

A Spiritual Understanding of Working with Abused Children

by Roger Heuser & Sam Southard

Introduction

Welcome to a journey of self-discovery and the unfolding world of special children!

We are still amazed at Jesus' response to the disciples' question concerning who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said. **"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me"** (Matthew 18:1-5). Michael Quoist playfully and prophetically describes God's imagination of this subject when he writes,

"I want only children (or childlike, ed.) in my kingdom
Youngsters—twisted, humped, wrinkled white-bearded
—all kinds of youngsters, but youngsters
I like children because my likeness has not yet been dulled in them
They have not botched my likeness
I like them because they are still growing, they are still improving
They are still on the road, they are on their way
But with grown-ups there is nothing to expect any more.
They will no longer grow, no longer improve.
They have come to a full stop.
It is disastrous — grown-ups think they have arrived"

A major reason that Jesus used children to illustrate entrance into the kingdom is because of their own position of being marginalized. Not many children in his day lived to a ripe old age, so once again it was the people on the fringes that received Jesus' special attention.

In this presentation we will explore what it means to have a spiritual understanding of working with abused children. We develop this understanding by looking into some of the teachings of Jesus that help us understand contemporary issues (such as abuse issues), and we will explore how our personal stories relate to the gospel and to the story of others. (We will use the metaphor of story since it is common to all of us regardless of our church backgrounds). More specifically, we hope to bring to you a growing awareness of yourself. Your self awareness is the charisma (or gift) that you bring to a child. It enables you to bring the gift of a deeper

understanding of abused children, and an exploration of what it means to be in a helping relationship.

Note: Part of your training involves self-disclosing parts of our own journey. If this is new to you, take your time. This is an affair of the heart, a spiritual exercise. Let the Spirit guide you toward openness and truth in His time, rather than by the expectations of those who are in your group.

You Are Writing the Fifth Gospel

The good news of Christ is bringing significance and meaning to those who feel insignificant themselves or to those who are seen as insignificant by others (see Luke 4:18, 19). This is central to the mission of Royal Family KIDS Camps (RFKC) —ministering to abused children in such a way that they have significance. This good news is a way to solve the major problem of those persons who have been deprived and mistreated in life—the problem of injustice. So, how does this good news become good news for us, and for these children?

Each counselor has a story that in one week encounters a child's story. Our own stories gain significance and meaning when we see how they are part of God's story in Christ. The gospels — according to four of Christ's followers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—give us insight of how individuals become part of (or choose not to become part of) Christ's life. The story of Christ and his followers does not end with the fourth gospel. Each of us who responds to Christ's invitation to follow him continues a narrative that describes God's relationship with us as individuals and our relationship with others.

Would you consider your own writing of a fifth Gospel during your week with abused children? The plot in the child's life (or your own) may take several turns quite unexpectedly. You will not know for certain how a story ends in the life of any person you meet, but you will play an important part in their chapter during your week with Royal Family Kids' Camp. The following questions will help us understand pertinent elements of your own story:

Four questions concerning your own story:

1. When were you first aware of God?
2. When did you make your first consequential commitment to God?
3. When did God seem closest to you?
4. When has God seemed far away?

Construct a time line as far back as you can remember up to the present time. Identify those persons, circumstances and events that help you tell your own story. Notice the similarities and dissimilarities when you share your story with others and listen to theirs. (Note: it is quite possible that when children who have attended Royal Family Kids' Camp look back on their life from the future, they will see their week there as at least one week of their lives which was filled, not only with positive memories, but perhaps even provided a life changing experience.)

The Power of Your Own Example

The primary way to give significance to a child is to treat her/him justly, providing through your own example tangible expressions of justice. As a counselor you recognize that a sense of injustice, often compounded by layers of deep seated cruel behaviors and attitudes of others, fuels the child's unhealthy attitudes and behaviors. Children—however confusing, misguided and raging their behaviors seem to be—continue to search for what is fair.

