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EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Being a Christian Educational Therapist: A Personal Reflection

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ABSTRACT

In a journey spanning educational heights, the author's narrative shifts from personal acclaim to a profound spiritual awakening rooted in faith. Driven by a pursuit of academic laurels, his life reflects the biblical notion of vanity until a pivotal realization redirects his path. This transformation leads to a fusion of Christian principles and therapeutic practice, transitioning from self-serving ambitions to a vocation steeped in faith and compassion. As the Christocentric narrative unfolds, the author's personal shift from academia to Christian educational therapy embodies a commitment to nurturing growth in others. The author adopts a holistic approach, intertwining Christian values with therapeutic techniques, with the aim to address educational and socio-emotional challenges. This new calling of vocation for the author transcends a mere profession, becoming his ministry of faith, compassion, and education. Emphasizing the integration of Christian faith into therapy, the author offers hope, resilience, and purpose to those facing adversity. Trust, understanding, and a profound connection between the author as an educational therapist and his client are pivotal, extending beyond conventional professional boundaries. Ultimately, the author's role of a Christian educational therapist is depicted as a ministry seeking to enrich lives through the synergy of faith, compassion, education, and spiritual development.

Keywords: *Christian, Christocentrism, Educational therapist*

1. PROLOGUE

In the biblical book of Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 (King James Version), it discusses about time, highlighting that there is a season for everything as follows:

¹To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

²A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

³A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁷A time to mend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

⁹What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth?

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

Born of Methodist parents, I was baptized as a Christian when I was still an infant and accepted Christ when I was serving my national service, and eventually accepted as a member of the Methodist church in Singapore when I was in my mid-fifties.

I was trained as a primary school teacher, taught in a secular school for two years before I crossed over to teach in the Gifted Education Program (GEP) in a Methodist school (primary and secondary) for eight years, left to join the School Psychological Service as a reading specialist, quit after two years to go into private practice as an educational therapist and free-lance trainer. I wanted to become the best educational therapist in my country.

My dream was realized when I became a Board-Certified Educational Therapist (BCET) in 2003, and three years later, I became an approved instructor for specialty programs (i.e., special needs educational therapy, reading therapy, dialogic-diagnostic arts therapy, and special needs community services). I went on to attain an ET Clinical Supervisor's status in 2005.

I was not satisfied with the knowledge that I had acquired as I felt it was not sufficient to make me a good therapist. I worked very hard to pursue further and became a registered Dialogic-Diagnostic Arts Therapist (DDAT) and registered Professional Counselor (both professional credentials were obtained in 2006), a registered Reading Therapist in 2007, an advanced credential as a Specialist in Reading Therapy in 2008, ... and much later, became a Board-Certified Special Educational Professional in 2013. During those years, I was on a crazy chase for more academic and professional qualifications, credentials and titles with one associateship (in dyslexia), one licentiateship (in effective speaking), five elected ordinary fellowships, two professional fellowships (one in literacy while the other in dyslexia), one honorary fellowship (in reading education) and one research fellowship (in Singapore children's literature in English from 1965-2005). Today, as I reflect on those hectic yesteryears, especially on what I had achieved in the past, it was nothing more than to satisfy my own ego, just my personal vanity, and all these achievements have become meaningless to me. As mentioned in Ecclesiastes 1:2-4 (King James Version): ²"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. ³What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? ⁴One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever." It was then that I decided to stop chasing these secular dreams when God intervened to stop me from straying away from Him in 2016.

Moreover, I became an assistant professor in 2008. It was something I had never dreamt of achieving and I thought I was more of a lecturer's calibre. Six years later, I earned my tenure as an associate professor of teaching in Special Education, before resigning from the position in 2016. I was also a visiting academic at a British university in 2014. I became a visiting professor at a Chinese university for five years until retiring from academia in 2021. To me, this is for good. I need a *really* clean break from the competitive academic world.

