

Looking Inward

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Beyond Pat Answers

I asked her a question that called upon her to search out her answer, not someone else's. Her issues in counseling were, in part, fueled by her worshipful need to please others. Pleasing others meant echoing their thoughts, their reasoning, their arguments, their beliefs. Discovering and sharing her own unique answers was too threatening...so she would parrot responses. But this time, she resisted her usual "echo" answers. She said she didn't want to give me a pat response, though it was a great temptation. She needed time to think my question through.

What she meant by "time to think it through" was that she needed to consult her own living experience. She had been taught as a child and into her twenties by her loving family and her church what the correct responses were. Don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble, don't have sex before you marry, treat others as you want them to treat you - these were some of the choices you make without having to think about them. You just do it because it's Christian, it's right, it's the way it's always been done, it's good for you, it's just something you simply know to do.

What happened in her life was what happens to many of us - she didn't get around to making these responses "her own." They were borrowed, swallowed whole, second hand, and they had never been tested by her. Maybe after unpacking these "pat answers," she would keep them as is, make modifications in them, or maybe even toss a few. Now she felt a sense of urgency to go beyond her "pat answers" if she was ever to be free to make her journey her own.

Those who ask me to join them as they are going through a crisis or trauma are, in part, searching for something that "pat answers" can't give them. Well-intended religious advice, such as, "hand it over to God," "trust in the Lord," "let your faith carry you through," and "pray," actually "short-circuit" the person in finding their way. They've heard these words a thousand times and find them hollow and trite. Their pain and suffering is pushing them to move from "pat answers" to "authentic" experiencing of God's presence. In a sense, we have to dig our own answers out of the dirt of life experience. No, we don't have to do this digging, but if we don't, we compromise our search for those deeper truths in life that

are found in the dirt - in earth experience from which God created us.

I recall as a child sitting in my Southern Baptist church and hearing the pastor proclaim that under no circumstances should a Christian ever lie. At that age, surrounded by like-minded believers, I knew not to question such a truth. I had no need to question this proclamation. But then I was introduced to life outside my church and community. The "pat answer" that you never lie didn't hold up in "all" circumstances. There were stories of American soldiers who found refuge in a foreigner's home as they tried to escape from the enemy. When questioned by the enemy, these courageous people "lied" and said they had not seen any Americans. You can name specific instances where lying is called for to protect and preserve life. No, you don't make it a habit to lie, but there are circumstances that call for us to think beyond "pat answers" to find the deeper truth - to take hold of the deeper love. I had to dig around in the dirt to sort out my own answers, some of which echo my traditional upbringing and some that differ greatly.

My friend from the beginning of this story replied to my question two weeks later. She had communed with her religious upbringing, her family teachings, her Biblical understanding, and her own digging-in-the-dirt life experiences. After she spoke her mind, she commented that she never thought she'd be where she now found herself in her beliefs. The she remarked that loving as God loves was what pushed her to go beyond her set of "pat answers" that were first base. Running to second base, then third, and then streaking toward home plate had connected her to the earth of life long enough for her to search out her own answers. Loving as God loves, she reflected, took her to wonderfully strange and new places in relationships. She spoke authentically - for her search had become personal.

As Christ sometimes asked his disciples, we are asked by life everyday, "**So, what do 'you' think??"** Bend down, take a scoop of dirt in your hand, and then reply. "Pat answers" will never do again. It's important that it's "your" answer. That's the only place you can start.