JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS

Self-Responsibility and Human Dignity in the Midst of Conflict

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Amartya Sen (2006) notes, "The world in which we live is not only unjust, it is, arguably, extraordinarily unjust" (p. 237). We live in an imperfect world. Of that, there is no doubt. One of the defining features of the last century has been the sheer extent of social disintegration, economic turmoil, and human violence made more potent by technological advancement. It is no surprise, then, that the role of leadership has been placed under increasing scrutiny as the world seeks new ways to address its problems.

The question of justice in an imperfect and conflict-ridden world is a fundamental one for servant-leadership practitioners who, according to Robert Greenleaf (2002), are concerned with "remaking the world" (p. 318), first by attending to the inner self, and then by radiating the fullness of that self out into the world. Greenleaf's characterization of that process as a kind of "inner radiance" (p. 308) is as beautiful as it is wise, for a self that can resist the assaults of the world is a self that can shine its light onto the world.

Justice theorist John Rawls (1973) articulated the primacy and priority of justice, describing it as the "fundamental character of a well-ordered human association" (p. 5) and "the most important virtue of institutions" (p. 6). In a less abstract vein, Greenleaf (2002) observed the development of institutions into the role of caring for and serving people, giving institutions a major role to play in improving society:

> If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (p. 62)

Greenleaf's identification of institutions as servants, caregivers, and vehicles of meaning, and not simply as machines of production in pursuit of profit, or community-less distributors of social goods, is important for questions of justice, which are inescapably tied to our judgments about civic virtue and the common good (Sandel, 2011). By placing the ideal of love within his conception of a good society, Greenleaf draws us more deeply into the heart of justice. For King (1986), too, love is our salvation, the antidote to the violence and injustice of our age. Significantly, the notion of regeneration suggests an organic and unbounded movement toward wholeness. Servant-leadership, with its commitment to human wholeness and flourishing, lends itself to restorative processes that build community. As such, it is a potent antidote to the relational poverty, oppression, and lack of meaning that characterizes so many of today's organizations.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

In reflecting on the idea of injustice in the workplace, I am struck by the extent to which relational poverty provides fertile ground for us to harm one another. The organization I previously worked for is a multinational communications consultancy headquartered in the United Kingdom, with offices worldwide. I worked for the Middle East division of the organization in its main office in Qatar. Producing written material in the Arabic language was a critically important part of our work. Due to cost cutting, the top management became unwilling to hire a specialist translator. As a result of this, as well as the lack of objective job and role requirements, responsibility for the translation of written materials fell to the Dubai office. A consultant and a newly promoted associate director would service requests from all four offices in the Middle East, overseen by a general manager.

The Dubai office routinely responded to translation requests with irritation and disrespect. They complained about the number of requests coming through, or the lack of notice in receiving them. In response to a translation request I made, the associate director and general manager were condescending and disrespectful. They angrily refused to translate the document according to the deadline and blamed my office for overloading them. When my manager failed to intervene, I rose to their anger, responding rashly and somewhat sarcastically. While my manager considered their behavior unreasonable and privately praised my response, the e-mail exchange was not constructive and only served to entrench the interoffice animosity and

resentment. This conflict damaged working relationships and undermined employee satisfaction and morale.

It is worth nothing that the conflict was part of a more generalized organizational malaise fueled, in part, by a lack of human resources. People were stretched and under pressure. Communication between offices and colleagues was minimal and most employees below the management level had never met one another. This begs the question: To what extent is meaningful relationship possible in circumstances that tend toward negativity, distrust, and alienation?

SELF-RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT

Organizations can be places of psychological and emotional pain—there is stress, anxiety, and fear. When conflict arises, there can be interpersonal injury. Although the above example was a relatively minor conflict, it generated considerable negativity and ill feeling. I initially felt justified in my response. I felt that I had been composed and only responded abruptly when pushed to the brink and in the face of aggression. However, according to Greenleaf, the servant "views any problem in the world as *in here*, inside oneself, not *out there*" (Spears, 1995, p. 240). In the light of this statement, self-responsibility requires an honest examination of one's personal role in contributing to conflict, and to its potential resolution.

Reyes ("Conflict," n.d.) said, "I take total responsibility for everything that happens to me and what I create.... I have sovereignty and self-determination over what I say and how I interact. I choose consciously to interact with love and compassion." Instead of this model of authentic freedom and loving intentionality, I sought to give my colleagues in Dubai a taste of their own medicine, as it were, and I simply reacted. This desire to return violence with violence is a retributive response to pain and suffering, and reflects a popular focus on desert (Miller, 1992) when considering questions of justice. This contrasts with the needs focus of restoration. Significantly, Miller (2003) posits a relationship between the nature of social relations within a given group—solidaristic community, instrumental associations, citizenship—and the justice response it elicits. Certainly, when people are not mutually invested, when relations are seen predominantly as a means to an end, when self-interest is the primary motivation, people will tend to seek retribution over restoration. In the case at hand, the deficient relational environment and instrumental nature of social relations within the group led to a negative, retributive climate.

