Handling Values Conflict With LDS & Non-LDS Clients

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First, I would like to indicate how pleased I am to be with you. I want you to know that I do not stand before you as a self-proclaimed expert in the area of values or values conflicts but I, as you, have done a good bit of thinking about the area, primarily as it has impacted my own therapy and the administrative work I do. What I would like to do today is share with you some of the conclusions that I have reached concerning values and their role in therapy.

The other night on our way to this conference, we were driving along the rather desolate roads of West Texas and Eastern New Mexico. It was a beautiful night. The stars were in the firmament and I was alone for a period of time while the other members of my family were asleep. The cool night air felt so refreshing. As I sat there driving in the solitude of the moment, I contemplated a number of things that I value. I contemplated my love for my wife and my children—my home and family activities. I contemplated the gospel and our understanding of the plan of salvation—and that seemed particularly relevant as I looked up into the sky and saw the stars and a portion of the moon. I felt very grateful and very blessed. The reason I share this personal moment with you is my belief that so much of what we do and so much of what we feel and think about is not been my intent to sit in the solitude of the time and resources to function in church callings.

We were talking about how there are some people who have a tendency to have such difficulty finding deep and abiding commitments to our profession or to our religion without eventually running into some conflicts. Some of my conflicts seem insignificant when compared to that described in the 22nd Chapter of Genesis where Abraham is confronted with what I think is a gigantic conflict of values. Abraham was told to take his son and offer him up for a sacrifice. If you read between the lines, you can see that that great prophet was struggling with values that he cherished deeply: a deep and abiding love for his son, Isaac, and a deep and abiding love for his God who was telling him to sacrifice his son. So significant was Abraham’s obedience in his intent to offer Isaac that it was immediately after that experience that Abraham was told that through his posterity all the nations of the earth would be blessed. We learn something about the serious conflict of values in the situation he faced. Nephi obeyed the Spirit and took Laban’s life. Even though the scriptures do not elaborate on that conflict, you and I know that Lehi had taught Nephi good and sound principles and that there was a serious conflict of values in the situation he faced. Nephi obeyed the Spirit and took Laban’s life. Even said, “You know, my experience is that people will always find time to do the things that they truly value.” I was struck with the simplicity and accuracy of his observation. I believe that it is true. That which we value most we ultimately support with our time and talents.

What are these values that play such a crucial role in our daily lives? There are a lot of different definitions of values. Webster defines values as that which is desirable or worthy of esteem for its own sake; a thing or quality having intrinsic worth. Mowrer in 1967 said that values are long-range attitudes, convictions, wishes and faith. Values are principles you live by. Rollo May recently talked about values as symbols around which one’s devotions gather. Values are those things which are something of special worth. He went on to say that values, indeed, require decisions.

I have experienced conflict with values relative to time commitments in trying to excel professionally, spiritually, and in church callings. I know that most of you have experienced those same conflicts along with me. I find it very difficult to believe that we could have deep and abiding commitments to our profession or to our religion without eventually running into some conflicts. Some of my conflicts seem insignificant when compared to that described in the 22nd Chapter of Genesis where Abraham is confronted with what I think is a gigantic conflict of values. Abraham was told to take his son and offer him up for a sacrifice. If you read between the lines, you can see that that great prophet was struggling with values that he cherished deeply: a deep and abiding love for his son, Isaac, and a deep and abiding love for his God who was telling him to sacrifice his son. So significant was Abraham’s obedience in his intent to offer Isaac that it was immediately after that experience that Abraham was told that through his posterity all the nations of the earth would be blessed. We learn something about both obedience and the struggle with a value conflict. I think of Nephi as he stood over Laban, having been told that he should take Laban’s life, and the tremendous conflict that Nephi must have felt even though the scriptures do not elaborate on that conflict, you and I know that Lehi had taught Nephi good and sound principles and that there was a serious conflict of values in the situation he faced. Nephi obeyed the Spirit and took Laban’s life. Even

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Father Adam had to resolve a values conflict in his choice between a life with his beloved Eve or a life in the garden. Abraham, Nephi and Adam relied upon the Spirit and eternal gospel principles to deal with their conflicts.

