

Accepting vulnerability – necessary for a good society?¹

© Finn Tschudi, September 2005

Revised draft of paper for Telemark symposium August 18-21 2005

1. Introduction
2. Art, religion and society
3. Acknowledging shame vs. escalation:
A story from Ghana vs. 9/11
4. Conferencing, I - Thou, and the emphatic wall
5. Agency and communion in conferencing
6. A mythical(?) story from Caucasus
7. “Therapy” – using the Ghana story to encourage vulnerability
8. Unmitigated agency – hubris
9. Concluding comments

Fellow human being:
Do not forget that Thou art dust!
Do not forget that Thou art more than dust!

[Menneske: Glem ei at Du er støv! Glem ei at Du er mer enn støv!]

Henrik Wergeland

¹ Most of the points made in this chapter has been presented ultimo July/primo August 2005 on the Tomkins-Talk website, and I am grateful for encouragement and suggestions made by other participants.

1. Introduction

In 1998 I had two major interests: I had gradually become aware that current psychology placed little emphasis on emotional processes and I also became interested in processes for transforming conflicts. Concerning emotions I renewed a longstanding interest in the seminal contributions by Silvan Tomkins (1962, 1963, 1991, 1992), Demos (1995). When checking the Tomkins website I saw that Tomkins' theory of affect had played a significant part in a new approach to conflict transformation in Australia. Don Nathanson - who has done more than any other in both making Tomkins' rather dense theory more accessible and also developed the theory further (Nathanson, 1992) - kindly introduced me to John McDonald, David Moore, Terry O'Connell and Margaret Thorsborne in Australia, and they introduced me to their work.

Their work is now seen as part of larger restorative movement, which contrasts with the dominant retributive tradition. Here the focus is not on who is to blame (and punished) when harm is done as is a major approach in the Western individualistic tradition. Rather the issue is seen as how to undo (as far as possible) the harm which has occurred and restore (or if necessary build) viable relations. For this purpose the major parties e.g. "offender(s)" and "victim(s)", and persons close to these parties are brought together in a **conference** where all participants are seated in a circle, and there is no table separating the participants. The Convenor (facilitator) follows a script which (hopefully) will bring the contesting parties to a point where strong negative emotions are transformed to mutual understanding and cooperation. An excellent introduction to conferencing is Moore & McDonald (2000), where this approach is shown to be relevant to a wide variety of conflicts. The present chapter builds on this and my previous work on conferencing, Neimeyer & Tschudi (2003), Tschudi & Reichelt (2004)

Here I specifically want to extend and elaborate the turning point between dominant negative emotions and cooperation which is called **collective vulnerability**.

"When everyone has spoken and so contributed to the collective picture of what happened, individuals experience a sense of deflation, and the group experiences a collective sense of vulnerability (or a collective experience of shame)". Moore & McDonald, 2000, p. 51). Concomitant with this is a deep recognition that "we are all in the same boat", an affirmation of joint humanity, what I think of as "jointness".

A major thesis in this chapter is that there is a universal core in deep cultural experiences (art, religion, myth, rituals) which is also found in transformation of serious conflicts.

In this chapter I first sketch a broad framework for experiences of vulnerability/ shame. Section 2 advances the proposition that such experiences may be at the heart of art and religion. Hopefully this will underscore the importance of honoring and promoting "soft" aspects of culture.

Section 3 draws on Lederach (2005) who provides a beautiful story of how acknowledging vulnerability may have played an important role in avoiding an all out civil war in Ghana in the mid 1990's. This is contrasted with the "hard" aspects of current US foreign policy in the wake of 9/11. .

The next subsections elaborate aspects of collective vulnerability in stories told in Neimeyer & Tschudi (2003). Section 4 gives preliminary sketch of some conditions for recognizing the other as Thou (vs. It). In section 5 Bakan's (1966) concepts agency and communion are introduced and two possible relations between agency and communion are illustrated:

Agency may be a precondition for communion
Experience of communion may foster a healthy agency

The story in section 6 illustrates that reconciliation is not a simple story of just saying "I'm sorry", a theme also prominent in the story in section 4.

Section 7 returns to problems associated with unbalanced agency/communion in organizations and proposes that the Ghana story may serve as an inspiration for promoting a more balanced atmosphere. This leads to some further comments on projects using art – specifically music and thus ties in with section 2.

While pride may be seen as a normal, healthy response, it may turn into lethal hubris, or "unmitigated agency" as Bakan (1966) warns against. This concept is further treated in Section 8 where we return to the story from Ghana and 9/11 in section 3.

2. Art, religion and society

Shame² has received extensive attention in the Tomkins tradition. The major emphasis here, however, has been on "bypassed shame", reactions which does not explicitly acknowledge shame but represent various defensive stances. Nathanson (1992) has formulated a "compass of shame", describing the four reactions (scripts) "withdrawal, attack self, avoidance, and attack others". Scheff (1994) has written extensively on "attack others" or in his terminology "shame-rage spiral". He does for instance find such spirals to be a major factor in the outbreak of both WW1, and WW2 in the last century.

