

Friday 19th December 2008 – Workshop H2: Reciprocity as a Personal and Social Transformative Experience

CONDITIONS FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE ENCOUNTER

Adam B. Seligman

Professor, Department of Religion/Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs,
Boston University

Central to the pedagogy and practice of Fr. Wresinski is the primacy of experience and in particular, the experience of poverty. Fr. Wresinski, and following him, all of the ATD movement, its volunteers, members and allies maintain the ineluctable importance of practice in the formation of our shared life and of our thought. Shared experience is, for us the key to overcoming poverty through the very mutuality that such sharing demands.

In many ways this emphasis on experience brings to mind the writings of the father of American pragmatist philosophy, John Dewey. Dewey too taught us to pay greater heed to experience than to our always-already-existing perceptions. In fact, Dewey attempted to teach us to think in new ways, to think as he termed it, “reflectively”. Yet, he cautioned:

“Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value, it involves the willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance. *Reflective thinking, in short, means judgment suspended during further inquiry, and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful. ... To maintain a state of doubt and to carry on a systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essentials of thinking.*”¹

This thinking through experience, suspending judgment even as one forms new conjectures, leading us to new forms of action, is at the heart of Fr. Wresinski's thought, in of course, one terribly important realm – our relations to those living in extreme poverty.

Our encounter with the other, in this case, with those living in conditions of extreme poverty has the potential to open up new possibilities for understanding, self-reflection and ultimately, for action. To realize this potential, however, we must be willing to meet the other as an equal. We must be open to the other and to the dialogue which may ensue. Dialogue, genuine dialogue, however exists only where – as Martin Buber has taught us – “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular beings and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.”² Such mutuality implies as well our willingness to relinquish control of the developing encounter. While not negating ourselves, we must nevertheless abandon our inherent desire to control the situation and order it according to our own dictates. This is not easily achieved.

While difficult, it is far from impossible. This in fact is the contribution of Fr. Wresinski's life and thought and the continued embodiment of that thought in the work of ATD Quart Monde. For when we look at the work done in the Merging of Knowledge volume, or stories told in collections such as Artisans for Democracy what we sense is precisely this transformation in and of the encounter; whether of partnerships forged between small businesses and the homeless, of a transformed awareness of corporate culture (in the form of the French electric company in Nancy) or of lawyers learning themselves the meaning of dialogue – and in

¹ John Dewey, How We Think, pg. 13.

² Martin Buber, Between Man and Man. Boston, Beacon Press, 1955. pg. 19.

general the continual forging of individual, organizational and civic links between members of different social groups and those in extreme poverty. All this difficult work is predicated on an experience of what I would term, "living together differently". And in the rest of my brief talk I would like to outline what I think is involved in achieving this. In doing so I will be drawing a good deal on the ideas of John Dewey in, what I hope, will provide a new light on the thought of Fr. Wresinski.

I begin with the suggestion made by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume in his dictum that: "Explanation is where the mind rests". For what the transformative encounter entails, of course – is, precisely, changing the place where the mind rests. Now minds are very busy things, constantly moving, restless, questioning and querying – people spend a life time of yoga and meditation to get the mind to rest. If so, then, indeed, when does the mind rest? Well one place it rests is when the particular purpose of its questioning has been fulfilled. I may have a need to explain why the hammer is not in its proper place (because Joey forgot to return it after he made his workbox for shop) so as to be sure that next time it will be in its place (and I make a mental note to tell Joey in no uncertain terms to be sure to return my tools whenever he takes them). I do not need (or think I do not need) to know why Joey forgot to return the hammer (i.e. it is irrelevant for me if it is because his friend Pete called him out to play ball before he had finished cleaning up after he made the workbox or if it was because he came in for a glass of milk and dropped the bottle and slipped on the milk when cleaning it up and had to change his shirt and then his grandmother called, etc.). The endless regress of reasons is irrelevant for my purpose (of making sure the hammer is always returned to its place after use). The mind rests when the purpose for which an explanation has been pursued has been met.

Now, this explanation of where the mind rests, draws heavily on what the American pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey defined as an *idea*. For when we have an *idea* of something it generally means that we have explained it to our satisfaction, leaving our mind, as it were, at rest. Our satisfaction is, in turn, determined by our ability to frame the given reality facing us with sufficient supplementary information for us to **know what to do**. And here is the value added of Dewey's thought. For while explanation rests with an idea that we form of something; this idea is, according to Dewey, an amalgam of the currently available, physical reality before us together with additional, interpretive data that frames this reality in a broader, meaning giving context, **defined by our specific purposes** and I stress here the notion of **purposes**. For the orientation of thought to purpose is of extreme importance in forging bonds that overcome social exclusion. There are certainly many types of action, particular tasks or sets of tasks such as studying for an examination, building a carburettor, preparing dinner, purchasing garden mulch, practicing open-heart surgery, bidding on a stock option, ordering food in a restaurant and so on where it is relatively simple to see this process of explanation and idea formation at work. They however are not our concern here. We are interested in a much more difficult to get at set of ideas; those revolving around the self, the other and how civic space is shared among all, including with people whose life in extreme poverty seems to set them apart from others and which therefore reproduces the extreme forms of social exclusion they face, as this exclusion is continually reaffirmed in most of their interactions with others.

