

Well Meant and a 21 Complete Failure

In the previous chapter I showed what makes for the right resolution of conflict. And yes, I do have the audacity to describe a solution as right or wrong. What I regard as *wrong* is, firstly, anything that goes against the intentions of the person in charge and is thus a clear failure; secondly, anything that increases the problems instead of reducing them; thirdly, anything that is contrary to basic ethical principles. *Right*, therefore, is anything that is felt to be successful, anything that solves the problem — assuming it can be identified — and anything that can be justified from an ethical point of view.

Here I would like to discuss an attempt at conflict resolution which a teacher wrote up afterwards and which I regard as wrong. The example is from a collection which was put together by a group of researchers at Zurich University at the beginning of the seventies. Their aim was to clarify the real ‘educational needs of teachers’ and they invited teachers in Zurich to think about everyday life in their own schools and to send in anonymous descriptions of ‘critical situations demanding a decision’.

Before I start I would like to apologise to my unknown colleague for using an action which he took spontaneously as a response to a professional challenge as the subject of a theoretical discussion. My excuse is threefold: in the first place the ‘case’ is such a classic example of a teacher with the best of intentions doing what he thought was for the best and yet failing because the theories his action was based on were

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wrong, that I could hardly find a better one. In the second place I am not passing judgment on the unknown teacher, simply on the 'case' as we find it in his description. To do justice to the teacher as a human being I would have to be acquainted with him and let him have his say. And in the third place I have to confess — may God forgive me — that I made much worse mistakes in the early years of my career. I assume it was the same for him as for me: with increasing experience we learn from our mistakes and gradually find the path to the truth.

The teacher's report:

'Rolf and Fritz are the weakest pupils in the class. They have both had to repeat a year but still find it difficult to follow the lessons. The two of them were accused by their classmates of having smoked cigarettes in the woods during an orienteering run (setting off from different points in groups of four). I discuss the incident with the class. It is not so much the fact of smoking that is criticised (almost all of them have smoked at some time or other) as the way they had shut themselves off from the rest of the class and not joined in the game. The class decrees that the two boys should miss the next outing and stay in school doing written work under the supervision of one of my colleagues.

That evening Fritz's mother rings me up and explains that Rolf had bought the cigarettes and her son was not to blame. His classmates had told her about the incident. I explain that both boys have to be reprimanded for their behaviour. Since, however, I knew that Rolf had too much pocket money, I rang his mother and recommended they check he made sensible use of it. The next morning there is a violent knock on the classroom door. Rolf's father is there, angry and ready for an argument; in a rude tone he asks what is going on. His son, he says, was forced by Fritz (who threatened to beat him up otherwise) to buy cigarettes. I tell him that the matter is closed as far as I am concerned. Now Rolf's father starts complaining angrily that his son has been unfairly treated. Pointing out that this is neither the time nor the place for a discussion, since it is disrupting teaching, I reject his complaint and object to the tone he has adopted. That only makes Rolf's father even more angry. Turning to leave, he shouts that he will see me outside if it doesn't suit me here.'

What immediately strikes one about this is that by the end the whole problem is much more complicated than at the beginning. The

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relatively minor matter of two boys smoking a cigarette in the woods has grown into a situation that can only be sorted out with great difficulty: two boys are banned from the school outing, their relationship with the class has been seriously impaired, the two boys and their parents are now at loggerheads with each other, the accord between the teacher and the parents of the two boys has been destroyed and the affair threatens to end up before the education authorities. All this is a clear sign that the problem was approached in the wrong way.

From the few details given we can deduce that the teacher was trained in the sixties, at a time when in educational circles the slogans 'democracy in the school' and 'the classroom as a practice ground for democracy' were current. In line with that, he 'called a public meeting' to solve the problem — at least superficially — and turned the classroom into a court of law, as is indicated by the expression '*the class decrees...*'

There are objections to that on two levels, on the one hand to the *way it was carried out* but also — and above all — to that *method of resolving conflicts in itself*.

The model the teacher is using as a guideline is the process used against people who break the law, roughly following the sequence: crime or misdemeanour → report to the authorities → investigation → charge → trial, including defence → guilty verdict → sentence → possibility of appeal → sentence carried out → possibility of a pardon.