The punitive approach entails the redistribution of harm, not its containment or diminishment, and not its resolution into meaning (Frankl, 2000). Yet, it is a testament to the power of forgiveness that meaning can be extracted from even the gravest harms. One only has to consider Sylvia Fraser (2007), whose book "My Father's House" tells the story of the horrendous incest she suffered at the hands of her father. Even so, her journey of forgiveness led her to proclaim one day, "I have burst into an infinite world full of wonder" (p. 253). What a delicately poignant reminder of the luminosity in the human condition, which emerges even from the deepest abyss, if we are willing to illuminate it.

The experience of wonder and possibility, represented through the metaphor of *seeing the unicorn* (Greenleaf, 2002), is the key to our responsibleness and the will to be an agent of change in the world. The alternative is negativity, which is an obstacle to interrelationship (Ferch, "Module 2 Introduction," 2010). Indeed, it takes tremendous optimism to believe that a commitment to embracing others with love and compassion—often despite a disinclination to do so—can have a positive impact. In the organizational problem at hand, a large part of me wanted to respond differently in the situation. I even wondered whether in discerning the deeper issues behind the behavior of my colleagues in Dubai, and bringing these hidden areas to light, I might lead them to respond positively to me. But ultimately, I did not have faith in my ability to influence in this way and I missed an opportunity to respond hopefully to the situation. Inevitably, in an environment devoid of meaning, apathy can result (Frankl, 2000). Therefore, it is incumbent on the leader to nurture his or her "interior resilience" (Ferch, n.d.) in the midst of conflict, through hope, courage, and faith in our ability to be reconciled with one another.

It is an uncommon thing for a person take full and unequivocal responsibility for his or her actions. Although I suspected that pressure and a sense of injustice were driving my colleagues' behavior, I chose not to let this understanding infuse my interactions with acceptance, empathy, and warmth. Instead, my local office colleagues and I complained, blamed, and rationalized our own behavior in the light of theirs. This was a failure not just of self-responsibility but also of humility, which requires that one refrain from self-justification and denial (Tutu, 1999). Being humble was difficult because I felt attacked. I also felt slightly humiliated at being spoken to with disrespect in an e-mail seen by my peers and my manager. Faced with hostility and disrespect, my ego was triggered, hindering a more constructive,

life-giving response. This is an example of the role of shame and the ego in obstructing the creation of an environment conducive to humility and the forgiveness process (Ramsey, n.d.). The wisdom of the servant-led environment is brought into sharp relief here. Two of its key principles—*first among equals* and *servant first*—focus our attention on the other and on the community, so that the rigid, protective, self-interested stance is undermined in favor of appropriate vulnerability, humility, and service.

HUMAN DIGNITY AND RELATEDNESS

For Greenleaf, it is essential to base organizational life on "interrelatedness" (Spears, 1995, p. 240), which is deeply personal, as opposed to "thingness" (p. 240), which is impersonal. In other words, the most irreducible thing about our organizations is the fact of our connectedness as people, not the fact that we happen to be pursuing common organizational goals. The former view of organizations is grounded in the Kantian notion of the dignity and inherent worth of persons. It provides an anchor in the midst of conflict. Certainly, it is far more difficult to act recklessly or to deliberately harm others when there is a deep sense of our common dignity and humanity.

In the problem outlined, interrelatedness was missing. We were locked into the "community-less environment" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 52) that Greenleaf warns us about. The fact that I did not have a relationship with my Dubai colleagues beyond the mechanical and impersonal form of e-mail communication made it impossible for us to feel connected to one another, whereas connectedness and empathy are integral to justice (Braithwaite, 2006). This deficiency created inevitable "misunderstandings and poor interactive behaviors" ("Relational Conversation," 2001). Insofar as these were uncaring behaviors devoid of love, they undermined the dignity of everyone involved.

