



CHI SIGMA IOTA
Counseling Academic and
Professional Honor Society
International

The Quest for Personal Excellence

Edwin L. Herr

**Distinguished Professor of Education
The Pennsylvania State University**

Last May at the Executive Committee meeting in Greensboro, we discussed what was implicit as well as explicit in Chi Sigma Iota's existence and meaning. The term that emerged was personal excellence. I was asked to think about the concept and how it could be embodied more fully in Chi Sigma Iota's Mission and Rationale. Through the past year as I put some thoughts on paper, Tom Sweeney and I shared how they might be used in a helpful way to articulate Chi Sigma Iota's culture and importance. Today in our Leadership Development Training, after I finish some general thoughts about personal excellence, Tom will present a more focused set of comments that we think may have utility to you. Following these two presentations, in the panels and small groups we have planned for this morning, we are going to spend our time thinking about the operational implications of personal excellence at the chapter and at the counselor education program levels.

To initiate a discussion of the implications of quest for personal excellence as part of leadership development in Chi Sigma Iota may seem presumptuous to some; stating the obvious to others; and perhaps irrelevant to still others. But, please hold those responses in abeyance this morning as we explore the concept a bit further as it relates to the role of counselors in society, to some of the dilemmas their clients experience, to the preparation of counselors, and to the symbolic meaning that a professional honor society, in this case Chi Sigma Iota, represents.

The Importance of Personal Excellence

Let me start with a point that I think is fundamental to the whole notion of personal excellence. It is that as we enter the 21st century, our nation will not long be able to compete with other nations in a global economy, in science and engineering, in the quality of education, in mental health, if we continue to advance directly or indirectly the standard that all that is expected by society, by schools, by social institutions is "getting by," getting a passing grade, taking the shortest route from a to b. However much we use rhetoric in the workplace or schools or universities or counselor education that indicates we are seeking organizational or educational excellence, it is impossible to achieve, it is an unattainable goal, unless there is an informed quest for personal excellence by each employee, student, or counselor trainee. If the latter does not occur, institutional mission statements and strategic plans that voice commitments to organizational or educational excellence are abstractions that have no substance.

So it is with counselor education and with honor societies such as Chi Sigma Iota. It is impossible to develop organizational excellence unless we mirror, reinforce, and make explicit in our standards that

what we do is celebrate the importance of and enable the quest for individual personal excellence.

Our nation, after years of *laissez faire* behavior with regard to the importance of selected personal core values, no concern about unfocused individual behavior, and commitment only to "what's in it for me," is beginning to subtly but surely reassess the role of personal character and responsibility in the decisions people make and in the actions that result. This issue arises in the literature about the prevention and the treatment of alcohol and drug abuse, AIDs, road rage, violence and related processes. Explanations for why so many people experience problems in living have suggested that the answer is not found in pathology or organicity but in issues of personal competence, values, a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Of particular concern is the degree to which people have or lack knowledge or skills that permit them to cope with the developmental tasks, transitions, or crises with which they cope as they deal with the multiple organizational systems, diverse populations, ambiguity and uncertainty, loneliness, and fragile feelings of self-worth that they face on an almost daily basis. The basic realities which support the need for counseling, preventive mental health, and similar processes rest on data such as that which indicates that when the 10 major causes of death are considered, at least seven of them are directly related to lifestyle, personal behavior and personal choices and aside from death as an outcome, many other major social problems' battering, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, alcohol and drug dependence, implicate personal choices (Herr, 1998). As the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has stated:

The most serious and expensive health and social problems that afflict the United States today are caused in large part by behavioral patterns established during youth . . . (e.g., physical illness or injury, mental health problems, hunger, pregnancy, alcohol and drug use, or fear of violence) . . . [These] social problems among America's young people seriously erode their health status, educational achievement, and quality of life. (p. 256)

Clearly the proportion of children, youth, and adults at risk of academic, social, and personal failure is growing in the United States in dramatic ways. The daily media highlight the victims of violence, physical and psychological abuse, homelessness, economic turmoil, racial, sexual or age discrimination, addictive behavior and other insults to human esteem, community, security, and economic, social, and psychological health. These issues are the content with which counselors work as they help persons reestablish the interpersonal skills and the support systems by which to diminish their loneliness and the sense that they do not matter. In such situations, counselors must focus on strengthening such processes as intrapersonal security, motives, and cognitive structures and on creating mental health environments that stimulate accurate perceptions of self-efficacy, rational beliefs, information, and effective action by which to reduce the anxiety, the information deficits, and the irrational beliefs that limit or distort individual behavior.

Counseling, Character and Responsibility

Against such a context, it seems not to be an overstatement to suggest that there has been no better time in human history than the present to underscore the importance of the role of the counselor as one who works at the intersection of individual beliefs, values, and character as it impacts on individual purpose and productivity.

Recent political and economic shifts, not only in the United States, but throughout the world suggest the magnitude of change and upheaval through which nations and their citizens are now moving. It is a time of excitement and uncertainty, but also one that generates fears in many persons about facing the challenges that change requires.

