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TEACHING INTEGRATION THROUGH THE CRACKS: A PEDAGOGY OF PROCESS

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For decades, psychologists have appreciated the value of tracking the process of a psychotherapeutic relationship in order to decode and extract information that is vitally relevant to the cure of the patient. In recent years, this notion of tracking the process has gained interest among Christian psychologists and educators. However, little attention seems to have been given to tracking the process of the integration between psychology and Christian faith that happens in the classroom. The present author contends that the teaching of integration happens “in the cracks” of formal classroom instruction far more often than we typically acknowledge. The author urges Christian psychology professors to become more intentional in cultivating an openness to seize stray moments or unexpected events both inside and outside the classroom, and to harness them as providential opportunities to give students experiential lessons in personal integration. Three narratives are presented as examples of how the subtle dynamics of the process embedded in typical classroom scenes offer a powerful medium for students to grasp integration concepts experientially.

When I was a first year graduate student, two of my classes were in buildings several blocks apart. Try as I might to scurry to the second class, I invariably walked in several minutes late. Embarrassed by this, I came up to the professor of this second class one day as he was standing in the hall. I apologized for my chronic tardiness to class. In my naiveté, I fully expected him to respond, “Oh, that’s all right.” Instead, he was silent for a moment, as if internally processing something.

Then he said, “Well, I think I’ll just let you sit with that one.” And sit with it I did. I finally realized that the walk across campus to class #2 only took perhaps three minutes. The real reason I kept arriving late to the second class was that the professor of the first class chronically went overtime with his lectures. Too polite to get up and leave at the appointed time for his class to end, I was actually making professor #2 pay for the discourtesy that professor #1 was showing me and my classmates. Once I was able to identify this as a boundary issue, I mustered the resolve to confront professor #1 about his overtime lectures, and to let him know that henceforth I would be leaving his classroom at the official end time of the class. When I began arriving at the second class on time, I felt the empowerment of a personal victory in being able to solve a problem by recognizing and setting an appropriate boundary. When the dynamics of interpersonal boundaries appeared in my course work curriculum months later, I realized that I had already had potent tutelage on this topic in the form of a spontaneous but well-timed intervention of, “Well, I think I’ll just let you sit with that one” (D. Beere, personal communication, March 1985).

As I reflect back on my graduate education, I realize that it was so potent for me because of the ongoing verve that the faculty had to make the process of the training experience congruent with the content. They were intentional in their openness to seize stray moments or unexpected events both inside and outside the classroom, and to use them as opportunities to deepen our understanding of our own psychological dynamics. They were explicit in explaining to us students that good therapy involves precisely the same thing: cultivating the ability to use any material presented by a client as grist for the mill of deepening the therapeutic work.

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The notion of applying psychodynamic principles to unpack the process of educating clinical psychology graduate students is not unique to my alma mater. Several excellent pieces have been written on this topic. Yalof (1993) notes the rampant tendency for various transferences and countertransferences to get stirred up by courses in projective assessment. For example, he contends, the stage is set for a professor teaching the Rorschach to get narcissistic pleasure in having his awestruck (but correspondingly disempowered) students perceive him as an elite guru who holds the keys of knowledge of this complex and seemingly mystical instrument.

According to McKeachie (1987) perhaps the single most volatile set of dynamics between professor and students happens in the process of evaluating them and assigning grades. Yalof (1993) and Bowman (1989) echo the observation that negative transference towards the professor is nearly inevitable when a student protests a poor grade. Yalof cautioned professors to be especially attuned to their inner dynamics when administering particularly difficult exams, to rule out the possibility of a sadistic transference on the professor's part. I confess that I have been guilty of such pitfalls. On occasion, my internal response to overly critical students, who have done poorly on one of my exams, has been to feel inappropriately vindictive. I am saddened when my initial reaction has been to think, "There! Now you get to feel as incompetent as you made me feel with all your critical comments in class."

A PROCESS APPROACH TO WORK WITH RELIGIOUS MATERIAL IN THERAPY AND IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

During the past few decades, psychoanalytic theories have been used to illumine the meaning of religious material that clients bring into therapy (Jones, 1991; McDargh, 1983; Ritter & O'Neill, 1996; Rizzuto, 1979). Lovinger (1984), for instance, found that religious issues could be processed with a client to uncover such dynamics as resistances and transferences.

