

## **A Surprising Use of Philosophy - Empowering a Teenager to Become the Subject of Her Life**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the surprising story of successful philosophical counseling with a troubled teen who was cutting herself. I say “surprising” because nowhere is philosophical counseling recommended as a therapeutic approach to adolescent cutting. Utilizing a practical approach to philosophical counseling aimed towards the highest good, elements of phenomenology, existentialism and pragmatism were drawn upon, which enabled the client to become aware of what was meaningful to her, to become the subject of her life, and to flourish within it.

The client and I made effective use of philosophy to help her reflect on herself and her life, to help her to stop hurting herself, and to become a budding philosopher. To achieve this end, the use of dialogue, reflective thinking, decision making skills, dream analysis, and parental coaching were also employed in the course of eighteen sessions conducted over less than a year. The client was given the opportunity to evaluate her own judgments, to stand back from her harmful behaviors, and to learn how her desires could be directed to the pursuit of her own good rather than toward her destruction. She acquired an ever-increasing degree of independence in practical reasoning, and a sense of herself as an independent person with agency.

**Key Words:** existentialism, highest good, meaningful connections, phenomenology, pragmatism, sandplay, symbols

### **Introduction**

One morning in the fall of 2016 I received a call from a distraught mother and father. They had just discovered their 13-year daughter, whom I will call Juliet, was cutting herself. From the multiple scars on her arms, they knew this was not the first time. Though by trade I work primarily as a philosophical counselor, I also write regular parenting skills articles which offer a philosophical approach to parenting. Juliet’s parents had read my columns and liked my philosophy. Although they understood that cutting is a potentially life-threatening practice usually addressed by psychologists and/or psychiatrists, they were looking for an alternative approach to the problem, which they hoped I could offer.

Psychological studies in the field of self-injury indicate that when a young woman engages in self-injurious behaviors, she is often using this unhealthy coping strategy to deal with emotional pain or confusion she doesn’t know how to process any other way (Strong, M., 1998). However, after interviewing the parents and Juliet, it seemed her problem stemmed from the fact that she had little to no ability to express her own wants and needs. By nature and by training, her behavior was timid and servile. Perhaps cutting herself gave her a way to feel in control and engaged in her own life, which was at that time torn between the demands placed upon her to succeed and to be very obedient. She

certainly did not have the skill of independent rational thinking which would enable her to assert her needs in a healthy manner.

Philosophical counseling involves a structured dialogue with a counselor which utilizes philosophical ideas and methods that apply to the client's life. In this case, elements from phenomenology, pragmatism, and existentialism were utilized in order to support a client/counseling dyad that centered itself on a search for the highest good, which, for Juliet, included stopping self-injurious behavior, but ended up encompassing much more. Existentially, the client and counselor gave real, sustained attention to the question of what gave her life meaning, as well as to issues of her personal freedom, choice, and responsibility. (Jaspers, K., 1955.) Within a phenomenological framework, she and I identified meaningful connections from her world which informed the choices she made throughout our work together. (MacIntyre, A., 2007.) Pragmatically speaking, we utilized a decision making model that enabled her to find the best practical solutions for the problems she faced. (James, W., 1995.)

This is the story of the practical and effective use of philosophy to help a young woman reflect on herself and her life. I offer it in the hope that other counselors will be helped to re-think cases which previously might have been thought about primarily psychologically and medically, and to consider them creatively through the lens of philosophy. What we want as counselors from our work is a good result. (Marinoff, L., 1995.) In this case, thinking about Juliet and her problem philosophically enabled her, her parents, and myself to obtain just that.

### **Determining the Highest Good**

When a client enters philosophical counseling, she is often filled with questions about how she should live her life and what aims she should pursue. She can be faced with tough choices and difficult decisions. In Juliet's case, she had to determine whether a lifestyle that included cutting herself was one she wanted to live. Was cutting herself in her best interest? Did this activity constitute the best use of her time? Might there be other activities she could engage in that would better serve her?

