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## **The Parable of the Tribes: On Anarchy, Peace and Spiritual Transformation**

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### ***Introduction:***

In the weeks and months following September 11, 2001, much of the public debate in America and in many places around the world focused on issues of retaliation, retribution and war. For most people, the immediate response to being harmed by another, especially when that harm is as great as it was in New York, is to avenge the act in a manner that equalizes the hurt. Retaliation creates a kind of harm-quotient that, while not removing the hurt of the original act, attempts in some manner to force the other to experience the relatively same amount of pain; thus balancing the ledger. When nations avenge harm and seek retribution through the use of unbridled power, we commonly refer to it as war.

For millennia, the average lay person, and men and women of letters have contemplated and debated the cause of war. Looking at history through the prism of war makes it clear that violent tribal to tribal, and nation to nation conflict has been the one universal reality that has existed cyclically for at least the last three to four thousand years. While the modern era has prided itself in seeing history as a gradual progression to higher

and higher levels of social organization and civilized behavior, the record seems not to justify the optimism. We view with mounting fear the rise of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. We are reminded again and again of the risks of building and attempting to maintain a democratic society against the encroaching apparatus and control of totalitarianism.

The problem of peace, more appropriately the problem of how to avert war and encourage peace among nations is, according to Andrew Schmoekler's "Parable of the Tribes" theory, related to two fundamental factors. First, peace has always been, at least since the agricultural revolution and rapid rise in world population, a transitory state. This has been the case because if just one member of a group of tribal communities chooses violent action against ones neighbors it is all but assured that all the members must then engage in war. Exploitative power is then spread throughout culture like a pandemic and will gradually become the dominant, though not exclusive way, of resolving inter-tribal disputes. Secondly, war between tribal groups or nation states reflects and is reinforced by an internal war between human consciousness and the conditions of alienated, unfulfilled lives. This is premised on the assumption that the ways of power leading to war and collective violence has distorted a much older, more organismic, holistic, peaceful and spiritual way of being. We moderns continue to war with each other because we have been at war with ourselves ever since we found a way to escape our perceived brutish existence and bond to the rhythmic cycles of the natural world (Oelschlaeger, 1991)

### ***Primitive Worlds and Civilized Society***

Increasingly, anthropologists and cultural theorists have come to the conclusion that

ancient hunter-gathering societies were not mired in a violent, uncivilized and horrific mode of existence. It was not a life beset by unceasing drudgery and feelings of privation but was, rather, as Schmookler notes, “a surprisingly humane existence” (Schmookler, 1984, p. 8). The overwhelming burden of labor, production and consumption experienced by many in modern western society was comparatively small for our primitive ancestors. There was much more time for play, dance, music and sensuality than modern *civilized* culture has ever known (Callicott, 1994; Shepard, 1995). For perhaps ten-thousand years prior to the onslaught of agriculture and increasing population densities, primitive peoples of pre-history lived relatively peaceful and fulfilling lives (Besthorn, 2002). This doesn’t suggest that the primitive condition was somehow a romanticized Eden of plenty and absolute contentment but, rather, that it was one relatively free from incessant warfare of the kind that has plagued civilized history for thousands of years.

What changed this peaceful way of existence? Schmookler (1984) describes the parable of transformation from peace to war in this manner:

Imagine a group of tribes living within reach of one another. If all choose the way of peace, then all may live in peace. But what if all but one chooses peace, and that one is ambitious for expansion and conquest? What can happen to the others when confronted by an ambitious and potent neighbor? Perhaps, one tribe is attacked and defeated, its people destroyed and its lands seized....Another is defeated....it is subjugated and transformed to serve the conqueror. A third, seeking to avoid such disaster flees from the area into some inaccessible place, and his former homeland becomes part of the growing empire of the power-seeking tribe. Let us suppose that others...decide to defend themselves. But the irony is that successful defense against a power-maximizing aggressor requires a society to become more like the society that threatens it. Power can be stopped only by power, and if the threatening society has discovered ways to magnify its power through innovations in organization or technology... the defensive society will have to transform itself into something more like its foe in order to resist the external force (p. 21)

So, no matter what the preferred response of any given tribe, the ways and will to power is spread like a cancer throughout the system. It is irrevocable and all but unstoppable except for brief periods of respite and retooling. This means that individual human beings and collective cultures don't have the freedom of choice and action that they might assume as a matter of course. "No one is free to choose peace, but anyone can impose upon all the necessity of power" (Schmookler, p. 21). Individual self-interest is ultimately sacrificed to the interests of the larger systems in which citizens are embedded. The ultimate lesson of the parable is that the struggle for power took on its own internal momentum, so that over time, even in the absence of active warfare, societies and institutions within societies sought power for its own sake. It is important to consider, however, that the thirst—in truth the necessity—for power and the preference for war and war-like iconoclasm according to the tribes theory does not rest on a theory that sees aggression as an innate drive in human beings. The parable of the tribes: ...offers no indictment of human nature. The irresistible social evolutionary forces that have swept us along since the breakthrough to civilization have depended very little on human nature for their origin and their direction. All that is required was that we be creative enough to develop culture to a certain point of freedom from natural limits, and that we be capable of (not necessarily inclined toward) aggressive behavior.

