

Metta, Jesus and MGM

A conversation between Bernie Wooder and Peter Malone

*Bernie Wooder is a psychospiritual ps
who has pioneered the use of films in
Peter Malone is a Catholic priest from
President of the International Catholic*

Bernie

In recent years I have been pioneering the use of movies as a mode of access for some clients who find it helpful in therapy. Many disgruntled Catholics are coming to me with a crisis of faith. Some are looking toward becoming Buddhists and feel somewhat guilty about that. At the same time there is some kind of psychic confusion with what I understand are the doctrines of the Catholic Church.

They use, unhealthily, the power of the Church and of confession to fuel an inner critic, and give it the spiritual authority of the Church. This is turned into a wrathful self-judgement, often leading into a pattern of rigid disciplinarianism. They use the power and authority of the Church to turn it on themselves and, in terms of a judgmentalness, on their relationships. Subsequent relationships with their children can make them very unhappy. This relates to my work with MGM on



The Wizard of Oz, where I highlighted the Wicked Witch of the West as the personification of this negative inner critic.

It is extremely painful for them to contain the pressure and suffering when dealing with this wrathful inner judge. Could you say anything, from your position as a priest for many years in the Catholic Church, that would help to alleviate the pressure?

Peter

I think that a lot of Catholics who stay within the Church are having the same experience, especially those who leave the practice but would still say they are Catholics. And those who are very loyal, and find a vitality in their seemingly contradictory Church, would still share some of that anger. They probably do have some of that rigidity in themselves, depending on how old they are. But they often see

this rigidity in their contemporaries who may be in positions of authority in the church and who are acting in this rigid way within their ministry. So it is not just Catholic, but universal.

Two points I would like to make for a start: I think that with the Second Vatican Council in the sixties we were lucky: we had an official opportunity to change on a world church level. I don't know where we would be otherwise – a small sect perhaps! So the last forty years or so have seen an extraordinary ferment within the world-wide Catholic church. This also means that the church is not monolithic in any way. Hispanic American Catholics are so different from Asian Catholics or British Catholics that you sometimes wonder if they belong to the same church.

The traditional Catholic emphasis on belief rather than experience is another area where there has been change over the last forty years. When there is a rigidity in images of God, God is seen as angry and vengeful. There also tends to be an absence of an image of Jesus, which is detrimental. With these people there is almost no image of the spirit of God. Whatever one's image of God, God needs to be seen as a loving father to Jesus, with maternal characteristics: Jesus embodies the very heart of the love and compassion of God. Many Catholics have missed out on this spirituality. If only people could rediscover it.

Two further suggestions: what your clients may see as the church is not the church but individuals representing the church. The royal family is not Prince Charles, nor Prince Edward, nor the Queen. But that's what happens in life, people judge the church through

some individual representative, and we have to accept that. Which is where our film work and therapy might be useful. To see a film about the work of El Salvador's Archbishop Romero in the movie *Romero*, to see Sister Helen Prejean and her work with death row prisoners in *Dead Man Walking*, to see the controversies and conflicts of a priest's celibacy embodied in a film like *Priest*: these could do a great deal to change the image.

There are other images of the contemporary church which would broaden the narrow horizons. Often the criticism is not merely of an individual, but of the culture. Many of the religious cultures are strongly patriarchal. But it's not really the church as such, it's dad and grandfather who are dominating, and who have given their precepts for behaviour in the name of the church. There's an Australian film, *Bad Boy Bobby*, where the mother keeps her simple son of thirty-five years hidden in a cellar home. There's a crucifix on the wall (without a head), but she says: 'if you move while I'm out, he'll know. God will tell me.'

Bernie

I agree with you that often it is a disgruntled grandfather or a stern father or mother who has been the personification of spiritual instruction. The shame is that when the children have gone to a Catholic school, that rut of experience is compounded because that's how they receive more Catholic instruction. And it may not be intended, but that is where the wound is made even bigger.

