

Annunciation and denunciation: relational psychoanalysis, liberation theology and the spirit of transformation

Professor Emeritus Linden West





A story

I want to tell a story about learning, dialogue, and the language we use; about mutual self/other recognition and transformative processes; and of the spiritual, even of the transcendental in imminence in the bleakest places. I draw on depth psychology, critical theory, educational and theological perspectives and consider whether these might, in the right spirit, complement rather than contradict each other. We may need, I suggest, both/and rather than the more usual either/or distinctions in our quest to chronicle and interpret complex, transformational, sometimes illusive experience. My story concerns a fleeting encounter between a Jewish Israeli male educator, who served in an elite counter-insurgency unit in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), and a Palestinian Christian woman educator whose family experienced ethnic cleansing and profound loss at the hands of the Israeli military. The man (both names are pseudonyms) we call Elie and the woman Hannah: her story, for ethical reasons, combines material from a number of women we worked with in a particular project and who we interviewed, auto/biographically. Elie's story is edited too. Hannah and Elie came to Canterbury as part of a European Union funded project, and we also met and worked with them a number of other times in Israel and elsewhere. Both stories exist in the border lands between historical and narrative truth, between what was said and what could be imagined.

Hannah's family were victims of 'ethnic cleansing', no less, in Haifa in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence: Palestinians call this El Nakbah and the continuing Catastrophe of that war and subsequent events. Elie could be labelled, simply, as the oppressor, a representative of a colonising, apartheid state. And yet his storytelling encompasses different kinds of suffering: abuse by his father, against him and his mother, as well as at the hands of a senior officer – a psychopath no doubt - in the Israeli military. Elie's tale is to be set against the backcloth of the Holocaust, but also the collective trauma of the rise of antisemitism and Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa and the consequent exodus of many Jews. The Holocaust dominates the storytelling of the State of Israel, but Hannah's story of El Nakbah and its tragic manifestations is denied legitimacy. Only one story counts in this State. The Holocaust is deemed a unique catastrophe – an attempt to erase a whole people and culture from the face of the earth – in the light of such terror there is only room for one victim and for one people to have suffered. Especially poignant in a present moment of ultra-nationalist, fundamentalist religious right-wing Israeli government that claims existential and moral privilege over the other with supposed biblical authority and fevered insistence.

My talk draws on experiences in a European Union financed research and development project designed to encourage active citizenship and democratic values among teachers and their students in Israel teacher education (and Georgia). It was controversial because substantial numbers of academics, including some in the University where I worked, have no truck with the 'apartheid' Israeli state and call for a boycott of projects like these in solidarity with Palestinians. I was bitterly criticised for participating in the project in a seminar I gave to the international Psychoanalysis and Politics seminar in March 2023. So, none of this work has been easy and often been riddled with doubt. For what it is worth, the project involved Jewish Israeli and Palestinian educators living in the State of Israel. Canterbury Christ Church University was one of 5 European universities participating in the work, undertaking evaluations and bringing specific academic expertise to bear: in our case, the use of auto/biographical narrative methods in teaching and research as well as interdisciplinary psychosocial interpretations of learning and change processes in narrative material.

Despite the potentially important objective of democratisation, the project became largely an exercise in avoidance: highly instrumental, pregnant with displacement activity rather than radical breakthrough: the avoidance of difficult issues through escape from the historical context and conflict between these peoples. For some of the Palestinians, moreover, it was an unsafe space, they said: they worked in the Israeli higher education system, and if they revealed too much about feelings and politics (particularly when in Canterbury in week-long methodology workshops), there would be trouble back home. But there were moments in our workshops of something more human, contextual and political – of fragile glimpses and acceptance of the other's suffering and story. Not least in intense dialogues within small groups, echoing similar processes from the psychoanalytically informed, deeply relational Acknowledgement Project in Gaza which also brought Jews and Palestinians together (Benjamin, 2018). In our work, in-depth auto/biographical narrative interviews supplemented workshop material; and particular Palestinians and Jewish Israeli participants gave profound insights in their stories of the precarious struggle for peace and dialogue in specific locations. We were to glimpse, and moved to imagine, how healing and redemption might be possible, even given the present vicious cycles of death and revenge.