Along with this has been a growing body of literature on what it means for a psychotherapist to integrate one's personal identity as a committed Christian into one's work with clients (Adams, 1970; Bouma-Prediger, 1990; Narramore, 1984; Sorenson, 1996c; Tan, 1987). Tan (1996), for instance, provides a model of implicit versus explic-

it integration of one's personal Christian faith with one's clinical work.

A process approach to working with religious themes has not been limited to the therapy room, however. As a faculty member of a theological seminary, I have watched my colleagues in the Schools of Theology and World Mission strive to conduct their lives and classroom dynamics in a way that is congruent with their theological or missiological curriculum. For instance, one faculty member who teaches courses in spiritual formation and in the building of Christian community intentionally lives in a communal household with his wife and several theology students. Many faculty open classes with devotions and close in prayer. The course in urban ministry includes an optional assignment for students to spend a weekend living on the streets like a homeless person.

TEACHING INTEGRATION: THE POWER OF FUSING PROCESS WITH CURRICULUM

A number of universities and seminaries around the nation currently have excellent courses in the integration of psychology and Christianity. At the seminary where I teach, our psychology students are offered integration seminars with such juicy content as "Sin and Psychopathology" and "Psychotherapy and Spiritual Direction." Great care goes into the crafting of the curriculum for such courses, as well as into making sure that our students receive enough training in various models and theories of integration. However, surprisingly little attention appears to be paid (both in the literature and at my teaching institution) on how to use the spontaneous process of events inside and outside the classroom as opportunities to teach integration "through the cracks." I find this particularly surprising, because as Christian psychologists and academics, we have Jesus himself as our ultimate role model. Jesus' forum for formal pedagogy was in the temple. However, he seemed to prefer to use ordinary life events like a wedding in Cana or an argument between his disciples to teach them the Way, often via parables (John 2:1-11; Luke 22:23-27, New American Standard Bible).

One notable exception to the void in the literature on this topic is provided by Sorenson (1994a, 1996b, 1996c). He addressed the danger of focusing on curriculum without process in teaching integration by asserting that

integration is something indivisibly, irreducibly, and fundamentally personal. It is my thesis that it is all too easy for those

of us who write professional articles or publish books on integration to run from this notion much as the lepers ran from Christ... By saying integration is personal I will argue that it occurs (a) in persons, not just disembodied ideas or words on a blackboard, and (b) between persons as persons-in-relation, not just individuals in isolated speculation. (Sorenson, 1996c, pp. 180-181)

Sorenson (1994b) also underscored the value of dynamic process as follows:

when it comes to shaping how students work with their clients' religious material clinically, all the books, classes, seminars, and workshops in the world—including professional articles such as this one—may pale in comparison to the clinical impact of how religious issues were handled in their own personal therapies. It may be more caught than taught. (pp. 342)

Sorenson (1996a) recently launched a multi-school collaborative project to investigate empirically those qualities in faculty which graduate students report as most helpful for their own personal integrative journeys. The results offered strong support of his hypothesis that students learn integration from all the faculty, not just those who teach integration courses. Moreover, what mattered to these students the most was having affective access to a professor and to that professor's relationship with God.

Sorenson's (1995) initial study was conducted at Rosemead School of Psychology. This study was then replicated with confirmatory path analysis at George Fox University (Derflinger, 1996; Derflinger, Sorenson, & Bufford, 1996) and at Fuller Theological Seminary Graduate School of Psychology (Pellegrin, Sorenson, & Vande Kemp, 1996). The results at George Fox and Fuller were strikingly similar to those at Rosemead, further supporting Sorenson's contention that the faculty members' personal integrative process is an overlooked but vitally important piece of classroom pedagogy. As Derflinger (1996) concluded,

With regard to curriculum development, data from the present study argue that a faculty member should plan time over the course of the semester to dialog with students about the professor's ongoing personal relationship with God. Such use of class time would seem to be at least as meaningful and useful to students as curriculum based on theory or models of integration. (p. 18)

It took me a long time to realize that I teach integration (either well or poorly) every day, whether or not I am aware of it. For instance, as I write this article, it is Sunday afternoon, and I hurried over to the office from church to work on it. What does that teach my students about the commandment to honor the Sabbath? What does it teach them about the mental health benefits of regular intervals of rest

and play? To explore what it means to teach integration through the cracks, I would like to offer the following three examples. All of these illustrations are based on my experience as a teacher.

