

I Am Not Scared by Conflict

ABSTRACT

This article is based on the clinical experience in a Family Planning Clinic and, through the two reported cases, takes into account the issue of family conflict in its lights and shadows.

The feeling of non-fulfillment that makes man unhappy seems to be the origin of the main family tensions, the extreme consequence of which is seeing the other as an enemy and judge him on the basis of one's denied Selves. An openness to dialogue with a view to communal reciprocity helps to become more aware of one's polarities and to accept one's judging Selves without transfer or fear.

The complex path of identification involves having oneself mirrored back, not an enemy to face but a viaticum for transcendence, a window opening itself to the world and our humanity.

KEYWORDS: self-judging, communal reciprocity, conversion, dialogue, fraternal conflict

THE CONFLICT AND THE RECIPROCITY

Considering the historic times we are living through, the title of this article may seem provocative and even too bold. However,

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in order to avoid a dangerous relativistic interpretation of the world's catastrophic events, we should direct our thought to images that embrace reality in its lights and shadows, not to avoid these ones, but to go through them with a clear and calm mind.

In fact, we all witness, sometimes with fear, the devastating consequences that conflict generates on a world scale, leading to political, economic and value system disintegration. But we are also firmly convinced that it is possible to alleviate the suffering of humankind with a positive, productive energy able to regenerate the torn up social fabric. This requires the engagement of "extremists of dialogue". Maria Voce used this evocative image in April 2015 at the U.N. Building in front of the mighty of this world to demonstrate that also international security requires conversion into facts.

As a Psychologist working in a Family Planning Clinic, I would like to try and be "an extremist of dialogue" and read the "facts" reported by the patients in their autobiographical stories in a reciprocal conversion perspective. Their conversion, which requires an existential conscience aimed at redirecting their own behavior towards new criteria; and my conversion, as a result of a freer view, as free of prejudice and theory as possible.

Thus, I find myself meeting families' dialogues, asking myself what is the possible best way to shed light on all the aspects of conflict, the negative and the positive ones.

It is obvious that nobody likes facing obstacles that inhibit one's projects, difficulties of any kind and scary conflicts, but it is also true that every trauma leads to a cleansing effect. We must recognize that every crisis has a creative, explorative power of transformation. Thus conflict leads to hope, if we are ready to see it, and to a conversion, meant both as a punctual event and an "ongoing and forever process".

As I try to let my patients' inner voices come out, I see in them the deep roots of external conflict, aroused by those same passions

that human beings carry inside: the fear of the other, of difference, the desire to have the last word, to believe oneself always right. Competition and desire for power ignite my patients' imagination and go through their relationships, especially the most important ones. I find the same competitive position in the couples that are in a crisis where each partner would like to persuade the other that he is right and thus obtain his consent and approval. Thus focused on arguing rather than on listening, aiming at asserting our own reasons in a shattered view of man who is supposed to turn out either winner or loser, we lose sight of the value of communication itself, we put a strain on the possibility of opening ourselves to the other and on the desire of listening to him and putting ourselves in his shoes.

In fact, we all know that dialogue finds its reason precisely in reciprocity, which is aimed at understanding, sharing, cooperating, never at persuading. As Chiara Lubich says: the other's being different is what makes "myself be myself".

I wish to echo the words of the physicist David Bohm, who defines dialogue "a collective way of opening oneself to judgment, discernment, hypothesis, in a suspension of opinions, to see what comes out".

And if the result is verbal jousting, a "redoubled attention" is necessary, says Sennett. Therefore, I would like to focus on the devastating aspects of the inability to communicate, both in a family and in society.

We see how, in a postmodern world where shared truths are insufficient, dialogue is likely to become a pervasive way of sharing words with no aim. Sometimes even in the absence of the person, by means of information technology surrogates that, regardless of the relationship, do not take into account the quality of the relationship itself. Transcendence which leads to sharing and communion is disregarded. Listening to the noise coming from outside and even more to the buzz from inside becomes impossible. This results in a sad "too noisy solitude" (B. Hrabal),

accompanied by a perceived feeling of marginalization and incompatibility, source of permanent frustration.

