

Walking the Path of the Cross so as to Live within the Veil

A brief introduction to Christian psychodynamic counselling

Human life is meant to be lived in the garden, within the veil. We are meant to be present, attentive, congruent, awake, thinking straight, self-controlled, and in touch with our bodies and our feelings; to be living in conscious relationship with God and surrender to Him; and to be honest with and lovingly connected to others.

That life is, for various reasons, scary (as well as, in other ways, attractive).

The path to it is the path of the cross, both in the sense of casting ourselves upon Christ crucified and in the sense of laying down and letting go of our own life, putting to death our false identities, securities, idols, and distractions.

The 'self' which must die is the staying-away self which avoids and keeps out of awareness those threatening features of life in the garden. It's the clinging to idols, attached to God-substitutes self. The feelings-phobic, out of touch with our depths and out of touch with our bodies self. It's the self that is frightened by dependence, contingency, vulnerability, exposure, and intimacy. And it finds a million ways of keeping threatening realities out of awareness.

We do not realise just how deep-seated and out-of-sight these things are and so part of our growth will be the Lord bringing them to our attention (making the unconscious conscious) so that we can let go of them / put them to death, and thus experiencing what we've been avoiding (and realising that it's LIFE!).

This is what discipleship is: walking the path of the cross so as to live within the veil.

And counselling is a ministry of Word and prayer, at the service of the church, which functions as a specialized and customized form of discipleship.

Malan's Triangle

Malan's Triangle. More fully, Malan's "Triangle of Conflict". In his 1979 work *Individual Psychotherapy and the Science of Psychodynamics*, David Malan introduced what has become perhaps the most widely used of all aids to understanding the elements of psychoanalytic theory in its portrayal both of the distress and dysfunction evident in the psychological, emotional, behavioural, and relational lives of human beings and of what takes place in psychotherapeutic endeavours to address such distress and dysfunction.

Here it is as it appears on p.80 of Malan's book:



In brief, the bottom of the triangle represents repressed material, i.e. material which unconsciously is kept out of our awareness (it would be difficult, but not impossible, *consciously* to remove things of this sort from our awareness). This could be, for example, traumatic memories, unacceptable desires, or intensely painful or threatening emotions. If in some way that material begins to enter our awareness (starts banging from below on the trap-door of the cellar-basement) it immediately generates anxiety (a move to the top-right of the triangle). And we move to reduce that anxiety by (again unconsciously) deploying defenses (top-left of the triangle), stamping down the trap-door, putting our hands over our ears, and whistling a happy tune.

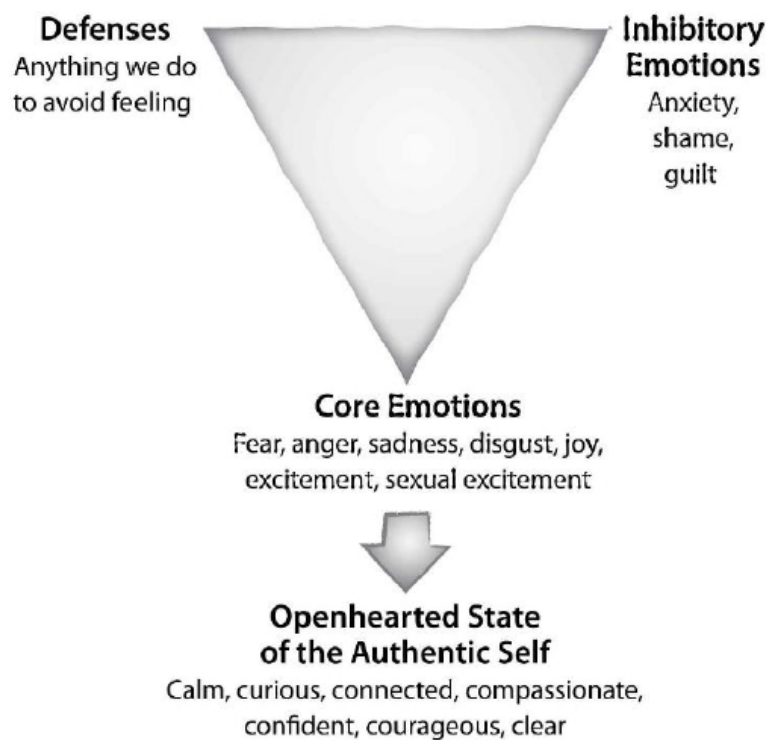
Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic psychotherapy believes that the choice (not that it is deliberate or conscious) to stay away from the uncomfortable realities of the bottom of the triangle, to hide ourselves from the truth of what happened to us and /or of what we really think and feel and desire is counter-productive. In avoiding the discomfort of reality (honesty about the bottom of the triangle) we experience the discomfort of anxiety, the incongruence of being out of touch with the reality of our deeper selves, and the various problems which our defenses bring upon us. (In fact, our defenses are, as often as not, our symptoms. My 'symptom' may be loss of temper, inability to commit, intense shyness, use of porn, procrastination, over-apologising, un-ending over-busyness, or a thousand other things. But that 'symptom' or presenting issue is more often than not an unconscious way of avoiding or keeping out of awareness something more psychologically, emotionally, or spiritually 'threatening' still.) This is a way of living which is painful, ineffective, and immature and it's the way which, to one degree or another, we all live. So the job of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic therapy is to 'make the unconscious conscious', either allowing the working through of the repressed material or recognising that it is not the threat we thought it was. Making the unconscious conscious will include *both* the defenses *and* the "hidden feeling".