In the story of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25-37), the one who had fallen among thieves, beaten, and left half dead, deserved to be treated justly, illustrating Christ's definition of being a neighbor. The severely abused man was to be on the same plane with the Jew and, therefore, deserved the same respect and consideration. Fortunately for the one who had fallen, the "mission" of the Good Samaritan was different than the 'mission' of others who passed by. There is no doubt that the power of example expressed in attitudes and mission does make a difference!

This is the attitude that Christians, who learn from the story of the Samaritan, convey to all persons who are in any way deprived of self-respect and basic care. They deserve respect at least in the same way that Christians respect themselves. They are cared for in the same way that the Christians care for themselves. Our mission and power of examples do make a tangible difference!

Perhaps the most profound gift you can give to children in one week is the power of your own example, being aware that you are also a child in the kingdom of heaven and living out a witness to your own story in such a manner that you bring significance to a child.

Your example of inner attitudes (e g., humility, gentleness and respect) and outer behaviors (spending time in listening and playing together) even in one brief week can be a tangible expression of your sacrificial commitment and care to be with children who often feel so insignificant.

Questions concerning the power of one's own example:

1. Think of the person(s) who most positively influenced you? What words would you use to describe them? Specifically, what did they do?
2. Think of the person(s) who most negatively influenced you? What words would you use to describe them?
3. How does this discussion relate to your week of counseling at RFKC? What do you want the power of your example to look like—what specific attitudes and behaviors do you hope to communicate in relationship with a child?

Creating a hospitable place for others is conditioned by how you responded to injustices.

Being an example does not mean premature disclosure of the details of abuse we suffered as children. It does mean that we create, with God's grace, a hospitable place in our own soul for the reception of hurt and hostility from another. Like our Lord, we take into ourselves the wounds of all those for whom he was wounded.

But we do this with respect for personal variations. No matter how much we are moved by a child's story, it is his/her unique burden. Each of us must carry our own. The details of our burden may not directly relate to the burden of the child under your care in camp. And the self-reassuring phrase, "I know exactly how you feel" probably should not be used.

In a word, be translucent rather than transparent. Let the child's story be illuminated by the light of our care and respect, rather than cast in the shadow of personal details that we pile on as adults ("It has been my experience;" "Let me tell you how it is").

Let your awareness of former (or present) distrust (major or minor) be an open door of hope to those who feel nothing good about themselves because of years of abuse. These words are basic in the Word, but can you put this in your words? Can you admit to ways in which you do/did not trust some part of yourself, or have confidence that others can/could be trusted with your personal story?

Such severe questions for people of faith can only be answered by the leap of self-disclosure for a purpose beyond our self-protection. Are you ready for the personal discussion of basic justice issues that verifies you as a "tested" disciple? If so, you're on the way to establishing authenticity with a distrustful child.

So, let's begin with some exploration of the soul. What was "injustice" to you as a child? List some examples:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

You probably did not use the word "injustice" if these examples came before or in the early years of grade school. "Fair" is the usual word used by children when others do not keep the "rules of the game." Early in grade school these rules are obeyed because that is the way we can enjoy playing with each other. By the time we are as old as Jesus was in his question and answer session with Temple elders, we can explain the rules as a part of moral living. That is, we try to do to others as we pray they would do to us.

For example, when Sam was 6, an older boy wanted to borrow his new baseball for a game between boys on different streets. Sam objected, and the older boy said: "Don't you want us to win?" So Sam gave him the ball. Later in the day, someone threw the ball into Sam's yard, minus the cover. Sam thought he was "mean" and "tricky" and never trusted him again.

So what did you say to yourself when someone was "mean," "unfair," - or whatever words you write now as you remember?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What we are trying to demonstrate from your answers is the way you thought about what happened to you at that age. For example, did it shake your faith in others? Or did you conclude that this was an isolated insult to your space in life?

If violation to your self-respect continued, then you might develop more generalized conclusions, such as "No adults can be trusted." And, if there was no friend to attend you, you might turn the distrust on yourself and say, "I'm no good. That's why I am treated this way."

By now you can see that the development of trust /distrust is shaped by several strong influences, such as the presence/absence of trustworthy people, and the persistence of attitudes and actions that lead us to trust/distrust.

