

# Psychotherapy Newsletter

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949-443-2222

Licensed, Caring, Professional  
Psychotherapy Services

Piper Glasier, LCSW

Individual, Couple, Parenting Issues  
LCS 20600

28202 Cabot Road

Suite 300  
Laguna Niguel, CA 92677

## God Ingrained

It is a privilege to work in psychotherapy with clients of any spiritual persuasion. It appears a sense of spirituality or a lack of one is apparent and part of any treatment. Probably because of my own faith and my involvement in churches through the years, I have a large percentage of my clientele that are of the Christian faith. Certain tendencies and patterns are becoming apparent in my work and it is these that I wish to contemplate in this newsletter. I do not consider myself a Bible scholar, nor have I reached any sort of pinnacle in my own walk with God, but I do enjoy the exercise of putting themes into written words when they begin to congregate in my mind along certain lines.

It seems, according to my own journey, and now my opportunity to join in the intimate, private journey of others, that we are pumping out Christians of a certain "ilk". Maybe other faiths have this same tendency, but I am not as privy to their process. In the Christian world, it is commonplace to view God as being primarily interested in our good behavior (once we have received the gift of salvation). Good behavior is certainly a socially acceptable and useful idea to reinforce and makes life easier for us all. Promoting moral decisions and self-control seems a logical idea to espouse from the pulpit and to encourage each other toward in our fellowship circles. There is, however, an expectation that once a person has a relationship with God that they become a new creation, and from that point on should not want to do the marginal things they did

before, think the sinful thoughts they thought before, or maintain the emotions they did prior to their conversion. Sometimes there seems to be what we could call a "honeymoon" period after receiving Christ, where a life is turned around and obviously better decisions are being made. We all like to hear radical testimonies of lives changed. I guess maybe the problem lies in the expectation that this should be a permanent new condition and any sort of recurrence of negative thought or behavior must be denied or ignored or stuffed down so that we can continue to function as the "new creation." We are told that God is happy with our new choices and behavior and delights in our good works. Even though there are plenty of scriptures that speak to the idea that it is not our good works that define our relationship with God, I do not think this is what we really believe. It seems more prevalent that we put pressure on ourself and each other to look, speak, and act Christian and suppress anything that does not seem Godly, mainly our sexual urges, anger, and certain behaviors. We do a lot of pretending amongst ourselves. For example, many Christians only drink privately. At functions within many churches, alcohol would not be served. While this practice may have the presumed redeeming factor of not "causing a brother or sister to stumble" in case they struggle with alcoholism, perhaps what it might be doing is promoting the idea that a drinking problem stay hidden, and what prevails is a sense of shame because it looks as though others do not have a desire or need to drink.

There are many practices that we as human beings keep to ourselves, such as viewing pornography, masturbating, engaging in sexual behavior outside of marriage or with others besides our marital partners. My Christian clients struggle more than any others with rules and regulations that leave them in seemingly impossible binds over complicated and sometimes relatively simple matters: "If I kiss someone I will feel sexual feelings - I can't have sex without being married, so I guess I shouldn't date - but then how will I ever find a partner and have a sense that we are sexually compatible?" Opportunities for connection with other human beings become wrought with conflicting and paralyzing fears of disappointing God. It is difficult to speak openly about confusing topics with one another in the best of situations - the most open of communities, but it seems the way some churches are set up, a shroud of secrecy remains tightly drawn and the healthy process of working through some of these issues does not occur. I have had many opportunities throughout my Christian walk to be in prayer groups and fellowship circles where I have left as empty as I arrived. Things seemed religious, but they didn't feel healing. I didn't feel known. I was left assuming that if people really knew my struggles, I would not be accepted. I tried very hard to be good and acceptable and Christian enough, but felt more and more tied up in knots inside. I now value something different than good behavior. I value honesty. I value realness. When someone makes a statement that captures a real life struggle, I tune in and come alive inside. I feel close to the person and I want to extend a heartfelt sign of validation - yes, you just said something I can relate to in my humanity and I'm right there with you. I have plenty of image sustaining parts in myself and I have to work at it sometimes to be real with others. It is tempting as a therapist to hide behind the education and work I do to maintain a sense that I have things worked out, when in reality, I have

plenty of my own issues I continue to struggle with.

I think we have all known people in our fellowship circles who seemed, at one time, to be a shining example of deep Christian faith, only to find out that they have either had an ongoing hidden agenda, or have suddenly "flipped out" and gone off the deep end. Sometimes it is the people who most exemplify "pillars of faith" to whom this experience occurs. I don't think it is a coincidence that this dynamic occurs to church leadership. I think it is probably deeply related to a need to perform and ignore the issues that have lurked within all along. Some of the most Bible pounding, public Christian figures are the ones that are the most oppressed in their willingness to look truthfully at what ails them. Their Christianity is a defense against the parts they want to deny. This idea that someone who looks like they have an obvious deep faith can fall so radically speaks to a very important issue. An old familiar struggle I often hear my clients mention is that they feel badly if they don't set aside time for a daily devotional with God. They feel that His presence is distant during those times and that it is up to them to implement a program - prayer, Bible reading, fellowship, that will bring God back to them. There is a constant and chronic sense that they are falling short and that God's closeness and distance is in direct proportion to their devotional habits. I want to contrast this dynamic with another one: the thing that happens when someone starts to get real and honest about their internal world. They put words to a nagging sense of emptiness or the futility of their best efforts to get through life. They may be maintaining a good image and a state of aloofness that belies a sense of angst and disturbance inside them. When they begin to take an honest look, even though the church may have taught them that to seek therapy is a "selfish" act because it includes talking and thinking about themselves, they begin to

transform their sense of spirituality. They begin to entertain the idea that perhaps God is interested in their real feelings, their struggles, their shortcomings, their history. They start by thinking, maybe just for a little while, they can suspense with their efforts toward maintaining good behavior and take a look at what lies beneath and that God will tolerate this process. Eventually they come to see that God actually ORDAINS this process - they sense He is excited for them, He is right there with them - they can feel His presence like never before. And though God knew their issues before they allowed themselves to see them, there is something about the act of revealing them to oneself, in the presence of God, that begins a process of weaving Him into their internal world in a way that has never occurred before. He becomes part of the fabric, the texture of who they are. They no longer have the sensation that God is coming and going, but rather that He is an integrated part of who they are. They are not going to "fall off the wagon" and away from God because He is part and parcel of their being. He is ingrained in their cell matter. To me, this is the height (and depth) of spiritual process. It is when the sense that God REALLY loves me begins. To be known at this deepest of levels begins a journey of developing a sense of compassion and connection with other human beings. To love thy neighbor as thyself, cannot occur, in my opinion, without a sense that God has seen the real me and survived it - that He actually loves me in spite of who I am and because of who I am. It is at this point that I believe we become useful to Him by being useful to each other.

I am interested in expanding and cultivating the ideas mentioned in this newsletter. Please feel free to comment, argue, or augment these themes. My e-mail address is: [piperglasier@hotmail.com](mailto:piperglasier@hotmail.com)