In the present context, however, we focus on deep recognition of shame, as for instance collective vulnerability experienced in conferencing. Nathanson nods to the advantage of "acceptance" of shame, but Scheff has a more extensive treatment of what he prefers to call "acknowledged shame". (Normal use of shame – as a necessary "brake" which often is necessary in social relations – is usually done automatically, without much conscious cognitive effort. Here I focus on explicit, conscious acknowledgement of shame.)

Scheff (1995) has edited an issue of *American Behavioural Scientist*, vol. 38, 8 devoted to acknowledged shame. Here Frederic Turner's (1995) article: "Shame, Beauty, and the Tragic View of History" is of special interest. Turner elaborates the view that acknowledged shame is necessary for "a deep recognition of our joint humanity" or in

² In the Tomkins tradition guilt is seen as a special case of shame. Readers might prefer to read "guilt" for some of the uses of shame here. One way to think of shame which might capture both the common sense notion and the more technical definition of "interrupted positive emotion" in the Tomkins tradition is to see shame as "exposed shortcomings".

his words “an astonishing feeling of solidarity with all human beings”. The essential knot of our human predicament revolves around: “the problematic coexistence of a reflective mind with a smelly, sexed, and partly autonomous human body”.

The Norwegian poet laureate in the first half of the nineteenth century, Henrik Wergeland, expressed it like this (sorry for inadequate translation):

Fellow human being:
Do not forget that Thou art dust!
Do not forget that Thou art more than dust!

Turner describes several foundation myths dealing with “some deeply shameful act at the origin of the human world”. I have been particularly taken by “the Eskimo story of Sedna and her father, Anguta. Sedna marries a dog against her father’s wishes; the father kills her dog-husband; on the way back, a storm rises and Anguta, to lighten the boat, throws his daughter overboard; she clings to the boat and he, to get rid of her, cuts off her fingers... The severed fingers of Sedna become the beautiful warm-blooded marine mammals by which the Eskimos survive.” This is an illustration of how “our myths conduct us into the realms of shame where the hot blush of consciousness can be transformed into the delicious shiver of beauty.”

I have been raised in a good Christian family, every year hearing the Christmas gospel, but not as Turner describes it:

“the shameful story of Christmas, of the infant god born between the two places of excrement, urine and feces, and laid in a manger among the brutes..” The Norwegian word “krybbe” – English “crib” – brings forth more “sanitized” associations than “manger among the brutes” in the English version, and thus the shame has been partly eclipsed for me.

A further question: How come that my associations to the primal crucifixion scene is glorious sacrifice? What has been next to completely absent for me is that crucifying at that time was a mark of utter contempt, the ultimate way of bringing shame to the transgressor. Quite often I listen to 'Ytre Suløens jazz-ensemble' – one of the Norwegian jazz groups which occasionally visit New Orleans, their "sacred town". The specific song which here is relevant is Aline White singing "The old rugged cross". I have replayed it several times these days:

"On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross. The emblem of suffering, sorrow and shame."

In the present context the important point is that "shame" is barely audible in the text, mirroring lack of attention in my religious upbringing. Today this carries a strong metaphorical meaning for me.

Turning to art, a major thesis in the article is that acknowledged shame is the mother of all true art (my formulation), and unacknowledged shame is thus incompatible with genuine art and beauty. As Turner puts it: “The traditional forms of art are both reminders of our shame and revealers of beauty.” When reading the article I was

reminded of Michelangelo's frescos in the sixteenth chapel; an awe-inspiring example of Turner's thesis.

An important mission for Turner is to castigate the major left and right political ideologies. Scheff has told him that "Both sides are equally at fault; they are involved in an extended shame- rage tangle." Concomitant with the rise of the left and right beauty, "the mysterious twin of shame", thus gets short thrift. "The political right arose out of a new response to shame; outright denial of the shameful kinship with the less fortunate.. All the shame of one's own condition is projected on the poor, the racially other.." and beauty is incompatible with the "breezy philistinism, the apparent incapacity for shame" by the right.

The left – where Turner indulges in strong bouts of self-criticism – is treated much more extensively. The main point, however, is that the left first "bypass the unbearable shame of personal failure, transform it into pity for the oppressed.. translates pity for the oppressed into hatred for the rich and successful"

He does point at a way out of the dilemma he poses for any left person (as I think of myself) when commenting on feminism. He distinguishes between radical feminism which clearly is indicted since it is "currently engaged in a debate about how best to deny the inherent shame of our division into two sexes. Should it deny the distinction itself, or deny the moral legitimacy of the male sex?" On the other hand he sides with the feminism "which is no more or less than the noble assertion of human rights and dignities".

His message is that "our dignity as human beings, paradoxically depends upon the acceptance of our shame.. In this perspective art may take on a new mission, which is also its old one – to be the ritual by which we accept our shame and transform it into beauty."

When I think about what "modernity" implies an expression from Max Weber is called to mind – living in "the iron cage of rationality". To me this speaks of an arid, disenchanted world, and I see Turner as encouraging us to search for and bring back the magical and wonderful to (re)enchant the world.

