to self-examination and then using this interior journey to accompany and “guide others in their requisite voyages.”¹¹ For this very reason, therapy may be seen as a spiritual pilgrimage toward self-discovery and the counselor as a spiritual guide that provides the needed accompaniment.

Goldberg’s approach anchors the counselor in the constantly evolving terrain of psychotherapy without sacrificing the counselor’s core identity and authentic self. The descent inward heightens awareness of self as a wounded healer, open yet discerning, broken yet resilient, and unfazed by the demands and challenges of counseling. The examined life is the best gift any counselor can offer to those who have “lost heart for that journey”¹² of self-discovery. And yet Goldberg’s timely admonition stops short on one important thing; he ends with nothing besides a self that has come through adversity and ordeal.

In contrast, the formation of the identity of the Christian counselor as a healer does not end with the realization of the resilient self. The journey continues and hopefully leads to the discovery of another reality, that is, the dual discovery that our true identity rests on who we are in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and that healing comes through the grace of God (2 Cor 12:9-10).

The most promising attempt at redefining the identity of the Christian counselor is offered by Mark McMinn, who claims that the best Christians counselors “are not only those who are highly trained in counseling theory and technique and in theology but also personally trained to reflect Christian character inside and outside the counseling office.”¹³

Echoing this view, Timothy Clinton and George Ohlschlager specify roles and tasks¹⁴ (such as reflective listening, physical and psychological attending, and empathic attunement) that every counselor, Christian or not, must perform. They then commend a list of spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, Scripture meditation, and worship) that should “first be alive in the life of the counselor, who then is able to give that life to clients and parishioners seeking help.”¹⁵

Either used implicitly or explicitly in therapy, these spiritual practices become the defining trait of the Christian counselor. Clinton and Ohlschlager further claim that the use of these spiritual practices in counseling is “consistent with a pro-active, strength-focused approach to human change,” and they argue that the work of spiritual formation serves to “feed our new nature in Christ.”¹⁶ As the work of spiritual formation helps us to “grow up into life abundant . . . we simultaneously starve our old nature, refusing to give place to the worry, doubt, fear, confusion, anger, vengeance and vanity that too often seethe within our souls.”¹⁷ In other words, the identity of the Christian counselor is closely tied to the pursuit and regular practice of spiritual disciplines.

Putting the spotlight on the practitioner’s devotional life as an identity-defining factor is a step in the right direction. After all, these spiritual disciplines can be a fountain of strength, wisdom, and clarity that we can draw from as we accompany our clients on their arduous journey toward healing. Hence the clarion call to return to the basic spiritual practices of the Christian life needs to be taken seriously. However, there is the potential for this pursuit of holiness to turn into a subtle form of Pharisaic spirituality where the outward expressions of the religious life take precedence over the cultivation of the interior life. When the underlying ethos of a *works mentality* and *performance-based identity* gradually seeps into the psyche of the Christian counselor, the result may be the rather disturbing image of a counselor enslaved both by human strivings and by cravings for mastery and control.

To guard oneself from this potential pitfall, it is important to remember that the pursuit of holiness is the fruit of an interior life lived in communion and union between the Lover and the beloved. The closer we move toward the heart of God the more we realize, and embrace, the profound truth that we are deeply loved just as we are.

God’s love for us is so unconditional and immense that the experience of this love moves us to simple obedience. The English word *obedience* is derived from the Latin word *ob-audire*, which means to listen. Hence, our first response to this great love is to listen intently, to incline the ears of our heart that we may hear the still small voice of God. Transformed by the experience of this love, we pursue holiness

for no other reason other than to radiate the source of this great love to others.

THE IDENTITY OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE COUNSELOR

The loving and experiential knowledge of God that contemplation brings about is foundational in forming the identity of the contemplative counselor. Since contemplation is both a gift from God and a fruit of the mindful cultivation of the spiritual life, it follows that our identity, first and foremost, is a graced identity based not on merit but on our status as God's beloved. It is this divine love from which we came that we return to and proceed from. "If we find our true self we find God, and if we find God, we find our most authentic self."¹⁸

Therefore, the starting point in the formation of a Christian counselor's identity is the recognition and acceptance of his or her being as one created and loved by God. Such identity formation continues and is strengthened when the counselor enters into a life of contemplation grounded in the mindful cultivation of the interior life. Take the contemplative practice of *lectio divina* or divine reading, for example. Predisposed to listen deeply and attentively, the contemplative counselor bathes him or herself with the word of God on a regular basis, receiving it fully, letting the words come alive, not through discursive analysis, but by being open and curious to whatever God chooses to communicate. In a very subtle yet powerful way, the contemplative reading of the word of God works to transform the inmost being of the counselor into the likeness of Christ, who is the fulfillment of the Scripture.¹⁹

Out of the rich soil of a deep, loving, experiential knowledge of God springs forth fruits that the contemplative counselor can share with those who hunger and thirst for both healing and a fully awakened life. The fruits of contemplation are not our own doing, yet through us the fruits of contemplation are made available to all who come to us for counsel. The contemplative counselor may well become an icon to the presence of God in the midst of pain and suffering.