I hope Catholics I see as a therapist are picking up some kind of compassion: they are being met and

heard, and feeling less discipline, judgement and inner criticism. Perhaps they could also see something of this from the films. Buddhism is also big on metta, loving kindness, and compassion. It really is at the centre of it all. I don't sit in judgement on what has happened to the Catholic church. When I work with Catholics, I want them to stay with their faith. I'm not trying to win them over to Buddhism. I have no interest in that, because there is positive strength in the religious upbringing. But how can we mitigate the negative experience? The authority from which you have been making your points may well help people to risk breaking down some of their cherished beliefs which have also become strategies for dealing with life. They desperately need official permission to let go of this punitive and often cruel inner critic.

Peter

And these beliefs and strategies have often become ossified. They are really out of date. A number of Catholics who did not like the Second Vatican Council found a 'siege mentality', developed since the sixteenth century Reformation, which they were hiding inside the church. They were so defensive that they had not realised the enemy had lost interest in the church and had long gone away.

A retreat called 'Life's healing Journey', which was developed by some Americans confrères of my religious order, is very popular now in Australia, and I find it helpful for people within the Catholic church. It is a ten-day process, in which people have personal guidance, not so much therapy but spiritual direction. Then they go into retreat, but also have an opportunity to share with others. Naming the hurts

in one's life with others who have similar experience is important. But it is in the context of openness to God, openness in prayer. Where some of the wounds have not yet been opened, the participants will eventually be able to heal appropriately and find some sense of direction.

Many who do not have this opportunity could look on the face of Cardinal Hume or mother Teresa, or other significant Catholics who are credible to them. These are images of the contemporary church other than the priest who was unwelcoming, the nun who was brutal, the family member who was a harsh disciplinarian: people who were really living out their unresolved tensions.

Bernie

With the weight you carry within the church, you are giving permission for people to risk doing this in whatever way they have. I think it would help therapists to realise that people have this permission. Without it, it is hard for people to break through. Even if people have lapsed, there is a knee-jerk reaction into doing what they were taught to do when they were very young, especially in stressful situations.

Peter

I don't know the answer to that. To use the transactional analysis terms, these clients are 'stuck' in the condition of a wounded child. The church has been such a 'critical parent'. If only there were a magic formula for people to see the adulthood of the church in an adult way! If you as a therapist can work on that, there is hope for breaking out of the rigid patterns, and

for seeing their church experience quite differently. The permission the clients need becomes a mature experience: they give themselves permission to make their own decisions.

That is the remit of the therapist. From my perspective I think that adult education within the church, experiential spirituality, the spirituality of justice, are important. There is a great deal of this happening at present, and the centres where people can engage with it could be helpful references for you as a therapist, seeking out the places where a particular client might feel at home. It might be in a prayer group, or attending a course. It might be in a retreat, or by getting involved in a charity of justice activity.

For many years I have been based at a spirituality centre in Melbourne where we train spiritual directors. When people contact us looking for spiritual direction we have a skilled person who conducts an initial interview. We are then able to advise that one director might take an affirming approach, while another would be more challenging. I am most familiar with that form of personal accompaniment.

Bernie
1996

I use the parent, adult, child Transactional Analysis formats in the main. It seems to me that I am helping the frightened child who has internalised so much from a negative or unhealthy parent. My work is to help them to feel a nurturing power which



is associated with the positive spiritual experience within the church. At the same time, I am trying to strengthen the adult. I think many Catholics would be interested to hear that they might well be looking at the church as a parent. There is 'mother church', and all those images. I like you saying the church can also be the adult. It would be interesting to make that shift, and healthy for people to have permission to look at the church as an adult instead of a parent.

The confessional has come up many times. It strikes me that it is all about the acceptance of sin. There is a strong emphasis on wrongdoing. I have developed an approach that I call the confessional: saying what people do right in the day, every day. I work with them on affirming themselves. They do not have to come from a position of concentrating on the power, majesty and ritual of the church, concluding that they are not good enough.

