Formation for Professional Practice:
Addressing Social Hurts

Barbara Sheehan

Summary
This essay challenges us to attend to both the suffering people experience from social hurt and the wounding systems and structures.

The mission of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, the accrediting agency for Centers offering CPE, is to advance exceptional experience-based theological education and professional practice to heal a hurting world.¹ This article articulates some of the hurts of today’s world, identifies subsequent pastoral and spiritual needs and explores educational curricula for the formation of effective faith-based practitioners. The Urban CPE Consortium program is highlighted as an example and model. The readers are invited to reflect on their own programs in light of the material presented.

WORLDS OF HURT

Everyone hurts in one way or another. There is pain, harm, suffering, and fracture of mind, body, spirit, and community everywhere. There are those whose primary presenting hurts are physical illness and/or mental challenges. More extensive and often not addressed in formation programs are the hurts and the people caught in massive social crises, challenges, and systems of oppression. Some of these social realities are poverty, racism, classism, individualism, heterosexism, sexism, immigrant marginalization, and the violence within families and on the streets due to guns. Facing these

Barbara Sheehan, SP, Executive Director and ACPE Supervisor, Urban CPE Consortium, Inc., 1668 W. Ogden Ave., Chicago, IL, 60612 (Email: urbancpeconsortium@gmail.com).
social realities is “dangerous,” because to do so one must face one’s participation in them, directly or indirectly, and seek conversion, transformation of self and others. These hurts and many others create broken lives and spirits inhibiting the flourishing of humanity, individually and communally.

Three pastoral or spiritual issues dominate the overt and covert dynamics of these crises today. These are: 1) fear from isolation, dismissal, intimidation, and a society based on the “laws” of scarcity; 2) loss of self-worth, dignity, identity, belonging, basic value; and 3) lack of empowerment because of power domination, squelched creativity, either/or dynamics, superior-inferior prevalence. These issues must be assessed as one engages with those in social crises and listens empathically to their stories with a compassionate, non-judgmental, curious heart. At the same time, it is of utmost importance for the developing practitioner to explore her/his own interior struggles when face-to-face with those in social crisis. Those encounters with people in crisis challenge our assumptions, worldviews, self-identity, projections, prejudices, unexamined clichés, unchallenged attitudes, and theological premises that contribute to the world’s hurts.

The task of empowering people in a social crisis presents the pastoral practitioner with yet another challenge. This empowerment is a risk as it calls forth a belief in the other’s inner resources and power and demands relational skills not often in the “tool box” of the dominant society of North America and some theological models of service. The “tool box” of routine, non-contextualized responses, learned from only one culture may protect the practitioner from being interiorly disturbed by feeling and experiencing the tragedy, crisis, traumatic suffering of the other’s reality. Pastoral models such as “pastor knows best” or “what does the Bible say?” add to the relational distancing of a practitioner.

**Healing**

A world fraught with such hurts and spiritual needs demands pastoral responses that engage the healing practices of “resisting, empowering and liberating.” This means that pastoral responsibility involves justice—working towards building communities of “right relationships” and of shalom, that all might have what they need. This responsibility involves reframing the identity and roles of the pastoral practitioner and revamping the structures and curricular components of CPE and other pastoral training centers.
Resisting begins with claiming one’s vision of justice, of right relationships, of how things ought to be in the world. From this awareness it is then possible to examine what reflects that vision. What does not is evil and needs to be resisted. It is necessary to raise personal and communal awareness of destructive powers and principalities of operative systems, theologies, and behaviors that create and perpetuate a block to the vision. Such operative systems create oppression, domination, poverty, violence, and other distortions. It takes an understanding and analysis of systems that includes making the interconnectedness between the various elements to fully comprehend the impact of a particular system of human life. Who benefits, who is left out, who is held down by the system are major questions to explore. These questions along with the analysis of power relationships, help the practitioner begin to assess who is hurting and where healing as resistance is needed.