The Case of the Anonymous Letter

During my first few years as a psychology professor, I gradually came to a point of burnout, in which I felt out of gas internally to prepare yet one more new course. I found myself teaching a particular new course decidedly badly, and the students were understandably resentful. Worse, I covered up my lack of preparation by trying to connect with the class by cracking some jokes. Unbeknownst to me, one joke inadvertently offended a class member deeply, and the next morning I found a scathing anonymous letter in my mailbox. The accusations stung and I had an intense shame reaction. I walked to a friend's house, slumped to the floor and burst into tears. Later I cried with my husband. Later still with a colleague. I couldn't shake off the pain using my usual psychological methods of coping. I turned to attempts at prayer. No dice. I finally decided that desperate times call for desperate measures. Recalling the potency of a psychodrama workshop I had once attended, I decided to enact a private "sacred psychodrama" ritual with the letter. Sitting alone in my office, I slipped the letter into my folder of Richard Foster's *Renovare* materials and prayed, "Lord, I can't manage the pain of this letter alone. Please let someone like Richard Foster—a man after your own heart—symbolically contain and neutralize the pain in this letter for me." Then I buried the folder deep in a file cabinet. Amazingly, the ritual worked. For the first time in weeks I felt free of the oppressive hold that the letter had on me.

One day, nearly a year later, a student came by my office and asked if he could talk with me. To my utter astonishment he confessed that he was the author of the anonymous letter. He poured out to me some of the deep pain in his personal life that had leaked into the letter. He asked if we could process together what had happened and then bury the hatchet. So we talked ... we cried ... we laughed ... we forgave ... and we recommitted our relationship as professor and student to Christ. A few months later, I smiled to see that this student signed up for an elective course that I was about to teach on (of all topics) the psychology of shame. Given our painful history together, I was touched by his emotional availability

during this course. In fact, I was so impressed by his obvious quest for authenticity, as well as the quality of his course work, that I invited him to become my teaching assistant the following year. When the time came for him to apply for internship, I wrote him a deservingly fabulous reference letter.

The Case of the Child Care Crisis

As a first-time mother of a newborn baby this year, my life as a teacher and scholar has not been without its bumps and occasional bruises. One such potentially bruising moment happened when my baby-sitter called 90 minutes before I was to teach a class to tell me that she was sick and needed to cancel. My knee jerk reaction to this phone message was to panic and think, "Oh no, I'll have to cancel my class today!" When I took hold of myself and thought more rationally, I realized that of course I would not cancel class. However, I noticed that I felt tremendous shame over the prospect of showing up to class with a wiggly, loud, fussy baby in my arms. I felt like a recipe for an internally-off-center-generated disaster in my teaching of the class that day (e.g., Will the class see how awkward I am as a new mom? Will I decompensate under the stress? Will I cope by cracking bad jokes that will result in an offended student writing me an anonymous letter? etc.).

As the minutes ticked away, it suddenly occurred to me that this was a textbook example of "false shame" in my life (i.e., I was bracing myself for feeling undone with humiliation in front of the class, due to an event that was totally outside of my control). Along with this came a haunting question of what integration of my faith with my teaching meant right there and then. I decided that it meant to resist the choice of fretting (which seemed sinful). Instead, I resolved to pray that God might make the class and me receptive to the love and peace that he wanted to lavish on us all in the midst of this rather strange set of circumstances.

In the uttering of that prayer, I felt the oppression of the moment lift from me. Suddenly freed from immobilizing panic, I made eight quick phone calls, and found a student who was willing to baby-sit on 40 minutes' notice. What an answer to prayer. More importantly, however, I believe that God answered my prayer by making me more receptive and pliable internally when the class actually met. As the students settled into their seats, I shared with them my unexpected child care crisis. I used this as a launch

pad to explore with the class how they were faring with managing baby-sitters who suddenly cancel, sick children, and other domestic crises that bump up against their obligations as full-time students and clinicians. It turned out to be an unexpectedly rich and empathic discussion for these students who were struggling more than I realized over these sorts of competing demands. I left that particular class lecture exhilarated with the sense that the kingdom of God had somehow scored a point away from Satan, through a holy alchemy that had transformed my baby-sitter cancellation frenzy into an opportunity for God to lavish his compassion on us.