It has been a sobering experience to try to find whether my own views also contain denied shame and projections. Believing in dialogue, denied shame might be a basic obstacle since this will call forth defensive reactions. Hoping that my own journey here might be an inspiration to others I give some personal examples³

³ A recollection from university life in the stormy 60's and 70's when marxists-leninists dominated the intellectual scene: In a conversation about the topics here my friend, neighbor, impeccably red, antiauthorian, rock expert Arild Rønsen reminded me of Pink Floys:

"teacher leave us kids alone/we don't need your thought control"

With the advantage of hindsight we could both agree that Pink Floyd was simply on a wrong track, but unfortunately the attitude described above was widely shared in the university. Sometimes I had the impression that "critique of the subject" should take place before they really knew anything about the subject. I think we at least to some extent failed in upholding proper intellectual standards, and today I feel some shame in being too bent on being "popular", and going too far in seeing good points in their political agenda. My "reward" (which I hasten to say would be from just a very small minority) which I accidently picked up,

3. Acknowledged shame vs. escalation: A story from Ghana vs. 9/11

The story from Ghana which is relevant to “collective vulnerability”, is named “I Call You Father Because I Do Not Wish to Disrespect You”. The story touched me deeply and gives rise to further questions on “acknowledging shame.”

It is from a recent book “The moral imagination. The art and soul of building peace”, Oxford University Press, 2005 by Jean Paul Lederach who is one of the world’s foremost experts on peace building and reconciliation. While “shame” is not part of his professional vocabulary it is sharply transparent in the following story:

In the mid 1990’s Ghana was on the brink of a devastating civil war. The story deals with a mediated face-to-face meeting between representatives from two of the major groups, the Dagomba and the Konkomba tribes.

“The Dagomba paramount chief arrived in full regalia and with his entourage.. He assumed a sharp attitude of superiority...wasted no time in denigrating and verbally attacking the Konkombas. ‘Look at them he said’, addressing himself more to the mediators than to the Konkombas: ‘Who are they even that I should be in this room with them? They do not even have a chief. Who am I to talk to?.. They could at least have brought an old man. But look! They are just boys born yesterday’..” (quotations from p. 7 - 10)

A young Konkomba spokesperson then addressed himself to the chief of the enemy tribe:

“You are perfectly right. Father, we do not have a chief... And this has been our problem... the reason our people go on rampages and fights resulting in all these killings and destruction arises from this fact... I beg you, listen to my words, Father I am calling you Father because we do not wish to disrespect you. You are a great chief. But what is left to us...”

While this can serve as a good example of acknowledging shame, this is beautifully matched by the Dagomba chief:

“The attitude, tone of voice, and use of the word Father.. apparently so affected the chief that he sat for a moment without response. When he finally spoke, he did so with a changed voice, addressing himself directly to the young man rather than to the mediators:

‘I had come to put your people in your place. But now I feel only shame. Though I insulted your people, you still called me Father. It is you who speaks with wisdom, and me who has not seen the truth. We who are chiefly have always looked down on you because you have no chief, but we have not understood the denigration you suffered. I beg you, my son, to forgive me.’

was being labelled “a useful idiot”. I have often thought about this as the strongest verbal equivalent of “contempt” I know. Translating: ‘We keep Finn at quite a distance but it is to our advantage that he feels “close” to us, he might be useful in promoting our cause’. Indulging for a moment in self-castigation: They might have been justified, by compromising on standards I did not deserve their full respect.

At this point the younger Konkomba man stood, walked to the chief, then knelt and gripped his lower leg, a sign of deep respect. He vocalized a single and audible “Na-a”, a word of affirmation and acceptance.”

It remains to be added that this episode did not put an end to all disagreements but “perhaps the seeds that avoided what could be a full-blown Ghanaian civil war were planted in that moment.”

The arrogance – hubris – of the Dagomba chief is met by a deep humility. When this humility is matched by the Dagomba chief they have both recognized their vulnerability and limitations. The reciprocation of “Father” with “Son” testifies to their close jointness in the “human family” – and a step on the road away from war and towards peace was made.

Right after 9/11 experience of collective vulnerability, and concomitant closeness to others were deeply felt around the world.

I quote from a message on Tomkins Talk (David Cook, 9/12 2001)

“Watching the trade towers burn and collapse had a kind of numbing overload effect on me.. Then when I entered the sanctuary of the church last evening for a prayer service, finding myself among other shocked friends gathered to find some comfort, the tears welled again.. This seems to be a lot about the importance of feeling connected at a time when the very fabric of our sense of connectedness and security has been rent apart in such an appalling manner.”

I remember a commemoration in Oslo right after 9/11 where it was deeply satisfying that a priest, an imam, a rabbi, and a humanist joined in expressing empathy in the moment of tragedy and vulnerability. After the meeting innumerable ambulance cars and fire engines slowly graced the central roads – symbolically extending a hand to their brave brethren across the ocean who had been fighting to rescue whoever it was possible to save.

In an interview right after 9/11 Desmond Tutu called for “restorative justice, justice that does not seek primarily to punish the perpetrator, to hit out, but looks to heal a breach, to restore a social equilibrium that the atrocity or misdeed has disturbed.”

Don Nathanson called for conferencing in the spirit of Desmond Tutu.