It was not just a matter of Juliet choosing an answer. It was of the utmost importance that whatever choices she made concerning cutting herself, she chose the best ones. That is why I took the time, as I do with all clients, to give her an understanding of the general concept of the highest good, which can be thought of as identifying with and aiming towards that which is deeply valuable. (Rohlf, M., 2016.) "What is the best I can do in the situation I am in, including the situation of having to live my life?" is the obvious question that grows from it, one which encourages reflection on what the person values and how she wants to live.

The problem is, most people have not been trained to think about what the highest good is, much less how to achieve it in their daily lives. This was certainly true in Juliet's case. Neither at home, nor at school, nor in her church had anyone thought about teaching her to know how she felt and what she really thought about things. Rather, they wanted her to think as a "good girl" should and to give what they thought were the right answers, which were, often enough, the ones they wanted to hear.

I explained to Juliet how we would work together to obtain the best possible outcome in her particular situation and emphasized that our work would be participatory, flexible and provisional as we determined what her best choices would be and as she made efforts to achieve them. (Brendel, D., 2009.) Throughout the process, she would learn how to make better choices and would gain tools that would enable her to continue to make good choices throughout her life. (Kidder, R., 1995.)

Because she hadn't been taught to be an independent rational thinker, which would have enabled her to make good choices for herself, she was left to try to solve the questions and tough choices she faced alone and without adequate resources. It is understandable that, armed with only her established habits of endless brooding and painful agonizing about which path to pursue, she saw cutting as her best possible option for breaking out of the limited situation in which she was confined. Her cutting expressed her sheer impatience to find a way out of her dilemma. She had to be admired for utilizing whatever assertive self-will she could muster at the time. After all, since she didn't have the proper tools, cutting herself was what she ended up using to try to resolve these underlying issues.

Juliet agreed that this behavior did not yield any good outcomes. She became curious about learning a new way of thinking which included concern for her highest good above that of expedient, non-rational behaviors like cutting herself. Rather than unthinkingly deferring to her strongest motive, cutting herself, she wanted to have other ways and means available to stop her self-destructive behavior.

In the beginning, of course, none of us - neither Juliet, her parents, nor I, knew what pathways we would need to take to achieve this goal. And, in the beginning, my ideas of questions to ask her about her situation did not prove to be of direct help. For example, in my first individual counseling session with Juliet, I asked her questions which could help her become more aware of why she was cutting herself, such as, "What does it do for you?" "What kind of relief does it give you?" And, "How does it make you feel when you cut yourself?" I wanted to help her understand that her actions have consequences, and to think about what those consequences were. I thought these questions would lead to her being able to offer practical evaluations of her cutting behavior. They could be a key to why she cut herself as well as to how to stop her self-destructive behavior.

However, Juliet could not answer those questions. She actually did not want to talk about cutting herself. She felt she could stop cutting herself on her own. In addition, she did not want any exercises that related to bringing greater awareness of that behavior.

Especially in the realm of philosophical counseling, it is not a matter of the counselor choosing a solution. Rather, it is of the utmost importance that each person involved take the time to deliberate on all the possible choices to consider along the way. It is a collaborative effort. The client is always encouraged to think about things such as her reasons in favor of, or against, a course of action, even when it might disagree with ideas held by the counselor.

Since this work is participatory, I took Juliet at her word and began to flesh out the things she was most interested in exploring. Together we came to understand that she wanted to learn what her feelings and needs were. She wanted to know how to express them, not only at home, but at school and with her friends. She wanted to know how to know what she was interested in, what she liked and didn't like, and how to think things through and to make good decisions for herself. As it turned out, her desired starting points were the appropriate ones. They led to our achieving the highest good, which ultimately went beyond stopping cutting herself to include ways to become the subject of her life and to flourish.

As time went on, Juliet learned to take into consideration her inclinations and to decide whether or not they would be harmful for her to follow. As she became more facile in knowing how to achieve the best possible outcomes for herself, she also became able to reason and to act with perspective, to bring her actions in line with her value commitments, and to direct her life so that these commitments ultimately shaped every important action and choice. She began to be able to live in the world knowing how to live

the best life of which she was capable and to endorse her life from her own reflective point of view. As a result, by the time we finished our work together, she had the assurance and the peace of having achieved the highest good within her world. (Tiberius, V., 2008.)

