



THE BEFRIENDER

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THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST.
THOMAS

An Interview with Tara Tieso

BeFriender Principles in Mediation

The student who came to Tara Tieso's office was devastated. An honors freshman in his first semester at college, he had just learned that he had failed a class. When he tried to talk to the professor about his grade, the professor brushed him off. While the student was shocked about being failed, he was also dismayed that the relationship with his professor had soured so profoundly, and he didn't understand why.

Tieso, an experienced BeFriender and BeFriender coordinator at Unity Unitarian Church, St. Paul, Minn., works at the Student Dispute Resolution Center at the University of Minnesota. This office provides a range of services from informal conflict resolution to formal grievance proceedings. Tieso has found BeFriender training complements her professional training in alternative dispute resolution and clinical psychology in her role as a mediator.

When Tieso called the professor, she discovered that he, too, was unhappy. He believed that he had made his requirements clear, and the student failed to meet them. Students were to turn in research notes weekly, but this student had not done so. In the professor's experience, students often did less work than was required and then complained when they received a poor grade as a result.

The first gift Tieso offers her clients is Level I Mutuality: attending to each person in a conflict while they tell their story in their own way. She checks her understanding frequently, paraphrasing their words and feelings. This allows participants to name and vent the energy they have invested in the dispute. When they are heard fully and respectfully, Tieso can then offer Level II Mutuality: informed feedback, targeted to the participants' needs when they are capable of hearing it.

In the professor's case, for example, Tieso learned that the course requirements were not all listed in the syllabus, but that some had been delivered verbally. Although he grumbled that other students had understood the requirements, the professor became willing to change the syllabus in order to try to prevent misunderstandings in the future.

On a daily basis, Tieso sees both the limits and possibilities of her clients' assumptive worlds. Students tend to personalize their professors' responses to them ("She hates me"), when, in actuality, professors with 300 students have no time to do so. On the other hand, professors tend to suspect that students with complaints are trying to get away with something. Having heard each person's story, Tieso is in a position to gently challenge the parts of each person's assumptive world that have led to the impasse.

Once the professor could acknowledge that perhaps his requirements were not

fully understood, he became willing to meet with the student to review the missing work. On learning that the work had been done, but simply not turned in, the professor then became willing to change the student's grade. In turn, the student could speak about his dismay when their working relationship deteriorated and about his desire to continue working with the professor in future courses. Although Tiesa mediated their first meeting, they felt empowered to continue their discussions themselves, one of Tieso's goals. In fact they were able to mend their relationship sufficiently well that the professor agreed to become the student's advisor.

Tieso is an active member of the local Coordinator Skills Development Group, which, she says, shows her ways to apply her skills to her work and to learn from others. "Skills Group contributes to my own spiritual development and helps me connect with others. I like the depth of sharing and the commitment to the Model for Ministry Reflection that I find in the group."

Listening, connecting, reflecting, and learning. Tara Tieso is living out her call to ministry in an unexpected setting, yet one where her BeFriender Ministry skills are used daily. As Skills Group renews her, the circle of ministry is complete: the giver is also a receiver, and having received, is able to give. ■

A Story of BeFriending

This is a story told by a woman who was BeFriended. We share it here with her permission.

"I didn't know what a BeFriender was, and I certainly didn't think I needed one." Those were the words of "Mary," a young, professional woman, former wife of a clergyman, who was suffering from severe depression. "I was always the one to help others. My family and friends cared for me very much, and I was receiving professional help. What could a BeFriender do for me? However, a woman from the church whom I trusted encouraged me to give it a try, so I did. It was awkward at first. I wasn't sure what to say. I found out, though, that having a BeFriender was a real gift. She really listened to me. Not that my family and friends didn't. They cared a lot about me, but it's difficult to listen to the hurts of someone you love for very long. It's just too painful.

"The best thing about my BeFriender was her faithfulness. I could always count on her to be willing to listen to whatever I want to talk about. We prayed together, too. What support that was!

"Maybe the thing I learned most from her is that it's OK to ask for help, especially from your church. As I said before, I was always the helper. Receiving care was a whole new role for me. I hope I have learned through this experience that everyone needs help sometimes and it's not only OK but important to receive it." ■

Holiday Blues

Emptying Your Cup at Christmas

The holidays are often stressful and can bring about the too-familiar “holiday blues.” As BeFrienders, we may see an increased need within our spiritual or other communities for pastoral care. How can we respond fully to others with a listening presence when we ourselves may already be feeling overtaxed, underappreciated or emotionally drained? BeFrienders are not immune from either the chaos or the depression that accompany the holidays. What “fills your cup” at Christmas? We might wish that this time of celebration would find only a splash of eggnog or hot cider in our cups, but, as with any other time of year, our cups often hold much more.