3. THE TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE: THE CHRISTOCENTRIC VIEW

For many years, I was doing everything in my personal interest to become the best educational therapist in the South-East Asian region, serving as a leader of a study group for educational therapists and

another separate group as a chapter leader, also in educational therapy. For a short while of three years, I was also elected as a Fellow of a local registry of educational therapists. It was after I left academia to enter into semi-retirement that I found time to do a serious personal reflection. One biblical verse found in Matthew 4:19 (King James Version), which states that “¹⁹And He saith unto them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men’,” struck me. In that verse, Jesus was calling His disciples to follow Him and become ‘fishers of men.’

As a Christian educational therapist, I can align with this by seeing my practice as a way to guide and support individuals, much like a fisherman patiently and skilfully tends to his catch. Consider fostering growth, understanding, and healing in my clients through empathy, compassion, and teaching, mirroring Christ’s approach in guiding and nurturing others. Embrace humility, servanthood, and love in my therapeutic practice, aiming to reflect Christ’s character in my interactions and guidance with those my work with. What comes to my mind at this juncture is the key concept of “*Imitatio Christi*, in Latin, which means ‘imitation of Christ’, written by Thomas à Kempis (b.1380-d.1471) - also known as Thomas of Kempen - was a German-Dutch canon regular in the Catholic Church during the late Medieval Era” (Xie, p. 6).

Through much deliberation during my personal quiet time to reflect what I had done previously in past three decades, I pondered and kept asking myself many questions about my faith. I am not perfect and that I know very well, but have I given my best to the professional field of educational therapy that I have devoted more than 30 years of my life? More importantly, am I a good example of a Christian educational therapist?

I am a Christian first and being an educational therapist as my chosen career second. It signifies I still prioritize my identity as a Christian over my career as an educational therapist. It means that my faith and beliefs play a central role in my life and decisions, shaping how I approach my career and interact with others in that professional setting. It has been a big struggle for me trying to live up to that expectation that I have set for myself.

Experiencing God through His only begotten Son, Christ Jesus, as stated in John 3:16 (King James Version), is essential for me as a Christian educational therapist as it deepens my understanding of faith, empathy, and guidance. There are three key biblical verses which have shaped my perspective as a professional:

- James 1:22 (King James Version): “²²**But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.**” This biblical verse encourages me in applying my Christian faith in my actions in the field of educational therapy.
- Psalm 34:8 (King James Version): “⁸O taste and see that the LORD *is* good; blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.” This biblical verse emphasizes my personal experience of God’s goodness throughout my career as a Christian educational therapist.
- John 15:5 (King James Version): “⁵I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” This biblical verse highlights the necessity of my personal relationship with God for my effectiveness as a practicing educational therapist.

My personal experience of God through Christ Jesus has deepened my empathy, understanding, and guidance when helping my clients as well as my ET trainees in through education, therapy, and counseling, aligning my professional practice as an educational therapist with Christian principles and values. This has brought me to the domain of Christocentrism, a doctrinal concept in Christianity (see Nichols, 1999, for more detail), which centers on Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, emphasizing his role in relation to God the Father (theocentric) or the Holy Spirit (pneumocentric). In Christocentric theologies, Christ Jesus becomes the focal point around which all other theological doctrines revolve (Linebaugh, 2013; Nichols, 1999; Pepler, 2012).

As mentioned in the above paragraph, Christocentrism, which is simply the Christian way of being theocentric (Knitter, 1987; Nichols, 1999), places Christ at the center of belief and practice (Peppler, 2012), and it can influence the practice of educational therapy for me as a Christian practitioner in various ways. It may guide my approach to therapy, emphasizing values like compassion, grace, and love in my interactions with my clients. Additionally, Christocentrism might inform the integration of faith-based principles into therapy sessions, fostering holistic development by addressing spiritual, emotional, and academic needs simultaneously (Linebaugh, 2013). Ultimately, it is about aligning my therapeutic practices with Christian beliefs to guide and support my clients in their educational journey.

