

The construction of meaning: Reasons for the scars.

Let me start with a story.

The story takes us to the village of Prabis in Guiné-Bissau. Renate Welsh, an Austrian author of children's books, wrote it down and published it in German in 1979. Here is my translation of part of it:

“Diallo Sampa was sitting next to his grandfather. In front of them sat the teacher. The teacher was young, only a couple of years older than Diallo. He himself still went to school – in the capital city. Two times a week he came to the village in the early evening. He came in a rickety old car which then continued the trip and took his colleagues to more remote villages.

They learnt to read.

The grandfather was reading aloud. Everybody was listening. He read with big effort, word by word. While reading he swayed back and forth on his heels, and he held the book very tightly. He frowned. Wrinkles seemed to creep up and down, to and fro. He read slowly, but he did not make any mistake.

When grandfather was ready, Diallo breathed out long. Grandfather was one of the oldest in the village. He had worked on the farm, when it still was owned by an agent of the Portuguese secret police. He had fought against the Portuguese. He had lead the men of the village when they took arms to the Southern Front of the liberation army. Grandfather did not tell much about that time, but other men from the village had told how grandfather alone had defended a store house for sugar cane, in which they had hidden the wounded.

And now he learned to read. In the beginning it gave him more trouble than Diallo. But now he had read an entire page without a single mistake.

Everybody looked at grandfather.

‘How do you feel now?’ asked the young teacher, ‘now, as you are so good at reading?’

Grandfather swayed more intensely on his heels. Diallo moved a bit closer to him.

Grandfather cleared his throat – once, twice. Then he passed the book to Diallo and showed his hands. He looked at his palms and held them in a way that the others could see them. ‘This scar’, he said, ‘is from the first hut I built. And this one here is from the big fire, when my first son was born. And this one is from the first bazooka which I set of. That was when I did not yet know how to handle it. – Every scar says what happened. It does not say why. The books say, why’.¹”

End of quote.

I tend to believe that this old man's reason for learning to read may contain in a nutshell what we mean by “building the scientific mind” or – in the wording of Jan's troubling questions – “a lifelong process of human development to acquire a way of being in and of the world, inspired by the

¹ Renate Welsh: Ich verstehe die Trommel nicht mehr. Erzählungen aus Afrika. Wien, München (Jungbrunnen) 1980.

heritage of the millennia-long history of the human pursuit of knowledge (scientia) for the advancement of understanding and wisdom”.

“The books say, why” should not be understood as a statement claiming causality, and I guess that this is only part of what the grandfather wanted to say. I understand it more in the sense of “attributing meaning”².

Thinking about “meaning”, brought me back to my contribution to the first “Building the Scientific Mind” colloquium in 2005 in The Hague. I was telling then about health work in Angola, where we found that people would be ready to take their children to polio vaccination, if we were proposing that to them while treating them respectfully and kindly, but that they were not interested in our explanation. We did not answer their questions and not respond to their concerns when we told them our story about viruses.

At that time the tentative description of what the “scientific mind” might be, included that it had “to do with not taking things for granted, questioning any given ‘truth’”. This is a very attractive concept for an academically trained intellectual. However – and that is what I tried to point out ten years ago – in order to be critical and creative in that sense, we need something to be sure of. Many people have lost that background certainty, have seen their cultural concepts being violently attacked and being replaced by nothing more than promises which for most of them do not have any chance to be fulfilled. So they latch on to meanings which they have inherited or which they pick up from those who seem powerful to them and who offer them to be part of some bigger community with clear orientation and a set of “values” which are enforced upon them and which they are expected to enforce on others. Such is the case with many children being abused as soldiers³ or with violent gangs like the “maras” in El Salvador⁴. Those people replace the books which say, why, by more comfortable orders which say what to do.

To find meaning to scars requires an effort. It was difficult for the grandfather to learn to read.

Personal and collective constructions of meaning

As a medical doctor I am convinced that medicine in the “bio-medical” variant has contributed to people’s health and reduced suffering for many people. However, I also know that this same medical concept has also done harm to people and increased suffering in many cases. The story about viruses is part of reality and it helps to deal with the phenomena of many diseases. However, we need to recognize two important things:

1. The story of the viruses is not the only one to explain certain diseases – and there is no need for people believing in that story to be jealous of others and perceive them as competitors who intend to take something away from them.
2. The story of the viruses does not provide an answer to the human quest for meaning.