THE DENIED SELVES AND JUDGING SELVES, OR JUNG'S SHADOW

In our daily life we have always gone through situations where we have felt lonely and rejected. Since we were kids.

We are all used to the lack of mutual recognition, and thus we know very well the pain and conflict resulting therefrom.

And if we take a step back and retrace our lives, we see vulnerable girls and boys, needing care and attention. Children who should be just as somebody wanted them to be. And isn't this the child we go on protecting from his own vulnerability? Aren't our "denied Selves" that make us suffer, becoming "judging Selves"?

And if it is true that everything which is not recognized is just as if it was denied, then it is probable that what we dislike in other people, actually, represents our dark side. The other represents our denied Selves and our often rejected dark side. He is the mirror of our negativity and, in this respect, becomes for us either a window opening itself onto the world or a brick wall (Rosenberg). The other is the one who allows us to evolve, if we are able to leave behind all excuses and to direct our tensions in a positive way. Considering conflict this way, allows us to balance and think of pacific solutions also on a macro-social scale.

It is our sincere opinion, that nothing can be so destructive as facing diversity we find in others as a pure stumbling block, or even, as a source of worry.

Welcoming emotions which people beside us harbour makes us more successful in recognizing our worries, even though they might be very frightful.

Society itself encourages us to be successful, to make every success worth of acknowledgment, to make practical skills worth

of the same acknowledgment even more important than the common know how.

It is so that us too, for most of our lifetime, get influenced by this type of culture which rejects any imperfection, any smudging and any limit by ending up to privilege what is more generally acknowledged.

The price we pay, by trying to protect our weakness and assure the fulfilment of our needs is too high: we end up by not acknowledging the frailties by fearing that they might be considered demeaning as such and be constrained in a shadow area.

This shadow area is difficult to open but it namely constitutes our true psychological imprint and without it we end up by not perceiving ourselves.

Our personality is made up of a lot of psychological structures and behavioral structures acquired during infancy through complex rules and values.

Every rule is self-reliant, it has an archetypal origin and both builds an entire personality and is in constant change.

The process is simple and follows more or less this path: any time we have cried, laughed or required any attention when we were kids we received from an adult person some feedback in terms of care, acknowledgement, love, or instead dispassion and refusal. That is the answer that our primary selves after a precise evaluation and subsequent feedback, learnt to adapt to in order to attain the best treatment . It is the way that the adjustment to the external world starts and takes place and will force us to constrain in the psychological depths, all those aspects which were not considered as valuable from our family first, then by school and, finally, society.

According to the Self Psychology worked out by Hal and Sidra Stone primary Selves make a kind of Internal critic which judges our internal parts, which are considered as unacceptable, this way it represses them and denies them.

We know however, that denied Selves are not only cancelled but sooner or later they will return under various shapes: psycho affective disorders or real disease, uncertainties, anxious states, scare and rage. The more these obstacles are buried the more they will try to express themselves by avoiding our control.

Just like a too long suppressed energy, therefore, they will arise in explosive ways.

In such a case it is necessary to building dialogue between inner voices, as would Stone says, or to face the Jung's Shadow, in order to make all the sides of our inner selves emerge.

Just to give an example: it is likely that the person who identified too much with a sense of responsibility must face the most hilarious aspects of his inner self and those who have privileged weakness deny their rational selves, or even those who are extremely rational try to hide their intuitive and creative selves .

Facing the shadow, therefore, allows us to experiment all our aspects which we don't particularly like and once we face them they encourage the intimate dialogue with other people.

It is this process that makes us truly perceivable as a whole.

We are able, namely, to live happily even under external pressure which would like to make us different from what we are and become, day by day, the leaders of our lives by widening our loving potential.

It is in the other self that we find our ego and the other person; it is in those that we find the invisible and where we can touch the untouchable, where we can discover differences and the infinite dimension; even introspection which nowadays is rare.