There were moments between Elie and Hannah, in the context of their broader stories, where the potential for reconciliation emerged, albeit firmly at the individual rather than macro-level. Maybe, at the moment, the personal is where hope lies, given the hopelessness of macro-level politics. And of course, the personal is deeply political. We drew on the language and concepts of relational psychoanalysis (defined broadly to encompass psychoanalytic object relations) in the importance attached to relationships and creating a good enough transitional space, in the language of Donald Winnicott. We also used perspectives from critical theory about processes of self/other recognition and emphasised the importance of building trust and creating hope, however precarious. And we sought to deepen storytelling, albeit emphasising, always, the right for colleagues to remain silent. In the perspectives of critical theory, social solidarities can be strengthened in self/other recognition so as to better resist fracture, division and othering; without neglecting the wider context and the issues of power, inequality and social justice. Over time, such processes can be pregnant with new life and hope in the mythic language of liberation theology and the work of Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire. Liberation theology emphasises dialogue alongside authentic, loving acts of solidarity with the poor (on the part of the educator, theologian and or civil activist), mirroring the actions of Christ. Educators themselves, especially academics, may have to experience their own Easter too in the death of arrogance and assumption, and to learn to dialogue in respectful, egalitarian and careful ways. The project at times felt like a cross to be borne in the face of the hopelessness of the macro, meso and even micro situations.

Relational psychoanalysis

I have drawn in my writing hitherto on the writing of critical theorist Axel Honneth, and psychoanalytic object relations to chronicle transformational change in human experience, including in diverse educational contexts (West, 1996; Formenti and West, 2018). Honneth, surprisingly perhaps for a critical theorist in the Frankfurt tradition – or at least surprising to me - brings love into the equation for human transformation: in the sense of its foundational importance in the formation of confident human subjects, drawing on Freud and Winnicott. We are born into absolute dependence on the other, who in turn, like us, requires a good enough, safe and secure facilitating environment to build depth of relationship. Love matters fundamentally alongside material conditions in Honneth's quest to understand the failure of Marxist historicity and to build a new theory of how social solidarities and political will formation are created. Honneth takes Winnicott further by locating transformational experience, and the possibility of new forms of social solidarity – in the qualities of our cultural, social and educational encounters. If, at first, we feel emotionally legitimate in the world, in the eyes of others, we can then intuitively experience the world as a place of nourishment, of existential possibility, in which we can afford to take risks and to learn in more open ways. In good enough, experientially open, mature groups, for instance, where we can come to experience ourselves as recognised and valued, with gifts to offer others. We can then, as Honneth insists, begin to recognise the other and otherness, more fulsomely, from which democratic forms of communication, community and politics can grow.

These processes are complex, and Honneth's rationale is primarily philosophical rather than grounded in any phenomenological depth. Feeling seen and recognised may be more

difficult if lives are riddled with abuse, shame or pervasive oppression (Benjamin, 2018). For Jessica Benjamin recognition lies in authentic acknowledgment of our suffering, trauma even, by the oppressor, and for them to take responsibility for what they have done. Forgiveness is possible, in places like South Africa but it is hard won. This is some of the territory of liberation theology too (as well as liberation psychology?), in which a mutual humanity might be reborn, even between those responsible for oppression and their victims (as in the case of a Father Lapsley whose hands were blown off by a letter bomb in retaliation for his activism in the African National Congress. What every victim of trauma wants and needs, he insisted, is fulsome acknowledgment of the wrong that has been done. Words themselves must carry authentic and deeply embodied truth (see Benjamin, 2018; 219-2200). In liberation theology, the oppressor, or for that matter the academic, must undergo his or her own Easter too: for the latter the death of assumed superiority and that the academy knows best.

