

'Power and Love'

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Glossary

Power – the drive of everything living to realise itself

Love – the drive to unity of the separated

Copenhagen Climate Change Summit – a meeting organised by the United Nations to negotiate a successor to the Kyoto protocol, with the aim of preventing dangerous global warming. It ran for two weeks from 7 December 2009 and was the latest in a series that trace their origins to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro

IPCC – the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a scientific body established by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization. Its role includes the evaluation of climate change and its impact and the extent to which it is associated with human activity

BRIC countries – Brazil, India, Russia, China – rapidly growing, previously economically underdeveloped countries

Dr Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) – an American clergyman, activist and prominent leader in the African American civil rights movement. His main legacy was securing progress on civil rights in the United States. He is also known as a human rights icon

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) – a German-American theologian and Christian existentialist philosopher

Overview

Based upon his experience of working on the major challenges in many countries over the past 20 years, and drawing upon his new book (*'Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change'*), Adam Kahane argued that in order to address our most intractable challenges we must learn to exercise both **power** and **love**.

Summary

In introducing the topic of power and love Adam began by suggesting that in his experience of working on a range of key intractable problems across the globe, he had become aware that attempts to address these often become stuck. He began to wonder why this was and his book is an attempt to address this.

To illustrate this point of 'becoming stuck' he described his experience of the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit (December 2009). What he saw emerging were two discourses representing a divide, which he argued, was more fundamental than those usually found in this context, of rich/poor, north/south. On the one hand he described the '**Power Camp**' – which consisted of: the developed nations who framed their arguments in terms of their need to increase their competitiveness; the BRIC countries whose main interests revolved around their desire to grow and develop rapidly; and a range of private companies in areas like oil, shipping and power supply, whose main interests focused on growth and profit.

On the other hand he described the '**Love Camp**' whose discourse was reflected in the events of the opening ceremony in which: the Danish Climate Minister (who chaired the conference) spoke of the responsibility of all delegates in negotiating successfully on this important task; in which the head of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change spoke of global imbalances and ecological questions; in which a specially commissioned film addressed children's future lives in the absence of effective action on climate change and the ethical issues which this raised; and in which an adult choir opened the hearts of delegates with its beautiful singing. The discourse of this group focussed on interconnectedness and the health of the planet and humanity as a whole.

The views of these two groups became polarised. The view of the power camp about the love camp was it was being impractical, perhaps unrealistic. The view of the love camp about the power camp was that it was being irresponsible, perhaps even oppressive. Adam's observation is that both of these camps are strong and that the ignoring or denying of one perspective by the other neither makes it untrue nor makes it disappear. The collision of these two positions is the meeting of an irresistible force and an immovable object. The talks became poised between breakdown and breakthrough, between being stuck and moving the issue forward.

A Universal Challenge

Adam's reflection and conclusion on this was that the Copenhagen summit represented an extreme phenomenon of a universal challenge – what does it take to move forward on such complex social challenges?

In his work on difficult problems he had seen this dilemma between power and love many times. He observed that this was true of all levels – internationally, within the nation state, in organisations and companies, and within individuals. He used several examples to highlight this, for example in his work on the Mont Fleur scenarios which helped shift apartheid South Africa to democracy. The group he worked with there was broad in scope and multi racial in nature. There was no expectation that such a group, which included as many perspectives and enmities as people, would do anything useful. To the surprise of all, including Adam, the group did achieve breakthrough.

His learning from this was that under some circumstances it was possible to confound pessimistic expectations and achieve breakthrough. He wanted to understand this more fully – under what circumstances is it possible and how does it happen?

In South Africa, and elsewhere, he could see how the conflict of power and love had played out clearly. For example in South Africa, on the one hand, a power drive had resulted in war, slavery, apartheid and peaceful resistance in successive phases of encounter between groups each trying to achieve its goals. On the other hand it is possible to see the love drive in operation, exemplified by two key protagonists: Archbishop Desmond Tutu with his emphasis on healing and reconciliation, and Nelson Mandela with his ability to reunite the

separated. He also highlighted that the word 'apartheid' in the Afrikaans language simply means 'apartness'.

Adam has used his learning from South Africa in the service of solving intractable challenges in other areas of the globe and on other issues where there is antipathy among the protagonists, who now realise that they must work with the others to achieve what they want.