The Case of Late Assignments

Like many professors, I have a written policy on penalties for turning in late assignments which I include in the syllabus for each course that I teach. Over the years, I have grown fascinated by the range of extenuating circumstances brought to me by students who request extensions without a grade penalty. More fascinating yet has been to wonder what principles I apply to discern which circumstances warrant the penalty-free extensions. "I had to attend my mother's funeral" and "I got spinal meningitis" were slam-dunk cases for me to grant such extensions. "My computer crashed" (me: "When did you start working on this 15 page paper?"; student: "Er ... last night") struck me as a clear case of not granting the extension. But what about the following petition, given to me the day after the L.A. riots? "My cousin's house was burned in the riots, and I felt compelled as a Christian to go and help him instead of working on the assignment." Was I to ask this student to take full ownership of his charitable decision, which included the sacrifice of a poor grade on his paper? Or was I, as a Christian professor, to affirm his noble act of helping a hurting member of the body of Christ by removing the grade penalty for lateness? The integration issues embedded in the process of grading students' assignments came to me with particular vividness several years ago during an actual incident that began as I collected assignments. Some students asked me for "grace" in granting them extensions, due to their feeling swamped with other course work. Anxious to please and eager to be "gracious" as a Christian, I readily granted the four extensions. A few hours later, one of the other students from that class came to my office. He was clearly upset and expressed his frustration. He believed that

my decision to show "grace" to a few students was very unfair to the others, who were also inundated with work, but who had worked late into the night to finish the assignment on time. He correctly suggested that I should not only consider grace and mercy when making such decisions, but also justice.

In contrast, I have had encounters with students on the other end of the spectrum. Based on my actual experience, I will create a hypothetical example. Once, a student came to my office, asking me to go to bat for him in his efforts to have a failing grade altered in a course taught by one of my colleagues. He explained that he had been extremely stressed out over meeting a deadline on his dissertation, and that he wasn't able to put his best efforts into his work in this class. Surely I could help my colleague see that this student's plight merited the grace of the chance to redo assignments for a better grade? When I pointed out the apparent contradiction between "merit" and "grace," he became irritated, stating that he believed it is the Christlike thing for Christians to extend grace to each other. He described the professor's stance on grading as excessively rule-bound and the professor as excessively rigid in general. Such comments from a student would represent a true mother lode of "teaching integration through the cracks" material. In that vein, I could tell this student the real incident described above which confronted me with the Christian ethical dilemma of how to temper grace and mercy with justice (Stob, 1978). I could ask him how he would integrate Christian principles with psychological dynamics in that scenario. Such a student might reply, "What a baby that guy was to come to your office and say that. I bet he was jealous because some students got an extension and he didn't, which was his own fault. After all, 'Ye have not because ye ask not'" (James 4:2, King James Version).

The scenario I have painted is not unthinkable, based on my experience with Christians who confuse grace with entitlement. Based on my own understanding of grace, I would refuse to support such confusion, but it is feasible that such a student might indeed be granted the chance to redo work. By making such exceptions, however, might we as faculty actually be depriving students of the opportunity to take ownership of their own actions, thereby growing in character and professionalism? Moreover, might we also be denying them the opportunity to examine the psychological entitlement issue that is embedded in the theological notion of grace (i.e.,

the hypothetical student's attitude towards the professor: "As a fellow Christian, you owe me the grace of a paper extension").

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we are continuously integrating our faith with our psychological dynamics in everyday life (either redemptively or not-so-redemptively), whether or not we are aware of it. This process is no less true in our work as educators than in any other profession or life circumstance. A curriculum-based education in theories and models of integration can be vitally useful for Christian graduate students seeking integrative training in becoming Christian psychologists. However, I believe that it is in the fusion between process and pedagogy that our true potency to teach integration well lies. Kudos to the likes of Bruce Narramore, who sat beside me at a luncheon a few months ago. Thrilled to pick his brain on how he teaches integration at Rosemead, I confess that I totally ignored the woman seated on the other side of me. Dr. Narramore finally turned to this woman and said, "Pardon me, I hope you'll forgive us for ignoring you. Please tell us about yourself." At that moment I discovered in Dr. Narramore the power of congruence between process and pedagogy in teaching integration.

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