

CHAPTER 16

THE HELPING PROCESS AND CHRISTIAN BELIEFS: INSIGHTS FROM ALAN KEITH-LUCAS^{1 2}

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“Helping is not a technique. It is an investment of one’s self” (Keith-Lucas, p. 17). That statement begins our journey into understanding the nature and approach of our professional helping according to one who has written most practically and profoundly about the nature of the helping relationship in social work. Clinician, consultant, and author Alan Keith-Lucas devoted much of his professional life to understanding and communicating what actually makes a difference when “professional helpers” encounter those we call clients and patients and consumers. The buzz word today is “evidence-based practice.” How do we as social workers engage our clients in ways that produce change? Alan Keith-Lucas taught that there are principles of helping that are essential to effectiveness and to positive outcomes. “This is a difficult and skilled business. If we are going to attempt it, we need to have some skill in helping.” (Keith-Lucas, p. 31).

The work of Alan Keith-Lucas continues to inform and inspire practice in child welfare more than ten years after his death. At a recent national conference of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW), focus was given to the writings and teaching of AKL as pertinent in practice today. A number of themes emerged in the discussions of professional social workers and in the special edition of the Journal of Social Work and Christianity devoted to the celebration of 100 years since Keith-Lucas’ birth.

Theme 1: The ethical integration of Christian faith and social work practice is possible, though not without its challenges. Social workers at the annual conference who knew Keith referenced his ground breaking writing that recognized the contributions of Christianity and Christians to the development of the social work profession. Ressler referred to this quote: “It must be intellectually rigorous, conducted by people who are amateurs neither in religion nor social work. It will have to deal with the ‘hard paradoxes’ rather than the ‘easy correspondences’” (p. 248). Powell recognized that Keith believed and taught that “our Christian faith should greatly enhance our ability to be of help to those we seek to serve; sincere Christian faith provides us with a source of inspiration, insight and skill” (p. 262). Sherwood identified Keith’s belief that “our fundamental assumptions about values and the nature of persons are always a matter of faith and worldview, whether religious or secular....” (p. 270). Harris summed up

Keith's commitment to the concept that good helping by the Christian always proceeds from the concepts of grace and forgiveness (p. 297).

Theme 2: Helping in social work practice is grounded in respectful relationships. This is a fundamental concept throughout Keith's writings about faith and practice. It is fascinating to see the parallels between Keith's theology and social work values. It was Keith who first wrote about the concept of client self determination, identifying it with God's gift of choice and unconditional love. Powell highlights this statement from *Giving and Taking Help*: one principle of good helping is that "helping people find their own way is better than controlling them, however subtly" (p. 266). Sherwood follows up on this theme of respect and self determination by identifying "the importance of respectful relationships in which the client is the 'expert,' valuing client self-determination rather than manipulation or control" (p. 270). Even with mandated clients, Keith recognized that they must be given the right to "decide what to do with the help offered" (p. 274). Harris notes that Keith understood these as "shared values of both secular social work and religion, including the worth and dignity of all human beings, a commitment to self determination, the need for kindness and understanding, and the importance of ethical and just principles" (p. 296).

Theme 3: All good helping involves three interlocking concepts of reality, empathy and support. In fact, these concepts were part of Keith's definition of helping before he came to faith in Christ and were part of his ability to understand God as Father, God as Savior, and God as Holy Spirit (Ressler, p. 247). Harris identifies the following description of Keith's triune helping model:

I have tried to show that these are the three ways in which God works with us, as Father, the One who plans the circumstances of our lives and gives us rules for living; as the Son who shared our life and 'was tempted in all ways as we were,' so that He understands our troubles, and as the Spirit who is always with us. (p. 297).

This concept became part of an organizing paradigm on the helping relationship. Kuhlman summed it up this way:

It distinguishes 'help' from 'control, focuses on the 'helping relationship,' and attempts to specify the 'helping factor,' that is, the combination of 'reality, empathy, and support' in order to make the basic principles of helping accessible to a wide variety of professionals and non-professionals. (p. 314).

Theme 4: Child Welfare Services are much more appropriately named and directed as Family Services. "Keith thought that residential care could be creatively used to benefit both children and families. It should be family centered....(Powell, p. 259). Keith believed that we would do better to focus on "patching up homes rather than patching up children" (p. 261). The social workers at the conference who knew Keith recognized in his work the precursor to the current kinship care movement, summed up in this comment by Harris: "Instead of trying to rescue children from poor or dysfunctional families, Alan Keith-Lucas recommended that families be understood as important to their children and a resource for planning for care for the child" (p. 299).

These speakers, authors, and in many cases colleagues of Alan Keith-Lucas identified on the 100th anniversary of his birth the inspirational, prophetic messages that still inform social work practice and helping today. The time-honored and practice-validated principles of this visionary leader are worth remembering and emulating.

I am more motivated than ever to share the timeless wisdom of this leader with social workers who are newly trying to integrate their faith and practice and those who are discouraged with the effort.

I first met Alan Keith-Lucas more than 30 years ago. I was a caseworker at the South Texas Children's Home where "Keith" (as he asked to be called) was a consultant who was invited by our administrator to the campus periodically to help us figure out this thing called faith-based residential child care. Dr. Keith-Lucas (I know, Keith) was, on first inspection, an odd looking man with his thin brushy goatee, his tweed jacket with the patched pockets, and his unlit pipe in one hand. His "older adult" look and his British accent gave him a distinguished air though he never seemed formidable to me. I went to the first meeting with him more than a little skeptical that this "outsider" could offer any insight of value to those of us who lived and worked among these children every day. He captured my imagination and my respect by the end of our first five minutes together. Here was a man who read and wrote widely, thought deeply, and loved children simply and completely. He was able in a few days on the campus to connect with the most intractable of the children. He delivered with kindness insights into the attitudes and behaviors of the staff (including me, I confess) that allowed us to look with new eyes into the hearts and potential of children instead of the scars from their damaged lives. He drew as much from Uncle Remus stories as he did from scripture. He, like another great teacher and minister to children, communicated through stories the most amazing truths. He was unorthodox in many ways. Keith saw and responded to the wounded child inside each of us. Remarkably, he left us with the tools to do the same for every child in our care as well as their parents and families.

