

Counselor's Toolbox

“You Are Here”: Helping Strugglers Share Honestly



by ESTHER LIU

People entrust counselors with their life stories. They open up about their sins. They invite us into their struggles. It is a gift to be the recipient of their raw honesty. Yet there can be obstacles to this candor. As counselees build rapport and trust with their counselors, they may wonder, “How will my counselor respond to me? Will they receive my self-disclosures graciously? Will they respond lovingly? Will they judge me?”

There are different reasons why honesty may be difficult at first, but a unique category among some Christians is a tendency to filter and caveat what they say in order to be theologically accurate. They may be tearfully sharing their suffering but still feel the need to add the qualifier, “But I know God is good, and I just need to remember that.” Or when sharing grief and confusion over difficult life circumstances, add, “But I know God is in control over all things, and I just need more faith.” Or when sharing a recent conflict with their spouse, add, “But I know God is patient with me, so I should be more patient with him.” Or when

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becoming emotional, add, "I'm sorry for getting so emotional. I know it's not that bad. I just need to be stronger." These are often sincere, well-intended expressions. Yet, at times, underlying them is a concern about appearing to be spiritually immature or theologically incorrect. There is an implicit sense of *should* in the caveats—I *should* have more faith. I *should* be more gracious and loving. I *should not* be this emotional. In the midst of their ideas of what they *should* be, they do not feel permission to be fully honest with their experience or their true feelings about God and the Christian life.

When I notice a counselee is adding these qualifiers to our conversations, I often make a note to discuss this with them at some point. When we have that discussion, I will offer my observation of the pattern and ask if they notice it as well. I may explore some of the reasons for it:

- Do they fear coming across as impious or deficient in their Christian faith?
- Are they concerned about causing others to stumble with their actual thoughts and feelings?
- Did they come from families that quickly corrected them for honest statements of wrestling and discouragement?
- Do they come from church communities that rush to offer platitudes or minimize their suffering by comparing them to others' hardships?

Eventually, I will want to gently let them know that, at this moment, I am more interested in hearing them express their honest experience, even if it may sound theologically off-putting and irreverent. After all, the Psalms are filled with cries that come across as controversial. The Lord placed them there for our benefit. With the limited time we have, I want to understand their actual lived experience rather than the version they feel the need to present to come off as a spiritually put-together believer.

In this toolbox article, I will offer a metaphor that has proven to be a useful tool when a counselee adds these caveats to the descriptions of what is happening in their lives. I use the image of a shopping mall directory map. When you look at the map, you usually look for one thing: the star with the accompanying words "You Are Here." A map might be helpful in telling you where one store is in relation to another

or giving you a bird’s-eye view of the facility, but it is the star that orients you to where you are and what direction you need to go to arrive at your destination. Where you are—where you are starting from—matters. If our counselees are starting from a place that sounds more impious than not, more theologically controversial than not, then it is worthwhile to draw that out and create space for them to share honestly.

One of the ways we can do that is to help them locate their “You Are Here” star. This is not a secular mantra of “You do you. You are perfect just as you are.” Rather, we want to help them to start where they honestly are and even welcome their openness. Otherwise, they may feel the pressure to maintain a facade of what a “faithful Christian struggler” ought to sound and look like. It’s best to begin in a place of honesty, even if it is messy and ugly, and trust that God has beautiful things to say to us there.

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To get to this place of honesty, we will explore what a sample conversation with a struggler might sound like. Then, we will establish the theological grounding for being more truthful with God. This can help convince you about the value of such conversations if you are unsure yourself or prepare you to give specific reasons from Scripture to help move your counselee in this direction.

Help Your Counselee to Locate Their “You Are Here” Star

How might we do this in a conversation? How do we cast a vision for this space where honesty is welcomed? I usually start the conversation with something like this:

“I know your caveats are well-intended and, in many ways, sincere. Yet I also want you to feel permission to express how you feel. If it feels like God is distant, that is okay to acknowledge. If it feels like he has forsaken you, you can say so here. If you feel and express intense negative emotions here, they are welcomed. This doesn’t mean this is where we will ultimately end up. Yet, just

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