Peter

In more recent Catholic terminology there is a shift from 'confession' to 'reconciliation', and a change in the way confession is conducted. Thus talking face to face with the priest is recommended. It is not meant to be the quickie ritual which we see in so many films of the past, and the present. The focus is on reconciliation with God, with the church and with fellow human beings through the confession. St. Ignatius Loyola, the Spanish spiritual master of the 16th century, developed a method which I hope comes more into use. Ignatius said that it is a 'consciousness examen', rather than an examination of conscience, a listing of our sins. We gain awareness of our consciousness

of our relationship with God. He recommended that we start with a prayer of thanks. It seems the equivalent of your idea.

It is thanking God for today. The second prayer step is looking at one's life in the light of God. One of the Psalms says, 'God, in your light, we see light.' God's light illuminates where our failings and sinfulness lie. This is no excessive breast-beating. Our awareness of sin is in the context of thanksgiving. It is not only personal sins, which is the 'guilt trip'. In the church there is a rediscovery and changing awareness of sin: that we are caught up in the social dimensions of sin. What does this mean in terms of reconciliation with others, justice for others? For me and my terrible sinfulness it is a whole mind-set shift that we can be reconciled in Jesus and in his compassion.

Bernie

In Buddhist terms it is realising that we are in the world of struggling and sin, that is a sharing of a broader community of compassion into relatedness and interconnectedness. But again I want to emphasise the good people do, the little things they don't even think about, when they might study the minutiae of what they did wrong.

Peter

Some of your Catholic clients may be twenty years out of date with current church thinking and practice. They may not have been participating in church recently, and do not realise that they are church, just as much as the next person in the pew or Cardinal Hume. Religious education has been

trying to move away from that old image of church for at least twenty-five years.

Bernie

But how do we communicate to the Catholics who cling to this memory of harsh discipline? How do we help them know that the Catholic church has moved on? It is my mission with film that it is about experience rather than belief. Do you know of any films which would illustrate the modern approach you have been talking about?

Peter

Some titles would be *Dead Man Walking*, *Priest*, *Romero*, *Choices of the Heart*.

Bernie

I would use the Sister in *Dead Man Walking* as the personification of the nurturing parent of the psyche, to be developed in relation to the Sean Penn part – the criminal who has been judged for his sins and condemned to death.

Peter

Yes. On reconciliation I would recommend *Dead Man Walking* where Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen Prejean virtually hears the condemned man's confession. Unfortunately, because of our ecclesiastical discipline she cannot officially give him the absolution blessing. But, if there is any reconciliation at this moment, he is able, through her compassion, to speak of the terrible crimes he has committed, and to acknowledge within himself that there is some kind of forgiveness.

There is also a reconciliation theme in the film *Priest*, especially in the final scene where parishioners want to walk away from the Eucharist. They refuse to receive communion from the homosexual priest. They can't be reconciled even though they are 'good Catholics'. But then the child who has been sexually abused by her father comes to the priest to receive. That's a wonderful reconciliation scene.

Films about El Salvador like *Choices of the heart* and *Romero* are stories from the seventies and eighties, and are powerful and moving. There are also some scenes from a rarely seen small American film of the eighties called *Impure Thoughts* – a very Catholic title! If you have clients who are able and need to laugh at the stupidities of the past I would heartily recommend *Impure Thoughts*.

Bernie

Brilliant that you were using humour.

Peter

There's another film about schooldays in New York in the sixties called *Heaven Help Us* (aka *Catholic Boys*), with Donald Sutherland and Andrew McCarthy. There's a strong Australian film called *The Devil's Playground* by Fred Schepsi which is also very powerful. It is set in a junior seminary. While some of it is very funny, it raises these issues, even making some audiences angry. So there are a number of interesting films that your clients might find helpful in surfacing Catholic questions they want to face.

In early 2000 Bernie Wooder and Peter Malone will be leading a series of days on the themes discussed in this article, which will be of interest to Catholics and therapists. Berniewooder@hotmail.com. 0181 386 4846