THE PERSONAL NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL CONCERN

Caring from a Professional Perspective

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Renner addresses what may be the central concern for educators who work in prisons—indeed for educators anywhere—namely, how do we draw the line between our professional responsibilities and our personal involvement? In prison, teachers are inevitably, structurally drawn to the side of the prison, the "keepers," while at the same time involved directly, intimately, and maybe even emotionally with the individual lives of the learners. Charting a course through these always troubled waters is no mean feat, and Renner offers some powerful insights.

It has been said by friends of mine (academically minded and otherwise) that a successful research effort is one which originates in a personal quest and is motivated by private conviction. This paper, undertaken to answer fundamental and very personal concerns about the nature and validity of my work within the corrections system, is testimony to that belief. It is an attempt to find answers for myself that I can live with; the style therefore is fairly non-academic and quite personal. Although this deviates somewhat from academic requirements, it was deemed necessary in order to arrive at workable conclusions. I am well aware that others have faced the same professional issues; for these people I am hopeful that the work will prove accessible, interesting, and helpful.

The basic issue is the dynamics of the professional relationship, particularly the concern within corrections (but also in other fields) for professional distance between staff and clients. The concern (from a

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therapeutic or rehabilitative perspective) is that over-identification with the client and his problems will make it more difficult for the professional to facilitate the process of personal development. The professional can, in the extreme, become an "enabler" of debilitative intellectual or emotional processes which can impede growth (e.g., "It's not your fault; these people have it in for you."). Also, the possibility for burnout increases with the level to which the professional "hooks into" the needs and feelings of the client. From the corrections perspective, the concern is that well-intentioned staff members may be set up by seasoned inmates to break the rules and end up in compromising or even dangerous positions. Although each of these concerns is completely valid, an obvious dilemma exists. It is precisely that *personal* concern (if appropriately handled) that can act for the client as a catalyst for change and for the professional as an energizing force to heighten or maintain work commitment. Handling that personal concern in a productive manner—walking the line between over-familiarity (over-identification) and cool professional detachment—is the focus of this paper.

I am well aware that I am addressing this issue from the idealistic perspective of a sometimes over-enthusiastic rookie. After only two years of teaching within only four correctional settings, I am prepared to admit that I am in possession of only a portion of that "truth," the totality of which evades us all. In addition, being female within a male-dominated environment and teaching a class in communication and interpersonal relationship skills (within an environment that must strictly regulate the nature of interpersonal relationships) gives a somewhat unique complexion to my perspective. To quote John Powell:

> No human being *on the face of this earth* possesses the whole truth. Each of us has only a small part; but if we are willing to share our small parts, our pieces of the truth, we will all possess a much fuller reality, a much larger share of the total truth.

To approach the same idea in another way: when confronted by Pontius Pilate in *Superstar*, Jesus Christ says, "And what is truth? Is truth unchanging law? We both have truths; are mine the same as yours?"

I am sharing with you *my* thoughts, from *my* perspective or frame of reference—nothing more than that but certainly nothing less either. I invite you, in the spirit of inquiry, to disagree with me, to question, to argue; within that process we will all learn and grow. I also ask that you

hear me out. Be aware if my ideas strike a responsive chord within you Let your responses be those of courageous inquiry rather than obstinate defensiveness. I am not critiquing anyone else's position; I am simply trying to better understand my own.

The Argument for Professional Distance

Since the inception of the social work profession, those who worked for the psychosocial well-being of others were at best working without the benefit of the law and, at worst, suspect with regard to their motives and abilities to assist others in the achievement of better, more fulfilling lives. I learned as a social work student that the first child apprehension case in Canada was legally tried under the same statutes that prevented cruelty to animals. There was no other way to prosecute those who were guilty of harming children. Underlying these two extremes of suspect motives and nonexistent legal support appears to be a wish to maintain the status quo—a desire, however obliquely voiced, to keep things the way they are. (Billie Holiday sang, "Them that's got shall get, them that's not shall lose.") Those of us who work in prison education have our motives questioned frequently. When I told her of my decision to pursue a career in prison education, my best friend said, "Vicki, it makes my blood boil when I think of my tax money going to pay you to teach those bozos!" Her feelings are not unique.

