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A Brief LDS Faith-Based Dialogue for the Treatment of Conditional Self-Worth

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This paper presents a sample dialogue which has been used effectively in psychotherapy with Latter-day Saint (LDS) clients who suffer from the belief that their worth as individuals is based on their performance (i.e., “conditional self-worth”). The dialogue makes use of LDS theology and strategic questioning in order to dispute and ultimately replace the client’s paradigm of conditional self-worth with beliefs in unconditional human worth. The dialogue is considered as one component of a larger religio-psychotherapeutic approach which has as its goal increasing flexible, rational thinking, including the belief that all human beings have unconditional worth.

In a recent *AMCAP Journal* article (Rector, 2006), I echoed the well-worn assertion of numerous mental health experts (Ellis, 1985, 1991; Hartman, 1967; Hauck, 1991; Miller, 1986; Rogers, 1957, 1961; Satir, 1978; Tillich, 1953; Walker and others, 1992; Woods, 1993; Yalom, 1990) that the belief in conditional human worth predisposes individuals towards neuroses, whereas the more enlightened life-philosophy of unconditional human worth tends to diminish neuroses. More specifically, I underscored teachings unique to both the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in particular and Christianity in general, which assert in a powerful way the unconditional worth of human beings. Such teachings can assist mental health professionals in helping their LDS clients develop more unconditional acceptance in their views towards themselves and their fellow human beings (Rector, 2006). Numerous other LDS mental health professionals and behavioral scientists have written about the problem of creating

and maintaining a healthy sense of self-worth and have asserted the unconditional worth of human beings (Ellsworth, 1990; Kapp, 1992; MacArthur, 1981; Strong, 1980; Wagstaff, 1981). However, this paper goes much further by not only asserting a definition of unconditional human worth, but providing an example of a dialogue between therapist and client in which such teachings are utilized to encourage the client to adopt a more unconditional paradigm of human worth.

In my experience this dialogue seems to be most useful to clients if it is used within the larger therapeutic context of helping clients understand how their beliefs can impact their emotional experiences (for example, in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy or Cognitive Therapy). Of course, it is important to use such a dialogue with tact and timing. While I believe that many members of the Church—both client and non-client—could benefit from such a conversation, I have often waited through numerous sessions to broach this particular conversation until the right segue presented itself.¹ Such an “opening” typically does not occur until (1) rapport has been established, (2) the client has been given enough time and space to repeatedly reveal the conditional nature of his or her acceptance of self and/or others, and (3) the topic being discussed (e.g., self-loathing due to perceived failures, perceptions of

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abandonment or rejection by God, disapproval from others indicating one's basic unacceptability as a person) lends itself well to beginning such a dialogue.

T: This leads us to something I'd like to explore with you. Can I ask you an abstract question?

C: Sure.

T: Let me encourage you to sit back, and put yourself into your typical frame of mind as you're walking around on campus, seeing others, interacting with others, and just going about your day. (Pause) The worth of a human being—what would you say that is based on?

After pondering for a few moments, most clients typically give one of three responses. (1) A few will say, "I don't know." I actually consider this to be a fairly enlightened response, as the client has not simply interjected conventional wisdom. I typically follow up with a question like this:

T: Well, if you were to say something specific—even if you're not sure—what would it be? What is your knee-jerk response to my initial question?

At this point, such clients typically proceed to offer a conditional definition (e.g., personal righteousness, accomplishments, etc.). (2) Most clients will quickly give a conditional definition of human worth, or (3) they will give a "Sunday School answer," such as being a child of God, etc., which, while doctrinally correct, tends to come across as superficial and parroted, and it belies much of the larger belief system behind the client's neurosis. If the client gives a Sunday School answer, I typically respond with something like this:

T: Yes, we Latter-day Saints believe that all human beings are children of God and that the worth of a soul is great in the sight of God, but I have a suspicion that that's not what actually informs or guides your thinking and feeling about yourself and others on a daily basis. I'm interested not so much in "the right answer" at this point as I am in what actually goes through your mind and guides your daily actions and feelings.

At this point, the client is typically willing to explore in a deeper way what he or she believes underneath these more superficial ideals; the client usually offers a conditional response, and a conversation like the following takes place:

C: *I guess I'd have to say that the worth of human beings is based on how much good they do in the world, or on how much of a positive difference they make in the lives of others.*

T: Those are very worthwhile sentiments and desirable goals. Can we try a little thought experiment?

C: Sure.

T: Who for you would represent the epitome, or the prime example, of "making a positive difference in the lives of others?" Choose someone who is fully human—not half-God and half-human (i.e., Jesus)—because none of us is like that.

C: *All right, let's see—I'd have to say my father.*

T: Really—

C: *Yeah.*

T: Tell me about him.

C: *My dad always seems to be doing things for other people. He's really respected at work and in the neighborhood because, you know, he's a doctor, so people admire him and seem to come to him for advice, or if they have a question about their health, or whatever. He also participates in that Doctors Without Borders charity every couple of years. This last time he went down to El Salvador and worked with the people for almost a month. He's just a really good guy who genuinely cares about people—goes out of his way for people, and people love him for it.*

T: He sounds like a really good person.

