Personal Theory of Helping Within Student Affairs

Part I: Personal Theory

Literature offers many pertinent theories from scholars and researchers about the nature and benefits of helping others. Analysis and synthesis of these theories offers much wisdom to the new and emerging student affairs professional. Still, it is invaluable for helpers, inside and outside the world of higher education, to have their own philosophy of helping that demonstrates and articulates their personal values in terms of personhood, change, and helping.

Values shape your meaning making and thus your behavior. My personal helping theory, though informed largely by literature, is shaped by my personal system of beliefs, including my values, views, and understanding about the nature of helping, humanity, and change. I believe the most valuable theory on helping others is one that reflects a deep and genuine value of the individual. Helping within student affairs should be an intentional commitment to valuing the needs, holistic wellness, and spirituality of students. This commitment to genuine care offers affirmation of strengths and support when needed. At the same time it is not lazy; a helper must offer challenge. They encourage exploration of views, values, and choices, taking new perspectives, and considering others. This challenge and support cannot take place outside of a safe relationship. “A therapeutic climate is one in which self-exploration and growth is encouraged and a positive and affirming relationship is developed” (Pope et. al, 2004, as cited in Reynolds, 2009, p.15). Helpers must learn to build rapport, offer confidentiality when appropriate, and develop patterns of open communication, verbally and nonverbally showing support. This can be achieved through body position, listening, having a “willingness and ability
to adopt the student’s frame of reference as completely as possible” (Reynolds, 2009, 144), and offering non-judgmental responses.

This theory would be considered student focused. It offers an understanding of the process of the college student’s developmental journey and their current circumstances. Because the college experience is not an infinite amount of time, it is a fixed number of years, this helping theory would offer an opportunity for the helper to begin to suggest or develop growth goals for a holistic development plan once a rapport is established and there is insight into the student’s needs. Because student affairs professionals often have access to knowledge and resources that the student may not be aware of, once a developmental goal plan is set, the professional may help the student connect lines that they may not be able see. This can be in the form of information, resources, contacts, etc. As this relationship is established further and the student begins to feel more comfortable, a mentoring relationship may begin to form. This will not occur with all students as it is only a few that will achieve this level of connection. Regardless of the level of intimacy developed, helpers can begin to instigate justice driven leadership development, providing students with a role model for leadership that is consistent with the university mission and vision, dedicated to the health of the collective university community. In this way, helping becomes more than a simple verb, it becomes an ongoing relationship.

**Nature of Helping**

Helping is an ongoing relationship with someone else that challenges them to make changes in their lives that will benefit their well-being. It involves a desire to help someone understand the ways in which they can “lead healthier, authentic, and more productive
lives” (Reynolds, 2009, p. 106). A helper is someone who assists others “in understanding, coping, and responding to problems” (Reynolds, 2009, xxi).

Helping occurs by establishing rapport, gathering insight into the other’s issues, and then advocating for that person and guiding them to take action steps in making the changes necessary for them to be healthy and successful. “For most student affairs professionals, the ethic of care is embedded within their personal value system and translated daily into professional practice. Since the profession is premised on a long history of support and care of students, a longstanding relationship exists between moral reasoning based on care and practice in student affairs (Canon & Brown, 1985; as cited in Evans, 2010, p. 115). To be an effective and ethical student helper, one must first provide genuine care and concern for the needs of students. This genuineness is evident through our conversations, body language, support, and follow up actions. To be an ethical helper, it is crucial that the professional understand the mission, vision, and values of their institution. Practice must not only be ethical but also comply with the particular protocol set by an institution. Solutions that are focused on the student’s well-being, support their holistic development, and align with the university policies can generally be considered ethical.

