

Ode to the White Board: Helping People Make Connections



by TODD STRYD

One of the great privileges and responsibilities in counseling ministry is the opportunity we have to help people make connections between their faith and their daily lives. These connections come in all shapes and sizes. A connection between faith and life can be as ordinary and straightforward as noticing how Psalm 69 captures the experience of living with suffering before the face of God. It helps us recognize we are invited to speak our heart to him because he is the God who hears. “Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.”

Other connections between faith and daily life are more complex. A father realizes that his angry outbursts at his son’s poor athletic performance reveal that his identity is based on his reputation and the approval of others. A study of Romans 5:8–9 helps him to take to heart that true identity and purpose are found only in his unity with Christ.

Connections may also come in stages. A young woman first makes the connection between her weekend binge of risky sexual escape and the recurring feelings of being unloved and alone that preceded it. The next connection comes when she realizes that she has oriented her life around the dominating desire for love and acceptance. Over time, this prepares her mind and heart for another connection, between the merciful and loving words proclaimed about her by the blood of Christ (Heb 12:18–24) and the

Todd Stryd (MDiv, PsyD) is the counseling coordinator at CCEF and also serves on the faculty.

promises and calling of a different kind of life, one found in his resurrection life (Col 3:1–16).

In whatever form they come, meaningful connections always take place at the intersection of our needy condition and God's patient, gracious approach toward us. The Gospel of John paints a picture of this intersection between earth and heaven when he says "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ... [He] became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:9,14). The one who creates and connects all things was on a mission to graciously make life-giving connections for all those with whom he came into contact.

Jesus Christ, the true light, knows what people need to make the specific connections between faith and daily life. The four gospel accounts picture numerous times when he helps people to do so. To a large, rural crowd, Jesus speaks in parables using the language of food, farm, and field to connect them to the reality of God's provision and care (Mark 4). To teachers of the law, Jesus draws in the sand to bring conviction and pierce their judgmental hearts (John 8). To a Samaritan woman, Jesus initiates a dialogue using the metaphor of living water that speaks to the Godward longing that touches all of life (John 4). To religious leaders, Jesus cuts to the chase by abruptly connecting their man-centered law-keeping with their mistreatment of their elderly parents (Mark 7).

As ambassadors of Jesus Christ we hope to do the same. As counselors, there are many ways we can set the stage to help people to make connections. We can develop a safe, trusting relationship that establishes a context for helping. We can pose thoughtful open-ended questions to draw out the person's struggles and strengths. And we can present timely, relevant feedback and truth that invites people to take specific action.

There are a few tools that can assist in this work. Enter my favorite: the white board. A white board is probably not the first thing you think of when you consider counseling tools. It earned a special place in my counseling after I observed skillful people use it as a visual placeholder for emotions, themes, events, and the relationships between them. Most of us need help understanding, remembering, and organizing all the different things that are rolling around in our minds and coming out of our mouths. The

white board is helpful with this because it enables people to see patterns, make connections, and then come to new conclusions about how to live.

In this article, I will first discuss how the white board can positively impact counseling. Then I will work with a case study to show how you can use it to bring about favorable conditions for self-reflection, gracious confrontation, and the concrete application of faith being lived-out in obedience to Christ.

How the White Board Helps

The greatest asset of the white board is that it adds a *visual* element to the counseling process. As you write important facts, feelings and other relevant information on the board, it positively impacts counseling in four ways.

It provides some distance from the problem. By putting concepts, ideas, themes, and truths on the board, it gives the person you are working with a bit of distance. When written out, problems can be discussed more objectively. It's easier to reflect upon, critique, and challenge interpretations, ideas, and actions when they are turned into words on a board, even if only temporarily.

It invites collaboration. Using the white board enables the counselor to be more collaborative with the person he or she is talking to. The information on the board becomes a shared channel for interaction as it creates a common language. It fosters mutual understanding. This common space and language is a constant reminder that there are two of us in the room. Our relationship is a dynamic one, not a one-directional presentation of information or advice.

It compels the counselor to be clear. Using the white board requires the counselor to break down an idea into its simplest form and most basic parts. If I can't capture the content and flow of a counseling session with a series of words, illustrations, or connections, there is good reason to suspect I don't understand the person I'm counseling or the challenge he or she is facing.

It enables the counselor to structure and focus the ongoing counseling process. It's the job of the person seeking help to tell his or her story and identify where assistance is needed. But it's the counselor's job to highlight the most pertinent information, organize disjointed thoughts, draw out patterns, and lead to relevant points of choice and change. These tasks are

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