Before I entered the contemplative path, there were times in my professional life when the demands and challenges of counseling

brought me to a state of inner turmoil and helplessness. Often the pain that clients bear is onerous and the pressure to “take away its sting” is immobilizing. In such instances, I have found myself hunting for every known intervention, both religious and psychological, that promised relief not only from my clients’ symptoms but also from my own dwindling sense of confidence.

The anxiety these situations evoked within me at such times was fueled by a willful desire for self-assertion and results. Consequently, my identity as a professional Christian counselor became more a matter of reactive performance than a quiet presence, discerning, decisive, and deliberate, that endures in the face of suffering.

The life of contemplation I now participate in generates a deep undistracted centeredness, enabling me to enter into the pain of others with undivided attention. This makes me more accessible and available to my clients and to the unfolding of the present moment. Instead of worrying about the types of questions to ask or interventions to offer, I ground myself in who I am as God’s beloved being, a person called to provide accompaniment to those hurting, using the gifts and graces I have been given to do so.

This book endeavors to reframe the identity of the Christian practitioner as a contemplative counselor who, in a humble walk with God, both receives and is energized by divine love. The experience of loving communion with God is deepened by the cultivation of the interior life through the contemplative practices of silence and solitude of the heart (Ps 46:10). These practices predispose the counselor to experience ever more fully the loving presence of God. The practice of mindfulness, with its emphasis on being awake, alive, attentive, and available to receive the gift of the present moment in a non-judgmental, hospitable way, supports the experiential and loving attention to God, who is fully with us in the present moment.

Being mindful of the presence of God gives rise to an interior peace that transcends all knowledge and understanding and guards the heart and mind from worries and anxieties that often beset the counseling context. With the peace of God permeating my body, mind, and spirit, I need not assert or exert my presence anymore or be scared by the depth of pain that my client experiences or be overwhelmed by the need for action and results. Instead, tranquility and a calm

demeanor give me the freedom and flexibility to respond, and not react, to the tasks and challenges of the therapeutic encounter. With my mind uncluttered and fully attentive and awake to the present moment, I am more able to listen deeply and discern with clarity how best to accompany my clients on their journey toward healing.

My use of therapeutic skills and knowledge in ways that are meaningful and beneficial to the client originates from this place of quiet confidence, equanimity, and careful, deliberate thought. There is no need to rush toward the end goal; no need to counteract the ambiguity that often plagues counseling with ready-made and premature answers. Instead, this peace that transcends all understanding keeps me open to what is actually unfolding in the present therapeutic moment. I am at rest yet fully awake to the presence of God who hallows the space and is the true source of healing and transformation for those who suffer.

The experiential and loving knowledge of God and of oneself as God's beloved defines the identity of the contemplative counselor and renders the therapeutic process inherently spiritual and theological. The counselor's presence mediates God's presence in the face of human suffering. When we incarnate in our lives and labor God's comfort, peace, and healing, the therapeutic exchange evolves into a spiritual encounter with the living God, who is present in the here and now. This is to say that clients are no longer alone in their suffering. In the presence of a contemplative and mindful counselor, the cry of their heart is heard, their suffering witnessed, and the isolation they experience supplanted by an experience of communion with another and the Other. Together, client and counselor (in the presence of God) set out on a journey, not by running away or hiding from pain, but by courageously accepting it as a guest bearing gifts of perseverance, character, and hope (Rom 5:4-5).

THE COMMON GROUND

I have traversed territories that, at first glance, might look foreign to each other yet, when seen through the eyes of contemplation, reveal a common ground that, when cultivated and nourished, yield fruit of many kinds. The rich traditions of Christian theology and spirituality, the field of counseling, Buddhist psychology and numerous encounters

with clients, supervisors, colleagues, and students have all contributed significantly to my own evolution as a contemplative counselor. Traversing these various territories and going deep into their collective wisdom demands the practice of magnanimity.

