



Case Study: “I’m Too Stupid”

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This is a case study Charlotte wrote up for her independent study class on Theophostic^{®1}. Throughout this essay, Frank’s own reflections are inserted in italics.

Theophostic[®] ministry is both elegantly simple and sophisticated in depth. One of its basic premises is that emotional pain in a person’s present is frequently being caused or at least exacerbated by “lies” acquired in the past. These *lies* are conclusions drawn, either consciously or subconsciously, during some traumatic event. The *lie* may have been true or nearly true at the time of the event, such as “I’m going to die” during the time of an assault. However, the fact that such a conclusion continues to feel true and to influence the person’s actions and reactions, emotions and thoughts, long after the event is past and gone gives it the character of a lie in the present.

In Theophostic[®] ministry, the minister’s job is to help the client expose the lies and the original pain associated with his/her traumatic memories, so that the client can receive healing words of truth from Jesus Christ in place of the lie. Once all three of the necessary elements are fully present – the memory of an event or events, the lie, and the feeling – the healing occurs quickly, often in what feels like a sudden, but enduring, great relief. The more time-consuming part of the process is getting to the place where all the elements are present, and all hindrances are removed. The case described here helps to illustrate some of the principles of Theophostic[®] ministry.

“I’m too stupid – I can’t do it”

Frank is a devoted Christian in his late thirties. Despite being a highly educated high achiever in every academic endeavor during his lifetime, Frank experienced the irrational but persistent feeling that he was “just too stupid” and “couldn’t figure things out.” *This negative belief had a profound impact on my problem-solving ability. If I couldn’t figure something out fairly quickly, I would get discouraged. Sometimes I would keep trying, but with an expectation of failure undermining the effort. Often I would just give up, with the conclusion “I just can’t figure it out – I’m too stupid.” I never even realized it until after doing this healing work, but I was inhibited/afraid regarding bold thinking. I would keep muddling around in the most obvious/simple/conservative ideas. It just seemed like I couldn’t think outside the box or consider anything that would be new or different in a bold way. I had to invest tremendous amounts of time and energy throughout my science and medical training to learn to problem-solve in very repeatable, systematic (but often slow) ways in order to prevent getting bogged down in this place of discouragement and feeling stupid. I also restricted my functioning (if possible) to areas where I was thoroughly and totally prepared – where I knew the material well enough that I could solve the problems quickly and easily. The beginning of every new rotation through medical school and residency was excruciatingly stressful because I was so far out of*

¹Theophostic Prayer Ministry is a trademark of Dr. Ed Smith and Alathia Ministries, Inc., of Campbellsville, Kentucky.

this safe, conservative, “over-prepared” comfort zone. In my current medical practice, if I tried everything I could think of in my systematic problem solving approach without success, I would get that “I just can’t figure it out” stuck feeling. It would be incredibly difficult to do creative, original problem solving outside of the material I had studied thoroughly. I could feel myself losing the ability to think clearly and getting increasingly discouraged. I would be miserable by the end of this kind of session and would dread appointments that I thought might end this way. I would then usually keep chewing on the problem over the following weeks and months, often eventually finding new ideas through huge amounts of reading and study, but with tremendous cost of time, energy, and chronic stress about the “unsolved problems.”

Frank felt that he worked much harder than other people at the same tasks, and that it was his diligence in putting in extra time and energy, rather than a high I.Q., that accounted for all his achievements. *Before this healing session, I truly believed that my I.Q. was barely average. I would argue with friends and family about why none of my academic accomplishments could prove that I was intelligent. I really did believe that it was all explainable by “I just worked harder than everybody else.” I felt that somehow I had managed to appear intelligent even though I knew I wasn’t. I had fooled people (unintentionally) into thinking I was smart, but certainly they would eventually discover this was not true. I even felt that my SAT scores weren’t “real” – almost that I must have cheated somehow, that my scores were “an accident.” An intriguing part of all this is that it was barely conscious but always present. If someone commented on my intelligence I would feel anxious and give them the reasons why it was an illusion, but I seldom thought about it otherwise. It felt so true and was a chronic emotional background context for my life, but at some level I think I realized that the pieces didn’t quite fit together.*

The process which lead to addressing this issue was not particularly direct; there were a number of inter-related lies which made the one emotional path at times difficult to follow. Over several different sessions, we touched on memories which seemed related to this feeling. We did, however, eventually come to a particular memory which seemed to be the origin of an important contributing component of the larger “I just can’t figure it out – I’m too stupid” lie.

