

Valley Pastoral Counseling Center, Inc.

OUTREACH

Spring 2015

Providing Spiritually Sensitive Psychotherapy to the Shenandoah Valley Since 1980

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“God, why did you let this happen?”

By Bill Huffman M.Div., M.A. LPC

Shortly after the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that killed over 200,000 Indonesians in 2004, my missions professor, who had been a missionary in Indonesia for several years, stood in front of our class and shook his finger at God and asked why God had allowed this to happen. It's been over ten years since that event, and the intensity of my professor's pain is still etched on my mind and probably will be as long as I have the capacity to remember. His reaction to this immense tragedy caused me to once again sit with the question of why these things happen to innocent people.

We often lament our pain and suffering at the hands of Mother Nature and the environment in which we live. From our observations around the globe, it is easy to see that no faith practice is exempt from sitting with the tension of this question. These events take place in every corner of the world, to people of every ethnic group and every religious practice, rich and

poor, educated or not-- no one is exempt. No one is exempt from pain and hardship! No one is exempt from the question of why.

Theologically, we might try to answer the question through Process Theology and the Chaos Theory which proposes that the sixth day of creation is still underway and these natural catastrophes are a result of the ongoing process of creation. For some though, that theory would call into question the nature of a God that would leave things incomplete and expose humanity to the chaos of an ongoing creative event. For others it would be non-biblical and for some it would call into question the very existence of God. There are those who would say this event was the vengeance of the Judeo-Christian God taken against a people who worship Allah and practice Islam. An Atheist may even propose that these events are strong evidence that there is no God; especially not the God that Judaism, Christianity and Islam proclaim. Even these proposed answers to the question of why is insufficient in answering the underlying question of who this God is, if this God exists at all.

Recently my thoughts have turned to a statement attributed to God in the book of Genesis. Genesis 1:31 stated at the end of the sixth day of creation that "God saw all the he had made, and it was very good." So, God didn't make the observation that creation was perfect, only that it was very good. The implications of God's observation may explain why we do have experiences of nature that can be sudden and catastrophic. However, to speculate on why God made this observation and allowed creation to be very good and not perfect would be conjecture at best. However, we do have this promise as well in Revelation 21:3-5, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.' And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"

This promise is a direct result of the events that the Christian world is celebrating during this holy season. Without the Cross the fulfillment of this promise would not be possible. The picture in the book of Revelation tells the story of a world that has been reconciled to its creator, that will contain not only God's people who will dwell with God in the new Jerusalem, but of life all over the planet where the nations will live in peace and without the chaos that we currently experience from nature. That promise is something for everyone, regardless of their faith practice or the lack of it, to celebrate during this holiest of seasons!

I DO NOT KNOW

By Melissa Hansen

I do not know how winter seeps into brittle earth slowly thawing.
I do not know how brown drought under pearly-sheen white blanket suddenly springs Vibrant.
I just curl under blanket white, shivering and hoping for spring.
I do not know how Life grows.
I do not know how green shoots shove aside black earth to Light.
I do not know how power shimmers in an Empty tomb.
It is not me; that much I know. I could not do this. Could not make it happen.
Even if I really wanted to. And I do... I do, so want to make it happen.
But I cannot. I must simply watch and wait, breathing until something Bursts forth.
Resurrected and Newly Alive.
I do not know how Life grows.

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

By Emilie Slechta Thomas, MA LMFT

Much has been written in the past few years about the negative effects that social media has had on our psychological well being and our ability to form meaningful relationships. Though there is great value in being able to efficiently connect to others and to share parts of our lives through words and pictures, there is no

possibility of true intimacy. Many of us have come to believe that we must appear as somehow more impressive than our authentic selves, leading us as a culture to create a virtual world of superficially picture perfect lives that no one is actually living. Further, the touted connections fostered by social media involve mainly one level of our being--our minds. Our hearts and bodies are left out of the equation entirely. We do not get the chance to take in another person with all of our senses while communicating-- no intuitive hits on what a person is like, no body language, no real connection with the deeper, even spiritual wisdom that our hearts bring into an interaction. Instead we have sound bytes by text and pictures for analysis, and we do not realize how empty those are by themselves. As if nursing an addiction, we lose touch with ourselves as we return to the computer screen again and again; hoping for fresh input or approval from others that we believe will fill that subtle emptiness and dissatisfaction. We never find it.