### **Becoming the Subject of Her Life – An Existential Task**

Existentialism has its roots in the Socratic dictum to know yourself, as well as in other philosophies that advise the individual not to look outside herself for answers. Subjectivity, the individual person, uniquely herself, ultimately alone, with a need to know who she is and why she is here, is the point of departure. (Flynn, 2006.) Of course, a typical thirteen year old girl is not going to have much conscious experience of being the subject of her life. However, right from the beginning of her life, a child starts developing a sense of herself which is either encouraged or discouraged. Due to her protected environment with its pressures to conform and to succeed, Juliet's sense of being the subject of her life was almost non-existent.

Although Juliet's parents had unwittingly stunted her blossoming self, they were willing to entertain the idea that it was entirely possible they had played a part in their daughter taking a self-destructive path. They were more than willing to help and to change wherever we determined change would be needed. Thus, the three of us began a dialogue regarding their philosophy of parenting.

We found that, though in principle they believed the purpose of raising a child is to help her become an independent, rational human being, their actions did not support that goal. (Dinkmeyer, D., 1998.) Rather than helping her to achieve greater autonomy, responsibility, and awareness, they were unintentionally teaching her to be servile and timid by being overly controlling and by allowing only super high achievements to count. In short, she had to think and act as her parents wanted her to and always behave in the manner they expected. As mentioned earlier, it seemed a pre-conscious reason Juliet was cutting herself was that it was one of the only autonomous acts she could think of by which she could communicate her distress, and it also gave her some release and relief from the pressure to be other than who she was.

The first principle of existentialism is that a person is nothing other than what she makes of herself. She is solely responsible for her existence. This is based on an extremely anxiety provoking moment every thoughtful person knows, that moment when she fully comprehends that she is alone. Rather than being one with everyone and everything, which is what she thought and felt was the case when she was a child, she comes to realize she is separate and isolated. After that moment, she is incapable ever again of being able to establish true solidarity with those who exist outside of herself. Despite the hope that other people might be fully accessible to her, she finds out they really aren't, and won't ever be. (Warnock, M., 1970.)

It seemed very possible that Juliet's cutting thrust her into a dialogue with her anxiety and with her wish to do something that belonged to herself, without outside interference. I hoped we could find a positive aspect to her realization of her aloneness that would enable her to begin to come to terms with the fact that her life is truly individual – hers alone and no one else's. Rather than living as part of the crowd, she could have the freedom to make her own choices and to take responsibility for them.

Freedom meant there were diverse possibilities between which Juliet would have to begin to make choices that were meaningful to herself, and then commit to them. Though she had unconsciously chosen cutting herself as a way to express her existence as an individual, I hoped to help her make

different choices that would encourage her self-motivated movement out into the world in meaningful ways

This is what the process of an existential analysis consists of. (Sartre, J., 1957.) The client, in this case Juliet, comes to an authentic awareness of herself and of reality through the use of thinking and reflecting as an inner activity. As she does this, her authenticity is found in her primordial spontaneous depths, and becomes her ultimate source, or ground. Never given, it must be actualized by each person, and so it would have to be actualized by Juliet. Existentialists call this our fundamental project. Like all persons, she was in the position of having to pursue the project of obtaining an authentic existence. She was not born with a sign indicating who she is or why she is here. Even after her birth, this knowledge was hidden. In the position of not knowing who she was, all the tasks of life took precedence along the way, obscuring who she was, even to herself, and making mute demands. By the time she came to see me, she was in the position in which many people find themselves. She was literally nothing in herself but the passive obedience to these demands.

A central task of our work was to help Juliet become the subject of her life through the process of becoming her own project, one in which she would, hopefully, become enthusiastically involved. First, she would have to catch sight of herself, see the ways in which she, in thought, and in action, was dealing with herself and the world. Then, together we would look at her choice to cut herself, a choice which she had been utilizing to try to construct her own unique world. Then, over time, we would work to understand everything that was meaningful to her, and to analyze the possibilities inherent in her situation. After that, she would be better prepared to decide upon her further choices and actions and to enter the widest realms of the possibilities available to her. (Macaro, A., 2006.)