I continue to regularly read what Alan Keith-Lucas wrote and left behind and I ask my students to do the same. He was a visionary, prophetic social worker, and educator. He wrote, in some cases 50 years ago, about concepts beginning to be understood and used in child care and in social work practice today. Keith's understandings and articulations are life changing. His understandings of the helping relationship, of the importance of the whole person with all of his or her history, of the value of concrete services, of the lifelong impact of separation and loss, of the Biblical mandate to love and respect others including (perhaps especially) those different than we are changed me and continues to change others more than ten years after his death.

I do not propose in this chapter to improve on what Keith has written about the helping relationship. I propose to gather from his works clarifying insights that provide the reader with both a glimpse and deep baptism into the wisdom Alan Keith-Lucas offers us as we discover more about being a helper in a relationship with those in the world who are wounded and to whom we are called.

In his book, *Giving and Taking Help*, Alan Keith-Lucas asks us to consider anew our motivation and our preparation for entering into a helping relationship with others. He asks us to move away from formulaic helping and tells us that

focusing on the application of a particular technique can result in poor outcomes if we have forgotten the main thing, the client. That, more than anything, sums up his central premise: The client is the expert of his/her own experience. The client is the specialist in the helping relationship, the person who must, in the end, make the decisions and be invested in the process. Keith explains that we begin as helpers by respecting our client's right and ability to make the choices that lead to change. It is the client who must live out the choices that are made and the results that are set in motion. So the client must be engaged in making active choices. An active, willing choice is one that brings with it commitment and the energy and potential to deal with life's circumstances. What then is the helping person's role? It is in relationship and in remembering that the relationship is mutual; the helper and the "helped" are mutually engaged in a relationship focused on choice and change. But having a helping relationship does not mean a having a social relationship like a friendship or a relationship that is focused on being pleasant. Yes, effective helping professionals care deeply about their clients; but that caring means both not prescribing what the other person should do and being willing to stay engaged in the helping relationship even when the circumstances and the decisions are difficult.

Keith-Lucas tells us: "The defined purpose of the helping relationship is to help a person or group to make choices about a problem or situation and about the help they are willing to take about it." (p. 51) This by necessity means learning how to hear what the client is saying to us and believing that only the client can make a real choice about what course of action will have meaning to him or her. Even in situations where the social worker also represents the "agenda" or interests of the agency, there can be no significant helping without the client's engagement and involvement. It is possible through effective helping to secure that engagement and involvement, to break through the barriers of distrust and agency power and prescription. It works when we let go of the notion of social control and engage in the kind of helping in which clients understand their own responsibility for their lives and the impact of their decisions on the lives of others. Keith-Lucas compares helping a client to trying to move a stalled trolley up against a coiled spring. All of the pushing in the world will only increase the "resistance" and likelihood of ending up further away from the stated goal. Instead, our role as helpers, according to Keith, is to help "uncoil the resistance" or in effect, address the negative experiences and negative feelings that may be keeping the client from being able to make progress. Keith presents a fascinating model for working with clients who have experienced loss of all kinds. He addresses the most important question in helping those who have experienced loss: What makes the difference in coming out of the crisis or loss experience with resilience and mastery instead of despair and lifelong disengagement? Every client encounters tragedy and loss. Keith adapts the "standard" grief and loss model to clarify that those who overcome and are able to turn tragedy into triumph are those who are empowered to address the loss and the feelings that come with it, a phenomenon he calls "protest." The helping person is then, not the person who makes everything seem fine, but the person who permits, even facilitates, the expression of the pain and outrage generated by the loss. The theme again of the helping relationship is authenticity and acceptance of clients even when they are crying or angry or tired or unpleasant.

What follows is the substantive text from Chapter 5 and Chapter 10 from the 1994 Revised Edition of *Giving and Taking Help*, in Dr. Keith-Lucas' own words. Some of the original text has been abridged in order to make space for materials from both chapters. My comments and reflections are in italics. I do this in the belief that Keith's work will be transforming in the life of the social worker who is called of God to professional helping. I'm not sure anyone can improve on Keith's words. My reflections are intended to lift up the concepts and add my own voice and experience to his.

Keith has much more to say about the nature of helping than I have been able to capture here. This material has been chosen because it captures one of his core ideas—that all good helping involves the skillful use of reality, empathy, and support—and that these dimensions of helping reflect the very nature of God.

The Helping Factor (*Giving and Taking Help*, Chapter 5)

Various Theories

There must be something which the helping person brings into the relationship through which help is actually given. The relationship we have discussed cannot do this by itself. It is resultant and not something that can be created apart from what goes on between helper and helped. We cannot set up such a relationship and then sit back and expect help to flow from it without some positive action or contribution on our part. *Helping happens when we invest ourselves in the lives of others, when we are engaged with them in the "here and now" as they understand it. We bring ourselves to the process understanding that we may well be changed as much as the person we are committed to helping. This active participation is the key to effective helping.*

Quite clearly, too, the helping factor is something more than the material things with which help often deals, such as money, a job, housing or medical care, although it is a mistake to think that these things are unimportant. It was one of the misapprehensions of many nineteenth-century helpers that to give material things was wrong, or at best, a necessary evil. *Many helping persons today seem to miss the tremendous importance of "concrete helping." The model of Jesus as helper includes many examples of his provision of material needs, his ability to meet the needs presented to him in the moment.*

A job, a house, an opportunity are very important to people. They may be completely necessary to the solution of their problems. Yet, there is something more to helping than this. While there are obvious situations in which they are all that are needed, in which case helping would seem to consist solely in their provision, in the majority of situations something else has to happen, either in the actual giving or possibly before it, if a person is to make full use of them. And even then their mere provision can be done in such a way that their use is enhanced or limited. The dignity of the application procedure, the concern shown for details, the promptness of their provision, even the setting in which they are given, all contribute to or deduct from their helpfulness.