I think the metaphor of a world that grows simultaneously larger and smaller is what happens when we enter into dialogue with persons different from ourselves. On one hand, as the world expands, our hearts are challenged to grow larger, all-inclusive, universal—what mystics call magnanimity—living with a great soul and an expansive heart. . . . This wonderful gift, called magnanimity, usually catches us off guard when we venture into the unknown territory and allow our defenses to relax a bit. It is then that the other—the one who is different—shows us how much we really are one.²⁰

One experience stands out as particularly formative in my learning both the art of encountering other traditions and the art of dialogue with those traditions. On my way to a spiritual retreat, I brought with me as my companions the writings of a Trappist monk, a Buddhist psychoanalyst, and the Bible. I can still remember how distinct their voices were, yet somehow together they formed a beautiful harmony, one that helped shape who I am today.

In Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, I heard the simple melody of silence and solitude. In Mark Epstein, the Buddhist psychoanalyst, I discovered the importance of sustained attention to the unfolding of the present moment in counseling. And my reading of the Scriptures has been enriched immensely by an attitude of waiting in silence and acknowledging the presence of God in the here and now. I believe that I have become a better follower of Christ because my heart has been cracked open to receive the nourishment that comes from the common ground between diverse traditions.

Of course, engaging in dialogue is never easy. It can lead to dissent and division, especially when competition instead of communion, and arrogance instead of humility and respect, rule the day. To avoid such divisiveness and futility, we must enter dialogue with an attitude of listening—deep and respectful listening. We must enter dialogue with the expectation, if not conviction, that we have things to learn from

others. According to Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, this means that:

In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of—not only within—our own group. . . . We have to believe that by engaging in a dialogue with the other person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves, that we can become deeper. . . . Dialogue must be practiced on the basis on non-self. We have to allow what is good, beautiful, and meaningful in the other's traditions to transform us.²¹

Thich Nhat Hahn goes on to say that those engaged in dialogue with others must touch deeply the roots of their own tradition first before opening themselves up to the rich tradition of others. He hones this point by saying: “For dialogue to be fruitful we need to lie deeply on our own tradition and, at the same time, listen deeply to others. Through the practice of deep looking and deep listening, we become free, able to see the beauty and values in our own tradition and others’ tradition.”²²

The practices of contemplation and mindfulness can assist in developing the capacity to fully inhabit one's own tradition while at the same time listening respectfully to and learning from the traditions and wisdom of others. The ongoing practice of *lectio divina*, for example, embeds the counselor deeper and deeper into the heart of God while transforming him or her more and more into the likeness of Christ. Anchored by the living word of God, the counselor then traverses unknown territory and hears multiple perspectives in therapy with an open heart—hospitable, curious, and respectful. In other words, listening deeply becomes a habit of the heart learned from daily contemplative prayer and mindfulness. The heart is primed to hear the heartbeat of another and together they discover that they pulsate as one, sharing the same human condition and promise.

The professional identity of the contemplative counselor is shaped by a deep and abiding experience and knowledge of God and the acceptance of one's standing as God's beloved. Use of the knowledge, skills, and practices related to counseling proceeds from that interior

place where God is known in and as love. One form in which this love is expressed is genuine listening.

The approach I take is integrative in nature and the attitude that moves me is dialogical and exploratory. I bring together the rich resources of contemplative spirituality, counseling psychology and mindfulness to shed light on what it means to be a contemplative counselor. What I bring to this task is: (1) the awareness and acceptance of my own religious-theological location (evangelical); (2) a hospitable and curious stance toward multiple sources of wisdom and truth outside of my assumptive world (Buddhist psychology, mindfulness-based psychotherapies); (3) openness to living in tension, ambiguity, and unknowing; and (4) an acceptance and embrace of Mystery.

God's imprint is in all of creation, and as a person of faith, I take seriously the call to discern as best as I can God's continuing self-revelation and intentions for the world. Central to this undertaking is the willingness to transcend the familiar and encounter with discernment the unfamiliar, the yet to be known and the unknown. As the "Author of the Word and World,"²³ God accompanies me in the process of discovering truths from other traditions—psychological and otherwise—and expands my horizon so that I can see beyond my immediate subjective reality.

Though the path that I have taken is unique, I am not alone in this journey toward ever deepening intimacy and union with God. As a contemplative counselor, I am poised to listen to the testimonies of others, to appreciate the contributions of those who have gone before me, to see the validity and authenticity of various ways of knowing and experiencing God, and to use them as sources for self-criticism over and against the traditions that have shaped me thus far. In other words, contemplation generates both a sense of humility in sharing my discoveries and honesty in admitting my deficiencies.

The theological nature of this integrative task is primarily grounded in Jesus Christ, who is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). His incarnation provides a glimpse of what it is like to experience wholeness. He embraced with fullness and loving obedience both his humanity and divinity. His teachings, miracles, and relationships with people of various kinds reflect his penetrating transparency to God

the Father as well as his steadfast commitment to bring all of creation back to the Creator.