Existentialism reminds us and our clients that life has no meaning *a priori*. Before we come alive, our life is nothing. It is up to us to give meaning and value to it. This basic philosophical operation demands a different kind of thinking, one that alters our being and allows it to have authentic expression. Though the process includes encounters with such feelings as anguish and dread, its absolute value is found when the person encounters her own spiritual intimacy. After all, life is nothing until it is lived, and, as existentialists would say, until it is lived authentically. I hoped my work with Juliet would enable her to live her life in such a manner. A true self is referred to as possible because, in principle, it can never be fully achieved. There is always something inchoate about it, right up until the last moment of a person's life. I hoped that in the time Juliet and I had the opportunity to work together, we would at least have a good start.

### **Becoming the Agent of Her Sexuality – Another Key Component**

By and large, studies show that teen-agers who injure themselves are generally not allowed to have their feelings or to express them. As a result, they are left with the hopelessness of ever being able to communicate in a way that will help them to get their critical needs met. Thirteen is a common age for girls to come into puberty, with all the budding sexual feelings and needs that come with it. Any adult could look at Juliet and easily see puberty had descended upon her. Since she had been cutting herself, I was led to wonder if she had been educated in a way that she was allowed to have and to express her sexuality in a healthy manner. This part of Juliet's story illustrates how, by disallowing her natural sexual desire, her parents had inadvertently manufactured danger and risk by throwing a roadblock in the pathway of her psychosocial development, psychological health and her ability to form authentic relationships.

Being Catholic, neither of Juliet's parents had had frank talks with their parents about their sexuality when they were growing up. In one of our sessions they confessed that neither of them had learned to be open about their own sexual needs and wants. Though they agreed it would be helpful to talk with Juliet about her sexuality, they admitted they did not feel comfortable doing so, in part because they did not know how. The father also believed that he needed to protect his daughter from being preyed upon and had irrationally decided that a way to do this was to deny her access to anything sexual.

What neither of her parents realized is that a person cannot cut off one kind of desire without affecting another. When sexual desire is truncated, all desire is compromised – including a girls' power to love herself and to know what she really wants. I wanted to help her parents understand that by not allowing Juliet to feel sexual desire, that rather than protecting her, they were actually putting their daughter in danger and at risk. It was important for them to know that when a girl does not know what her own feelings are, she disconnects the apprehending part of herself from what is happening in her own body. Then she becomes especially vulnerable to the power of others' feelings, as well as to what others say she does and does not want to feel. It also makes it more difficult for her to become the subject of her life in general, not just of her sexual life. (Tolman, D., 2002.)

Over the span of the several sessions I had with Juliet's parents, we engaged in a dialogue in which we rationally concluded that it would be a good idea for them to educate their daughter about the complexities and nuances of her feelings, choices, and behaviors, sexual and otherwise. In looking for pragmatic solutions to this problem, in addition to a mother/daughter "heart to heart" on the topic of sex, we found several other things which proved to be helpful. First, we found books on adolescent sexuality that proved useful not only for their daughter's edification, but also for their own. Secondly, realizing it was hard for Juliet to explore her sexuality while her younger sister was her roommate, the parents made it possible for Juliet to have a room of her own. After all, if safe sex was one of their goals for their daughter, it would be smart of them to teach her about the safest kind of sex to have, and that is sex with oneself. And, as we all thought about it, when given the choice, what is more pleasurable in the end, cutting, or pleasuring oneself? Since Juliet has not cut herself since, we can assume she chose the second option.

### **Establishing the Meaningful Connections**

Knowing what is important to the client is essential to a good outcome. A useful tool that comes from phenomenology is the one that suggests the counselor understand the world of the client and her lived experience. Without putting any abstractions on top of the client's experience, the counselor becomes capable of entering into her world with her particular and multifaceted intentions, as well as her beliefs and involvements. Gradually the counselor comes to understand what the client values, how one event emerges from another in her life, and the ways they are linked together. This process is called a phenomenological reduction. It enables the counselor to recognize the client's identity beyond its surface appearances and to the meaningful connections inherent in her world. (Sokolowski, R., 2000.)

