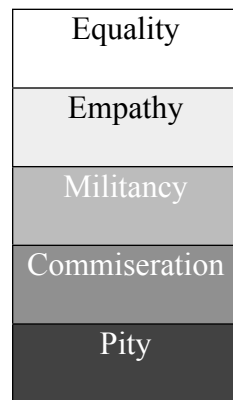


THE HEART OF HELP

A story I heard recently brought to mind a thought-provoking chart some of my colleagues who teach people in communities about innate health have used. It is meant to awaken curiosity and dialogue about the assumptions behind various methodologies in the helping professions.

The chart sets forth different ideas people have about their clients, from “You poor thing, let me help you!” (pity) to “We can do this together,” (equality). In the middle are ideas like “You have every right to be angry!” (militancy) and “This is terrible, but let me tell you about even worse things,” (commiseration). This is the chart:



It is always fascinating to get involved in reflection about this chart and in discussions about the assumptions embodied in the bottom four ideas. Once examined, they each uniquely lead to unintentional disempowerment. The question for reflection is: When the helping professional has this stance, what is the assumption about the client’s capacities? A follow-up question is: Given the relationship between helper and client based on that assumption, what is the best outcome or change that can be expected from this kind of thinking? Consider this, and see what you see.

In any discussion of these ideas, the point is not to evaluate whether the professional’s stance will bring about results. Each of these ways of looking at others could bring at least temporary resolution to a situation. Pity might help distressed people feel better and draw them out of their misery. Commiseration might widen the view of people feeling sorry for themselves and encourage them to feel more connected to others and less alienated by their own troubles. Militancy can bring about action, although the losers in a militant confrontation rarely feel good about it and usually remain in the background, seething. Empathy warms the heart and awakens good feelings between people that might lead to calmer and more productive ways of handling problems.

The crucial questions facing all the helping professions, though, are not addressed by any of these four stances: How are people empowered to think, act, speak and solve problems for themselves? How do we bridge the gap between the extraordinary needs in the world and the relatively small numbers of helping professionals and resources to respond to them? In the case of pity, commiseration, militancy and empathy, there is an endless loop of relationship between helper and client: the client keeps needing the helper and the helper is always in a one-up position, having to step in and do something for the clients. The common ground of assumptions in these four stances is that there are people trained and equipped to help and do things for needy people who cannot do things for themselves. These are the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the world of problem-solving. The haves control a limited fund of social capital and the have-nots continually draw down the reserves.

Many of us remember The Great Society, a program that empathetically presumed that a wise and beneficent government could help the poor and disenfranchised of our nation by providing for them and telling them what to do to get ahead. Over time, everyone, including the poor and disenfranchised, was astonished by how much acrimony developed between those helping and those who were to receive the help. On a highly visible national scale, we swallowed bitter lessons of disempowerment. It violates the human spirit and no one finds comfort, solace or success in it. It not only drains social capital beyond replenishment, it drains the hope, the will and the dreams of the poor and disenfranchised. It exhausts people on both sides of the equation and leaves people sick at heart and burned out on helping, or being helped.

The story I heard that reminded me of all of this was an interview with a woman in Oakland, California named Oral Lee Brown. A hard-working African-American woman, she was appalled, 15 years ago, by how many school-age children were wandering around poor neighborhoods during the day, unsupervised and uneducated. She decided to do whatever she could to see that a generation of her neighbors was not completely lost. She went to a first-grade classroom in a neighborhood school, and she promised the 23 children in that class that if they made it through high school in good standing and got into college, she would pay for their college education. She was a Realtor and she didn't make a lot of money and she had no idea how she would do this. But she believed in these children and believed if they were inspired and had a dream, they would beat the odds against them in their troubled families, crime-riddled neighborhood, hopeless circumstances. Now, 19 of those 23 children are entering their junior year in college, and she has found the way to pay all of their tuitions.

What is the essential difference between what she did, and so many failed social programs that have left both beneficiaries and providers dispirited, leading to blame and disappointment? She assumed that these children were no different from any other children – that all children are equally capable of curiosity, engagement, learning, dreaming, achieving. And she assumed they were no different from her, that if they

believed in themselves and wanted to accomplish something, they would find the way to do it. She met with those children once a week, every week, for all their years through school, and they kept their hope and their aspirations alive together and shared their faith in what they could accomplish together, no matter what obstacles cropped up along the way (and plenty did).

She was operating from the stance of equality, from resonance with a notion so fundamental it is laid out as plain as a pattern on a quilt in the United States Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”

And from that stance, she did not generate a cycle of withdrawals from social capital. She and her students, together, created new social capital. From nothing, they began a creative process that generated savings and investment; that generated classroom exemplars of studious persistence, which undoubtedly spilled over and inspired students not in her program; that generated savings, small though they may be, in truant officer time, teachers’ and principals’ frustration. And they may well have even saved some innocent neighbors from becoming victims of crimes perpetrated by hopeless children disenfranchised from their dreams.

It began not with a federal mandate, not with a city ordinance, not with a school policy. It began with an idea formed fresh within the imagination of one woman. It began with an original thought she created within her own mind, and from which she started a cycle of deposits into social capital, creating a whole new life for herself and 23 others. Twenty-three because even though only 19 of her initial class group made it to college, she has not given up on the four who didn’t and they are still her children and she still believes in them and their dreams.

What if all of us who want to contribute to a better world for the next generations took a deeper look at the assumptions we make about the human potential? What if we all considered the restrictions we impose on ourselves and others by the thoughts we bring to life about our own training and importance, or by the ideas we hold about the limitations of our clients?

Would the stance of equality ring true at a level we rarely acknowledge, at the level of the human spirit alive before the circumstances in which we find ourselves? What if we *are* all created equal, equally capable of connecting to the creative power that is endowed upon all people, to use our own thinking to unfold the life of our dreams?