However, there continues to be in parallel to the dire portrayals of economic and social turbulence and the individual problems of living that result, a growing respect for individual potential to deal with such external realities, to shift the focus of attention from external environments to internal environments' individual attitudes, values, impulse control, world views, interpersonal sensitivity, etc. and to the implications of such internal environments for individual responsibility, for what the individual does, for achievements, for self-care and concern for others. Researchers are not only pursuing paradigms of treatment and remediation in counseling, but paradigms that capture the ingredients of the optimization of behavior, personal resilience, self-renewal, and personal flexibility as important foci for counseling.

Although, until recently, the counseling literature has not been filled with behavioral outcomes like "developing good character," such terms are beginning to emerge in various guises. Lickona (1991), in speaking about character education in schools suggests that

When we think about the kind of character we want for our children, it's clear that we want them to be able to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right, even in the face of pressure from without and temptations from within. (p. 51)

According to Lickona, the two values essential for developing good character are respect and responsibility: respect primarily provides direction regarding what we should not do (e.g., do not hurt others) and responsibility provides direction concerning what we should do (e.g., do help others).

There are many other models of what "good character" is that go back to the time of Aristotle if not before. Certainly, a popular contemporary view is that of "Emotional Intelligence" now being applied in workplaces and in schools. Goleman (1995) in the book Emotional Intelligence argues that emotional intelligence is a different way of being smart. It includes self awareness and impulse control, persistence, zeal and self-motivation, empathy and social deftness. Goleman contends that these are the qualities that mark people who excel in real life, whose intimate relationships flourish, who are stars in the workplace. These are also the hallmarks of character and self-discipline, of altruism and compassion, of maturity and responsibility. They can be taught and they can be learned. And, they are certainly elements in the quest for personal excellence.

Individual and Organizational Meaning-Making

There are several other issues here that are worth brief note. Constructivist theory is reaffirming that people are meaning makers; in essence, according to this view, we create our own reality by the choices we make and those we ignore. We have learned that the decisions that persons make about the daily behavioral options with which they are faced tend not to be spontaneous and unconnected but are linked to their philosophy of life and to their self-attributions (I am a winner or a loser?), to their view of their own internal or external locus of control, to their sense of self-efficacy to cope with the daily onslaught of personal encounters and options which require them to take action. In such conditions, self-esteem, personal responsibility and control are interactive: when individuals feel good about themselves, they are able to accept their characteristics, systematically attempt to understand and improve selected ones, to be optimistic and resilient in their approach to life, to feel that they are in control. In a major sense, unless one has these attributes, it is difficult to grant them to others, to be caring, to offer respect, to take responsibility.

Constructivist theory adds new perspective to the transactions between individuals and contexts, of

the personal meaning that arises, and of the ways to enlarge our understanding of individuals as meaning makers within social contexts through the uses of narratives, stories, and metaphors. Constructivists tell us that we are born into stories: the stories of our parents, our families, and our cultures. I would argue that students in counselor education and members of Chi Sigma Iota are born into metaphors and stories as well. In a sense, what we are doing this morning is contending that a significant metaphor for Chi Sigma Iota might well be the quest for personal excellence. We are arguing that how counselors construct their own reality needs to incorporate their potential to continuously pursue the learning, the attitudes, the skills that consistently advance personal excellence in their personal and professional lives and in the lives of those with whom they work.

Social scientists in our society are constantly searching for and pursuing metaphors to describe the essence of a particular time, people, and place. We all live with a myriad of metaphors: the Renaissance, the Dark Ages, the Cold War, the Great Society, the Third Wave, the Age of Unreason, the Triumph of Meanness, the Age of Discontinuity, the Baby Boomers, the Generation X'ers. You can think of many other books and speech titles that develop metaphors of who we are as people, or as a nation; these metaphors carry within them a psychology, a social rhetoric, an opportunity structure to which persons in these environments are exposed and by which they are reinforced. These metaphors suggest the stories, the narratives, the beliefs, the values a particular people at a particular time and place unconsciously share.

We are probing here this morning the validity, the importance, of making explicit in the stories and the metaphors which Chi Sigma Iota expresses, that of the Quest for Personal Excellence in what we do and in our aspirations for those whom we educate and whom we invite into membership in Chi Sigma Iota.

I think one can make a similar argument relative to the role of the counselor-in-training. Unless every counselor education student is pursuing a quest for personal excellence, they are going to short change their clients in the future. If the only criterion is passing courses with a sufficient grade to become certified, there is a continuous and growing gap between what the student might have learned and what they, in fact, do learn. For example, to participate only in selected practicum or internship experiences required by the program, but not volunteer to engage in contacts with populations or problems not in one's practica or field work is to run the risk of having blind spots, to risk areas of incompetence, to risk being ineffective in our contacts with selected counselees for whom we have few insights, meaningful techniques, or ways of serving.

The world of professional counseling, in its training or in its practice, can not be a world of minimums, learning only enough to get by; it must be a world in which one continues to seek maximum insights, maximum skills, maximum competencies; a life devoted to continuous learning as one accepts the reality that to counsel, to intervene in the life of others, is a world of obligation to render the most effective service, to do no harm, to be attentive, to give the gift of time and hope to clients as a manifestation of one's commitment to the quest for personal excellence.

