A nuclear scene

This is a slightly edited correspondence with my friend Norman Brown. We know each other through membership in Tomkins Talk, and have also met several times personally. Excerpts are presented in a chapter to appear in a book on Reflexivity in Personal Construct Psychology, edited by Richard Butler.

July 25-26, 2007 some slight changes are made in first letter to Norman to make it somewhat easier to understand. I see it as a special point that the below actually are two separate letters, July 24, and July 25, since there is a marked differences in emotional tone – an important development has happened. Norman is at the moment occupied with finishing a new book, but has found occasion to respond favourably, looking forward to have occasion “to be fully focused and committed to riding it thru my own personality”. The door is open for further cooperation between Norman and me. He is surprised that I am the only one (yet) to have answered his general invitation. In the July 24 letter I have indicated where a COMMENT had to be added, and the COMMENTS are found in July 25 letter.

July 24, Dear Norman,

Here you get perhaps quite a bit more than you asked for in your recent script invitation to members of ‘Tomkins – Talk’. I do hope that it may serve more as an invitation for collaboration than ‘just a story’ for your next book. But I am getting ahead of myself.

It was my personal script which brought me join the ‘Tomkins tribe’, the most ardent followers of that great psychologist in the last century, Silvan Tomkins. I do not think I have ever told you the nuclear scene – please, please correct me if I am wrong here, this is important to me! First here the scene then the story of how I have/have not coped with it, and some examples of the analogues. Not until today – deciding to write to you - did it really dawn on me how important shame has been in the script development, how it has kept me from dealing constructively with the script.

I do remember the breakfast scene, close to seventy years ago. I was probably three year old, and there had been lots of talk about my parents going to/ having been to Northern Norway. So it was quite natural for me also to go there, and I announced that at the breakfast table – only my mother present. She did not understand that I was as serious as I had ever been and just said that “then you need a lunch package to take with you”. ‘Adult- speak’: This “legitimated” my quest. We were living at the outskirts of the center of Oslo and I knew the way, first crossing the main road, which was the border to the surrounding community, then along a main through way, with a tram line close by. I must have walked about a mile when the catastrophe intervened. A middle aged women stopped me, and asked me where I was going. I think she recognized me as living in the same housing area as my family lived, but this I will never know for certain. I was not trained in subterfuge but spoke the truth, telling her that I was on my way to Northern Norway. She must have said something to the effect “no, you are not, little friend”, then firmly taking my arm and taking me home. Perhaps more about this later. I have not (yet) reconciled with her, for most of my life she has been a devastating figure. To say that I was angry might not be appropriate I cannot recall my emotional state, just (reconstruct?) the feeling of intense frustration.

This story has been kept alive, not only by hundreds of times going through it in memory, it has also been told me dozens of time. Furthermore, each time I am between the two stops on the tram line where catastrophe happened, I try to figure out the exact place where I was stopped. A most important addition to the story has recently been provided by my dear aunt Randi. I was not possible to ‘reach’ when I got home, would not
respond to attempts at contact. What brought me out of this state was the greatest gift I possibly could get, to be a whole day with my grandmother!

Bear with me as I digress to say some words about her, it is my attempt to give her credit for ‘saving’ me. She – together with her husband, Sigurd, who died when my mother was about 17 years old spent the formative years for their seven children as missionaries in China. My mother was the oldest – and in writing this it occurs to me – lessening my feeling of distance towards my mother – that she herself got little ‘mothering’. Life was fairly tough in China, bad economy, and my mother had to take care of some of her smaller sisters. Grandmother must have had many capabilities not really brought forth. My favorite story is that sometimes Sigurd would be sitting struggling with the budget, making sense of the bewildering array of numbers, and my grandmother would be busy knitting. She would, however, have half an eye on what Sigurd was up to. When occasionally she felt that he was quite stuck, she might use a knitting needle to point to some erroneous calculation. From what I have heard about her she was running a tight ship, mostly due to necessity. When, however, in my time she could ‘relax’ – having made sure that all her seven children had got education beyond high school she could enjoy being with a small child – I was the first of her grandchildren she got to know! I remember that my parents did not want me to learn to read before I started school, but my grandmother enjoyed showing me the joy of reading!