C: *He is.*

T: Okay (I raise my left hand, palm turned upwards, flat). On this hand, let's put a miniature version of your father; he's G.I. Joe sized. Can you see him?

C: (smiles) *Yeah.*

T: Okay, now on this hand (I raise my right hand like I did my left to form a sort of balancing scale), let's put another man about the same age. And let's imagine that just by looking at this man, you know some things about him. You know that this man has lived what would be considered to be a very selfish life. He hasn't ever really manifested much concern for others. He's manipulated business deals to gain at the expense of others; he's stolen from employers many times. He left his wife and kids for another woman and didn't pay any child support after the divorce, and now he cheats on this other woman with younger women. He has used a lot of alcohol and drugs and seems to live a life where other people don't matter much to him (pause). Now which of these two has more ultimate worth as a human being?

At this point, clients typically say—within a matter of seconds—one of two things: Either they have the same worth, or one has more ultimate worth.

C: *Well, they have the same worth.*

I typically respond with something like this:

T: Wow, you just undid your whole philosophy of human worth in three seconds! Why did you do that? Are you telling me what you think I want to hear, or do you really believe what you said?

The client typically makes this kind of reply:

C: *Well, I know it's true, but I just don't feel it very strongly or put it into practice very often.*

Then we go on to talk about “why not?”—which eventually comes around to the fact that the client actually holds some deeper beliefs about himself or herself and others which are more conditional in terms of perceived worth.

Some clients give a more revealing response to the question over “which of these two has more ultimate worth”:

C: *My dad does.*

At that point, I briefly summarize what the client is saying:

T: In other words, you are saying that the worth of a human being depends on meeting certain external conditions: specifically, “making a positive difference in the lives of others.” We call that “conditional human worth.” What I want to suggest to you is that that belief is quite possibly a significant factor in your problems (i.e., depression, anxiety, eating disorder, etc.).

At this point, it's typically appropriate to talk about how belief in conditional human worth is a trap.

C: *What do you mean?*

T: Believing in the conditional worth of human beings, or in your own conditional worth, is like walking on a high-wire over a big vat of neuroses: So long as you are living up to your own cherished conditions of worth, you'll believe that you're on the wire and will feel okay with yourself. But who can do that all the time? Remember our past conversations about how all human beings are—by nature—flawed, imperfect, and fallible? What does that suggest?

C: *That sooner or later, I'm not going to be able to pull it off; that I'm not always going to be able to perform just as I'd like to on some important thing. Then it'll be like I've fallen off the wire and landed in the “vat of neuroses,” as you put it, because I believe that I'm worth less as a person than I was before I fell off the wire.*

T: Yes, and as a result your life will feel something like a roller-coaster ride where sometimes you'll feel that you have worth as a person (up), and sometimes you'll feel like you have less worth as a person (down), depending on how you judge your performance.

C: *That's exactly what it's like.*

T: And if you believe that you have less worth as a person every time you perceive that you've failed or fallen short on something that matters to you, how are you likely to feel?

C: *Depressed or panicky.*

T: Which is just how you've felt many times before, and these feelings are the very reasons you're coming in here to see me.

C: *Right. So what can I do about that?*

T: That's an excellent question. How would you answer that?

C: *I don't know. I guess I'd have to come to believe in something new about myself that wouldn't change all the time depending on my performance.*

T: So what could that be?

C: *I don't have the foggiest idea (laughter).*

T: I believe the enlightened answer to your question is to come to believe in what we call (naturally) "unconditional human worth." The best definition of unconditional human worth I have ever heard was given by Elder Monson on a number of occasions, but most recently at the Spring of '06 General Conference Priesthood Session, when he said, "The worth of a human being is his or her capacity to become as God" (Monson, 1997; 2006). Now think about that for a minute, because the implications are profound (pause). Here's a very important question: What do you have to be in order to have "the capacity to become as God?"

At this point, many clients will very quickly revert to their conditional paradigm:

C: *Well, you have to be righteous or obedient to the commandments.*

T: Now be careful. Do you see how quickly you went back to the conditional human worth paradigm?

C: (Looks puzzled)

T: Righteousness and obedience are conditions that fluctuate, aren't they. But Elder Monson said human worth was based on something different: "the capacity to become as God." So let me ask you again: What do you have to be in order to have the capacity to become as God?

At this point, many clients begin to understand:

C: *I guess you just have to be a human being.*

T: Exactly! And what are you?

C: *A human being.*

If the client doesn't make this insight on his or her own, I go ahead and say something like the following. Even if the client does come to this insight without prompting, I may say this in order to help clarify and deepen this very important point.