He also noted that in addition to seeing this clash between power and love in every country he had worked, he also saw it in every organisation – expressed in competition, teamwork, friendship and rivalry. Furthermore he suggested it also existed in each individual as we try to be ourselves and yet connect with others.

To explain this universal clash, he settled on the following definitions of power and love based on the work of Paul Tillich:

Power – the drive of everything living to realise itself with increasing intensity and extensity.

Love – the drive to unity of the separated¹

He observed that while it is easy to define these terms in the relative safety of the lecture theatre, in practice it is difficult and dangerous work. This comes from the fact that power and love each have a generative and a degenerative side.

The generative side of power is manifest in its ability to get things done, promote growth, development, and self realisation. He calls this 'the power *to*....'

The degenerative side of power is that it can be oppressive and can undermine the power of others i.e. 'power *over*.....'

Love also has generative and degenerative aspects. Its generative side is manifest in unity and wholeness. Its degenerative side is seen in the undermining or debilitation of individual power and self-realisation. An example he used to illustrate this was historically constructed gender roles: the male representing power and the female love.

The generative side of male power is that the man participates in the world and 'makes things happen'. Its well-documented degenerative side occurs when he becomes so focussed on 'this thing he has to do' that he becomes dehumanised and/or tyrannical.

The generative side of female love is that she literally gives life to children and figuratively to the family as a whole. The degenerative side of this love is that she may become so focussed on the unity of the family that she undermines the autonomy of its individual members and perhaps most importantly of herself.

Adam gave a second example based on his role as a facilitator of negotiations in Israel after the second Lebanon war in 2006. A three day work shop was planned but Adam was initially perturbed that the Jewish Sabbath came in the middle, effectively ruling out one third of the time they had to work together. However, far from being wasted time, the Sabbath turned out to be the most effective day as it made time and space for unity to emerge, unfettered by the distractions of work. However, some members of the group made it clear that they had no

¹ It is important to note in this definition that the assumption is of underlying unity or 'whole' which has been, or appears to be, separated or fractured. The drive is to 'wholeness' – a word which shares its root with the word 'health'.

wish to be a part of this unity characterised by religious observance, valuing their secular self and links to others outside of faith and indeed outside of Israel as part of their unity.

This raises an important question – what is the whole or unity which is separated? This is often highly contested and not easily resolved. However, Adam suggested that the more a group works on its power and its love, the more generative both become and the work of the group becomes more fluid and open to new possibilities.

Power and Love – connected aspects of the same whole

In developing the idea that power and love are aspects of the same whole, he suggested that power is generative when guided by love and love is generative when it is linked to power and self realisation. He quoted Dr Martin Luther King Jr who said:

“What we need to realise is that power without love is reckless and abusive and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. It is precisely this collision of immoral power and powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time”

This idea of walking a narrow path between reckless power and anaemic love was a guiding principle of King’s work and can also be seen in ancient and modern literature, fables and storytelling.

Once again, this is easy in theory but difficult in practice as most of our societies, organisations, communities and individuals tend to be dominated by one or the other – by power or by love. This means they either tend to be reckless and abusive or sentimental and anaemic. Choosing only one or the other means we tend to get stuck. To usefully address our most complex challenges, we need to find ways to choose both.

How to get unstuck

What can change agents do to help the social systems of which we are a part become unstuck on difficult challenges? In other words how can power and love be balanced? Adam argues that this cannot be done for systems if we do not do this within ourselves. Change agents must learn to employ – indeed embody – both power and love. The difficulty here is that most of us are more comfortable with either power or love. In difficult situations, we tend to resort to our preferred mode.

In this sense power and love do not present us with a choice but with a dilemma. We need both and cannot choose only one. A helpful analogy is one of walking on two legs. Power and love are part of a dynamic balance which helps us move forward. To walk we need both legs, both dimensions.

Three actions were suggested:

First, to be aware of power and love within one’s self. For those who prefer power to see the drive to unity and for those who prefer love to see the drive towards self realisation.

Secondly, to work on strengthening our weaker drive, not diminishing our strong one. The aspiration is to use all of our power and all of our love.

Thirdly, practice the power *and* practice the love until they fuse within us.

Adam asked why we hesitate to do this and he suggested that usually fear prevents us. Those for whom love dominates are scared to use their power as it might hurt others. Those in whom power dominates are afraid to express their love lest they themselves are hurt. The key to making progress on difficult challenges is to work through the fear rather than give up and revert to the comfortable mode. The key is to step forward.

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.