



Thoughts from a young male professional

By Dave Banks

Dave Banks shares his experiences of feeling led to train as a counsellor, and some observations now that he is practising.

She pushed the cider sideways along the bar towards me, and, raising her glass, we toasted. She took a sip of her drink, then turned to me, leant on the bar top, and asked: "Have you considered training as a counsellor?"

She wasn't the first to ask. Having submitted my theology research paper, I was still none-the-wiser what exactly God had had in mind when he had answered my prayer request concerning vocation in a slightly unfitting blaze of glory. I had followed the subsequent breadcrumbs, but after eight years of theological education and study, I had started to get the feeling that all I was doing was developing an expensive hobby of higher education. I had been delighted to be led quite clearly in the direction of theological study, and firm that I didn't want to dilute learning opportunity with philosophy or religious studies at that time. Yet secretly I had always been rather envious of my 'theology and counselling' colleagues back at London School of Theology (LST), disappearing off to Watford to counsel clients. They always asked such good questions in conversation! I wanted to ask good questions like that...

It has to be noted that, for my journey, around the time my friend bought me that cider in an Austrian guest house in the middle of nowhere in a Styrian valley, I saw a notable increase in the number of people commenting that I would "make a good priest, chaplain or counsellor", often in the same sentence. In my great wisdom (and ever seeking to be efficient), I decided to pursue all three – therefore for me, these three areas have always been intertwined together. Hence my final paper at Waverley Abbey College being entitled 'A conversation between the Church and counselling on bereavement support and what we can learn from each other'. With more hindsight, I suspect this is all part of God's sneaky plan...Or at least I hope so.

To supervise or not to supervise

Thus I found myself, through full fault of my own, sitting a little uncomfortably at the beginning of my counselling supervisor training – uncomfortable, not because of the chairs (they were pretty good, and allowed me to slob and slouch the way I do, much to the dismay of one of my first group supervisors) but because of the subtle sense of imposter's syndrome that I had being in a room of about 18 counsellors,





with me being the least experienced (in one case by about 18 years). Not that I mind being the youngest either, or one of the few males or facing a challenge of proving that I am capable of growing into this new ministry I sense God is calling me into. (My second-ever client was nearly twice my age with a presenting problem of sexual performance anxiety, so 'go big or go home'.) But what I quickly learned in the first question that was asked (in my memory something along the lines of "What prevented you from doing this training sooner?") was that many of my fantastic peers had been put off by both a daunting sense of responsibility and wrestling with ethical dilemmas. I am ever so grateful that Heather Churchill, who was leading the four blocks of supervisor training, had both helped flourish my enjoyment of ethical dilemmas already in my LST days, and in this season, sought to allay and address our fears as trainee supervisors. What very much stood out to me was the emphasis that, as supervisors, you're not on your own, and that there is always a ladder to run things up (even if for the more experienced supervisors, this runs more sideways than upwards)!

The multi-faceted meanings of accreditation

I hope that you might be getting a small sense of the how and why of my own journey in becoming a young professional and some of the choices that I've made so far, and that I would encourage all to reflect on in their own journey. I wanted to

be a supervisor to be able to support others within the field, much like I feel drawn towards clerical orders to support other clergy, and wanted my supervision training to influence and help mould my counselling practice. This is similar to my having studied theology, or rather beginning to study theology, from an earlier age and allowing that to shape my life experience, rather than the other way round. Though it all comes around, in my experience,

anyway. It remained unclear how these three areas of counselling, chaplaincy and priesthood would play themselves out, so I was quite determined to acquire the hours needed for accreditation sooner rather than later, so that I would be able to apply for accreditation as soon as possible, in case formal priesthood or chaplaincy also developed and made it difficult to focus on reflecting on my practice.

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For me, I took on a number of additional placements about a year or so into the pandemic. This allowed me not only to grow in experience but to try out a number of different fields. I felt very blessed to get a good mix, giving me the opportunity to learn about a 12-session model, then six to eight and open-ended lengths, initially with a mixture of low-medium issues, before 14 months of bereavement support, alongside a Christian agency working with burned-out ministers, dealing with issues such as spiritual abuse and porn addiction.

Some might say that I did too much too soon, and it's healthier to learn over time and more organically – perhaps they're right. Anyone that knows me well knows I don't do things by halves. But I'm mindful that the person that learns a new skill or sport repetitively over time for three hours a week has a different learning experience from the one who over the same time practises for seven to ten hours a week. Please don't misunderstand me; I am not advocating trainees and fellow colleagues to seek paths that lean to burnout; I've been there twice in the past before training and trust me, you'd much rather return the free T-shirt! But I feel it is important to find a path that feels right for you. Part of my story involved eight years of struggling to find an appropriate place in work, and feeling a need to 'catch-up'. I'm therefore more comfortable hitting the ground running, and that's OK for me, but it is not a competition. What I would encourage anyone who has read this far to consider is that first question I was asked in supervision training: "What prevented you from doing this training sooner?" Is there a valid reason to not take another jump? Only you can answer this for yourself.



This is a...woman's world?

It remains a tragedy that there are not more male counsellors, for we are all served well by a multitude of insights and skills, and there is much that men bring to the psychology/therapy/pastoral care table. We are the body of Christ, and therefore don't function well when we are all seeking to be little toes, or the show is being run by noses! I take great courage in research that shows different ways of working across all forms of spectrums, such as the outstanding observations of Martin and Doka in *Men Don't Cry...Women Do: Transcending gender stereotypes of grief*. Martin and Doka set out originally to identify the differences between men and women when grieving, but ended up discovering that there is a spectrum between intuitive and instrumental grievers: intuitive grief presents itself in tears and external processing, while instrumental grief is more activity-focused, not to mention the impact of being introvert or extrovert. Many times I've heard a grieving woman share disappointment that a male character hides themselves in their shed and 'doesn't cry', and yet the instrumental grievers are fantastic in, for example, arranging care and planning funerals. I highlight Martin and Doka's work because even though men may statistically be more at the instrumental end of the spectrum and women at the intuitive, this is not always the case, and my clients have found it a helpful research observation, and not just bereaved clients.

Research like this highlights in more scientific ways what we hopefully already know, that we have all been made in the image of God, and all bring different skills and gifts that God has endowed us with. I have experienced my own dose of prejudice in life, as a male, as a white person, as an educated person, as a driven person; being told that these relative positions of privileges restrict certain opportunities (thankfully not in the counselling world) has been a painful experience



References

1. Martin, T.L. and Doka. K.J. (2000) *Men Don't Cry, Women Do: Transcending gender stereotypes of grief*. London: Brunner/Mazel