We can test our awareness of these conditions upon us and others by asking “Was I repeatedly treated unjustly by someone I depended on for life and love?” This will help us measure our initial capacity to enter into the heart and life of the children in our camp.

If there was much more love and justice than injustice, you will have resources of warmth and acceptance that draw children to you. But you may also be naive. Your assumptions about trust will be challenged through incidents like the following:

Suppose that after dinner on the first night of camp, a new counselor saw a 10 year old boy collecting leftover hamburgers from his table and shoving them into his pockets. The counselor asked if the boy was going to feed animals in the woods. “No,” he replied, “I just want to be sure I have enough for tomorrow.” The boy had often been “thrown out of the house” before mealtime.

If you experienced more injustice than fairness and love in childhood, you won't be naive. Your heart will beat in time with neglected children. Good, but not if it's unreflective acceptance. So we need to lift up another resource for spiritual counsel: the way you think about the consequences of justice/injustice in yourself and others.

Please use your head as well as your heart as a counselor. In previous learning exercises we aimed at the heart You told how you felt as a child. Now let's exercise our head.

The Head and Heart of Wise Counsel

We ask about your thinking because we want you to be wise rather than impulsive; to use your head as well as your heart as a counselor. In previous learning exercises we aimed at the heart. You told how you felt as a child. The following is an example of why it is necessary to also use your head.

A counselor who had suffered much injustice as a child was immediately drawn to a child at camp who acted just like the counselor in grade school. On the first day he patted the boy on the shoulder, grinned broadly, and said: “I want to be your best friend.” The boy froze. He would not go near the counselor for days. He had been repeatedly molested by a relative who was near the age of the counselor (and who probably used the same “warm” language).

Here is a “head” exercise.

What did you figure was the best way to protect yourself whenever you were badly (or unfairly or unjustly) treated or blamed as a child?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

After reflecting on your answers, consider this question: What do I want to tell other counselors (and myself) about the way we protected ourselves? When you explain yourself; others will probably be very sympathetic.

Enjoy the acceptance. Then ask yourself “So what?” We may sound unsympathetic when we raise a question about this general support of each other. We’re challenging because it is not enough to have courage in overcoming the reluctance and silence that defend us against distrust. We must also seek wisdom in understanding why we talk certain ways because there have been some threats to our self-esteem at some time in our lives.

Note.: These ways of responding to a threat are important and necessary at any time we are in danger, but they are troublesome to us and others if they become habitual responses. We know they are “troublesome” when friends (and maybe some enemies) say, “Why do you always have a chip on your shoulder when nobody is attacking you?” They have noted our defensive responses and wonder where the danger is.

Do all of us have some vestiges of these defenses against danger in us? If so, what’s the evidence that they still exist? Here’s our theory:

The way we protected ourselves in childhood (from minor or major unfairness) can be identified in the way we still respond to any sudden or major threat to our self esteem.

Well, that may sound like an insult to your intelligence or maturity. Easy now, we're just trying to follow the example of the apostle James, who asked the first believers to check their unseen rudder in the water, even though they were “on course” in their stated commitment to do good, love others, etc. The “rudder” was self awareness. James warned that if we don't look carefully into ourselves and remember what we saw, we are at the mercy of any doctrine or

impulse that sounds good to us (James 1). He wanted the head and heart to work together, to think through what we felt about ourselves and those we served.

The Purpose of Conversation

James then issues a warning about the tongue as a fountain of blessing/cursing. His moral conclusion makes good sense in modern communication theory. The purpose of conversation is both to reveal and conceal ourselves

Is this really so? Jesus thought so. A dramatic example would be the clear and deep way in which he told skeptical Pharisees that he was God's son (John 9). He was revealing himself. But they wouldn't believe him. Jesus identified their excuses as bondage to sin. They defended themselves with the assertion that they were sons of Abraham and had never been in bondage to anyone. Throughout the rest of the chapter there is growing tension between revealing and concealing conversation.