² It is interesting that the noun „mind“ and the verb „mean“ seem to have a common etymological root, reconstructed as *men in the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European language.

³ See for example the testimony of Ishmael Beah: *A Long Way Gone. Memoirs of a boy soldier.*

⁴ See for example Wim Savenije: *Maras y Barras: Pandillas y violencia juvenil en los barrios marginales de Centroamérica, San Salvador, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), 2009.*

I think that it is one of the basic virtues of science and scientists to know the limits of what can be done within such concepts.

It seems that the need to attribute meaning to an experience or a condition is more urgent if the condition is more invasive. During recent years I have been working in the context of HIV. 25 to 30 years ago, being infected with this virus meant to pass to the condition of AIDS within a period of roughly five to 15 years, depending on a lot of other context conditions. It made then sense to speak of “HIV/AIDS” as both were necessarily connected⁵.

Things have changed a lot since then. Part of that is progress in therapy, but a very big part is the amazing fact of people infected and affected by this particular virus having organized themselves and struggled for their interests. And these people forced us to reconsider our medical and health concepts from a human rights’ perspective. Daniel Tarantola, then a Senior Policy Adviser to the Director General of the WHO, wrote in the year 2000:

“At 20 years, the HIV/AIDS epidemics have had major impacts on how we look at health from the perspectives of human rights, human development, and security. The effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the global response to HIV/AIDS require that prevention, care, and support be mainstreamed in all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural actions. But this process should not distract us from this historical human challenge. For the successes and failures of our response to the HIV/AIDS epidemics will continue to suggest new ways to advance health and human rights”⁶.

I think that we can state that this is part of the meaning of HIV on a worldwide social scale. And if we look at how this meaning was constructed, we find the prominent role of people who were and are infected by this virus and who were closely connected to them as family members, care givers and others. This experience has changed approaches to other diseases and to public health in general.

There is another level of meaning with regard to health and disease, which is the personal one. Of course, that personal level is closely connected to social and cultural dimensions. Culture and ideologies, including religion, offer possibilities of meaning to individual people and communities.

Many societies interpret events which happen to them as indicating disturbances in relationships, either within their families or communities or between themselves, their families and communities and the spirits of the ancestors. The construction of these meanings may make people feel powerless and afraid. However, most societies have created ways to deal with these threats. In other societies a condition like the infection with HIV may be regarded as a punishment for socially not accepted behaviour. The different interpretations may have a wide variety of different consequences ranging from comfort and consolation for affected people to stigmatization and discrimination. The fact that the human rights dimension of disease, including gender, has been more and more recognized, includes the awareness for human rights violations in that particular context.

Obviously the pursuit of meaning does not determine the quality of meanings. We may in general agree that “the books say, why”, but we all know that there are good books and bad books. We tend to say that statements can be true or false. At the same time we know that these categories are

⁵ This is not to say that HIV is the only cause for immunodeficiency. Human immunodeficiency can be and by millions of people is acquired through other conditions, the most prominent ones poverty and hunger.

⁶ Daniel Tarantola: The Shifting HIV/AIDS Paradigm: Twenty Years and Counting. In: Health and Human Rights, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 6.

difficult to handle. There is probably not only one truth for a certain phenomenon. There may be different truths on the same subject for different people under different circumstances. So does that mean that meaning is a totally subjective category and can have any content or are there limits to what can be an acceptable meaning? And furthermore: Where do the “good books” come from?

Determinants for the construction of meaning

The social or communal context

Jacob Bronowski emphasises in his lectures on “Science and Human Values” the communal, the social context of science and the scientist: “All this knowledge, all our knowledge, has been built up communally; there would be no astrophysics, there would be no history, there would not even be language, if man were a solitary animal”⁷. The “scientific mind” is not only meant for scientists. If it is a concept of human beings for their “being in and of the world”, it is at least potentially possible for any human being. If that is true, the social dimension of it is essential. Meaning can be very personal. It can be and is constructed by individuals on the basis of their personal experiences. However, in any of these constructions, context is a significant element. Whether a person living with HIV decides to hide his or her condition out of fear to be stigmatized or decides to disclose his or her serological status publicly and use that condition to advocate for human rights, depends on his or her social context.