Because young people have a difficult time verbalizing what is important to them, I often use symbols as a medium of communication. As long as men and women have been living on this earth, they have found meaning in symbols. With symbols, the primary material to be communicated is not intellectual, but rather a quality of experience. Their essence is a tone of feeling, something that a flat statement of concepts and ideas cannot convey. By their means, the person works her way to concepts which can be recognized, investigated, and applied. The point of contact at which this happens becomes a turning point in the individual's experience because she thereby enters a very different atmosphere. The

relationship between her personal existence and the universe around her is transformed, enabling her to transcend her current situation through thought and by action. (Jacobi, J., 1959.)

A tool I frequently use, sandplay, utilizes symbols as its basis of communication. It arose out of the work of Carl Jung. It makes use of miniature toys. A complete sand play collection should contain everything in the world. People of all cultures, religious figures, wild and domestic animals, fantasy figures, houses, plants, and vehicles are among some of the things commonly represented. The client is instructed to pick out the miniatures they particularly connect with and arrange them in the sand in a way that makes sense to them. Whatever the client picks is meaningful. Through our dialogue, we find the connections that make each figure relevant to him or her. Not only does this tool help to establish connections meaningful to the client, it also reveals their current world view. (Kalff, D., 1980.)

I utilized this tool five different times during my work with Juliet. It enabled us to establish what was meaningful to her and the means to talk about it, whatever "it" was. For example, she placed a church in all five of her sand worlds. By doing so, she indicated the importance of her nascent spiritual life. She also picked different kinds of domestic animals and plants, which gave her the opportunity to talk about her love of nature and of spending time alone. From this, I found out she would like to spend more time alone. As I mentioned above, she did not have a room of her own which would permit her to have more time by herself. She told me if she had a room of her own she would use the space to draw more. It is one of her favorite activities. She likes to do it in private. If she had more privacy, she said she could draw as much as 2½ hours per day.

At the point in time Juliet entered counseling, her parents had become so desperate to stop her cutting behavior that they were thinking of taking all the doors in their home off their hinges so that Juliet would never have an opportunity to be alone and therefore would be unable to cut herself. I never thought that was a sensible solution, but her revelation of how much she liked to be alone lent support to the fact that she needed more time alone, not less. Because of her revelation, her parents ended up giving her a room of her own, which I believe was another factor in her discontinuing her destructive behavior. She was given a safe place to allow her inside life to come out creatively.

Other figures that Juliet chose included that of a girl runner, as well as a cheerleader. These proved important because at the beginning of our work, her father thought she should put equal efforts into volleyball and basketball, and was even getting ready to send her to volleyball camp because he thought it would be good for her. Once Juliet was able to voice her definite preferences for track and cheerleading, she was able to get her parents further on board to support her interests rather than theirs.

Her choices even affected the family vacation that year. Her parents had decided Las Vegas would be the perfect place to go, but when Juliet picked out a number of Disney characters and talked about her love of California, Disneyland, and the beach, they decided a trip to Southern California would be a better idea. Not only did she get to have the vacation of her choice, she also gained the opportunity to learn that when she knows what she wants and gives voice to it, she is much more likely to get it. The trip never would have happened if she had not made her wishes known.

One additional figure she chose that really stood out was a camera. Her use of that figure led us to talk about her love of being creative. I asked her to name some of the ways her creative abilities express themselves. It took her no time to mention other things besides photography. Finding different ways to solve math problems, drawing and painting, weaving, working with clay, and being a coach for younger

children were included in her list of creative activities she enjoyed and found meaningful. Through our dialogues, Juliet came to realize that her creativity is a strength, something she can always draw upon, not only for her benefit, but also for the benefit of others.

As Juliet came to recognize more and more things to which she was meaningfully connected, she became better able to recognize how her energy went up for the things she was attracted to, and down for the things she wasn't. She learned to observe these feelings as indicators of where to exert her energy in her on-going efforts to know who she is and what she likes.

