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THE GREAT INDEPENDENT VARIABLE
Richard D. Berrett, Ph.D.*
Presidential Address delivered at the AMCAP Convention
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In contemplating what I might say today I reflected back on the five years I have been associated with AMCAP, its beginnings, and the evolutionary process that I have seen take place as we have moved from a point of what might be called a place to come together to contend with one another periodically, to a place where we come together knowing there is a divine purpose that we are here for and that is to understand truth, and with that understanding to go forward in helping others.

I have, in the same sense, looked at my own life as it has evolved as a therapist, and I have come to recognize that my thoughts have changed as well. It wasn’t very long ago that I looked at the techniques I used as a therapist as the independent variable in therapy, the causation factor, and the client outcome the dependent variable. So I gathered as many techniques as I could. I loved to sit in conferences where they talked about strategies: this is the strategy you use with this problem, and this is the strategy for that problem. I was feverish in my notetaking because of my belief that if I knew the techniques, if I knew the processes, if I had an understanding of the strategies, then I could be a good therapist. I could really work with people and be effective. There are some elements of truth to an understanding of practice, techniques and strategies, but I have come to recognize the great independent variable is character, who you are, what you are in that office or around the people you are working with. So, because I have come to believe that the great independent variable in therapy is character, I think I will share with you some of what Dag Hammarskjold once said was the longest journey, the journey into yourself. And if you will allow me to, I would like to share with you some confessions, some convictions, and some convictions that aid me to understand character. I hope you will be tolerant of my personal sharing; and that, perhaps, it may reflect some similarities in your own experience that you might understand more of your own character.

Let me begin then by talking about confessions and commitments. An appropriate reference which provides a framework for my confessions is found in the fourth chapter of Luke. It begins in verse 1, “And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.” I must confess that there are times when my motives as a therapist were the satisfying of my pleasures and my wants. Here the Savior turned down the temptation of the flesh for pleasure, turned down the temptation of the flesh for personal satisfaction, for He believed that there was something greater than personal pleasure and that was to live by the Spirit. I, at times, have not done this. I have been subject to the arm of flesh, and used it as my guiding principle at times. I have allowed the humanists to affect me periodically, and encouraged people to do their own thing, to be who they think they are, and to be unashamed of that, without giving them the important message of who they really are. It is one thing to tell someone who knows by divine whisperings who they really are, to be themselves; it is quite another thing to say to someone who does not have a divine knowledge of who they really are, to go ahead and be who they think they are. Because without that divine knowledge, what they think they really are is not true. And as a therapist I have given them, so to speak, my permission to give in to hedonistic wants.

I also think that my motives at times have been to achieve bread, financial remuneration, financial security and stability. I have given in to the temptations of the flesh. Verses 5, 6 and 7 read, “And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them; for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread.” There are times, I must confess, when my commitments have been to power, to attaining glory, to having status, to receiving from others praise and recognition and the accolades of man; and in that same search for power and the glory of others, I have by these motives tainted my character, gone down wrong paths, for in verse 8 we read that the Savior said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only

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shall thou serve.” I have served man; I have served mammon. I have at times been more concerned about people’s reactions to me than listening to the Spirit and serving my Father in Heaven. Perhaps some of you occasionally experience the same choice of serving mammon, not Father, and make the wrong decision. I confess I have.

In verses 5, 9, 10 and 11, “And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, [again, Satan did not bring the Savior there, the Spirit did] and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: And in their hands shall they bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.” There have been times when, I must confess, I have avoided responsibility. I have, so to speak, cast myself down and let others deal with what I did to them, or how I affected their behavior, when I have not been willing to assume personal responsibility for my behavior. And, in doing that, I placed too much responsibility upon others. I cannot remove myself from the responsibility of being a therapist. I am always a therapist; I am always affecting the lives of those around me, and I cannot remove that responsibility from me, and neither can each of you. It is inaccurate to say that the client is to blame because he or she is not progressing; I share in that responsibility.

Finally, verse 12, “And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God,” meaning that thou shalt not place upon the Lord thy God responsibilities to rescue you when you have the freedom and the choice to not put yourself in jeopardy. We also should not place blame on God or others for aspects of our therapy in which we have a part.

