# Expanding God's Redemptive Fractal

## Spirit-centered Counseling and the Transformative Wisdom of Jesus

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**Abstract**

Using the image of a fractal, a Spirit-centered approach to counseling is proposed that conceptualizes the Spirit's activity as seeking to replicate the patterns of God's redemptive story throughout creation by facilitating deep second-order change. Involving an epistemological shift from ways of knowing shaped by the conventional wisdom of culture to a renewed mind grounded in the transformative wisdom of Jesus, this deep change is explored from the perspectives of science and Scripture. Integrating findings from systems theory with the ministry and message of Jesus, this approach to counseling emphasizes relational premises and values believed to be characteristic of the mind of the Spirit. Defined as the capacity to know and see in ways that are consistent with the passion and purposes of God, cultivating the mind of the Spirit is viewed as the essence of Spirit-centered counseling. Presumed to be seen most clearly in the life of Jesus, this model focuses on his distinctive way of knowing and seeing by examining what can be learned about the epistemological facets of perception and meaning-making when comparing his Way with the patterns of this world. It is proposed that Spirit-centered counseling is guided by the premises and patterns contained in Jesus' transformative wisdom.

## Introduction

Characterized by a property referred to as "self-similarity," fractals are never ending patterns that repeat themselves at every level (Butz, 1997). Driven by the recursive feedback loops that are characteristic of dynamic systems, these patterns can become infinitely complex, yet remain strikingly familiar (Capra, 2002). While their complexity is a result of the ongoing repetition of simple processes, their familiarity is in the recognition that fractals exist all around. From the formation of trees, roses, and river networks in nature to the development of lungs, blood vessels, and neural networks in the human body, fractals are everywhere. What each has in common is that every level is comprised of the same pattern, such that any dimension of the fractal reflects the whole.

With this image as a visual aid, the work of God's Spirit is envisioned as the formation of a fractal [1] in which he invites all of us to participate. Using the pattern of God's redemptive story as a template, it is as if the Spirit is seeking to replicate that design in all of our stories by facilitating new creations out of thwarted dreams. Summarized as a sequence involving creation, fall, struggle, redemption, and new creations, this redemptive pattern reflects the universal human experience of life not going as intended. Just as God set creation in motion and pronounced it good only soon to discover that something went terribly wrong, so also we set our lives in motion (e.g., relationships, careers, education) only to encounter a similar reality. Like God, we get upset and in attempts to salvage our plans, often incur regrets, especially in realizing that despite our best efforts the progression often goes from bad to worse (Genesis 6:5–8; 9:8–17). Stuck in a cycle that repeatedly generates feelings of "here we go again," we experience confusion, despair, and in many cases, disillusionment. It is a story of disappointment, frustration, resilience, and repair. One that requires perseverance, trust, creativity, and flexibility. The challenge is in learning to collaborate with the Spirit's activity so that conditions can be established that allow for redemption and the emergence of new creations. This typically occurs when we finally realize that redemptive responses are most likely to appear when we stop engaging in willful behaviors designed to exert control and become willing to surrender to the Spirit's activity. This movement from willfulness to willingness (May, 1992) involves a deep perceptual shift, characteristic of second- and even third-order change, by which transformation is facilitated and new creations conceived. Getting to this point and beyond generally requires an examination of the underlying premises, values, and beliefs constituting the network of epistemological assumptions that inform yet limit our perception and options.

## The Pattern That Connects

In expanding this redemptive fractal, the Spirit's activity is conceptualized as hovering over the chaos of our lives, inviting us into God's story by enabling us to recognize its patterns and embrace its wisdom so that something of beauty and value can be birthed out of hopes and dreams that did not go as intended. This redemptive process is analogous to Bateson's (1972) "pattern that connects" in the sense that it unites our stories around a common experience and reveals how we are all part of a meta-narrative in which relationships are fundamental. Examining the relational patterns of God's redemptive story and the systemic epistemology that makes them apparent provides a way of understanding our own experience and involvement in this meta-narrative to which and in which we are all connected.

### Systemic Epistemology

From the systemic perspective, the understanding of life itself must begin with an understanding of pattern (Capra & Luisi, 2014). In fact, there appears to be an inherent sacredness to the organization of the universe. Revealed in what Bateson (1987) described as "the pattern which connects" (p. 145), this sacredness reflects an enveloping, integrated fabric of mental process in which everyone and everything participates. Recognized by those who are able to perceive systemically, it expresses itself in interwoven regularities so pervasive and influential that they could be said to reflect the will of an encompassing, permeating Mind (Bateson, 1972/2000; 1987). This emphasis on pattern, especially a "pattern which connects," offers an intriguing development that reflects a paradigm shift from the previous emphasis on substance and allows for a fresh way of conceptualizing reality (Keeney, 1983).