### **Juliet's Dream – A Symbolic Path to Knowing Herself**

Dreams use symbolic communication in order to deliver their message. (Jung, C., 1964.) When a client has a dream, the amplification of its meaning is extremely useful in helping to establish what is meaningful to her. Dreams can become building blocks for the foundation of a person's being and ultimately serve as ciphers of transcendence. (Jaspers, 1971). This is why I was particularly pleased when Juliet brought in a dream she had had very close to the beginning of our work. After hearing it, I believed her dream could provide her with a deeper impulse to attain her own experience of her true being, which it in fact did at a number of different points in time.

In her dream, Juliet was Nemo, the well-known fish from the Disney movie, "Finding Nemo." As Nemo, she was out of the water, and at the same time she was fighting ninjas who were attacking her from all sides. We began by talking about the ways in which she feels like a fish out of water in her daily life. For example, a fish out of water cannot breathe. Juliet had a hard time breathing whenever she was afraid. When she thought about it more, she realized she was most afraid whenever she was around people. She worried they were going to find fault with her for things she herself wasn't aware of. It was easy for us to see that her fear of people being critical, for whatever reasons, were like the feeling she had in the dream when the ninjas were coming out of nowhere to attack her.

Juliet agreed she did not want to feel like a fish out of water, endlessly fighting chimeras, but she did not know what she needed to do in order to change her situation. Her conscious desire not to live like that any longer was a part of the beginning of her applying her will to shape her life to please herself. When asked if she could envision another way to live, she came up with the image of Dory, the counterpart to Nemo. Dory was someone who always spoke her mind and said what she thought. She was able to find her way home due to those particular character traits. Dory was what existential philosophers would call being the subject of her life.

Because of Juliet's dream, we were able to add the achievement of becoming an authentic subject of her life to the picture of the highest good that we wanted to achieve. How we would achieve our goal became clearer as we better understood what she was deeply and meaningfully connected to and as we found the means to successfully become who she was gradually envisioning herself to be. The main tools we consistently used to achieve that condition were those which taught her to become an independent rational thinker, the process of which will be discussed in the next section.

### **Pragmatism: Learning to Become an Independent Rational Thinker**

The question, "Why should I do this rather than that?" is characteristic of human beings, and from an early age becomes inescapable. Juliet's cutting herself was a clear indication that she had not learned to stand back in some measure from her inclinations of the moment, so as to be able to evaluate them. In



other words, she had not learned think reflectively. If she had, she would have been able to give sound reasons for her actions, which, at the beginning of our work together, she was not able to do. Realizing this, I knew I needed to spend a number of our sessions teaching Juliet how to become an independent, rational thinker through the use of reflective thinking. (Tiberius, V., 2008.)

Reflective thinking occurs when the basis for a belief or action is deliberately sought and the adequacy of that basis is examined. It is not random thinking. Rather, it involves sequencing ideas in a way that one can see the consequence of one's beliefs and actions through a process of consecutive ordering. Each belief or action determines the next. And each, in turn, leads back to its predecessors. Every phase is a step from something to something. This flow becomes a chain which leads to well-reasoned propositions and behaviors, and it is educational in value. (Dewey, J., 1910.).

Since learning to become an independent rational thinker became the cornerstone of our work, I want to give examples from three of our sessions that show, practically speaking, the process of how Juliet achieved this goal.

### **Example Number One:**

Each time Juliet came to see me, I noticed she entered my office with hunched shoulders and a submissive demeanor. When we sat down to begin our sessions, her arms were either firmly crossed against her chest, or held in tightly by her sides, her hands jammed into her pockets. To me, these were indicators that she was afraid. It seemed she was trying to hold her fear tightly inside herself, all the while thinking no one would notice she was afraid, including herself.

After helping her to observe herself in those moments, I gave her some tools to help her to know what she was feeling. We agreed that the highest good would be for her to be able to recognize fear when she was experiencing it. This would enable her to be able to take care of herself appropriately. I wanted her to be able to move her fear from pre-recognition to recognition, and to give her tools that would help her decide the best way to handle herself in these kinds of situations.