Personal ethics will always highly influence our beliefs about helping and how to help others. Faith and meaning-making play large roles in how people live, react, cope, and help. “Understanding of meaning making and faith provides a comprehensive lens through which we may perceive and interpret the multifaceted and often tangled features of emerging adult lives” (Parks, 2011, p.10). It is impossible to completely separate professional life from systems of belief. The way one views the world informs the way the live in it, view it, and make meaning of it. College age students are particularly responsive to new ways of thinking, living, and
behaving. Thus, our meaning-making processes will serve as a guide for students who are navigating emerging adulthood. “Young adults are particularly vulnerable to various ideologies, as well as charismatic leaders and communities; therefore, it is important to understand the content of their faith, as well as the structure. Content includes the symbols, images, and ideology that give meaning to faith.” (Evans, 2010, p.206). Faith will influence the way help is given, but it naturally informs our perceptions about the nature of others, their value, and the way that change occurs.

**Nature of Personhood**

But why bother helping others? As human beings, we naturally progress through different stages in life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood). And in this process, the goal is to grow and mature, learning from our experiences. People who aren’t able to continue the maturing process, learning to cope with new phases of life aren’t generally successful. Success can be measured by one’s ability to mature spiritually, learn academically, progress socially; however, not everyone can do it on their own. No one is equipped naturally to survive life’s struggles completely on their own, let alone thrive in isolation. Thus, to help someone else through these times is not only nice, but in the Christian faith we are called to spur each other on. Christians are biblically called to be in community and in relationship with each other. Human beings are dynamic and constantly moving, hopefully forward. In community and in helping relationships, we influence each other. We intend to help move them forward.

However, helping is not only a religious notion. Scientist and scholars recognize the need for help and our innate ability as humans to connect. College in particular is a time in which there is a great need for connection, for spurring on. It is recognized that “there is much at stake
in how [students] are heard, understood, and met by the adult world in which they are seeking participation, meaning, purpose, and a faith to live by” (Parks, 2011, p. 3). As we serve our most basic purposes as student affairs professionals, advising academics or developing programs, there is a chance to meet students where they are at and not only give them what they are tangibly seeking or assistance for, but to assist them in the development of their future self. College is a preparatory means to a student’s success in the future. “Chickering saw the establishment of identity as the core developmental issue with which students grapple during their college years... establishment of identity in turn allows the person to successfully address issues that may arise later in the developmental process.” (Evans, 2010, p.65). There is a need to prepare students for what lies ahead.

Perception of Human Nature

Obviously this view of helping, our natural desires to willingly help others, relies on some specific ideas about human nature. This theory and view of helping relies on one’s ability to see others’ innate value for simply being a member of the human race. The theory suggests, but doesn’t exclusively demand, the view that all human beings, regardless of demographic, are made in the image of God. The story of Genesis describes the powerful value that God places on the people He loves, the masterpiece of His creation. As such, people are intended to be in relationships with God and others. Isolation is not a condition that allows for challenge, progress, or maturation. People thrive in communities, alongside other people. Intimacy is a natural desire. It is also natural to ask questions about our nature, about our world, God, and others. People have the cognitive ability to notice dissonance and incongruency in their environment, and to question it. They can perceive problems and work toward solutions. “The way we think about problems
determines to a large degree what we will do about them” (Reynolds, 2009, p. 75). Human beings have a desire for purpose, to live a purpose driven life. Nobody longs to live a life that contributes nothing, to lack meaning in their relationships or choices. People are meaning-makers. Our choices reflect the meanings that we give to certain things, our values and beliefs.

*The Helpers Role in Student Affairs*

Students are at a key phase in life when they are asking big questions “regarding purpose, vocation, and belonging” (p. 203) and this can cause a dissonance between what they once believed and possibly a new perspective they are beginning to understand. This struggle calls for a helper. God gave human beings an innate desire to help others when they are hurting. It is not only a responsibility, but a deep longing for us to play a significant role in someone else’s life, just as we hope they would do for us. People are worth helping because we are all connected through the community of humanity. As parts of the same body, whether in Christ or just as members of the same society, we need each other to reach full potential in order to be the most successful local or global community possible.

“Helping students is central to the history, goals, and responsibilities of student affairs work, and it is vital that student affairs professionals develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to assist college students with all aspects of their curricular and extracurricular lives.” (Reynolds, 2009, p.8).