There have been many attempts to isolate or define the primary helping factor. The nineteenth century, by and large, relied on moral exhortation, friend-

liness, and encouragement. Later a more rationalist approach relied on careful case study and appropriate treatment, which in general meant manipulation of the environment and the supplying of influences which the helped person was thought to lack. A little later, in the late twenties and early thirties of this century, it was believed that listening alone was perhaps the primary helping factor. The helper became little more than a mirror against which the helped person projected his concerns.

Knowing “Why”

With the advent of psychoanalysis, interpretation of unconscious motives was given first place. It was believed that the rationality of the conscious brain, brought face to face with the apparently infantile reasoning which the unconscious seems to employ--its tendency, for instance to identify wholly unlike things—would reject this irrationality in favor of sensible behavior. Insight would lead to change.

So deeply is this concept ingrained that many people will uphold that one cannot modify one's behavior unless one knows exactly why one has misbehaved in the first place, which is clearly not always so. Some understanding of one's motives may be very helpful in coming to a decision but many of a person's most fruitful decisions and commitments are made without knowing exactly why.

The belief that understanding motive is critical to behavior change once caused a class of mine to insist that the purpose of an interview with a delinquent girl [called Mary Ann] we were studying could be no other than to find out “why” she ran away from home. They were quite shocked when I said that this might be quite helpful, if it could ever be known, although I doubted that it would ever tell us more than the precipitating factor. The actual causality would be probably almost infinitely complex and involve many factors outside both their and Mary Ann's control, a recognition which is being increasingly made by students of epidemiology. If they were interested in trying to create conditions in the community which would minimize delinquency, such an analysis might have value.

But this was not the purpose of the interview as it was held. It could have only one purpose. That would be to find out ways by which Mary Ann would be able to handle her impulse to run away again.

I do not mean that the epidemiological approach, the desire to control or alter conditions so that other Mary Anns might not need to run away, is something with which a social worker should not be concerned. I do mean that to help Mary Ann in the here and now, the knowledge of her action's complicated causality is probably not enough. Even if Mary Ann could say, and even be convinced, that she ran away because of any number of factors, there is still her will, her image of herself, her fears, and the reality of her present situation to take into account. Humans are not simple rational creatures, and a fourteen-year-old girl perhaps not always an exemplar of logical thinking.

If Mary Ann were a very sick child, or if her impulse was such that it was

uncontrollable by any conscious act on her part even with some change of attitude on the part of her parents, psychotherapy with interpretation might have been necessary. The need for this would have shown up, perhaps, in a more total disorganization than this girl was presenting, or in her failure to make use of the helping process that most people can use to some extent. Even here her problems might have been solved by psychiatric treatment not involving interpretation.

Her particular behavior might be amenable to conditioning or to drug therapy. This solution would involve a “why” or a sort-knowledge at least that her condition could become manageable if certain tensions were relieved, which is not so much a “why” as a “how.” Sometimes by handling one factor in a complex situation a person may be brought to a condition below, as it were, the critical point at which symptoms appear.

However, a preoccupation with causality would have failed to engage Mary Ann’s capacity to face her situation and to do something about it herself. It is all very well to know that one behaves badly because one has been rejected or unloved. There is no doubt that to be rejected makes it harder to behave well. But it does not remove the responsibility of a person to do something about his behavior.

Reality, Empathy, and Support

Doing something about her impulse to run away is what Mary Ann needs to struggle with now. To help Mary Ann do this the worker must start with the reality of the situation, the fact that she has done something illegal; the possibility that the judge might send her to a correctional school, or let her go home only under supervision, which she might find difficult to bear; even the fact that she might find it impossible not to run away again. In order to decide what she wanted, what she could bear, what use she could make of whatever was decided, and what help she needed to do this, Mary Ann would need to be held to facing these facts and possibilities.

She would also need to be free to discuss and explore her feelings about them, and in fact be reassured that her expression of these feelings would not get her into trouble. Part of these feelings might be anger, at her parents, at the judge, or at the probation officer. The last is particularly true if the worker has done her job in holding Mary Ann to the reality of the situation; but since this anger is something which Mary Ann cannot help feeling about the situation, and since to repress it, or “bottle it up” will only make it more important and harder to deal with, it may need to be expressed.

Lastly, if Mary Ann is to take help in her situation, she must know that the worker will be available to her, will not turn against her when she is troubled, and will provide as far as she can what Mary Ann needs to carry out her decisions.

This situation may serve, despite its particularity, to help us see what it is that the helping person must convey to any person in trouble. What has to be conveyed can be phrased as a “statement” which the helping person makes, although it is much more than this. It is not simply something said. It is something conveyed by words, feeling, and action. But in terms of a statement it could be phrased in three sentences, as follows:

“This is it.” (Reality)

“I know that it must hurt.” (Empathy)

“I am here to help you if you want me and can use me,” or more succinctly,

“You don’t have to face this alone.” (Support)

These three sentences in turn may be expressed in terms of what is actually offered through them. In this form the helping factor is composed of three complex, interrelated and important elements which we may call *reality, empathy, and support*.