Unmet Expectations

Christmas is traditionally thought of and depicted as a time of family. There are many sources that have informed our assumptive worlds about what a “perfect” family holiday experience should be. Whether those sources are our childhood memories, our secret dreams or the glut of happily-ever-after holiday movies, we don’t always achieve the perfection that we have defined for ourselves or imagined to be possible. If we hold a picture of the extended family talking and laughing around the dinner table as our ideal, it may be displaced by half the family watching a football game and the other half scrambling to get the last of the presents wrapped. The extended family may in reality be an assemblage of whoever happens to be in town. The faces around the table might include a few snarlers and bah-humbuggers.

Expectations of perfection don’t always stop with family, either. We may seek out the perfect tree, the perfect gifts, the perfect meal. Instead of joy and gladness, we find ourselves with feelings of anger, frustration and impatience when the roast burns or we have to wait in line to buy a last-minute gift. No matter what our images of perfection are, when the reality falls short of the expectation, we are left with a sense of disappointment and loss.

As Tevye Said, “Tradition!”

Along with other expectations go the rituals and traditions that have either defined our holiday celebrations throughout our lives or that have been denied to us in our past experiences of Christmas. Some longtime traditions bring us great joy and warmth while others may feel mechanical and meaningless. We may struggle with the guilt or melancholy of letting go of the things that have “become” Christmas for us, even if they no longer hold meaning. We may be dealing with family members who no longer value, even show disdain for, the traditions that mean a great deal to us. We may be trying to create new traditions because they were lacking in the past or because we wish to honor the changes in our lives and the people we have become. Changes in traditions for any reason can produce a sense of sadness about what’s been lost or what we never had.

Ghosts of Christmases Past

For some of us, the holidays resurrect deep feelings of pain. Memories of childhood Christmases can be associated with anger, abandonment or abuse. Even when the experience of Christmas has been reimagined and rebuilt to conform with who we are as adults, we may now and then find leftover bitterness creeping back into the holiday merriment.

Desperately Seeking Spirituality

The same churches that have empty pews after empty pews during services throughout the year are suddenly filled beyond capacity on Christmas Eve. Why? Some have identified this as the need to fill a “God-shaped vacuum.” A flurry of activity at Christmas, including attendance at worship services, is an attempt to fill that void. That quest doesn’t apply only to infrequent churchgoers, however. Even those with a more regular connection with their church through the year can be affected in unexpected ways by this longing for spiritual fulfillment. The hype surrounding the holidays bleeds over to create the expectation of a peak religious experience during this season of celebration. With so many other activities demanding our attention, the time for quiet reflection and connection with God can elude us, leaving us feeling surprisingly empty.

Sad Reminders

Each of us experiences a Christmas – indeed, many Christmases – that are “first times” without someone or something that we have held dear. It may be a loved one who has died or a first time away from the place where we grew up. Whatever the loss, our grief is renewed and heightened by the reminder of the absence at Christmas. The profound grief that is stirred up can seem antithetical to the apparent joyousness that surrounds us at Christmas, which only serves to hold a magnifying glass to our despair.

Build-Up and Letdown

The post-holiday letdown can be disheartening, as well. After weeks of parties, preparation and having nearly every waking hour filled with festivity, the time after New Year’s Day can be a time of emptiness. As things settle back into a routine, there is time to dwell on unmet expectations from the holidays. Grief and sadness stirred up during Christmas is no longer mitigated by a hundred other diversions, and we are left to “be with” our pain.

Emptying Our Cups

Christmas, despite our wishes otherwise, does not banish reasons for feeling angry, sad or lonely and may even renew and embellish on those feelings. When we are called upon to befriend someone at Christmastime, it may seem harder than ever to empty our cups in preparation for hearing another’s story because our cups are extra full ... or maybe it’s not harder. Perhaps the frenetic hustle and bustle of the holidays serves its purpose by raising the whole gamut of our feelings to the surface and making us more aware than ever of the variety and intensity of all we hold in our hearts. If the breadth and depth of our feelings is greater than usual at Christmas, we can’t help but notice how full our cups are! And if we’re aware of what is filling our cups, then we can choose to deal with or set aside what is in them.

There is room for all of the feelings that vie for our attention to be present during the holidays. Fortunately, as BeFRIENDERS, we’ve learned and practiced the tools for emptying our cups. During the harried holidays, the ability to empty our cups is a great gift ... not only one we can give to those we are called upon to befriend, but also a gift of *self-care*. ■