

Greetings one and all,

Last week I mentioned Anton Boisen who is given credit for beginning a change in pastoral care education with his comment “study the living human documents.” In an eleven-week intensive quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education, usually in a medical or mental health setting, writing a verbatim a week begins the study. A verbatim is the conversation you remember in the sequence of what he/she said, I said, and these are numbered from 1 to the end of the conversation. This allows those discussing the verbatim later to refer to a particular part of the conversation. The discipline does improve the memory, however it is not the memory that is all-important. If there are places where you are unable to remember you are to fill in the blanks according to what you think you heard and said. Now you are getting close to what verbatims do. They reveal the interpretive mind of the listener, where you were staying with the conversation and where you were avoiding the conversation. The more we are in touch with our own stories, with assets and flaws, the more we can be open to hearing the story of another.

Living at General Seminary the summer of 1953 gave me the occasion to walk from General on 9th Ave to 1st Ave on the cross town of 23rd street. Bellevue was up the street on 1st Ave. About half way on 23rd Street, high on top of a tall building, was the sign New York Life. The company represented the worst of the Eastern Establishment during the Great Depression. They held mortgages on farms in the mid-west and when payment could not be made because of another ruling called sealed corn, they foreclosed. Our 160-acre farm was one with a New York Life mortgage. My father was devastated by this loss of the 3rd generation farm. This was also another rejection within the family system. Some way at an early age, when children are great observers but poor interpreters, I had developed the mistaken idea that humility meant doormat. I had internalized my anger.

As mystery would have it, my time to preach that summer at the Bellevue Hospital Chapel was the story of the two men who went up to the Temple to Pray. I did not have a lot of practice writing sermons at that point. But this one was getting to me. The passage was like a wrestling match and as a high school wrestler I knew a little about that. The breakthrough came when I re-read one of the few books I brought with me that summer. I had underlined several years before, “humility is accepting yourself as you are.” That is what the publican did. Now the line made personal sense.

Fred Kuether, our supervisor, complimented me in the conference session that week. He had heard me preach the same sermon twice. I had consented to go with him to the Federal Detention Prison in lower Manhattan and preach in the prison chapel that he visited. That was the warm up for the Bellevue Chapel. He said something like I came through loud and clear both places. I had made a significant personal breakthrough.

The other half of the breakthrough had to do with a work ethic out of my German, Dutch, Scotch-Irish heritage. The German background put it into words. My grandfather taught me at my request to say in German, "work makes living sweet." I remember how difficult it was to say that summer, "I am accepted as I am. I am loved as I am. God in Christ

loves me as I am." I thought I had to earn it, learn it, know it, be in charge of it. Now I was in the process of accepting a new way.

The bottom line can be stated simply, the summer experience in my first CPE quarter was a freeing experience. A big burden had been lifted in more ways than one.

I had gone to seminary my first year hoping to gain an intellectual understanding of what Christianity was all about. I was ready to study hard to find that out. I had done that in college and graduated with honors. As I started my second year of seminary I was doing a turn about. This was the beginning of seeing Christianity as a relational way of life, within oneself, with others, and with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Stories are the outcome. They reveal our care and compassion as we live out the summary of the law, loving God, others, and self.

Shalom,
Fr. Whitmer