

What I Learned About God from Group Therapy

By Shaun Dutile

So I'm cruising down Route 29 in central Virginia last week on my way to Liberty University for a week-long intensive class on Group Counseling, when all of a sudden the truck comes to a screeching halt throwing everything on my slippery, vinyl bench seat onto the floor beneath me and myself to the front of my seat belt. Up to this point the 7.5 hour trip was rather uneventful: no major traffic jams, no mechanical problems, no speeding tickets (although I probably deserved a couple) and only a half an hour to go. At this point I knew I would not meet my 8:00pm check-in deadline for the dorms so I was no longer in a hurry to get there. I have to admit, though, that I was still driving somewhat unsafely: messing with the radio, eating snacks, drinking coffee and looking out all windows at the beautiful Virginia landscape. My attention was distracted just long enough to miss the traffic light up ahead. Still 100 yards or so from the light I began to see the perpendicular traffic begin to emerge across the highway and then the sneaky traffic light appeared as well. With one foot jammed on the brake and one hand on my coffee I slid to a screeching stop with the rear-end of my truck just past the white stop line. Fewwww. That was close.

It was not until I arrived back in NJ a week later that this brief almost-accident would prove to be a theme for our Group Therapy class and an important spiritual insight for me. You would be amazed how quickly a group of 8 strangers can bond when they spend 3 hours a day in intense group therapy, bearing their souls to one another, handing each other tissue after tissue, and telling each other things they had never told another soul before. By the end of the week we all started to feel a little bit of separation anxiety as we anticipated heading back home on Friday to interact with certain friends and family members who, although not strangers to us, are just not as close to us as these 8 strangers became in 5 short days.

In our final class session the Professor asked the entire class, "What did you learn from this group therapy process this week that you will take with you in your careers and relationships?" I gave it some thought and said, "I leave here discontent with the depth of relationships I have allowed myself to settle for because of fear of conflict. I have learned that unless relationships experience conflict and wrestle through that conflict together, we forfeit the opportunity of growing deeper and closer".

Truth be told, unless we are willing to drive a little risky in life, perhaps drive a little outside of the lines, maybe travel at speeds not recommended by the authorities and occasionally take our eyes off of the imaginary dotted lines of relational safety, we forfeit the opportunity to get really close to others, dangerously close even. We miss the opportunity to cross the white line of separation and get into each other's worlds. Now I am not advocating that Christians go out and break all traffic laws, but I am advocating that we break all relationship-halting laws that keep us on superficial terms, both with God and each other.

Let me ask you, how many of your current relationships would you call superficial? How many people in your social circle right now actually know you? How many people in your social circle right now do you actually know? I mean really know: struggles, sins, weaknesses, fears, beliefs and all.

Now onto a deeper question (I hope you will allow me to drive a little outside of the superficial-relationships lines here and ask a potentially offensive question): How superficial is your relationship with God? What type of smooth road, speed limit enforced, no passing zone, law abiding, relationship hindering track are you on with God? I mean really; are you satisfied with a 30 second bed-time prayer for your time with God each day? Is “going to church” once a week or once a month really exhilarating to you? Do you really want to abide by all of the relationship-smashing signs on the side of the road which say, “a little religion is ok but don’t pursue God too fast or with any sense of adventure or you may get hurt”?

Well after this group therapy class and a near-death experience I have learned that unless I am willing to break a bunch of relational traffic laws that haven’t done anyone any good anyways, then I must settle for the smoothly flowing, conflict avoiding relationships on this road to nowhere, and I can do that just fine. But do I really want to hibernate into my own mind and try to convince myself that I am the only one in the world with my problems? Is it really that freeing for me to drive on the safe relationship road where I never let myself be known or get close enough to others to really know them? I’m wondering which is worse: risking being hurt by people I have let know me (it will probably happen at some point) or risking the formation of an unfulfilling relationship with God and people that ultimately leaves me lonely and depressed.

The more I think about it, the more I think that the road God wants us on with each other, and especially with Him, is a dirt road with no lines at all. It is a road with no road-signs to tell us how much of God is too much and no traffic lights to warn us when we are becoming too transparent and real with each other. On this road 4 wheel drive is required and a heart which is willing to risk danger for the sake of deep, abiding, lasting and loving relationships with God and people. Now let’s be sure that this risky, potentially dangerous road is a road which leads uphill to the King of the Hill, that is Jesus, and not the one-way, southbound road to the valley of despair and the king of the air. Taking risks with relationships must never involved risky behavior; but it better involve risky challenges toward holiness with God and others.

So in what way do you need to begin to drive dangerously this week? What risky spiritual steps do you need to take in order to pursue God more completely? What relationship-hindering stop lights do you need to ignore in order to risk becoming dangerously close to people who could help you become dangerously close to God?

What did I learn about God from Group Therapy this past week? I learned that getting close to God and to people involves risk; but the risk is more than worth it.

May God bless you as you begin to live relationally risky today!

Shaun