The tension between substance and pattern has existed at least since early Greek philosophy and is probably best reflected in the basic tension between the parts and the whole (Capra & Luisi, 2014). An emphasis on the importance of understanding the parts is typically referred to as a mechanistic, atomistic, or reductionist perspective, while an emphasis on the whole is known as a holistic, ecological, or organismic viewpoint. Reflected in the pursuit of answers to different questions, these competing emphases have explored divergent paths of investigation, with a study of substance or matter generally beginning with the question, "of what is it made," while research on form or relationship asks, "what is its pattern?"

Regarding the relational perspective, some have explored its theological implications (O'Murchu, 1997, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2007; Yong, 2011; Hall, 2021) and Trinitarian theology, exemplified well in Jacques' (1991) work, finds within the Godhead nothing less than the relationality by which reality is constituted. He boldly states, "I shall go so far as to say that God Himself [sic] is relationally. God is He [sic] who is, the One who makes relations possible, because He Himself [sic] is a relation" (p. 69). Knabb and Bates (2020) seem to echo these sentiments by asserting that every work of God is shaped by God's relational nature such that at the heart of Christianity is relationality.

In exploring relationality with its emphasis on patterns, it becomes apparent that this conceptualization of reality comprises a paradigm shift from the popular presuppositions of western culture, which have favored a reductionist focus by emphasizing substance and the related question "of what is it made" (Bateson, 1979). Since God's story is characterized by patterns, the version of Spirit-centeredness presented in this article proposes that the premises informing the mind of the Spirit consist of a wisdom that is inherently relational (Hall, 2021). When viewed as a reflection of God's design, especially as demonstrated in Jesus' life and ministry, it provides a fresh way of appreciating what it means to be Spirit-centered.

Building upon this possibility, a model of Spirit-centeredness is proposed that emphasizes the importance of cultivating a relational epistemology and suggests that such a mindset is informed by a wisdom that runs counter to the conventions of culture, a transformative wisdom revealed in the message and ministry of Jesus and distinctive of the mind of the Spirit. Adopting this mindset involves a perceptual shift, whereby we come to recognize the relational network in which we are all interconnected, and especially the principles that enable the dynamics within this network increasingly to reflect the redemptive patterns of God's story. In cultivating the mind of the Spirit, we come to know and see like Jesus such that we stop conforming to the patterns of this world and start accurately discerning and cooperating with the purposes of God (Romans 12:1–2). In other words, we become Spirit-centered.

## The Mind of the Spirit

As the term is used in this article, to be "Spirit-centered" is to have the mind of the Spirit. Based on the Apostle Paul's declaration that those who live by the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5), Spirit-centeredness

is defined as the cultivation of a particular mindset distinguished by the capacity to know and see in ways that are consistent with the passion and purposes of God. Equating it with Paul's references to the mind of Jesus (Philippians 2:5), the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16), and setting our minds on things above (Colossians 3:2), Keener (2016) states that this mindset goes beyond a frame of mind that is in accordance with God, to cultivating a way of knowing that is inspired or activated by God, that thinks like God.[2] Essentially, the mind of the Spirit constitutes an epistemology, a way of knowing, perceiving, and understanding that enables the Spirit-centered counselor to function cooperatively with the Spirit's activity in the counseling process.

To experience this epistemological shift, Keener (2016) notes that those whose lives are quickened by the Spirit already have something of the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) and are transformed as they no longer conform to the patterns of this world but renew their minds, presumably according to different patterns, so that the will of God can be accurately discerned (Romans 12:1–2). The implication is that this new mindset (renewed mind) is informed by alternative premises, which lend themselves to fresh patterns. Since this renewed mind is capable of discerning the will of God, its epistemology or means of knowing must be distinct.

## Epistemology

As the flip side of ontology, which is focused on the nature of reality, epistemology is concerned with how we come to know that reality. Consisting of "the basic premises and presuppositions that unconsciously influence the interpretation of experience, thus serving as the basis for action and cognition" (Bateson, 1974, p. 87), or more succinctly as "the rules of operation governing cognition" (Keeney, 1984, pp. 12–13), epistemology is the study of the processes that influence how we come to know what we know. In stating that "your machinery of perception, how you perceive, is governed by a system of propositions I call your epistemology: a whole philosophy deep in your mind but beyond your consciousness" (pp. 93–94), Bateson (1987) emphasized that it is impossible not to have an epistemology. Anything we claim to know is the result of an epistemological procedure whereby information is selected and filtered through a meaning-making process influenced by numerous factors, especially core beliefs and assumptions. Ultimately, epistemology governs perception. In other words, we cannot separate what we see from how we know. Our perception provides a doorway into the deeper premises that inform how we see the world. Together they

form a mindset, consisting of a network of taken-for-granted presuppositions (deep philosophy), which is resistant to change (Watzlawick et. al., 1974). So, when it comes to understanding and altering patterns, it is important to identify and examine the mindsets that inform them. What are they, where do they come from, and how are they formed?