These three elements are always necessary in any helping process and the three together do, in fact, constitute the helping factor. I know of no piece of helping that cannot be analyzed in these terms, and no piece of unsuccessful helping that does not show a weakness in at least one of these elements. Reality has been partial or empathy and support conditional.

We will examine first each principle by itself and then try to bring them together. The order in which they are presented here does not necessarily mean that one introduces them, in helping, serially or in this order. One may start with an expression of empathy or even of support, and in any case they are interwoven. One does not stop where another starts. But if there is an order, reality often does come first.

Reality

Reality means a number of things, some of which have already been touched on. It means, first, not discounting another’s problem, not taking it away from him by believing it unimportant. This is a thing we are particularly likely to do to children, whom we cannot believe, for some reason, feel as deeply as we do. How often we say, “Oh, they’ll soon forget it,” or “They’re too young to be affected much,” when everything that we really know about them points to the fact that their despair, their fear, and their anger are not only intense but can leave permanent scars. To be real, on the other hand, means to face the problem with someone in all of its ugliness or terror. It means doing him the honor of taking his problem seriously. And, with children in particular, but with adults also, this is the first requirement if a relationship is to grow. Another form of taking away a person’s problem is to solve it for him or to insulate him from it. We either produce a quick solution or we help him to evade it, to forget it, not to come into contact with it often to spare him the pain or disturbance.

But, while it might be necessary to allay some forms of disturbance temporarily, disturbance has about it some of the qualities that are now recognized in a fever. It used to be good medical practice to allay all fevers. Now there is growing understanding that a fever is the body’s way of fighting an infection. A child once, in a children’s home, was very much disturbed by her mother’s visits. The social worker suggested solving the problem by restricting the mother’s visits. The child said, with a good deal of anger, “What you don’t understand is that this is something I need to get disturbed about.”

People need their problems if they are to solve them for themselves. Some-

times they need to be disturbed. Not to permit them to become so, when they are trying to tackle their problems, is to encourage nonchoice.

False Reassurance as “Nonreality”

A common form of nonreality is reassurance. False reassurance, is an attempt to palliate reality by telling the person in trouble that “things will be all right” when there is no reason to think that this will be so, or when the present hurts so much that this is wholly unimportant. We can recognize obvious cases of it. No wise parents today would tell their child that the dentist won’t hurt. The dentist very well may hurt, and the parent be proved a liar. But we still, some of us, will tell a child that he will be happy in a foster home when this may not be so and when in any case all he can think of at the moment is his pain at leaving his own parents.

We use this kind of reassurance for two reasons. In the first place, we cannot stand the child’s present unhappiness and are willing, although we may not know it, to try to dispel it even at the cost of greater unhappiness later. And, in the second, we are apt to be a little defensive because a foster home, in this case, or some other service, is what we have to offer him and we do not like the idea that he might not like the only thing that we have to give him. It makes us feel very inadequate. I have seen a welfare worker “reassure” a client that the termination of her grant does not really matter, since she ought to be able to get support from a recently located absent husband, when her lights and gas were to be turned off that afternoon. False or unrealistic reassurance does not strengthen a person’s ability to handle his problem. It effectually disarms him and robs him of the anger or despair he may need to deal with it.

Another reason for false reassurance is our natural protectiveness toward those we consider vulnerable or lacking in real strength. We feel that the person we are helping would be hurt by coming face to face with the truth. There may be some instances in which the helped person could not possibly face the truth, but more often the helping person is only too glad to have a good reason not to face the helped person with the truth. The genuine cases where the truth is so horrible that it would be more harmful than helpful are rather rare.

Protecting People from the Truth

To protect someone from the truth is to make a very serious judgment about him. It is to say that he is incapable of being helped with his real problem. As a minister expressed it to me once, it is to deny him his chance for an “abundant life,” fully experienced.

The truth, too, is often much less harmful than what the imagination puts in its place. Some years ago I was approached by a teacher who was concerned about a fifteen-year-old boy, the adopted son of an apparently stable and loving family, who had begun to run away. There seemed to be nothing in the home to suggest a need to escape from it, and although the boy was adolescent, he did not appear to be particularly rebellious. The boy was plainly running “to” rather than “from,” and when I was told that the town he was running to was

his birthplace, I was fairly safe in assuming at least tentatively that he was doing what so many children away from their own parents have to do, which was the answer the question, "Why did my parents give me up?"

I therefore asked the teacher why the boy's parents had done so and was told that the boy was illegitimate. It was quite hard for her to take when I suggested that if she wanted to help the boy, someone had better tell him the truth. To her surprise the boy was greatly relieved. As the boy expressed it, "Of course she had to find another home for me." Later the boy confessed that he had been for several years tortured by two alternative fantasies, one that his parents were murderers; the other that he had an unbearable odor. We are much too ready to assume that another person cannot bear the truth. Only when an untruth has become so necessary to a person that he or she cannot live without it is it wise not to face the truth. We must remember, however, that reality is only one of the three helping elements. It cannot be introduced without empathy and support.

Reality as Difference

We sometimes call a piece of reality deliberately introduced into a helping situation a piece of difference. It may be a fact. It can conceivably be an opinion, although we need to be careful that it is not a prejudice or a personal point of view irrelevant to the helped person's need. Unskilled workers are, as we have said, full of inappropriate difference, and they introduce pieces of difference in inappropriate ways. *We do this when we blame others for their situations and preempt their problem solving with advice and with prescriptive instruction. Inappropriate difference is what happens when we set ourselves up as good and moral and imply that others could be too if they were just like us.*

How do we know when difference is appropriate? I would suggest at least four criteria for appropriate difference. The first, and perhaps the most important, of these is that there is sufficient likeness – understanding, common purpose – to assure the helped person that the difference is not a personal attack. People can, after all, say things to other people who know that they love them that they could not possibly say to a stranger.

