

To be seen within the counselling relationship

Jess Erb

The fear of being seen and known

The words *Do not fear* have never been a phrase I've uttered within the work I do as a psychotherapist. My work is not to make clients *not* fear but rather for us, together in relationship, to dive into the fearful depths, not shying away from the darkness but dwelling within it together. Nearing the end of a session, my job is also to bring the client up to "shallow" enough waters that they may face another week. Rather than *Do not fear*, perhaps my philosophy would be *Let us embark on a fearful journey together*.

Yet this *togetherness*, I believe, is at the heart of many client's fears—the fear of being truly seen by another. While clients deeply desire to work through their darkest fearful depths, within this another fear lurks: that I will *see* them for who they are. To dive into fear's depths means to take off the carefully laid masks, defences, and layers of protection that we have learned to adorn through the years. While facing one's fears is difficult, it is this latter fear that is even scarier. And it is one that is most difficult to work with in the here-and-now of the counselling relationship.

If being fully *known* by another is one of our deepest human needs, it is also one of the most fearful endeavours we can undertake. In this piece, I address this fear through the Christian liturgical practice of confession and posit how the counselling relationship may be one of the first places in which confession can become communal outside of the church, as counsellor and client work to embark into these dark spaces. Following this, I explore whether the act of counselling may help clients reach a better place to accept absolution, which can only ever come from Christ.

The liturgy of confession

During our weekly confessional time, heads bow silently as we think of deeds best left unspoken, opening ourselves to admittance into what we have done and left undone. I find this time powerful and enlivening but often far too short; I am usually just getting into the thick of my sins when the absolution comes.

I've complained before, stating that I have way too many sins for just a short pause for silent confession. It's yet to be resolved, either in providing a longer space for confession or in me tightening the reigns on my sinning.

Anecdotal frustrations aside, I have often wondered whether there might be a discomfort in the silence of confession—in paying attention to



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one's darker deeds—perhaps akin to the discomfort of the painful Good Friday often resulting in the rush to speak of the glory of Easter Sunday. Yet the time of confession is one of the most poignant moments in the service: a communion of sinners showing themselves to God and allowing that space to be used for honesty, reflection, and shining light on that which is darkest in our lives. Furthermore, while many faithful Christians hold the belief that the confession time is not revelatory to God—God *already* knows our hearts and minds—what is important is perhaps not that we are telling something *new* to God but rather

that we are opening ourselves up to the creator in such a profound way as to recognise our place *in relation* to God.

The confessional time provides a place in which we can make full recognition of our lack of deservedness next to the creator, who then forgives our sins. Often this confessional time is just before we commune together—thus not only joining the community as a body of broken sinners but also providing a way of partaking within the broken body of Christ.

Nevertheless, confession is temporally, spatially, and situationally limited. While there is vulnerability in confessing sins to God, the wider body rarely, if ever, will hear these sins; thus the darkness disclosed in silence remains there—hidden from the purview of others. And there is good reason for this: it is one thing to silently confess our sins with heads bowed at church and quite another to speak these sins in the open—to meet the gaze of another as we share our darker material. I have felt this most poignantly within my work as a psychotherapist, and I have dubbed it *the fear of encounter*.

Fear of encounter: The story of Mr. C

He sits with hands neatly folded, as usual, only unlike most sessions he isn't meeting my gaze.

"Mr. C, you seem quiet today. Perhaps a bit apprehensive?"

I have learned to ask these questions more sensitively with Mr. C. He looks up at me, and his eyes are brimming with tears. "I have never told you this before. And I don't think I want to now—to have you look at me after I say this."

His voice trails off only to come back with a resounding loudness that shocks both me and him. "*But I need to,*" he regains himself, "I need you to know this . . . thing . . . because otherwise I will just stay in the dark forever."

Mr. C is by no means the first to wait several months into a session before sharing something powerful; I have learned that often what may bring someone into counselling is not necessarily going to be the main piece of therapeutic work.¹ But I was shocked by Mr. C's resolute need to share his darker story with me.

A timid man, Mr. C usually talked at length about a past that he wished he could have lived—hours poring over how he did not take enough chances and had "wasted" his life. Yet in this counselling hour he shared more. This day, it was not the confession of deeds left undone he shared but rather what he *had* done that had made him feel ashamed. Almost a year of working together, finally I was witness to a narrative—if reluctantly relayed—that had long been locked inside Mr. C and had impaired his every decision since. It was in this moment that I realised it was not Mr. C's timidity that hindered him from living a life he wanted but a deed he felt so dark that the rest of his life was left frozen.