The Change Triangle

Theorists and practitioners from various schools have worked on and worked with Malan's Triangle. Here's an interesting and recent variant, developed within AEDP (Advanced Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy) by Hilary Jacobs Hendel (see p. 16 of *It's Not Always*

Depression, 2018):

THE CHANGE TRIANGLE



There are two reasons for introducing this version. Firstly (for good or ill), the Change Triangle makes even clearer than Malan's version its understanding that it is avoidance of and distancing from unwelcome *feelings* which drive human experience and behaviour. Secondly, it makes explicit that the consequence of regulating inhibitory emotions and of identifying, seeing the cost of, and dismantling defenses does not end with recognising, experiencing, inhabiting, expressing, and processing core emotions, but rather serves as the path to a place of honesty, congruence, and liberty, described here as the "Open-Hearted State of the Authentic Self".

The Open-Hearted State of the Authentic Self!

Now "Open-Hearted State of the Authentic Self" may sound a little goeey to Christians more used to thinking in terms of Van Tilian antithesis, Framean perspectivalism, the centrality of the cult, and the liturgical shape of all of life; the One and the Many, earthiness and embodiment, the covenant renewal shape of discipleship, and the importance of names and of story; paedo-faith and paedo-communion, the world as sung and the Psalter as the song, zones of the world, priest-king-prophet, chiasm, feasting, politics, and the postmillennial hope for the ouranification of the universe.

But where Hilary Jacobs Hendel writes of the open-hearted state of the authentic self, we could try these instead:

- coming out of the bushes, dropping the fig-leaf, standing empty-handed and naked in the centre of the garden
- returning from the far country to the waiting Father
- coming down from out of the sycamore tree to receive Jesus into your house

Each of them, of course, involves confronting reality and moving vulnerably towards uncomfortable truth. Each of them involves the relinquishment of some form of security (the letting go of some form of 'life' or 'self', however attenuated that may be). And each of them (though the first did not play out thus) leads, through the discomfort, through the letting go of 'life' i.e., the death of that 'self', to the better place, the place of honesty, congruence and liberty.

Referring here to the centre of the garden, we inevitably think of the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies is the place of God's holiness, beauty, and total demand. It is a little bit of heaven on earth and ultimately will come to fill the cosmos: I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

An old chorus ran like this:

I stand before the presence of the Lord God of Hosts,
A child of my Father and an heir of His grace
For Jesus paid the debt for me, the veil is torn in two
And the Holy of Holies has become my dwelling-place.

This would be a life of being truly present here-now, wholly open, attentive, and surrendered, wholly entranced and engaged by God Himself. I would see and sense the Lord's hand in every event (He works out all things in accordance with the purpose of His will); in every object (made and purposefully, personally sustained in its every atom by the Lord who is thus revealed in and through it); in every person (made in His image and bearing something of His likeness). I would think with the mind of Christ, feel with the heart of Christ, know that "my Father is always with me", and be energised by the Spirit of Christ. I would be a coherent and congruent (not a divided) self. I would be awake, not asleep. Alive, not dead. Present, not absent. Connected and intimate with others. Simultaneously the right sort of self-aware and self-forgetful. Emotionally alive, bodily aware. My world would be "charged with the grandeur" and love and intense presence of God. I would enjoy God in all things and all things in God. Life within the veil; myself a little bit of heaven on earth. My heart, the throne of God. My belly, a spring of Holy Spirit living water. And thinking the thoughts, feeling the feelings, and breathing the breath of Christ I would, of course, be conformed to Him in creed, conduct, character, and consciousness.

The Room of the Really Real and the Door of Double Death

Another way of thinking spatially about this Holy of Holies, this meeting place of God in His perfect Godness and humankind in our imperfect humanness is to conceive of Reality, the Here-Now as a room.

To come into the room is to be attentive to, engaged with, and vulnerable towards the Here-Now in

- honest, surrender-presence to God (the ultimate 'Here-Now', whose name and nature is "I AM")
- openness to honest and intimate relationship with the other
- body-ful, emotionally honest, congruent, awareness of self

You would think that we would all want to live in such a room but this is not the case because such a life is dependent, derivative, subordinate, partial, and always changing and (as we see in Adam and Eve) we'd rather be 'as God', independent, underived, sovereign, and 'always' possessing the absolute fullness of our own life. So to live in the Room of the Really Real, we have to allow God to be God and to accept our creatureliness in gratitude, obedience, and humility. That surrender or relinquishment is a form of 'death'. [See below for more on relinquishment and the death-resurrection pattern.]

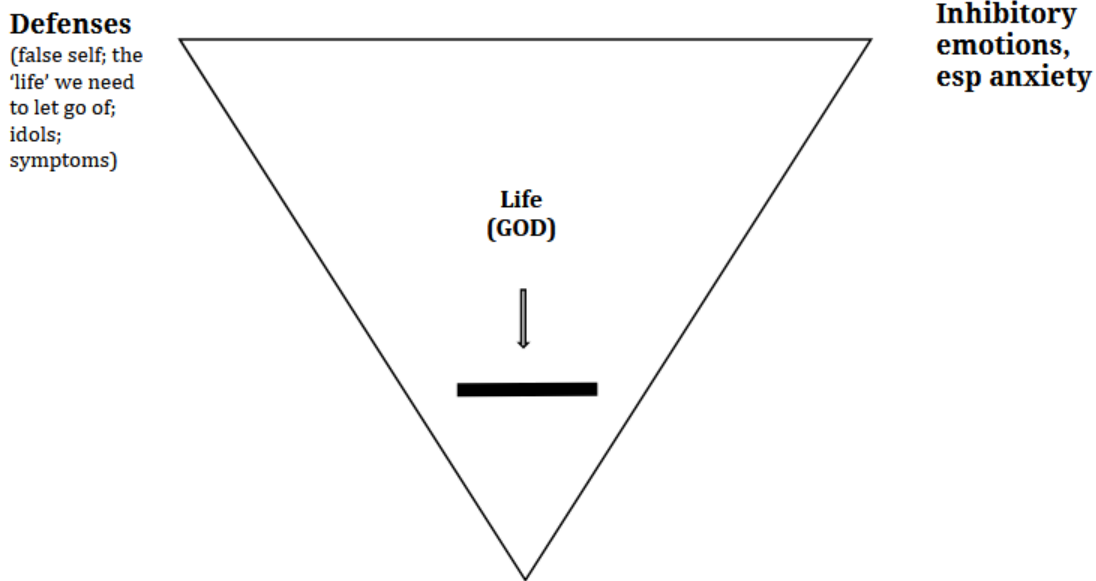
On top of that, our guilt as heirs of the Great Rebellion and as actual rebels in our own right, subjects us to a second (judicial) death and in order to enter the Holy of Holies, we will have to die that death too.

