

Institutional Transformation

(This is an edited summary of the theoretical basis for my dissertation)

While any number of theories of transformation could have been adequately employed to provide a basis for this paper, I chose to use the theory proposed by the late Professor Manfred Halpern. I made this decision primarily because of his theory's versatility. It has been used in the past to provide the analytical basis for transformational processes ranging from the personal to the geo-political. I will apply Dr. Halpern's theory to the situation within a Catholic secondary school directed by a lay Board of Trustees.

I did not realize how significant September 20th, 1999 would be in the evolution of this project, coming so early in the Doctoral program. On this day, Manfred Halpern was invited by Dr. Lester Ruiz, the director of the Doctor of Ministry program, to New York Theological Seminary to deliver a paper to the students entitled, "How can we rediscover wisdom and compassionate love?" This provided my initial, if somewhat confusing, exposure to Dr. Halpern's theory. To a person, we were grateful, weeks later, when we were presented with a transcript of his address.¹

Halpern describes the process of transformation as participation in the core drama of life. The first act of this drama is emanation. Emanation is the hunger for safety. It is the commitment to the unchanging. It is the originating myth that provides safe harbor and demands unquestioning allegiance to this frozen moment of truth.² It will protect you if you remain faithful to it, and is often embodied in the concepts of mother, father, God, or church.

When another myth appears to either contradict or challenge this emanation, the individual can enter into dialogue with the new story or retreat to the first myth. A retreat is often accompanied by intense passion (deformation). In deformation people will violate themselves and others in an effort to maintain control. This

¹ Manfred Halpern. "How Can We Rediscover Wisdom and Compassionate Love?" a special lecture, September 20, 1999 at New York Theological Seminary.

retreat (arrest) is the path of the fundamentalist or the demagogue, and leaves them with two options: either absolute control or total anarchy.

The individual or the institution can attempt to thwart this process of transformation at any act or scene. Markham defines resistance as, "...an *unconscious* process of retarding or blocking transformation. People and organizations always resist transformation, just as no one readily seeks out the pain of conversion."³

Resistance can manifest itself in fragmentation, rather than collaboration; in undoing innovative actions; in denying the existence of problems; or in rigidity, by designing tighter systems of control and accountability.⁴ If this resistance is neither named nor confronted it can result in depression. Thus, "...corporate malaise manifested in complacency, low morale and loss of a sense of organizational meaning and purpose frequently blocks a group's energy to address the future."⁵

According to Halpern, this new and challenging myth can enter the stage through one or a number of our four "faces."⁶ Our *personal* face embodies our creative participation in the unique source of our being. Our *political* face is expressed in our connections with others. The *historical* face is constituted by our memories, and our *sacred* face puts us in touch with an underlying, living force that transcends the individual.

To illustrate how these four faces interact, Halpern provides an example based on the myth of the nation-state:

The drama of the nation-state seeks to mold our personal face above all into conformity – one nation, under god. The only personal contribution that is really appreciated is what makes our nation-state, instead of the others, richer, more famous and above all more powerful. It diminishes

² Manfred Halpern. "Notes on the Theory and Practice of Transformation." Unpublished manuscript. 1980.

³ Donna Markham. *Spiritlinking Leadership: Working through Resistance to Organizational Change*. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999). 24.

⁴ *ibid.* 35-39.

⁵ *ibid.* 40.

⁶ Manfred Halpern. "A Theory for Transforming the Self: Moving Beyond the Nation State." in Stephen Woolpert (ed.). *Transformational Politics: Theory, Study and Practice*. (New York: SUNY, 1998). 45-46.

our political face domestically in ways that we shall soon discuss, but few indeed are the areas of life in which we now feel ready to explore and act upon what we can and need to do together with others who are not part of our nation-state. Much of our historical face has been falsified. We are told we are one nation. But in fact no nationalism existed anywhere in the world in word or deed until the late eighteenth century. Except perhaps Iceland, no nation in the world is in fact but one nation. All are multi-cultural. The sacred face of the nation-state as we shall see keeps us all partial – meaning biased and incomplete – yet ready to die for it.⁷

This new myth plunges us into confusion, or incoherence. It makes us question the validity of the originating emanation. It deprives us of our security and of our sense of the eternal nature of truth. If the individual embraces this new myth she can become a rebellious prophet, forcing her to face ostracism and potential extermination. The rebel-prophet must move to the next scene by learning to unlearn and by opening herself to previously unfamiliar understanding. This is the task of the philosopher. In this act we must be able to reflect upon and critique our myths. We must discern what bound us to our first myth and what attracted us to our second myth.

Markham suggests that the work of the philosopher may be accomplished by identifying the mode of the resistant behavior, by engaging the institution in determining why this resistance is manifesting itself at this particular moment, by considering what will happen to the organization if this resistance continues, and by determining if the institution is sufficiently motivated to move beyond it.⁸

In the final act we face transformation ourselves and invite others to journey with us. We have moved from being prophets and philosophers to participants and protagonists. And while “We can never coerce anyone into transformation,”⁹ yet we can and we must extend the invitation to others to walk with us. “Our task is to engage ourselves in face-to-face encounters to explain the experience of the drama of transformation so

⁷ *ibid.* 46-47.

⁸ Donna Markham. 17.

⁹ Manfred Halpern. *Transformation: Its theory and Practice in Personal, Historical, and Sacred Being*. (Princeton, NJ. 1999). Work in progress. 97.

that people can recognize it and practice it.”¹⁰ As part of a transformative community we journey again and again through this process, living as we do in a world of continuous creation.

Our task is not to overthrow the nation-state, but to begin creating interconnected communities of transforming human beings, so that we may be understanding, loving and just with ourselves and each other – the heart of the politics of transformation.¹¹

Emanation is dying in our time because it does not allow us to ask new questions or to experiment with fundamentally new answers.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 98

¹¹ Manfred Halpern. “A Theory for Transforming the Self: Moving Beyond the Nation State.” in Stephen Woolpert (ed.). Transformational Politics: Theory, Study and Practice. (SUNY, 1998). 55.