Student affairs professionals are often highly visible on campuses as they are easily accessible and approachable (Reynolds, 2009, p. 13). Generally, student life workers are able to develop deeper personal relationships with students that work or come into their offices. The work we do opens us up to having the hard conversations that might not occur in length in the
classroom setting. As advisors or supervisors we have the nearness to be able to ask hard or challenging questions. For example, if a career counselor is advising students about career path options, they will inevitably hear multiple reactions, narratives of fear, uncertainty, or confusion about the future, about who they are, what they have learned, where they are going, their self-worth, concerns about moving home, or relationships in general. This is an opportunity to help.

As early alert, retention, and academic advisors, one may discover that the root of poor performance is often not that the student is incapable, but that there are needs or circumstances that are not being met, handled, or discussed within the residence halls. It is then that these professionals will need to be able to help guide these students in working through these struggles and guiding them toward success. Similarly, as spiritual mentors, counselors, ministry advisors, professionals will encounter students who are questioning their faith, asking big questions of God, of themselves, religion, and others. They will find students at all different developmental levels who do not understand the world. They will find students who have never grown up in the church or do not understand how to accept God because their father never accepted them, students who are angry at God because of some abuse in their life. There will be others who feel guilty, abandoned, worthless, or ashamed because of the mistakes they made and need to find forgiveness in Christ. It then is the professional’s job as a helper to walk the student through these questions and help them find meaning.

*Wellness*

The helper’s goal is to help someone else achieve wellness. But, what does a “well” person look like? What is our desired outcome as student affairs professionals? According to The National Wellness Institute, a well person will achieve balance between occupational, physical,
social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health. This is not an end goal that can ever be achieved. Wellness is a constantly evolving process that changes as you gain skills, awareness, and knowledge. There is a constant striving to reach full potential rather than settle for mediocrity. To be well, a person’s lifestyle should reflect healthy mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions. No one area should thrive while others are lacking. Wellness is truly holistic. It allows for a fulfilling, purposeful life. A well person makes positive choices, has healthy relationships, maintains a good self-image, and is generally successful at completely daily tasks with ease. A well person is not a danger to themselves, others, or destructive to their environment. Within the world of student life and student affairs, it is critical that we understand the holistic nature of wellness and find a balance in our implementation of wellness plans or evaluation.

Cultural Implications on Concept of Personhood

Culture impacts all areas of our lives. The environment in which one is subjected to affects their view of self, others, environment and God. The messages that are sent to the collective society impact the things we believe and therefore the way we live. Different cultures have different values, stories, and belief systems. People who grow up immersed in different cultures will understand the world through a different viewpoint. The messages that are sent to us through the media, family heritage, and education largely affect our understanding of the ways the world work, what is important, and what is expected of us. This is an important concept to grasp as helpers. The way that we interpret a student’s behavior reflects our own understanding of appropriate behavior, human nature, personhood, and helping. Similarly, the way that we interact with students will be viewed differently dependent upon the cultural understandings of
the student. For example, helpers are often taught SOLER. This includes posture, listening, and eye contact. These three ideas of how to communicate care are very culture specific. “Some behaviors- such as direct eye contact, physical space, or use of silence- can be interpreted quite differently across various cultures, and accommodating those differences gracefully can convey the sensitivity and respect for a student’s culturally based communication patterns” (Reynolds, 2009, p.145).

**Nature of change**

The goal of a helper is to guide someone to wellness. This often involves a change. The change can be behavioral, cognitive, academic, or psychological. What causes a person to change? Can people change? Human history provides enough stories of successful revivals to suggest that people can change and they can profoundly change. Paul who famously writes much of the Christian New Testament was once a persecutor of Christians. In America, we celebrate recovery and reformation. There are programs and facilities for rehabilitation in nearly every city. People can change and as a culture we believe they can change.

So, then what causes change? “To be human is to seek coherence and correspondence. To be human is to want to be oriented to one’s surroundings. To be human is to desire relationship among the disparate elements of existence” (Parks, 2011, p.27). When people notice that there is something in their life that doesn’t make sense, they seek change. When tragedy strikes, people ask big questions and require change from whoever is to blame. When a relationship falls apart, often one will ask, “what am I doing wrong?”. People by nature make mistakes and adapt their behavior based on their experiences. As people are constantly changing, growing and maturing, making mistakes, sometimes big ones, is consistent. We live often by trial and error, testing our
environment and our community to see what is acceptable and what is not. When we find there is a behavior, thought, or lifestyle that is inconsistent with what we believe, experience, and understand to be true, we seek to change it in whatever ways we can. People are constantly changing behavior and thought processes to not be dichotomous with their deepest values.