The door to the Room of the Really Real (the Holy of Holies) is, therefore the Door of Double Death and as we approach it, we will see words like:

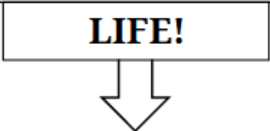
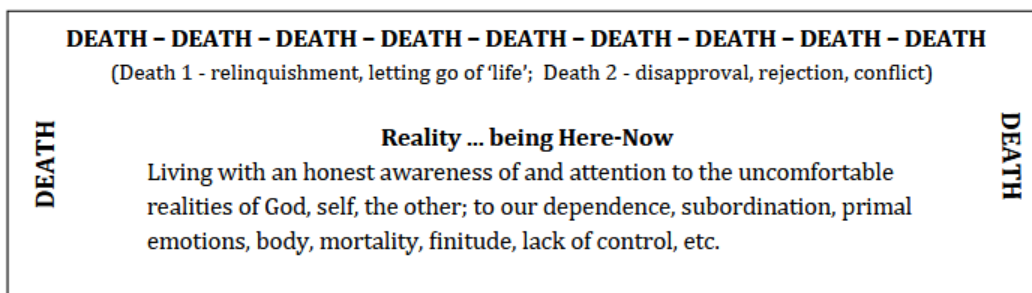
- Entrance fee: double death
- Entrance requirements:
 - unfiltered honesty – openness to truth
 - personal intimacy – openness to relational demand
 - emotional intensity – openness to what you were raised to avoid/fear
 - exposed vulnerability – openness to finitude, dependence, and pain
- Come in and meet
 - God in His total demand
 - your self in fallenness and finitude
 - the other in all their otherness, superiority, and demand
- [What from this side of the door looks like] disapproval, rejection, and conflict lie within
- Enter here to encounter the strange and unsettling: untamed fears, unsatisfiable longings, unfiltered insults, unmanageable memories; mortality; sex; ignorance and uncertainty; stillness

Features of reality, of the here-now, which are especially disturbing because especially replete with or reminiscent of God's presence and summons include bodily sensations; emotions you'd rather not feel; exposure to / nakedness before others; intimacy, vulnerability, and visibility. These features are marks of finitude (we're not God – ignorance, uncertainty, limitation, dependence) and fallenness (we tried to be God and failed, resulting in guilt, corruption, and inability and generating shame and the terror that we are fundamentally bad, rejectable, disgusting, and to be disapproved of).

Let's try to represent that in a triangle of our own which builds upon and develops Malan's Triangle and the Change Triangle ...



Being real - with all the discomfort and threat that brings ...



**The Really Real / The Holy of Holies
Christ living in me / True humanness**

... so as to live within the veil

Walking the path of the cross ▼ ...

- In the middle of the triangle, life (God in not very good disguise) is constantly inviting / summoning us to Reality – to being Here-Now.
- There is much about Reality which is threatening and uncomfortable and, in particular, it smells of and sounds like GOD.
- So when Reality (God ++) threatens to break into our awareness and/or when we move towards Reality, we perceive it as the approach of death.
- This generates anxiety – we bounce up to the right-hand corner.
- And in order to reduce that anxiety and to keep Reality out of awareness, we (unconsciously) deploy defenses (top-left) – avoidance, distance, absence, protection, sleep, blindness, distraction, anaesthesia.
- So we choose un-Reality (lies, incongruence, self-harm, lack of intimacy, absence) in order to avoid death (the cross).
- If, however, we walk the path of the cross (in both its death-forms), we find it leads to LIFE.

A simple explanation

1. Current reality 'contains' God; pain; primal emotions; passions.
2. We associate those things with rejection, disapproval, conflict (discomfort/death).
3. So when they come near or we are brought near to them we experience anxiety.
4. But we find ways of absencing / protecting / anaesthetizing ourselves from reality (defenses). We choose 'comfort' over Reality; 'life' over LIFE.
5. That anxiety and those ways of staying away from reality are our problems.
6. The solution is to move towards reality (God, pain, primal emotions, passions) in spite of how uncomfortable that is. Go to the cross, to 'death' (which contains and brings GLORY-LIFE) or avoid the cross and end up with 'life' (which contains and brings DEATH).
7. The path of the cross – the letting go of 'life', the move towards uncomfortable reality, is what leads to maturity (and liberty-relationship with God, humility-congruence with self, and intimacy-connection with others).

And another

They knew they were naked; the sound of God made them afraid because surely His arrival would mean death. They sewed fig-leaves to cover themselves and they hid, condemning themselves to a life of anxiety and avoidance.

They knew they were naked; the sound of God made them afraid because surely His arrival would mean death. But – somehow confident in God's goodness – they came out into the open, neither trying to cover themselves nor to hide; they moved towards God, trusting that 'death' at His hands would be better than 'life' elsewhere.

Life calls us into the presence of God (the deep and real; a place of honesty, vulnerability, and intimacy) but, knowing that we are naked, we are afraid that being in the presence of God would mean death. So we live a (false self) life of continuing anxiety (inhibitory emotions) and of defences (ways of keeping God and the 'deep and real' out of awareness). **The path to maturity is the path of the cross** – turning against our defenses, letting go of our fig-leaves, and submitting ourselves to the death of the false self. In the economy of God, such an (immature- or false-self) death-descent proves to be the gateway to (mature and true-self) life-ascent.