### *One Pattern, Two Mindsets*

God's redemptive pattern tends to reflect universal human experience, at least in its first three phases, but how it ultimately unfolds depends upon the mindset of those involved. The first three phases of the pattern—creation, fall, and struggle—are universal. We all set initiatives in motion with hopes and dreams (creation) yet due to the fact that we cannot control all of the variables influencing the process, we eventually experience the disappointment and frustration of discovering that our plans rarely go as intended (fall). At that point, we instinctively seek to salvage our initiatives by engaging in efforts (struggle) to correct or control whatever we identify as the problem. If those efforts are not effective, we reach a watershed where the premises informing our mindset determine whether our continued actions move the pattern forward toward redemption and new creations or generate a repetitive cycle of ongoing struggle and hitting bottom experiences. For the purposes of this article, two mindsets will be explored in terms of their impact on the redemptive pattern: one that is based on the conventional wisdom of culture and the other on the transformative wisdom of Jesus.

**Conventional Wisdom and the Pattern of This World.** Essentially the epistemological assumptions of which our mindsets are formed are more caught than taught. They are the result of a socialization process whereby persons inculcate the conventional wisdom of their culture containing the premises and presuppositions that form the lens through which life is perceived (Keeney, 1983; Bateson, 1987). Every culture has its version of conventional wisdom, which Borg (1994) describes as

> the dominant consciousness of any culture. It is a culture's most taken-for-granted understandings about the way things are (its worldview, or image of reality) and about the way to live (its ethos, or way of life). It is "what everybody knows"—the world that everybody is socialized into through the process of growing up. It is a culture's social construction of reality and the internalization of that construction within the psyche of the individual. It is thus enculturated

> consciousness—that is, consciousness shaped and structured by culture or tradition (p. 75).

Borg (1994) suggests that the values of a culture's conventional wisdom can be summarized in how it defines the three A's of appearance, achievement, and affluence, to which I add a fourth, authority. These four A's provide a description of the good life to which most aspire. They comprise a standard by which success and significance are assessed and in so doing, influence perception in a manner that produces both social and psychological consequences. Socially, they provide a means of establishing who is in and who is out, and psychologically, they become the basis for identity and self-esteem. As such, they create a performance-based, image-driven orientation that characterizes the pattern of this world.

As far as *appearance* is concerned, the emphasis tends to be on external characteristics such as certain desirable physical features, body types, and fashion. *Achievement* is generally showcased through the recognition of various accomplishments that culture deems important such as in athletics, education, and the performing arts. *Affluence* is typically noted through attention given to attractive homes, cars, and leisure destinations, while *authority* is often highlighted by featuring those in positions of power and influence, which commonly spotlights the political and financial arenas. As culture socializes its members into these values from a young age, they tend to be internalized without much critical thought. Because they are simply taken for granted, these premises exert their influence outside of conscious awareness, thus enhancing their power. In our desire to feel good about ourselves, we end up instinctively and unconsciously pursuing those values.

Since the conventional wisdom of culture is based on the principles of rewards and punishments, it tends to assume that those who succeed have worked hard, and thus earned their favored status (Borg, 1994). By implication, the opposite is also considered true. These values not only invite an image-driven, performance-based orientation but also create a culture characterized by the C's of comparing, competing, criticizing, conforming, consuming, and controlling. When aligned with conventional wisdom's four A's of appearance, achievement, affluence, and authority, it is easy to see how attempts to feel good about ourselves are not simply based on personal improvement but on outdoing others, as we compare, criticize, and compete to receive the recognition and validation that our self-esteem craves. In being unaware that we are conforming to what conventional wisdom dictates,

we consume what we are fed while seeking to control outcomes, especially the image by which we are perceived.

**Conventional Wisdom and Religion.** Sadly, religious versions of conventional wisdom are common and produce similar approaches to life as found in the broader culture. Since both base identity and worth on performance, they are characterized by anxious striving, profound self-preoccupation, and selfishness (Borg, 1987), qualities that are not relationship-friendly and, in attempts to cope with the resultant stress, are often conducive to the development of unhealthy patterns such as addictions. Since these "baptized" versions of culture's four A's base success and significance on equivalent cultural principles of rewards and punishments, they create environments characterized by the same C's, thus generating comparable experiences and outcomes.

**Transformative Wisdom and the Pattern of Redemption.** The conventional wisdom of the culture to which Jesus came appeared to define the four A's in a manner not dissimilar to our contemporary western world. Those considered successful and significant were assessed as such based on similar values of image, prosperity, performance, and position. These values created distinct social divisions and those in power seemed invested in keeping it that way. Standards for acceptance and inclusion were clear and demanding, as were the consequences for falling short. The result was what some scholars (Borg, 2006; Brueggemann, 1978; Crossan, 1991; Wink, 1992) describe as a domination system in which a small minority of elites exercise power over most of the population.