This awareness of systemic dynamics continues to one’s participation in, or victimization by, certain systems within which one functions. This total awareness, difficult at times to “take in,” can lead to the exploration of, openness to, and development of skills needed in the professional practice of liberation and empowerment. These skills focus on self-transformation, interpersonal transformation through changing how one acts, advocacy, and empowerment with others. Resistance “cannot rest with the ideas of compassion, charity, or care, unless these ideas are embodied in a social vision that includes some sense of how human suffering is the result of a relentless, highly organized, and immensely powerful social system.” The “good news” is that the professional practitioner knows others’ hurts, resists participating as enabler in them, and is working so that they (the hurts/situations) come to an end.

In resistance, the practitioner joins in mutual empathy and empowerment with the ones hurting. Through this empowerment, liberation becomes possible. Empowerment occurs when persons find within themselves the spark of energy to claim that they have power to resist and to choose how to live. This in turn begins to heal the ingrained internalizations of negative systems, individual experiences of domination, and marginalization. In defiance of the system, persons are freed (liberated) to choose how to live in the midst of their hurts. Healing is having a choice, being freed of negative concepts, and being joined by a practitioner who resists and walks with them.
The Identity of the Socially-Aware Practitioner

Identity and roles are influenced by culture, ethnic realities, and religious tradition and language. Some are more readily integrated into one’s practice, others more difficult and “foreign.” The identities needed for today are:

- Minister of Reconciliation
- Facilitator of Lamentation
- Partner of Community Development
- Shaper of Community Care
- Companion of Mutuality and Empowerment.

Each of these identities presumes an understanding of the minister as a person-in-community, living and working in the midst of the lives of others with their knowledge, spiritual superiority, and authority. This shift leads to an interconnected and co-responsible self as one among many in an interconnected, equally affected community. Words and phrases such as community companion, empowering presence, sojourner, listening gatherer, resister, creator of growing space, and one-in-solidarity are identifiers of some interpersonal roles that the practitioner assumes. One does not heal as an individual. The community heals itself with a practitioner who enters into the community, creates an empowering environment and engenders hope within community. The practitioner acts in mutuality and partnership, simultaneously being changed and changing within relationships, seeking greater kinship toward right relationships in the process of healing.

One method or way of reflecting on how one is utilizing authority and power to resist, empower, and liberate is to ask what one has authored by her/his behavior in relation to others and to self. What action of mine has contributed to resistance to evil, empowerment, and liberation of others and self? Actions that come from a perception of “better-than,” “more-deserving-than,” or “me-first” result in behaviors, decisions, and relationships that demean, dismiss others. By contrast, mutuality and partnership of “each brings something to offer,” “we all are created in Love,” or “us-and-me” result in inclusion, respect, and the potential for empowerment of all.

Cultures, groups, and individuals are both recipients and perpetrators of the wounds of injustices manifested in broken relationships in every sphere of life. Such both/and recognition requires an examination of what happens when formative ministerial training focuses exclusively on becoming self-actualized. Such recognition demands reflection on the dynamics of power and an exploration of theologies as they participate in the creation
of injustice and when they promote liberation and resistance. Today’s practitioners need to keep asking who do we (I) say we are (I am), how do we act as participants of empowerment and liberation, and are our supervision programs consistent with that vision.

The maturation of the professional practitioners who are pastorally responsible in resisting, empowering, and liberating is a complex process that includes multiple elements of formation and training. The challenge, particularly for an ACPE Center, is to assess how it provides the experiences needed to assist the practitioner in exploring the pastoral identities and skills that will help heal a hurting world. Any assessment should include the Center structure, supervisory practices, and curricular components. The following example of an urban CPE program is presented as one way to address these concerns.

The Urban CPE Consortium, Inc.

The Urban CPE Consortium, Inc. is a Center that intentionally aims at training professional practitioners within the context of pastoral responsibility for justice. Urban CPE Consortium, Inc. (UCPEC) is a not-for-profit ACPE Center comprised of a network of four theological schools and thirteen social agencies working together to provide compassionate care and advocacy among the marginalized and vulnerable and to train persons in the art of urban ministry. All member agencies have a representative on the Administrative Board. There are additional Board members who are former students now serving full time in the community.