Some Examples and Explorations

1. The rich young ruler places his 'life' (identity and security) in his possessions. What are they defending him from? (Vulnerability to the challenge of life without possessions; fear of being thought a nobody; the anxiety generated by mortality (he wants eternal life) or purposeless or exclusion (he wants the kingdom). Jesus says he needs to let go of that 'life', that false self in order to have real life. He makes the unconscious conscious, identifying and challenging the young ruler's defense.
2. Here's a father whose intense concern that his son should behave well or achieve in school or sports may be a defense against facing up to his own lack of accomplishment or guilt for his past laziness.
3. An Abram who feels threatened by the ongoing wait for God to keep His promise. Taking Hagar is a defense against the anxiety generated by Sarai's un-pregnancy.
4. Why does this husband, who loves his wife, find it impossible to hold eye contact with her and say, slowly and tenderly, "I love you"? What is the threat / discomfort that his *not* doing so is defending him against?
5. These young men obsess over exercise; these middle-aged women obsess over the right dietary supplements; this ambition to publish, to church plant, to have successful children ... might they be a defense against mortality. Or internalised paternal disapproval?
6. Here's a man whose church, children, and fantasy-life are out of control. But his desk is supremely tidy and his middle name is punctuality.
7. The real God takes too long to do things or has tiresomely high standards of sexual behaviour and (somewhat) ties good harvests to good behaviour. Rather than face the discomfort / threat of being real with Him, I'll make a golden calf or worship Baalim.
8. This conversation is getting a bit personal: I'll change the subject.
9. My boss has been horrible to me again. Where's the two litre tub of ice cream, the beer, the video game?
10. I never seem to be able to sustain a possible life-partner relationship – something goes wrong every time. I notice things that begin to niggle me or I find myself wanting more 'space'. These keep me away from the discomfort / threat of commitment, intimacy, and the 'closing down' of choice.

11. When someone enthusiastically praises me after the service for my sermon, I make a joke of it, self-deprecate, trot out my “praise God” deflection formula, look at my shoes, or find something to criticise about my own sermon.
12. There is no apparent medical explanation for my back-aches, my migraines, my stomach trouble.
13. Is it possible that the Pharisaic antipathy to Jesus, leading to His death, was a defense against some version of being real and honest and relinquished and surrendered which was just too uncomfortable or threatening?
14. What’s so difficult about naming body parts?
15. In what way and against what was the prodigal son’s flight and wild living a defense?
16. Why, in contrast to Jesus, do I like to have ‘office hours’ as a pastor?
17. Here’s a woman who has internalised the notion (thanks, Dad!) that expressing disagreement with another person’s view at the meal-table is un-humble and unbecoming. What is she defending against, how might she do so, and how does that defense cost her?
18. We know the guy who turns pretty much everything into a joke. Sigh.
19. And the other one who turns pretty much everything into a discussion about ideas or books. Sigh.
20. This person can’t sit physically still. This one can’t bear silence.
21. One person ‘can’t’ get angry but goes to tears. Another ‘can’t’ cry but goes to anger. “Defensive affect” is when I use an emotion which is not primary or appropriate in that context to keep out of awareness the (less acceptable, more threatening) emotion which would be.
22. Procrastination may be a defense: if I *don’t* procrastinate then:
 - I’ll feel like I’m trapped, I’m being constrained, I’ve lost my spontaneity, I’ve become a drudge
 - I won’t have an excuse if what I produce comes in for criticism
 - I’ll sweat (i.e., I’ll be accepting / moving towards the discomfort of work-curse)
23. Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent. Blame as a defense.

24. Two of us have just told each other that we think our friend is making a mistake in going out with that guy. But we 'can't' say anything to her.
25. What might be the uncomfortable / threatening thing being kept at bay / avoided / kept out of awareness – and how – and at what cost – in the following?
- The Speck and The Log - Matthew 7:1-5. Why might you point out a speck in the other's eye?
 - The Wise and Foolish Builders - Matthew 7:24–27 Why might you build on sand?
 - The Unforgiving Servant - Matthew 18:23-35 What is the unmerciful servant defending himself against and how? And how does that work out for him?
 - Laborers in the Vineyard - Matthew 20:1-16 What is so uncomfortable for those who put in the full day?
 - Two Sons (one obeys, one disobeys) - Matthew 21:28–32 How might equal and opposite actions / inactions *both* be defenses? Against what?
 - The Wicked Tenants - Matthew 21:33-45 What defense do the wicked tenants deploy – to avoid what uncomfortable reality? At what cost?
 - The Marriage Feast - Matthew 22:1-14
 - The Ten Virgins - Matthew 25:1-13
 - The Talents - Matthew 25:14–30
 - The Rich Fool - Luke 12:16–21
 - The Good Samaritan - Luke 10:30–37
 - The Prodigal Son - Luke 15:11–32
 - The Shrewd Manager - Luke 16:1–8
 - The Rich Man and Lazarus - Luke 16:19–31
 - The Persistent Widow and Crooked Judge - Luke 18:1–8
 - The Pharisee and Tax Collector - Luke 18:10–14
26. What ways of keeping uncomfortable reality at bay / out of awareness can you see in the following passages? What do people (consciously or – often – unconsciously) want to avoid – what's so uncomfortable about it? How does it work out?
- Cain in Genesis 4
 - Lot in Genesis 13
 - Lot and his wife (separately) in Genesis 19
 - Joseph's brothers in Genesis 37
 - Pharaoh in the early chapters of Exodus
 - Job's friends
 - Gideon at the end
 - The wicked in the Psalms
 - The fool in Proverbs
 - Isaiah 10, 18, 26, 36-39
 - Jeremiah 28
 - Daniel 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

- Hosea
- Jonah – multiple uncomfortable realities and defenses
- Malachi
- Herod
- Pilate
- Peter
- Thomas
- John 5, 7, 8, 12
- Acts 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15, 26 21, 23, 26, 27, 28

The purpose of giving these examples at this stage is simply to *illustrate* the basic structure of the model: reality (God in His total demand, the other person, primary emotions, unacceptable and painful thoughts, memories, and desires) is uncomfortable and so we (often unconsciously) find ways of keeping it out of awareness. We are thus not present in a real and truthful and congruent way to God, to ourself, or to the other.