Through Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God, which is widely acknowledged as the major theme of his ministry and a description of what life would be like if God were King instead of Caesar (Ladd, 1959; Crossan, 1991; Borg, 2003; Perrin, 2019), he introduced a counterculture in which he described new patterns of living and relating, informed by a transformative wisdom. He did so by essentially redefining the four A's of conventional wisdom. *Appearance* shifted from an emphasis on externals to internals, from management of image to matters of the heart (Matthew 23:25–26). *Achievement* was less about validation from others and more about hearing God say, "well done," less about elevation to positions of status and honor and more about serving others and finishing one's race (Matthew 25:14–30). *Affluence* was not determined by what one possessed but more by what one gave away, not by striving and hoarding but more by contentment and gratefulness (Luke 12:13–21). *Authority* became about controlling self rather than controlling others, more about empowering than dominating, being under authority than in authority (Matthew 20:20–28). Through this transformative wisdom, Jesus revealed a set of relational values that

directly countered the conventional wisdom of the dominant culture, thus explaining their paradoxical nature. You can imagine how odd it must have sounded to hear that greatness came from serving, honor from humility, receiving from giving, and finding life from losing it. To this day, these principles remain challenging.

If we conceptualize the seemingly paradoxical statements contained in Jesus' transformative wisdom as constituting his underlying epistemological premises, or "rules of operation governing cognition," to use Keeney's (1983) phrase (see Table 1), then it becomes possible to understand how Jesus saw a different world. When looking through the lens of this wisdom at the same cultural dynamics as everyone else, his assessment of what he saw contradicted convention because his perception was informed by alternate values and beliefs.

*Table 1*

| CONFLICTING ASSUMPTIONS AND RULES | |
|---|---|
| **Conventional Wisdom** | **Transformative Wisdom** |
| If you want to be great, get into a position to be served—demand respect and recognition | If you want to be great, serve—develop an attitude of service |
| If you want to be first, assert yourself—go after what you want | If you want to be first, be last—prefer others over self |
| If you want to receive, take—declare what is rightfully yours | If you want to receive, give—be a generous and cheerful giver |
| If you want to find your life, claim it—take control | If you want to find your life, lose it—let go of control |
| If you want to live, go for the good life—follow culture's path to success/significance | If you want to live, die—die to an identity based on cultural definitions of success |
| If you want to be strong, hide your weaknesses—don't be vulnerable/apologize | If you want to be strong, embrace your weaknesses—be authentic and vulnerable |
| If you want to be exalted, promote yourself—toot your own horn | If you want to be exalted, humble yourself—stay small in your own eyes |
| If you want to be wise, listen to the cultural experts—get knowledge | If you want to be wise, embrace the foolishness of paradox—be like a child |
| If you want to be free, exert your independence—trust yourself | If you want to be free, surrender—trust the process |

With the self-referential paradox in mind, which contends that anything we claim to know says as much about us as it does about what we are asserting (Keeney, 1984), some interesting questions emerge. What do our personal assessments of success and significance reflect about the underlying wisdom that informs our own perception? Would the same people, organizations, or ministries that are currently on our noteworthy list remain there if we viewed them through the values of Jesus' transformative wisdom? Whenever we classify someone as successful or something as significant, what does that say about our own values?

Because Jesus' way of knowing and seeing, his epistemology, was influenced by a wisdom counter to the premises of convention, his perception was aligned with the values of the Kingdom he proclaimed, premises reflective of the mind of the Spirit. As a result, when he saw the religious elite seeking seats of honor at banquets, or announcing their charitable giving, or only loving those who loved them back, or praying in public to be seen, or disfiguring their faces to indicate they were fasting, he assessed them differently, accusing them of following the broad path that leads to destruction and building their lives upon a foundation of sand (Matthew 7:24–27). In what must have sounded like an impossible task, he cautioned the people against imitating their example stating that unless their own righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees, they would not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Since by the standards of convention, the Pharisees were considered the most righteous of them all, what hope did the average person have of entrance to God's Kingdom? In response, Jesus offered an alternate route that constituted a redemptive pattern and narrow path, which came to be known as The Way.

## The Way of Jesus

Much controversy exists over the Way of Jesus. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (*New International Version*, 2011, John 14:6), what did he mean? In what sense is Jesus the way to God? Is his way exclusive, and if so, how? What are its patterns and how are they relevant to Spirit-centered counseling?

For many Christians, following the Way of Jesus involves believing certain ideas about Jesus such as his virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and future return (Borg, 2003). If a person believes the right notions, which of course may vary somewhat depending upon the religious organization, then they have the truth and Jesus becomes their way to God. The concern with this approach, however, is that it tends to equate truth with belief, thus

conceptualizing it in static terms, more consistent with the reductionist paradigm's focus on substance. As Todd Hall (2021) states,

> If the Bible is a set of facts to be properly arranged, and God is known strictly through explicit knowledge of propositions, then knowing God, ourselves, and others—indeed the entire task of theology—becomes a linear rationalistic process rather than a nonlinear relational process (p. 10).

Whenever the emphasis is placed on right beliefs, it elevates the intellect, becomes inherently divisive, and does not necessarily result in a transformation of life. We are told that even demons believe and tremble (James 2:19), but that knowledge does not seem to produce much change. While not disparaging the importance of good theology, the dynamic, nonlinear emphasis of the systemic paradigm allows for a different understanding of the Way of Jesus that prioritizes transformation by accentuating the importance of following his pattern.

