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“Burden-Bearing” as a metaphor for counselling

Experiences from the Philippines

topics:

- counselling in the Filipino context
- popular images and story-telling as a tool for counselling
- counselling to political prisoners

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Introduction

Within his work with victims of human rights violations in the Philippines, Dr. Edwin Decenteceo has developed a model which takes up common images and experiences of Philippine people, and which may encourage the victims to describe and reflect on their difficulties in their own words, within their own story. The model starts from the image of “bearing a burden” and the Filipino culture of telling stories. In the Philippine context, the individual is generally interwoven with his or her responsibilities, and this is even more so with people who joined the resistance movement. Political detainees are very committed individuals, who took over many risks and give a higher priority to their goals than to their own person. A therapeutic model cannot neglect these responsibilities (these “burdens”) and put the person alone into the centre.

I am a clinical psychologist, I am not a worker in pastoral care. I am American trained and my specialisation is behaviour modification, behaviour therapy. My work has been with victims of human rights violations and workers, who work with these victims. These include families of victims of extra judicial killings, political prisoners most of whom have been tortured, ex-political prisoners, families of victims of disappearances, and ‘internal’ refugees - communities that have been sent from their homes, because they are in the way of an industrial project or in a combat zone. Counselling is only one part of a larger effort. Co-ordination and co-operation among different human rights organisations are very important. While individual counselling is conducted, the task of counselling is shared with other political prisoners, especially in distant detention centres to which visits are not frequent. This has been formalized into counselling training.

Most of the people I work with are very poor, and they speak in different languages. I am able to speak two of them. What I will talk about is a model that I have developed as a result of my work, but I will talk about it as it were a story. I call it: the story of burden-bearing. “Ang lahat ay may dinadala” is a common Tagalog saying, “we all bear burdens”. I will write the Tagalog terms, because it is important for you to realize that this story is rooted in the language of the people I work with - these phrases are there, in ordinary day-to-day conversation. And it is also important to realize that I am talking about the act of burden-bearing, the whole act. I can start the story anywhere, because no matter where I start I will eventually talk about everything.

There are different parts or aspects of this story. One part of the story is, of course, about the burden bearers. I have drawn here – or tried to draw – a farmer couple, the majority of the people in the Philippines anyway. As you can see, the man is carrying a plough and a little basket. The woman is carrying a baby and something wrapped in cloth. So these are burden bearers and they have their burdens. Burdens in this story are tasks, responsibilities, relationships. The burden of each of the couple is the relationship of the two, or their family. He traditionally has his farm to work with, that is his burden. She traditionally has the children to take care of (although if you go into the farms you will see that half or more of the workers in the farms are actually women). Each burden has a destination. In the burden-bearing story, the destination is not a place, it is actually a condition: a family is brought to good health, given an education, given a good life.

So we have – let me put up the Tagalog terms again: “Nagdadala”, the burden bearers, “Dinadala”, the burden, and “Patuntuguhan”, the destination. There are two other elements I will talk about, and that is: The manner of carrying a burden, “Pagdadala” - in the Tagalog we say some people carry burdens heavily, some people carry burdens lightly, these have to do with the manner of carrying a burden. And finally, there is the way, “Pagdadaan”. Sometimes the way is easy, sometimes it is difficult. Sometimes it is downhill, sometimes it is uphill. So these are the major elements of the burden bearer’s story. But we must also realize that the burden bearer is never alone. The burden bearer is always with a community. This community helps in defining all the elements of burden-bearing.

So now we have someone talking about his or her act of burden-bearing. How can I as a helper help in this act of burden-bearing? First I must ask: When does the burden bearer need my help? The burden bearer needs my help when the burden becomes heavy, or when the act of burden-bearing becomes difficult. When does it become difficult or heavy? When it is not clear who I am, I will have difficulty with my burdens. When it is not clear to me what my burdens are, I will also have difficulty with my burdens. When I am not clear about my destination, or if I do not accept my destination, it will also make burden-bearing difficult. I may be carrying in a way that makes burden-bearing heavy (e.g. the woman in this picture is carrying the baby on her hip. That may be difficult. In some cultures they carry a baby on their back, tied to the mother in a blanket). The path itself may be difficult, or events can happen, a flood, a fire, an earthquake, that make my bringing of my burdens to their destination very difficult. If these are what makes burden-bearing difficult, what can I as a helper do? Then an important part of my role is clarification, or to “enlighten”. In clarifying, I lighten the load. I can help to clarify the person, the burden, the destination. I can also help to clarify why that is the way that must be followed. I can also help in teaching the person - the burden bearer - ways of making burden-bearing easier. I can also help by actually carry-

ing the burden part of the way. I can also help by making the person – the burden bearer – rest.

I am working among cause-oriented individuals, who feel that they should not rest. One of the major problems we had in talking about this resting, was the concept of “burn out”, to which we are used. “Burn out” is based on the image of a candle burning down or of an engine running out of fuel. The people I work with cannot relate with those images. Burning out means: loosing any function. But if I point out: It’s okay to put down the burden every once in a while, there is nothing wrong with that, you have not given up your burden-bearing – then they are more likely to listen to me.

And there is one more way that I have found among Filipinos, that is: I can listen to their stories of their burden-bearing. That also helps to enlighten their load. How is that related to burden-bearing? Those of you who do manual labour or know people who do manual labour, will sometimes see them do this: breathing deeply. In the burden-bearing story, this act of breathing deeply in and out is equivalent to telling your story to someone else.

This is how this model has helped me to understand those who would come to me and say: “I don’t need counselling, I just need to talk”. It has also helped me to understand why the people I work with say they do not need counselling. Of course, they will say only those who are crazy need counselling; but there is more: Counselling deals only with the burden bearer. What the burden bearer needs is help with the act of burden-bearing. And I can help with all these other aspects of burden-bearing. So I must take on a lot of roles - but my training has strained me to help only with the burden bearer himself or herself.

So that is the story, but it is now a model that I am trying to use in my work – both to help directly with people, and to train those who will help other people. And it is my hope that, because it is based on the experiences of the people I work with, we can talk to each other more, and I can be of help to them more.

One last point though: Who am I in relation to the burden bearer? I realize that I am a co-burden-bearer. I have my own burdens to bear. But I have a one additional burden: I have taken on the burden of helping other burden bearers.