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What is your intention?

WC: 1500

Two months ago I participated in STAR training with the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding - Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resiliency. Towards the end of the week a trainer asked for a volunteer to drive home a point she was trying to make. Eager to get out of my seat and move a bit after spending too much of the week sitting, I volunteered. She had me leave the room, gave instructions to the class, and invited me back into the space.

She asked me to stand and face my fellow students with both arms raised perpendicular to my body. I was instructed to stand firmly. She would push down on my right arm, and when doing so I was to resist that push. She did this several times. The first time I stood strong, she was barely able to move my arm much at all. The second time was different, she pushed my arm down to my side almost instantly.

It wasn't fatigue from standing firm the first time, because the third time and several subsequent times I was able to resist her touch. There were times that I could, and times that I could not.

The same year I was born, 1994, Italian scientist Giacomo Rizzolatti produced one of modern neurosciences most "sensational discoveries," by accident. Rizzolatti, undertaking an entirely different study, noticed that as he picked up food pellets and placed them in a box, his study monkey, just sitting there, perched, watching him, was firing brain signals as if the monkey himself was the one moving the pellets (Van der Kolk, p. 58). This happenstance is what led us to the modern discovery of Mirror neurons- that I, at a neurological level, am mirroring you.

Now, twenty-three years later I stood in front of a classroom of over a dozen other students and something within me was mirroring them. After our little "experiment" the trainer let me in on the secret. Every time before she pushed my arm she would, behind my back, give a

thumbs up or a thumbs down to the rest of the room. This was their instruction to think either positive thoughts or negative thoughts about me. The times they sent quiet positive thoughts to me (and maybe expressed them a bit in their body language, too) were the times that I stood strong, resistant, and resilient to the trainers touch. But when they were sending bad vibes my way, I crumbled.

I'm sharing this story with you for more than just the hope that it will encourage you to think positive thoughts about me right now. I'm sharing because this was the first time I had heard of what I've come to wonder about as the phenomenology of trust, relationship, and reconciliation - the study of intentions. We mirror not only another person's movement, but her emotional state and intentions as well (Van der Kolk, p. 59).

But what does it mean to be a mirror? And what do our intentions have to do with trust, relationship, and reconciliation?

Let me share two stories with you to illustrate this connection.

A few months ago I returned to the US from Colombia, having spent just under a year learning and working alongside victims of the (over) 60-year armed conflict and alongside the social workers and professionals that walk with them everyday.

The organization I was with works primarily with families forcibly displaced from the war; families with stories of the incredible violence that accompanies war. Everyday I saw the weight in the shoulders of the victims that had fled their homes and found themselves in our

office ... and I heard the comments of the social workers claiming that this person lied, and that person probably did too.

I don't blame the social workers for wanting to make sure those that needed it most received the services that they were able to offer. There were times I imagine they were right, too; they had listened to clients tell their stories for years.

But regardless, I wondered what it would look like if the social workers were aware of their mirrors. When one of the social workers would relate to someone whose story they believed (they trusted), they would interact compassionately, they would hold themselves up in a grounded manner and speak gently, affectionately. The client would often leave lighter, mirroring and embodying what they had seen in their caregiver.

But when they would work with someone whose story they didn't believe, they would stand tense, talk firmly, and this too was mirrored. In reality, we will never know who came through those office doors having truly been displaced and victimized by the war. But what would have been different if the social workers had reflected their radical compassion to everyone who came through their doors? We are, after all, mirrors.

At some point I realized (or perhaps just remembered) that the problems of intentions and trust were not unique to where I found myself in Colombia. In fact, they were manifesting in my very own community in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

On November 28, 2016 Eastern Mennonite University published its report of the "investigation in response to allegations of sexual misconduct" by the former vice president of enrollment and EMU's subsequent compliance with Title IX, the Clery Act, and other policies, procedures, rules, and regulations ("Sexual misconduct and compliance investigation"). The report, reflecting D. Stafford & Associates independent investigation, found that Eastern

Mennonite University and administration held no responsibility in the case, it did not find any systemic failings, and supposedly wrapped up a painful part of EMU's most recent history.

I do not want to point, I do not want to place blame where it may not be warranted, but I do want to ask, much like in Colombia, what parts of this process trusted the victim's narratives and what parts did not? What were EMU's intentions and how was this felt?

In Colombia the doubt and distrust were likely not tendencies of the individual social workers, but rather the effects of a violent 60 year war that had taught them to do just that. In one of John Paul Lederach's books he references an old journal entry of his, from his time working in Colombia, and mentions "the combination of pessimisms that float about the country. (Lederach, p.52)" I found that the structural pessimisms there made caregivers doubt those the very people they were trying to help.

I have to wonder whether the investigation at EMU also showed the consequences of what we might call structural pessimisms. This report was not about people to people mirrors, reflections, or explicit intentions. And maybe that is the point.

Was the process undertaken with the DSA one that fully trusted the painful narratives brought to the table? It respected process, aimed to restore trust in the system, but what about the people? Did the process recognize our responsibility as individuals to be mirrors of radical compassion to those most hurt by the violence, despite what the systems are saying? What about our responsibility as Christians, our responsibility as a Christian University, our responsibility as a Church not unfamiliar with the pain of sexual violence?

I recognize a Jesus that came to contradict the powers that be, to bring hope to those affected by an oppressive system on top, and to remind us that power can come from the bottom.

Divinity was the power to stand with the masses, the marginalized, despite what the systems were saying.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says that, “All divine power is shared power ... There’s no seeking of power over in the Trinity, but only power with—a giving away, a sharing, a letting go, and thus an infinity of trust and mutuality” (Rohr, 2017).

So what do we do when we encounter systems that don’t trust us?

That’s where we emerge with our intentions, to seek this infinity of trust.

What happens when you place two mirrors face to face? Has anyone here ever stood between and seen that infinite expanse?

That between is where we emerge with our intention to stand in the way.

Black civil-rights attorney and law professor Derrick Bell invites us to do just this. He reminds us that service requires humility and the recognition that sometimes our actions are of more help to a system than the victims of that system whom we are aiming to help. He says only with that realization can we seek change “that [is] less likely to worsen conditions for those we are trying to help and more likely to remind the powers that be that out there are persons like us who are not only not on their side but determined to stand in their way” (Bell, 2002).

He calls for humility, a power with. Let us remind the powers that be that out there are persons like us who fully intend to stand in their way in one of the most seemingly simple ways possible - by offering each other an infinity of trust and good intention.

And it is only your good intention that will keep my arms up.

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