CPE students serve at the agencies in collaboration with the care and guidance of a site practitioner/supervisor. A covenant is established among the site supervisor, student, and CPE supervisor. This covenant includes the student’s specific learning goals while at the site, and the responsibilities and interactions of all three partners. The ACPE Supervisor is the clinical supervisor of individual and group supervision and remains in conversation with the site supervisor. At the beginning of the CPE Unit, all students and site supervisors and CPE Supervisor gather for a specifically focused exploration of an urban issue, followed by a commissioning service and a meal. At mid-Unit there is a three-way conversation among the students, site supervisor, and clinical supervisor. The site supervisor writes up a final, two-page review that goes with the CPE Supervisor’s and the student’s final evaluations. An ending gathering party brings everyone back together again.
Structural Elements

The Urban CPE Consortium does not use “sticks and lines” for its organizational chart. UCPEC desires to visualize the interwoven and interdependent nature of mutual working relationships among its members including the CPE Supervisor(s). The visual image of UCPEC is reflected in the title *A Tree of Life Planted in the City: Partnership, Advocacy, Care and Education*. The tree is deeply rooted in the city where the people reside and share their stories and lives and where students and practitioners provide compassionate care and advocacy.

The “just below the surface” roots of the tree are the CPE Supervisor, Education Committee, and fund raising elements who are responsible for nurturing the soil by their specific functions.

This visual image speaks to the inclusion and mutuality of all persons, including those served, as part of the learning while serving community. UCPEC seeks to honor its power and authority and to witness what it desires in its CPE program with professional practitioners-to-be. It functions on relationship building, a design that developed over a period of nine-months of round table conversation of many people with many ideas and needs. A common vision of service and pastoral education led to community building that is embodied in a healthy win-win organization. As such, the CPE Center is owned by the larger community and is not just the program of the CPE Supervisor or Executive Director.

This ownership of the whole does not imply that the CPE Supervisor and her/his supervisory practice are not vital to the CPE students’ experiential learning. One learns a great deal in experiencing a supervisor and how he/she practices the healing arts being fostered within the program’s curriculum.

Supervisory Practice

The supervisory practice of the UCPEC Supervisor is based primarily on relational-cultural theory. Using this theory highlights the CPE group as the center of the students’ learning. The supervisor’s role is that of group gatherer, initiator of mutuality, empowering presence, power-sharer, and model of transparency and transformation. The supervisor serves in a unique teacher role as a didactic presenter and focuses distinctively on the individual during one-on-one supervision. In these latter functions, the supervisor embodies and models community in a manner that is open to new
challenges, transparent, and responsive to ongoing methods and learning within cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.

I have believed for some time that the image of a living human web is better than the living human document to identify the contexts of the experiences of CPE students. The image is more in line with my belief in the interconnectedness of all life and the interwoven systemic pastoral issues to be addressed. The web image, as developed by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, shifts the locus of pastoral understanding and response from an individualistic view to community understanding. This shift seeks a response that includes confronting systems of domination and powers that oppress and exclude some by others. The image of living human web is inclusive of those on the margins.

In her article “The ‘Living Human Web’ Revisited: An Asian America Pastoral Care and Counseling Perspective,” Hellena Moon argues that the living human web, “while an accurate depiction of our culture here in US society, can also be a precarious metaphor for those who have historically been marginalized by the dominant society. Some webs act as barriers or impediments that serve to confound and knock down flying insects, making them more vulnerable to being trapped in the web below.” Moon goes on to note that a web can also help protect the spider from predators, identifying the spider as “the privileged in society whose status or social power...provides protection from institutional and societal inequalities.”

I believe Moon is correct. Within the web of interconnectedness, there are individuals with their unique stories and honored lives. Individuals may also be trapped in social webs. And yet if we are only regarded as unique individuals, community is lost. Both are true. I now regularly invite CPE students to explore how their cultures and their theological concepts of the human one relate to these paradoxical conceptual frameworks.