An important first step in healing this widespread cultural problem is reconnecting with and forming a quality relationship with ourselves. Social media will remain, but our relationship with it and with other people can change dramatically if we allow ourselves to be in the world more fully on all levels of our being, engaging body and heart as well as mind. Normally, if we are moving about our day with racing thoughts, focused on our many chores and responsibilities, we hardly even experience life.

Our minds are peppered with subconscious gossip about what our friends have said or not said, or what happened at today's meeting, and after enduring the constant inner chatter that goes on just under our awareness, we are mentally exhausted by day's end. We do not feel connected to or nourished by our own being, let alone by others. We are also anxious and restless in that exhaustion. Our minds have not even quieted enough to sleep well, for we are still seeking connection with something more than what technology in modern life can provide. Though our poor minds are faithfully attempting to find it, they can only do so on the thinking level, and we are more than just thoughts.

We must engage our entire being fully to know and nurture ourselves and others, and as I often tell my clients, beginning to do so is much simpler and less esoteric than we might think. Exercise can work with the right approach. Meditation works. Yoga works. Simply dropping awareness into our heart area and breathing slowly in and out works- it even quiets those thoughts, allowing for a moment of peace in a busy day. We can try something that might feel silly such as going for a walk and paying attention the whole time to how our feet feel. Yet what happens is that during that time, we become more aware of our literal place in the world and of our existence at the physical level of life. For those moments we are not locked in our heads with the chatter. The practice of consciously feeling our feet, our hearts, or our breath requires that we pay attention to something other than the many idols--such as social media-- that our culture encourages us to worship, and perhaps we make room for worship of another kind. In fact, through the continued and developed practice of mindfully increasing a conscious presence in mind, body, and heart there have been many who have nurtured their relationship with God while they developed greater self-awareness and intimacy with their loved ones. That's quite a reward for such a simple shift.

The amount of scientific and experiential evidence confirming the effectiveness of this approach to total well being is vast and well beyond the scope of any article. If you would like discuss these ideas in more detail or discover more about how to slow down and deepen your own experience, please call me at 932-1476 for an appointment or consultation.

Couple's Enrichment Seminar
By Melissa Hansen

On Valentine's Day, February 14 of this year, 18 couples gathered at Chestnut Grove Baptist Church in Earlysville, Virginia for a lovely time of laughter, tears, and shared hopes, dreams, and desires for our marriages. My husband, Evan Hansen, joined me in presenting and in guiding the time these couples set aside to nurture their relationships.

We spent three hours together talking, listening, and sharing. The first hour we focused on laughing and enjoying one another and also taking a pulse on how our marriages are doing. The second hour we focused on our own contributions to our marriage – like how we are doing in terms of loving our spouse. And the final hour we talked about communication and how to listen more attentively to our partner and their experience of things.

The most significant challenge was that there just was not enough time to get through everything! Many beautiful and good thoughts and feelings were shared and we connected deeply to our own beauty and brokenness individually and in our families. There was a resounding call from the participants that we do these sorts of seminars more often and for longer periods of time. It was a privilege to lead and participate in healing and growth for so many couples and I look forward to leading more of these sorts of experiences. I hope you will consider joining us for one in the future.

How Basketball is like Counseling

By Stephanie Sterling M.A., LPC

With March madness quickly approaching, and with basketball on my mind, I began thinking about how playing the game of basketball can be a metaphor for what we teach to our clients as therapists in an effort to help them improve the quality of their lives and relationships. A few parallels...

