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□ Faith Today

Regaining control: The not-so-instant, no-magic formula

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

Ruth came to see me for the first time about three years ago. We had worked together on several church projects. Her energy, talents and marvelous sense of humor made her an asset in any community project. But we had never talked about anything personal.

Then one day she called with a personal request. She sounded down and depressed. "I was told that you are also a counselor and I think I could use some help," she said.

Then she told a story that with variations could probably be repeated in many a household.

During a recent medical checkup her doctor noted a substantial weight gain and warned, with something less than perfect diplomacy, that, "Just because you're getting older now you can't let yourself go."

"Older," she had thought indignantly. "I'm only 43!"

But then, as she drove home, she recalled that in a few short years the children would be grown and gone. What really got to her, though, were his comments about "letting yourself go."

She knew something was wrong. Her energy just wasn't there any more. She was finding it harder to do ordinary household chores. She seemed to be running late more often. What she did get done brought little sense of reward.

Ruth knew her appearance was slipping. Her husband didn't compliment her looks the way he used to. She recalled with distress how the bold straight lines on her plaid skirts were now all curved. She thought of buying

new clothes, but didn't even want to talk about it with the salesperson until she lost weight.

When she got home she went to the bedroom and looked long at herself in the three-way mirror. Then she sat down, put her head on her arms and sobbed for about 10 minutes.

That's when she called me.

By the time Ruth came to see me a few days later, her distress was worse. Feeling the need to get away, she had suggested to her husband that they go for the weekend to Carmel, a beautiful spot on the Pacific Ocean south of San Francisco. "Come on," he joshed, "our television has the same football games as theirs."

The children hadn't helped much either. As Ruth explained it: "The other parents and I have a driving pool, but I still seem to spend the better part of the day on the road. Three different schools each morning, then it's chauffeuring this one to football practice, that one to slumber parties. And all I ever get from the children is, 'Ma, hurry up. We're gonna be late.'"

She looked at me, and with humor showing through the tears in her eyes, she said,

"I need to know, is there life after car pooling?"

Counselors don't see themselves as magicians. We don't try to fix what is broken. We don't say we can change lives. What we can do is help people find their own direction and support them as they regain control of a situation slipping from their grasp.

Ruth is a competent, intelligent and productive woman and an affectionate wife and mother. But like all people she needed real goals and purpose, the kind of purpose that can mobilize her during the day and give her a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction at its end.

Like many people, she reached a point where her working goals began to seem thin, even hollow. She would go through the same motions that had carried her happily through 20 years of marriage and parenting. But from somewhere inside her came a suspicion that it was no longer enough.

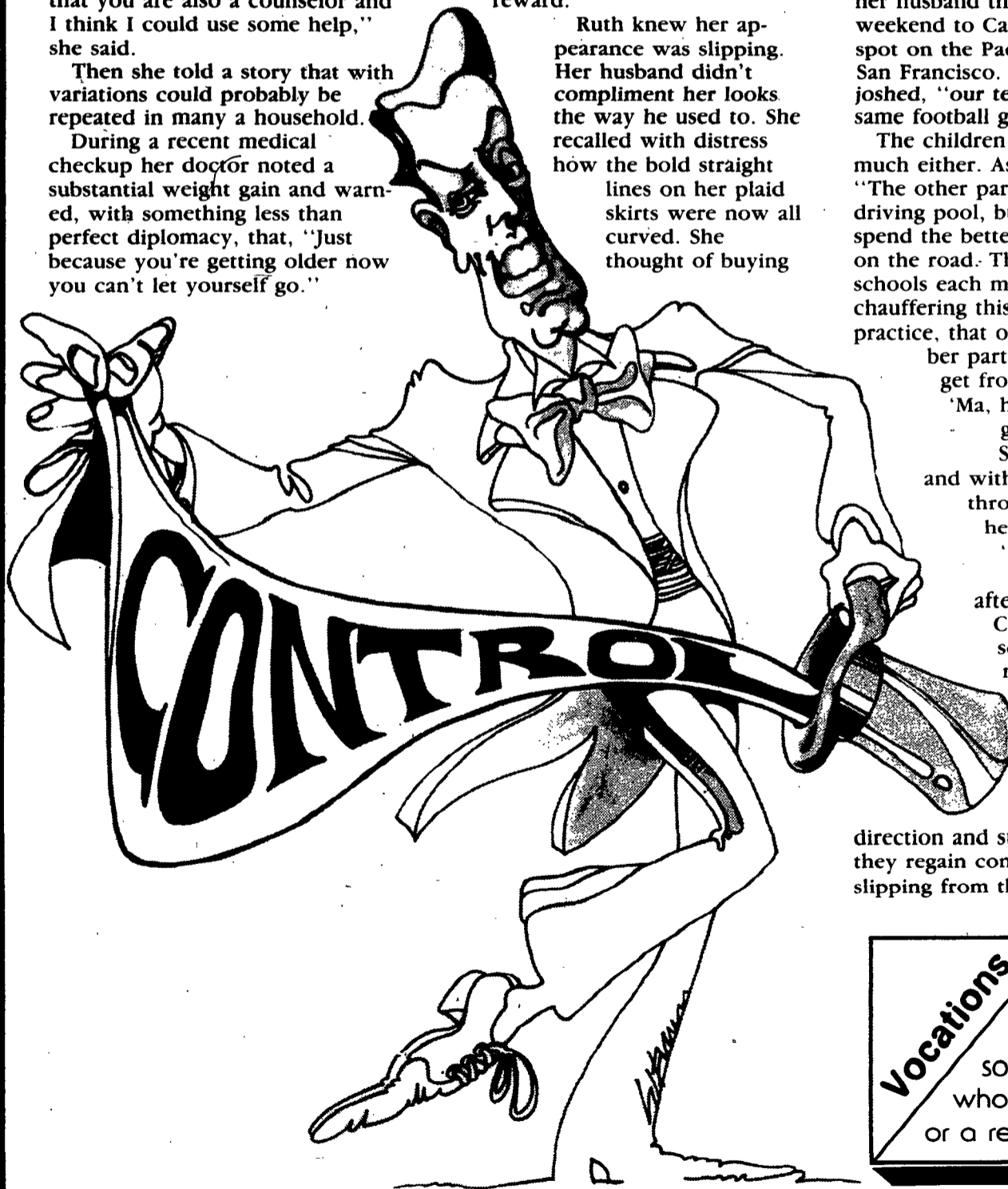
Ruth and I met weekly for about four months. During our first sessions we tried to put labels on what was going on in her life. Then we went on to see what we could do about it.

How she and her family pulled things together is not important here. What is important is the belief our work was based on — that much of our life is subject to our own human control. It is right for us to exert that control where possible.

This is also a traditional Catholic notion. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, said that conscious action for well-understood goals is the principal mark of humankind.

In this, the views of the theologian and the pastoral counselor come together. For the counselor spends much of his or her time helping people to reassert control over their lives.

(Father O'Rourke is associate director of the family life office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)



Vocations

Counselors such as this week's writer, Father David O'Rourke, don't claim to work miracles. They simply provide some direction to the many ordinary people who sometimes lose sight of worthwhile goals or a reason to struggle with life's demands.