T: All that's required to have the capacity to become as God, thus having unconditional human worth, is to be a member of the human race. Period. No other species that we're aware of has this particular innate capacity—to ultimately become as God—but human beings have it simply by virtue of being members of the species. I consider this insight to be one of the best-kept secrets in the Church, though it shouldn't be. After all—Jesus taught parables illustrating this. Why would the shepherd (representing God) leave 99 found sheep (representing righteous individuals) to go after a lost sheep (representing a sinner—perhaps you or I) if a lost sheep had less inherent worth than a found sheep? (Luke 15:4) It wouldn't make any sense for him to do that, because the risk of losing more sheep would be too great; but he goes after the lost sheep, which suggests to our minds that whether or not we're "lost" has nothing to do with our inherent worth to our Creator—that our true worth comes from another source. The story is the same with the woman who searches through the night for her lost coin (Luke 15:8) and for the Prodigal's father, who runs out to embrace his returning son—no questions asked (Luke 15:20). Now in each case the story has a happy ending because the figure representing God finds the one lost—one of us. But that's not the central point here. The point is that God comes after us and desires us—wandering sheep though we may be—because we have intrinsic, inherent worth as individuals based on our innate capacity to ultimately become as our Creator. What a powerful, beautiful idea, right?

This takes us back to the little thought experiment we did earlier today when I asked you to decide which person had more ultimate worth—your dad or the other guy, and you said your dad did. Well, which of those two do we admire more?

C: *My dad.*

T: Right. Which of those two do we want our sons and daughters to be like?

C: *My dad.*

T: Right. Which of those two is going to be better off in life and receive more blessings?

C: *My dad.*

T: Right. But which of those two has more ultimate worth as a human being?

C: *They're the same on that. I've never looked at it that way before.*

T: I think that's because we've long perceived that unless we did certain things, we wouldn't have much worth, either to God or to our parents, though God has never said that, and most parents have never said it just like that. Also, without realizing it, I think we as a people have often reinforced notions of conditional human worth to one another in order to motivate each other to be righteous. I think we've believed deep down that if we didn't dangle our worth over the fire that we wouldn't have enough motivation or desire to make sacrifices and do the right things. But think about it—if drugs were legalized tomorrow, would you run right out and try heroin or cocaine for the first time?

C: *No way.*

T: And why not?

C: *Because that would be stupid; because I know that heroin and cocaine aren't good for me and would just cause more problems.*

T: Exactly. By the same logic, do you think you might decide to become a skid-row bum or be unfaithful to your wife if you came to believe in your own unconditional human worth?

C: *No, because I still want to be a good person and have good experiences in life. And just because I know that my worth can never change and that I'll have the same worth to God no matter what I do, that doesn't make me want to suddenly become some kind of a slouch.*

T: Why not?

C: *Well, because that's not who I want to be or how I want to live. I still value the same things.*

T: So in other words, you still have a strong preference to be an upright, upstanding person for a variety of reasons, even if you know that whether or not you behave like that kind of a person does not change your inherent worth in God's eyes. (Pause) So I want you to now sit back again and pause for a minute and pay attention to your feelings as you ask yourself, "How would my life be different if I came to believe deeply and profoundly in what Elder Monson said: if I came to believe deeply in not just my own, but in everyone else's unconditional human worth? How might that awareness impact me on an emotional level?"

C: (Pause) *Well, I know I would be more peaceful about life. I mean, I think I would be more relaxed and calm realizing that my worth as a person is stable and intact no matter what; so I probably wouldn't beat myself up so much. Also I think the good I did would be motivated more by my desire to experience good things and by gratitude to God rather than by a need to create or maintain some fleeting sense of self-worth. I would just become a more peaceful person.*

Of course this dialogue has the potential to go in a variety of directions according to the specific nature of the client's problems, his or her intellectual and doctrinal sophistication, and so forth. It's important for the therapist to avoid being dogmatic or rigid about the client adopting an unconditional view of human worth. My experience has shown that client resistance can eventually be overcome with a gentle, repeated emphasis on the

“fruits” (Matt. 7:16), the “what-you-get” from a paradigm of unconditional human worth versus a conditional view.

In using this intervention, I have found that clients typically feel an initial sense of relief, clarity, even mild euphoria after gaining these insights, and as a result they leave my office feeling quite hopeful. However, in almost all instances they will return to therapy in the near future suffering from the same neurotic symptoms they had before this conversation. Giving up old ways of viewing ourselves and the world is indeed difficult. Despite conscious realization that certain of our beliefs are dysfunctional, we often cling to them because they are part of a deeper emotional sense-of-self framework, and they provide a predictable order to our experience. These issues all need to be acknowledged and worked through.

As with most new beliefs, the perspective of uncondi-

tional human worth takes considerable time to become internalized and deepened to the extent that this new perspective helps create healthy emotion, such as disappointment, in situations which previously led to dysfunctional emotion, such as self- or other-hatred. Clients will need to have a variety of real-life experiences in which they may try out and assess these new ideas to see if the “fruits” of such a perspective are in fact in line with their larger life goals. They will also need the therapist to remind, encourage, and clarify as they continue to work hard at discarding old conditional notions of human worth and adopting a new, more enlightened paradigm of themselves and others. But when clients finally achieve this lasting paradigm shift, they find themselves in the enviable position of living more peaceful, graceful lives despite the adversity they face.

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FOOTNOTE

¹I have also used this intervention quite early on—even during the first few sessions—with some clients. This depends upon a number of factors, such as the client's apparent ego strength, the quickness of rapport established, and how tightly linked the presenting problem is with perceptions of conditional self-worth.