UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

Understanding trust through a spiritual process

Karine Coen
5/15/2012

 This is an in-depth reflexivity that gives evidence of a process of self-awareness that is both liberating and developmental in one's relationship with one-self, the other and God. I explore the theme of trust within my religious tradition and how my faith development within the triadic relations of oneself, the other, and shared centre of power and value are profound in my understanding of the concept of faith and hope. The mutual ties of trust and loyalty are redefined within the therapeutic work I do as a spiritual counselor. Hence, reconstructing the ties of trust and loyalty are discussed within the context personal growth.

I: Nature versus Nurture

I have chosen to discuss the concept of trust and what it means for me. I decided to write about this topic because I came to the realization that all of my resentment towards my mother and my limitation to self-explore is rooted in my inability to trust individuals. When I reflect on my family of origin, the reasons for my inability to trust people become clear. As a child, I witnessed the dysfunctional marriage of my parents, but rigid family boundaries preventing me from communicating the abnormalities in my family system to friends or family members. Divulging family problems to third parties, for instance, was unacceptable; silence was an unspoken family rule. Furthermore, crying and discussing feelings were viewed by my mother and siblings as weakness and were frowned upon. As a result, I became reserved and unable to properly display emotions; internalizing my feelings and thoughts became second nature to me, part of my identity. This was not helped by my mother, who did not display any form of love or affection towards me. I never heard the words "I love you" from her, nor do I recall ever receiving hugs or kisses as a child. Moreover, my mother was very critical of everything that I did as a child, never believing me when I spoke of situations that occurred at school or with my friends. The psychoanalyst Erikson (1968) makes the correlation between an infant's basic need for trust in the first stage of psychosocial development and the resulting insecurities/mistrust that arise when an emotional abandonment occurs. I, too, felt emotionally abandoned as a child and as an adult, this had a lasting effect since I did not trust my mother with my thoughts and feelings, how could I trust myself?

Consequently, my childhood experience refined my understanding of my faith and tainted my understanding of loyalty. Originally, my faith development had been like that of any other child, composed of "experiences combining to form [a] trusting disposition, [where]....vocal and visual interplay, ritualizes interactions associated with play" (Fowler, 2000, p. 57-58). My interaction with my mother, however, was not beneficial to my acute faith of development. My profound need to be accepted and acknowledged as a being with valid emotions was not cherished, and the result was a "domino effect" that affected my understanding of trust and loyalty, leaving me withdrawn and mistrustful.

Taking a holistic look at my family of origin, I now recognize that family obligations were pronounced during my childhood; I was expected to be the family protector, decision-maker and problem-solver. Additionally, I became very ambitious. Refusing to experience the same struggles as my mother, I began to work at the age of 12 and was the first child in my family to obtain a university degree. Due to this immense responsibility, however, I lacked social skills and, pre-occupied with family loyalty and responsibilities, I did not socialize much as a child or as a teenager. This hindered my ability to make friends and develop trusting relationships with people.

Moreover, addressing problems with my siblings or disagreeing in any way with my family members was unacceptable. When disagreements arose, the silent treatment was the preferred method. Discussing family conflicts was not encouraged, and I developed high levels of anxiety as emotional connectedness among my siblings became more stressful, leaving me feeling overwhelmed and alone. My unrealistic expectations of achievement led to feelings of fretfulness. My mother was a pleaser, and she never defended me against family members or outsiders. When problems at school occurred with teachers or other students, my mother would

automatically blame me. She never believed in me and it was my fault—or I came to believe that I was always at fault. Even when I succeeded academically and professionally, my mother never praised any of my accomplishments. Evidently, if I was unable to trust my mother for her support, protection and love, how was I to trust the other?

It was not until I gave birth to my son that I recognized how the continual pattern of being cold and emotionally withdrawn was vividly present in my being. As I progressed in my life, I questioned why I chose the field of counselling. I knew I wanted to provide others with the opportunity to speak and find their own voice, to listen to their thoughts and feelings. Subconsciously, I decided to pursue a profession that is founded on the idea of embracing, respecting, and listening to the thought processes of individuals—values that were contrary to my childhood and belief systems. So I wondered: how am I to counsel individuals if I am unable to address my own suffering? What exactly was I suffering from?

