

Resistance and Responsiveness

We have been discussing resistance a lot around the office lately. It has been considered in a staff meeting, in many case consultations, and even in the kitchen.

As you know from your own experience, it is a frequent occurrence in the counseling office and often a difficult thing with which to deal. It shows up in a variety of forms. Resistance can be passive, aggressive, verbal, behavioral, emotional, or financial. It can be a projection into the therapeutic relationship of the patient's internal world in the form of chaos, silence, or overwhelming emotion. It can be an expression of the client's relational experience with others such as ridicule, criticism, or anger. The recipient of all this resistance is, of course, the therapist.

Resistance is an expression to the therapist of the client's major defense mechanism. It is something that infects all of his relationships and functions destructively in his life. Whatever he is doing "out there" relationally, he will eventually do in the counseling relationship.

It goes something like this: the client comes for counseling, and you assess the situation and think you understand the issues. You see ways you might be helpful and proceed to establish an alliance and begin to help. Somewhere along the way you slam into a wall. You have met resistance in some form. Your response, then, is to try to remove the obstacle so the issues can be dealt with and change can occur.

Your client agrees with your assessment. And although he wants your help, he also wants to leave the obstacle intact. For example, you and the client agree that he has difficulty with communication and intimacy in relationships. He wants you to help him grow and change so that relationships are satisfying and healthy. As you work with him, you keep encountering silence

and withdrawal. You want him to learn how not to retreat into silence. He wants satisfying relationships and intimacy, but also wants to hold on to the protection afforded him by silence and withdrawal in case he needs it.

For the client, the defense mechanism is a solution and he is determined to hold on to it. Yet, for the therapist, it is a problem. It makes for a therapeutic dilemma. It is at this point that therapists can get frustrated, befuddled, and irritated and struggle with thoughts of inadequacy. Resistance assails the therapist's ego and produces anxiety. It derails our messianic notions and dreams of being the hero. Young therapists think it means they picked the wrong fields and are not fit for the profession. Older, or sometimes weary, therapists can withdraw emotionally or react with anger and frustration. It is easy to act as if somehow the resistance is an attack against them. **We misunderstand resistance.**

Resistance, first and foremost, is not about the therapist. It is not a commentary or judgment of your therapeutic skill or acumen. We forget that therapy is in many ways about exposure. Thinking we have a good treatment plan, we proceed, but sometimes the resistance we encounter is surprising.

Resistance, second of all, is always there. If not there yet, it is coming; it will show up. It is, in fact, where the real work of therapy will happen. How is that? Because the resistance exposes the heart of the matter if you expect it, learn to sit with it, and embrace it. The wise therapist always expects, learns to "read" it, and reflects on it.

By doing this, you will find that the resistance will teach you a great deal about your client. It will teach you something about what they want more than overt solution or help they came to find. We resist because we fear something more than we want something new. We resist because we hold tightly to something

that feels safe and protective, while all the time it is destroying or blocking that for which we long.

We really do understand resistance—will learn to read and decipher it correctly—if we will stop and think about it because the truth is this: God encounters resistance in His relationship with us all the time.

Resistance, ultimately, is an expose of the heart. Jesus says to us, "Follow me". We say to Him, let me first go try out my oxen or bury my father. At one level we do want change. Every one of us wants to be His disciple; we want to grow in His ways. But as we move toward Him and the transformation of our lives, the obstacles to that growth are revealed. The resistance on our part toward God reveals our hearts, our fears, and our true loves.

Furthermore, as with therapists, our resistance to God says nothing about Him, and everything about us. What reveals God to us is His response to our resistance. HE does not respond with anger or withdrawal or force or condemnation. He waits, He invites, He has compassion. God understands and He is saddened, as with the rich young ruler who walked away. Loving patience is the hallmark of God's responsiveness.

We can learn from God how to respond to our clients. We can also learn from our clients something of what we do to the heart of our God when we resist Him. May His expose of our hearts lead us to repentance and renewal, rather than an exclamation of the resistance.

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