For Freire (2006), Greenleaf's "thingness" is objectification, which is akin to dehumanization. He stated, "The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men and women" (p. 68). Similarly, when we are denied relatedness in the workplace, we are dehumanized, because we are being asked to function as less than our whole selves. Spears (1995) outlines the effect on organizations of what Henry Mintzberg called "machine bureaucracy" (p. 241). A style of organizing that is particularly common in the public relations industry, this kind of

bureaucracy is highly mechanical with sharp hierarchical divisions, creating an extremely alienating experience for employees. At its most extreme and inhuman, "it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation" ("Max Weber on Bureaucracy," n.d., p. 3). The fact that I had always remained silent when the associate director and general manager were difficult and unhelpful, simply because they were closer to the top of the hierarchy, was evidence of this bureaucracy. Feeling my personal autonomy and dignity assaulted, this fueled my resentment. Equally, I suspect that my translation requests subverted the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal style of management, generating resistance.

FORGIVENESS

Leaders who wait for people to behave properly before responding in life-giving ways cannot hope to heal, restore, or reconcile. Tutu (1999) states, "Jesus did not wait until those who were nailing him to the cross had asked for forgiveness" (p. 272). Instead, Jesus led the way, using forgiveness not as a response but as an initiating tool to transcend harm and transform relationships. Seen this way, forgiveness is an extension of self-responsibility in that it starts with the self and then turns out toward the world (Greenleaf, 2002).

Many years ago, I asked my mother for forgiveness for my years of hostility and bitterness toward her after she divorced my father. What motivated me was the feeling that I was responsible, and that healing and wholeness needed to begin with me. Previously, I had felt that I could not love and embrace my mother until she recognized and confessed the hurt she had caused me. This meant that I was locked into my role as both an oppressor and a victim—an oppressor because I consciously sought to punish my mother, and a victim because I was unable to transcend my anger, though I often tried. In keeping with Tutu's (1999) contention that "our unforgiveness undoes us" (p. 156), my quality of life was diminished, as evidenced in my self-destructive behavior.

It was after an intrapersonal experience of divine grace and forgiveness that I felt the need to ask my mother to forgive me. Forgiveness has been described as a bridge (Tutu, 1999; Ramsey, n.d.) from a past that constrains us to a future that liberates us. What I needed more than anything was to be freed from a painful, debilitating past. Yet, it was not entirely self-centered.

Though the process began with me, it was essentially about our relationship. Reyes ("Conflict," n.d.) said that our role is to "bring out the best in people" and to "optimize their humanness and sense of personhood." I felt the truth of this statement very acutely in the interpersonal context. It no longer mattered who was right and who was wrong. My overwhelming desire was to be accountable for my actions. Through my accountability, I hoped to validate my mother's worth—her dignity—and restore the love between us. In practical terms, this led me to forego the desire to settle the score. I put my scorecard down and asked her forgiveness, taking full and unequivocal responsibility for my role in contributing to *her* pain. This initiating act was the essence of forgiveness as gift, as love (Braithwaite, 2006; Ramsey, n.d.), because it was without condition. Her response, in accepting my love, brought us back into relationship.

I experienced this process as both liberating and empowering because I regained a sense of self-efficacy and hope in the future of our relationship. Through forgiveness, I was also able to see beyond my mother's actions to her simple dignity and personhood. I expressed my gratitude for my mother and for the person she was. "You matter," is what I meant to convey. "And you matter to me." I recall feeling intensely vulnerable in front of her, yet still safe. This event freed me from the guilt and shame that I had carried with me for so long. My loving potential as a person, which had been so elusive, I could now grasp. Although I cannot speak for my mother, the emotion we shared suggests that she also had a great burden lifted. Today, our relationship is freer, more affectionate, understanding, mature, and loving. This experience supports Braithwaite's (2006) call for a more intelligent form of justice, one that is capable of "flipping vicious circles of hurt begetting hurt into virtuous circles of healing begetting healing" (p. 403). In keeping with MLK's notion of loving one's oppressor for mutual salvation, Freire's (2006) articulation of mutual humanization, and Tutu's (1999) will to love through forgiveness, my mother and I emerged lifted, cleansed, and free to be different people.

There are a number of insights to be drawn from this experience. First, forgiveness is a transformative tool that promotes healing and reconciliation. This is because being forgiven frees us from past behavior "so that we can be different people, choosing and acting differently in the future" (Wiesenthal, 1998, p. 184). As such, it is deeply restorative—not retrospectively but prospectively. This kind of justice and forgiveness does not simply undo harm; it raises us up to "the richness and fullness of life for which we have been

created" (Tutu, 1999, pp. 155–156). This is a higher vision of what it means to be human, and I dare say the only vision worth striving for.

