



Case Study: “I’m Too Stupid”

(©Copyright 2002 K.D.Lehman MD & C.E.T.Lehman MDiv, Last revised 2/1/2025)

This is a case study Charlotte wrote up for one of her seminary classes. Throughout this essay, Karl’s reflections are inserted in blue.

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”

Karl is a devoted Christian in his late thirties. Despite being a highly educated high achiever in every academic endeavor during his lifetime, Karl experienced the irrational-but-persistent feeling that he was “just too stupid” and “couldn’t figure things out.” *Karl’s comments: 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 this safe, conservative, “over-prepared” comfort zone. In my 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.”

Karl 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. Karl’s comments: Before this healing session, I truly believed that my I.Q. was barely average, or even below average. I would argue with friends and family about why none of my academic accomplishments could prove that I was intelligent. I truly believed 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 somehow (unintentionally) fooled people into thinking I was smart, and I always felt that they would eventually discover this was not true. I even felt that my SAT and Medical Board scores weren’t “real” – almost that I must have cheated somehow – that my scores were a fluke, or some kind of 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. This belief that I was unintelligent felt profoundly true, and it was always present as a subtle emotional background context for my life, but at a barely conscious level I had a vague sense that the pieces didn’t quite fit together.

The process which led 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 sessions, we touched on a number of different memories which seemed related to this feeling. Eventually, we came 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, Karl 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 Karl 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: Karl 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 Karl’s house. Some other boys were in the hallway outside the room, and they decided to trap Karl 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 Karl had an idea. There was a teeter-totter inside the basement with them. The board was long enough for all the boys to line up along its length, and heavy enough to make an impact. They could make a battering ram! Karl rallied the other boys to implement the idea. It succeeded brilliantly, in that the boys on the outside scattered and the door came open when the ram came *through* the lower panel of the door. However, what happened next squelched any notion of success. Karl’s father heard the loud crash of the battering ram smashing through the door and came running down the basement

stairs. Karl 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 Karl, got spanked with his father’s belt. Karl 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.”

Karl described the whole memory fairly dispassionately, without any intense emotion. I suggested that his good idea certainly had produced an unpleasant result. Karl 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, Karl 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 Karl’s mind. As has been the usual pattern in Theophostic® work with Karl, 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.

Karl 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. Karl 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.

Karl’s comments: I have had an interesting subjective experience since this healing work. Every time I have talked about this issue since the 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 been consciously aware of, but that had been explained away or just put on a shelf because they didn’t fit. I can even 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’m 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 Karl received was a different perspective on the meaning of his father’s reaction. Karl 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, irresponsible¹) idea,

¹Adult vocabulary expansion of the original child thoughts and feelings.

and I was bad for breaking the door (acting on my bad idea).” Prior to this healing moment, it had never even occurred to Karl that his father could have responded differently. Suddenly Karl was able to envision several alternative ways that his father could have responded to the situation – alternative responses which would have taught Karl to be responsible for property, but would not have frightened him. Karl realized that his father may have reacted due to some wound and lie being triggered in his own life. Karl 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 Karl 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.

Karl 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 piece of truth that Karl received during this session was to lose this fear of having bold ideas and acting on them. All of a sudden 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” just 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. Karl does not have to work to convince himself of the truth, or maintain belief in the truth, as one would have to do in cognitive therapy. Since that session, Karl 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.”

Karl’s comments: 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,” but 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), Karl identified an important lie still lingering in this memory². As he was carefully reviewing 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

²This is a common phenomena. Even when important lies are identified and resolved in the initial session(s), and 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, different lies lingering in the same memory.

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”). Karl 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, with fear of thinking boldly and acting with initiative being only one example.