

Motivational Interviewing: A Disciple's Best Friend

With The Holy Spirit at play the soul's transformational possibilities are endless. Unfortunately, The Holy Spirit is often sidelined, a non-participant on the field of play as we continue to roll out unconscious inflexible and repetitive playbooks that err on the faith-less side of tried and tested habits of surviving in a broken and sinful world. You might say that the Holy Spirit gets short shrift in a timeless game of mistaken identities. We mistake our justified and sanctified selves for our "fallen expressions of ourselves," and mistake the loving disciples around us for authority figures looking to ferret out and snuff out our clandestine shadow sides, our lone wolf-like, survival clinging personas.

Faith in God, God's mercy, providence, and the unmerited gift of redemption prove over and over to collectively be insufficient motivation for us to reflect, recognize and bridge the cognitive dissonance gaps between our professed righteous intentions and the timeless faith eroding narratives we recapitulate.

Categorical examples of the "little sins" that come to mind as in need of modification are: Speaking only one love language(ours) in a multi-lingual universe of love languages, E-mail etiquette only a mother could love, Speaking devoutly at people instead of humbly relating to people, the art of treating commitments as if they are disposable diapers, etc. Please pardon my dark sense of humor. However, the little insults and injuries to our identifications as creatures made in God's image to serve at His pleasure, are enduring and refractory. They must not be minimized and trivialized.

It's easy in the moment and damning in the long run to do what is tantamount to guarding the exposure of our shadow sides to God's righteous light. Certainly all internalized parental and surrogate messages hostile to the autonomous unfolding of our souls' mandates leave us skittish over allying with The Holy Spirit in opposition to what has been over learned. So this state of affairs begs the question: If we are to love our siblings like God loves us how do we maximize the possibility that the our discipleship efforts will bear fruit? Another way to frame this idea is to ask: How do we offer our siblings corrective emotional experiences that motivate them to set us apart from those we suspected often were at a loss to keep our best interests at heart?

This is where Motivational Interviewing enters our conversation as a devout gift from God. The most current version of MI is described in detail in Miller and Rollnick (2013) Motivational Interviewing: Helping people to change (3rd edition). MI is a guiding style of communication, that sits between following (good listening) and directing (giving information and advice). MI is designed to empower people to change by drawing out their own meaning, to deem it in their self-interest to work for meaningful changes. MI is based on a respectful and curious way of being with people that facilitates the natural process of change and honors client autonomy. MI is particularly useful to help people examine their situation and options when any of the following are present:

1) Ambivalence is high and people are stuck in mixed feelings about change, 2) Confidence is low and people doubt their abilities to change, 3) Desire is low and people are uncertain about whether they want to make a change, and 4) Importance is low and the benefits of change and disadvantages of the current situation are unclear.

<https://motivationalinterviewing.org/understanding-motivational-interviewing>

All superficial expressions of righteousness to the contrary, MI addresses the undermining realities of our most deep seeded truths embedded in our most inveterate habits of being. MI in operation dismantles our toxic anachronistic belief systems one motivating brick at a time. Please keep in mind that in order to not trigger another's automatic defenses we have to check our egos at the door before donning our hats as agents of change.

As practitioners of MI we master the art of emotional neutrality to identify and explore the conditions if any, under which the objects our concern might be interested in changing behaviors for their benefit. No doubt, MI is a corrective reparenting strategy that meticulously avoids heaping shame on those needing to own up to the myriad ways they express their inherent sinfulness and unworthiness to be redeemed. We model open curiosity with open ended questions to invite others' curiosity. In essence we say without saying to them: You are the experts on what make you tick. Tell me whatever you can tell me about what might allow you to pursue your spiritual needs without

fear of paying the “devilish piper.” There is no faking our demonstrable interest in eliciting the feedback necessary to imbue confidence in us that we understand what it means to walk in the others’ shoes.