Additionally, two well-known Christian authors whose respective works have very much shaped the way I view myself as a Christian are J. I. Packer (b.1926-d.2020) and C. S. Lewis (b.1898-d.1963). Both men wrote extensively about becoming a Christian. The former (J. I. Packer) was an English-born Canadian evangelical theologian, cleric and author in the low-church Anglican and Calvinist traditions. Packer was a highly influential and respected theologian in the Christian community, and his profound contributions to theology have greatly impacted the understanding and practice of Christianity. In Packer's book *Knowing God* (Packer, 1973/1995) he emphasizes the importance of knowing and experiencing God personally through faith in Jesus Christ.

The latter (C. S. Lewis) was a British writer, literary scholar, and Anglican lay theologian. He was well-known for his Narnian Chronicles - a series of seven portal fantasy novels written for children but also enjoyed by adults, too. In his two books like *Mere Christianity* (Lewis, 1952) and *Surprised by Joy* (Lewis, 1955), Lewis discussed the transformational journey towards Christianity, often highlighting the need for surrender, faith, and recognizing the truth of Jesus Christ's teachings. Lewis particularly focused on the intellectual and spiritual aspects of embracing Christianity.

5. WHAT IS IT TO BE A CHRIST-LIKE EDUCATIONAL THERAPIST?

While there is no hard-and-fast rule what constitutes a Christ-like educational therapist, it is how I can emulate Jesus's example in my professional field of educational therapy. However, having been a Board-Certified Educational Therapist (registered with the Association of Educational Therapists, USA) for past 30 or more years, I have identified seven points along with supporting biblical verses to support my ideal of becoming a Christ-like educational therapist. They are listed and briefly discussed as follows:

1. Compassion and empathy: I must show my compassion and empathy towards my clients (especially since they are individuals with a wide range of different special needs), just as Christ did. Colossians 3:12 says, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."
2. Patience and understanding: I have to practice patience and understanding in guiding and teaching, especially those clients with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other disruptive behavioral disorders (DBD), which include oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD) of childhood or adolescence onset, mirroring God's patience with me. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel."
3. Individualized care: I must recognize and cater to the unique needs of each client I am working with, as well as collaborate with other professionals in helping my client, reflecting how Christ attends to each individual. Philippians 2:4 says, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."
4. Unconditional love (Agape): I need to offer unconditional love (the Greek term is *agape*, which is 'to love in spite of') and acceptance, mirroring Christ's unconditional love for humanity. 1 John 4:7 says,

“⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”

5. Wisdom and guidance: It is also my role as a mentor to other younger educational therapists under my clinical supervision, to provide wise counsel and guidance (should not be just based on my personal experiences alone), seeking wisdom through God’s Word. Proverbs 16:16 says, “¹⁶How much better to get wisdom than gold, to get insight rather than silver!”
6. Forgiveness and restoration: It is also my responsibility to teach the value of forgiveness and restoration, reflecting Christ’s teachings. Colossians 3:13 says, “¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”
7. Faith and hope: I must instil faith and hope in my clients as well as my ET trainees or supervisees, fostering a positive outlook on life through Christ-centered teachings. Hebrews 11:1 says, “¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

6. CONCLUSION

Personally, to me, being a Christian educational therapist is a profound calling that merges my faith, education, and compassion. It entails a commitment on my part to helping individuals achieve their fullest potential, integrating Christian principles with therapeutic techniques to address learning and/or socio-emotional behavioral difficulties. This role or responsibility is rooted in my personal belief that each individual (child, adolescent and adult alike) is uniquely valuable, deserving of support and guidance.

In this vocation of calling, the intertwining of Christian values and therapeutic interventions forms a holistic approach to my education. It is about nurturing the mind, heart, and spirit, fostering growth in academic, emotional, and spiritual realms. My dedication as a Christian educational therapist to providing a safe and supportive environment reflects the biblical principle of love and empathy towards others.

Furthermore, the incorporation of my Christian faith into therapy offers a sense of hope, resilience, and purpose, guiding individuals through challenges and empowering them to overcome obstacles. It also encourages a deeper connection between myself as an educational therapist and my client as a unique individual, fostering trust and understanding.

Ultimately, being a Christian educational therapist is more than a profession. I see it as a ministry that embodies faith, compassion, and education, aiming not just for academic or professional success but also for personal and spiritual development, enriching the lives of those seeking guidance and support.

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8. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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