Based on the New Testament portrait, the Way of Jesus is not a set of propositions, it is a pattern. It is the way of death (Borg, 2006). Just as the redemptive pattern allows for new creations to emerge out of the ashes of dashed hopes, so also following the Way of Jesus necessitates dying to live, losing life to find it (John 12:23–26; Matthew 16:25). From this perspective, regardless of what persons believe about Jesus, they cannot follow his Way without being transformed. Maybe this explains why he reserved his commendations for right actions rather than right beliefs. In fact, he commended those who were considered outcasts and heretics by the religious establishment of his day if their actions were consistent with his Way (Matthew 9:20; Mark 7:24–30; Luke 10:25–37; 17:15–16). But while the pattern of Jesus involves loss, experiencing new life is not automatic. It necessitates a certain type of response, which the Spirit seeks to facilitate.

## God's Redemptive Pattern and the Way of Jesus

While the redemptive pattern's initial phases of creation, fall, and struggle are inherent to human experience, due to the fact that life rarely goes as intended, new possibilities are not guaranteed. Consequently, Spirit-centered counseling plays a vital role. Since clients typically reach out for help on the Saturday between their cross of Good Friday and new life of Easter Sunday (Rambo, 2010), the focus of therapy for counselors in general, and Spirit-centered counselors in particular, is how to facilitate redemption out of loss, disappointment, frustration, and the

further complications that have often been created by their struggle to produce desired outcomes. Toward that end, how a person responds when life does not go as intended appears to be the critical variable and that response is determined by the wisdom with which their mindset is informed. Responses informed by the values of convention are typically distinguished by either escalating efforts at conquest and control or disillusioned capitulations to despair and bitterness. These reactions generally create a stuckness in the pattern typified by repetitive cycles of increasing struggle and hitting bottom experiences. Minds renewed to the transformative wisdom of Jesus, however, are more likely to exhibit responses that are accepting, trusting, flexible, and creative. In other words, they are more cooperative with the Spirit's activity, and thus conducive to moving the pattern forward toward redemption and new creations.

The challenge of Spirit-centered counseling is in facilitating a shift from one mindset to the other. This process is challenging not only because it requires addressing the underlying, taken-for-granted presuppositions informing perception but also an even more deeply embedded set of premises that operate unconsciously and are intensely resistant to change. Referred to by Bateson (1971) as symmetrical, these premises fuel performance-based assumptions making it difficult for persons to stop competing even when there is little hope of victory, yet when shifted, result in a radical reorientation to life.

### *Symmetrical vs. Complementary Premises*

In his classic paper on cybernetics and alcoholism, Bateson (1971) discussed pride and symmetry in relation to an alcoholic's addictive behavior. Underlying the alcoholic's relationship with the bottle, Bateson believed, were premises so fundamental as to be called epistemological. By fundamental he meant that these premises are so deeply embedded in the psyche ("hard programmed") that the alcoholic is unaware of their existence even though they determine the manner in which s/he experiences the world. As such they are resistant to change, but when shifted, result in a reorientation so radical as to be transformative. In other words, when these fundamental premises change, the way a person is oriented to life changes such that their experiences of self and the world shift in ways that lend themselves to complementary responses based on humility rather than pride.

**Symmetrical Premises.** The fundamental premises underlying the behavior of many alcoholics were what Bateson (1971) referred to as symmetrical. In relational terms these are characterized by competitive actions, in that a given behavior by one person will stimulate more of the same in another. Often described

by the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses," symmetrical relating involves engaging in similar actions as another in an attempt to outdo the other. Additional examples include one-up-manship, athletics, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Driving symmetrical behavior is pride and fear.

Behind their competitive relationship with the bottle is the hubris of alcoholics, which is not based on past achievements but rather on a stubborn assertion of ability. It is reflected in the willful claim "I can," often expressed as an ability to control one's drinking behavior. As a repudiation of the proposition "I cannot" it becomes a challenge that typically compels alcoholics repeatedly to attempt controlled drinking in order to prove themselves right. Of course, this involves risk-taking and since the drinking habits of western culture are prone toward symmetrical relating, the pride of alcoholics will not let them be outdone by another. Inevitably the risk-taking results in another drunken state. But, rather than recognizing this as a reflection of a lack of control, alcoholics typically continue to claim "I can" and respond in either rage or shame to any contrary assertion. This symmetrical pride leads to increasingly desperate attempts to prove that they cannot be defeated by the bottle, which, due to the phenomenon of emergence, eventually produces various types of hitting bottom experiences.

