

Transforming Humiliation: Spiritual and Dialogic Aspects

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The focus of my comments is on how we can “process” humiliation so that it can be transformed and on how we can create social spaces where this can consistently happen.

From my childhood I have been interested in what enables some people to go through terrible experiences and still emerge as whole human beings while others are destroyed by these traumatic experiences. In my doctoral dissertation I examined 192 life histories, autobiographies and autobiographical novels trying to identify the variables associated with Effective Multicultural Coping and Adaptation among US physically distinguishable minorities, that is, Native-, Hispanic-, African- and Asian-Americans. This was “tough case multiculturalism,” that is, having to become “multicultural” in order to survive. A key element in this effective tough case multiculturalism is an incredible amount of *resilience*, and the key element of this resilience was *the ability to transform negative emotional energy into positive emotional energy*.

This “ability” has both *energetic, spiritual* aspects and *dialogic* aspects. The *energetic, spiritual* aspects are beyond the realm of conventional social science to explain. For instance, there is the case of Alfred White Hat, an American Indian Movement activist, whose Grandfather had survived the December 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre. Carrying this tragic history in his family was one of the things that had turned Alfred into an activist in the 1960s and 70s. However, he was carrying so much rage, he knew he was in trouble and that in a burst of rage he might either kill others, kill himself, or both. So, he decided to do a traditional Vision Quest. This Quest involved fasting, climbing a sacred mountain and tending a fire for four days on the top of the mountain. Entering into a state of altered consciousness some kind of guardian spirit generally appeared to the Quester. However, with Alfred nothing happened. He was just getting more and more enraged. However, he was committed to completing the Quest, so he stuck out the four days. On the morning of the last day he had pretty much decided that when he descended the mountain he was going to get a gun, kill as many White People as possible and then kill himself. However, as he was dowsing his fire on that last morning, the sun started to rise, and it was the most beautiful sunrise he had ever seen in his life, and in a twinkling of an eye, his whole energy shifted, and he decided to be part of the Beauty rather than part of the Ugliness. However, he later remarked, continuing his commitment to Beauty he sometimes had to forgive a hundred times in one day.

The *dialogic* aspects of transformation involve the healing effects of *authentic listening*, of being really heard. Such authentic listening involves a special form of *dialogue*. My

ideas about dialogue have been shaped by many influences, but today I would like to highlight the influences of four women.

First, there is *Mme de Stahl*, the 18th century “salonist,” who identified the nature of what she called “*compassionate conversations*.” These are conversations where the *feelings* of one person are able to enter the *soul* of another. Such conversations are dangerous. Why? Because you exit the conversation a different person from the one you were when you entered. Why? Because you learned something in the conversation that transformed your consciousness.

Second, there is *Dolley Madison*, President James Madison’s wife, who, at the beginning of the 19th century, first created “coming together space” in the White House. At that time there were often canings on the floor of Congress, and dueling amongst members of Congress was a regular happening.

Third, there is Aeli. As I mentioned above my interest in resilience stems from my childhood. Aeli, a Sephardic Jewish, Viennese, was a heroine of my childhood. She and her husband had survived the Holocaust. Her husband, however, eternally regretted being a violinist in the Vienna Symphony and his whole pre-War life in Austria. Aeli, however, thought it her duty as a survivor to live life well and fully. Her very presence in a room made you feel better. At her funeral the Rabbi said that Aeli had this rare ability to enter a space in which discord was taking place but provide “the third note” so that harmony could occur.

And, fourth, there is La Donna Harris, the Comanche founder, 40 years ago, of Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO), a national Native American advocacy organization in the US. Her idea of “setting people in with each other” involves the creation of both physical and intellectual spaces where people can come together to see how they are related to each other and, therefore, how they affect each other. A question that allows such knowledge to surface is, “How did you get your Medicine?” That is, where did you get your power? What enabled you to be here today? What did you have to overcome? Whom do you have to thank?

Each of the kinds of spaces these women created suggest the kind of atmosphere that supports the *authentic listening* that is key to the ability to transform stories of humiliation and victimhood into stories of resilience.

I have worked with three *dialogic processes* (and these are not the only ones) that consistently support this *authentic listening*. First, there is Alexander Christakis’ and Ken Bausch’s Structured Dialogic Design (SDD), a computer-assisted, consensus-based dialogue process for complex problem-solving. Second, there is David Bohm’s Transcultural Dialogue (TCD), an open dialogue process for relationship building and information sharing. Third, there is Sharon Ellison’s Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (PNDC), which “is more than a technique but a new way of being.” All consistently create social spaces where the *authentic listening* that supports transformation can occur.

The last three years of my 17 years teaching at International Christian University (ICU), in Tokyo, Japan, I organized the North East Asian Dialogue (NEAD) Project, which brought together Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and Russians to identify the obstacles to intercultural relations in the North East Asian region and to discuss how to overcome them. This Project grew out of the fact that there is no standing forum for discussing North East Asian regional issues. At the end of World War II, the fighting just stopped in the region. There were no treaties. Nothing (including issues like the Nanjing Massacre) was reconciled or resolved. As a result of this Project, many relationships were created out of the opportunity to discuss all this contested history. Eventually, this network of relationships may be able to create (maybe in the next generation?) a North East Asian Regional Day of Reconciliation.

And under this recent layer of contested history there were other layers, some of which had to do with the “deep” history of the four nation states and their relationships with the Indigenous Peoples in their territories. As a result of “being heard,” the Ainu, the Indigenous People of Japan, who participated in the NEAD Project were also among those who organized the International Indigenous Peoples’ Summit in July 2008. This meeting took place one week before the G8 met in Hokkaido, and it was this meeting that “enabled” the Japanese government finally to recognize the Ainu as the Indigenous People of Japan. In addition, this coming January the Ainu will now create their own political group to participate in mainstream Japanese politics, for the first time enabling Ainu voices to be heard consistently at all levels of governance.

A Japanese student, Yuu Tagawa, who is a very talented graphic facilitator, vividly captured what happens when *authentic listening* takes place ...

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TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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I have come to call the spontaneous “communities” that emerge around a given issue or problem **MIID Communities**, that is, **M**ulticentered, **I**nclusive, **I**nterlinked, **D**ialogic Communities. The current Occupy Communities are the most dynamic manifestation of this phenomenon to date, and with the help of Peter Jones the Toronto Occupy Community has started to experiment with Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) processes to manage their affairs, both *political aggregation* within the Occupy Movement and *effective communication* of their multifaceted vision outside the Movement.

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- _____. On the Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) Process see The Institute for 21st Century *Agoras*. www.globalagoras.org