In retrospect we can see that US was at a crossroad: Quoting further from David Cook’s message:

“What have we as a people, through our political, social and economic structures done that has engendered the type of hatred and rage we saw unleashed yesterday?... we need a wake up call to .. ask what we need to do differently.. so that others don’t feel oppressed and unjustly treated.”

Desmond Tutu was even more explicit in the need for explicit recognition of shame in US:

“A nation can be held accountable for the holocaust, and so a nation must remember national achievements of which it is proud. It must recall the things that make it hang its head in shame and perhaps be a little less arrogant as it recalls its own anguish, bewilderment and impotence after September 11. It might then perhaps be led to think how others might have felt in Nagasaki and Hiroshima; how little girls running naked from napalm bombs were feeling.”

We can see some similarity between the arrogance of the Dagomba chief and the cruel 9/11 attacks. Furthermore the humility Tutu calls for, as a response is similar to the humility of the Konkomba spokesperson. The US response and subsequent happenings, however, bear tragic testimony to “shame-rage spirals”. US led war – state terrorism – in Afghanistan and Iraq seems to have played a major role in triggering further terrorists attacks, not only in Madrid, December 2004, and in London, July 2005, but also innumerable attacks in Iraq.

A major difference between the Ghana situation and 9/11 is that the first took place in a face-to-face encounter, whereas 9/11 was completely anonymous. The latter situation seems intrinsically far less conducive to soul-searching humility. A further difficulty is that US currently looks at itself as the leading country in the world, destined to show others the proper way.

Few things are more scary than US hubris. It is then of basic importance to support US citizens like David Cook, and do whatever is possible to promote a culture more tolerant of shame and shortcomings.

4. Conferencing, I – Thou, and the emphatic wall

The story from Ghana might give the impression that collective vulnerability suddenly appears in a magical moment. This is, however, not usually the case. To illustrate this we take a further look at a story described in some detail in Neimeyer & Tschudi, 2003, 177-181. Briefly the chief characters in a conference was Jack, ridden by intense sorrow for his 16-year-old daughter, Pat, who had been killed in a car accident. Jill, the drunk driver was a 20-year-old unmarried mother who had just been released from psychiatric care. Jack’s sorrow was only matched by his intense wish to make Jill – as far as possible – feel pain similar to what his daughter had experienced just before dying.. Jill had asked for a conference in order to be able to express her sorrow for what had happened to Pat’s parents.

“the critical turning point of the conference came when Jack passed around a graphic photograph of the scene of the accident that had been taken by the police, providing a vivid portrayal of the disaster that all participants had in common. As the photo slowly made its way around the room, a reverential silence fell over the group, punctuated only by the occasional sob of a participant. This, in the words of the facilitator, was the point of the emergence of “collective vulnerability,” experienced as a shared physical deflation. Joined in the poignant recognition of the frailty and brevity of life, a new sense of coherence within the community of conference participants was cemented. The sense of connection seemed to reach out and embrace Pat herself. With shared sadness but conviction, the group then turned toward forging an agreement.” (p. 180)

which stated that Jack and Jill should cooperate on a program to prevent drunk driving among young people.

After the conference Jack admitted that part of him sought to reconnect with his daughter through Jill. (p. 188)

Before this, however, several things had happened which paved the way for the turning point as illustrated below:

- Jack had placed a picture of his daughter directly opposite to Jill, as if this magically could serve to inflict pain on her. At one point in the conference, however, Jill spoke directly to Pat's picture, saying she wished Pat could be there with them, and saying she wished it was she who had died. Much of Jack's anger then dissolved into a primary sadness, and he cried and held his wife's hand for the first time. Perhaps this abetted his "reconnection" with his daughter through Jill.
- The fiancé of Jill's older sister told a moving story about the suicidal death of a friend and the father's inconsolable grief afterwards. Jack was visibly touched by the story.
- It turned out that Jill was not the only the one responsible for the accident. Several of her family who were present had seen that she was drunk when driving and could firmly have stopped her from driving. It is here of interest that in a related form of conferencing from Hawaii, ho'oponopono, participants are often asked both about sins of omission – "what could you have done to prevent the happening" and commission – "what have you done that have contributed to the happening". A variety of such examples appeared during the conference. Furthermore Jill's uncle and Jack had extensive conversation about the nature of causality, and this served to underscore a wide distribution of responsibility.

The famous Australian playwright David Williamson – who has also studied psychology – has written a trilogy of plays (Williamson, 2002) inspired by McDonald and Moore's experience with conferencing. The play "A conversation" draws much of its inspiration from the Jack and Jill story. Here a young white girl, Donna, had been killed. The transgressor was Scott, a young black man with a predilection for brutal sexual assault, which in this case had led to an extremely painful death. Scott's mother wanted the conference in order to be able to convey her and other members of her family their sorrow about what had happened. Again the father was vindictive and the situation seemed deadlocked. What seemed to help turn the table was that both Donna's mother and Scott's mother came to exchange details about their children which brought forth a nuanced picture. Donna had had her haughty moments, which could be strenuous, and Scott had redeeming features. They thus came to a mutual recognition of both joys and worries of parenthood, and thus a joint vulnerability. Furthermore, as in the Jack and Jill story it was clear that several of the involved persons – on both sides – had to share responsibility for the terrible crime.