1. Basketball can provide a number of opportunities for the development of self esteem. As in counseling, there are multitudes of ways to assist someone in the experience of feeling good about oneself. In basketball, a player may practice shot after shot, skill after skill, play after play and when the moment all of the hard work and perseverance comes together and the shot is perfected, or the skill becomes muscle memory, or the play is perfectly executed - the player feels the elation of hard work paying off and enjoys the rewards of their investment, and thus, self esteem is developed ever so incrementally. The same is true in therapy - weeks turn into months of talking through painful past experiences that once limited the development of healthy self esteem. Counselors work to soften the harsh voices that play over and over in a client's mind. Clients, with help, practice new thought patterns and ways of viewing themselves, ever so slowly changing inaccurate perceptions of self and others. Eventually all these elements come together and the reward for the hard work is experienced when a client - for the first time - sees him/herself as they are, more accurately and less critically - as the capable, acceptable, wonderful human being they were always meant to be.
2. Basketball requires teamwork in order to be successful. While it's true that some teams find success with one person as the "star" player; usually the success is short lived and limited to a few very specific situations. Long term and frequent success on the court requires good communication, selflessness, and players knowing their strengths and weaknesses, using their collective strengths to their advantage collaboratively, and supporting one another. As in basketball, good mental health includes engaging in and maintaining relationships with others. Relationships, like good teamwork, require proficient interpersonal communication, selflessness at appropriate times, an understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses, compassion and empathy for others' weaknesses coupled with encouragement of others' strengths, and support for one another. Counseling frequently models and teaches these foundational relationship skills in an effort to assist clients in their ability to have satisfying and meaningful connections with others.
3. Basketball also requires flexibility. If the plays aren't working, players must re-adjust the game plan. Every great basketball player knows that when your plays aren't working you have to adjust, and then adjust some

more. The varying strengths and styles of different opponents require different strategies. You have to be able to thwart and respond to whichever attacks an opponent uses on you. In counseling, therapists often address client's resistance to change, which can lead to inflexibility in life and in relationships. Life presents us with many challenges for which we must adjust our game plan; difficult emotions manifest when we aren't able to cope with the monkey wrenches and unexpected twists and turns that inevitably pop up.

4. Along with flexibility and the ability to make adjustments, a player will find additional success the more he/she anticipates the moves of his/her opponent. The ability to anticipate and be ready for a play makes him/her a proactive, rather than a reactive, player. Having this ability allows players to be where the ball is going before it gets there, which often gives the team an edge which may mean the difference between a win and a loss. In life, the ability to think through possible consequences of actions and make decisions accordingly may mean the difference between reaping the benefits of a positive life altering decision versus suffering the consequences of a negative life shattering one. Anticipation and planning are generally associated with more positive outcomes while acting on impulse and pure emotion lead to negative ones.
5. And finally, as we all know, participating in any kind of sport means having to accept that there will always be losses amidst the wins. Basketball, as with any sport, comes with the inevitability of losing. Fans, players, and coaches have all had to taste the bitterness of defeat - whether the loss of the game, or the loss of playing time, or the loss of physical integrity. Life also comes with its share of losses. Counselors frequently deal with the reality that life is a series of losses, as quoted by Katherine Weber...

“Life seems sometimes like nothing more than a series of losses, from beginning to end. That's the given. How you respond to those losses, what you make of what's left, that's the part you have to make up as you go.”

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300 CHESTNUT AVENUE
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New Website Design!

At VPCC we recognize the need for ease of access to our information for our potential clients. This need has led us to have our website redesigned and we are very excited about the new look and other improvements. Improvements include a map and driving directions, more information about our services, ease of use, and the inclusion of our newsletter as well as important information about our Associates.

Note to Pastors

We are requesting that Pastors in the area provide VPCC with an email address so that we may supply an electronic copy of our newsletter to them. Electronic copies are easily distributed to your congregations through your distribution list. Please send your email address to pastoral@ntelos.net.

IT IS OKAY TO SEEK HELP!

It is easy to schedule an appointment with us. Please contact Stephanie Sterling at (540) 932-9722 and give your name and number. Ms. Sterling or one of our Associates will return your call and discuss scheduling an appointment. You will be warmly welcomed with care, compassion and understanding. For general information please call (540) 943-8722 or (540) 886-5757.

Great News!

VPCC has been designated as a Category 1 Pastoral Care Specialist Training Center by the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. The training program has been designed for those who have theological training and who desire to provide care to individuals of various religious traditions. Training and supervision is provided by the Associates at VPCC. For information about the program or to schedule an interview please contact Emilie Thomas LMFT at (540) 932-1476.