I was honoured and overwhelmed with feeling for what *loss* Mr. C had to endure for almost thirty years. My eyes welled, not with my own feelings but for what I realised Mr. C had gone through. When he saw my tears, his own flowed, and much of the session was spent in silent weeping. He grabbed a tissue and handed me one, and in that exchange our whole counselling relationship changed. This was a pivotal moment for him, for instead of responding in disgust and anger, I was instead pained by his lingering pain. He could see that clearly displayed on my face, in my tears, and in the silence that connected the space between us. In sharing for the first time, Mr. C was met not with another person making him

1 Michael Jacobs, *Psychodynamic Counselling in Action*, 5th ed. (London: Sage, 2017).

feel shame—which he later revealed is what he feared most from me—but rather with a mutual sharing of his darkness.

Facing the forgiver

This process of meeting, of being seen, of sharing one’s darker moments often serves as the first instance of real healing for clients.² This is because counsellors have a special opportunity to provide a faithful witness to cli-



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ents’ stories, and in this meeting of two people—in sharing aloud the story—a client can feel some of the weight of the silent burden lifted. Thomas Cottle argues that the practice of having someone listen to one’s story might be the “quintessential act of counseling and teaching.”³ And it is in this way that we can come to be fully human as we share ourselves with another—or, as Heidegger

powerfully describes, rather than believing we *have* relationships, perhaps it is better to think that we *are* our relationships.⁴

There is great power in opening ourselves up to another, and I have been honoured to be a witness to this time and again with clients—illustrated through the vignette of Mr. C. This means that a bigger part of my job is enabling both the fear and desire to be seen to entangle and work together, for us to dive into these fears through *relationship*. In the counselling space, a client can look me in the eyes and open up about deeds that have long been left in darkness, shining light and mercy into these dark areas. Hearing the story and feeling the weight of it allow for these pieces of self to be carried by another—another who is also flawed.⁵ Getting to this space of being *able* to share, of fighting past the fear of encounter, is of

2 Thomas J. Cottle, “Witness to the Story,” *Schools: Studies in Education* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 143–70; Rosemary Rizq and Mary Target, “‘The power of being seen’: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of how experienced counselling psychologists describe the meaning and significance of personal therapy in clinical practice,” *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 36, no 2 (May 2008): 131–53.

3 Cottle, “Witness to the Story,” 144.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 2008 [1962]).

5 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994).

the utmost importance for this encounter to happen. And when it does, it can provide the path to healing.

Pathways from confession to absolution

Nearing the end of our session, tears dried and shaky voices more stable, Mr. C looked at me and asked, “Am I OK? Will it be OK?”

In that moment, I realised that he was asking if I was OK with him, with what he shared. Was I? Leaning toward him, I said the only thing I could think of: “I don’t know why I am saying it like this, but Mr. C, I forgive you. I see how much hurt you’ve been through. Though I was not at all involved, I feel involved—enough to say that there is forgiveness here.”

While I have had many experiences of being a witness to clients’ pain, this was the first time I had ever felt the need to “forgive” them for what

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had happened. But in this moment, that weird phrase seemed like exactly what was needed. And it made me realise that if I, as counsellor, act as a witness for another’s story, perhaps I can also enable the client an opening to feel some of the forgiveness that they have yet to let themselves feel. As Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne posit, the unconditional positive regard of clients can allow them to start to care for and appreciate themselves.⁶ Perhaps sharing our darker deeds

enables a way of asking for forgiveness or acceptance into these hidden areas of our lives.

Yet asking for forgiveness and feeling forgiven are two different things. For Mr. C, what led to the breakthrough was not that he asked for my forgiveness but that he received my care by both seeing me feel his pain and hearing me speak words of forgiveness. Both of these acts meant that in subsequent sessions he could work with this material within the shame that darkness and fear had held him trapped. I will never be able to offer even a fraction of the absolution that Christ does. But by welcoming one’s darker story with mercy, care, and unconditional positive regard,⁷

6 Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne, *Person-Centred Counselling in Action*, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2013).

7 C. R. Rogers, “The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 44, no. 3 (2007): 240–48.

I see how my witness and care can offer new avenues to both accepting brokenness and seeing new paths to redemption. As with the confessional liturgical time, it can be just as hard to realise that we are redeemed as sinners—to recognise that our place in relation to God has been overtaken by the powerful act of the cross. By offering myself as both counsellor and witness—seeing into these darker deeds and providing a space for relationship—I see how this act enables that moment between confession and absolution. Modelling this process, creating a semblance of what *could be* in the counselling room, allows the practice of being seen, and still cared for, to hold sway.

About the author

Jess Erb is a qualified psychotherapist, having completed her doctorate of Psychotherapy and Counselling from the University of Edinburgh. She currently practices using a dialogue between the psychodynamic and person-centred perspectives and has counseled both youth and adults in Winnipeg, Canada, and Edinburgh, United Kingdom. She has presented at conferences in Europe and North America on the counselling relationship and the counsellor's presence. Jess grew up in Squamish, British Columbia, and currently lives with her husband, Landon, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where they attend St. Margaret's Church.