We would not expect your talks as counselors to be so definitive. But they should be guided by an admission that we use words in two ways, depending on the amount of trust or distrust that is stirred up in us.

A wise person also learns from Jesus' spirit to identify the way in which "the rudder" is revealing or concealing us from others. This is not easy, for as the Apostle James notes, we are often unaware of the way we actually "come across" to others in our speech. But there are certain habitual patterns of concealment during threat. If we can identify them in our response to real or conceived dangers to self-esteem there will be two benefits. First, we will be closer to the "true religion" that James describes. Second, we will be alert and sympathetic to similar patterns of concealment among children who suffer from massive damage to self-esteem

Here are some exercises.

What do you say to a loved one to "smooth things over" so they won't get mad?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How similar is this to the protection you used as a child? We suspect it bears enough similarity to be admitted. We're not asking for a judgment, like "childish" or "mature." We're just trying to acknowledge a sometimes-used concealment, which is called "placating" by Virginia Satir in her excellent study of family communication *The New Peoplemaking*.

Here's another familiar way to conceal ourselves. What do you say to a loved one when, without discussion, you want them to say that they are wrong?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Why do we project blame onto others before we hear the whole story (as they see it)? Usually there's some anxiety that, in this case at least, we're not quite sure of ourselves. So we don't want any examination of our responsibility for this mess!

This may be a rare occurrence in your family, but we push the idea so you will consider how a child feels when they have been habitually subjected to this kind of concealment from persons they want to understand, support, and forgive them.

Let's go on to a middle-class trick of the mind. Let's suppose that you despise loud blaming. You try to be completely objective. Show how rational analysis keeps you cool on a hot subject

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

During a drive to prayer meeting, a prayer partner of Pastor Sam's wife asked how Pastor Sam felt about accusations that he took too much car allowance from the church. The question disturbed the peace of mind that Pastor Sam sought to have before a time of sharing and prayer. He told this prayer partner of a Presbyterian study of fair allowances and said we should be as professional as they were. "Bah!" she said. "I despise people who are as secure as you are."

Well, since this form of concealment didn't work so well (even for a "professional"), let's try another (which is very similar):

How do you pretend that you “were not there.” “All hell” may have broken loose in the kitchen yesterday, but today, when you and your family are in the parlor with the preacher, you don't discuss it that way. Name some typical phrases that designate you:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Specifically, how do we help another regain self respect and significance damaged from unjust treatment?

We seek to help the person to identify the secret (or not-so-secret) sense of justice by helping the person speak without fear or shame about that which troubles them.

If they are unwilling or unable to speak of their pain, then we may help them regain self respect simply by our hospitality, accompanying them on their journey if for only a week with care, acceptance and respect. Accordingly, they will have a positive memory of someone who accepts them just as they are.

You will not be able to hear or see all of their story—we don't remember all of our own. But there is this thread that runs through every chapter of their life and offers meaning and insight into their story. Your job is to find out the plot of their story. If we changed the metaphor from story to movie, we would see that there are specific, identified frames that, should we walk through, would provide a consistent pattern that give meaning to the whole film.

Some children may let you in on some of these snapshots or movie frames of their existence and experiences, and you will see the pain that often appears in their words and/or on their faces. Why do the experiences of life give them pain? They are suffering because of injustices!

Since we cannot hear the entire story, how do we put together the significant frames into a meaningful pattern that demonstrates a significant theme? How do we know that persons (like ourselves) are in pain or feel that they must defend themselves with insult or as a threat to their significance?

You may be shown old wounds or at least the scabs of former wounds; these are communicated by children in non-verbal and verbal ways. For example your past traumatic experience with water may cause you to suggest that the child not go near the pool. These

revelations of old wounds are warnings to us that we are feeling threatened or imperiled in some way.

If we have been neglected or abused during a time of our life when we were defenseless, we will find ways of defending our pain which can become permanent and chronic with those who are burdened by continued sense of injustice (or lack of self esteem). Virginia Satir has identified ways of responding to a threat which include computing and projection/blaming [2].