This is not to suggest that I empathize with this stand when I say that the first *logical* reason for the evolution of professional distance is that it is precisely that distance that helps to keep things the way they are. Thus, we function as a cog in the social machine, doing enough to pacify our collective guilt feelings as a society but not enough to change the way that wealth and power are actually distributed. I plead guilty here. I'm used to a comfortable middle-class lifestyle; I'm not about to give that up. When I start seeing some of the clients I work with not as prisoners but rather as people from economically and socially deprived backgrounds, it's harder to see them as separate from myself. I struggle to maintain my "professional distance." A client once told me that he felt that *some* of the professionals he worked with used their "professionalism" as an excuse (a "wall") to *not* get to know him as a person. I believe he was right.

It is very true that you could make yourself really crazy if you took everything that happened to you at work home with you. In my own completely scientifically invalid study, I believe that over 80 percent of the approximately two hundred and fifty prisoners I have worked closely with are victims of child abuse, neglect and family violence, and lifestyles that dictate their destiny. If I took that information to heart it would destroy not only my effectiveness, but perhaps even me as a person. This leads us to address the problem known as burnout: the result of a professional "supernova" when your level of caring exceeds your ability to do anything about what you see and your ability to be objective is lost. Burnout destroys many professional helping careers and probably disillusions those people who could potentially be the most effective.

A third argument against personal concern in professional relationships appears to be the potential for what is referred to as "enabling" behaviour. As happens often in personal relationships that involve dysfunctional people, sometimes the most caring concern ends up encouraging the dysfunctional person in his role because people are forever rationalizing or making excuses for him. I recall a conversation with my supervisor ("Gary") at Family Court concerning a troubled young man whose wife had just laid charges against him for physical abuse. The young man drank heavily in response to pressures in his life and then took out his frustrations on his wife. My supervisor and I were discussing the drinking. Gary stated unequivocally, "The drinking has got to stop." "But," I replied (in my most enabling fashion), "look at what he's got going against him." I listed the variety of pressures that I was aware that the young man was under. "No wonder he drinks," was the feeling that went unexpressed. "It doesn't matter," said Gary. "Until he stops drinking, he'll never be able to work out answers to all the problems he's having." I was twenty-two years old, and possessed of a burning desire to make the whole world happy; I thought Gary terribly cold and cruel then. I consider him now to be an incredibly wise and compassionate individual. He knew that it's often kinder in the long run to be cruel; to confront a client with what he must do in order to live more effectively. I was uncomfortable (*for myself*) seeing the young man suffer; Gary truly cared enough to show him that there was a better way.

Finally—and this is a concern in a corrections environment—there is the possibility that well-intentioned corrections employees may be

set up by seasoned inmates. Believing that they are actually helping this "poor guy" who has been victimized by this "rotten system," employees may be talked into doing things that are against regulations and ultimately place their own safety, the safety of others, or the security of the institution (or even society) in jeopardy. Although I must admit to personal frustrations in dealing with a system that I consider paranoid at times, I do acknowledge that such concerns do have validity. The reality is that we do not change the rules by ignoring them, and that change within any system happens slowly, if at all. The argument for maintaining professional distance here is that such distance increases the possibility that well-intentioned staff members will be immune to such manoeuvres on the part of the client.

Point to consider in developing an attitude of professional distance, then, can be easily summarized.

Maintenance of the status quo. As a sociological phenomenon, this can result in stagnation and continuing just the way we are. This situation is obviously beneficial to those who "have" and costly to those who don't.

Over-identification with the client. The cost of this particular result of lack of professional distance is "burnout" and eventually professional ineffectiveness.

Enabling behaviour. If you do not maintain professional distance, it is possible that you may inadvertently encourage the very dysfunctional behaviours that have presented a problem to the client.

The set-up. Lack of professional distance may result in compromising or even dangerous situations occurring, especially within a corrections setting. The professional needs always to be aware of the potential for being set up.

The Argument for Personal Concern

Regardless of the validity of all the above arguments, the reality is that clients are motivated to change by people who communicate that they are truly interested in them and who believe in their potential and their

dignity as unique individuals. It is from this type of individual that a client is more likely to learn those skills and ideas that will assist him or her to live more effectively. It is a universal truth that we cannot respect someone whom we do not feel respects us. It is our ability to communicate that respect sincerely to a client—to differentiate between who he is and what he has done—that can potentially motivate him to listen to ideas that may have the potential to change his perspective.

