

Reflection on personal development and self-awareness



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The Voyage

Introduction

The title of this essay is “ The Voyage” . It’s a reflective essay, and I am using the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) as a template for this exercise. It’s a critical reflection on the importance of personal development and self-awareness, which are necessary if one is successful in becoming, and remaining a councillor. In simple terms it’s a examination of one’s outlook on life, from their own behaviours and to how they interact with other people.

By self examination and peer feedback facilities me to become more aware about myself. Conscious of my privileges, prejudices, perceptions, core values, beliefs , and behaviours. Aware of my strengths, weaknesses and blind spots. This development of self awareness, along with the ability to self reflect on one’s life experiences, is viewed as not only necessary, but professionally ethical, as its practice enables a councillor and clients to remain safe and emotionally detached from future relationships they are trying to develop. Because it’s so easy for a counsellor to fall into the trap of forming a sense of identity or empathy while counselling clients. But it’s vital for both, especially the councillor, that they remain emotionally detached at all times.

Being objective is the main difficulty when assessing our personal development and self awareness. How we see and think of ourselves can be quite different from what other people see us. Only by rigorous personal inventories and feedback from others can we find a yardstick which with we

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can measure our ethics, and our professional standards which are vital in providing a safe environment when forming a relationship with our clients.

Its only by this sometimes painful process of becoming more self aware can we then embarque on our lifelong personal development, and be better equipped in dealing with the challenges presented by possible conflicts, and enable us to be more attuned and less vulnerable with our relationships with future clients.

The Voyage

According to Plato the famous philosopher Socrates once said “ The greatest good of a man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, andthatthe life which is unexamined is not worth living” (Plato, Apology).

This course, which is a diploma in the psychology of counselling, has contained within it a module on personal development and self awareness. This module challenges us to examine our core values, beliefs and prejudices and behaviours.. One of the requirements to becoming a good councillor is to know which way your ‘ moral compass’ points, and to be aware of any prejudices, privileges and blind spots, and to remain emotionally uninvolved. To achieve this one has to embarque on a new journey of fearless self analysis.

We were advised to keep a journal, in which we could record events on one side and our feelings of these events on the other side. This has provided me with very valuable insights into my personality while compiling this essay.

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Also this paper is a reflective essay, and so we must immerse ourselves in self reflection. The goal of this exercise is to make us more self aware. Aware of our personality traits and prejudices, our core values, habits, emotions, and the psychological forces that dictate our behaviour. This comprises of all events, good and bad, acquired throughout our entire lifetime that shapes who we are as a person today, and what we have to offer any potential client.

While our tutor explained the module in greater detail, warning us that it could be a emotional rollercoaster for some of us, I could sense the nervous atmosphere throughout the classroom. After all it's not easy dissecting ones entire lifetime, reliving all the events, good

and bad, questioning ones reactions, the lessons learned or forgotten, and most importantly how these events shaped our personalities, attitudes, and our behaviour.

I could see the importance in such an exercise. To become a good councillor requires change, and the first step in making a change of any kind is to be aware that a change is wanted or needed. This can only be achieved by getting to know oneself by immersing themselves in various scenarios, reflecting on past events, and questioning their reactions and what thoughts were felt at the time. This is the path to self awareness, and its only by self awareness one gets to know what are the strengths and weaknesses they poses that can achieve better results in their role as a councillor, and with their clients.

Unlike many of my classmates I thought I had an advantage. The advantage in question is I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict, thankfully in recovery, five years clean and sober. I've been to rehab, several times. The most popular method of treatment used is called the Minnesota Model (Hazelden 1949), this has developed into the more widely known 'twelve step program'. Today there are many similar twelve step programs. But there is one important step common to all groups, that is step four, which reads: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" (The Big Book: April 10, 1939, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.). My feelings was that in my case it was already done and dusted. In overcoming my addiction I had to 'dig deep' very deep. From my earliest childhood memories up to the present day. I didn't find it easy, but it changed the person I thought I was completely, and was a vital tool to my recovery.