Student program feedback enables UCPEC to affirm the coherence of supervisory practice and Center values and goals. Some of the most common feedback related to supervisory practice is: 1) the power of the CPE group with inclusion of all voices; 2) the experience of the supervisor living what she teaches; 3) the transformative power for all (including the supervisor) of conflict dealt with relationally; and 4) the community building among diverse cultures and religious/spiritual frameworks.
Curriculum Components I: Pastoral Formation: Experience and Reflection

Development of the pastoral responsibility to resist, liberate, and empower begins with an awareness of what must be resisted and overcome in order that people might be empowered and liberated. To be a healing partner it is also necessary to face how we contribute to the hurt and bondage that others experience.

Formation for professional practice moves from cognitive knowing to an integrated awareness of the people who are hurting. This movement happens when one takes the risk to enter into the lives of those hurting, pays attention to her/his own situation alongside the realities of others, grows in understanding of the context, and then is open to being changed through these experiences.

In the Urban CPE program the students enter into the lives of others in their social location and in the midst of their crises. They serve people at shelters, addiction and HIV Centers, neighborhood clinics, visit the alone and isolated elderly, the homeless, the uninsured ill, and accompany the undocumented to courts or assist them in accessing resources. Students listen to stories and feel the dissonance between their ignorance, prejudices, theological and spiritual proclamations, and the realities of people hurting. The people the students engage hurt from poverty, addictions, violence, discrimination, ageism, healthcare, unemployment, and immigration issues. These practical encounters serve as the material for peer supervision, site supervision, and individual clinical supervision.

Integrated with these experiences is focused reflection and group sharing on the association or disassociation of the experiences of loss, grief, and suffering, and the concepts of one’s faith or spiritual tradition. The Urban CPE students gain a deepened sense of the experiential meaning of loss, grief, and suffering by the three-way process of: 1) naming and sharing their personal loss, grief, and suffering stories; 2) identifying the losses, grief patterns, and sufferings of those with whom they listen; and 3) reflecting in group on the tenets of their tradition on loss, grief, and suffering as congruent or not with their personal and ministerial experiences.

These exercises can be daunting as the students experience the immense realities of social grief and hurt. The following variation of the prophet Micah can be a guide as sustained groups work through this experience: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Walk humbly now. Do justly now. Love mercy now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

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Suffering and grief are recognized as that which permeates the experience of those unable to flourish. Losses are multiple in suffering, ranging from loss of self worth, housing, family, of belonging, of decision-making power, to near loss of physical life in poverty, starvation, isolation, victimization.

To be pastorally responsible in grief empowerment with others, an exploration of the root causes of suffering is imperative. This exploration demands a broad-based understanding of human systems and an ability to assess the impact of those systems on individuals and groups of people served. Students become familiar with the basic mechanisms and purposes of human systems, as well as the interrelation of the social, cultural, political, economic, religious, security, and ecological systems. They learn to assess the systemic bondages that keep people from flourishing and to then formulate a liberating pastoral plan in service with the other.

Particularly for urban-based CPE, system assessment might be considered the present day “clinical rhombus.” The “clinical rhombus” is the conceptual model formulated by Eckstein and Wallerstein that depicts the complexity of the psychological and social nature of a learning environment. The focus of the clinical context or ‘rhombus’ of the past has been useful, but is limited in addressing today’s complexities and intricacies of systems that benefit some and devalue others. Systems incorporate power and privilege, two dynamics also associated with practitioners’ identity and use of pastoral authority. They are dynamics that can empower and liberate and/or dominate, suppress, and oppress. UCPEC addresses these continually in its reflective practice about systems.

UCPEC uses the unpublished Inclusive Curriculum initially developed by Supervisor Rev. Dr. Cameron Byrd at Howard Divinity School. This Inclusive Curriculum helps students and supervisor in three ways: 1) to recognize domination systems of –isms; 2) to name and claim their participation as perpetrators, victims, and/or rescuers within the systems; and 3) to identify skills needed for advocacy, resistance, and empowerment from perpetration, victimization, rescuing. The latter skills may also be stated in terms of prophet, mystic/priest, and shepherd as related to the “Drama Triangle” of Karpman.

