



FLUTES AND HORNS

FINDING CONSISTENCY WITHIN
MYSELF TO CREATE
CONSISTENCY WITH OTHERS

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The following is a reflective article written more than a decade ago, revisited now in light of the division we are experiencing in our world today. It applies to political disagreements, as well as institutional divisions and interpersonal conflict. If you would like more information about navigating conflict, contact us at traumatransformed@ebac.org

I am not a wine connoisseur, so my taste in wine is not very sophisticated. I make very blunt distinctions in my mind when I drink wine (like noticing, for example, whether the wine is tart or sweet or—perhaps even less refined—whether I like it or not with no real explanation as to why). When one sits with wines for a long time, however, like a sommelier, one begins to notice so many more distinctions—like the aroma, the fullness of body, the subtlety of influence of

different types of grapes, the contribution of age to the wine, additional delicate flavors that appear like nuttiness, etc. A whole complex nuanced experience gets unpacked for sommeliers all at one time that does not happen for me.

Not Separate, But System-Like

Similarly, some people look out into the world, and they see individual separate events like unemployment levels, or crime, or violence, or racial stratification, or living conditions that create stress. Each of these phenomena is seen as separate, simple events. Others are more able to notice the blended complex arrangement of all of these things unfolding together. These separate items are actually mutually influencing and can be perceived all at the same time, interdependently, as one self-reinforcing 'system' rather than as separate individual events. This 'systems thinking' way of perceiving makes the first way of seeing seem comparatively blunt and unsophisticated.

Internal Experiences As Systems

On the inside, we have an ability to notice our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Typically, we think of these as separate events happening inside our bodies. Sometimes the data in these domains are experienced as a kind of collective note or unified singular knowing. When this happens, we scarcely notice that we are perceiving three very different dimensions as one simultaneous gestalt. However, when our minds and our hearts or our bodies do not line up in a way that feels 'natural' or when we feel inner conflict or contradiction, what is more typical is that we experience these domains as one versus the other—our thoughts versus our feelings for example—separate, distinct events happening inside us where one is vying for dominance. We feel the need to impose one OVER the other. We especially frequently turn our thoughts against our emotions when more mature parts of us come into contact with younger less mature parts of ourselves.

A more sophisticated move would be to relate to our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations together as one system – not as separate events – but as one coherent system operating together much like a symphony.

If there is enough ease inside me, I can allow this to happen without needing to impose one over the other irrespective of what is happening in any given perceptual field. I can pull one out at a time and notice my thoughts separate from my feelings – like noticing the violins separate from the flutes in a symphony. But I can also experience the whole thing as one flowing movement with many united (if somewhat disparate) parts flowing together. We hear the sounds of a symphony in unison, not as separate reverberating instruments. It is actually a very easy (as well as sophisticated) move of perception. What we can do quite easily on the outside, can actually take quite a bit of practice to do well on the inside. But it is possible. It is possible to consistently allow one's thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as one collective interlocking, unified system or experience, even when they seem initially to contradict. It is an example of perceiving in a more complex way, a more multi-dimensional way, like the movement from 2-dimensional to 3-dimensional perceiving. It is akin to feeling like you are two pieces of fruit in a bowl. You could bounce back and forth between being an apple or an orange. Or you can hold the experience of both apple AND orange simultaneously if you see yourself as the bowl.

Attend to Awareness

The same thing can be said about noticing what is happening inside of me and noticing what is happening inside of others. It is easy when there is accord between two people to experience them as unified. But when there is discord it feels like a struggle where one almost needs to "win" or at least the two need to be more in "agreement".

There is a push for sameness, which is actually often a push for domination of one over the other. Perceiving inside and outside seem like separate distinct experiences. And, of course, they are. But on another level, they are not.

My perception of both is playing out inside of me—inside my awareness. That is, some part of me is able to perceive myself. Some part of me is also able to perceive another. And the part that is aware of me and the part that is aware of the other is the same part. It is my field of awareness—which is always, always unified, continuous, and whole, even when it is perceiving separate distinct events, which may seem contradictory. Having the ability to notice what is happening inside of me and what is happening inside another, together—not separately, not sequentially—is a highly refined skill. Like the fruit example above, it demands that we perceive from a larger space than each perspective can offer alone. The focus has to be on awareness itself, not on the objects in our awareness. This is the next stage of capacity I believe in complex group dynamics and facilitation.

Stop the Splitting

This is important because if we want to heal the world, if we want to feel our grief and upset, if we want to bridge differences better, we have got to stop splitting. Splitting off me from myself. Splitting off self from others. I have to be able to notice that EVERYTHING I feel is actually MY experience—even when it appears to go against my values, or does not feel pleasant, or is in tension with other thoughts or feelings. Somehow I create a mental habit that these other things are not me, or assume that they are not things that I want to experience. But actually, I AM experiencing them. They do register. I just don't want them to. It is only when I am able to experience everything without unconsciously preferring or rejecting some things over others that I will be able to adequately manage the complexity and diversity that exists inside myself and in the world.

The million dollar lesson is this: *The split that happens between others and me happens first inside myself.*

When I am unwilling to feel all that arises inside me but instead turn away; when I am unable to stay in painful experiences but instead blame others; when I am incapable of looking internally and recognizing that what I am rejecting is an experience of myself that I don't want to have, then I refuse to get past the notion that the cause of my experience or discomfort is the other—separate and distinct from me.

But is it?

By owning and allowing the experiences I am having as ME, even when their origins start somewhere else, I am able to resist rejecting others. (This is one definition of what it means to re-integrate one's shadow). This does not mean that there is no one separate from me or that there is no need to make choices or discriminations. It just means that when I am able to relate to all the musical chords playing inside myself and not unconsciously privilege any one at the expense of any other, then I will be able to relate to others without needing to control or reject them. By being able to sit with all of my experience without splintering or imposing any thought or feeling over any other (neither inside myself nor outward toward any other), I am able to confidently act from a place of coherence (which is the opposite of fragmentation), and from that place I can stand in a place of wisdom by being able to value the relevant contribution of all involved. The simple practice is that I am able to be in relationship with your experience and mine at the same time, without having to reject either or bounce back and forth between them.

In Closing

It is in building this inner capacity of non-splitting, of being whole rather than parts, that we can grow to learn how to live in a world without domination, atomization and fragmentation. It must first happen inside myself. How I treat others reflects

how I treat myself inside. Though I hate to admit it, I am not the center of the universe. It is my own hubris to think that only I know best. At my best I am able to stay consistently in relationship with others—not to stand out, above, separate, or away from them. One very sophisticated perceptual capacity is to realize I am never ever truly on the outside of anything anyway. An incredible thing to consider, isn't it? If I can be friendly to all of it, then I can be an ally to all of it. For in the biggest sense, all of it is part of me anyway—not just the parts I identify with or like. When I am able to stand bravely in complex experiences that I don't like (and relate to these with compassion from the inside rather than think they are affecting me on the outside), it becomes unnecessary to reactively impose my will on others.

Again, this does not mean I cannot make skillful choices or distinctions, including forcefully pushing back. But I am doing so from a place of connection and affirmation rather than from a place of separation and rejection. This is a highly sophisticated perspective of unity that erases all fragmentation, and it can be cultivated with practice. What a skillful manager or facilitator offers a group is coherence. When apples are fighting against oranges or when lemons don't want to be seen or tasted, the skillful leader offers the perspective of the bowl.



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