Change is a part of maturing into adulthood. People are constantly transitioning through stages of development. “Each transition represents the achievement of a more sophisticated understanding between selfishness and responsibility” (Evans, 2010, p.112). We all have the power to create change and to shape the world around us. Change is desirable, as long as the change is for the better. The alternative must be worth more than the cost of losing what we already have.

Often a person is not in control of the circumstances that demand change. Crisis and conflict often dictate changes that must be made. Whether this be a tragedy that forces a child to take care of a parent, a relationship that deteriorated and caused deep pain, or surprising news about one’s health, an unexpected event can be cause for immediate changes in behavior, action, thought. It is these changes that often require a helper because there is no previous context to understand how to navigate these types of events.

The Role of Community

Everyone is a part of some community. This may not be as obvious for some; but, everyone is involved in some group alongside others, whether that be a school, a family, a church, or a club. Nobody lives in isolation for extended amounts of time. Having a group of people, whether they are dear friends or acquaintances, provides opportunities to be a helper and to receive help. It is often said that “you will become like the five people you hang out with the
most, choose wisely.” Community has a profound impact on people. People are relational beings. Community can push someone to grow by challenging them with diverse views, opinions, and theologies. Community can ask big questions and encourage big dreams. This is not surprising, acknowledging that community is scriptural. Ephesians 4 encourages being in intentional and intimate community with others, pouring into each other with acts of love.

Sharon Daloz Parks speaks to the need for community and mentoring for emerging adults; “in the good company of thoughtful mentors and mentoring communities, emerging adults can navigate the complex tasks at hand and galvanize the power of ongoing cultural renewal” (Parks, 2011, p. 13). Parks’ work proves that having a community of belonging serves students in a plethora of ways. Community is a safe place to ask big questions, wrestle with them, and answer them. Within community there are diverse worldviews that with confirm and contradict personal values. This allows for critical thought development. Asking big, meaningful questions, encountering otherness, dialoguing, listening, becoming informed, seeing significant leadership styles, nourishes critical thought and the ability to “recognize multiple perspectives and the relativized character of one’s own experience” (Parks, 2011, p. 186). Community is a huge

**Theoretical Understanding**

This personal theory of helping and the ideas it implies about personhood and change would hold little weight if it was not informed by literature and professional research. Much of my personal understanding comes from the concepts from developed theories and practices. The theories that had particular impact on my own understanding of helping were the Cognitive-Behavioral Theory, Humanistic Approach, and the Feminist Theory. These theories gave me the
basic tools for application in helping students, as well as a deeper understanding of the purpose and nature of helping.

The Cognitive-Behavioral Theory is helpful in navigating the role of helping in many tangible ways for student affairs professionals. Often students will present overt behavioral issues which demand an orientation toward action, “replacing irrational or unproductive thoughts, ideas, and attitudes with rational and productive ideas and attitudes... develop new and more socially desired behaviors to enhance coping and functioning in one’s environment (Reynolds, 2009, p. 85). This theory influenced my perspective that helping should be somewhat goal oriented and offer action steps through conversations about other behavioral options.

The Humanistic approach is student focused. It allows the practitioner to value the student’s individuality, emphasizing their personal strengths. I appreciate that this helping theory “focuses on the positive aspects of humans- including their strengths, creativity, free will, virtues, and potential,” looking at what someone is like at their best (Reynolds, 2009, p. 88). I think it is important to emphasize students’ emotions and the impact emotions can have on their thoughts and behaviors.