We also need to develop an understanding of the difference between empathy and sympathy. If I can feel *with* a client, then I can understand his perceptions and motivations as *he* sees them. They do not become my own perceptions and motivations, but I accept and acknowledge his right to them. Feeling sympathy, on the other hand, is a good argument for professional distance. If I feel "for" a client, then I may rob him of the opportunity to experience the implications of his feelings for himself.

When caring develops between the professional and the client, the client is encouraged to see himself as an equal partner in the rehabilitative process: he is worthwhile. To quote a client of mine, "I used to pretend it didn't matter, but it does matter, because now I am about something." Being "about something" implies not only rights, but responsibilities. Being "about something" means (for example) that you correct your own language when you communicate with others, not because you've been *told* to, but because you accept yourself as an equal, and someone to be respected. It is a responsible choice *you* are making. Caring implies and encourages personal responsibility.

The individual playing the role of the professional has a human and very real need to feel respected and valued, and to feel that the work which he or she is doing has had some consequence beyond that of a pay cheque. Professional distance can rob a professional of the energizing force of establishing a meaningful connection with the client. Knowing that your work matters can push you to come to work when other more personal pursuits may seem more appealing—a great way of reducing absenteeism!

Finally, understanding and developing personal concern within appropriate boundaries can motivate a professional to expand his/her knowledge, skills, and abilities. If a job feels good the professional will be more inclined not only to stay in the job but also to expand, learn, and grow within a professional capacity.

The results, then, of an attitude of personal concern can be summarized as follows:

The need for mutual respect. I cannot hope to encourage more effective behaviour in another person unless I can convey to that individual that I respect him as a person (not for what he has done, but for who he is). If I cannot convey this genuine respect for him, it will not be returned to me.

Empathy as opposed to sympathy. Personal concern means that I can show someone that I understand his feelings about the problems he is experiencing, but that I have complete faith in his ability to work out his problems in a way that makes sense to him. This is true empathy.

Caring encourages personal responsibility. If I truly care about someone, I can encourage that person to be responsible for what's happening in his life. I can encourage him to avoid blaming others.

Caring as an energizing force and as a motivator for professional development and growth. Letting myself really care about the welfare of the people I work with allows me to feel good about who I am when I'm at the job. That energy inspires me to try harder, work longer, to "go the extra mile." Really caring means that I'm not afraid to risk, to try new ideas. Knowing that I acted out of care and concern makes even mistakes more forgivable, both in my own eyes and in the eyes of the client.

The Requisite Conditions for Professional Interpersonal Effectiveness

Having set out the personal concern versus professional distance argument, the conclusion I would like to draw is that personal concern is beneficial and necessary to both the client and the professional. However, some parameters need to be established to make it clear what we mean when we talk about personal concern. I believe that, if these six conditions are considered when setting up a professional relationship, then "personal concern" can come effortlessly and without jeopardy to yourself, the client, the profession, or the institution.

Principle 1: Develop your level of intrapersonal awareness. Increase your level of understanding of who you are and how you can be hooked. In that way, you can learn to deflect problems before they occur. Acknowledge your areas of strength as well as your weaknesses. Incidentally, they can often be one and the same. For example, one of my strengths is that I am a friendly and open person; one of my weaknesses is that I am a friendly and open person. I like to be liked. One of the areas of personal growth that I have been working on is to feel good about who I am even when I must do things that cause a negative reaction. I'm finding this professional learning to have quite significant implications in my personal life. Journal-writing is helpful here, as are friends who are not involved in the same profession. Invariably, these friends can provide me with a helpful and fresh perspective.

Consider the following questions:

> Are you a "puppy dog"? Are you most comfortable when others are happy? Do you sometimes avoid necessary and growth-producing confrontations for this reason?
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> Are you particularly susceptible to flattery? Are you highly motivated to achieve and therefore easily affected by a client's positive evaluation of you? Are you equally devastated by a negative conclusion?
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> Are you a "sucker" for a sad story? As a child, were you always bringing home stray animals? Do you feel more confident and competent personally when you "take care of something" for someone else?
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> Do you find criticism hard to handle and therefore go to all lengths to avoid being criticized? Do you find yourself feeling defensive when someone says he disagrees with something you have done or said?
>
> What professional situations are hard for you and why? What professional situations are easy for you and why?