A common theme in the above stories – as usual in conferencing – is that at the beginning there are strong negative feelings, and one or more of the main characters are out to get the other. Put otherwise, there is a stereotypical picture of the other as "bad".

As all the participants give their versions of their stories connected to harmful happenings the picture will get more nuanced.

At this point I think that Nathanson's (1992, 1997) concept of the "emphatic wall" is very useful. The point of departure for this concept is the basic insight that emotions intrinsically are highly contagious. Life, however, would be strenuous indeed if we always "allowed" emotions to "rub off" on us. We thus erect an emphatic wall to protect us. Sometimes we "defend" a high wall verbally, as when we tell small children to be quiet since we often are not primed to let ourselves be carried away by their high level of interest-excitement. As Buber once put it: "Each of us encased in armour whose task it is to ward off signals".

I think it is a natural tendency to show empathy when witnessing distress, and enjoyment when witnessing charming qualities in the other. Negative emotions, however, imply a high emphatic wall for such emotions. From this perspective a turning point in conferencing implies a pronounced lowering of the emphatic wall, or breaking through the armour in order to experience the full humanity of the other.

Much is known about how to "encase in armour". Sadly this is part of the training of soldiers; not to see the other as a full-blown person but just as "the enemy".

What is much needed, however, is an understanding of the reverse process, how to break through the armour. As yet I cannot see any clear-cut answer from conferencing. It may not be possible to find a simple formula. It does, however, appear that it is important that a "breakthrough" resonates with deeply felt personal experience. Or perhaps many small dents can add up?

Glover (2000) has a fairly comprehensive and depressive survey of human cruelty during the last century. There are, however, rays of light when he gives examples of what he also calls "breakthrough" (of the human response). An example is a helicopter pilot who came to witness the carnage carried out by US soldiers at My Lai during the Vietnam war. When he saw a small child about to be killed this reminded him of his own small child, and the "resonance" made him take steps to end the slaughtering.

To quote from Martin Buber's (1958) celebrated book "I – Thou". What we must hope for is more widespread:

"I – Thou relations which signifies solidarity of connection. [*cf. communion*] I – Thou can only be spoken with the whole being and establishes the world of relation, whereas I – It is the word of separation [*cf. agency*], a world of objects."

Conferencing is a fascinating laboratory for witnessing a budding emergence of I – Thou from a petrified world of I – It. In a more mundane language typical retributive processes emphasize a segmented view of the world whereas in the restorative world the whole person – embedded in a network of relations – appears, as already pointed out in Nils Christie's (1977) seminal article.

5. Agency and communion in conferencing

Communal / agentic is from David Bakan's (1966) *The duality of human existence. Isolation and communion in Western man..* "Isolation" is a feature of "agency" , and the contrast between agency and communion is described as follows :

“Agency manifests itself as self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion. Communion manifests itself in the sense of being at one with others organisms. Agency manifests itself in isolation, alienation, and aloneness; communion in contact, openness, and union.”

For Bakan:

"the villain is unmitigated agency. The moral imperative is to try to mitigate agency with communion. The moral imperative to which I subscribe was magnificently expressed by Hillel many years ago; "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? The first speaks of agency, the second, of communion, both together, the integration of the two. " (p. 14- 15)

I wish to draw attention to an African answer to the last question "if I am only for myself.." The answer is that this is impossible. The African concept *ubuntu*, may be translated as "I am because you are" that is to say "our humanity is inextricably linked together". The best known example of ubuntu in practice is found in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee. cf. Bishop Tutu's (1999) : *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

A story from Neimeyer & Tschudi (2003) – where I was fortunate to witness the conference– concerned how a school should deal with an all out fighting between “Lebs” (immigrant student of lebanese descent) and “Aussies” (native-born students of Western European background)

When the parents were invited to tell how they had been affected by the conflict, one Aussie father expounded a remarkable theory: “The problem with you Lebanese,” he declared, “is that you fight like a pack of dogs. Aussie boys fight one-on-one, not like you, where a whole pack attacks one boy.” This characterization triggered real consternation and angry interruptions, but the father continued to hold forth. A necessary condition for improvement, he argued, would be for the Lebs to “learn to fight the proper way,” like the Aussies. However, he conceded contemptuously that this was unlikely, as the “dog-fighting was in the genes of the Lebanese.”

At that point, an older sister of one of the Lebanese boys became especially upset, and addressed the facilitator both verbally and non-verbally with the message, “You can’t let this go on.” Restraining himself, the facilitator simply nodded back to her to signal, “It’s up to you to say what you feel must be said.” The essence of her response to the group can be summarized as follows:

Where are we now? We have come here to find out what can be done to prevent further fighting and make this school a peaceful place. But now we are no better than the boys when they were fighting. We must set a good example

and stop fighting among ourselves, and concentrate on what can be done to improve the situation at the school.