When I asked Juliet to name a typical example of when she experienced fear, she said she always experienced it when she was around people. One of the things she feared was showing other people her true self. She was afraid they might not like her. As we explored the situation more, she told me the disadvantage to her of being afraid was that she was often at the mercy of others. Because her fear left her unable to express herself confidently and to make her wants and needs known, anyone could take advantage of her, or feel free to dismiss her, at any time.

By this point, we had discussed her problem and were beginning to establish some of the connections that were meaningful to her in relationship to it. We identified irrational thoughts like "They're not going to like me," or "I might say the wrong thing," which led her to get tense and nervous, to become afraid, and to be unable to express her thoughts. As a result, people did not know what she thought or felt, they couldn't get to know her. Nor could they help her to get her needs met.

We began to explore pragmatic solutions that would address her fear and its crippling effects. This process would enable her not just to recognize the problem, but also give her the clarity she needed in order to take actions that she would feel good about. The first idea we came up with was to change her negative thoughts to positive ones. For example, when approaching a person, she could tell herself that the person would like her and enjoy having a conversation with her. Since Juliet is a lovely and creative

person, these statements would hold true when she interacted with any normal individual. We also talked about her unreal expectation that she should be enthusiastically liked by everyone.

Now that her thoughts were becoming more in line with the truth, she quickly found they were more useful and good for her than the negative ones she had been utilizing. This led her to be less nervous and more calm, which enabled her to have better conversations and to express her needs. She also gained respect for herself because she was no longer afraid to say what she was thinking.

### **Example Number Two**

Four of our sessions centered around Juliet's anger towards her public school music teacher, Mr. M. Due to the fact that he was not competent in his subject matter and he that he lacked the ability to establish rapport with his students, he had not won her respect nor the respect of most of the other students. Two things that particularly bothered her were that even by the half-way point of the school year, he had not learned the students names, and he that chose songs for the students to sing which were not only below their general level of competence, but which also were not tailored to their musical interests.

Juliet had been taking voice and piano lessons for years. She had also had an excellent music teacher in years past, and she was singing in her church choir. As a result, she had what could easily be considered the relevant knowledge and experience to enable her to speak out about the situation with the aim of changing it in a positive manner. Rather than allowing herself to remain an object in the situation, which would lend itself to her expressing herself in passive aggressive ways, we agreed this situation could provide her with another opportunity to increase her ability to be an independent rational thinker and to be the subject of her life.

For Juliet, making this effort of the will would be worthwhile because she would be telling Mr. M. (the "other") how she felt. She would have the satisfaction of standing up for what she believed was best. Plus, she would feel good knowing she had made the rest of the class happier by standing up to things she knew they didn't like either. As a result, Juliet decided that she would confront Mr. M. with the two main things that he did that made her angry. We agreed this was the perfect venue for her to learn to stand up for what she knew to be true, right, and good.

Juliet and I discussed the things she would need to do in order to be the most effective she could be in achieving these goals. Four things we thought of were: 1) Calm down before she approached her music teacher with her comments and suggestions. 2) Remember not to make him wrong. 3) Stick to her main points; and 4) Be clear. We also established that it would be best to approach him after class, and that it would be helpful to her to bring along another student who was a friend for support.

In one of our next sessions, Juliet told me, with pride, that she had spoken with Mr. M. as we had discussed. As a result, he was making more of concerted effort to call the students by name, and was including them in the choices of songs. During the remainder of the school year, Juliet brought up other complaints she had regarding Mr. M., which he seemed to take in stride. Unbeknownst to him, his class turned out to be a very good laboratory for her to begin to establish herself as the subject of her life.

### **Example Number Three:**

The third example comes from later in the school year, after Juliet had begun the track season. Track was an activity to which she felt deeply committed, as she had been for the last several years. When we discussed the second meet of the season, it turns out she was only one second behind the fastest girl in the state in the 100 meter hurdles. She had the desire to win the event at the meet, not only for herself, but to help her team win the state championship.