The life of a councillor will always be a work in progress, there is no such thing as perfection, but one should always be as self aware as possible, and continue completely and honestly with their personal development. This includes sourcing important feedback from superiors and colleagues, which proves valuable information as to how others view you.

Like our tutor explained, the path to personal development and self awareness can be very difficult and emotional. The pain of dredging up memories long buried can be to some too much to endure. But the simple fact is just this, the pain one experiences while undertaking this difficult task, comes in not the journey, it comes by not having the courage to embark on such a journey. Fear that one has to challenge and change some thought processes and behaviours that they have used and relied upon for some

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time. Often through various defence mechanisms that they may not be even conscious of. The journey of self discovery can be a difficult one, but I was first in line to buy a ticket, confident I had already been there, and if there were some omissions, I was eager to discover them. I viewed my life story as an open book, and was comfortable in disclosing any of my many shortcomings, to anyone at anytime.

However I soon realised it was far from done and dusted. To maintain abstinence we have to always seek self awareness, and continue our personal development. In doing so we have to be completely honest and humble. Completing step four of a twelve step program is like looking at your reflection in a mirror. You only see your shortcomings through your own eyes. The fact that others may see you differently felt slightly uncomfortable, due to the possibility that I may be someone different to whom I thought I was.

Over the next two months we sometimes engaged in groups to discuss and debate various topics. One of those being, what are the effects of modern society, and how people living in congested inner cities, with no community can lead to future mental health problems. I once thought of such people as scum. Undeserving of any free handouts. It would be true that I viewed these people as narcissistic parasites. Freeloaders who only existed by terrifying innocent and vulnerable people, and who should be locked up to protect decent honest people.

However I began to realise that these same people were victims of a society that judged and condemned them, a society of which I was a part of. I

realised that these people didn't have a choice as to which culture and society they were born into. A society which denied them equal access to education, sports and pastimes, marginalising them to such an extent that the easiest path to fill the vacuum they felt was through violence, crime, addiction, and most unfortunately suicide.

I learned through enrolling in this course that it was they who were the victims. I grew convinced that the culture and society they lived in, was one we created for them. I soon formed the opinion that the root of these problems was a result of poor parenting. By poor parenting I mean stressed parenting. Stress caused by economic poverty, violence, unemployment, dysfunctional societies, abandoned mothers, poor housing, no access to education, crime, addiction etc. I argued that the problem started from birth, and possibility pre-birth as stress hormones in the mother has been proved as having a negative effect on the unborn foetus. (Verny&Kelly1981). I was, and still felt that these problems were caused by poor or no attachment to any care giver because nobody cared. I also stated Bowlby's opinion which was " the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment, and that not to do so may have significant and irreversible mental health consequences" (Bowlby, 1951). I also argued that in my opinion it was a " Self fulfilling Prophecy" that a Mother, who herself never had any attachment or continuous relationship with her own Mother, while also experiencing possible mental health problems, would give birth to a child whose ' template' of care will be

identical to her own, thereby ensuring that the chain of dysfunction remains intact.

Another example was related to colour, race, and privilege. We were shown a movie directed by Lee Mun Wha called (The color of fear 1994). This entailed of a group comprising of Eight men, two African American, two Latinos, two Asian American and two Caucasians. The discussion was about race, especially the racial experiences 'as seen through each other's eyes' in America. The exchanges were often dramatic, and sought to clarify the pain caused by racism in North America.

In this movie the 'people of colour' expressed their racial experiences and problems in American society compared to the two Caucasians in the group. As the discussion developed one of the African Americans became quite animated if not abusive towards one of the Caucasians in the group. The reaction of the Caucasian was one of surprise. He stated that he often employed these people of colour, and that some of them were his closest friends. He was obviously surprised at being portrayed as a racist. The other coloured people also expressed similar views, though in a calmer fashion.