This earnest plea made many of the adults feel shame, and the emotional climate turned from conflict to cooperation and creative goal setting followed. (p. 181-182)

After the conference John, David, and I mentally embraced the Lebanese sister, she had carried the day! John – the Convener – might have said much the same as she did (substitute “you” for “we” above). The impact, however, would have been quite different, it would have sounded patronizing; like an authoritarian teacher scolding children for not behaving properly.

This illustrates the “horizontal” structure of conferencing; there is no “authority” to solve the problems, this is the responsibility of the group. The Aussie father clearly was on to sidetrack the group, and being sidetracked is in the Tomkins tradition a shame inducing experience. When John refused to help her with the shame experience, she was left to her own resources. She managed beautifully to induce a collective shame/vulnerability and avoided the compass of shame reactions. She neither “attacked other”, nor “withdrew” to mention two likely alternatives.

Her reaction required strong agency, self-confidence, and this was put to use in service of “communion” - putting the group on a productive track.

The last story to revisit from Neimeyer & Tschudi (2003, p.182-184) is about Cathy who had been sexually abused from the age of 12, and for 20 succeeding years by David, a tenant who lived in her home. Like many victims of long-term abuse she had lived in a kind of “vacuum”, reduced to seeing the world through David’s eyes. Both her agency and her capacity for wider communion had been hampered. She did, however, manage to muster courage and got in contact with Terry O’Connell who organized a conference. Even though David in no way accepted responsibility for his behaviour the conference had a remarkable impact on Cathy’s life, and she could say (p.183-184):

I’m free.... Deceit and corruption officially ended the night of the conference. I’m free to perceive, decide and behave in a way appropriate to myself and not to the perpetrator of my life.

Everything has changed because I have changed. Before the conference [my friends and family] didn’t know how to behave towards me. Terry was good at making my parents see things from my point of view. My father changed – now he shows me courtesy.... The conference allowed the best of humanity to come out. I felt renewed, a rebirth. I’m not the same person after this.

The joyful conclusion of the conference underscored Cathy’s personal transformation. Summarizing the support and social mingling that characterized this occasion, she noted:

There was euphoria at the end, hugging all over the place. David’s wife hugged my father. [His sons] hugged my sister. I had been emotionally scared of them, [but] one

of them asked me to keep in touch, and gave me a hug. I never expected that. Other people came to tell me that they also had been abused, both men and women. Indeed, one of two therapists in attendance who had worked with Cathy remarked following the meeting, “I did not sleep last night. I think I will have to go back to the drawing board. I could not have achieved half of what this conference has, even if I worked for the next ten years.”

This case illustrates that her experience of communion in the conference strengthened her agency, “a rebirth”. Discovering herself as a “free” person also brings to mind the South African *ubuntu* spirit: “I am because you are” or “my humanity is tied up to your humanity”. Agency and communion harmoniously coexisting!

6. A mythical(?) story from Caucasus

Lee Ross (personal communication) told the following story he had heard when he once visited Caucasus. In cases where there had been a long history of bloody revenge between two mountain tribes it might come to pass that a leader of one of the tribes decided to make a call for peace. He would then wait for an occasion when there was a grand celebration at the other tribe, perhaps an important marriage. He would then walk alone, crossing the mountains between the tribes, and arrive in the midst of the celebrations. Usually an elder woman would be the most important person at the celebration.

Our protagonist would then walk to this woman, rip apart her blouse and start sucking her breast, exclaiming “my mother”. It should be understood that he thus put himself in a rather precarious position. If anything did not ring quite true he would not return from the place. If, however, the women patted his head and said “my son” the occasion was set for reconciliation.

We notice the similarity with the Ghana story – reconciliation involves making oneself (extremely) vulnerable – and may lead to deep recognition of “jointness”, riding on the most intimate family relations.

The point Ross wanted to make, however, was that in US culture he had found a too facile call for reconciliation: “let’s shake hands”, “just say ‘I’m sorry’ “ which he saw as sharply contrasting with the story above. Hopefully this story underscores that reconciliation may call for the deepest aspects of human jointness.

A similar theme is evident in the previous Jack and Jill story. When Jill’s uncle repeatedly emphasized that Jill all the time had wanted to say “I’m sorry”. Jack responded that he did not believe it for a minute. When she said that she had asked her solicitors if she could contact Jack to apologise they had instructed her that under no circumstances was she to make contact. So she had not contacted Jack. At this point Jack muttered something like “garbage” under his breath and the air stayed very tense.

7. “Therapy” – using the Ghana story to encourage vulnerability

At Tomkins Talk Daven Morrison pointed out the difficulty of working with organizations where self-assertion ruled the day and there was “a tremendous resistance to acceptance of a common humanity.” and a hunger for interest-excitement and a concomitant intolerance for the softer emotion of joy-enjoyment⁴. In other words rampant agency with little concern for communion ruled the day. This led me to suggest that a meeting starting with the Ghana story might set the stage for fruitful interchange.

First, the story should be put on internet – freely available to everyone. Further details might be added, and also a prelude especially written for occasions as sketched below.

Second, the story is read aloud, or read silently, or enacted as a drama, and or choreographed in a dance and showed (live or videotaped) for your group. (What might your favorite mode be?)