Doing an intrapersonal inventory is a useful way of coming to terms with yourself. In the Life Skills Coaching Certificate program that I teach at the college, students are expected to write self-concept papers and to keep journals. In such a way, it is hoped that the process of

intrapersonal discovery will lead to intrapersonal growth and increased professional effectiveness.

***Principle 2: Develop strong communication skills**—particularly assertiveness—to minimize the possibility that your motives will be misunderstood by clients, fellow professionals, or security staff.* It is not my intention to elaborate on this point to any great length. It is sufficient to say that ongoing practice in assertiveness and recognizing the reasons behind and the techniques of manipulative behaviour are the most important communication skills to develop. Learn to own your own feelings and beliefs and allow others the right to own theirs. This will reduce the degree of defensiveness with which you enter into *any* situation and increase the likelihood that you will not only *be heard*, but that you *will hear*.

Principle 3: Find solutions to your personal problems within your personal life. Working in any "helping" profession can be a profound emotional experience. Working within a closed community such as a correctional facility is so much more intense that the emotional experience can be incredibly powerful. Unless you deal with your private problems outside the institution, it is easy to be psychologically seduced into believing that the answers can lie within the walls. We often deal with a clientele who are charming, considerate, and capable people within a controlled environment. They know how to live within the institution; the chances are often quite good that they will fragment when returned to the street. Grow personally and professionally from what you learn by working within the institution, but solve your problems on the outside.

Principle 4: Develop professional support systems. This has been, for me, an absolute necessity. I know that there have been times when I simply would not have survived if it hadn't been for the support of my colleagues at Fraser Valley College, in particular at Kent Institution. Find coworkers with whom you can talk over your feelings in an atmosphere that is confidential, supportive, and nonthreatening. Learn to trust the people with whom you work. When problems or misunderstandings arise, deal with them openly and honestly. Learn to accept interpersonal style differences and acknowledge perceptions that differ from your own. That is the basis of growth.

Principle 5: Learn to recognize the signs of stress. *Do something about stress before you overload.* As with the previous principles, knowledge is definitely power. Read what you can on stress management, attend workshops when time and money permit. Become *proactive* in the way you deal with the stresses and strains of life. The most significant stress reduction technique I've learned is a process known as "compartmentalization." When I'm at work, I'm *completely* at work (so much so that I'll forget to phone home, arrange dental appointments, etc.). However, when I'm at home, I'm *completely* there. I get caught up in my personal life and in the lives of my family and don't have the time, interest, or energy to concern myself with what's going on at the institution.

Principle 6: Develop a good working relationship with security. This principle was suggested to me by a psychologist at Kent Institution. I was surprised at how defensively I reacted to his suggestion. My reaction suggested to me that by not working to correct misunderstandings with security staff or better still, becoming proactive in our relationship with them, we as educators can set up the very situations we try so diligently to avoid, the quintessential self-fulfilling prophecy. This psychologist emphasizes that the good security/educator relationship is developed before the fact (i.e., before problems occur). Over-reactions, he says, are more likely to occur when information arrives via a third party. It is a standard communication principle that each individual is entitled to his own view of anything. I may disagree with his view, but my disagreement does not invalidate his view. It is then my responsibility to enlighten him with reference to my view of the situation. If I evade that responsibility on the basis that "He won't listen," or "She doesn't care," or "He's already got his mind made up," then that is also a prophecy which becomes self-fulfilling.

Conclusion

The helping profession in general and more specifically prison education/rehabilitation programs are constantly evolving as more recent information suggests new and more effective approaches. This paper outlines my beliefs regarding the need for (and benefits of) personal concern or caring between a professional and a client. If I am going to

facilitate the interpersonal growth of a client, then his success has *got* to matter to me. If I am to encourage him to respect himself, then it is true that I must show him respect. The helping professions in general appear to be moving away from "helping" (in the sense of doing for the client) to "facilitating" (in the sense of helping the client to gain the skills and resources necessary to do for himself). It is my contention in this paper that we can all better help clients to achieve their potential as individuals through organized and principled personal concern.