***Symmetrical Premises and Culture.*** While Bateson (1971) focused primarily on the symmetrical pride of the alcoholic, it would seem reasonable to suggest that symmetrical premises are fundamental in all of western culture (O'Murchu, 1997/2000). Whether "hard-wired" through genetic inheritance or "hard-programmed" through socialization processes, they appear to be prevalent and reinforced by cultural values. In western culture symmetrical premises appear to be socialized into a person's psyche from birth. When combined with an innate pride that fuels them and a conventional wisdom that promotes them, it seems as natural to respond to life symmetrically as it is to breathe. Promoting self, demonstrating influence, producing outcomes, achieving distinction, and projecting images of success and significance are all symmetrical strategies for success. They create environments characterized by the C's where comparisons are the norm and others are viewed as either competitors for recognition or possible sponsors of a personal agenda. In whichever case, relationships become selfishly organized around the fundamental premises of symmetrical pride. For this willfulness to move in the direction of willingness (complementarity), persons generally have to discover that they are part of something bigger than themselves over which they cannot exert control. This discovery often comes in the form of hitting bottom experiences

created from attempts to control this larger system, which even though they may have helped to bring into existence, is now more powerful than they.

***Emergence.*** Summarized by the popular phrase, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," emergence reflects the capacity of interactions within a system to produce something that transcends the participants involved. Just as water (H2O) emerges out of the interaction between a particle of oxygen and two particles of hydrogen, a quality that cannot be found in the particles themselves but only as a product of their interactions, so also qualities, behaviors, and experiences can emerge in relationships that are more a result of mutual influence than a reflection of individual character traits. The cliché, you never know what will happen when those two get together, and the Torah's observation that one can put a thousand to flight but two, ten thousand (Deuteronomy 32:30), both reflect this non-summative dynamic.

When participants in a relationship system begin to recognize the influence of their interactions to produce entities and experiences that transcend what any of them could generate on their own, they are starting to think relationally. Even our sense of self is an emergent property that can shift from interaction to interaction depending upon the engendered experience (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2016). In any relationship, whether with another person or a substance, the interactions of those involved produce something beyond themselves—what Bateson (1979) referred to as the mind of a system and Wink (1998), its spirit. Much like the gravitational field of the solar system in which each planet, based on its mass, contributes gravity yet is in turn regulated by the resultant field, so also the emergent properties of systems regulate their members (Kerr, 1988). As a result, symmetrical relating predictably fails. Based on the systemic principle that no part of a system can control the whole, any attempt to compete with that which is larger than the self will consistently result in reminders of one's limitations, often coming through the gift of hitting bottom. At these low points, however, persons typically become a little less willful and a little more willing, even if temporarily, to experience deep change. In other words, their deeply embedded symmetrical premises soften toward complementarity.

***Complementary Premises.*** In contrast to symmetrical relating, a complementary style seeks to fit appropriately into a given interaction. Rather than exhibiting similar behaviors that invite an escalating competition, a complementary style engages in dissimilar behaviors that more effectively complement a situation. Examples include such combinations as speaker-listener, mentor-mentee, and fans-athletic events. Complementary premises recognize the larger system of which one

is simply a part, and thus seek to relate to that greater entity with humility and flexibility. This does not mean that complementarity is always desirable such that persons cannot take initiative or seek to influence a system. In fact, parallel interactions involving occasional episodes of symmetrical relating, as participants in a system temporarily engage each other competitively, usually while addressing conflictual issues in an attempt to facilitate a more mutually satisfying fit, are considered healthy. But complementarity does acknowledge that ultimately control is not possible or desirable and it is willing to be influenced by the feedback that the larger system inevitably provides.

*Complementary Premises and Culture.* Shifting from symmetrical to complementary premises usually requires the gift of crises but when it occurs, generates a radical reorientation of life (Rohr, 2011). Rather than being absorbed with one's own status, as determined by the performance-based values of convention, persons become more oriented to how they can fit into the larger system(s) of which they are a part, for which the relational values of Jesus' transformative wisdom provide guidance. In other words, the self is no longer viewed as the center of one's concern, an independently existing entity that must compete with other entities for recognition and dominance, but as part of something bigger, a meta-narrative in which it can play a vital role in finding its fit by learning to complement the others involved. This deep change parallels what Capra and Stiendl (1992) have observed as a paradigm shift, occurring in both science and theology, involving a movement away from reductionist (linear) approaches to understanding the universe and divine revelation to a way of knowing that is informed by relational (nonlinear) emphases more attuned to process than substance. Such a shift is essentially epistemological in nature, constituting what Keeney (1983) describes as the deepest order of change humans are capable of experiencing.

## Jesus and Second-order Change

One way of understanding and facilitating such a dramatic shift is to conceptualize it as a process of second- and possibly third-order change (Watzlawick et. al., 1974). In applied terms, this involves replacing the symmetrical premises of culture's conventional wisdom, as reflected in performance-based, image-driven behaviors, with the complementary premises of Jesus' transformative wisdom constituted by relationally-oriented values that are more others-centered. But as conventional ways of defining and pursuing success and significance are

discarded, the resultant loss of these former bases for self-esteem and identity are often experienced as a type of death, leaving persons wrestling with the question, who am I? Yet as new ways of knowing the self, founded on radically different premises, are discovered, it commonly feels like resurrection to new life. In this sense, adopting the mind of Jesus, by embracing his transformative wisdom in seeking to follow his Way, becomes a means of understanding what losing life to find it might involve. This deep, second-order change[3] constitutes both the process and goal of Spirit-centered counseling.