Returning to the nuclear scene, I have a very clear image of how I would have wanted the story to continue. After about six miles the main road has a clear downhill turn, it is then crossing one of the main rivers around Oslo. At about that point I would begin to wonder how far it really was to Northern Norway. Going on flat or slightly uphill ground would be the ‘correct way’, but downhill would not be on my mental map. This, together with feeling a bit tired would have led me to reconstrue my project, and at that point I might have asked someone for help, or been happy if someone had offered me help. I would return home, happy about having tried an exciting project, but realizing on my own that this very undertaking was too big (at this stage of my life).

A benign offshoot of this scene is that when I was, say seven to ten-eleven my big dream was to be a polar explorer. The prime Norwegian explorers, Nansen and Amundsen, were my heroes, and books about them nourished my imagination. [Interestingly this just surfaced when writing this letter to you]. What has been more salient as analogues for me is the tendency to start with grandiose projects of such a kind that I could ‘discount’ ensuing lack of success without feeling shame. A very close friend at the university had a brilliant way of expressing my ‘strategy’ (scripty) behavior: “You are hiding in the bushes with a knife, ready to stab yourself in the back when the occasion arises”. [I might dig forth other examples, but not right now]

So this is the background for my interest in scripts. I met Silvan in 1963, but was ‘overawed’ by him – “how come that such an all-knowing wise person cared to talk with little me”? I asked myself. I once asked Don [Don Nathanson chief protagonist in ‘Tomkins – Talk’ who kindly lodged me for a week in his home in 1998] what would have happened if I had asked to study with Silvan – I would have known more about multivariate methods than people like Izard and Ekman, and this would have been handy in study of emotions [see later here]. Many times I have asked myself what a glorious career I would have had if I had been courageous enough. Don, however, said with quite some emphasis “it would have been a kiss of death”. [Are you going to include a chapter about Silvan’s script, certainly you would know that ‘sculptor’ is Silvan himself!!]

A question which I, however, have not been able to answer was why I did not turn on to Tomkins when I read his first script statement; Nebraska symposium on motivation in 1979. I was impressed and intrigued, but something was missing in my engagement. Next ‘awakening’ was an article by Rae Carlson in Journal of Social and Personality sometimes in the late 1980’s. I wrote her a letter ca. 1992, about my nuclear script, (I wish I could recapture the letter, but will not right now take the necessary time to locate it – it might even be an interminable quest), and a couple of years later briefly met her at a conference at Rutgers. I explored scripts in my teaching in personality, Singer and Salovey in “The remembered self” has an excellent instruction for
writing stories pertinent to scripts. To my great surprise I came to learn that quite few persons recounted anything like a nuclear scene (I here take the defining characteristic to be an extremely strong sense of ‘good feelings turning into bad feelings’ as I hope is apparent in my story above). \textit{COMMENT 1}

So a few words about shame. Previously I used to cringe when I heard references to my story, what a shame it was to be thus exposed! Boys can be cruel mocking each other, ‘look at him, ha, ha’! Attempts at self therapy first got at just accepting the story, there is really no reason to be ashamed! I am now at the point where I can acknowledge the scene, e.g. right here sharing with you! ‘Intellectually’ I also know that I should forgive the Dannevik lady who stopped me. Don said that very strongly to me, also Einar Dannevig, one of the very best therapists in Norway which I went to a few years ago. Accept reality? – part of me is still [well; see \textit{COMMENT 2}] saying “to hell with ‘reality orientation’ there is a child seriously hurt out there”!

I know I am jumping ahead, there are so many tasks around, but hopefully I am here managing to open a door calling for some further exploration. The shame has generalized to a bad feeling of meager accomplishments in life. The times I have been asked to give a biographical statement has been pure hell, so little to be proud of – never having arrived at coveted places.