After perhaps thirty minutes of following a number of different emotional trails, Frank recalled a memory we had come to in a number of other sessions. Since we had worked with this same incident before, we wondered whether there was actually anything else to find there. We have, however, learned by experience that many thoughts which initially seem to be distractions can later be seen to be significant steps on the pathway to healing. This time, as Frank described the memory we identified a clue that we had not seen in previous sessions. This clue – the absence of a certain thought and feeling since the event – turned out to be the key to discerning an important lie in the memory.

The memory itself went something like this: Frank was five or six years old, and he and several other friends of the same age were playing in the large recreation room in the basement of Frank’s house. Some other boys were in the hallway outside the room, and they decided to trap Frank and his friends inside by holding the door shut. Due to the specific configuration of the door and the doorknob, the leverage was greatly in favor of the boys on the outside. There was no way that those on the inside would be able to open the door. Then Frank had an idea. There was a teeter-totter inside the basement with them. The board was long enough for all the boys to hold together, and heavy enough to make an impact. They could make a battering ram! Frank rallied the other boys to implement the idea. It succeeded in that when the ram came *through* the

lower panel of the door, the boys on the outside scattered and the door came open. However, what happened next squelched any notion of success. Frank’s father heard the loud breakage and came running down the basement stairs. Frank remembers that his father was angry and that all of the boys were frightened. Several of the boys escaped by running out of the basement through the cellar door. Those that did not “get away,” including Frank, got spanked with his father’s belt. Frank specified that the spanking did not actually hurt physically, but that he had been terrified, thinking: “I just did something bad – I just did something terrible! Now I am really in trouble.”

Frank described the whole memory fairly dispassionately, without any intense emotion. I suggested that his good idea certainly had produced an unpleasant result. Frank stared off into space for a few moments, and then commented quietly: “You know, I can’t remember having that exciting feeling of ‘Wow! I’ve got a good idea – follow me’ ever again since that memory.” Emotions and tears welled up immediately. After crying for a few minutes, Frank commented spontaneously: “It’s not safe to have a good idea and act on it; you’ll break something and get in trouble.” He then began recalling times after that event when he had thought: “Matthew and Steve (friends of his) always have good ideas and do cool things. I never do – I must be stupid.”

During those few minutes, I was praying both silently and sometimes aloud, that Jesus would bring His truth to replace this lie in Frank’s mind. As has been the pattern in Theophostic® work with Frank, he did not “see” any mental images or “hear” any mental words or thoughts. Rather, healing came with the realization of several simple insights. There seemed to be three main parts.

Frank was somehow suddenly able to recognize that he had, in fact, come up with an idea that no one else had thought of to end their imprisonment in the basement. For a five year old, it had been quite brilliant. The idea had worked, after a fashion. He began to remember a number of other events in his life that would objectively indicate that he was actually a very intelligent person. Frank had always known about these other events, but they had never before been able to convince him that he was not stupid. Now he was able to interpret them accurately. He realized that he had been released from the lie: “I don’t have good ideas, so I must be stupid” – it just didn’t feel true any more.

This has been an interesting subjective experience. Every time I have talked about this since the Theophostic® session, I have remembered more examples of data contrary to my long-standing belief that I was stupid. All have been memories that I have always had, but that had been explained away or just put on a shelf because they didn’t fit. I can remember being puzzled by one experience, and actually thinking something along the lines of “Boy, that’s strange. It’s almost like I was intelligent for a minute or something. I wonder how that happened?” It is also interesting that grades and degrees I used to explain away with “I just worked a lot harder than everybody else – it just looks like I am smart” I now think of from a totally different perspective: “It’s amazing I was able to do all that even with a reading disability and all those negative beliefs about my intelligence.”