What Jesus and Spirit-centered counselors share in common is the desire to facilitate second-order change, meaning both are seeking to shift perception by challenging the underlying assumptions that inform it. This indicates that the focus of change is on the deeper level of epistemology where Bateson (1987) located the network of propositions that influence how we see the world and come to know what we claim to know. While any effective counseling process will facilitate second-order change (Fraser & Salovey, 2007), Spirit-centered therapists have a particular type of deep change in mind, which is based upon the transformative wisdom of Jesus.

When the ministry of Jesus is examined through the framework of second-order change, it reveals both the possibilities and challenges of facilitating deep transformation via an epistemological shift. If we conceptualize Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God as constituting a different set of epistemological assumptions, in other words a spiritual wisdom to guide us in how to live, then the challenge facing us is how to embrace and internalize those premises such that they form the new philosophy that guides our perception. From this perspective, Jesus' task in his earthly ministry was essentially that of facilitating deep second-order change.

## Spirit-centered Counseling: Facilitating Second-Order Change

All second-order change interventions share the common goal of shifting the way clients see the world, especially the situations that have brought them into counseling. While Jesus demonstrated many of these techniques (Buker, 2021), especially reframing, the one he seemed to use most frequently was stories. Story-telling is a rich component of the rabbinic tradition from which Jesus emerged, and he was a master storyteller.

For the Spirit-centered counselor, the beauty of stories is that they are easily remembered and repeated, and there are so many points of entry where listeners can connect. Jesus' parables, as invitations to a different way of seeing (Borg, 2003), have continued to exert an influence long after their initial telling and still bring value to the counseling process today. They contain common second-order change elements, such as unpredictability, paradox, and reversals (Fraser & Solovey, 2007), and they certainly challenge the performance-based assumptions of culture's conventional wisdom. To hire workers at various times throughout the day yet pay them all the same even though some worked much longer (Matthew 20:1–16), or to restore a son to his status with seemingly no consequences for his arrogance and irresponsibility (Luke 15:11–32), or to make a despised Samaritan the hero over the religious elite (Luke 10:25–37) all constitute subversive yet transformative scenarios, which the values of convention would not have predicted. Together they provide snapshots of what life is like in the Kingdom of God and serve to illustrate what Jesus' transformative wisdom looks like in action. Take for instance the familiar parable of the prodigal son, which is especially useful therapeutically when addressing issues of shame with its underlying performance-orientation fueled by symmetrical pride.

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son

In Jesus' story of the prodigal, a father's younger son requested and received his share of the inheritance and promptly departed for a distant country where he "squandered his wealth in wild living" (*New International Version,* 2011, Luke 15:13). Left with nothing, he hired himself out to a local citizen who sent him to feed his pigs, which to Jesus' Jewish audience would have presumably reflected an unkosher, and thus shameful, place to end up. While in the pigpen Jesus said the prodigal "came to his senses" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:17) and acknowledged that he was no longer worthy to be called his father's son, a statement that any person struggling with disgrace would immediately recognize as the voice of shame. He tells himself that his father's hired hands are better off than he so he decides to return home to ask if he can be received as a servant. The implication is that the humiliated son just wants to slip quietly back home in the hope of simply gaining the security of a roof over his head and decent food to eat.

Upon his arrival, the prodigal's father, who saw him coming, runs to embrace him saying, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:24). He instructs his servants to bring his

best robe to place on him, along with his ring and sandals, and to kill the fattened calf to celebrate his son's return, all of which constitute a completely unexpected turn of events. It seems confusing yet wonderful, unless you are the prodigal.

### *The Father's Perception*

Essentially the father's gracious response placed the prodigal in a predicament. He is now faced with the challenge of how to celebrate grace in the face of shame. It goes against everything the conventional wisdom of culture dictates. Instead of being punished for his performance, he is embraced for his relationship as the father emphasizes reconciliation over mistakes. As amazing as this response was, it creates a dilemma, one that all of us must face on our spiritual journeys. Essentially it is the challenge of how to celebrate the gift of grace, which we know we do not deserve and can never earn, a reality that our performance assumptions struggle to accept and one that is complicated by the presence of elder brothers (and sisters) who serve as constant reminders of our unworthiness.

Based on the tenets of conventional wisdom, we would have thought the father gracious if he had said something like, "son, you have embarrassed yourself and this family, but I am willing to give you another chance. I will let you come back as a servant and if you work hard and demonstrate that you have learned your lessons and changed, then maybe at some point in the future we can consider restoring you to your former status." According to the guidelines of convention, such a considerate response would have been deemed evidence that this was a good dad, firm yet kind. So how do we account for what appears to be an excessively gracious response, one that seemingly overlooks failure and does not punish faults but rather celebrates reconciliation? Two observations seem important. First, the father may have realized that the prodigal's pigpen experience had already done its intended work, and second, he may have been preventing the son from falling back into old performance-based patterns, in which his older brother seemed trapped.