Feminist Theory is useful because of its multifaceted nature that allows practitioners to integrate components of all other theoretical models and put them into practice. It allows for valuing the individual, but also sees them as a member of the whole community. It accounts for culture and its effect on the individual. When facing students’ issues of identity, uncertainty, and future, it is important to look at problems within a sociocultural context. I share the understanding that the goal of helping is to see issues or problems as reflections of not individual
weakness but societal issues. This allows a practitioner to empower and strengthen students, broadening their view of their own opportunities, abilities, and personal identity.

**Application**

Understanding these theories and their use in student affairs has practical application. As a student affairs worker, I plan to incorporate these theories and skills to be a more effective helper. I want to be able to build positive student relationships by being accessible, authentic, knowledgeable, and approachable. Understanding these theories along with other developmental and identity theories will encourage me to be the best professional that I can be, to continue learning and observing students, and developing best practices. As a helper I desire to encourage development and be a support for students as they transition through the various phases of emerging adulthood. “For development to occur, teaching should involve active learning, student-faculty interaction, timely feedback, high expectations, and respect for individual learning differences...encourage interdependence, cooperation, and interpersonal sensitivity.” (Evans, 2010, p.70). I hope that my personal philosophy will serve as a foundation for spurring students on toward success.

By studying the techniques of helping I better understand my role as a helper. I can take the skills of building rapport with students and translate that into my current work and future work. No matter what role I play in student affairs, listening, reflecting, and summarizing will always be effective techniques to help connect with students and provide an atmosphere of genuine care and understanding. As I begin to build trust and respect in relationships with students, I can now confidently ask questions, clarify and interpret responses, and begin confronting students when appropriate.
Self-knowledge

Beginning to evaluate the role of the helper and the theories that serve as the foundation for understanding the nature of helping others, I find that I am passionate about the work that I am doing. I chose to pursue a career as a helper because I want to be able to offer students the same guidance that I was lucky enough to find in my undergraduate experience. I know that college is not always an easy transition. I experienced what felt like oppressive uncertainty and asked big questions, wrestled with my faith, and was challenged with new perspectives and worldviews. “One’s adult identity becomes increasingly complex and controversial.” (Parks, 2011, p. 7). Therefore, I want to be able to make that process easier to navigate.

It is easy to feel a loss of control when you enter this new world of emerging adulthood amidst so much pressure to perform well academically and socially. Young adulthood is a time of asking big questions and “crafting worthy dreams” (Parks, 2011). As human beings we need to be able to ask these big questions in safety and feel supported in our dreams. It is certainly hard to survive the transition to adulthood, let alone thrive, if we do not have others helping us to make meaning of our experiences. “We need to be able to make some sort of sense out of things; we seek pattern, order, coherence, and relation in the dynamic and disparate elements of our experience” (Parks, 2001, p. 9).

I think that I can be an effective helper because I genuinely care about the success of students. I believe in the power of higher education and the opportunities that it offers in terms of holistic development. However, I do not think that the enrollment in higher education alone is a determining factor in success, wellness, or development. It is the people who surround and support a student during their time in higher education that make the difference. Like Parks, I
believe in the power of mentoring and mentoring communities. I think that I possess the qualities of an effective mentor and have been able to use those skills through supervision of interns and the mentoring programs on Azusa Pacific University’s campus.

I find that I am someone with an intuition for how to meet the needs of the people around me. This does not always come naturally, but I have to work to be aware of the people that I am surrounded by. I try hard to play a significant role in the lives of people who are both close to me and also in the margins. This awareness of the needs of others often leads to great opportunity to bless people with hospitality and encouragement. Giving supportive advice, a listening ear, or simply a safe place to feel welcomed is energizing. My faith in Christ and the truth of His Gospel encourages me to recognize what people want and need and work toward meeting those. This has become the key ingredient to helping them.

Still, I am no expert in helping. Though I try to provide the best assistance and the most effective practices, I still find that there are areas of helping that I struggle with. I often find myself excessively questioning and fact finding, or encouraging premature problem solving. Because I want to see results and desire wellness for others, I try to help them set goals and get things accomplished before adequately exploring the emotions or thoughts behind what is really going on. I often too am overly optimistic, making suggestions that are not realistic.