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### **The Psychoanalytic Attitude**

- What else might be at play here?
- What’s the question behind the question?
- Why might I/they ‘really’ be thinking, saying, doing that?
- What invisible factors might be taken into account?
- How am I / how is this person ‘staying away from reality / the deeper here-now’ and what is it about that which is unsettling for me / them?

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The Unconscious – that which is “out of awareness”

A high proportion of reality (the universe, let alone an infinite God) is inaccessible to us and out of our awareness.

We are oblivious to many of the things which shape our feelings, relationships, and behaviours. A tiny proportion of our sins are deliberately and consciously *chosen* in the moment whereas the strong majority come through ‘ignorance and weakness’ rather than our ‘own deliberate fault’.

How conscious are you of the millions of biochemical events and processes taking place in each of your cells every second? Does your heart beat because you choose and instruct it to or only beat when you are aware of it?

Can you name all of the players in and describe the processes of the machine, the deep state, the blob, the establishment which prevents elected leaders from enacting and implementing the very things they were elected to do?

Can you fully know the depths of the human heart, out of which spring our feelings and actions?

Are the spiritually blind and spiritually dead *conscious* of their condition?

Isn't most of our spiritual, emotional, relational, and behavioural difficulty the result not of not-knowing things but of not-being-aware of them?

Isn't the character of faith in Hebrews 11 that it 'sees the invisible', that is, it brings into awareness and makes real (makes us real-ise) things of which, without faith, we would be unaware, we wouldn't be able to 'see'?

In 2 Kings 5.15-17, the horses and chariots of fire were there (all along) but the servant was unaware of them and so he feared. Once the unconscious was made conscious, he could understand, feel, and behave differently.

¹⁵When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶He said, "Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed, and said, "O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

Counselling and discipleship

And after that slow wind-up, it can be brought home very swiftly.

The work of counselling is a form of customized discipleship which supports, rather than rivals, other forms of the pastoral care and discipleship of the church, including that which takes place in the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Discipleship is learning with and from and in Christ to say "Yes" to God in Christ and to say "no" to everything which would keep us from Him.

We are mysteries to ourselves – we do not understand why our relationships and emotions and behaviours are marked by the distress and dysfunction that they are, especially since *consciously* we are committed to the opposite.

There must be, there are forces at play in us from further back in our lives and/or from deeper down in our lives which are shaping the way we perceive, experience, and navigate the world.

Are we to try to identify and address such forces or just to get on with “obeying”?

In what *ways* do our experiences as infants, our relationships with parents, our internalization of parental attitudes, major incidents, family culture, and so on get inside us and shape us in ways that later we don't see?

Are there characteristic ways in which we are disposed towards the world: perceptual filters, blind spots, (over-) sensitivities, limps and curvatures, blockages and anchors-triggers which we'd do well to find out about and address *if we could*?

How, given all that has been said above about primary emotions and bodyfulness being amongst the most uncomfortable aspects of reality, can we arrive at a biblical estimate of both these *essential* aspects of true humanness?

What are some of our characteristic ways of keeping reality out of awareness, avoiding true self-awareness, staying away from intimacy and honesty with others, keeping God at arm's length?

How do they hurt us? When did they start? What can be done about them?

What does it actually mean to 'let go' of our life? How do you DO relinquishment, mortification, presence?

What part in that do deliberate exercises and practices play?

How essential to that is confidence in a loving and acceptant other (first, the Lord; then, ideally blood family and church family; sometimes, failing these but returning us to them, the counsellor)?

How can the anxiety and other inhibitory/secondary emotions in the top-right of the triangle (boredom, numbness, awkwardness, shame, and so on) be regulated so as not to get in the way of the work?

How does the counselling *work*? What is required of Christian counsellor and how do they relate to and serve the church?

Comfort or Reality: Choose One

Do you think that T S Eliot was right when he wrote, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality."?

Reality can be uncomfortable.

We can shut out or distort Reality for the sake of being comfortable. (We can refuse the cross.)

Or we can let go of comfort for the sake of being Real. (We can take up the cross.)

With **sensory reality**, for example. We try to shut out the noise of fighting cats or of a high-speed train screaming past. We shut or avert our eyes when a powerful torch is shone into our eyes or, in a movie, there's an amputation without anaesthetic.

With **relational reality**, we break eye-contact and fill the awkward gap in the conversation; we refuse criticism or we refuse compliments. And all of these are ways of keeping uncomfortable reality at bay.

Similarly with **internal** or **existential reality**. We find ways of staying away from or keeping out of consciousness the depths of our own loneliness or fear or self-despair. We live as though it were not an elemental feature of the universe that those we love most and we ourselves are going to die. We 'try not to think about it'.

None of this is unfamiliar. It's a simple fact that there are some aspects of reality which are so uncomfortable that we cover our ears, cover our eyes, turn away, move away, distract ourselves, or drug ourselves so as avoid or reduce that discomfort. We put blocks, defences, mufflers, or distance between ourselves and the reality that makes us uncomfortable.

And we pay a high price for it.

What do you think is the ultimate uncomfortable Reality?