I mentioned earlier that all of us have probably experienced conflicts relative to spending time in our Church callings, in our professions, or with our families. Those are difficult decisions. Some of us have experienced values conflicts that are even deeper in nature. I can remember vividly the day I learned of the revelation that President Kimball had received concerning the priesthood being given to Blacks. The reason it is such a vivid part of my memory is because that had represented for me what was a value conflict. I had learned very early in life from my parents that you share what you have of value with other people. I'd lived during the course of my childhood with 74 foster children who my parents had brought into our home and had seen demonstrated there the principle of sharing that which we value with other people. The result of this circumstance was that I had a tough time and experienced some dissonance because of a practice that restricted our ability to share that which was of greatest worth, the priesthood, with our black brothers. My model for dealing with the conflict was that of Abraham, Nephi, Adam and others--that is, obedience. Nevertheless, in my prayers I talked with my Father about the fact that the value conflict was there and it was hurtful at times for me. And so when the day came when I was in my office at work and a call came from my wife, Joan, who reported that President Kimball had announced a revelation that Blacks could receive the priesthood, I can remember a feeling of tremendous thanksgiving, a feeling of joy and a feeling of resolution as what had been a conflict of values for me was dissipated. There was an added increment of congruence in my life in connection with that announcement.

So it seems that all aspects of our lives interact with our value systems. We certainly cannot separate them from our day-to-day decisions. So, of course, what that means is that as we enter into a therapeutic relationship with other people it is utterly impossible and possibly even preposterous to think that we can rid ourselves of our values. Lowe (1976) concluded that no “intense human interaction, which includes psychotherapy can occur without the expression and manifestation of values.” Bergin in 1980 concluded that “values are an inevitable and pervasive part of psychotherapy.” Some of these statements are based not only on intuition but on empirical investigation. Even more recently in 1980 Hlasny and McCarrey concluded that a therapist’s value system appears to be a relatively pervasive characteristic that has an inevitable yet covert influence on the therapeutic process. Now if you were to look at my notes you would see I have underlined “covert.” Values are such an important and integral part of our lives that there is certainly no way we can shed them in an intense, interpersonal interaction such as psychotherapy.

I have not always believed this about values and psychotherapy. As I completed training about 14 years ago, I was deeply committed to keeping my values and my agenda out of the therapeutic process. I was very careful during those years not to intrude in the therapeutic process with what I thought were my values. I worked very hard to listen carefully to what the client was saying and to respond and react only to that which was presented, both overtly and covertly, by the client. I worked very hard to do that and to not include my values because I thought that would constitute a distraction, a diversion from good therapy. My belief at that time was that if I could just “stay with the client” and provide my clients with a mirror that was brighter, sharper and clearer than they had ever had in their lives, and that I could in addition to presenting that mirror through my verbal interactions, provide an environment of safety, that the person within that environment would grow and develop in basically constructive and positive ways. I had a lot more patience in those days than I do now. There were times when I waited and waited and most of the time I found that this type of therapy worked. Some of the time, of course, it did not work. But, if you could observe me doing therapy today, you would, I think, see some significant differences between what I did then and what I do now--relative, particularly, to the expressions of values. Over the years I have found it utterly impossible to keep my own values separate from my therapy. So my own experience confirms the conclusions that values are infused in all that we do, in all that we say. As I look back on those days it is now increasingly clear to me that in my therapeutic endeavors I can identify those client comments that I must have responded to with greater enthusiasm than others. I am convinced that my values were at work as I selected a vocal intonation, or as I selected a piece of content, out of several pieces, to which to react. I have no doubt that my values were very much with me. Nevertheless, my effort at that time was to keep them separate. In that I failed.

Over the years I have learned and concluded several things. I would like to pass those on to you at this time. I've identified six propositions that relate to values and therapy that matter to me and that I wish to share with you today.