John Dewey says we only learn to think through the things that we really care about. (Dewey, J., 1910.) Since Juliet cared a lot about being in track, I saw this as a great opportunity to learn how to develop her skills as an independent rational thinker by thinking through how to shave that extra second off her time. Since I know nothing about track, I had to begin by asking her what she thought she could do to improve her time. In problem solving terms, we were looking for alternatives that would lead her to a solution.

I was very impressed with the ideas she came up with on her own. She knew a number of ways she could work on her feet to get them stronger and quicker. She also mentioned that she could push off from the starting block with more force. In addition, she could make sure she had her foot totally flexed as she went over the hurdles. Juliet went on to name four or five more things she could consciously work on to improve her time, which she did.

We never found out if she could beat the girl who was the best in state because before she could compete with her again, Juliet's coach gave her the opportunity to advance to the varsity team in the middle of the season. Though this meant she would be losing many more races due to her being the youngest runner, after due consideration, she chose the opportunity to advance to the varsity team in order to have the opportunity to get better coaching and to compete against more seasoned runners.

Each of these sessions helped Juliet to become an independent rational thinker and also helped her to become the subject of her life. They showed her how a person, through making thoughtful choices, can transcend her current situation and become the subject of her life. I think the real excitement she experienced was quickly more satisfying to her than the excitement she might have been getting from cutting herself, and it also made more sense.

### **Helping Juliet's Parents to Help Juliet**

Throughout my work with Juliet, which took place over a period of nine months and included eighteen sessions, I helped her parents implement strategies designed to help each family member feel heard and supported. Some of these strategies included: learning a democratic parenting style, holding regular family meetings, and encouraging Juliet to make decisions commensurate with her age by using a systematic problem solving method. (Dinkmeyer, D., 1998.) Over time, they learned that a high degree of insularity and control doesn't promote self-motivation. As a result, they decreased the amount of control they exerted, allowed Juliet to take more risks, increased the number of independent activities in which she could be involved, and encouraged her to take part in exploratory learning, rather than telling her what to do.

### **Reviewing the Case**

When I reviewed the summaries of our sessions, I found in every one various ways in which I helped her to become an independent rational thinker. I believe this was the thing that helped her the most. She only cut herself once more while we were working together, and that was about two months into our

work. I think as she learned to do other things that made her feel better and that she would like to do more of, and as she learned how to step back from situations so she could make better decisions for herself, and as she gained more autonomy within the family, the cutting issue took care of itself. Juliet now had better things to do and successful ways to go about doing them.

Along with becoming an independent rational thinker, Juliet came to know herself better, which enabled her to become the subject of her life. As a result, by the end of our work together, in which she chose the things she wanted to talk about and work on, she was able to think through such problems as how to assert herself against her music teacher, how to shave time off of her track events, how to decide whether or not to become a cheerleader, and how to manage her time and her grades. It also included becoming the agent of her sexuality, which enabled her growth from that of being a girl to becoming a young woman. (Tolman, D., 2002.) Although the agreed upon highest good at the beginning of our work was perceived to be helping her to stop cutting herself, by the end it included so much more that enabled her to flourish within a world that she was learning to create to suit herself.

### **Conclusion:**

This case represents the use of philosophy which arose from and lived within a physical place of rawness. We started from the point of respecting that Juliet must be cutting herself for a reason. If she was willing, we might be able to engage in a dialogue in which we discovered together why, and what were the best things to do about it. I believed that her cutting herself was meaningful and that her self-destructive behavior could be transformed through philosophy. Our beginning place was to be curious and to reflect together.

This case reveals how widely applicable philosophical counseling can be. It illustrates how philosophy can offer a method to help people develop self-reflective capacities, even in surprising situations where it seems there isn't that possibility. The case also demonstrates how, rather than jumping to psychological treatments, it can be helpful to recognize that many young people do not know how to be independent rational thinkers, which means they are unnecessarily debilitated and can be demeaned as a result. Rather than diagnosing and medicating them, it might be preferable to teach them how to be philosophers, albeit in the budding stage. Through a continuous cycle of self-reflection, choice and action, and subsequently seeing the consequences, and then starting again, our young clients can end up in a positive loop they might not have achieved otherwise.

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