From the Years

Lowell L. Bennion
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Lowell L. Bennion,* Ph.D.
Presented at the AMCAP Convention
1 April, 1983

I am neither a social worker, psychologist, nor psychiatrist. I operate from no single, scientific theory, or combination of theories. There are a few ideas that work for me in my relations with people which I pass on for your critical review. I have no trouble living by the following well-known counseling principles:

1. I am a good listener.
2. I keep confidences.
3. I am not judgmental. (People expect that of me in my role as bishop, but that doesn’t change my methodology.)
4. I am never shocked, and only occasionally surprised.

I try to help people to solve their own problems instead of solving their problems for them. There are rare exceptions. One of my Institute students, who was hustled into marriage by the first girl he had ever known, came to my office one day and asked in a plaintive tone, “Brother Bennion, I got married ten days ago, do you think I did the right thing?” I replied, “You surely did. Never doubt it.”

One of my parishioners, a professional man, told me of his plan to take out a second mortgage on his home to invest in a business that would return 30% interest on his money. Without wasting a second, I warned him against borrowing money to speculate with and in a business he knew nothing about. But, in most instances, I find it wiser to let people work through their own problems. Along the way I will try to clarify options and help them foresee consequences but leave the decision to them.

Professor Cowles commented to me years ago: “I encourage people to do what they decide to do unless there is a strong reason against it.”

II.

I have learned to try to strengthen the individual so he/she can cope with life. This seems more important than concentrating on the problem—which is often impossible for me or the client to resolve anyway.

I recall a young married woman with two children whose husband was carrying on with another woman. She wanted him back. I encouraged her to hold her head high, to be friendly and respectful, but independent—to face the situation with pride and courage and not to go begging for his return. In this way, I thought she had a chance to win him back or, if not, she was on her way towards self-sufficiency.

*Brother Bennion is “retired” after serving at the University of Utah in many capacities including Director of the L.D.S. Institute and Dean of Students. He currently serves as a Bishop and is actively involved in volunteer community service.

Some years ago a married woman told me how her husband was either an angel or a devil at home and was destroying her and the children. I said something to her which she interpreted as meaning that she was in control of her life and no one was going to determine her state of mind and feeling but herself. She said it worked wonders.

One of the distressful things in the lives of some LDS women is their inability to be a perfect wife, mother, teacher, neighbor, Latter-day Saint.

In strengthening the individual, we should not encourage them to be perfect, in the literal meaning of the word, for three reasons:

1. As human beings, we don’t know what perfection is.
2. We are bound to fail and carry a burden of shame or guilt.
3. Or, worst of all, we might think we are succeeding. (Luke 18)

The passage in Matthew 5:48 “Be ye therefore perfect...” is stated in the context of love. It is urging us to love as Christ did. I like the wording in the New English Bible: “Let there be no limit to your goodness even as there is no limit to the goodness of God.”

Let us help people strive for improvement, encourage them to live the gospel and love God and fellowmen—be good mothers, loving wives and husbands, not perfect ones.

III.

Counseling alone is often helpful but not enough. We need to help individuals meet their basic needs by buttressing counseling with life experiences. I try to help people satisfy the following basic psychological needs:

1. Belongingness— to give and receive love.
2. Creative self-expression.
4. A faith or feeling that gives meaning to life.

A boy came to me at the Institute carrying the burden of the world on his shoulders. He had been advised to see a psychiatrist, but didn’t wish to go.

I listened to him, encouraged him to keep his integrity, do what he thought was right day by day. I maintained a warm relationship with him, put him on a vital standing committee. He was made an officer in a Lambda Delta Sigma Chapter. He began to function well, got through school, became a teacher, then a business man. The Institute was (is) a wonderful setting in which to supplement counseling with experiences which meet the needs of young people.

The basic psychological needs previously mentioned are best fulfilled by fundamentals of the gospel. Jesus
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made love the heart of his gospel and it is a human being's greatest need. Creative self-expression is free agency in action. And I know no one who had as great a feeling of the worth of the individual as did Jesus of Nazareth. Our religion—if we only knew how to express it and help others to internalize it—is a great resource in our efforts to build lives.