What I would like to suggest is that the great contribution of Fr. Wresinski's thought and life lies in the context of the encounter with those living in extreme poverty, forcing a change in the place wherein the minds of those engaged in this encounter, "rests". This is accomplished, I suggest through the transformation of the purposes of knowledge. We thus transform the fundamental purposes of our knowing, (and thus of our explanations), from providing a **knowledge of**, to providing a **knowledge for**. Not an idea *of* the other, rather ideas *for* certain joint purposes - for a set of to-does - become the goal towards which our explanations are

oriented.

When the place of explanation, the place where the mind rests, is identified in terms of **knowledge of** the other, and that other, is an individual living in extreme poverty the result is often a heightening of social exclusion. Said individual's difference appears so great, so monumental in terms of worlds shared that the "default" position is one of constructing an almost impregnable cognitive and emotional barrier, behind which the mind can rest in relative peace and security. However the real experience of a transformative encounter allows the goals of knowledge to be transformed to a **knowledge for** which sidesteps these pitfalls to allow the construction of a shared world.

All of this brings us to what I like to call the idea of embodied knowledge; that is, knowledge focused on particularities and hence what is, in essence, experience. Experience, as Dewey has taught us, is the central component in thinking. "To learn from experience" he tells us, "is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy and suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like".³ In this process, the intellect cannot be separated from experience and the attempt to do so leaves us with disembodied, abstract knowledge that all too often emphasizes "things" rather than the "relations or connections" between them.⁴ Which, needless to say, is what characterizes so much of the work and thinking around poverty in more traditional and state sponsored venues. Such knowledge however is of precious little help in our attempt to connect the multitude of disconnected data that the world [in this case, the world of extreme poverty] presents into a framework of meaning. Meaning rests not on the knowledge of "things" but on the relations between them, that is, between us. These relations, in turn, as Dewey and Fr. Wresinski both, in their different ways, argued, can only be assessed through experience – because only through experience do we bring the relevant relations between things into any sensible sort of juxtaposition.

Think of this in material forms and then draw out the relevance for human relations: The relevant relations between fabric, wood, staples, hammer, stain-pot, brush etc. are only made relevant in the construction of the chair. Without the experience of chair-making the relations between the components, even the definition of the component elements is open to endless interpretation. Moreover, if I were building a light air-glider the relevant relations – of tensile strength, thickness, suitability of material, etc. – would be different. Thus meaning, emergent from experience can only be supplied by the goals towards which we aspire – as indeed, experience, as opposed our simple passive subjugation to an event, is always in pursuit of a practical aim.

In terms of the construction of a shared social world, which includes those subject to extreme forms of social exclusion, we are in the same situation and must learn from and hence be open to experience – rather than preconceived ideas and abstract forms of knowledge. We must enter a process that can only be realized through a slow, cumulative and not always conscious process of straddling the boundaries of our existing and developing modes of thought through the challenges of shared action – of embodied experience. In so doing, we may thus come to recognize the only partial, fragile, mutable and heavily freighted nature of the interpretive frames that we bring to our experiences, even as we overcome them in our newly shared human encounters.

The experiential aspect here is central and it calls to mind John Dewey's important distinction between science as a statement that gives directions or states meaning and art which expresses

³ John Dewey, Democracy and Education, NY: Dover Publications, 2004. pg. 134

⁴ Ibid, 137.

them. The giving of directions (like a sign to a city) in no way supplies one with an experience of the object of those directions (just as a sign supplies the viewer with no experience of the city). Signs and statements of direction may be good one or bad ones, confused or clear, comprehensive or partial – but in no case can they give us the experience of their object. Art, on the other hand, does not simply lead us to an experience “It constitutes one”. It is expressive of experience. This distinction is helpful in the present context. For the experience of the other, the encounter with her can only be expressed in action. It is constituted in the doing and only in the doing, in the practice – in the pragmatic orientations taken when we find ourselves in the midst of an uncontrolled encounter with what is different: of acting together. Experience is much more art than science. In fact, I would say, the art of the encounter with the other, the openness to the transformative potential this contains actually constitutes experience as such. And experience constituted in this way is very different from the type of rational control and descriptive acumen that we identify with science.

What I would like to end with, is the presentation of a small “tool-kit” of possible ways to further such reflective thinking and openings to shared experience. These include:

- Holding all claims to absolute truth in abeyance. In terms of concrete action, most such claims are irrelevant and often counterproductive. (One does not need to know reigning theories of subatomic particles to cut the wood for a living room shelf).
- Recognizing the partial nature of any and all understandings. David Hume’s “Explanation is where the mind rests”, is never the place of full knowledge, only of a purpose well served.
- Allow experience to precede judgment. Bring in the minimum assumptions needed to get the job done, rather than a check list of principles against which the experience itself is to be verified.
- Knowledge is always, knowledge *for* and we should be careful to define this *for* in non-ideological terms, without reference to our own fantasies and fears.
- Distance our own commitments (to our own well being or the well being of our group for example) from our idea formations and explanations of the concrete other with whom we are in contact.

Ultimately, I believe it is Fr. Wresinski’s legacy that the very privileging of shared experience over either abstract thought, ideological posturing or theoretical constructs is the only way to provide the conditions necessary for overcoming social relations predicated on different forms of social exclusion.