Secondly, the difference must be expressed in the helped person's terms. Often the most useful little bits of difference can be expressed by using the helped person's own words. A welfare worker was interviewing a deserting father, who rather naturally was trying to excuse his desertion. His statement was that he could not bear not being master in his own house. "You know," said the worker, "that's the strangest way I've ever heard of being master in your own house, to run away from it."

Thirdly, there is a somewhat elusive quality about the person who is ready to accept difference. There is an element of challenge, of projecting an image and watching to see how you are going to respond to it. This was very obvious in the deserting father's words. This is perhaps the least concrete of our criteria. It is a sense one gets, an understanding of the process of image projection, a knowledge that a projection is being made for a purpose. The helped person is really saying, "Will you buy this image of me?" and if you do, you only strengthen

the image and make the real self less accessible. The last criterion has to do with empathy and support. It is briefly that one has no right to introduce difference or reality unless one is prepared to help the person one is helping with the shock. Reality by itself is harsh. It is only reality approached with empathy and support that is a true helping process. Indeed we might restate the whole method of help as “facing people with reality with empathy and support.” To face someone with reality and leave them to handle it alone is cruelty, not help.

Problems in Using Reality

The fear of not being able to handle the repercussions is one of the chief obstacles to introducing appropriate difference. Obviously to tell even a small percentage of those one is trying to help that they are unpleasant people would be a poor rule in practice. In most cases it would result in the very reverse of helping. It could only be done when the worker is sure that the client recognizes her desire to help. Just as people can tell “home truths”- in itself an interesting term- to those who are sure of their love and interest, so a helper can risk difference with someone who trusts her. Sometimes one can pick up an inherent contradiction in what the seeker for help may say or do. Sometimes one may have to say to someone, “You say you enjoy doing this but you don’t sound like it.” Body language, too, often betrays what a person is feeling. So does tone of voice. The classic example is that of the counselor who told a mother that her child needed more loving if he were to behave better. The mother came to the next session dragging the child into the office and said, “You were wrong. I’ve half killed this brat loving him and it hasn’t helped a bit.”

Playing Devil’s Advocate

Another form of difference which can sometimes be of help, providing again that it is kept within a framework of likeness, consists in the speculative assumption of exactly the opposite of what the helped person is asserting, so that he may gain strength in demolishing your argument. This is, in fact, the function of the devil’s advocate in a canonization procedure. What a devil’s advocate says is, in effect, “Have you considered the possibility that we’re on the wrong track altogether? Let’s look at that possibility.” This is a form of difference that can only be used when the helped person is fairly sure of himself; when, in fact, all that he needs is to move from a tentative statement to a forthright claiming of what he knows and believes.

Reality and “Tact”

Reality also means being direct. Helping persons, unfortunately, have acquired something of the reputation of being rather “wily birds” who tread delicately and never quite say what they mean. This is sometimes described as “tact” or “consideration” but so easily becomes either evasion or a way of gently manipulating someone else to do what you want him to do and at the same time think that it was his own idea. One area in which the reality of the situation needs to be very clearly expressed is that of the helping relationship itself. It

includes what will or may happen, the probable consequences of actions, the authority and rights each person has in the situation, who can tell whom to do what, and the conditions under which help is being offered. Concealed power is both unfair and generally unhelpful. The worker from the juvenile court who minimizes its authority and presents it only as wanting to be “of help” without making clear that it will enforce this “help” is trying to buy relationship at the cost of the truth, and she will end up having neither.

Do Not Justify Reality

A further requirement of reality is that it must be presented as it is, without attempts at justification. The moment one does this to reality, one robs it of its primary helping value, which is that it exists outside both helper and the helped person and is something that they can both look at together, as a fact, and without a predetermined mental attitude toward it. To justify, or to explain, means that one claims the reality as “good” and that the helped person is wrong in being angry at it. It raises the possibility that it could be different and nearly always ends in a wrangle between the helped and the helping person about what might be instead of about what is. Helper and helped person need to be on the same side of reality.

The Right to Fail

But there is one use of the word “reality” which helpers should avoid. Unfortunately, the word is often used in professional social work literature to mean the social worker’s estimate of the client’s capabilities. A course of action is seen to be unreal if, in the social worker’s opinion, the client is attempting something beyond his power. But this assessment, although it may be common sense, is not reality for the client. It is merely a judgment on him. What is real is what such plans would cost him and the very real possibility that he might fail. As David Soyer points out, people have the right to fail and may not in fact be satisfied with a second best until the impossible has been attempted. Sometimes, too, people surprise one. To elevate into reality a diagnosis, however careful, is presumptuous and is, in all too many cases, a disguised form of protectiveness.

Being Nice

Reality is perhaps the hardest of the three elements to hold to for any sensitive person. None of us likes to be the bearer of bad news. We do not like seeing people hurt, and reality often hurts. Americans in particular find great difficulty with it, since American culture puts a high premium on considerateness and on not “hurting people’s feelings,” which makes plain speaking very difficult. If anyone doubts this – and paradoxically many Americans think of themselves as outspoken – one need only compare American and British book reviews or political comment. There is a deep tradition in our culture of being “nice.” To face reality with someone often feels like being “mean,” although it can be tremendously helpful. Even professions which have something of a tradition of “toughness” and no nonsense” about them have apparently developed a need to show themselves gentle and understanding.

Empathy

In order to help someone else with reality, one has to show empathy for him. Empathy is the ability to know, or to imagine, what another person is feeling and, as it were, to feel it with him without becoming caught in that feeling and losing one's own perspective. It is not, let us be very clear, a way of softening reality. Empathy needs to be clearly distinguished from two other responses to people in trouble, sympathy and pity. The three responses have sometimes been described as feeling "like" someone (sympathy), feeling "with" someone (empathy), and feeling "for" someone (pity), but I find these prepositions somewhat difficult. The real difference between them lies in the amount and the kind of difference from the helped person that the helping person maintains.