So I have been involved in a search periodically for pleasure, for power, and for the avoidance of responsibility as a therapist. I have also been involved in selfishness as a therapist. C. S. Lewis’s Book Three in the Chronicles of Narnia talks about a young English boy named Eustace. Eustace is a very selfish, self-centered young man. Part of his selfishness is manifest by his desire to avoid working and cooperating with others. He wants to do his own thing, whatever the cost may be for those around him. And so on an occasion when the ship that they were traveling on had docked in a bay and those who were on the ship were unloading the cargo, preparing the campsite, and a meal, Eustace escapes the work by deciding,

“Well, I am just going to go up in the hills here for a while, rest and relax, look at the beautiful scenery and then when food is ready, I am going to come back down and eat.”

But he becomes lost. He becomes afraid and while searching for a return route, he discovers an area where there is a valley and a little pool of clear, smooth water. He decides to take a drink,

“But as soon as he had turned and before he had taken a step forward into the valley he heard a noise behind him. It was only a small noise but it sounded loud in that immense silence. It came from him dead still where he stood for a second. Then he saw his head was a low, dark hole—the entrance to a cave perhaps. And out of this two thin wisps of smoke were coming. And the loose stones just beneath the dark hollow were moving (that was the noise he had heard) just as if something were crawling in the dark behind them. Something was crawling. Worse still, something was coming out. The thing that came out of the cave was something he had never imagined—a long lea-d coloured snout, dull red eyes, no feathers or fur, a long lithe body that trailed on the ground, legs whose elbows went up higher than its back like a spider’s, cruel claws, bat’s wings that made a rasping noise on the stones, yards of tail. And the lines of smoke were coming from its two nostrils. He over said the word Dragon to himself. Nor would it have made things any better if he had. It reached the pool and slid its horrible scalv chin down over the gravel to drink; but before it had drunk there came from it a great croaking or clanging cry and after a few twitches and convulsions it rolled around on its side and lay perfectly still with one claw in the air. A little dark blood gushed from its wide-opened mouth. The smoke from its nostrils turned black for a moment and then floated away. No more came.”

After a brief sense of relief, Eustace seeks the shelter of the cave to rest and avoid the rain which was beginning to fall. In the cave he discovers the content of any dragon’s lair, treasure. There were crowns, coins, rings, bracelets, ingots, cups, plates, and gems,—all treasures of this world. And Eustace wonders how much of the treasure he can obtain.

“I wonder how much I can carry? That bracelet now—those things in it are probably diamonds—I’ll slip that on my own wrist. Too big, but not if I push it right up here above my elbow. Then fill my pockets with diamonds—that’s easier than gold.”

This “getting” behavior suggests the fallacious thought that when wealthy, one is happy. Eustace then falls asleep. What woke him was a pain in his arm. The moon was shining in at the mouth of the cave, and the bed of treasures seemed to have grown much more comfortable; in fact he could hardly feel it at all. He was puzzled by the pain in his arm at first, but presently it occurred to him that the bracelet which he had shoved up above his elbow had become strangely tight. His arm must have swollen while he was asleep (it was his left arm).

He moved his right arm in order to feel his left, but stopped before he had moved it an inch and bit his lip in terror. For just in front of him, and a little on his right, where the moonlight fell clear on the floor of the cave, he saw a hideous shape moving. He knew that shape: it was a dragon’s claw. It had moved as he moved his hand and became still when he stopped moving his hand.
It is interesting to me that frequently we are concerned about the first misjudgment, namely that we never judge that which is of the devil to be of God, but I don’t hear the same priority given to the avoidance of the equally false judgment of deciding that which is of God to be of the devil.

Mormon then writes about the light of Christ, faith, the prophets and other means we have to know the truth. Then in verse 33, “And Christ hath said: If ye will have faith in me ye shall have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in me.” I think of myself as the therapist. I think of the power I need to operate for good in the lives of those with whom I come in contact; how I cannot do this in-and-of myself, no matter what my training, no matter how many strategies and techniques I have listed, no matter how much reading I do. I have access to a power beyond all this. It is the power to do good. It comes from having faith in Him.

Continuing in verses 40 to 48,

What a contrast to my motives of power and prestige!... And again, my beloved brethren, I would speak unto you concerning hope. How is it that ye can attain unto faith, save ye shall have hope? And what is that ye shall hope for? Behold I say unto you that ye shall have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and this because of your faith in him according to the promise. Wherefore, if a man have faith he must needs have hope; for without faith there cannot be any hope. And again, behold I say unto you that he cannot have faith and hope, save he shall be meek, and lowly of heart. If so, his faith and hope is vain, for none is acceptable before God, save the meek and lowly in heart...”

What a contrast to my motives of power and prestige!... and if a man be meek and lowly in heart, and confesses by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus is the Christ, he must needs have charity; for if he hath not charity, he is nothing...”