Then this summer; the most important request to write that I can remember in my life. You may have heard about George Kelly, apart from Tomkins the most important influence on my professional development. [Interestingly both presented the first major statement of their theory in the same year, 1955, Tomkins in his catholic embrace somewhere refers to Kelly but never the other way around. (I know it is inconceivable yet I have sometimes asked myself if we would not have had a more exciting and pertinent psychology if at some point they could have joined forces, but I know full well that their personalities were too different)]

One of Kelly’s major points is that a theory should be reflexive it should not only account for the behaviour of those chaps out there but equally for itself and its author. My major Kelly clinical writing – from 1977 – is (somewhat to my surprise) still held in high esteem in Kellian quarters, and I was thus asked to contribute to a book (to appear on Wiley late this fall) on reflexivity in my own development. At my beloved cabin I got into a creative frenzy, much of which is not worth saving but some parts I think are worth exploring further. Of course, one of the vignettes I used to illustrate my (then) thinking was about myself. Thinking about my development it did occur to me that there was some continuity between my doctoral dissertation on multidimensional scaling from 1972. In order for the reader to have optimal chance of exploring the depth of such connections I thought that it would be necessary to make the dissertation available on internet. Here ‘undeserved’ luck has intervened. A few years ago my dear partner Åse spent days and weeks scanning, correcting, learning the \textsc{word} mathematical language so that barely readable mimeographed pages from the early seventies are now available on internet. One thing leads to an other, I found that the dissertation needed some ‘wrapping’, i.e. a web site. My oldest son Per has on and off expressed interest in giving me a hand here. He has now taught me some of the mysteries of \textsc{html}, and the preliminary result may be found on

\url{http://folk.uio.no/ftschudi}

It is interesting (and a bit embarrassing) to review the process I have been through. Partly I was wondering whether I at all could include unpublished stuff (but there were so few ‘good publications’). On the other hand could I include something like ‘Can animals think’ [\textit{Kan dyr tenke}]. Finally I decided that there really are no explicit rules here, do what you feel good about! So you can see for yourself what I do feel good about!

There is an important lesson here; the gist is getting respect for myself, not treating myself as a lost child not having any sense of direction. On the other hand there is the equally prominent feeling that arriving at this would not have been possible without loving help from my closest (Åse and Per). Of course – as I am writing here – Åse showed me deep respect when going to the length of scanning in my dissertation – I never would have even contemplated asking her to embark on such an herculean undertaking! So she had sensed that here
there was something of value not only to me but more generally, and she reflected this back to me, thus buttressing my own self-respect.

Concerning ‘therapy’ from a nuclear script, there is another related strand. Having started serious thinking about my script in the nineties I arrived at the conclusion that a major fault – reflected in my nuclear scene - was to embark on a major undertaking alone. Grand vistas, yes, explore alone, no!

There is also the furtitious happening, contributing to shaping a life course. In 1998 Johan Galtung recruited me to TRANSCEND, and this together with reborn interest in script theory, and reading about John and David’s work in Australia led me to seek out Don, that was when the two of us first met, Norman! It is not incidental that the most important concept for me today is UBUNTU, cf. attached DIGNITY paper. Rediscovering community! COMMENT 2.

So much more which I might say, but afraid of already having overtaxed your patience there is yet one more think to say. In my euphoric state at the cabin I thought I could wrap themes from my 1977 paper and script thinking and my editor did not object to Tomkins stuff. There is yet, however, so much more to say from the 1977 themes so I have been thinking about the scripty part as a separate theme.

You do sometimes explore Europe. Couldn’t you join me for some days at my cabin? We could explore scripts, mine (and yours if you would like to share with me). I had a peek at the view from my cabin at the web site (can’t say how grateful I am grateful to Per for finding that picture) but reluctantly had to conclude that the far away mountains are barely visible. But they are there!

Good luck with your work!