It is not by chance that our example omits all provision which formal legal proceedings have *in favour of the accused*: a proper investigation, defence, the possibility of appeal and pardon. In my opinion that expresses the unconscious attitude of the teacher and the class towards the two boys: basically, they were found guilty as soon as the offence was reported and all that was left was to find a punishment that would hurt in order to show them who's boss. It has also clearly not struck the teacher that in proper legal proceedings those who report a crime and are directly affected by it cannot be judge and jury, and should certainly not — as happens here — profit from the sentence. The two boys have had to repeat a year and that makes them what we might call foreign bodies in the class, that is, they are socially marginalised. Their classmates would prefer not to have them with them on the school outing. The punishment that was 'decreed' speaks loud and clear.

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The excessive punishment also gives one pause for thought. The two are being forced to miss the best thing in the year, the school outing. Instead, they have to do what they are least good at (*Rolf and Fritz are the weakest pupils in the class*) and probably hate most: written work. On top of that they will have to appear before another class as miscreants. It seems to me that this kind of punishment says little about the degree of guilt but a lot about the degree of rejection they suffer from those who have condemned them.

On the basis of what one can glean from the report, I also suspect that, although they are hardly aware of it, there is an alliance between the teacher and the class against the two boys which means on the one hand that the pupils unconsciously meet the teacher's expectations and on the other that the class decisions are protection for the teacher. That is a form of power against which one can do nothing and which therefore makes Rolf's father's feeling of outrage understandable. In general there is a certain coolness, a certain distance about the teacher's language (*I explain that both boys have to be reprimanded for their behaviour* — *'...recommended they check he made sensible use of it'* — *I tell him that the matter is closed as far as I am concerned* — *Pointing out that this is neither the time nor the place for a discussion, since it is disrupting teaching, I reject his complaint and object to the tone he has adopted*) which could be seen positively as expressing superiority and strength, but which comes across to the others as the exercise of power and makes them feel correspondingly impotent. Nowhere is there a sign that the teacher might have any understanding for the feelings of others, nor does he show the faintest sense that he might have made a mistake, even that he himself might be responsible for the worsening of the problem.

For these reasons I consider the method the teacher chooses to be fundamentally mistaken. In order to show the alternative method, I have concocted a fictitious conversation about this example between Heinrich Pestalozzi, Alfred Adler, Ruth Cohn and Thomas Gordon:

Pestalozzi: My friends, I'm sure you have read my *Investigations*, in which I demonstrate that 'democracy' does not entail the renunciation of power but is, in fact, a form of power structure. It is therefore quite clearly situated in the social condition, which is why its mechanisms —

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for example legal proceedings — are out of place in all situations which must be shaped from the perspective of the moral condition. Or do you take a different view, Herr Adler?

Adler: Not at all. I have spent my whole life pointing out that the exercise of power arouses, in those who are its object, feelings of inferiority, for which they then compensate by exercising power themselves, with the result that conflicts are aggravated, as we see clearly in our example. I suspect that the two boys smoked the cigarettes in order to make themselves seem big and grown-up — at least to each other — that is, out of the unconscious desire to compensate for their feelings of inferiority by seeking prestige and superiority. The teacher does not seem to understand this, for the process he orders or allows only increases the two boys' sense of inferiority: they are shown up by having to stand before the class as accused. And the particular punishment makes them feel very clearly that they are not wanted.

Gordon: I can only agree with you, Herr Pestalozzi, Herr Adler. Personal conflicts cannot be resolved by the use of power, for that always creates winners and losers.

Cohn: That is also the reason why I do not get the participants to vote in my method of theme-concentrated interaction. Voting, that is deciding by a majority against a minority, is all right within the state, since there is no better way. In a school class, however, there is mostly a better way, and that means that 'democratic' procedures are out of place there. When conflicts arise in a community we have to go to the trouble of looking for a solution together for as long as it takes until everyone involved can agree. Admittedly that is often difficult, especially at the beginning. But when all the members of the group regularly find that their feelings, needs and desires are taken seriously, they become increasingly ready to engage with the others and to put selfish attitudes behind them. The teacher in our example was quite right to involve the whole class in solving the problem, and it is to be hoped that this becomes the rule. But he ought not to guide the discussion so that it concludes by finding someone guilty and punishing them.