It is difficult in our society, defined as liquid by Bauman, to keep one's own identity because, just like water continuously changing direction and reaching new shapes according to the shape it encounters, we are lead to adapt to new and fast social models.

Therefore, if we are facing a consumption model of society, we are both consumers and someone else's consumption.

So, if we are not trained to recognize ourselves in others, we tend to lose our slowly acquired identity because it is replaced by a new and unstable identity.

We have to improve in order to keep the pace with social changes that require our “connection” just as if we wanted to hide our true solitude.

Facing the other helps, then, and makes us experience a direct meeting which, as Levinas says, shapes the ethical principle.

It introduces us in the experience of the other different from myself and in the absence of amazement if, before the elegant king’s clothes, we still can perceive the naked king.

Therefore, leaving aside self-reference we can say, in ourselves, that what makes us stay in the register of ourselves and face the other for what he truly is, goes through perceived differences more than worrying and contrasted differences.

This process leading to communal reciprocity not only distances us from the dangerous end of “all the same” but it helps us, to face boldly conflicts.

SOME CLINICAL CASES

It is starting from these observations that I proceed towards the analysis of a couple of cases: the competition between brothers and a marital crisis.

Simona is the invented name of a 57 year-old patient. She asks our Clinic to be helped to face the problems in assisting her mother who’s been suffering from dementia for a few years. Simona has got two elder twin brothers: Giorgio, who is schizophrenic, and Maria. Simona is very dedicated to her mother and takes care of her with much love. After a few therapy sessions, we realize that what disturbs the patient is not so much the burden of assisting her mother but rather what is not done by her brothers according to her. Maria’s absence, her apparent disengagement on one

side and, on the other, Giorgio's inability to take charge of their mother, cause in Simona a deep sense of injustice. Her words are full of rivalry, competition and resentment. So we ask her what she would have done instead for her mother if she had been an only child. To our surprise, we hear her say that she would have done exactly the same things.

While acknowledging that a shared grief is a grief reduced by half, we point out that to overcome her conflict she has to accept her brothers' blessed identities in a communal reciprocity and recognize the trap she has fallen into: she loves her mother, so she takes care of her the best she can; she wants to do for her all she can to answer her needs by herself and she does a perfectly good job. However, she cannot be happy until, she thinks, her brothers do the same as her. Just to follow her own principle of equity.

Unprepared to listen to her own judging Selves and denied Selves, she cannot overcome her conflict.

The second case is that of a middle-aged couple, Maria and Armando. For some time now the way they communicate has become hostile. He reproaches his wife for not making decisions concerning their children, grown up and independent by now, but still unable to be so according to him. I wonder what bothers Armando so much, making him angry with his wife. After a few sessions, I run into his dark side.

Armandino", as he was called when he was a kid, could hardly stand being cosseted and protected by his parents who, because of a slight malformation, considered him the weakest among his brothers and sisters. Today Armando, without realizing it, goes on defending in his relationships that denied Self, that fragile child, never fully recognized. And he does so projecting onto his wife and children his ancient raging and naive desire to assert himself.

In both cases we see that suffering has the same origin: the feeling of inadequacy that, because of the original wound, makes us incomplete. In this respect, it is worthwhile wondering about

the clinical and spiritual meaning of such an “absence”. Not much emptiness to be filled but rather weakness that brings closer to the encounter with the other. In fact, we know that man is by nature inclined to the search and integration of his missing pieces and aspires to completeness and perfection, also through his relational nature. As Sidra Stone says: “ There is something inside us, a deep intelligence that wants us to be complete”. Paradoxically, we acknowledge that it is exactly experiencing our incompleteness and frailty what makes us free, whole persons.

So we fear the other not only because he is different from us but because, through his own being, he reminds us our difficult task of individuation and integration. We always need to confront opposites in order not to be crushed and alienated from our own humanity. Since we know that everything we remove as unpleasant sooner or later will come back and present us the bill.

Accepting our judging Selves without projecting them onto other people helps us to be more aware and to embrace the dreadful polarities, our own and the other people’s, in order to face conflicts better.

But this time without fear.

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