These ways of defending are not unique to abused children. They are, to some degree, common to all of us so we can note them in ourselves. And, in time, we can also learn to recognize the use of these defenses in others when they communicate with us. But we must first begin to recognize these defenses in ourselves before we look for these in others. Why? Because our own self-awareness provides clues as to how effective we will be in helping others. If we are not honest with ourselves and open to the truth about our own story, how can we expect others to be?

Write down some ways in which you defend against a threat:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

These can be specific indicators that give us the clues to understand the child's defending behaviors. How much do you need to know to be of help once you understand how a child expresses defenses? What does a child need, to be able to live with both justice and injustice in this world? The answer is for the child to be in the presence of people who will relate to them with respect and an empathic understanding of their indignation, rage, or self-contempt.

We can learn such lessons as illustrated in the life of Jesus who was unjustly condemned by those who hurled insults and physical harm, yet he lived with love, joy and hope in the midst of this. The mission of Jesus was on behalf of the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He understood the meaning of unjust suffering. And he prepared his disciples to also live with love, joy, hope and courage in the continuation of injustice during their life time.

As followers in this century, we understand what Jesus said during his last meal with the disciples about the continuation of deprivation of rights and continued persecution, without any guarantee that in this world we will have complete deliverance (John 15:18-1 16:4a). In order to help us through this journey, we experience the presence of Jesus through the Counselor, the Spirit of truth (John 16:4B-15).

The story of Jesus connects with our story, and with the child's story. But we continue to live and hope, knowing God delivers us, and we work toward inner confidence amidst the abuse, rage, listlessness, and denial. One biblical writer encourages his readers to “. . . hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23-24).

God has provided a remedy and a model for alleviating suffering. We gain insight for ourselves by observing the very commitment of God being God-with-us. An effective counselor (or partner with God) against this kind of suffering and abuse must be comfortable with the gift of hospitality, just being with another on their journey. What does it take for the presence of a companion to be effective? When have we ourselves received comfort and consolation; has it been when others have given a piece of advice, telling us what to do and when to do it? Has it been when others immediately began to pray with us before we had time to express what was troubling us?

The premature prayer may actually create distance and provide a way for the prayer itself to ignore the other person's pain. Advice can be helpful at certain moments, but there is no substitute for someone simply being with us in a time of easy solutions and expectations to “fix it” for another person. It is difficult to say, “I can't explain why this has happened to you, and I can't tell you what you should do, I can only tell you that I will be with you this week, I care for you, and I will be your friend as much as you wish.”

Henri J. M. Nouwen speaks of the companion with hospitality as a “wounded healer” [3], one who has had enough of life's wounds himself to be genuine and empathic, and one who has received healing grace himself to be able to be with another, however vulnerable the moments may be. Being with another in vulnerability to enter into their world of weakness, frustration and pain is demanding when we ourselves are unable to “fix it” for the other person or, perhaps more frustrating, when they don't want our “fixing them.”

Before leaving the subject of communication, a word about listening. This is probably one of the most important forms of communication you can utilize.

Someone has said that “listening is a sacrament.” Some churches refer to themselves as sacramental, and define a sacrament as an outward sign of an inward grace. Listening is the outward sign of the grace of genuine interest and concern. Be a good listener.

Boundaries

What do we do with our feelings of wishing to continue to help or share everything about ourselves? Are you one who can push too hard or care too much? When we speak of boundaries, we identify our limits. For example, we live with God-given boundaries of time and place and, if we push beyond them, we are disobedient and self-serving. Jesus found the balance of boundaries between engagement in ministry among crowds and engagement in solitude and in intimate community. He often would withdraw to a lonely place to spend time alone with the Father, and he would also include time with his closest disciples. Engagement in ministry expends our energy; spirituality (including community) restores our energy and capacity for serving others.

In the setting of Royal Family KIDS Camps, boundaries help us know our limits between who we are and who the child is; between what we can do and what we cannot do. People with unclear boundaries will often share inappropriately with another, or they will “take on” for themselves the pain and feelings of another person. If someone else is in pain, they feel they have the same pain.