No matter what power, no matter what pleasures in life, no matter what status one achieves, no matter what earthly possessions one obtain, no matter how much responsibility you avoid, you are nothing. I am nothing without charity.

“And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things,
believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail—"

And then the great words that provide the theme for this convention,

"But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart,"

This is the technique to gain charity.

"Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he has bestowed upon all those who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is;"

And only those who are like him shall see him as he is.

"that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure."

I have the conviction that the most effective enterprise I can engage in as a therapist is to develop my character, and that ingredient of my character that will be most influential in my life and in the lives of others is to develop Christ-like love, charity. And then whatever technique I use, whatever principles I apply in my therapeutic process, will truly be effective as my personality and character are what they should be. I think we must give ourselves to our clients. We must pray for them, we must seek spiritual whisperings which give answers to aid them. We must also pray for ourselves to be a therapeutic influence.

Our sad little friend Eustace who became a dragon realized he was a monster cut off from the whole human race. His crisis led to humility which facilitated remorse and a repentant attitude. He found his friends and to their surprise revealed it was he who had become a dragon. He then reached out towards others, helping them in many ways, even to the degree of losing his dragon-self in their service. It was then, and only then, that the power of Aslan, the symbolic savior in Lewis' writing, could remove the thick, dark, knobbly, nasty dragon scales, bathe Eustace and dress the once-again-but-very-different boy in new clothes. How much like Eustace am I! I must lose myself in the service of others, shed the shackles of false convictions and become a new character through Christ.

I used to be an Adlerian. I now avoid the narrowness of any particular secular theory, but rather seek truth. I used to put my special theoretical glasses on, Adler being one lens, the other Dreikers, which provided vision. And everything I looked at was looked at through these lenses. But as with any theory of man, the vision is limited in scope. Now I'm a seeker. I search for true principles in theory and practice. I study a broader scope of man's theories and use gospel glasses, which are equipped with the lenses of discernment. As I obey the principles which govern their functioning, the lenses are sharp and clear. In a humble way, I feel like the great seeker, Joseph, who sought to understand the characters on the plates as he viewed them through the Urim and Thummim. As righteousness was demonstrated on Joseph's part, including his own diligent application and work, the characters were clear and understandable and translated for the good of all who would read and apply. So it is with me. As I diligently work for therapeutic understanding by study through the gospel lenses, I gain that which is a blessing for my life and for the lives of my clients.

My conviction is that one must seek a divine nature if one is going to be an effective therapist; that even the development of a gospel-oriented personality theory will not answer the key issue, because that will not make of you or me a gospel-centered therapist. We, ourselves, must seek to develop our own divine nature, and then we will have access to the gospel-centered practice and theory of psychotherapy. I draw your attention to covenants made through the sacred ordinances of receiving a name and a blessing, baptism, the sacrament, and the endowment including the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. These covenants provide a frame of reference regarding the development of charity which is the foundation of our divine character.

In closing I want to share a poem which has great meaning for me; perhaps it will influence you.

"The Touch of the Master's Hand"

'Twas battered and scarred and the auctioneer
Though it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin.
But he held it up with a smile:
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"

"A dollar?"
A dollar, then two.
"Only two?"
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?
Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three—"

But NO, from the room, far back, a gray haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then wiping the dust from the old violin
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.
The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low, said:
"What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow:
"A thousand dollars! and who'll make it two?
Two thousand!
And who'll make it three?
Three thousand once, three thousand twice
And going, and gone," said he.
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The people cheered, but some of them cried.
"We do not quite understand
What changed its worth."
Swift came the reply.
"The touch of the master's hand."

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And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A mess of pottage, a glass of wine;
A game - and he travels on.
He is “going and almost gone.”
But the master comes and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand,
The worth of a soul
And the change that’s wrought
By the touch of the master’s hand.

Myra Brooks Welch

My friends, I say to you that it is only when we align our lives with true principles that we can represent the master’s hand in touching the lives of others. It is only as we develop that we can truly represent Him in this great work of therapy. It is recognizing our worth and the worth of others by understanding divine nature and character that leads to therapeutic outcome. Yes, character is the great independent variable.

I bear you my witness that Christ lives, that He can be your co-counselor as you develop the character that allows you to listen to His whisperings. I hope that you will consider these things, that you will listen to the whisperings of the Spirit as you attempt to work with others. Whether they be members of the Church or not, they are all God’s children and all have a divine destiny, and I hope that you will be sensitive to that and sensitive to the whisperings of that Father, given through the Spirit, as you touch their lives. I bear you this testimony and share with you these thoughts in and through the sacred and holy name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.