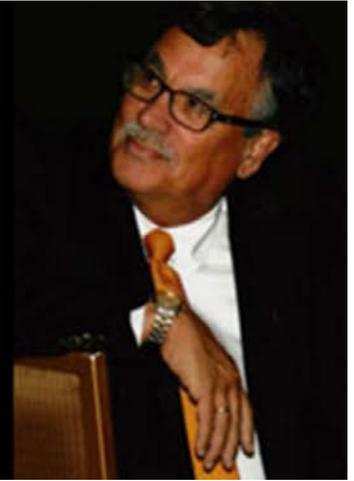


MY VIEW



Founder Wayne Fortin



THE DEATH OF A RESCUE FANTASY

I've been in the helping profession for over 50 years. I became a mental health professional to help people, which for me meant changing them. I anticipated that people would come to me sad, and I would make them happy. Others would come to me angry, and I would calm them. Couples would come to me unable to communicate, and they would leave holding hands and sharing their deepest thoughts and feelings. Victims would come to me after horrible crimes, and I would rescue them from lifelong pain and suffering.

Who wouldn't want to change people and take away their suffering? Who wouldn't want to "rescue" the suffering? But a funny thing happened to me on the way to becoming a rescuer. I found I couldn't change others. Although clients came to me saying they wanted to change, they didn't. I remember as a young therapist believing I was having great success treating a compulsive gambler. Then one day as I was driving past the local race track, I saw my client pulling out of the track's parking lot. This was my first (but not last) lesson on the futility of trying to change others.

Although I couldn't change my clients, I came to realize that I could still be valuable to them. I noticed something that seemed strange to me at the time... my clients were more likely to change if I didn't try to change them, but just accepted them. Thus began my new approach to helping others... empower others to change by unconditionally accepting them.

Why in the world would anyone come to a therapist just to have their painful and maybe dysfunctional behaviors accepted and validated? Answer: because usually no one else in their lives (including themselves) provided this acceptance and validation. I came to realize that my value as a therapist was to serve as a safe haven where my clients could have the rare experience of being understood and unconditionally accepted... pain, flaws and all.

TIP volunteers eventually learn the same lesson about the futility of changing others that I learned early in my career. They learn (sometimes reluctantly) that they can't cure survivors of tragedy and make things all better. During the volunteer training academy most TIP trainees learn to embrace that fact. At the TIP volunteer graduations I attend, my message to volunteers is this: *"You will encounter many colorful and mysterious individuals in your TIP work. Accept and validate each of them... their pain, idiosyncrasies, living arrangements, addictions, appearances, personality traits, hang-ups and quirks..."*

People do change. Survivors do heal. But “helpers” including therapists and TIP volunteers eventually learn that we are not the cause of that change and healing. We don’t work miracles and we don’t have magic wands. However, we can establish the favorable conditions that make it likely for our clients to grow and self-heal. Those conditions occur only if we are willing to give up the idea of saving others and resolve to understand, accept and validate them.

The journey for aspiring helpers begins with their excitement about the prospect of rescuing others from their pain and suffering and ends with the realization that helping others does not involve rescuing them but accepting them. It’s a humbling journey. My youthful fantasies about being admired by all for my mysterious helping powers are still deep within me. But most of the time I realize I’m just a guy who bumbled into the helping profession and have had the privilege of accompanying other human beings as they struggled to change and heal.