My first interpretation was that the Caucasian in question was being harshly treated. After all it was he who employed and befriended people of colour. As the discussion developed I began to realise some privileges that Caucasian's poses and may be unaware of. The structure of American society was built by white Caucasian people of European descent dating back to the colonization of the continent. Any other race such as people of African, Asian, Latino origin arrived later, either through slavery, immigration, or economic

need. It was these later arrivals along with native Americans who had to comply with the status quo, which was created by the ' Founding Fathers' (Brown Jul 1976). by white European decedents. I began to realise that the debate may not about ' hard racism' like the violent protests in the US during the 1960s human rights movement, (New World Encyclopedia contributors , 05/11/2014) which eventually led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (congresslink. org, 2014).

My interpretation is that it's more like passive discrimination, and that the real issue may be inequality rather than racism, especially economic inequality. The US is one of most unequal societies in the world. Its inequality is now at Great Depression levels (Saez & Zucman 2014)

However there's another term called " Colour Blindness" (Doob, 2012). The author describes this process as allowing whites to ignore the disadvantages of coloured or non-white population. Doob also argues that white people may believe they live in a world in which racial discrimination no longer exists, but their behaviour often consists of racialized practices. My final analyses of the movie is simply that the Caucasian in question was Colour Blind but was not conscious of the fact. This I believe is because he never discriminated against such people, while also knowing at the same time such practices are widespread. From the irate African American point of view I believe he was angry that Caucasian's had the privilege of deciding to play the " Race Card" or not, while not having this privilege himself, he may have viewed it as a prejudice not evoked, rather than exercising a privilege to which the Caucasian was unaware of.

This movie brought into my consciousness some privileges I was totally unaware of. Examples such as race, religion, education, strong family bonds, access to healthcare etc. are some of the privileges I enjoy that many of the people I referred to at the start of this essay don't have. This leads to the question, am I racist? When referring to members of the travelling community, who are Ireland's largest ethnic minority, I, like many others are of the opinion that it's the minority of travellers that cause the most conflicts. In my opinion it is these people who are responsible for the discrimination experienced by them.

Regarding travellers, I have witnessed both sides of their behaviour and culture. For thirty years I was a rural publican. I served travellers on many occasions, not in large groups, but in small groups of two or three that I knew would cause no problems. But unfortunately sooner or later these would arrive in larger groups. These larger groups would include the troublesome minority mentioned above. This would always result in expulsion from the premises. Always my main complaint would be why don't these people take responsibility for the troublesome minority? Instead of attempting to dissuade these minorities they seemed to "close ranks" and support them. Because my regular customers, to whom I relied on to make a living, objected to their presence, I felt I had no choice but to impose a blanket ban on all travellers. I don't think I'm racist towards these people. My decisions were based on pragmatism rather than race.

Unfortunately this seems to be the norm throughout today's society, even though some self-righteous people object, stating it's illegal for this

discrimination. But the fact remains that all businesses have the right to refuse service, without having to provide a reason.

Since leaving the trade I have come into contact with many of these people and they have treated me with the utmost respect. They are quite aware of the predicament I faced, and understood why I had to be pragmatic in choosing my regular and loyal customers over their unwanted presence. I now see in them a strong moral code. They are deeply religious. But unlike many devout, they also have an unconditional faith to match. A faith to which I have a unconditional respect. However I still question why they don't call to account the small minority of trouble makers who tarnish all the decent members of their identity and culture.

Conclusion

The two subjects discussed above are just two examples of the advantage of applying Personal development. There are many other examples where personal development and self awareness would be beneficial. All types of counselling present new challenges, wither counselling for depression, addiction, anxiety, bereavement, suicide etc. The fact that when we examine these in greater detail it results in a change of our point of view, we become more aware of subtleties and inaccurate assumptions. We become aware of different views which people revile. In other words it enables us to be more self aware.

Because only counsellors who are aware of their own skills and knowledge can successfully help a client, Personal development and self awareness are vital.

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Today the benefits of personal development and self awareness have become more widespread in society. Practices such as mindfulness, yoga, meditation and other eastern philosophies are now widespread.

More and more people practice some disciplines above. People, especially I, now question the narcissistic nature of western capitalism. I question is this the path to personal wellbeing and happiness? I, for one think not.

I will end this essay with a quote from ex US President Jimmy Carter. “ Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but rather by what one owns.”

To own ones soul is true freedom. Only self awareness and personal development makes this possible.

The End

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