How about ... GOD?

God in His perfect Godness, God in His beautiful holiness, His total loving demand, His intense inescapable intimacy, and His give-to-receive, let-go-to-keep way of doing things is, of course, LIFE itself. If it were not for our brokenness and wrongness. But when the two are put together – God in His perfect Godness and humankind in our brokenness and wrongness, *then* we've arrived at the most uncomfortable place in the universe. Because now, if we to experience God as LIFE, there'll need first to be a DEATH to our brokenness and wrongness. In other words, to move towards Reality will be death first and then life. To be real is to take the path of the cross.

God is a light too bright for us, a fire too hot for us, a sound and a silence too loud and too unnerving for us. And so, like Adam and Eve, we try to put something between ourselves and that Reality – distance, bushes, fig-leaves.

What might we call this ‘most uncomfortable place in the universe’?

A place inhabited by God and to which humans come, the ‘meeting place’ of God and humans is often a **temple** and, in Scripture, this comes in various phases and forms:

the garden-sanctuary, where the two trees sit, is a temple;

- so also the holy building of Old Testament times (the tabernacle is called a ‘temple’ and, the temple is, of course ... a temple;
- the man Jesus of Nazareth speaks of Himself as a temple and more than a temple; He is the dwelling place of God;
- the church, the community of those who’ve sworn allegiance to Jesus, is a temple and perhaps especially so when gathered together;
- the physical body of a human being which is a microcosm, a little universe of its own, is a temple, created, sustained, and filled by God;
- which reminds us that the whole universe is a temple: “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the Lord;
- finally, this moment, this here-now is a temple. Since God is “I AM”, and omnipresent, He is always *here-now* and since we are inescapably embodied and ‘time-bound’, we are always *here-now*. So here-now is the meeting place of God and humankind. “In Him we live and move and have our being.” He is not far from each of us

What does it mean to say that God is ‘here-now’?

Because God is infinite and personal, all-knowing and purposeful, sovereign and relational, when He is present at all, He is wholly present. Jim Elliott famously said, “Wherever you are, be all there” and that is exactly what God does.

So God is present in, to, with, and through every **object**. He is Creator and Sustainer of all things and it is only *because* He is present that the object (from a galaxy to a gluon) exists at all. So if you are confronted with an object, a ‘thing’, (animate or inanimate, large or small, long-lived or short-lived, complex or simple) you are confronted with God.

God is also present in, to, with, and through every **person**. Human beings are made in the image of God and all the image has been marred, it has not been erased. God gives us every breath we breathe and, as above, it is in Him that we “live and move and have our being”. So if you are confronted with a person, you are confronted with God.

Finally, for the moment, God is present in, to, with, and through every **situation, event, or circumstance**. He “works all things in accordance with the purpose of His will” from the rise and fall of empires to the rise and fall of sparrows. So if you find yourself in a situation or circumstance or involved in (even if only as witness) an event, then you are confronted with God.

Reality, then, is that the world, your life, every moment, every place, every object, person, and event, is the meeting place of God’s perfect Godness and our imperfect humanness.

That’s reality. But humankind cannot bear too much reality.

The Pharisee and the Tax-Collector

How do we keep reality at bay?

If there's one thing that human beings are good at, it's keeping Reality at bay, at a distance, out of consciousness.

The greatest writer ever put it like this in the greatest novel ever (though the author himself refused to call it a novel):

Sometimes Pierre remembered what he had been told about soldiers in a shelter under fire with nothing to do, trying their best to keep busy and thus make the danger easier to bear. And Pierre pictured all men as soldiers like these, escaping from life through ambition, cards, law-making, women, little playthings, horses, politics, sport, wine, even government service. 'Everything matters, nothing matters, it's all the same. If I can only escape, one way or another!' thought Pierre. 'And not see *it*, the terrible *it*.'

Soldiers try to make the "danger" easier to bear and this danger, presumably, is that of death. Meantime, Tolstoy says, "all men" are like this and yet in relation not to death but as they find ways of "escaping from *life*". Death and life are both "the terrible *it*" which must be escaped.

It seems that there is nothing at all, in all creation, which we're not capable of using to keep us asleep or at a distance. Anything at all can become a drug to stupefy us, a shield to protect us, a toy or terror to distract us. Give us anything, anything at all, which will make us forget the presence, the demand, the closeness of God as it meets our brokenness and wrongness.

Most of the time, of course, we don't even know we're doing it. We have SO many ways of fleeing reality, protecting ourselves from reality, keeping reality out of our awareness.

- some people surround themselves with noise;
- some make a joke of everything;
- some obsess over understanding and knowing things;
- some are addicted to over-busyness;
- some live a life of constant anxiety, others of relentless desire for more;
- others are all about their stuff-posessions.

We can use good things to keep the beauty, intensity, demand, and presence of God (which, given our brokenness and wrongness is desperately uncomfortable) out of awareness. Things like the creation of beautiful things, the care for family, the pursuit of knowledge, the service of others.

We can use uncomfortable things to protect us from the greater discomfort of God. Things like physical illness and pain or mental and emotional distress.

And we can use wrong things to help us escape awareness of God's perfect Godness and our imperfect humanness. Things like gluttony, excessive self-pity, contempt for others, pornography, substance abuse, or harmful over-work.

What is the alternative?

The alternative is to lean into the reality of God's perfect Godness and your imperfect humanness, and to be fully, humbly, honestly, vulnerably, openly present, right here, right now, face to face as imperfect humans with the perfect God. To drop our fig leaves, come out of the bushes, move into the middle of the garden, trembling perhaps, but being awake and real and naked. To own the realities of His holiness and intensity, our finitude and fallenness. To surrender, submit, receive, and be real. To stare at God the sun, fall into God the fire, stay still and listen to the sound and silence of God. Be undone, be overwhelmed, be consumed. To let go of life and see if **somehow** we might find it

How do we see these in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector?