In sympathy there is little difference. The helping person feels as does the person she is helping. She shares the same feelings, identifies herself with his interests, becomes aligned with him, loves and hates the same things. The helper who feels empathy on the other hand, understands the feelings that the other has about the situation, knows, as we have said, that "it must hurt," but does not claim these feelings herself. The helper who feels pity also retains her difference. She does not get overwhelmed by the troubled person's feelings. Emphasis is on the difference between her and the person she is helping, and the likeness, or understanding, is for the most part, lost. Sympathy, as we have described it, is not entirely useless. There is some value in the precept to "rejoice with those that do rejoice and weep with those who weep." It is good to know that one is not alone and there are others who feel as you do. This may seem like an exaggerated sympathy. But this is one of sympathy's problems. We often hear it said that one can have too much sympathy for such and such a person (or such and such a group of persons). This is perfectly true. Sympathy can very easily become a weak emotion, and it can confirm a weak person in his weakness. Empathy is both a strong and a strengthening emotion. Because of the difference that the person who has empathy retains, she never condones or confirms weakness but enlists the troubled person's feelings in the attempt to overcome it. One cannot have too much empathy. But – and here, perhaps is the rub – empathy very easily slops over into sympathy. Sympathy is much the easier emotion. It is very easy to get caught in someone else's feeling system and to begin to identify with it.

An Act of the Loving Imagination

I have spoken of empathy as an emotion, and purposely so. It is, of course, formally an act, but an act based on feeling. The best description I know of it is an "act of the loving imagination."

Both "act" and "imagination" are important words here. Empathy is much more than knowing intellectually what another must be feeling. It always involves the ability to enter into this feeling, to experience it and therefore to know its meaning for the other person and the actions that are likely to flow from it.

There is in fact a paradox here which it is very hard to explain in ordinary, rational terms. Both to feel and to know is necessary if the purposes of empathy

are to be fulfilled. Nothing carries less conviction, or is likely to fall so wide of the mark, as an attempt at empathy that is purely intellectual. The purpose of empathy is to convey feeling, not knowledge. But because feeling is communicated by so much more than words – by gestures, tone of voice, facial expression, and bodily posture, which are too complex to be capable of dissimulation – an assurance of feeling can only be communicated if this feeling actually exists.

In my experience, the facility of empathy can be trained, if not fully taught. While there are certainly people who have a natural empathy for others, there are also those who can release a great deal of loving imagination once they can free themselves from stereotyped reactions to people and once they become aware of their tendency, in some situations, to respond negatively, or sympathetically rather than empathically.

To learn empathy one has to be free from the kind of blocks that are thrown in one's path by liking and disliking people, by lining oneself up either for them or against them, instead of just caring about them, whether one likes or dislikes them. And this comes largely from self-knowledge. It is not so much that a person stops liking and disliking as it is that he or she learns to control the consequences of such feelings. Empathy also depends on knowledge, and on encounters with people who are quite different from oneself.

Knowledge of social conditions and some of the causes of feeling can also be of help. But empathy does not in fact need to be too precise. There is always something of the tentative about it, an acknowledgment that feeling must be present, and probably within a given range, and an invitation to the helped person to express his feeling more precisely. That is why the statement which we have used to typify empathy is not, "I know how it hurts," but "I know that it must hurt."

The empathy which is needed, at least in the beginning of a relationship, is largely directed toward the struggle through which the helped person is going, his fear of help, his wanting and not wanting to get well, the frustrations of his efforts to solve his problem by himself, and this is common human experience, although not always recognized as such. There are times when one can convey empathy in a subverbal manner, but generally it needs to be expressed verbally. I find that many young helping people can feel empathically, but they find it difficult to put their feeling into words.

Support, No Matter What

The third element in the helping factor is support. This has two aspects, material and psychological. Material support, the means to accomplish the task, may or may not be present in the helping situation. It is not generally part of either psychotherapy or problem-related counseling. When it does occur in these, it takes the form of technical know-how of some kind, whether this be marital techniques or where to find a school for one's child. In some helping it is, however, the most visible part and is thought of by many people as all that there is to help. It is what helping gives, whether this be money, opportunity, or know-how. Nor, as we have said, can it ever be considered unimportant.

People need money, opportunity, education, and technical assistance to implement their decisions.

But people also need psychological support. They need to know that they are accepted and that the helping person will not give up on them. She will not be shaken in her desire to help. Even if helping proves impossible, she will still care about the person she is helping, "no matter what."

Support Even When Help is Not Possible

Particularly she will not desert the person she is trying to help because that person disappoints her or makes what she believes to be an unwise or immoral decision. It is true that there are two or possibly three situations in which this decision or failure may mean an inability on the part of the helping person to go on being the primary helper. One situation occurs when the decision, or some limitation in the helped person, removes him from contact with the particular source of help with which he has been working. A student may fail and be required to leave a school; a child's behavior may be such that for the protection of others he must leave a Children's Home; or a client may no longer be eligible for assistance. There is also always the possibility that the helped person's problems may be such that no one knows at present how he can be helped. His resistance to help may be so strong or his ability to act so lacking that no skill that we have at present would be enough to provide any help. He may need, for his own protection or that of society, to be institutionalized, or control measures may have to be substituted for help. This decision would, however, have to be made with the greatest reluctance and with the knowledge that the helped person had not so much proved himself unhelpable as we unable to help him.

