

Integration Interview

with Ruth by Dr Sarah Penwarden, Lecturer, Integrative Practice course, Bachelor of Counselling, Laidlaw College, Auckland New Zealand.

Sarah: *Tell me about Incarnational practices in your counselling*

1. How do you make sense of the incarnation?

Ruth: For me, the incarnation sits prominently within my Trinitarian theological anthropology. Being made as relational beings, in the image of a relational, Trinitarian community of reciprocal and mutual respect characterised by self-giving love, this is where the incarnation fits in. Perichoresis, is the doctrine that the three persons of the Trinity are in a continuous relational dance of love and out of the overflow of their love, creation and (to be ultra anthro-centric in this context), human beings, were created, for communion, friendship, delight and joy. As Ireneus the ancient mystic said, the glory of God is the human person fully alive. This overflow of love, took on flesh and blood (embodiment) and moved into our neighbourhood, as my friend Eugene Peterson translated, John 1, speaking of Jesus' incarnation.

“The Word was first, the Word present to God,
God present to the Word. The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.

³⁻⁵ Everything was created through him;
nothing—not one thing!—came into being without him.

What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by.

The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

1 John 1 “The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. ³⁻⁴ We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Our motive for writing is simply this: We want you to enjoy this, too. Your joy will double our joy!

2. What's your understanding of incarnational theology?

My understanding of Incarnational theology is the understanding that Christ, one of the members of the Trinity, took on embodiment (flesh, blood, vulnerability, emotions, frailty

and finiteness) as a way to express the self-giving love of the Trinity. He did not give up his full God-ness though, so he did not suffer the effects of sin, which the rest of us mere mortals do. For me, Christ's humanness speaks volumes of how he can empathise with our pain and vulnerability. It also reassures me that I am never alone in my places of darkness.

3. How do you think Christ is incarnate in us?

I think we can mirror Christ's love and compassion; Paul tells us that in Christ we are new creations, made in the image of Christ: like we hold his DNA. And as children of our divine heavenly father we imitate him like children reflect and imitate their own caregivers.

As Theresa of Avila once said "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

I truly believe that this is the case when I sit with my clients – I am trying to embody what Christ's compassion would be like for them to experience experientially, as many of them did not have non-judgemental caregivers who make them feel safe, and heard, and worthy to be attended to.

4. Where are the traces or sparks of the incarnation in your practice? Where/how do you notice them?

I notice what you call the 'sparks of the incarnation' in my practice, or what I call transformation, when my client has a corrective emotional experience, that is where transformation happens. (I write about that in my journal article for the BJGC which you can find on my website: ruthmccconnell.com). I believe tears are a sign of inner transformation: when a client can find their tears over all that they cannot change (past, their current stuckness, their losses, lost dreams, relationships, future prospects, etc.) and are held in a safe embrace while they cry, then inner transformation or adaptation occurs. Adaptation is one of the three processes of maturation or transformation: the other two are the process of integration and the process of emergence. This is informed by Neufeld's work as well as the work of Interpersonal Neurobiology (Dan Siegel, Bessel Van der Kolk, Bonnie Badenock).

5. Could you talk more about how by dwelling in particular virtues (love or hope or faith) you are practicing incarnationally?

The Apostle Paul outlines a list of virtues concluding that the 'greatest of these is love' (1 Cor. 13:13). My understanding of Attachment Theory, the science of love or relationality, has informed my practice as a counsellor. Because love is such a powerful emotion, it has the capacity to heal (form) and wound (deform) us all. I strive to manifest and role model safe 'love'/secure attachment in all my encounters with my clients. My training in

neuropsychotherapy has helped me take our embodiment more seriously. Secure attachment helps us self-regulate; and emotional self-regulation has been found to be the foundation for healthy maturation. Many of our clients struggle with emotional dysregulation (high anxiety (hyper-arousal of the CNS), depression – hypo-arousal of the CNS; obsessive thoughts and ruminations as well as being dissociated due to traumatic memories stored not just in the narrative or autobiographical memory held in the neo-cortex; but held throughout their bodies as muscle memory which unconsciously impacts their emotional dysregulation). So I am not just a talk-based therapist, but a more holistic practitioner who takes the body very seriously.

7. *How does love influence your practice?*

Dwelling in the virtue of love my work as an attachment-based counsellor focuses on healing attachment wounds. These can come in the form of

intra-psychic wounds: attachment to self – self loathing, self hate, self injury;

inter-personal wounds: attachment to others – how relational hurts (separations/divorce betrayal etc) can lead to breaking our hearts and what does the client need to heal those wounds;

transcendent level: attachment to God/a Higher power/the Cosmos/spiritual dimensions of attachment) sometimes we project onto God the wounds we have inherited from our human attachments – caregivers, teachers influential people with power. My trinitarian theology informs how I see everyone being invited to join the life-affirming, generative dance of the trinity, to become the best versions of themselves, because that is already how the trinity sees them and delights in them: they just have a tarnished view due to our lenses being warped by sin, shame and rejection, amongst other wounds.

