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‘Belonging to One Another: Principles and Practices for Engaging the Other’

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Overview:

This lecture began differently from others in the series in that participants were asked by the speaker to pay divided attention to what he said and also to think about how it made them feel. This difference was reflected in the way the lecture was delivered and in the extended discussion section at the end.

Different societies are embedded in different narratives about shame, reflected, for example, in the taboos in use and what it is possible and not possible to talk about. The existence of shame and taboo is universal. Such taboos, by setting up exclusions, prevent us from reaching our capacity as individuals, families, organisations, cities and societies. This limitation occurs through the web of adaptive strategies which cultures develop and which tend to make us impervious to shame, for example, of the persistence of poverty. Omer argued that finding ways to become more fully human, creative and engaged will help to overcome these limitations.

Key ideas:

- **Shame:** an emotion which evokes awkward feeling in relation to particular topics and behaviours.
- **False belonging:** a sense of belonging which is built upon a sense of oneself based on the exclusion of others.
- **Exposure:** non-mutual examination of the shame of another which involves a violation of sovereignty.
- **Sovereignty:** autonomy and integrity.
- **Mirror neurons:** electrically excitable cells in the nervous system which activate both when an animal performs an action and when the animal observes the same action performed by another animal. Thus, the neuron ‘mirrors’ the behaviour of another animal, as though the observer were itself performing the action.
- **Restorative justice:** focuses on crime as an act against another individual or community rather than the state. It encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalise peaceful approaches to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights. Rather than privileging the law or the state, restorative resolutions engage those who are harmed, wrong-doers and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.

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Aftab Omer told the audience a story or two about his own experience of airport security as a man of Pakistani origin, as a way of gently introducing his subject of otherness, reactions to it and the limitations which this brings. He asked participants to divide their attention between listening to what he was saying in his lecture and observing their own reaction to this.

He then introduced a poem by William Stafford, reproduced on the right. He used the poem to suggest that in a world where we do not fully engage with each other there are limiting consequences and undesirable outcomes which it is necessary to address.

He went on to suggest that the shame associated with this lack of engagement was universal across cultures and through time and is indeed a central part of what makes us human – what he called “being’s call to belonging”. However, turning away from shame in order to avoid discomfort is a common way of dealing with its presence in individuals, families, communities, organisations and nations. This has the effect of making us less aware of its consequences and results in shame being distributed inappropriately in society. For example, shame is often doubly carried by victims of rape if the perpetrator has no shame for his crime. This is especially true when violations of sovereignty occur resulting in the exclusive exposure of one party to shame inappropriately.

Omer called this “false belonging” – the establishment of an identity which is built on both the exclusion of others and what we do not want to know about ourselves. It leads to a kind of shamelessness which diminishes desirable human characteristics such as compassion, dignity and the pursuit of the good. He illustrated this point by relating the story of the Green River killer who showed no shame – and therefore no potential for remorse and healing – for the murder of 40 victims, until forgiven by a relative of one victim.

Reaching across the awkward boundaries of taboo and shame is, he argued, an essential part of creating healing possibilities. In such situations it is both what we do and what we don’t do which makes the difference. To turn away from the other is to turn away from transformative possibilities. This was illustrated further by reference to The Jerry Springer Show as an exploitative form of exposure which not only uses guests’ stories inappropriately but also re-injures by unnecessary and non-mutual exposure.

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider--
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

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Omer illustrated these points more fully by reference to the tale of the Fisher King, which is known to be at least 800 years old. At a key turning point in the tale, Parsifal (Percival) is berated by a bestial woman (Kundry, the other) just as he is about to be accepted as a member of the Knights of the Round Table. She berates him for not helping the Fisher King, who languishes wounded in his castle causing the kingdom to be wasted. Whilst the Knights of the Round Table behave well within their own rules, their actions do not help to heal the kingdom because their habits make them blind to the needs of the King and the wasted land. It is only when Parsifal reaches out to the other with compassion that the wound is healed and the land restored to wholeness. The Fisher King's wellbeing is a metaphor for cultural transformation which emerges from habits of enquiry and necessary engagement with difficult issues.

In such cultural transformations, the web of habits where flourishing is encaged shifts to another way of being where the web of habits is sufficiently restructured. This enables new capacities to emerge because engaging modes of interaction, essential for such emergence, can take place.

In this way the future can re-emerge from a new sense of the past – dignity can emerge from shame, courage from fear, compassion from grief, acceptance from rejection and good from evil. This type of change moves away from stability dependent on the known (implying exclusion in the rejection of the other) and presents a doorway towards a larger, more flourishing and inclusive future based upon turning towards the unknown and embracing otherness.

In the extended discussion session, one participant suggested this was a key theme in Sartre's work where protagonists are often stuck in shameful situations until they decide to use this experience of shame to act.

Another strand of the conversation focused on prisoners and the idea of restorative justice. The use of shame to open up the door to the admission of responsibility to what they had done by integrating difficult-to-address aspects of life before prison. It was emphasised that the success of this depended upon valid use of shame – it needed to be fully felt and developed by and with the prisoner rather than introduced abstractly by others. When shame is present no other experience is there – as shame rises protagonists become less and less present as they come to see previous events in a different way. This allows protagonists to turn towards the future and for the future to enter in previously impossible ways. This forms the basis for much work on restorative justice. In this sense shame calls to belonging as it invites one to own one's past, even if shameful, in ways which make renewal rather than degeneration possible.

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A further contribution used the experience of post-war Serbia to illustrate some of the main points of the lecture. Thus the tendency to warring faction in Serbia post WWI and WWII was contained by Tito's governance in WWII. This containment meant an uneasy peace while Tito ruled. Following his demise, the underlying enmity towards the other re-emerged and was brutally played out in the late 20th century. Omer argued that growth is not possible until the underlying causes of the enmity are addressed. Repeated exposure to such situations leads to the development of adaptive identities, built upon exclusion of the other and impervious to the shame of how they are treated. When shame returns, it signifies hope as it is based on a sense of the other as also human. In these moments when shame is present and it is still possible to engage with the other, then we meaningfully belong to each other. At times of turning away, events are less fully owned. This is reflected in who we can turn to in difficult times and in the idea of mirror neurons which reflect the behaviour of others laughing, crying, smiling, etc. This suggests the existence of a moral brain alongside a cognitive and emotional brain.

The penultimate contribution suggested that firstly shame is a social construct and can therefore be socially deconstructed and secondly that it has a political dimension in which shame is used by others as a power source to control particular kinds of behaviour. In the ensuing discussion it was suggested that who shames who and for what is an important indicator of taboos in a culture. If protagonists do not themselves belong to each other, in the sense outlined above and suggested by Stafford's poem, then the quality of their relationship and the shame it contains will be defined by others and the context for expression limited in this way. Omer illustrated this by suggesting that advertising space could be seen as shameful in some ways as it intrudes into space which is visually common simply because someone can buy it. This also extends to inequalities in wealth which allow some wealthy people to behave in ways which would be considered shameful in more traditional societies and a pattern which others made may prevail.

The final point asked how people could arrive at stability which they might use as a basis for flourishing. Many people found this difficult as they were trying to contain the shame they felt from an existence of poverty. In reply it was suggested that continuous exposure of the poor in this way re-injures continuously, through the repeated violations of sovereignty inherent in the everyday life experience of poverty. Ignoring this liberates those who ignore in one sense, and since there are direct neuro-physiological correlates of this behaviour it is less and less likely that these capacities are used. Shame is one way in which people are pulled away from this kind of behaviour and are re-awakened to the needs of the other and to belonging.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.