Jesus confronts our refusal of and flight from Reality in many different ways. In Luke 18.9-14 He spots in the Pharisees one of the most powerful and common ways of not being humbly, honestly, vulnerably present to God and self here and now, namely, that they "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on others". So he tells a story in order to wake some of them up from the sleep of their own self-justification.

It's about two men - the Pharisee and the tax collector - who come to the meeting place of God's perfect Godness and their imperfect humanness, the temple.

The Pharisee is unreal for the sake of being comfortable.

The tax-collector is uncomfortable for the sake of being real.

And, amongst other things, we could read Luke 18.10-13 as telling us seven ways of avoiding and keeping out of awareness, the uncomfortable Reality.

1. Focus on and cling onto your SELF

The Pharisee is all about himself and is the subject of the verbs. The tax collector is self-relinquished, letting go of self-protection or self-promotion, and making God the subject of the verb and himself the recipient, the dependent, the patient. He has the nakedness, dependency, un-self-consciousness and simplicity about him that mark the tiny infants who in the next paragraph Jesus says, are those who enter the kingdom.

[The Pharisee's particular way of focusing on and clinging to the Self is that of self-righteousness or self-justification, and self-congratulation but there are plenty of other ways of doing this: self-confidence, self-punishment, self-promotion, self-pity, self-indulgence, self-attack, and self-minimization, to name just a few. All forms of holding onto self, are a refusal to

come fully to the here-now which, after all, is filled with God and, in the best and happiest possible way, is all about Him.]

2. Talk too much

The Pharisee speaks around thirty words; the tax collector, just six. And too many words can often be used as a way of staying away from being real and present, here-now. Many people are uncomfortable with pauses. Life is talk, talk, talk. Narrate, explain, discuss, and analyse and if words won't come then, rather than face the possibility that silence will bring me into vulnerable attention to the present, fill things up with filler words and noises: y'know, like, just, sort of, I think, um, er, whatever. Because whatever happens, it would feel like death to go quiet or slow or deep or personal: after all, you might have to be Real.

The tax-collector has a small number of honest, direct words. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. You don't need lots of words to be real with God; in fact, lots of words may be a way of staying away from uncomfortable reality.

3. Live as though your body were irrelevant to how you relate to God

In contrast to their words, almost nothing is said about the Pharisee's body and a great deal is said about the tax collector's. If God animates, sustains and inhabits our body, then living in our head, living "at a distance from our body" will be an effective way of staying away from God. [See other body sections.]

We are told about the tax-collector's position (he stood at a distance); something about his posture (he wouldn't lift his eyes to heaven); and something about his bodily actions (he beat his breast).

And if we want to be real, here-now, then Jesus shows by own example and even in this story that what we do with our body can be a more or less appropriate expression of how relate to God.

4. Refuse dependence / vulnerability

The Pharisee doesn't need or ask for anything. It's as though God is lucky to have him: "Listen, Lord, for your servant speaketh"!

The tax collector, by contrast, in effect say, "I'm helpless, I'm stuck, and I'm in need. I probably deserve to be beaten (the significance, perhaps of his being his breast). He accepts vulnerability simply in being present, honest, unfiltered, undefended. That is how it would have been if Adam and Eve were to have come naked into the middle of the garden and said, "Lord, you know you told us not to eat the fruit. We ate the fruit."

5. Compare yourself with others

Jesus is telling this parable to those who “looked down on others” and very often, we stay away from full and honest engagement with the uncomfortable reality of God and us, here and now, by looking elsewhere and comparing ourself to others. This may serve as a basis for blaming God rather than engaging with His perfect Godness or as a way of not noticing his own brokenness and wrongness. And comparisons with others can be contemptuous in view of our superiority, self-minimizing in view of our inferiority, complacent in view of our security or comfort, envious in view of others’ security or comfort. We can play these things in all directions but the main thing is that doing so serves to keep us away from God-and-us, here-and-now.

[The next two items are theologically freighted. Key words in the passage include “righteous” and “justified” (or “declared righteous”) in the frame to the parable and “have mercy” at the climax of the parable.

Since “**have mercy**” is the propitiation / expiation / atonement word, it relates to the question of whether, like the Pharisee, we provide our own covering or whether, like the tax-collector, we ask God to provide a covering. God provides a covering in the death of Jesus – it’s atonement. Because Jesus, like the tax-collector was at a distance, with a bowed head, beaten, and humbled then a covering is provided for our wrongness which means we are brought near, our heads are lifted, we are healed, and we are raised up.

As to “**righteous**” this relates to the question of whether, like the Pharisee, we pass our own verdict or whether, like the tax-collector, we receive the verdict of God. God declares the verdict in the resurrection of Jesus – it’s justification. After Jesus’s humbling, came His exaltation; after His apparent defeat, came His vindication; after His exile, He went home justified. His Father’s thunderous verdict on Easter morning, in the resurrection was: “You are my Beloved; I adore you. You’re vindicated, you’re in, it’s ok. Beautiful. It’s all good. Oh, Yes.” And so, connected with Jesus, real with Him, that verdict is passed over us.]

6. Provide your own covering

The Pharisee covers his nakedness with a covering of his own devising and construction – his version of a fig-leaf, his achievements and performance.

The tax-collector comes uncovered, naked, vulnerable, exposed.

7. Pass your own verdict

The Pharisee passes his own verdict, one of self-congratulation: I’m a marvel. He marked his own exam and scored very well. He constructed own identity as a success, superior to others, and pleasing to God. And never mind if “Reality” disagrees: so much the worse for Reality.

The tax collector passes a verdict in one sense, one of self-condemnation: I'm a mess. But, in reality, in asking for mercy, he ultimately leaves the verdict with God.