My training in Neufeld's attachment-based developmental paradigm has informed how I am with my clients as well as how they may have been shaped by their own attachment stories. One of the phrases Neufeld uses to describe what attachment is all about is "being invited to exist in the presence of the other" (Neufeld, 2008). For me, this connotes the hospitality, acceptance and love, embodied in Christ and at the heart of the Trinity's live giving dance. I use Neufeld's six levels of attaching, to not only develop a secure attachment in the therapeutic relationship, but also understand what aspects were missing in the client's story that needs healing. These levels of attachment progress sequentially, involving increasing depths of psychological intimacy and greater capacity for vulnerable feelings (Neufeld & Mate, 2004). You can read about those stages in the chapter I wrote for the book *Stories of Faith Stories of Therapy* – also on my website.

8. *How do you listen for love in a client's life?*

As an attachment-based counsellor, I see every client as worthy of love, legitimately hungry for love and yet maybe has not been fed well, especially in their early relationships, which sets up templates (or Internal Working Models) of how they approach life. The two key

questions that we as attachment creatures come into the world asking are: am I loveable and is the world safe. The first question is an emotional, heartfelt question, the other has dimensions of physical safety as well as emotional safety. We all need safe love and a safe environment to blossom to our fullest potential and I think the Trinity is the truest model of a 'family of origin' which demonstrates secure attachment, and human templates despite how hard we try, will always fall short. For me there are two ways of being in the world: in fear or in love.

As I hold my clients in love (secure attachment) I also believe in their becoming (I hold faith in them and in the Trinity and hope for them, rooted in the Trinity). From my training in neuropsychotherapy I have come to understand how love heals at the neuronal level, with mirror neurons of the therapist calming the limbic brain (emotion centre) of the clients, offering them a new 'taste' of secure attachment, also helping develop the client's capacity in their prefrontal cortex, to safely experience without going into overload, shutdown or dissociation, increasing their ability to sit with and manage intense competing emotions. This capacity to tolerate and mix intense emotions may have been compromised in early life, due to not being well regulated by a secure attachment caregiver, thus leading to developmental stuckness in adulthood.

Increasingly the research is showing that using a bottom-up approach (working with emotions held in the body and the limbic brain) rather than a top-down approach (working with cognitions and insights from the neocortex)(Badenoch, 2018; Fosha, 2000; Fosha, Siegel, & Solomon, 2009) is more effective at leading to transformation in our clients.

What helps you listen to stories where a person has not experienced love in their life?

The most important thing that has helped me to listen to stories where love has not been experienced, is the many many years of personal therapy I have done to heal the areas on non-love in my own life, and that is an on-going journey. I have my own personal therapy 2 x a month, a see a spiritual director once a month and my clinical supervisor who all help me attune to where love is not present in me therefore I am living in fear/anxiety and dysregulation and will not be able to be a gift of non-anxious presence to my clients. My own journey of healing my attachment wounds, has formed a deeper compassion for, and a greater capacity to hold dysregulated emotions emanating from traumatic attachment wounds. We as therapists cannot take our clients to levels of healing that we ourselves have not first plumbed the depths of. In my training events I am now offering workshops along with a Laidlaw graduate, Karen Lorimer, on creating a sanctuary for healing shame, because attachment wounds leave a deep legacy of shame in our stories. I think shame is an existential emotion that happened at the fall; pre-fall in the garden humanity did not know shame and were able metaphorically and physically to walk, naked before the Lord and not feel shame. The fall introduced original shame: the feelings of 'I am not good enough' rather than original guilt: 'I have done wrong'. All of my trainings are advertised on my websites and you can sign up for my newsletters that keep you up to date with my events.

7. Does incarnational practice look different if a client has Christian faith, or does not have Christian faith?

Not really, I don't hold a in/out, sinner/saved distinction over my client's stories. I know God is creative and big enough to reach them in whatever 'state' they would describe themselves on the faith journey. If I can bring a glimmer of hope and a taste of Trinitarian love into their lives, that might be one link in a chain that the spirit is building in their lives. I always light the Christ Candle before each session, but I check on my intake form if they are wanting to include spirituality in their session or not, and if not, then I don't say anything while I light the candle apart from lighting this candle to bring light and peace into this space. If they are Christians I say: we light this candle to remind us that the Trinity is always with us no matter what we are going through – or words to that effect. Many already shed a huge burden with a deep inhale while we light the candle.... I sometimes ring a gong and we sit in silence for 2 minutes, breathing deeply, calming our racing minds and grounding ourselves. These are body based practices which target our sense and for me are very important when I offer a holistic approach to their healing.

6. *Could you tell us about an encounter with a client where you noticed incarnation happening?*

Each session for me is an incarnational encounter, where I see the divine in the other and welcome them into a non-judgemental, emotionally safe space to explore things that may be too overwhelming to face alone. Facing things alone is never what the Trinity intended for us – that is why Jesus is called Immanuel, God with us. Loneliness is one of the leading causes of death in the western world; more of a health risk than heart failure, diabetes or cancer. That is why the British Government has just instituted a Minister for Loneliness, to attempt to eradicate this toxic social situation of non-love. My tagline for the business I set up since leaving Laidlaw early 2018 is: Eradicating relational poverty one encounter at a time. I think that is what we as counsellors are all called to do.

If you want a more detailed answer to this question, may I suggest that the students read my chapter *Designed for and by Love* chapter *In stories of therapy, stories of faith*. where I outline Neufeld's 6 levels of attachment and my work with a family who was in distress. That has insights into how I saw the Trinitarian love come across in the healing story for this family: