

# Myths of Being a Counsellor

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During counselling training the fledgling counsellor will undergo a number of stages of development in his or her journey towards becoming a competent and experienced practitioner. Each one of these developmental stages can be seen to be linked to both a personal mythology held by the trainee and the collective mythology of the vocation and of society. At each successive stage the previously held myth is transcended and replaced by another one by which the person lives, until it in turn is transcended. The myths of each level of development will be related to the counsellor's own unique personality, to cultural myths about counselling and helping, to the myths portrayed by counselling books, journals and organisations, and to those of the counsellor's trainers, peers and theoretical model. As I believe that each individual's experiences will be unique (and that may itself be part of my own mythology), below I share the myths I lived by in each stage in my own developmental journey towards becoming a counsellor.

When I first started training my fantasy was that I would soon be able to sort out other people's problems for them. My training would equip me with the necessary methods and formulas to cure a wide variety of ills in other people. I would be

doing my duty as a responsible and caring member of society and I would be helping to make the world a better place. Like many counsellees who come to counsellors expecting them to have a metaphorical magic wand that can instantly solve their problems, I approached counselling training expecting it to instantly equip me with all of the solutions to life's suffering.

I was living out the myth of being a Saviour in a form heavily influenced by one of my favourite childhood fairy tales, *The Sleeping Beauty*. I was to be the prince whose role was to rescue helpless maidens from their own unawareness. It was this particular myth that had brought me to counselling training in the first place. In order to be the prince I needed maidens to rescue and this would be the role of my counsellees. I saw counselling as primarily being a process of helping people by providing answers for their problems. I was later to discover that with some counsellees, just like in the fairy tale, such a process would in fact be akin to hacking my way through an impenetrable forest of thorns!

Not long into my training two truths dawned. Firstly, not only could lots of people 'out there' benefit from counselling, but so could I. Secondly, when I started to work with counsellees, I discovered that,

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although I was good enough, I was not as good at counselling as I had assumed I would be. I entered personal therapy and adopted a new myth — that of being a Fully Competent Saviour. Everything would be fine if only I could become fully competent at saving people. I had a map (the theory) of how to help people and I was determined to do it properly. When all of my counselees got completely better I would know that I was a true prince, as would everybody else, and I would be able to live happily ever after. Fortunately it was not long before the patience and skill of my supervisor and my own personal therapy began to bear fruit!

I did have one last shot at being a saviour, however. As my knowledge deepened and I became aware of the huge depth and breadth of counselling theory and methodologies, I moved my goal posts, and still being idealistic I updated my original saviour myth to that of the Universal Healer. Counselling had now become a universal panacea for all ills. It had, in my fantasy, become endowed with even greater magical properties. When I worked with clients with physical illness I wanted to find its roots in their personal psychologies and somehow effect a miracle cure. When I looked at the wider world, all of humanity's problems could be solved if only the message and methodologies of counselling could be spread far and wide through out the world. In this rather grandiose phase the message I wanted to give to the world was something along the lines of 'This stuff is brilliant, you need it, and I'm going to give it to you!' Fortunately, following some further breakthroughs in my personal counselling, I got a better perspective on

exactly what my personal abilities and responsibilities are!

I was getting to really enjoy counselling by this time, and I wanted to take it further, so having got a more realistic perspective on what counselling is, the next myth that I adopted was that of being a Professional counsellor. In this instance I was adopting the myths of wider society and of western economics. I had made the move from viewing counselling through filters influenced by my personal childhood experiences and was now viewing it through the filters of more widely accepted cultural myths. Eric Berne posited that each culture provides its members with prescribed ways of filling prolonged periods of time. He suggested that people are required to fill their time with activities that prove their status and ability to play an approved role with in society. In return for this they are given permission to belong, to fit in. Adults are expected to take on what Berne colloquially called the mortgage. The mortgage is supposed to give meaning and structure to people's lives and involves working for a reward. This may be material gain, or, for example, a husband or wife. I was ready to play the approved role of the professional; to structure my time with work and thus to fit in with the expectations of my culture. As my chosen vocation is counselling, I was eager to continue to structure a lot of my time in the role of counsellor. The easiest way for me to do this whilst meeting the mortgage requirements of society was to turn counselling into a profession.

Having set my sights on professionalism I turned my attention to Accreditation. This was my new goal, and in my

myth its attainment would bring security, status and a sense of belonging. However at the back of my mind there was a nagging doubt. In my personal experience the most effective counsellors I knew, and those who were in most demand, were not necessarily accredited. What they did have was a sense of security in their own ability, grounded in thorough training. The need to be accredited, or to be formally recognised as professional, never seemed to be a major issue for them. I was also becoming increasingly aware of the major role that many of society's institutions have in contributing to the difficulties and suffering of my counselees. One group of clients who seemed to be increasingly affected were professionals. Many were experiencing increasing levels of work-related stress and disillusionment. The incongruity between my aim and the experience of my clients finally became inescapably clear when I found myself doing twenty or more hours of counselling a week, both in a GP surgery and in a clinical psychology department, as well as in private practice. I could no longer invite a counsellee to examine his or her own tendency to work too hard whilst ignoring my own process! Increasing levels of tiredness and compassion fatigue finally brought home to me the message, that in my case, my quest to become a full-time professional counsellor in order to fulfil the mortgage expectations of society was slowly killing me! It was time to examine in more detail my quest to be a professional. Why did I want to take on the culturally given myth of the professional? Why did I want to prove that I could earn the right to belong in society when I felt that the society to which I wished to

belong was in many ways pathological and destructive of human happiness? The answer was very clear. Once again I had been caught up in a myth that I had mistaken for reality.

I now started a major period of introspection and whilst I was re-evaluating my work as a counsellor I underwent a major breakthrough in my understanding. It suddenly dawned on me that counselling itself is a mythology. By being a counsellor I had adopted one of a vast array of myths that have been created by people in order to give structure to their lives. By hanging on to my, at times, desperate need to be a counsellor, no matter what effect it had on my well-being, I was imprisoning myself within the myth of being a counsellor. I was ignoring my potential to choose at any moment to identify with any one of a possibly infinite number of identities or myths. In effect I was trying to squash myself in to a tiny box and getting anxious every time the whole of me failed to fit into it. Following this breakthrough a major change began to occur in my life. I was for the first time in charge of my myths, they were no longer in charge of me. In fact I was now free to be a truly effective counsellor because I no longer had an investment in being a counsellor above all else. On closer examination of my definition of myself I discovered that nearly all of it was mythological. Everything that I had held to be true about myself suddenly seemed to be on very shaky foundations. I had been screening my perception through such narrow filters that in my new perceptual frame my efforts to narrowly define myself seemed absurd. I now realised that I could really benefit from not being so attached

to my myths of who I am or what I have to be. Over-attachment only seemed to lead eventually to suffering. This was certainly true of the myth that I had adopted of being a counsellor — professional or otherwise.

Having realised that much of what I had assumed about myself and society was in fact mythological, I found that I had in a sense turned full circle. I realised that I could not live alone in society and, even though I was now free of many of my own myths, many other people were not free of as many of their own. As a trainee new to counselling I had felt compelled to transform society. It had been my fantasy that I was about to go on some kind of crusade of helping and healing. Although I had given up this fantasy, from my latest vantage point I could see that much of the misery and suffering in society is caused by people living out their lives according to mythological formulas. I felt a desire to do something to bring about change, just as I had as a complete beginner. My question was what?

For me personally the answer has been twofold. Firstly I have to learn to be more of the full human being that I am by being true to myself. Secondly I have turned to teaching, on the grounds that by teaching people what has been taught to me, they too can uncover their more authentic being through taking control of their

myths. My view of human beings is that at a deep, fundamental level they are by nature loving and cooperative, with a tendency to strive towards health on all fronts, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. By taking control of their myths I believe that people get in touch with this deeper level of humanness. When this occurs on a wide enough scale I believe that societies begin to transform from the bottom up. All of which could of course be another myth; but if it is, this time it is one that I have consciously and deliberately chosen with all of my adult awareness and resources.

Now whenever I find myself weighed down I realise that I am caught up in a myth. I no longer have the myth: it has me. And I have found that all that I have to do is step back, become aware and see that indeed that is all it is — a myth. Sometimes this is far from easy, but I am getting better at it with time. Before too long the weight lifts and I am free again to chose the appropriate myth of the moment. One sobering thought keeps me grounded in all of my myth-making. If my chosen vocation had not been counselling, would I have ever realised what I have? There are not many vocations that have the added bonus of freeing people from their mental prisons as an integral part of the work!

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## *Further Reading*

Eric Berne, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?*  
Andre Deutsch, 1974