But even should one of these conditions separate helped person and helper, the principle of support means that the separation is not accompanied by rejection. The helping person still cares. She still respects and is concerned about what happens to the other. Sometimes indeed it is in this very act of separation that helping really begins. I once knew a child in a Children's Home for whom all attempts to help her had seemed unsuccessful. When she faced trial in another city, the housemother, rather than rejecting her, asked the administrator to allow her to support the child through the trial. It was, not unnaturally, to the housemother who had shown concern for her at her worst that this child turned later in life. It was she whom she consulted over the problems of working and marriage. And six years later when her younger sister, who had remained at the Children's Home, became restless, she offered her sister a home and help.

It goes without saying that support is also hard to practice. It is very easy to reject those who have let one down, especially where this has been accompanied with anger, blame, or ingratitude. Hard, but possible

To Support is Not to Condone

It is extremely difficult for human beings to get away from the idea that to care about a person in trouble is to condone what he has done. It does not seem sufficient to allow someone to suffer the consequences of his act or to

take his punishment for it. We seem to need to reinforce societal sanctions by disassociating ourselves from those who have offended against them, instead of seeing these people as those who need our help the most. Part of this is reaction against unrealistic helping. To be concerned about a delinquent is not to approve of delinquency. Nor is it to excuse it, to throw all of the blame onto conditions or onto society. Poor conditions and poor heredity undoubtedly make it harder for acceptable decisions to be made, but not all people make such decisions under these strains. The helper whose support is a disguised form of exculpation, who believes that the delinquent had no choice but to act as he did, is being unrealistic. She is indulging rather than helping.

But, in part, our unwillingness to try to help rather than to punish the delinquent is our fear of ourselves. It is a strange reflection on how delicately balanced our “good” and “bad” decisions must be that we get so angry at the bad ones. This anger has its roots in fear. We fear that we, too, may be tempted. It has long been known to psychiatrists that those who are most violently opposed to some social ill are often those to whom it is secretly most attractive, and that the faults we see in others are often the ones we are most prone to ourselves.

Support may be indicated in a number of ways. Sometimes the mere fact of being there is sufficient. Sometimes it is indicated by physical contact, particularly with a child. Sometimes it includes a direct offer of help, or making clear that one is available. Sometimes it is a matter of giving someone an introduction, of “breaking the ice” for him in facing a new experience. One must, however, remember that the statement is not simply, “I am here to help you,” but “I am here to help you if you want me and can use me.” Support is at its best when it is consistent but unobtrusive and it must be always be unconditional.

Using the Elements

Reality, empathy, and support, then, are the three elements of the helping factor. They still do not tell us how to help in any given situation, which is perhaps something no one can tell another, but they do give us some idea of how we need to approach the problem. But even here they are not prescriptions. No one can go into a helping situation saying to herself, “I will be real. I will be empathic. I will offer support.” The very effort would distract her from listening to the person she wanted to help.

But they do offer a way of looking at our own helping efforts. In every helping situation that has gone wrong, or been less than productive than one hoped, it is good to ask oneself three questions:

1. Have I been able to face reality with this person, or have I glossed over the truth or offered false reassurance?
2. Have I been able to feel and express real empathy, or has empathy been lacking, or limited (“You can share your feeling with me as long as you don’t feel so and so”)?
3. Have I offered real support, or has it been conditional support (“I will continue to try to help you as long as you don’t do this or that”)?

An honest answer to these three questions often shows us what has gone wrong.

All three elements are necessary to each other. Reality without empathy is harsh and unhelpful. Empathy about something that is not real is clearly meaningless and can only lead the client to what we have called nonchoice. Reality and empathy together need support, both material and psychological, if decisions are to be carried out. Support in carrying out unreal plans is obviously a waste of time. The three are in fact triune, and although in any one situation one may seem to be predominant, all three need to be present. *Alan Keith-Lucas found significant connections between the concepts of reality, empathy and support and the roles of the Trinity in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Effective helping requires all of the components of relationship with the God who provides ultimate helping.*

The Triune God and Triune Helping

God the Father, the Creator, is in Christian thought certainly the author of reality—both the reality of things and that of the moral and natural law, as well as of the laws of causality and consequence. God is also the Wholly Other, the One who is different, who is “God, not man.”

Biblical history, as Christians read it, certainly suggests that this reality was not enough. Human beings alone could not, of their own will, face reality and change in relation to it. There was needed an act of empathy, and there is no more characteristic or total act of empathy than that described in the Incarnation – God who became human and yet remained God, “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.” Indeed, the whole theology of “very God and very man,” the refusal to consider Jesus as either less than God and not wholly human, or part human, or part God and part human, the insistence that he is a single person, is a struggle with the problem – how a person can feel another’s pain and yet remain separate from it. Both require the concept that in doing two apparently different things at the same time, one does not do either less completely.

Again, the name given to the Spirit, both in the King James Version and in the Prayer Book, is the Comforter. Although the word “comfort” has suffered a weakening of meaning since the seventeenth century, its derivation is from *cum*, meaning “with” and *fortis*, meaning “strong.” A comforter is therefore one who is “strong with you,” and there is no better one-sentence definition of support.

Reality, empathy, and support—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the analogy may seem blasphemous at first. It is, however, logical that if the person asking for help is analogous to the recipient of grace, then the helping person must, as far as it is possible for a finite, fallible being to do so, model her helping on the actions of God. Help becomes in a new sense the expression of one’s religion, not just as the term is often used, one’s general but unspecified goodwill toward others, but what one actually believes. It follows, too, that the helping process is real, that it is not merely a collection of pragmatic principles, that it deserves much closer study than it has received to date, and that where we have got it right, it is much more than a set of useful techniques.

How Might We Distinguish a Christian Helper from A Secular One?

A Christian of Grace will not...