I think that I have learned a lot about myself during this course that will impact my role as a helper within student affairs practice. I have learned tangible skills and gained an understanding of what techniques and theories resonate with my experience and worldview, what skills I can use effectively and what skills do not feel natural in daily use. I have also learned to notice my reactions to students and the way that I naturally tend to try to support them. I think
that I am a lot more sensitive in my care for students than I realized. Because I currently work in a largely disciplinary role, I find that often my interactions with students revolve around negative rather than positive behaviors and attitudes. I try to display support and understanding while still maintaining authority and enforcing the university policies. These interactions are hard for me. I find myself trying to play it safe, get students’ approval, and give them the benefit of the doubt. In this way, I’m often not helping students. I am not challenging them to change their behavior or even maintaining my own personal theory of helping by allowing them to get away with continuous poor behavior.

I have definitely learned however that I love helping. I am passionate about student success and creating a positive environment for holistic development. I have really enjoyed this class and the critical thought that it evoked. I appreciated the fact that I always left class evaluating my views, challenging my own experiences and perceptions, and trying to understand other points of view. I learned to appreciate rather than simply memorize theory. I truly try to incorporate it into my daily interactions with students.

**Part II: Application**

*Rapport*

Andrew is a timid student, appearing to not want to be noticed on campus. This calls for careful consideration when building a relationship of trust, respect, and openness in order to be able to help support Andrew. It is important to remind Andrew of the rules of confidentiality and that your office is a safe place to share what is on his mind. However, Andrew has already taken the first step in seeking you out. He has already noticed your wisdom and helpfulness with other students. This probably means that he has already developed some level of trust. It will be
important to maintain that trust by using verbal and non-verbal support. This will include intently listening to Andrew while he is explaining his situation, allowing moments of silence for him to process and continue, and then clarifying and summarizing so you are sure that you understand what he means.

*Insight*

Once a comfortable tone is set, you will be able to communicate your genuine care and appreciation that Andrew came to you with these issues. Obviously there are a number of concerns other than just Andrew’s grades which seem to be the original cause for him seeking you out. His overall wellness needs to be addressed. This includes first and foremost his emotional stability. His mother recently passed away and there seems to be some residual emotional affects of this that have not been dealt with, at least not healthfully. Similarly, his social health is a concern. He does not have many relationships in which he feels comfortable. His relationship with his father is strained and even though he is hopeful that his dating relationship with Samantha will turn out positively, he does not show confidence. He reports not having many other friends. His support system seems to be in shambles. He has recently come back to the area and finds little sense of connection. Academically, he is also having challenges. Andrew seems to show a desire to be successful in school and would not have come to you if his academics did not pose an obstacle. Professionally, Andrew is also concerned that he has yet to find anything that he is passionate about.

There are many dimensions of Andrew’s wellness that need to be addressed. I would start by affirming his courage in being able to come to you with so much personal information. I would also encourage him to see that it takes maturity to process some of these issues to the degree he
has already done so. Andrew is relatively articulate and is able to make connections between his 
academics, his lack of passion, and his difficulty finding direction. Andrew is not hopeless. He 
may be in somewhat of a depression, but he is not without hope. He desires passion and success, 
he is just struggling to find it. I would dialogue with Andrew further to try replacing some of his 
irrational or unproductive thoughts and attitudes about his self worth in his academics and dating 
relationship with rational and productive ideas and attitudes. I would challenge him to begin 
conversations with Samantha about their relationship and her view on what needs are or are not 
being met. I think that if this is a healthy relationship it will draw them closer together and 
hopefully Samantha will help Andrew recognize what he is and can contribute.

Action

I think many of Andrew’s concerns need to be addressed by specific professionals. I would 
discuss with Andrew what his options are and what resources are available to him on campus. I 
would make sure that Andrew understands that he is welcome to come to my office with further 
questions, concerns, to catch up, or get some support and encouragement. I think that first, 
Andrew can see a career counselor in order to discuss different majors that he might be interested 
in and different careers that he can explore. This will address his desire to find passion and 
direction. I would also suggest that Andrew be referred to the on-campus counseling center to 
process some of the relational loss of his mother’s death, his father’s absence, and his self-
confidence.
References