Gordon: The important thing would be for every pupil to look inside himself and then to say what *his* experience of the situation was and

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what *he* had felt at the time. Pupils of that age are perfectly capable of formulating genuine I-messages if they are shown properly how to do so. This ability would be encouraged if the teacher were to listen to all of them — especially the two ‘miscreants’ — genuinely, that is ‘actively’. Then the two boys might pluck up the courage to tell their classmates what was going on inside them when they decided to smoke. Only on that basis is it possible for that kind of discussion to reach its goal: not, namely, to point the finger at and punish the guilty ones, but to bring understanding and help for the future.

Cohn: To come down to practical matters, I would get the pupils to sit in a circle, of which I would also be part. Then I would start by telling them to ask themselves: what was my experience of the orienteering run? If this form of discussion had been practised in class, they wouldn’t express suppositions about others but truly examine themselves and give genuine answers. Rolf and Fritz would then also have the opportunity to say openly how they felt.

Pestalozzi: That is the spirit of the moral condition: we genuinely seek the truth and do not depart from the path of love, even when not everything turns out as we would wish.

Adler: Precisely. It’s all about developing a sense of community. That is only possible when power is left out of it and we support each other with help.

Gordon: That is why I ... I wouldn’t say ‘invented’, rather I discovered the ‘no-lose method of conflict resolution’.

Pestalozzi: I’m sure you’re right about that. In education we can’t invent anything, everything we do — the whole ‘art’ — must be derived from human nature. Our example is proof that the teacher’s way of dealing with problems was not in accord with human nature, for it created revolt and rejection. I am convinced, Herr Gordon, that with your method, which I was unfortunately not acquainted with during my lifetime, you will eventually achieve general agreement and love will return.

Cohn: Not only that, understanding will grow as well and only then can the problem really be solved. It must have become clear that the problem was not simply the two boys’ smoking — or their lack of interest in the athletic side of the exercise, as the teacher puts it — but the social rejection of the pair. Thus all of them, teacher and pupils, are

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involved in the problem and therefore have a duty to make a contribution to solving it.

Adler: And that's why this punishment is so wrong as well. It obscures the fact that this conflict is a problem concerning *all* of them and completely *discourages* the two boys while aggravating the real problem, their social isolation. We must bear in mind that all the experiences they will have on the school outing together will form a bond between the pupils, and these two, who are being punished, will be excluded from these experiences which will strengthen the sense of community. What is needed is the opposite: the two boys must be *encouraged* by the fact that the class has recognised the real problem and takes it seriously. And that will only happen if in future they feel they are more part of the community, that they are *accepted*.

Gordon: What this shows is that every conflict has a deeper meaning. Conflicts bring sore points out into the open and if they are properly dealt with, everybody is a winner.

Adler: Correct. And what is gained is an increased sense of community in everyone. It is only in community that we human beings become good human beings...

Pestalozzi: ...which shows that 'community' and 'society' are not the same. 'Community' is always a question of the interplay between the natural condition and the moral condition, and that means contact between one human being and others. 'Society', on the other hand, views human beings collectively and is not really interested in them as individuals.

Gordon: Yes, and when you talk of individuals, that does not mean just the pupils in our example, but the teacher as well. The great tragedy for him is that he thinks he has to have everything under control and can't show his own feelings. The kind of resolution of the conflict we are proposing here would be a relief for him too. He feels he has to fight against everyone and everything. That isolates him and turns people, who could well be kindly disposed towards him, into enemies.

Adler: This aggressive attitude comes out clearly in his cool defensive reaction to Rolf's father's outrage.

Gordon: I have to admit that such situations require great presence of mind. But if the teacher had realised that every angry outburst is a

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clear sign that a person feels completely impotent, he could — instead of reprimanding him — have shown that he understood his anger.

Cohn: Yes, disruption is what this is all about and it is not sensible to send the angry father away because teaching must not be disrupted.

Gordon: If he had learnt to listen actively, he would perhaps have said, 'I can see that something has happened to make you very angry and you want to sort that out with me.' Then the father would have sensed that he was being taken seriously and would have offered to clear the matter up calmly at another time.

Pestalozzi: Of course, the important thing is not the choice of words, but the spirit that comes out in them. Words are just so much noise if they are not imbued with real humanity, with truth and love.