Idolatry in therapy
Dethroning the gods, enthroning God

Delores Friesen

Marriage and family therapists and pastoral counselors often encounter situations that call to mind Elijah's question to the Israelites and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21).[1] Limping people come to my office to explore their options, their fears, their idolatries, their alliances and commitments. In the process of therapy, they call on their gods and seek to prop up their hopes and dreams and fulfill their needs. Sometimes they find the path to healing through discarding all the false gods they have set up, including (sometimes) their expectations of marriage, their ways of being in the world, their goals and dreams. Sometimes they cry and cut themselves, even engage in suicidal gestures, as they feel bereft of all that they had worked and hoped for.

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But then a more chastened, focused, integrated self emerges, with a heart purified in willing one thing, and the therapist or pastoral counselor stands as a witness to one made whole, with the dross and desires cut away, and the false selves, facades, and masks destroyed. It is holy work, this therapeutic cleansing of the soul that permits people to recognize what they have been worshiping and what it takes to cast down every idol and become integrated and at one with the Creator/Redeemer.

Therapy as stripping away lies, finding meaning

As a marriage and family therapist, and as a pastor, I have been privileged to walk the road with many troubled souls. The essence of therapy is stripping away the defenses, the lies, the beliefs that

keep one bound to relationships or ideas that no longer are life giving and freeing to the soul. The second step, which is sometimes neglected, is equally necessary: helping a client or a parishioner or a troubled, isolated person connect with others and find meaning and purpose in relationships, work, and service. As Alfred Adler summarized it, healthy people are able to love and to work. They, like God, are able to create and redeem. They are focused, single-minded, purposeful. They no longer have to blame others for their situation, or complain, or run around seeking solutions and cures. Instead they have found the center that integrates and holds their life together. They no longer seek solace in passive-aggressive behaviors, violent actions, or anxiety-ridden patterns that threaten or destroy the self and others.

The common idols of our culture—beauty, achievement, riches, privacy, technology, power, adulation, sports, possessions, polarizing political ideologies, pornography, and militarization—captivate and enslave. At the heart of most of these idols is the attempt to present the self as more than it is. For example, anorexia may be an attempt to meet the cultural ideals of slimness and beauty, but to deny the body its food is akin to denying the soul what it needs to flourish and grow. Addictions are often used to mask feelings and to relax people and help them lose their inhibitions, be one of the crowd, and be accepted and desired by others. Narcissism is self-worship; anxiety often signifies an inability to trust and find safety and security.

Jesus' response to the rich ruler, and to the lawyer—seeking, intelligent people who were captured by the idols of their day—was: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–38). Much of the work of therapy is helping people discover who and what they love, and helping them to do it with all their heart, all their soul, and all their mind. When a divided mind and heart cannot let go of its idols and the pulls and pushes of others, there is no center, no loyalty, no integration of heart and mind and soul. The practice of therapy strips away what is false, what divides the soul—perhaps the marriage or the vocation—from one's personhood, and seeks to guide the person back to the *imago Dei*. Finding one's true self, understanding one's personality, developing the courage to ask for

what one needs and wants, letting go of family expectations, and exploring past wounds are all ways the relationship of therapist and client heals and purifies.

For the therapist and pastor, often the task is to challenge the dominant story, the narrative that keeps a person bound or running after things that do not satisfy. In practice, this means approaching the other in humility and empathy, valuing the other and helping him mourn, let go, and discover a new story, a new identity, a new focus. As Jesus put it so aptly in the Beatitudes, blessing comes when one mourns; hungers and thirsts; is merciful, pure in heart, poor in spirit. And being a peacemaker and finding resilience even in the midst of persecution, evil, and false accusations are other marks of those who follow God's way.

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People often come for therapy bringing a combination of unworthiness, shame, and general unhappiness with their life. All these negative feelings enthrone the self and put one in a position more important than the other's or even than God's. In marital counseling, partners often insist that they are innocent, and the one who had the affair, the one who hurt them or left them, is the scum of the earth. The real work of therapy is to dethrone the self, recognize one's own failings and needs, and figure out how to connect with the other and build a bridge of communication so at least some of both partners' needs can be met.

Bound by fear of rejection

A medical student, the first in her family of origin to attend college, is failing her classes. Her constant negative self-talk floods her mind and heart and soul, so she no longer believes that she is capable of becoming a doctor. Exploring her intense anxiety, self-loathing, and depression reveals deep fears that if she did succeed, she would no longer be accepted by the blue-collar mechanics in her family. Her dreams and vision, her deep desire for "something better than working on cars," are buried under the family rules, the traumatic memory of hazing when she graduated from college, and her procrastination and inability to focus enough to study. She constantly thinks of herself, her failures and dilemmas. She

has to begin by naming her fears and worries, and recognizing how self-centered it all is. Then she can start to unpack how much she has idolized "becoming a doctor, and helping my parents get a nice house, so they don't have to work so hard." She has valued medical school not for what she can learn but for the prestige, power, and money she thought it would grant her, when she finally made it through and was a doctor.

The simple act of wearing a rubber band on her wrist and snapping herself with it every time she engages in negative self-talk awakens her to the violence she is doing to herself, and the self-sabotaging attitudes she is indulging. She finally admits that she needs to be a part of her family more than she needs to rescue them or prove to them that she is somebody. She acknowledges her fear that to move beyond where they are might create a chasm so wide it could not be bridged! Her depression and despair are an opportunity to ask herself questions: Who am I? Who is God? What is my purpose in life? What is realistic and possible? What gives life to my soul?

Dethroning the gods of self-justification

A wife and husband are each convinced that the other is narcissistic, self-centered, and impossible to live with, and they are probably both right. Their only child has adopted the patterns they have modeled: they scream, dig in their heels, act in passive-aggressive ways, and are resentful and full of anger and disappointment, because "you have let me down again." These partners have learned not to expect—or give—much. They distance each other in order to keep conflict levels from escalating, and they put each other down in front of their child.