Seven ways to avoid the uncomfortable reality of the meeting place of God in His perfect Godness and humans in our imperfect humanness.

And the alternative:

- let go of self
- use fewer words
- stay in the body
- embrace dependence and vulnerability
- eschew comparisons with others
- abandon efforts to provide your own covering
- give up on passing your own verdict.

The Rich Young Ruler and the Apostle Paul

How are the 'false-self', idols, defenses, and the 'life' we need to let go of in order to have LIFE all related?

In Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18, there's an account of a rich young ruler's encounter with Jesus.

A rich young man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him. He wanted the life of God to fill him but in spite of the man's endeavours to obey God's commands, Jesus realised that he didn't have space for God. The space which belonged to God alone - the throne-room, the sanctuary, the man's deepest core, the man's true-self-space, the heart - was occupied by his possessions and his wealth. His possessions and his wealth were his "life" and he couldn't have the LIFE of God unless he let go of his own "life".

Jesus loved the man, wanting him to enjoy the exuberant freedom and the glorious beauty of those who make a total offering of self to God. He wanted the man to be totally enfolded and delighted in God. As a sponge in the ocean is saturated by water and immersed in water (water inside and out), so those who throw themselves open wide to God and throw themselves into God are full of God's love and surrounded by God's love. The kingdom. Eternal life. And Jesus wanted this for the man.

But Jesus, looking at the man, knew that there was still a blockage. The man's riches occupied the central space in his life, his true-self-space. Go to the place of identity and security in the man and you would find riches rather than God. And since God-alone is our true-self, then riches amounted to a false-self.

If, then, he was to be filled with the life of God, he would have to clear that space, to make room for God, to relinquish his false-self, his attachment to wealth - and in his case, relinquish his wealth itself. 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."'

We then read some of the most heart-breaking words in the Bible, "Disheartened by the saying, the young man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." If our heart-space is occupied by other things, we exclude God. If our hands are clinging to other things, we miss out on receiving the gift of the life of God.

Some observations:

1. We have no reason to doubt that the man sincerely and consciously wanted God / eternal life or to doubt that he sincerely and consciously obeyed the commandments. To get to the heart of things in discipleship and pastoral care, we will need to go deeper

than a person's *conscious* self-awareness, motivations, beliefs, and experiences. That is, to use the most famous of Freud's illustrations, just the tip of the iceberg.

2. Because, for all his conscious sincerity, there was something at play in him at deeper levels which he was insufficiently aware of to realise that he was conflicted.
3. In wanting God, in wanting eternal life, he was wanting LIFE or 'true-self'.
4. The thing he was attached to which was in conflict with God-in-him (i.e. 'true-self') could be thought of as "life" or 'false self'.
5. Without his being aware of it and without his (initially) consciously preferring it, his 'false self' stood between the man and enjoyment of God-life. His riches-false-self represented both an alternative to God and a distorted and deficient version of God, (like an idol). His riches-false-self also represented a 'defense' to keep the uncomfortable Realities of God and self out of awareness. For all his conscious desire for eternal life, there was also an unconscious (but about to be made conscious) refusal to engage with the total demand of the real God.
6. Jesus – "looking at him, loved him, and said ...". Jesus makes the unconscious conscious and shows the man's relationship to his riches for what it is, some sort of defense against and alternative to all-out abandonment to the life of God.
7. Once the unconscious has been made conscious, things are more stark:
 - will the man let go of "life" (that in which he has located his identity and security) in order to have LIFE?
 - put differently, will he say "no" to his false self in order to become his true self?
 - put differently, will his defenses move from being ego-syntonic to ego-dystonic?
 - put differently, will he turn from his idols to the living and true God?
8. Letting go of 'life' is to die. He wants LIFE but he already has 'life'. So to receive LIFE, he has to let go of / be emptied of 'life', to relinquish his possessions. But to be emptied of 'life' is to die. So in order to have LIFE, he must die. Or he can hold onto 'life' in which case he loses out on LIFE.
9. The path of the cross is the way to human flourishing and maturity. The unconscious is made conscious; conflicts, deficits, and hidden impulses are revealed; defenses are exposed and challenged; the move towards relinquishment is available. The false self – the misidentified, unduly attached, self-protecting, self-asserting self – must die.

What were Paul's equivalent of the rich young ruler's riches?

Some people think that Paul *was* the rich young ruler. Perhaps he was one of the first hearers of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. Whether or not either of these were the case (I doubt both), the patterns seen above are at work in his description of what happened to him in Philippians 3.

The panel-parallel between Philippians 2 and Philippians 3 will come up for us later. Here, simply note that the seven religious privileges of Philippians 3.5-6 (circumcised on the eighth day; of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrews of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless) suggests that those things he lists at the beginning of chapter 3 were what we have been calling the 'false self'. Those things in which identity and security can be found; that which he might have called his 'life' and which, therefore must be let go of in order to secure LIFE. Paul would need to let go of his own covering, abandon his own verdict, and place himself humbly, honestly, vulnerably, openly before God.

This, it seems, is exactly what happened to him – the next verses of that chapter read:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

His religious privileges, like the rich young ruler's wealth, were a substitute for and a defence against radical openness and emptiness, against the discomfort, the 'death' of the meeting place of God in His perfect Godness and Paul in his imperfect humanness.

The dismantling of his defenses, the counting of all things loss, the death of the false self, the letting go of life: these are all perspectives on the same thing.

This is our 'choice' (except that it is rarely conscious and explicit) – every moment. We can be comfortable, safe, and keep our 'life' and be unreal, asleep, absent; or we can die and live, be naked and real – falling into the hands of the living God in the burning intensity of His love and beauty and the unqualified totality of His demand and claim.

There's safe, comfortable, superficial, un-real, and false.

And there's unsafe, uncomfortable, deeper, real, and true.

Choose one.