In applying these perspectives to the difficult dynamics of building dialogue and self/other recognition in such dangerous contexts, and to seek to create relative openness, authenticity and acknowledgment - among Jewish Israeli and Palestinian educators - we emphasised the importance of storytelling for everyone, of listening; of non-judgmentalism; and of the need for trust and a spirit of empathic enquiry to imagine how the world might be experienced through the other's eyes. We offered a theoretical and methodological rationale for the work, role-played a good narrative interview, shared the evocative objects participants were asked to bring with them (something symbolising hope or a positive experience of citizenship). We asked two people if one could observe what one of us as interviewer was doing, and how the other, as interviewee was responding, encouraging free association in what people said. The large group was then split into groups of four, with each person taking the roles of interviewer, interviewee, and observers in turn, according to an agreed protocol. As workshop facilitators we needed to embody good practice: taking time, opening space, being reflexive, mindful of the right to remain silent, and constantly living in doubt and uncertainty. It helped that we were both psychoanalytic psychotherapists and were able to bring clinical competencies into play, similar to the Acknowledgement Project in Gaza (Benjamin, 2018; West, 2023)

Liberation theology

And yet I constantly wondered, before encountering liberation theology in Freire's work, if something was missing in our interpretative repertoire: another language, perhaps, doing greater justice to the complexity, messiness but also the spirit and even mystery at the heart of potential transformation. It was not that psychoanalysis lacked metaphor, in using the Greek myths, for instance of Narcissus and Oedipus but I wanted something more (the use of the Greek myths of Narcissus and Oedipus, we should note, went against Freud's rationalist, scientific instinct). I was encouraged – via Iain McGilchrist's right as well as left hemisphere hypothesis – to play with more explicitly theological interpretations of what might be witnessed. But not, to repeat, as an either/or in relation to relational psychoanalysis or critical theory, but an and/also. I wondered, in considering particular moments in small groups and in-depth interviews, if we had glimpses of what theologian Martin Buber calls I/Thou relationships, the power of which can bridge chasms of difference and suspicion. I and Thou: an I able to recognise something of the divine in the other rather

than seeing him/her or they as a potential killer or putative terrorist; or as a frightening other who must be controlled and manipulated. Incarnating, in short, new qualities of relationship and perception.

Buber links us directly to the Brazilian radical educator and liberation theologian Paulo Freire. The goal of liberation for Freire was the building of new kinds of dialogical, mutual and egalitarian communities. Each one of us exists in the womb of history, carrying the potential to relate more fulsomely to the other and a whole world. Including to the reality of oppression and the harm done to people, maybe by others like us. Freire calls us to specifically seek and dialogically engage with the sidelined of this world but also those who sideline too: both those in the basements, slums and refugee camps and their bosses and jailors. This is a tall order indeed.

Love has a central role in the incarnation of a radical, humanising spirit in and between people. A process of mutual humanisation, of learning from the other, the not I, through which we can come to recognise more of our own self, including our otherness. The oppressed, Freire insisted, because of their suffering, have privileged access to the Christian mythos of the divine who works in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Divine energy bringing hope, meaning and narrative power in the face of oppression. Oppression and tyranny are a result of human actions not the desire of God. In liberation theology, this is no god who belongs to the rich and powerful, or supports a conservative status quo, but one who urges us towards social justice and equality. Moreover, in the Catholic tradition, love is not necessarily a feeling of warmth and affection – although that is not precluded, but rather a theological virtue. Loving our neighbour as ourselves for the love of god, so to speak. So, we are taken, in a deeply metaphorical, hope-imbued language, into a wider play of metaphor, not least the idea of incarnation, of pedagogic sacrament, of communion and community. Breaking, sharing and digesting the bread and wine of the Eucharist meant much to Freire as a means to symbolically inspire and nourish community. But such spiritual sensibility did not exclude concern for the material conditions of human life: quite the contrary; paradise belonged in the here and now and poverty was no delayed gratification for a heavenly afterlife. Freire was influenced by Marx in his abhorrence of inequality, and in the I/It manipulations of capitalism and consumerism. Capitalism was in fact a religion of death. But Marx had only a partial answer: spirit mattered within and alongside the material. Humans could not be reduced to economic entities alone, however sophisticated the analysis of capitalism's contradictions.