- Pass judgment because she is conscious of herself as a sinner dependent on grace.
- Practice direct evangelism or witness unless involved with members of her own faith or people who are seeking a Christian solution to their problems as witnessing is often not good helping. People rarely change and grow because they are told that they should. Most people one helps do not as yet trust the helper. The best witnessing occurs in service responding to the client when the client is ready to deal with spiritual matters. Many clients' life experience has been such that they have no reason to believe the Word of God. If one's only knowledge of having a father is that he beats one or deserts one, how can one believe in a Heavenly Father?
- Focus on spiritual help rather than tangible concrete help. Christianity is the only religion whose founder prayed for daily bread, and in Matthew 25, Jesus did not say, "I was in need of counseling and you counseled me," but "I was hungry, thirsty and naked."
- Ask if someone deserves to be helped. Jesus was more concerned with the character of the person who gives aid than the character of the person who receives aid.

Qualities of a Christian Helper...

- Looking for evidence of grace in those she helps
- Steadfastly standing by people and caring even when help seems impossible
- Standing by her values despite current culture
- Holding institutions accountable for justice, kindness, and walking humbly with God
- Staying tough enough to deal with reality with clients
- Continuing to exhibit true humility and willingness to learn, grow and discriminate new practice trends

Drawing it all Together

*In the last several chapters of *Giving and Taking Help*, Alan Keith-Lucas helps us to understand that not everyone is called and gifted to helping, particularly professional helping as articulated here. Helping persons are human persons with our own needs and interests. This makes self awareness or "self knowledge" even more important as we consider our own areas of prejudice and personal challenge when working with clients. Awareness of our "similarities and differences" is the beginning of good helping. Helping persons use specific knowledge, values and skills, but not to the exclusion of spontaneity and natural helping. Keith identifies that helping persons particularly need courage to be real with clients, to take risks that they won't be liked, to give clients the right to fail. We also need the kind of humility, awareness*

of sameness, that lets us relate to clients without judging their differences and that keeps us grounded in serving others, knowing that ultimately our treatment of others as persons worthy of respect and care will bear fruit. It is not necessary that we “like” all of our clients. It is necessary that we care and that our concern includes respect rather than control as Powell, Sherwood, and Ressler so powerfully pointed out in their recent writing about his work.

Understanding the nature of the helping relationship and process allows us then to incorporate specific guidelines for our professional helping. Keith suggests that we always start with what the client is asking us for rather than what we think they should be asking for from us. We must tune in then to the feeling behind or underneath the words even before the client articulates them. Good helping means not taking the client's feelings personally and recognizing that feelings are neither good nor bad – they simply are. So we focus on the issues rather than denying the feeling by reframing the situation. Real helping, according to Keith, means letting clients choose even when the choice includes failure and then continuing in the helping relationship to formulate the reality, the problem, the alternatives, and the opportunities. Clients can become overwhelmed by the enormity of their reality. Partializing the problem or concern allows them to focus on work that can be done now and in subsequent meetings when the helper and helped can explore how well the choices and resultant actions are working out. This evaluation of practice with the client allows modification of the plan of action in response to ongoing results. So the helper, rather than offering imperatives and control, may offer advice that the helped can consider and that can be modified as needed. This early definition of client self determination is essential to the Christian social worker.

For Keith, helping another person is more like consultation than it is diagnosis and treatment. The helper comes alongside the person who is facing a difficult reality and helps the person figure out exactly what it is and what the available options might be, including what they each would take or cost to pursue. The helper tries to support the person in making what Keith calls “choice” rather than “non-choice” responses to the difficult situation. “Choice” responses come in two basic kinds: (1) To fight against the difficulty and to change it (when change is possible); or (2) To accept and constructively use the difficulty (when change is not possible). “Non-choice” responses come in two parallel basic kinds: (1) To deny the reality of the difficulty and seek ways to avoid it; or (2) To “accept” the difficulty in a way that leaves the person crushed. The helper can neither fully know when change is possible nor take responsibility for what the helped person is able to choose and do.

The key to helping is not the answer to “why?” but the answer to ‘given your current circumstances, what next?’ When we help clients to modify choices and decisions that aren't working and celebrate those that are, we bring with us movement toward long term success for those clients. Helpers cannot help everyone and must use self awareness and assessment to know when to refer clients for more specialized help. Even in those cases, the helper can often assist with immediate needs while the referral is being made. Keith-Lucas also identifies ways in which the principles of helping contribute to positive outcomes in more adversarial settings including court, business, arguments among colleagues and in therapeutic settings including work

with children and families. His bottom line: "The helping process, in fact, works." (p. 157.) Recent attention both to his principles and his practice affirms the importance of work with families and the importance of respect for clients in all circumstances.

The values that drive the helping process, according to Alan Keith-Lucas, are centered in the value of each person and the person's freedom to choose without being judged, leading to the use of feelings and relationship to help people find "their own way." He finds those values for himself grounded in and growing out of Judeo-Christian values, even as he acknowledges that the values of the helper have significant influence over the process. Helpers are frequently agents of social systems with power; the helper's willingness to empower clients rather than exacerbate the power differential is key to successful helping.

Alan Keith-Lucas describes God, the Father, as the author of reality; Jesus, the Son with us, as empathy; and the Holy Spirit as comforter and supporter. The use of the helping factors of reality through empathy and support sums up the professional use of self that is taught in so many helping programs and models the integration of Christian faith and professional helping practice.

Notes

¹Readers wishing to cite this work should do so understanding and noting that a substantive portion of this chapter is taken from the following work: Keith-Lucas, Alan. (1994). Chapters 5 and 10, *Giving and Taking Help*. Revised Edition. (Editor: David Sherwood). St. Davids, PA: The North American Association of Christians in Social Work. The original work was published in 1972.

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