The metaphor of a wounded healer does not mean that you as a counselor share your own deepest wounds with the child. **Should you be so tempted, you will continue to abuse the child by trying to make them be your counselor.** The wounded healer's strength lies in the willingness to be with someone else in pain since you have been in like places yourself. But the wounded healer also has received enough healing grace to separate themselves from the other who is in pain.

The Good Samaritan left the wounded person with the inn-keeper. You will have one week to be hospitable, to create positive memories for another human child. So here we take comfort, and we discipline ourselves by Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan, who made no attempt to complete the care of a wounded person. He simply did what was necessary through administering first aid, and then he entrusted him to another to contribute as well.

There are times when we are limited in what we can do for another, and we must trust that God shall help the person on their journey through others and in a variety of life’s experiences, even though it will be without us. Jesus certainly trusted his disciples enough so that he would let them be on their own to learn even hard lessons for themselves, and to simply grow up. We learn from Jesus and his relationships that there is a time for support, closeness and intimacy; there is also a time for separation and letting go. Our genuine respect for the child as a person can take our limited relationship and use it for godly purposes in the following weeks and months.

Who will continue the care of the child after the week at Royal Family Kids' Camp? The role of the innkeeper in Jesus' story is not identified as the church or even someone filled with the Spirit. Our spirit is quieted when we are tempted to say too much or push too hard in our time with the child. We can have confidence and courage that the child may be with other persons in the future, and be open to the same Spirit who has guided us through a variety of life's experiences. What we have been with a child will not die just because we are not with them.

How do you begin to explain this to yourself and to a child? Thursday is the day to begin to say good-bye. When this happens, the child may act out in frustrating behaviors to you. These simply are ways for them to cover their anxiety, putting scabs on the wounds again. An overzealous counselor trying to force re-birth may be actually causing "abortion of the soul."

[1] Michael Quoist, *Prayers for Life*.

[2] Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking*

[3] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*

Spiritual Impact

Royal Family Kids' Camps represents the faith-based community coming alongside social services to provide a week of enrichment and memorable experiences that are positive and wholesome for foster children.

Because these children are wards of the court, Royal Family cannot proselytize, or coerce any child to accept a faith or belief system different than they already profess.

Because most abused and neglected children are from dysfunctional families, the concept of a loving, caring father is generally a distorted, or foreign, one, as they find it hard to relate to God the Father as the God of love.

Many of these children feel guilty, embarrassed, angry and fearful about their background and it is difficult for them to believe they are worthy of God's love. Instead, they feel they are bad because bad things have happened to them and that God the Father only loves good people. Since Bible knowledge is either limited or lacking among these youngsters, it is NOT WISE to begin to approach them with their need for salvation, because they are a sinner. Instead, **the fact that God loves them unconditionally** needs to be reinforced over and over again by the counselors and all other camp staff.

Examples of how unconditional God's love is and what unconditional means should be emphasized. (Unconditional love = **NO THING** you can do can separate you from the love of God. Romans 8:39.) Throughout the week the children will have many questions about the

Bible, Jesus and God. Remember to always lead them back to God's love for them. If they discuss their abuse, reassure them that God did not cause the abuse, but choices were made by the abuser who caused their abuse.

Briefly discuss the concept of Jesus blessing the children and caring for the children as described in Mark 10:13 - 16 (from The Living Bible):

¹³Once when some mothers were bringing their children to Jesus to bless them, the disciples shooed them away, telling them not to bother him.

¹⁴But when Jesus saw what was happening he was very much displeased with his disciples and said to them, "Let the children come to me, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as they. Don't send them away! ¹⁵I tell you as seriously as I know how that anyone who refuses to come to God as a little child will never be allowed into his Kingdom."

¹⁶Then he took the children into his arms and placed his hands on their heads and he blessed them.

Remember, each staff member, regardless of position, is an extension of God's love to these special children and the greatest task any of us has is to represent God's unconditional love in such a way the children will understand what that love really means and begin to believe that it is truth so that their lives might be changed by the hope that only Jesus gives.