The Inclusive Curriculum has three separate exercises. These exercises address racism, sexism, and sexual orientation. The direct questions focus on the taught messages about one’s race, gender, and sexual orientation, and about those not like them. These exercises also deal with one’s religious
teachings and oft quoted phrases, use of jokes, media, and other sources to enhance or de-value self and/or others. The responses to the questions are shared in a group setting. From these exercises, CPE students become more self aware of their embedded concepts, attitudes of self and others, fears, and non-inclusive or internalized aspects of their lives. The CPE student has a greater awareness of the historical dynamics (systems) and their impact on others in this story telling experience.

Curriculum Components 2: Pastoral Skill Competence

Listening skills with a developed empathic capacity are fundamental to the art of healing. An important component of listening with those in social crises is to listen for the person’s assets and to reflect these back to the person. Instead of engaging in depth on the more “destructive” aspects of a person’s life (poverty, drugs, violence) the asset-based approach identifies the assets of a person and reflects those back to her/him/them. For example, assets of a person who is homeless might be resiliency and perseverance; of a gang member might be a sense of belonging and loyalty. Naming these assets and exploring the source of these resources enables utilizing them for other desires one has to survive and/or thrive. This is a skill toward mutual empowerment and liberation from potential destruction while respecting core values of those caught in social crisis.

A listening and acting stance of mutuality involves the skill of relational power (as opposed to unilateral power), in which the practitioner is influenced by each person and group encountered. To use relational power one must be open to being vulnerable (i.e., impacted emotionally) by the other person. This impact affects both head and heart. “Head and heart, thinking and feeling, combine to create a response toward others that listens to their needs and acts in solidarity with them in their empowerment.”

As stated above, the skill of system analysis and assessment integrated with one’s personal awareness of his/her systems, history of internalization, victimization, privilege, and domination cannot be ignored in formation of a professional healer. Closely related to this integrated skill of system assessment and personal awareness is community or partnership development. It is closely related to the practitioners’ need to reflect carefully on who they say they are and how they participate in the contextual systems that damage those they serve. This reflection depends on the ability to perceive oneself as an equal, a continual learner, and one in solidarity with the other. This skill is not often easy and requires a dialogue with experience and one’s spiritual
and/or theological framework. The fruitfulness of this skill is enhanced by being an active participant in a diverse and mutually consultative peer group.

Another skill that is part of the UCPEC curriculum is that of the use of language. Language reveals our values and our relational selves. For example, if we use “bullets” to separate ideas, or we want to “target” such and such, or we want to “kill” an idea, we reflect on how these military and violent terms effect our attitudes, responses, and capacity to walk with another as brother and sister. To some, these reflections seem “silly” initially, yet with experience and deep reflection students begin to understand how language effects their developing relational self. The students begin to realize that there is a difference in their theology, their identity, and the role between “walking with” and “walking for.” Often, the choice made between the ‘with’ or ‘for’ role indicates a power differential in which one believes the other does, or does not, have power and voice or inner resources for liberation and healing.

Using the words “conflict transformation” as a skill signals that a conflict has power to transform all parties toward greater freedom. These words invite the development of the skill of staying present, engaged, listening, and honest in the normal reality of conflict. They invite equally and not a sense of someone needing to win and someone needing to lose. “Conflict Resolution” signals a need for an end, to resolve, to conclude, finish. These situations do arise, of course, and what might be needed is a reflection on who wins and who loses within a system of resolution-making.

_Curriculum Components 3: Pastoral Theological Reflection_

Roger Gottlieb reminds us that it is only “…when we embrace that which is most disturbing not by accepting but by seeking to overcome it, that we can know ourselves as fully one with all of reality. It is only in resistance that acceptance is actual, and not a mask for denial. And thus…that we encounter the face of God, awaken to the call of the Goddess, and realize our deepest connections to the mysteries of human life.”