The second part of the truth was to receive a different perspective on the meaning of his father’s reaction. Frank had not maliciously, or even intentionally, done something he had been told not to do or knew was wrong. Nevertheless, he had assumed that his punishment and the intensity of his father’s anger were justified, and came away with the misinterpretation: “I deserved it

because I was ‘bad.’ I was bad for having such a bad (careless, irresponsible²) idea, and I was bad for breaking the door (acting on my bad idea)”. Prior to this healing moment it had never even occurred to Frank that his father could have responded differently. Suddenly Frank was able to envision several alternative ways that his father could have responded to the situation which would have taught Frank to be responsible for property but would not have frightened him. Frank realized that his father may have reacted due to some wound and lie being triggered in his own life. Frank had simply been the unfortunate victim of a collision between five year old miscalculation and some trigger in his father regarding damage to their home. Through these simple insights, the Lord showed Frank that he was not bad for having a bold idea and acting on it. Even breaking the door was not a terrible wrong deserving of punishment – only an honest but unfortunate miscalculation.

Frank had also come away from this event with the misinterpretation (lie) that thinking boldly and acting with initiative were dangerous. The chance for miscalculation was too great, and the unexpected consequences could be too scary. A third part of the truth was to lose this fear of having bold ideas and acting on them. It just seemed obvious that miscalculation and unexpected damage were the exception, and that bold thinking and initiative would usually be rewarded. “It’s not safe to have good ideas and act on them because you can break something and get in trouble” didn’t feel true any more.

That the new insights were healing words from God is evidenced in the significance and permanence of their impact. Frank does not have to work to convince himself of, or maintain belief in the truth, as one would have to do in cognitive therapy. Since that session, Frank has actually felt a difference in his ability to think clearly and to solve problems. He has been able to navigate more complex ministry situations without the paralyzing sense of being “too stupid.”

The change is so thorough that I often don’t notice it. When I start working on a problem, I just start with a greater confidence that I can find a solution and a subtle sense that I have the ability to think more boldly, that it is okay (not ‘bad’) to think more boldly, and that it is safe to think more boldly. I feel like this has somehow enabled me to think more clearly, to be more tenacious in the overall problem solving venture, and certainly to think more boldly/creatively. There have been several situations where I could feel the place I would have stopped in the past – “Shoot, this just doesn’t work, I guess I can’t figure it out,” and then I would just go ahead and think of a whole new possibility that would provide the answer. I am definitely able to work on a problem longer before deciding to give up. There have been a number of complicated clinical situations where staying with the problem longer resulted in finding a solution which would have been missed had I quit earlier with the conclusion “I’m just too stupid.”

Addendum: In the process of editing this essay 11/27/00 (many months after the initial session), Frank identified an important lie still lingering in this memory³. As he was carefully reviewing

²Adult vocabulary expansion of the original child thought, feeling.

³Dr. Smith describes this phenomena (*Beyond Tolerable Recovery*, 2000 edition, page 347), and we have also seen it to be common. Even when important lies are identified and resolved in the initial session(s), even though the person experiences profound relief at the time of the initial session(s), it is still common for a person to return days, weeks, or months later and discover other lies lingering in the same memory. See also “Recurrent and/or persistent symptoms” (forthcoming essay).

the memory and ministry session in order to focus and describe the lies more precisely, he realized that there were two separate lies attached to feelings of fear in the memory. “It’s not safe to have good ideas and act on them – you can break something and get in trouble” had contributed specifically to the fear of having bold thoughts and acting on them. This lie had been identified and resolved in the earlier Theophostic[®] session. However, there was a second lie, regarding making any kind of mistake: “It’s not safe to make mistakes – something terrible will happen” (adult vocabulary expansion of the child thoughts and feelings: It’s not safe to make mistakes because I won’t be able to handle the frightening and overwhelming consequences”). Frank realized that he was getting triggered as he focused and described this lie, and that it still felt true. Thinking more about it, he realized that this lie and the fear that goes with it had contributed to the motivation that drove him to academic excellence throughout his life, but that it also contributed to his lifelong anxiety and fearfulness. He realized that this lie contributed to being anxious and over-cautious in many settings, fear of thinking boldly and acting with initiative being only one example.