We have no control over whether or not a brother or sister will awaken to the folly of shooting themselves in the feet in their efforts to pop water blisters. All we can control is how we attempt to awaken them from their addictions to short term gratifications they pay dearly for in the long run. With MI we do what is counter intuitive for us. We surrender our “no holds barred” efforts to manipulate outcomes as betrayed by such questions as: “Have you considered how your actions affect....?” I believe what I am presenting to you works harmoniously and synergistically with Paul’s exhortation to his Jewish followers in Romans 3. I’m paraphrasing one takeaway of Paul’s words: If we put faith first our righteous actions will follow suit.

Here is a prime example of a treatment failure of mine while working as a psychotherapist which could have resulted in a more successful outcome had I been able to compartmentalize and check my over bearing emotional reactions to a patient’s “outrageous behavior(a belief I clung to with a death grip)” at the door to use MI as my primary tool of engagement. I will say that this is one case I was unequivocally relieved to end as I simply could not get out of my own way to help this patient.

“B’s” reticence to spend no more than 15 minutes of his 45 minute scheduled session in my presence no matter what, was unprecedented in my entire 30 year career of treating individuals. I could barely listen to the same empty and lame excuses for his tardiness without screaming in silence: “Not again, “I’ve had enough.” To this day I’m not sure how much he even believed the nonsense he offered up. I was too busy in my imagination shaking my head in disbelief over my entrenched belief he was making a mockery of our work together. I could not refute that my oozing intolerance, impatience, shame and helpless rage had something to do with his distrust of depending on me in a meaningful sense. My enduring takeaway was that “B” kept coming in the event that his second marriage of brief duration, fell apart. I was his safety net albeit, one that did not produce feelings of safety.

In truth we were unable to clear a safe, commitment-free space to explore alternate solutions to his dilemmas. Short of subordinating my ego in ways his parents could never do, B would do what he had been doing his whole life. That is to present as bowing to authority figures while in truth desperately fending off what he perceived as their oppressive demands for submission. This rigid dynamic got played out around the issue of his disowned and disavowed defiance of the boundaries of time I imposed on our work. If he didn’t believe he counted with me in his own right then I had no chance that he would make our time together count.

Way too often I oscillated between defensive indifference and outrage, at a loss to muster a humble, mindful, compassionate and concerned effort to assist this suffering human being. I failed the patient miserably and our years’ long stalemate was finally broken when I cried “uncle” one morning and said to the patient I was dubious that our appointments achieved more than to enshrine his experience of being stuck between the rock of his wife wanting to undercut his treatment and his distrust of my desire to liberate him from enslavement to the toxic, unhealthy and growth resistant relationships in his life. In truth “B” had no better reason to trust me and my self-centeredness more than his wife’s. Had I been able to employ MI the process would have unfolded very differently.

What I did not do was affirm and ignite the patient’s flicker of a yearning to mourn the futility of this iteration of himself to ally with me to harness his powers of reinvention. Even before he had an opportunity to hit play on his pre-recorded apologies, I might have said with some newly mustered equanimity, “are you up to pursue what might be a novel slant on our work which might get you what you most need?” Let’s for argument sake consider that I piqued his interest. I could have followed up with: “Will you play with me in the sandbox of our imaginations for a few minutes?” I’ve never had anyone refuse such an invitation. Then I might have said: “If you realistically had nothing to lose in terms of anyone’s support and had the potential to gain confidence in your abilities to identify what was lovingly best for you and your son, do you think this would be sufficient motivation to set your alarm clock and give us the time we need to achieve this desired goal?”

MI simply and artfully speaks directly to the cloistered voice of enlightenment. If B had found the motivation to permit me to nurture his autonomous authority to direct his own life we might have had a legitimate shot to shrink

his fears of spousal conflict, judgment, rejection, and abandonment sufficient to not block the route to loving, righteous fulfillment of his needs and those of his son. His wife's mid-life crisis and drinking might have become an inconvenient challenge but no longer an overwhelming, insurmountable obstacle.

If this path toward righteousness is one that intrigues you as a means of helping others navigate their way towards righteous fulfillment of their roles as kingdom builders, perhaps you will play with this tool in your conversations with God, and the folks in your life in need of your discipleship, which at some point is potentially everyone.