Unless they can dethrone the gods of self-righteousness, self-justification, and self-sufficiency; until they can give up sarcasm and coldness; as long as they refuse to give and receive counsel, grace, sex, understanding and forgiveness, their marriage and their child are at risk. Both are Christians, but their reality is so far from their expectations of a partner "who would always love and care for me" that they have ceased to hope. Recognizing idols and idolized views of self and other will be one place to begin the therapeutic process. Grace, intimacy, delight, and love would all help heal their shame and disgust. When the therapist asks, "Who

delights in you?" "Who gives you grace and accepts you just as you are?" she also offers acceptance, grace, and unconditional positive regard, allowing each individual and the couple and family an opportunity to experience a relationship based on God-like behaviors and trust. Insecure attachments are healed by consistent love and acceptance, and the therapist uses heart, soul, and mind, feelings, experiences, story, and metaphor to challenge and connect.

Dying to accumulate

A professional man spent his retirement agonizing over the ups and downs of the stock market, anxiously calculating whether his savings and investments would suffice. His fascination with the economy's vagaries became an obsession, and he traded almost daily. He lived to read the business news and check his accounts, and he increasingly isolated himself from the outside world, even ignoring his wife, children, and neighborhood, as he made deals motivated by his fears and by a desire to take advantage of others' mistakes. Soon his physical and mental health deteriorated, and he died a broken and disappointed man. One thinks of Jesus' story of the rich fool, who gathered and stored into barns.

But Jesus' admonition to give in full measure also comes to mind: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37–38). A good therapist might have been able to help break down the idols that bound this man preoccupied with his stocks among facades of reality. A counselor could perhaps have worked with him and those he loved, seeking to help him find other meanings and purposes for his life, eliciting gratitude for enduring blessings; creating a new narrative, a new story, an engagement with a future removed from the Monopoly game that consumed him.

Prisoners to self-loathing

Women who have had abortions or who have experienced rape or incest or promiscuity sometimes feel they are "damaged goods,"

and that no one will ever respect or want them. Wise therapists and pastors ask, "Are you too bad to receive grace? Grace woos and comforts us when we think we are too far gone to be rescued. How could you be too bad to receive what is for the bad?"[2] They offer acceptance, forgiveness, and love, and they engage in the redeeming and creating work of God, helping their clients find ways to memorialize an unborn child, create cleansing rituals, write lament psalms. They sit with their parishioners in their tears and pain and self-loathing, until these women can believe that God cares and God forgives, and that God wants their allegiance and commitment, not their self-destruction and preoccupation with the idolatry of "what might have been" or "what should never have happened."

The promise and pitfalls of counseling

As a professor of pastoral counseling in a seminary for more than two decades, I have worked with several generations of students, most of them planning for a ministry of counseling, and some for pastoral or chaplaincy vocations. But sometimes it seems that the church values preaching, telling, and leading more than service, healing, and counseling. Why not train our pastors *and* our counselors to listen to the confessions and pain of those who come to them, so they can help break down the idols and offer forgiveness and grace? Why do we continue to perpetuate the practice and idea that mission and ministry are more worthy vocations than counseling?

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Even more troubling are claims to have The Truth, The Method, or The Correct Theology, which then becomes in itself idolatrous. For example, the commitment of the Biblical Counseling Movement "to use only the Bible in its counseling theory and practice and its general rejection of modern psychology are based on the theological assumption that the Bible is entirely and singularly sufficient for counseling and psychotherapy."[3] Whenever an ideal or theological concept or even an ethical position becomes set in stone, it elevates that truth, that belief, that idea to the level of an idol.

When elements of the Christian faith are taken as ultimate, or one counseling method is chosen as the one and only way to engage in the cure of souls, this becomes

> *the most difficult form of idolatry for Christians to recognize, because it clings to the trappings of Christian subculture and, in the worst cases, to the very means of grace that foster one's relationship with God. Nonetheless, these means can become unconsciously identified with the Self and subservient to its narcissistic agenda and so take on an idolatrous significance in relation to God. Here, religious activity (e.g., church-going, praying, personal devotions, evangelism), the Bible, Christian doctrine, pride in one's denomination or branch of Christianity, a gift of the Spirit, the type of Christian counseling we do and even the fact of one's salvation can be unconsciously abstracted from God and become paradoxical sources of self-aggrandizement and self-satisfaction. They can make believers feel superior to others and so become, at least in part, the unconscious focus of one's ultimate reliance, paradoxically dissociated from the very God to whom they are supposedly related.*[4]

As Blaise Pascal put it, "We [can] make an idol of truth itself, for truth apart from charity is not God, but His image and idol, which we must neither love nor worship."[5]

In sum, then, the Christian counselor has many opportunities to challenge idolatry in all its forms. However, those who do this work face unique temptations and risks, not the least of which is setting up oneself or one's own work as healer as the idol. Walking with others as they journey through life and death is holy work, but those of us who accompany others must guard our own hearts and souls and minds lest we elevate our work, our insights, our training, or our wisdom above that of God. And, like our clients and parishioners, we must worship God and God alone, and love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Notes

[1] All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[2] David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 49.
[3] Wayne A. Mack, "What Is Biblical Counseling?" in *Totally Sufficient: The Bible and Christian Counseling,* edited by Edward E. Hindson and Howard Eyrich (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997); quoted in *Foundations for Soul Care,* by Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 108.
[4] Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care,* 463.
[5] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées/Provincial Letters* (New York: Random House, 1941), 191; no. 581; quoted in *Foundations for Soul Care,* by Johnson, 463.

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