II: History versus Reality

I decided to have a conversation with a close friend regarding my battle with trusting the other. I casually began the conversation by expressing my thoughts about trust: for me, trust intertwines with loyalty. I continued by expressing my resentment and anger towards my mother and how my perception of trust was essentially influenced by my childhood.

I was hoping my friend would say "Karine, you are right— I can definitely understand your dilemma," and the conversation would end. In fact, my friend asked me "Why are you resisting change?" I instantly became defensive, blurting out "What do you mean by 'change'?" My friend responded by saying that "'change' in the sense of forgiving your mother and understanding that she did the best with what she had."

I was completely blown away. I was angry with my friend for not sympathizing with me, but I also felt guilty for defaming my mother's character. My intention was not to belittle my mother—I simply wanted to find a resolution to my trust issues. The questions of my friend left me feeling uneasy and more confused, so I decided to end the conversation. After I went home and reflected on her question, however, I experienced a profound instance of metanoia, as if a light bulb had be lit above my head. I realized that perhaps I enjoyed holding on to this negativity because it is what I knew best. Was I content with my suffering?

The next day I decided to contact my friend and request a second meeting. She agreed and we met for coffee. I felt emotionally vulnerable; I had never spoken to anyone regarding my concerns. I began the conversation by explaining my frustration regarding her lack of empathy, but I admitted that I wanted to put myself in a situation where I felt uncomfortable because I believed that it would help me explore my inner suffering. I candidly said that "I didn't like the way our conversation ended, I felt a sense of betrayal simply because you didn't agree with me." My friend laughed and asked "What kind of friend would I be if I always agreed with you?"

We both laughed, but the core of my problem was not addressed. I still wanted to know why my friend questioned my suffering as a form of resistance, so I continued the discussion by explaining my interpretation of trust and how it was shaped by my family of origin. She agreed and explained that she did not necessarily disagree with my thoughts; in fact, she understood and agreed with the origin of my suffering. What she did not understand, however, was why I appeared to be so fixated on the issue. Why did I feel inclined to continue the same journey of

resentment and bitterness? If I was aware of the problem, why was I not on the journey of resolution?

I pondered the authenticity of her questions for several minutes and there was an awkward silence. I did not speak because I agreed with her notion of freedom. I then realized that I had been my worst enemy, refusing to acknowledge my responsibility in my own suffering. I embraced her perspective and decided to once again end the conversation, not because I was angry, but because I needed time to reflect on my own reservations.

I walked away from the conversation with mixed feelings. I was relieved and disappointed. It is easy to blame, but it can be difficult to recognize and accept that we set our own constituent assembly of rules and regulations. Nonetheless, I was reassured that freedom was possible, and that I was in control of making a positive change. The same image kept floating in my mind: the image of a small child in a darkroom behind a door. While she previously had always remained trap in that room, this time, however, the child would be able to open the door and exit out into the light! I was beginning a new chapter in my life where the possibility of happiness and trust existed. I would be able to love without restrictions; I would be able to embrace the other without a barrier. I would be able to live!

III: Hope and Faith

Two concepts repeatedly entered my thoughts as I reflected on my perception of trust: hope and faith. For me, hope is found in the idea that something can be done differently, while faith is the belief in something. I hoped that I would find a resolution to my suffering and that my inner divine would excel beyond my traditional belief systems. At the same time, I wanted to have faith in the greater good of humanity, to believe that my attempts to trust the other would contribute to the overall happiness of society, and to live an ethical life where I could experience personal fulfillment and work for to the greater of good of humanity.

An important part of achieving these goals has been getting in touch with the different levels of my essence of being. I have experienced hope, not as a rational process, but as an emotional development. For instance, when my friend questioned my resistance to change, I was dumbfounded by her audacity on an emotional level, but I also instantaneously experienced freedom from my own expectations of what constituted trust. At that point, I disengaged myself from my own pretentions and was able to embrace my friend's dialogue and syncretism.