Personal Excellence: Some Perspectives

When we speak of personal excellence what do we mean, what are the ingredients, is it a destination or a journey? Given the fluidity of our lives and of our client's lives, personal excellence can not be a static notion of a destination, it can only be conceived as a journey, a process in which one is consumed by the effort to do one's best, to learn all one can learn, to offer the best one has, to be a statesperson for one's field by understanding the history of our profession, its theories, its techniques, its ethics. I would argue that every member of Chi Sigma Iota should see him or herself as a

statesperson for counseling and for those who need counseling. To be a statesperson is to be more than a technician, a mechanic; it is to see the big picture, the connection between the why and the how. Such goals require a number of specific characteristics. Let me suggest several: for example, self-discipline, compassion, commitment, perseverance/resilience.

Self-discipline is to follow through, to do what one says one will do; self-discipline gives control over the course of one's life and development; it mediates intelligence and focuses one's energy. Self-discipline is not perfection. Obtaining personal perfection is probably impossible, but in our efforts to perform to the best of our abilities, we can achieve excellence. The Japanese word for continuous improvement is kaizen which conveys the notion of constantly reaching, stretching, making improvements incrementally, the quest for higher quality craftsmanship, the daily pursuit of perfection even though the latter is never fully attainable (Pritchett, 1994). In this sense, continuous improvement is unlikely unless it is embedded in self-discipline.

Compassion is a virtue that takes seriously the reality of other persons, their inner lives, their emotions, as well as their external circumstances. It is an active disposition toward fellowship and sharing, toward supportive companionship in distress or in woe. It is this disposition that "hurries us without reflection to the relief of those who are in distress" (Bennett, 1993, p. 105). . . . "Compassion seeks to retain our hold on [the] very early awareness that we are all in the same boat, that, but for the grace of God there go I" (Bennett, 1993, p.107).

Commitment essentially means to care about and work to accomplish goals beyond one's self. Counseling requires such commitment. Unless one is willing to make the extended effort in learning and in behalf of those one serves, one may still be practicing "meism," not commitment.

Perseverance/resilience

Hang in there! is more than an expression of encouragement to someone experiencing hardship or difficulty; it is sound advice for anyone intent on doing good in the world. Whether by leading or prodding others, or improving oneself, or contributing in the thick of things to some larger cause, perseverance is often crucial to success. (Bennett, 1993, p. 527)

Perseverance is an essential element of counseling but it needs to be integrated with other behaviors like self-discipline, compassion, sensitivity, caring, conveying hope, brokering opportunity. It is not just being in one's face, not just pestering. It is being there for others, for one's clients, on a persistent and continuing basis. It is being resilient, continuously getting back up after the hurts, rejections, put downs cause one to pause, to lick one's wounds, to reassess.

Obviously, each of you can think of other counselor characteristics that are important. I hope you will identify them as you write your notes or participate in small groups later this morning.

Probably the most important issue here is that personal excellence is not singular, it is a multiple set of characteristics which likely maintain their core but are constantly being added to as one's life experiences, obligations, and commitments grow throughout life. They are not simply fixed entities but sets of attitudes and behaviors which grow as they are implemented and practiced. They are fundamental ingredients of being a counselor, of being a recipient of and a contributor to the culture of counseling, and to the continuous optimization and renewal of one's quest for personal excellence.

To bring these remarks to a conclusion. Let me suggest that personal excellence is not a matter of

social engineering; it is a matter of informed commitment. From an assessment perspective, informed personal excellence for a Chi Sigma Iota member, a client, or a counselor education student rests upon understanding one's strengths, interests, values, and purposes and the ability to systematically use these attributes to evaluate and fully participate in the educational and career opportunities available. Such self-knowledge must, in turn, be reflected in the personal confidence that using one's skills or knowledge constructively will lead to meaningful and desired outcomes. Thus, assessment cannot stand alone but must be integrated with attitudes from Chi Sigma Iota chapter advisors, professors, and counselors that provide support for and direction to individual productivity and purposefulness.

In the case of Chi Sigma Iota, informed personal excellence means continuing to mirror in publications, conferences, and workshops, examples of the quest for personal excellence and creating in its rhetoric, metaphors, narratives, experiences, and stories that reinforce such a quest. It means providing awards and accolades that identify those who are role models of the quest for personal excellence; those who are statespersons for counseling and counselor education; those who embody self-discipline, compassion, commitment, perseverance/resilience and other traits that motivate them to purpose and productivity and who, therefore, represent mentors for the rest of us.

References

Bennett, W.J. (Ed.). (1993). The book of virtues: A treasury of great moral stories. Carmel, NY: Guideposts, Inc.

Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence. New York: Bantam Books.

Herr, E.L. (1998). Counseling in a dynamic society. Contexts and practices for the 21st century. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Lickona, T. (1991). Educating for character. New York: Bantam Books.

Pritchett, P. (1994). The employee handbook of new work habits for a radically changing world. 13 ground rules for job success in the information age clellas, TX: Pritchett & Associates, Inc.