Finn

July 25, 2007

COMMENT 1

Peter Singer and Salovey has an opening vignette about Yetta, Peter Singer’s grandmother (Incidentally, Peter’s father was a very famous psychologist). When she was four years old she wanted to go to school, knowing how to read, and sitting down in the classroom. The teacher scolded her telling her that she should not lie. An elder brother defended her and she was allowed to continue. Tragedy did, however, intervene when she wanted to go to college. Some queer US regulations about the first world war limited college attendance mainly to males and she was deprived of a higher education.

The story deeply resonated with me; embarking on a lofty journey, but ‘unjustly’ being stopped! I asked my students to rate this and a couple of other stories on a scale from 1 to 10 on how deeply it resonated with them. Of course I would have a 10 with multiple stars added. Much to my surprise my students, however, just gave it about 5. This really brought home to me one of George Kelly’s basic axioms “people differ in their construction of events”!

COMMENT 2

UBUNTU has grown to be something much more pervasive than “I am because you are – our lives are deeply intertwined” being a vision for a better world – ‘GLOBAL UBUNTU’. It is also something which has immediate implications in my daily life, and this has become much clearer to me today when I reflected on the inadequacy of my treatment of this topic yesterday! Perhaps the most important thing Don gave me when I stayed with
him in 1998 was his ability to say something nice – mostly humorous, a compassionate form of humour - to almost everyone he met. Complimenting him on this in a later letter he surprised me by saying that I had grasped the essence of his form of therapy [encouraging, and fostering positive emotions]. When the occasion seems appropriate I try to engage in meaningful conversation with some of the strangers I happen to meet. Helping a stranger has a special importance, and I am grateful for the few occasions where I have received such help from strangers. Once I was riding on my bicycle without a helmet. When furthermore the handle was in bad shape and there were holes in the road, I stumbled, head first and felt quite dizzy struggling to get up. Two (or three) women as by magic suddenly appeared to help me, saw that I was in not in a too serious condition, but sternly told me to go to the medical emergency section, there might be damage to the head, and they called for a taxi. I weakly protested “what about my bike”, but was in an authoritative way told that my head was far more important! (I did, however, just manage to lock the bike to a tree before the taxi came.)

Being on the other end of a helping relation, a woman was recently stumbling along on the platform by the subway station closest to where I live. I wondered whether I should stop, but walked slowly past her, then noticed that three young women stopped by her, and I turned to see what might be done. One of the women tried in vain to get a coherent message from the distressed woman, what could they do to help her? I suggested calling the medical emergency unit, and one of them did. This did not, however, turn out to be helpful. The medical person did not go beyond assuring that she could breathe, and then seemed to loose interest. The hurt women looked around, said “why you are all staying there, looking at me”? “Trying to help you” was the obvious answer. The distressed woman then said “one of you is sufficient” and pointed to me. The others left, and being alone with her I tried to get her story and it seemed as if she had been sexually molested by a person professing to be a good Christian, beaten, probably also drunk and maybe on other drugs as well. I tried to get her address, being prepared to either walk her home or get her a taxi. This failed and I was at my wits end. I kept quite close to her, being afraid that she would stumble along and she might then risk falling down on the tracks and this might have been very dangerous. At this point I tried to call my partner who has much more experience then I with deeply distressed persons (especially where drugs are involved). The battery was flat. Here we come to the (too me) salient point of the story. When the next train arrived I stopped the first person I saw, briefly stated the problem and asked to borrow his mobile phone. He immediately complied.

A few words about the rest of the story; my partner did not find it necessary to get running to the subway. She asked me about the state of the distressed women – probably mainly drugs. Another train arrived, the distressed women threw herself onboard, I saw her stumbling onto the lap of a sturdy elderly woman who seemed capable of taking care of the distressed woman. I had a vague feeling of bad conscience, shouldn’t I have done more to help? My partner reassured me, the distressed woman would be safe. Later reflecting, I know that train drivers know about first aid, how and whom to call in emergencies. What I at first construed as a mere transportation device might in this case more appropriately be thought about as a “a community of care”!