The social dimension has been lost in many of what can be described as “modern” societies. Emphasizing individual liberties and rights has been used to disrupt social structures based on communities and to make people available for the needs of neo-liberally conceived market-economies. There are serious analysts who argue that HIV is the phenomenon which corresponds to the epoch of globalisation⁸. However, we have also seen a movement of resistance to individualisation. There has never been such a powerful movement of people infected by a particular pathogen. They have created conditions for a collective construction of meaning.

The link to scars

For another limitation of what meaning can be, we may go back to the village in Guiné-Bissau and listen again to the grandfather: “Every scar says what happened”, he says. Meaning should be related to the scars – or at least to “what happened”. It is part of the “scientific mind” that it relates to real experience or knowledge and evidence based reasoning, evidence understood as the relative confidence in a hypothesis of which we are not able to provide proof.

The essential framework of human dignity

Finally I think that meaning should be compatible with human dignity. There is a lot of literature on dignity. Immanuel Kant wrote in his “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” that “Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as an equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits no equivalent, has dignity”⁹. Meanings constructed against that fundamental concept, cannot be considered as such. It seems to me that this is a very important

⁷ J. Bronowski: Science and Human Values. New York (Julian Messner) 1956, p. 73.

⁸ Reimer Gronemeyer: Living and Dying with AIDS in Africa. New Perspectives on a Modern Disease. Frankfurt (Brandes & Apsel) 2005, p. 52.

⁹ Immanuel Kant: Grundlage der Metaphysik der Sitten. 1785. As I do not have access to a published translation into English, this is a tentative translation by myself from German.

element in our present societies. There are phenomena in our present world which are particularly worrying. One is the issue of migration and flight. People who leave situations of war or poverty, are forced to illegal procedures and attacked if they manage to arrive at places which should be able to offer them a safe surrounding. Racism and gender based violence seem to be increasing. People who defend racist positions, give their own meanings to what is happening. However, those meanings are not acceptable.

This situation is closely linked to a fundamental challenge with regard to the concept of democracy. If a majority in German or French towns votes in favour of racist policy proposals, something must be conceptually wrong. It is urgent to deal with that matter. And it could be an area in which the idea of “building the scientific mind” needs to show its validity and its capacity to “build peace in the minds of women and men”.

I am aware that it is highly problematic and far from democratic to state that there are unacceptable meanings. Can the concept of the “scientific mind” contribute to a solution for the dilemmata we are facing here?

I participated recently at a regional dialogue in El Salvador, organized by IOM, on “migration and health”. There were participants from different organizations: governments, international institutions, academia, non-governmental organisations. Governments had sent representatives of Ministries of Health, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and border control officers. The latter ones were very open minded people, ready to discuss the possibilities to improve health conditions of migrants. However, what struck me was the fact that it was not even noticed that some of the people discussing represented institutions which created the health problems for migrants by not allowing people to choose themselves where they want to live, while others were representing institutions created to solve the problem. The fundamental issue that in terms of human dignity, a person should have the right to choose where to live, could not be addressed.

Is it naïve to think that on the basis of a “scientific mind” the construction of meaning could allow us to penetrate to the origins of problems which threaten human societies? When a couple of weeks ago about 1000 refugees from Syria and other places arrived at the German city of Dresden, they were received by a shouting nazi mob. Sure, there were more people demonstrating against the nazis, but it was probably hard for the refugees to distinguish between different types of protesters. They had then to deal with totally unprepared authorities who were not even able to apply well known international standards for refugees – not the well intentioned individuals’ mistake, but a failure of responsible politicians who could very well have prepared the situation in a different way.

What do these phenomena mean? We find ourselves in a situation where there are lots of scars and fresh wounds. Who are in these situations which are getting more and more compelling in many parts of the world, the people who can build the “scientific mind” and make a difference, write the books which say why?

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