So, in engaging with Freire's work, I began to play with a more diverse range of metaphors like annunciation and denunciation in considering Hannah and Elie's material. Although the workshops, or rather the small groups offered moments of mutual humanisation, and the auto/biographical narrative interviews mapped the suffering in these lives, a week was no time at all for building solidarity, let alone a new politics of the personal. Engaging over time with all the material, and in continuing dialogue with various colleagues from the larger project, a language of 'as if', or 'can we imagine?' began to take hold, in the manner of the historian of slavery Tiya Miles (2021). The story of so many slaves is missing from the historical record and how might greater voice and agency be given to them, their stories and dreams? I felt something similar about particular Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, as if dialogue and our work together had continued. Although Hannah is an amalgam of various

stories, there is Christian Palestinian conviction at her core. Imagining an experience of annunciation in the project – mirroring a bigger story - born out of complex, ambivalent encounters with otherness: selves, like her and Elie, becoming mutually humanised in moments of I/Thou connection as the space developed and deepened for sharing stories of ethnic cleansing and abusive authority. Developing more of a lived experience of how a suffering humanity evokes, in the depth of sacramental storytelling, moments of shared community, spirit and deepening solidarity. Just to imagine for a moment, beyond despairing, pervasive binaries that render and reduce the other to stereotype.

A spirit of mutual, pregnant understanding, of projecting self into another body: giving birth to hope and a new politics of the personal beyond difference and death. A politics and pedagogy of the personal in Israeli higher education. A new politics of faith and mutuality. It is interesting how Jessica Benjamin (2018) in her work, draws on the inspiration of people like Father Lapsley, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and the American Civil Rights movement as evidence of the power of religious witness and courage to break cycles of violence in acts of love, forgiveness, and the making of community. Religion can be much more than patriarchy or privileged men in black: it can transcend hatred and despair.

In writing this about liberation theology, I am mindful of Iain McGilchrist's insistence that we have only a partial vision from any one standpoint. To see things from one side, or through one frame only, according to philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, is not really to see it at all. Critical theory, psychoanalysis and theology have a troubled relational history, but it might be possible for some work of reconciliation to be done in a spirit of humility and playfulness. Storytelling, mutual recognition, love, kindness, listening, imagining ourselves in the shoes of other, new life and energy made incarnate in a community of difference; a renewed politics of the personal in places like Israel/Palestine leading to something bigger, as happened in the case in Apartheid South Africa or in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Imagine. Moments of hope and new life bursting forth, when all else seems to fail. Or of course this could be hopeless naivete.

A footnote to the talk: representations of the annunciation are, as we know, deeply embedded in the Western cultural imagination. Fra Angelico's magnificent Annunciation is one well-known artistic embodiment of this: God's intervention in a broken world, challenging hubris and the death of God. Liberation theologians/educators like Freire insist on God as a living historical presence, most poignantly expressed in the story of the brief Galilean experiment in love, community and liberation. A story of a living theology, a revolutionary incarnation, in that image of a young Palestinian peasant woman's encounter with the divine in a backwater of the Roman Empire. An image of new life - divine energy in this narrative - penetrating the soul of a young woman living on the edge, powerlessness and obscure; but enabled to become historically and anthropologically transcendent. Picture in this talk something similar, however limited, in the life of Hannah (and Elie) as she told her story and listened, and better understood some of the brokenness underlying the oppressor's actions, and the longing for forgiveness in a new politics of fraternity.