In fact, the questions raised by my friend have been crucial to this process provided me with a combination of different perspectives. First, she introduced me to the philosophy of respecting your elders and appreciating their contribution. Second, she spoke about the elements of faith and religion, and how they can act as a doctrine to influence and guide my decision making and views of humanity. She wanted to present a series of systems of philosophy, religion and culture that would enable me to have heterogeneous outlook of trust. Initially my understanding of trust was narrow and limited to the teachings of the Christian faith, but I soon experienced an emotional and spiritual transformation. I was no longer embedded in my belief systems, but could stand outside of my preconceptions and rationalize my suffering. I was able to appreciate my faith as "an early notion that life is bigger than we are," and understand how the belief that "there is something out there that is eternally just, eternally loving, is the antidote to

darkness and a strong step in the exercise of hope" (Chittister, 2003, p. 99). Life at that moment was good; I was able to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Furthermore, I believe that the connection between faith and hope is religion and spirituality. God places people in situations where they can grow emotionally and psychologically. For me, that was made particularly clear when I registered for a course on practical theology. I assumed it would be similar to other courses I have taken at the graduate level. The first day of class, however, I was questioned about my contribution to the greater good of society. I was insulted that someone needed to know my perception, but I was also frustrated with myself because I was unable to understand why I felt extremely uncomfortable discussing situations pertaining to my personal life experiences. Eventually, after being convinced to remain in the class by my husband—who believed that I would learn something— I decided to stay, and I am glad that I did. Forced by the professor to explore and consider the area of self-reflection, I realized that I had been denouncing my authentic spirituality. I had truly believed that the foundation of my suffering initiated by my personal experiences as a child was normal (McCarthy, 2000), I had always feared the unknown—I was emotionally paralyzed—but as I analyzed my behaviour, I came to understand that while fear of the "unknown strangles the heart, one tiny act of courage can bring hope alive" (Chittister, 2003, p. 99). Inspired by my frustration and a special professor, I found my own courage.

That class, and the lessons it taught me, were crucial to my spirituality. For example, according to Christian beliefs, we must honour our mother and our father. Contrary to the Fifth Commandment, I was unable to honour my mother due to my anger. While I sincerely believed she raised us to the best of her ability, I still resented my mother for never acknowledging my truth. As I considered things through a spiritual lens, however, I came to understand that I must trust God and have hope that "these assertions are not the outcome to past experiences [but the] invitations to new ones" (Moltman, 2004, p.89). Consciously, I perceived trust within my religious tradition as my inner connection with the other and myself. I became aware of the factors that influenced my judgment of the other, and I overanalyzed and overcomplicated the simplicity of the act of trusting the other while my on focus of autonomous individualism provoked my disregard for understanding trust within my faith.

Nonetheless, this self-reflection promoted my transition to the "conjunctive stage" of my faith development, and I began to make peace with "the tensions arising from the realization that trust must be approached from a number of different directions and angles of vision" (Fowler, 2000, p. 65). My religious perspective enabled me to understand that these transformations were an invitation from God; this solicitation provided me with the opportunity to create new memories that would redefine my relationship with my mother. I can admit that I purposely avoided situations that would assess my ideology of trust. For example, if questioned about my relationship with my family of origin, I would always give a homogenized answer: "Yep pretty— normal like yours!" Now I am able to reflect on my suffering and appreciate my spirituality as an enrichment of my faith.

IV: Trust Through a Modern Lens

My concept of trust has been refined, and I now believe in the greater good of humanity. When I began this process of growth, trust had a fundamentally negative connotation for me. I

felt that it was an element that no one could acquire, but that I could never fully trust someone until they have proven themselves to me. That is an unrealistic approach and unattainable outcome, however, and I was therefore indirectly creating a setting where no one could ever meet my expectations of trust. Consequently, I never was (and never would be) in a situation to trust the other. I felt that no one should ever be trusted.

It was a vicious circle that I had created. My perception of trust was directly linked to honesty and loyalty. Due to my experiences as a child, I viewed trusting the other as an impossible task. Since I never developed a trusting relationship with my mother, I was unable to believe in the greater good of humanity. Instead, I believed that everyone had an ulterior motive, and I reserved my personal thoughts and feelings. Although I had chosen to counsel in a field that is based solely on the concept of trust, I was unable to trust the other with my thoughts. In time, I realized that the lack of trust that I experienced was not completely related to my relationship with my mother; it was also link to the relationship I had with myself. That is why I never fully trusted myself—I had chosen to perceive trust as a synonym of deceit.