Third, the facilitator/convener has a statement running along lines as: This story usually evokes strong emotions. Close your eyes stay with the emotions for a while. [you might perhaps use your preferred encouragement to meditate]. Can this story tell us something about our situation?

In the spirit of conferencing instead of a group constructing a joint story of critical happenings, the task is thus to try to forge a joint story from the two tribes story – hopefully embodying “healthy empathy”.

I can in my mind immediately hear a “yes, but” running along the lines this “sounds very nice and charming, but these tough-minded guys would reject such a story as completely irrelevant to their situation.” At this point I can draw on an insight from John Braithwaite. In *Restorative practice and responsive regulation*, 2002, he takes important steps in treating conferencing (restorative practice) and business regulatory practices under the same umbrella.

He has elaborated the concept “soft target”. The thinking is that – for instance in cases where a business has swindled a community for an untold million of bucks, most of the business leaders may be tough-minded, “business is business”, and be willing to spend a few of the millions to line the pockets of greedy lawyers. Braithwaite would then take the premise that not all concerned would be equally tough-minded, somewhere you could find an honest person willing to stand by “this is to bad, we must make amends”. So my suggestion is that similarly it is necessary to have a “soft targets” in the group,

The outcome of such a session might be a wish for workshops on e.g. on dialogue, emphatic listening (including the often hard task of listening to oneself!) etc . Perhaps it might also be useful with one or another variant of “solution oriented approach”, “appreciative inquiry” etc.

⁴ In the Tomkins tradition there are two basic positive emotions; interest-excitement, and joy-enjoyment. Tomkins sees interest-excitement as a dominant Western emotion, joy-enjoyment being more characteristic of the East, Tomkins (1991, p.250)

I might add that I am in the process of assisting some friends in launching a fairly large-scale research project on the use of art in furthering dialogues between conflicting groups. Vegar Jordanger (2005) has written a paper on "Music Journeys" where he has a moving description of how a carefully selected set of musical pieces created a deep state of "collective vulnerability" in a group where both Russians and Chechens participated (hard to find more serious conflicts than between main Russia and Chechenya) leading on to constructive scenarios for the future of those troubled areas.

This gives rise to the question of the relation between use of music and other types of art in bringing forth collective vulnerability. We hope to launch a project with international affiliates, hopefully including Lederach .

8. Unmitigated agency - hubris

The call for humility and recognizing vulnerability should be matched with a warning against "unmitigated agency" which is more than just "the villain" for Bakan. He devotes a chapter to a figure conspicuously absent from all? modern parlance, the figure of Satan. Bakan's thesis with respect to this figure is that :

"Satan is a projection in which the agentic in the human psyche is personified. The characteristics attributed to Satan are universal in man, and through the appreciation of these characteristics we can come to a better understanding of the agentic aspect of man himself. "(p. 39)

A major aspect "for understanding the mechanism associated with the Satanic image is that of separation" (p. 45) Bakan draws attention to how Satan is seen as a "fallen angel" who separated himself from God. To illustrate the breadth of Bakan's analysis he states that "cell divisions may be taken as a model, and perhaps the ultimate biological example of separation" (p. 45). He reads Freud's original model of libido in the vein of unmitigated agency since for Freud libido was associated with "sadism, independence, solitariness and estrangement" (p. 165) Perhaps in a somewhat speculative vein Bakan from this Freudian basis interprets some research as establishing a (tentative) association between cancer and "unmitigated agency". However that may be: "Cancerous growth" seems an apt metaphor for unmitigated agency, a lethal growth without any blessing of concern for a larger unity, a growth completely lacking any "communal" features.

On a psychological level unrelenting quest for mastery of an external world – at the expense of being connected to this world – may lead to "the sense of despair which comes with a failure to master the world . .so well described by Kierkegaard in *The sickness unto death*, that leads to the projection" (p. 50).

The closest parallel to Bakan's analysis I can think of in the Tomkins tradition is that shame may be the result when "desire outruns fulfillment". Since this, however, may be ubiquitous I might add *ad extremis* to "desire outruns fulfillment".

A related parallel to "unmitigated agency" in the Tomkins tradition is excessive pride, or hubris. We should not forget that hubris was the sin of arrogance when mere humans trespassed the limits set by the gods. The myth of Ikaros is the primordial example of

hubris.. Ikaros wanted to fly to the sun but as he got higher and higher and approached the sun the wax fastening his wings melted, and he fell into the ocean and drowned.

Hubris gets scant treatment in Nathanson's (1992). There is, however, the suggestion that hubris involves confusing an attribute (small part of us) and our whole self. (p.213) Hubris may, however, be a topic of no less importance than shame!

The Ghana story in section 3 may be stylized as exemplifying an interpersonal reconciliation script:

Dagomba chief	hubris
Konkomba spokesperson	(deferential) respect, showing vulnerability
Dagomba chief	humility, accepting vulnerability, and shame
Both	reconciliation, mutual forgiveness

There is an implicit premise in the suggestion in section 7 to use this story in a constructive way: When Bakan talks about 'unmitigated agency' he is referring to "universal characteristics" – we all have some of the Dagomba chief's hubris. By the same token we might also be capable of showing respect – helping to bring forth humility and reconciliation. Stated in this way the story might be useful as an allegory both for intraindividual and interindividual processes – including processes at state level.