Pastoral Theological reflection is interspersed throughout any formation program and particularly within the UCPEC. When CPE participants lead prayer rituals, they are encouraged to connect the experiences of those in crises with their personal views. Story theology each week helps illicit the many diverse dynamics within the group and within the ministry fields. The biggest discussions within the UCPEC are those on suffering, grief, loss, sin, oppression, and the meaning of redemption. All are encouraged to read
and listen to the spiritual texts/testaments being lived among the poor and marginalized, translating these into their sacred readings, and preaching.

Outcomes: ACPE and UCPEC Program

This article has named the hurts, healing needs, and identities of the pastoral practitioner for today’s world. It then focused on the structures, supervisory practices, and curriculum in the formation of responsible practitioners with particular illustration drawn from the Urban CPE Consortium, Inc. ACPE Center. One of the pastoral competence skills named above is the use of language and its resonance with the vision and goals of a formation program. The language and phrasing used on a program evaluation completed by the students and the ACPE Standards Outcomes for CPE reflects the formation elements of the particular program and those considered by the system of ACPE, respectively.

One of the items of Urban CPE Consortium, Inc. student program evaluation specific to its outcomes is: “This Unit of CPE provided me an awareness of times I have marginalized persons and an awareness of when I have been marginalized.” Another item evaluating how Urban CPE assisted in a student’s pastoral formation is: “This Unit of CPE provided me an awareness of the contextual and shifting nature of privilege depending on situation and place and my situation and places of privilege.” While these evaluative items speak to relational dynamics necessary in the formation of an integrated practitioner, they parallel necessary awareness of supervisory practice and Center dynamics.

The supervisor or training leader must reflect personally, also: In what ways has my supervisory practice with each student and the group as a whole empowered them and what ways has it been power over them? How did my practice honor the voice of each and the voice of the group with dignity, self-respect, and inclusion? In my supervisory practice, how did I “author” in the in-between space of student-supervisor and group-supervisor? How was I a resisting, empowering, and liberating presence? These reflections help the leader become more aware of how his/her behavior, language, and attitude within a relationship foster mutually empathic and empowering relationships for learning.

UCPEC has nuanced some of the ACPE Outcomes as stated in the Standards to reflect the mission and goals of its program. For example, in the Pastoral Formation outcome (311.2) that states the ability of the student to identify and discuss life events...and cultural contexts...influencing per-
sonal identity and pastoral functioning, UCPEC has inserted “and social real-

ties.” In the outcome associated with “recognizing relational dynamics

within group contexts” (311.5), UCPEC has added “as they relate to specific

social constructs and peer group.” Instead of “helping relationships” (311.7),

which indicates a potential lack of agency in the one helped, UCPEC out-

come is “initiate empowering relationships within and across diverse popu-

lations.” In Level II outcomes, UCPEC has inserted “asset-based approach
to behavioral science and theological perspectives” to assessing strengths

and weaknesses of those served (312.4)—and, UCPEC competency is for one
to demonstrate competent use of self-in-ministry, and self-in-administrative
functions...(312.6). In the pastoral reflection section, UCPEC adds to Out-
come 312.8 by extending it to include the non-individualistic development
and mutual functioning of a practitioner. The UCPEC nuanced outcome is: “
demonstrate self-supervision through realistic self-assessment of pastoral
functioning in-community.”

Conclusion

Formation in the art of pastoral responsibility to assist in healing a hurt-
ing world today requires the renewal of programs. This renewal demands

naming and addressing social hurts and providing opportunities for the de-

velopment of pastoral identities and roles of resistance, empowerment, and

liberation among those hurting. This renewal includes reflections, and sub-
sequent changes in organizational structure, supervisory practices, as well

as curricular components. Formation program renewal is about attending
to both the living human document and the living human web, about indi-

viduals, communities, and groups; about those in and those not included.

This renewal of CPE and other formation programs advances and expands
the healing of the world by developing professional practitioners capable of

addressing today’s immense social hurts.

NOTES


tional, 2004), 34–35.


7. Ibid., 22–23


11. Jody Kretzman and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Skokie, IL, ACTA Publication, 1993); also see Northwestern University, School of Education and Social Policy, Asset-Based Community Development Institute, accessed February 18, 2014, [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org).

