

Bread and Counseling Skills: A Review of *The Tassajara Bread Book*

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Counseling Skills

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In *Helping Skills*, Clara Hill (2004) says “ Although I can provide general guidelines, I cannot provide a cookbook to tell helpers exactly what to do in different circumstances” (p. 96). My experiences with cooking, however, have been that cookbooks themselves tend much more towards general guidelines than exact specifications. In particular, Hill’s statement made me think of my relationship with baking bread.

I have never liked to cook. It involves too much waiting around. While I waited for the pan to get hot or the water to boil I would go get a book to read, or check my email, and almost invariably something would burn. For me, cooking was about getting something to eat as fast as possible. I was never interested in spices or trying out new things.

When I moved out of my parents’ house, I had to take cooking a step further. One of the few things I felt comfortable making was bread. My dad had made bread when I was very young, so I could just barely remember how to knead and what good bread dough feels like. I found a very basic recipe (flour, water, yeast, salt, oil and honey) and made a couple loaves. They turned out beautiful and delicious, and I fell in love with baking.

Then I ran in to trouble. I kept forgetting to check to see if I had the right ingredients before starting to make the bread and repeatedly had to improvise in the middle of a recipe. I made half-wheat half-white flour bread, half-wheat half-cornmeal bread, wheat-white-cornmeal bread, bread with too much and too little yeast, many

different kinds of oil, bread with molasses and honey and sugar, and once, very memorably, bread without salt. I always worried that this time would be the time my bread would be inedible, but somehow it always turned out fine.

I started to gain confidence. I started to get a feel for how much I could fiddle with the ingredients, and what would happen when I did. For instance, salt inhibits yeasts fermenting and rising, so if you leave it out the dough ferments more and tastes disgusting. Then I made my biggest leap; I started *wondering* what would happen if I put molasses in, or powdered milk, or butter.

For my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, my mother gave me her copy of *The Tassajara Bread Book*. It is well loved, covered in contact paper with stains on most pages. *The Tassajara Bread Book* does something I hadn't seen before: it describes the individual ingredients not only in and of themselves, but also as part of a system of bread. Flour contains gluten, which holds air in the dough and makes it rise, and gluten stretches while the dough is being kneaded. Different flours have different amounts of gluten, which affects the texture of the baked bread. Oil and milk make the bread texture more cake-like. The yeast is a living organism, breathing oxygen, eating sugars, changing flour and water into bread. *The Tassajara Bread Book* says, "Bake the bread, and the yeast dies. Slice it, butter it, eat it. Be thankful" (Brown, 1970, p. 15). This was a revolutionary approach to cooking and eating for me. Baking became a meditation on my connection to the rest of the universe.

I believe *The Tassajara Bread Book* is about the same thing as Hill's *Helping Skills*. Hill's exploration stage is about being fully present with the client, letting go of the client's situation and focusing on the person. *The Tassajara Bread Book* says, "Bread makes itself, by your kindness, with your help, with imagination running through you,

with dough under hand, you are breadmaking itself, which is why breadmaking is so fulfilling and rewarding” (Brown, 1970, p. vi). Likewise one could say a counselor’s client heals themselves, by the counselor’s kindness, with their help, with imagination running through them.

Baking is visceral. When you bake bread, you can’t be anywhere else. Kneading is about throwing your whole body into the stretching and molding of the dough. You have to think like the yeast: is this too cold? Is this too warm? Is the dough sweet enough or too salty? What is the texture of bran flour or wheat flour and does it want more water? And yet somehow, with all these choices, every loaf of bread I have ever made has been tasty, healthy, made and eaten with love.

When I make bread, wondering is the key. Curiosity is the key. Experimentation is the key. But most of all, confidence is the key. If I don't think I can do something well, I won't try to do it well. With bread, I gained that confidence by continually improvising, unintentionally changing recipes, and somehow making a whole lot of very good bread anyway. *The Tassajara Bread Book* says, “everything is leading you, pushing you, instructing you, butting you to supreme, perfect enlightenment. This means there are no mistakes. You might do it differently next time, but that’s because you did it this way this time” (Brown, 1970, p. 2).

Making mistakes in a counseling situation is scarier. After all, if a loaf of bread is inedible I have lost a dollar or two and a few hours. With another human being, their health is on the line. I have a sneaking suspicion, however, that the lessons I learned baking bread will end up applying to counseling as well. When I am fully present with

the client, I know what I can give them as easily as I know that dough needs more flour or more water.

No one counseling method works for every client. The only commonality in all helpful client-helper relationships is the quality of the relationship itself. As a helper, I must feel that connection with my client, be present with my whole self, and I will be able to tell what the client needs from me. If I can learn to have the same trust in counseling that I do in bread, I believe I will do well. If I am present, if I work with love and willingness and knowledge of what all the ingredients can do, the client can heal.

*The Tassajara Bread Book* says, “A recipe doesn’t belong to anyone. Given to me, I give it to you. Only a guide, only a skeletal framework. You must fill in the flesh according to your nature and desire. Your life, your love will bring these words to full creation” (Brown, 1970, p. vi). When I knead bread dough, I am connected to another living being. When I use Hill’s skills with a client, I am connected as well. *Helping Skills* is that same skeletal framework of ways to help a client. It is up to the individual helper to fill it in with unconditional positive regard, insight, humor, and all of themselves. Perhaps *Helping Skills* is a cookbook after all.

References

- Brown, E. (1970) *The Tassajara bread book*. Berkeley: Shambala Publications, Inc.
- Hill, C. (2004) *Helping skills: Facilitating exploration, insight and action*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.