

Confessions of a Frustrated Psychologist

Remember the old “Bob Newhart Show”? The one where Dr. Robert Hartley, a Chicago-based psychologist in private practice, worked with troubled adults? One of which was the irascible, irrepressibly cynical—yet somehow lovable and neurotic—Elliot Carlin?

Yeah, that TV show in the mid to late 70’s helped me get through my first two years of grad school—7:30 PM every Friday night. I really looked forward to it each week. But then, I didn’t get out much...

Anyway, I was a Bob Hartley wannabe: one day have a nice outpatient counseling practice with suburban adults, imbuing keen and insightful verbal utterings to my loyal patients. Only one problem.

I was lousy at counseling.

After several years of doing outpatient psychotherapy in the early to mid 80’s, I yearned for a greater sense of closure in my work—a finished “product” if you will. Although highly analytical, rarely did I see much success by way of the “talking cure,” even after toiling with persons over a one- to two-year period, in many instances.

As I mucked along for five years or so, primarily doing individual counseling with children and teens—a clinical population in which I had been trained, and a demographic at the time in need of mental health services in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex—I was miserable. And, to my mind, wholly ineffective.

I was a square peg trying to jam myself into the proverbial round hole.

Then, I was introduced to the world of consulting—in short, evaluating troubled youth via the use of neuropsychological (NP) tests. NP tests are instruments aimed at gauging brain function—endeavoring to tease out what manner of brain-based disturbances constitute the underlying “root causes” of what ails complex children and teens. And what, in turn, was driving their parents and families into acute renal failure.

Well, one thing led to another, and before long, I found myself really loving what I did! Not only that, but I had begun to primarily focus on youth with histories of maltreatment. As any adoptive parent will attest, adoptive youth possess very unique needs and issues all their own.

I also discovered that said long-suffering parents were tremendously grateful for what I was doing for them: namely, giving them the primary reasons for why their kiddoes were undergoing nuclear meltdown, often on a daily basis.

For the first time during their frustrating career of adoptive parenthood, they often told me, “We now have answers—and treatment options—for our child!” Another way of putting it is that we all need “handles” for those persons or issues in our lives that challenge us. In short, itches were being scratched for both parents and complex/disruptive children alike.

I have now been a grunt down in the trenches for over a quarter century. In excess of the last 16 years of that has almost exclusively focused on helping the hurt child: doing NP evaluations, neurofeedback training, seminars, and parent consultations. But no counseling. I leave psychotherapy to the Barbara Rilas, Dan Hughes, Vicky Kellys, and Greg Kecks of the world.

So, what are the morals of this story? Well, I see a couple of them:

- 1. For the child who has been loved into your family, don’t live your life vicariously through hers. It’s no fun. Let her little personality emerge by exposing her to a smorgasbord of experiences. Her unique strengths will become apparent as you pray for and raise your child. And HER strengths may not be YOUR strengths. That’s O.K. There really is a great deal to be said for being yourself—and allowing your kiddo the same privilege. I learned that for myself. Doing counseling wasn’t my thing—even though I errantly assumed it was.**
- 2. Second, if you are an adoptive parent who loves and cares for a difficult youth who is presently stuck, get a thorough NP examination by a professional who specializes in the hurt child. The sooner the better. By knowing what the underlying root causes are, good psychotherapists are able to do their jobs immensely better. We are then that much closer by way of freeing-up your youngster to fulfill God’s plan for her life. And, for the Christian, that’s really what it’s all about.**

Oh, and by the way, if your kiddo needs counseling, don’t call me. Bob Hartley I’m not.