The miracle of without any hesitancy about asking a stranger about using his mobile phone contributed to my feeling that we are not ‘mere strangers’ to each other. Ubuntu-like we are ready to ‘create each other’. Resting and enjoying the magnificent view at Vettakollen (giving one of the most beautiful panoramic views of Oslo from a nearby hill) there was a woman, fiddling with her mobile. I was ready to give her mine if she had troubles. This was, however, not necessary but we happened to engage in a good conversation. I told her about the incidence at the subway and asked her if she without hesitation would have lent her phone to a stranger. Her look and tone of voice is staying with me, it was as if she had rarely heard such a stupid question before, “of course” she said.

The above strands joined to form good web this morning as I went home with my new printer, once more having enjoyed expert help with the somewhat recalcitrant new Windows version, Vista.
The man lending me his mobile phone, the women helping me having fallen from my bike, the three women trying to help the distressed woman, the woman I met at Vettakollen: Were they a breed apart from the women who had stopped me close to seventy years ago? Tears were streaming from my eyes, no longer could I see her as an ogre, bent on casting long shadows on the life of a tender child. She belongs to the same group of good citizens, compassionate, as ready to help someone seemingly needing help as the others I have mentioned above.

A metacomment is here necessary. The insight of today is certainly not different in “cognitive content” from what Don Nathanson and Einar Dannevig previously has told me. But somehow, their interpretations did not stick! There must be a necessary emotional ‘substratum’, a resonance!

Again I have to fight a feeling of shame about what I wrote yesterday. It seems utterly pointless to continue to think that anything can be gained from spotting the exact spot where I was stopped, furthermore the exact spot where I would have began to reconstrue my mission. Yet a counterpoint: Why castigate myself as in the previous sentences? Solution to this dilemma comes in the form of a psychoanalytical notion, “decathexis” is possible: Try to withdraw the emotional investment in this seemingly pointless quest, but this does not imply that the ‘cognitive’ search needs to be obliterated!

So what can be said about “therapy” in this case?

* Trying to link this to my story in ODYSSEY, cf. ‘Current projects’ on my web site, the first point would be to recognize that there are valuable parts of the ‘dead end’ ‘nuclear’ search. This might here be seen as ‘explore new terrain’, but now the focus has shifted from the geographical landscape to “the human landscape”; more specifically what might be done to alleviate distress. [hopefully my current interest in ‘conflict transformation’ cf. web site will also provide some measure of ‘self-help’]

* Explore alternatives to harmful emotion – here feeling of betrayal which may be pronounced in many nuclear scripts. For me the best alternative here is UBUNTU like connectedness. Usually this is explored – and nurtured – primarily in close relation. For me, however, a turning point has been to recognize connectedness in relation between strangers. This fits well with Don’s emphasis on nurturing positive emotions, but may be a neglected area in research and theory about therapy. (Well, I recognize that ‘people differ in their construction of events’, thus what is of importance).

* Reflection, specifically writing. Concerning the mood necessary for productive reflection a half forgotten concept from my previous infatuation with ego-psychology comes to mind “regression in service of the ego”. Also I here wish to give credit to Pennebaker’s (1997) pathbreaking forays in the power of writing down important episodes from one’s life: “Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions”, cf. (hopefully) progress from the outpourings of yesterday to the insight today.

* Serendipity, openness to the vagaries of daily life, treating each day as anew gift. A poem pasted on my wall – from Tomkins Talk – states the contrast: “when you worry and hurry through the day/ it’s like an unopened gift/thrown away”.

Finally, Norman – I am somewhat surprised that you write as if script theory readily provides for therapy. What I in this respect remembers most clearly is that Tomkins seemed to me to be skeptical here, analogues – new scenes bringing forth ‘replays’ of the stultifying reactions in the nuclear scene – would appear faster than any reflection or antidotes could be formed. Certainly it seems to me that he is in own life struggled deeply with relations. Furthermore I have the half-baked theory that some skirmishes within the Tomkins movement
somehow represents “passed on”, unresolved traumas from Silvan’s own life. It is well known that traumatic relations in one generation somehow quite often is passed on the next generation. [a few examples for Norman deleted here]

Again, looking forward to further contact!

finn