The contemplative counselor gazes upon the face of God in Jesus Christ who, as an exemplar, reveals the power of reconciliation and asks us daily to pursue it in our lives. The division and fragmentation we all experience is the flipside of our deepest yearning for wholeness and union. The Lordship of Christ over all creation releases the potential in all of us to engage the unfamiliar, the unknown, and the different in a conversation that is dialogical, mutually rewarding, and ultimately God honoring.

The integrative nature that contemplation promotes requires a deep, abiding and personal relationship with the source of truth (Jn 14:6). Encountering the great I AM personally and intimately transforms our tendency to pay homage at the altar of self into a whole-hearted devotion to the one God. It means offering everything that is descriptive of us to God who will transform and integrate our lives and relationships into a meaningful experience of wholeness and holiness.

A SNAPSHOT OF A CONTEMPLATIVE APPROACH

We now return to the case vignette presented earlier, only this time it is framed from the perspective of a contemplative counselor. Erin's cry for healing from the devitalizing impact of depression evokes a sense of urgency for intervention. However, as a counselor nourished by a life of contemplation, *the tendency to act is supplanted by a desire to be, to listen deeply, fully awake and attentive*. This means being available and present to the outpouring of Erin's anguish without probing, interpreting, reframing, facilitating a cathartic experience, processing residual or hidden emotions, or any other acts designed to contain this emotional cry for release. Instead, the counselor inhabits an interior peace and takes a posture of openness, curiosity, and hospitality to what is unfolding in the moment, without grasping or clinging to the urge to act or intervene, just letting things be as they are.

This models for Erin the possibility of her being available to her internal experience without the usual tendency to attach to (by rumination or getting overwhelmed by emotions) or to avoid (by psychic

numbing) her thoughts and feelings. The theory of change that undergirds this process is that the contemplative and mindful presence the counselor exhibits releases Erin's capacity to become more aware and accepting, with compassion and non-judgment, of her own subjective and interior life. This creates the distance necessary for her to explore the myriad options available to her as she becomes more fully present and available to her own experience.

Developing Erin's innate capacity for meta-cognition being aware that she is aware of her conditions by simply noticing and observing, enables her to de-identify herself from her thoughts, feelings, and reactions, which in turn increases her self-agency over her life. The counselor, from time to time, will coach Erin to describe or label her feelings as they arise, to try to locate them in her body and to enter both her body and the feeling fully by gently pressing against it with her hand. This emotional coaching heightens Erin's connection with the counselor, who bears witness to her pain and offers a quiet yet attentive accompaniment. By letting Erin symbolize what she feels in words, images, metaphors, or actions, she gains a different perspective of herself as someone who is able to regulate instead of being swayed helplessly by the sheer force of her experiences.

The counselor's contemplative and mindful stance is a clear indication to the client that there is another way of relating to suffering, an attitude that is less adversarial and more welcoming. In a culture dominated by quick fixes and pain avoidance, this new way of dealing with suffering is counterintuitive. When suffering is embraced, however, we discover that we are resilient, that symptom alleviation is inadequate, that healing and transformation of character are available to those who enter into it fully and compassionately. By listening attentively to the cry of her soul, she will soon discover her suffering is not to be carried alone, denied, or resisted, but accepted as one accepts a guest bearing a gift of renewal and connection. She will learn that in the midst of and beyond the ache is the faint, still, gentle voice of God calling her name and longing for her to come home.

The counselor's ability to stay engaged mindfully with Erin comes out of his or her ongoing commitment to live a contemplative life. The cultivation of the interior garden through contemplative prayer, silence, and solitude of the heart enhances attentional focus. Devotionally, it

brings to mind both God's call for dependence and God's offer of accompaniment as the counselor and client descend inwardly into those places of pain.

When the counselor surrenders everything that is self-descriptive, including knowledge, skills, practices, doubts, lingering questions, and even good and godly intentions, for God's redemption and use, the therapeutic space becomes a place where afflictions are laid bare, acknowledged and accepted, and ultimately surrendered at the foot of the cross for healing and transformation.

The daily practice of mindful breathing affirms that our very breath is the gift of life from God. It is a concrete way of connecting the counselor to God, who sustains and enlivens the soul and whose love overflows beyond measure. Having been created by and for love, the counselor feels secure and grounded, lacking nothing and desiring only one thing—to be a channel of this diffusive love to others. And so he or she enters the therapeutic space with a clear sense of his or her identity in Christ, and is therefore capable of showing deep compassion and empathy for those who are hurting and have lost heart for the journey toward home. The contemplative counselor comes and offers peace in the midst of chaos, turmoil, and anguish, and in that quiet and still space suffering turns into dancing.