### *The Elder Brother's Perception*

The elder brother's perception reflects a classic performance-oriented mindset characterized by the C's of comparison, competition, and criticism. Calling attention to his own performance, the elder brother compared his responsible choices to his younger sibling's irresponsibility and criticized his father's decision to throw a party on his brother's return. In a typical compare-compete-criticize pattern, the elder brother distanced himself from the prodigal by informing his father that "this son of yours" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:30)

squandered your inheritance, to which the father responded by emphasizing relationship in reminding his eldest son that "this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:32). In other words, he is not just my son, he is also your brother. With this simple reframe, the father seems to be saying that relationship is the basis of identity and worth, not performance.

### *The Prodigal and God's Redemptive Story*

While no one wants to end up in the "pigpen," these experiences seem to have an important role to play in facilitating second-order change. As with the prodigal, they bring us to our senses by exposing our symmetrical, performance-based orientation to life and inviting us to do some deep soul-searching. For those who allow their pigpen experiences to have this intended effect, two qualities become especially pronounced—humility and gratefulness. In the case of the prodigal, rather than making excuses or blaming others for his mistakes, he accepted responsibility, acknowledged his loss of credibility, and only asked to be a servant, not to be restored as a son.

Pigpen experiences, or what Alcoholics Anonymous (AA, 1976) refer to as hitting bottom, are designed to serve as a mirror, challenging us to take an honest look at ourselves. When humility and gratefulness are prominent responses, they are reliable indicators that the pigpen experience has done its job, meaning that the person has had the courage to acknowledge what was revealed, and as a result has been deeply impacted and humbled. They are no longer the same. Symmetrical premises have begun shifting to complementary, but since these presuppositions are so deeply embedded and easily recovered, the father's gracious response was key to ensuring that this fledging change continued.

While on the one hand the father's emphasis on relationship over performance seems naïve, on the other hand if the prodigal had been granted his request to come back as a servant and given the opportunity to demonstrate the sincerity of his repentance, he would have found himself right back on the broad path of performance, trying to perform his way out of shame. Such an approach would have likely reactivated his symmetrical premises by reinforcing culture's conventional wisdom that identity and worth are based on producing desired outcomes. Knowing that this strategy is a dead end, the father, rather than requiring the son to earn back his status, chose to celebrate their reconciliation.

When viewed through the template of God's story, the prodigal's experience clearly illustrates the redemptive pattern. He took his share of the inheritance and

set his life in motion with hope and dreams (creation) only to discover that it did not go as intended (fall). In landing in the pigpen, he came to his senses (struggle), humbled himself and returned to his father's house (redemptive response) where his status was restored and a party thrown to celebrate resurrection and reconciliation (new creation).

Through the lens of performance-oriented premises, the prodigal is an abject failure, undeserving of the father's favor. But when perceived through the lens of Jesus' relationally-oriented wisdom, the prodigal's resurrection to new life generates excitement. He has lost his life to find it, a process that while painful, produced an outcome that is arguably worth celebrating.

## Conclusion

When clients enter counseling, their presenting problems often reflect imprisonment to the image-driven, performance-oriented patterns of this world, secular or religious. Although most do not recognize it as such, their attempts to gain the experiences they desire have been driven by the assumptions of conventional wisdom into which they have been socialized and whose guidance they have followed to the point of exhaustion. Even though they are experiencing problems severe enough to seek help, it is difficult for them to stop their previous efforts, regardless of how ineffective, due to the symmetrical pride that drives them. While thinking they are trying different approaches to producing desired outcomes, they are unaware of how each of their strategies is informed by the same performance mindset, oriented to comparing and competing, and thus, only capable of producing more of the same results. At this point the transformative wisdom of Jesus provides hope in revealing an alternate Way forward. But to walk this narrow path, a deeper change is required, involving a form of death.

Experienced as a perceptual shift, clients essentially die to an identity based on performance-driven assumptions, or what the Apostle Paul referred to as the "patterns of this world" (*New International Version*, 2011, Romans 12:2). In so doing, they position themselves to discover a new identity grounded in relational values, as contained in the transformative wisdom of Jesus and exemplified in the pattern of his Way. In other words, they lose their life to find it. Concepts of success and significance are drastically redefined. Engagement with life becomes less competitive and controlling, and more collaborative and compassionate. A redemptive process is allowed to unfold, facilitated by increased cooperation with the Spirit's activity, which enables new creations to emerge and God's redemptive

fractal to be expanded. Such is the type of deep second-order change that constitutes both the goal and distinctive of Spirit-centered counseling.

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**Notes:**

[1] The term "fractal" is referenced here only for its visual properties to provide a means of imaging and imagining how the pattern of God's redemptive story can serve as a template for our own.

[2] In this article the terms "mind of the Spirit," "mind of Jesus," and "mind of Christ" will be used interchangeably.

[3] While some would argue that the epistemological shift I am describing is actually third-order change, to which I would not necessarily disagree, for the sake of simplicity I will refer to it as a type of deep second-order change.

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