For Freire, Mary's song of thanksgiving in the Magnificat is a celebration of being divinely chosen. God engaging with the humble state of his or her servant. S/he who scatters the proud and brings down rulers from their thrones and fills the hungry with good things. S/he

who challenges hubris and the conceits of the coloniser, and the colonised, in revolutionary ways. A peasant girl from an obscure backwater bringing a powerful presence to Hannah's story of oppression and exile. And of how a supposedly former soldier, like Elie, could be reborn in a new politics. Of course, the annunciation portends risk, sacrifice and even death in the face of confrontations with power, political and religious authority. The message is troubling too. It takes us back to the assaults on people, memory and experience in the current State of Israel, in Gaza and the West Bank, and in countless other places. For Freire – himself a victim of imprisonment and exile - there can be a heavy price to pay for asserting, in loving ways, the right to memory, agency, authentic storytelling, to space for self and the other, and for the work of I/Thou reconciliation, taking communion even, in places like Brazil, Palestine, Israel or a wider world.



Biographical details

Dr Linden West is Professor Emeritus of Canterbury Christ Church University, and a celebrated researcher and writer. A Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (RSA), Linden has worked in a number of British Universities as well as being Visiting Professor at the University of Milano-Bicocca, the Université de Paris Nanterre, and Michigan State. He is an historian of popular and workers' education while his main contemporary interest has lain in the application of auto/biographical and narrative enquiry, and interdisciplinary psychosocial and spiritual perspectives, to diverse educational, social, cultural, political and psychological phenomena. He is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and brings insights from clinical work and training into understanding learning, popular education and what we might call transformative and transcendental experience.

Linden co-coordinated the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults' (ESREA) Life History and Biography Network as well as the Network devoted to transformative processes in learning and education over many years. He is an Emeritus Steward of the International Transformative Learning Association, an Editorial Adviser to the *Journal of Transformative Education*. His book, written with Laura Formenti, *Transforming*

perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education, a dialogue won the prestigious Cyril O. Houle international prize for outstanding literature in adult education. In 2020 Linden was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame, at the University of Oklahoma. Linden has written and or edited many books and is published in diverse academic and popular journals. His work is translated into French, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Chinese and Korean.

In preparing for the seminar, or afterwards, perhaps, colleagues might like to read and or listen to:

West L (2023). *Psychoanalysis and Politics, a troubling relationship. Talk to the International Politics and Psychoanalysis Association*. March. This includes a section on the Palestinian/Jewish conflict.

<https://www.psa-pol.org/crises/politics-and-psychoanalysis-a-troubling-relationship/>

West, L (2021). Annunciation and denunciation in Paulo Freire's dialogical popular education. In *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 61. 3. November, 421-441.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/25c087ad72501dd01c3c80af374d532a/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=25751>

Bainbridge A and West L (2021). A key? Conflict and the struggle for an ecology of dialogue, learning and peace among Israeli Jewish and Palestinian educators. In A. Bainbridge, L. Formenti and L. West (Eds). *Discourses, dialogue and diversity in Biographical research*, Brill Sense, 121-142.

<https://brill.com/display/book/9789004465916/BP000019.xml>

Formenti and West (2018) *Transforming perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education: a dialogue*. Palgrave MacMillan.

<https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9783319963877>

Some further references

Benjamin, J. (2018). *Beyond Doer and Done to; recognition theory, intersubjectivity and the Third*. Routledge.

Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, MIT Press.

Honneth, A. (2007). *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Polity.

Honneth, A. (2009). *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*. Verso

McGilchrist, I. (2021). *The Matter with Things; Our Brains, our delusions and the Unmaking of the world*. Vols 1&2. Perspectiva Press.

Miles, T. (2021). *All that she carried; the journey of Ashley's sack, a Black Family Keepsake*. Profile

West, L (12996). *Beyond Fragments; adults motivation and higher education, a biographical analysis*. Taylor and Francis.

West L (2016) *Distress in the city: racism, fundamentalism and democratic education*. Trentham