The first one, I think, grew out of an interaction I had with Beth, a client of 13 years ago. Beth was a freshman who sought counseling at the university counseling center. Her presenting problems related to loneliness, a hunger for affection and a need for
inclusion. I had only seen her several times when she came in to report that she was several months pregnant. She was then confronted with a decision from among several alternatives. The alternatives Beth identified included having the baby and keeping it, having the baby and putting it out for adoption, and abortion. Other alternatives included marriage, although she was unsure about the identity of the father, or remaining single. Examining the alternatives became the primary focus for the next few sessions. My effort was to be the best possible counselor and therapist that I could be, and in so doing, at that time 13 years ago, I worked very hard to keep myself and my values out of it. I worked hard to help Beth explore all of those alternatives and all of the consequences of each of the alternatives, as best we could. I referred her to people who I thought were crucial to her decision, including a physician, her minister, and an adoption agency. So for several sessions we had some very intense interaction with the intent of helping Beth make the best possible choice. I think one of the reasons I remember the case of Beth so vividly is that Beth’s final decision was to have an abortion. I remember that vividly because, although I had made a real effort to be a very good therapist and, according to my beliefs and training at the time, to keep my own values separate from the therapist and, according to my beliefs and training at the time, to keep my own values separate from the therapy, Beth’s decision elicited a dissonance in me that exists even now. I didn’t understand this dissonance that was within me at the time. All I knew was that it was there and that it troubled me. I somehow felt badly about the work that I had done, or perhaps had not done. There was something apparently that I was not attending to, and the experience did not leave me at peace with myself. In 1967 the whole question of abortion was a relatively new issue that was being confronted by professional psychologists. When Beth made her decision I felt compelled not to support it—there was something inside me that would not accept it. Yet I felt that I had no choice but to remain neutral. It seems that my values could no longer be suppressed, yet I could not express them. From this and other experiences I have derived a postulate that relates to the therapist’s relationship with self.

Therapeutic interventions that are consistent with the internal value structure of the therapist will result in more effective therapy than those that are not.

This was what I did not do with Beth. I did not tell Beth who I was, and what my values were at the time in our therapeutic interaction, but I feel now that it would have been appropriate to do so. My values were obviously present. I have no doubt about that, but I feel some regret for not having been overt in my expression of those values. I am not convinced that Beth’s decision would have been any different, but I am convinced that the process would have been more thorough, effective and honest. I feel now that my commitment to assisting Beth in dealing with her dilemma would have been honored more deeply.

My second postulate concerning values in is a corollary of the first:

Therapeutic interventions that are contrary to the value structure of the therapist detract from the therapeutic impact and weaken the therapeutic encounter.

As I reflect back on my work with Beth, I believe that there was in me at the time of her decision a prompting telling me that her decision was not in accordance with established, eternal principles. I think that is what troubled me so much at the time. Again, I’m not sure that Beth would have done anything differently had I expressed my concern about her decision. I do know that I would have been more at peace with myself had I introduced Beth to Jim Hurst and his value structures, and if I had explained to her my concerns for her welfare from my perspective.

A third postulate deals with a dimension of the therapist’s spirituality.

Therapeutic interventions that reflect mutual trust and respect between the therapist and his or her Father in Heaven enhance the effectiveness of therapy.

I noted earlier that I did not feel at peace with the therapy I offered Beth. My own conclusion is that my therapeutic effort left me more spiritually dissonant because of what I withheld of myself. I think it’s becoming more acceptable in the world of psychology to talk about values relating to God and the role of religion and deity in our therapy. I think a number of years ago we would have been taken less seriously by our colleagues in identifying these kinds of postulates. I, for one, feel indebted to Dr. Bergin and others at the Values Institute at BYU who are providing very important leadership relative to the acceptability of considering the variable of the therapist’s spirituality as an important component of effective therapy.

A fourth postulate deals with therapist-client morality. If spirituality is a construct describing interactions between man and God, so morality is a construct describing the characteristics of man’s relationship to man.

Therapeutic interventions that create mutual trust and confidence, that enhance open communication and understanding between the therapist and the client result in a more powerful therapist and more effective therapy.

I have already reported to you that I was not at peace with the spirit at the conclusion of my therapy with Beth. I must also report that I did not feel at peace with Beth. My hunch is that if we could have talked with her after that experience, she would probably have given some basically positive
evaluations of her experience with therapy, but had I evaluated it, I probably would have talked a bit about a discomfort I had, based on the feeling that I let Beth down—that I had, at a time when it was perhaps most inappropriate, divorced myself from my spiritual makeup and separated it from the therapeutic encounter. If I were to do it again, I would do it differently. My therapy would reflect more accurately the postulates I have listed thus far. It would have made a difference to me, and I feel confident that, even considering the worst circumstance, it would not have hindered the therapeutic encounter with Beth. Beth, by the way, was not a member of the Church—and Beth and her family did not report any value at that time that was discrepant with abortion.