I cannot but see similarities between the current US foreign policy in many troubled countries and the opening remarks of the Dagomba chief. This, however, does not seem to elicit much respect around the world, and at present we are all caught in ill-boding spirals. Furthermore it seems that US foreign policy is under the spell of hubris as spelled out by Nathanson. One unmitigated agentic attribute – military power – seems confused with the whole or “engulf the field”. Might we come to witness that like for Ikaros the “wings may melt” and spell the end of the US empire?

Furthermore, locked in one mode it may be difficult for the reigning people in US to distinguish signs of “respect” from “weakness”, mere fawning or “deceit”.

We should not forget that respect for the adversary, and concern for saving face was crucial in avoiding a global catastrophe in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Braithwaite expresses the hope that national leaders in crisis situations will acknowledge their fear of shame – like Kennedy and Krushscev – so that they prevent shame - rage spirals (p. 189-190).

Heavy reliance on military power – abetted by “rational actor model” - goes far in exemplifying “unmitigated agency”. We strongly need the mitigating power of the communal spirit, a guiding principle for all restorative practices.

9. Concluding comments⁵

In the present context: 'hubris', 'showing respect', 'humility', 'shame' etc. may be seen as different voices which we all have. There are, however, individual and cultural differences in how easy or difficult it is to call forth the different voices. Put otherwise there are "emphatic walls" for a variety of "voices". All the nine basic affects have their important function, and likewise I think all voices mentioned here are important. If, however, there are pronounced imbalances serious problems result. Here I have especially tried to draw attention to unmitigated agency, which violates a sane and healthy balance between agency and communion, cf. section 5. It may be healthy to recall Aristotle plea for finding a "golden middle way"!

What about religion? When working with this essay a quotation from Bateson (1979) comes to mind. Going through a nested sequence of higher order systems he ends by saying "there is a larger system..call it God if you like". He also writes:

'We have lost the core of Christianity. We have lost Shiva, the dancer of Hinduism whose dance at the trivial level is both the creation and destruction but in the whole is beauty. We have lost Abraxa, the terrible and beautiful god of both day and night in Gnosticism." (p. 17-18).

Perhaps we have lost recognition of a need for grace – facilitation of forgiveness and reconciliation – descending on our troubled world. It may be an advantage with religious faith when working for reconciliation. I cannot say that such faith is necessary but I can pray that we draw more inspiration from people like Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, and Desmond Tutu, and I here want to add the mennonite Jean Paul Lederach who provided the beautiful story from Ghana.

I have here tried to draw in experiences of vulnerability and shame both in concrete conflicts and as aspects of larger culture. When such experiences are recognized in art, myth and religion, this may facilitate recognition of joint humanity in concrete conflicts – what we have called collective vulnerability. This may again inspire joint, creative ways out of deadlocks.

⁵ The notion of recognizing different "voices" both within and between persons is elaborated in chapters by Sissel Reichelt's and Arild Ambø.

References

- Bakan, David (1966). **The Duality of Human Existence. Isolation and Communion in Western Man.** Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bateson, Gregory (1979). **Mind and Nature.** New York: Dutton
- Braithwaite, John (2002). **Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation.** Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buber, Martin (1958). **I – Thou. Edinburgh.** T & T Clark
- Christie, Nils (1977). Conflict as property. **British Journal of Criminology**, 17, 1-14
- Demos, Virginia E. (Ed.), (1995). **Exploring Affect. The selected writings of Silvan S. Tomkins.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Glover, Jonathan (2000). **Humanity. A Moral History of the twentieth Century.** London: Jonathan Cape.
- Jordanger, Vegar (2005). Musical Journeys as a tool for dialogue and track-two diplomacy. Manuscript.
- Lederach, Jean Paul (2005). **The Moral Imagination. The art and soul of building peace.** Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Moore, David B, & McDonald John M. **Transforming Conflict.** Sydney: TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE AUSTRALIA PTY LTD
- Nathanson, Donald (1992). **Shame and Pride.** New York: Norton
- Nathanson, Donald (1997). From empathy to community. **The Annual of Psychoanalysis**, 25, 125-143.
- Neimeyer, Robert A., & Tschudi, Finn (2003). Community and Coherence: Narrative Contributions to the Psychology of Loss and Conflict. In Fireman et. al. (Eds.), **Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain** (166-191). New York: Oxford University Press
- Scheff, Thomas J. (1994). **Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War.** Boulder: Westview Press.
- Tschudi, F. & Reichelt, Sissel (2004). Conferencing When Therapy is Stuck. **Journal of Systemic Therapies**, 23, 38-52
- Tomkins, Silvan S. (1961, 1962, 1991, 1992). **Affect Imagery and Consciousness**, Volume I - IV. New York: Springer.
- Turner, Frederick (1995). Shame, Beauty, and the Tragic View of History, **American Behavioural Scientist**, 38, 1060-1075.

Tutu, Desmond (1999). **No future without forgiveness.**

Williamson, David (2002). **The Jack Manning Trilogy.** Sydney: Currency Press
Face to Face
A Conversation
Charitable Intent