I have since come to terms with my suffering, and I now am able to understand the immense impact that my perception of trust had on my developmental process. Psychologically and emotionally, I was trapped in this vicious cycle of resentment. I was angry and unable to forgive my mother for dismissing my emotions. Furthermore, the anger that I held for so many years was destroying my spirituality. As I reflect on my past behaviour, it is now clear to me that my frustration began to have a negative effect on my code of beliefs. I began to perceive society as a constituency of untrustworthiness, and I became more paranoid of the intentions of others. The norms and principals I followed took neither God nor my spirituality into account. I deliberately engaged in a ritual that was composed of hatred, and I refused to view trust as a positive trait.

Now, however, I have a different outlook of life, and while my revelations have provided me with a better understanding of human behaviour, they have also made me a better counsellor. Counselling is about recognizing the client as an agent of their own lives, and it is my job to create a secure atmosphere that provides the client with freedom of expression. To accomplish this, I attempt to provide clarity through open conversation that enables the client to view life from a different perspective, and while I always provided my clients with proper counselling technique, I had to question my ability to correctly assess their emotional state: if I was not in touch with my own suffering, how could I properly evaluate my client's anguish? How could I provide advice and solutions if I was unable to comprehend my own grief? This process of reflection provided me with the skills necessary to excel as a counsellor. Fundamentally, my counselling philosophy is to recognize my own solidity in order to properly assess and respect my client's belief systems, values and social ideologies. The fact that I am able to understand my relationship with myself and to take a step back from my own biases enhances my ability to assess my clients, while also giving me a profound understanding of any resistance to change that may be a link to their own belief systems.

Ultimately, my progress and growth can be compared to that of a caged bird that does not know if it has the ability to fly until it is forced out of the cage. Once the door has been opened and the bird is removed from the cage, the bird has no choice but to fly or fall. Similarly, while I had the skills necessary to overcome my barrier, I was blinded by own predispositions until I was forced by a professor to explore my suffering through a spiritual, religious, and cultural lens. This spiritual growth has enabled me to become a better person and better counsellor, but it

cannot be measured in absolute terms; instead, it is a life lesson that must be passed from generation to generation.

It is very difficult to acknowledge our negative contributions to our own development. Despite that, I am pleased to accept my responsibility in my own suffering. Although I do not dismiss the influences that provoked my inability to trust the other, I can now respect the axiom: "Those who are unaware of their history are destined to repeat it." It is the platonic idea of always being in a state of becoming and constantly being redefined that provides me with the awareness of my future and my past, and the theme of acknowledging the antecedents and preceding events in my life will constantly guide my future. I can also say with confidence that I am now well-developed in numerous aspects relating to counselling, including not only listening and respecting the client's perception of their reality, but being responsive, empathetic, and sympathetic.

V: Trust as a Positive Antidote

I decided to contact my friend to discuss my new enlightenment. I was proud of my growth and wanted to discuss the matter with her. I emailed her requesting a third meeting and, of course, she accepted. We met for coffee and I began the conversation by expressing my gratitude towards her for her friendship and for allowing me to have a voice. I was happy that she acknowledged my feelings and respected the time that it took for me to digest her feedback. I continued the conversation by extending my appreciation for providing me with the opportunity to reflect once again on my interaction with my spirituality and the other. She was pleased that I decided to embrace change in my life. I had to admit that this process was extremely emotionally draining; I experienced feelings of hope, anger, faith and happiness simultaneously. She replied by saying that "it was about time you get over it." I cherished her honesty and also agreed that I needed to "get over" my frustration so that I can continue to live a healthy and joyful life. As our conversation progressed, I began to notice how free I felt, and I experienced freedom through a cultural lens. Culturally, I was entrenched by my values and norms, and now, I can freely accept trust as a gift from the other rather than as punishment.

References

Chittister, Joan D. (2003). *Scarred by struggle: Transformed by hope*. Ottawa, ON: Novalis, Saint Paul University.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity:* Youth and crisis. New York: Norton.

Fowler, James W (1996). *Faithful change: The personal and public challenges of postmodern life*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

McCarthy, Marie (2000). Chapter 14: Spirituality in a postmodern era. In James Woodward & Stephen Pattison (Eds.), *The Blackwell reader in pastoral and practical theology* (pp. 192-206). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Moltman, Jurgen (2004). *In the end—the beginning: The life of hope.* (Translated by Margaret Kohl). Minneapolis, MA: Fortress Press.