Another counseling situation emerged that has led to a fifth postulate. Rob and Jill had experienced some marital discord. Jill came reporting that she had had sexual intimacy with a colleague in a city nearby. I made a real effort to reflect and explore what was troubling them. I assisted both of them to face the consequence of their actions and confronted them with the discrepancies between their behavior and the religious faith that they espoused. Over a period of time they were able to resolve the conflicts and today are still married, but I know their marriage is still struggling to build back a degree of trust that was badly damaged during that period of unfaithfulness. Postulate number five describes a way I would have worked differently in dealing with the value conflict I personally experienced in working with them.

Therapeutic interventions that overtly confront value conflicts between the therapist and the client lead to greater trust and confidence, and enhance communication and understanding between the therapist and client, and thereby result in more effective therapy than those that do not.

With Rob and Jill I think that if we had reached down into their souls and asked them to evaluate their therapeutic experience they might have felt a bit of disappointment. That is my perception and may reflect simply my own disappointment in me in that I was not much more overt in verbalizing the value conflicts that I was experiencing with them. I think if I were to do it again, I would be more assertive in stating what my values are. I think that Rob and Jill might have been disappointed that I didn’t rise up in indignation and confront them with the huge discrepancy they were living with. It’s true, I can feel a sense of gratification in the fact that they are still together, their children are still there, and apparently doing very well, but I’m disappointed that in that period of value conflict I was not more overt in disclosing my values and letting them know who I was and what I believed. I believe my therapy would have been more powerful and more effective had I done that.

Postulate number six:

Therapeutic interventions that overtly confront value conflicts that exist between the client and the client’s primary group (spouses, family, friends) is more effective than therapy which does not confront these conflicts.

Well, how might these various postulates make a difference? Let me indicate to you one other situation that existed that I think left me at greater peace with the Spirit and with a better feeling concerning the therapy that I was providing. More recently, two women sought me out for therapy. They were in a homosexual relationship. They described themselves as lesbians. They sought me out, having heard about my therapy from others and not knowing any more about me than that. Their presenting problem was one of interpersonal conflict. Their goal was to resolve that interpersonal conflict with the intent of learning how better to manage their lesbian “marriage”. There were issues of trust, devotion, dependence and external pressures that were all pertinent. I listened to them for the better part of two hours in the initial session so that I could be sure that I understood what their goals were. At the conclusion of their presenting problem, I introduced myself to them. I told them who I was and what I believed and what I valued with regard to homosexuality, heterosexuality and intimacy. I talked with them about some of my knowledge, fears and doubts relative to lesbian relationships, and I acknowledged that although I ascribed to their terminal value system, (which basically was to have happiness, joy and satisfaction in life) I had to depart from them when it came to the instrumental value system that they expressed—a lesbian relationship. I indicated I would work with them, but that my goal would be different than theirs because I had concluded as part of the introductory sessions that part, at least, of the reason they were together was because of deficits in their interactional and attitudinal skills with regard to heterosexual friendships. I indicated I would work with them, but it would be in the direction of providing them with the freedom to leave each other and go their separate ways. They agreed to therapy on these terms—one was much more favorable than the other. They went through a therapeutic process that lasted six months. About three months into the process they did split. One person moved away and I lost touch with her. The other person, I learned sometime later, did marry and presently has a family.

Reviewing the six postulates listed in this paper, I think my therapy was much more compatible in this instance than in my two earlier examples, and I feel more at peace with the Spirit.

Brothers and Sisters, we are going to be confronted with value conflicts. For my own part, the postulates that I have mentioned have helped me with some of my decisions. I hope that by sharing them with you
they cause you to think and that together we can become more efficient and adequate and in tune with the Spirit relative to how we deal with value conflicts in our own lives and in the lives of the clients we assist.

I pray the Lord's blessings on all of us that we will be able to succeed. I am convinced that the work we do is of vital importance. I am also convinced that we need the help of the Lord if we are to be fully effective in our important and, at times, sacred role as psychotherapists.

REFERENCES