Secondly, the series of tit-for-tat e-mails my colleagues and I exchanged was part of a cycle of "reprisal and counterreprisal" (Tutu, 1999, p. 260) that needed to be broken through forgiveness, both as an attitudinal stance and as a behavior. This would have enabled those involved to move beyond negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In the same way that my relationship with my mother is today infused with tenderness and compassion made more profound with the memory of pain, we can experience a similar restoration through our capacity to forgive and heal workplace harm. By practicing love in community (Greenleaf, 2002), we can build just, lasting, and meaningful relationships where these have not existed. This is a truly life-giving response to the daily reality of pain and suffering.

DIALOGUE

Discussing her experience of employee resistance when spearheading organizational change, Anne McGee-Cooper ("Resistance," n.d.) said that we need to reframe what people are saying in order to understand what they are feeling and experiencing. This stance then enables a two-way relationship that is transformative. What if I had sought to really listen and identify the fears and frustrations driving my colleagues' behavior? These likely included: budgetary and resourcing frustrations, alienation and disaffection, a feeling of being overworked, and interoffice competitiveness. Bringing these deeper issues out into the open, rather than simply reacting to the surface behavior, reduces projection and creates a space for honest and constructive dialogue.

Dialogue is essential in the midst of conflict. All too often, we are engaged in communication, which is purely functional, instead of dialogue, which builds community and "gives rise to the forces that unhinge the way we harm each other, opening us toward a more accepting and empathic understanding of one another" (Ferch, 2003, p. 10). As an illustration of the distinction, one might observe the way in which "How are you?" has become little more than a platitude in professional settings, instead of its original purpose as an invitation toward mutual understanding and relationship. With regard to conflict, viewing a person with love and understanding means that one is invested in an outcome that honors that person, so that the win-lose mindset of interpersonal conflict gives way to a *community-full* win-win mindset.

Taking my organization as a microcosm of the corporate world, a new corporate spirit is surely needed in order to support conversation and better ways of relatedness. In very practical terms, Morris ("Conflict," n.d.) advocates a "positive framework of ideas" according to which people know how to deal with differences and conflict. Such a framework was present in Townsend & Bottum, an organization credited by Spears (1995) for its servant-leadership culture. According to Spears, this culture was fostered through a set of core values, including "nurturing the positive in people" (p. 274). The attitudinal and behavioral stances associated with this value included: being nonvengeful, controlling anger, practicing forgiveness, not harboring grudges, and seeing the positive in people. From this position, one interprets others' actions in the best possible light, and one is "present and vigilant to that person's truth" (Reyes, "Conflict," n.d.), respecting their autonomy and individual voice.

Morris ("Conflict," n.d.) goes on to state that such a culture is formed by informal workplace conversations and observations. Put differently, the key to building a more just and loving corporate culture is relational conversation, in which we are fully present to one another. Based on the idea that communication should deepen a relationship and not just resolve conflict, relational conversation is employed in the therapeutic setting to "increase relational fortitude and promote a consistent level of intentional and loving connection" ("Relational Conversation," 2001). Underpinning such conversation is a foundation of justice and forgiveness as a means to resolve conflict, so that authentic relationship can emerge. This is more than just exchanging ideas; it is sharing meaning (Spears, 1995, p. 226).

It is possible to build this sense of connectedness and empathetic understanding within organizations. With this foundation in place, we can create truly life-giving and life-enriching organizations in which power and love, justice and mercy, are brought into balance.

CONCLUSION

The idea of proportionality and desert is a misnomer in the world of servant-leadership because it lacks moral imagination. Let's talk, instead, about transformation. Restorative justice is transformative, in that it is capable of restoring the dignity and humanity of the person, addressing the need for meaning, and revitalizing our collective future. With the insights and reflections of this paper, I have sought to highlight the value of pursuing

deeper and more meaningful relationship within organizations. Relational conversation, underpinned by a foundation of justice and forgiveness, demonstrates mutual commitment and mutual respect. It is thus an appropriate tool for building relatedness and shared meaning as the basis for a caring, compassionate and life-giving organization.

Faced with the daily reality of conflict, pain, and suffering, leaders need to cultivate a vision of human possibility that is solid and without bounds. Palmer (2004) expresses this imperative with the thought: "As I stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility, this small, tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope" (p. 178). This greater capacity is the key to interior resilience in the midst of conflict. It entails an openness, vulnerability, and courage of the heart. It requires a leader who dares to venture more deeply into the center of a problem, setting the stage for others to avoid the "fight or flight" urge, and to stay. Forgiveness and reconciliation require that we stay and that we commit to one another; that we commit to being responsible.

In the words of Kahlil Gibran (1977), "The erect and the fallen are but one man standing in twilight between the night of his pigmy-self and the day of his god-self" (p. xii). Such an insight calls into question our urge to punish and alienate the other, and calls us, instead, to be sources of light in the midst of darkness.

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