The problem of war and inter-tribal violence is structural. It has been built into the very internal gearing of civilized societies and institutions. The source of war is not psychological (competition), not physiological (strength), not genetic (aggression), nor philosophical (ideas) (Wink, 1984). The will to power, eventuating in war, is built into the fabric of civilized societies and becomes the central controlling factor in social evolution. The ways of power and the inevitable anarchy that follows in its wake become the

dominant value determining virtually all societal choices. It has shaped the lives of civilized peoples for countless generations. The chief characteristic of the power/war system is that while developed, staffed, and theoretically controlled by well-meaning and free-willed individuals, is in fact beyond merely human or individual proscription. In a sense the ways of power represent a spiritual force or momentum—a *dark spirituality* if you will. It is a perpetual and nearly irredeemable social, evolutionary *via negativa* (Fox, 1991). The struggle against violence, maximizing power and war is as the biblical writer suggests “not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). This powerfully descriptive and not easily exaggerated passage suggests that there are both outer and inner manifestations of power systems. And by far, the real evil of civilized society lies within a domination system and not in evil individuals.

### ***Internalized Warfare***

The consequence of living in an ostensibly *civilized* and sane society surreptitiously, and most recently conspicuously devoted to war, carries a high psychological and emotional toll. The anarchic conditions which have been created by the parable of the times are “unnatural and therefore unfulfilling conditions for human life” which “generate pathological distortions of human nature” (Schmookler, 1984, p. 170). These then act to continue and reinforce the tendency to perpetuate war. An additional piece of the puzzle of incessant war is to suggest that it has a second source. War is “an expression of the war... between ourselves and the conditions of our lives” (Schmookler, 1988, p. 26). The pain of living in a power obsessed society alienates us from our natural inheritance, our

embodiment within the nurturance of the natural order, the pleasurable of sustaining relationships; the striving for wholeness. The cost it exacts is that of physical and psychic numbing. Our bodies become objects of use, our minds simple repositories of facts and ideas. We are separated into parts and our parts become alienated from one another and the cosmic wisdom that seeks expression in us.

We have become so numb to the real loss to our natural existence that we rarely grasp the severity of the defeat. Our numbness produces a kind of amnesia about what a fully human and fully alive existence would be like. Indeed, it turns into a deep-seated fear and terror of remembering our natural condition of living in harmony with others and the natural world around us (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Wilson, 1993). It should not surprise us that environmental destruction and psychic numbing go hand-in-hand. The power maximizing regime necessitates environmental destruction partly because of the change in human attitudes toward nature precipitated by the cost of living within a competitive, power-maximizing system. Schmookler describes it in the following way:

The emergence of modern Western civilization was accompanied (rather, it was fostered) by a new attitude that facilitated the more complete overthrow of the natural order for the enhancement of human power....This ideological change is inseparable from the technological revolution that so explosively has escalated the growth of power. Those who can eye nature with an uninhibited urge to use her are far more likely to discover the techniques for manipulating her. And those who hold to an ideology that encourages the unlimited exercise of power are the more likely to put their technology to use. The selective process that has favored the technologically advanced has therefore also favored the spread of the less pious, more exploitative and rapacious attitude toward the natural order (p. 259).

So, what civilization has been creating is a humanity at war with each other and at war with itself. The internal conflict created by the demands of the power system and the

inherent need of the human organism for dependence and safety creates human beings culturally structured in such a way as to adapt to and appease the powers they rely upon. The internalization of the ongoing conflict between human nature, evolutionarily rooted in a natural world, and civilized culture is fully fixed in the great machine metaphor of modern civilization. In the words of Walter Wink (1992):

We internalize the ethic of productivity, the constraints of patriarchy, the imperative of success, the driven-ness of modern life, the obligations of machismo, the laws that prevent our achieving for ourselves what the powerful achieve at our expense. We become complicit. And so we leave unopposed the world that injures us, restructuring ourselves to appease the powers we depend upon. To achieve peace with the world, we declare war upon ourselves. (p. 42)

### ***Spiritual Transformation***

The parable of the tribes hypothesizes that the current condition of maximizing and cohesive power reflects only a transitional stage between two spiritually related and phenomenologically connected relational systems. The first is governed by our very limited capacity to break out of the confines of our natural environments and our own naturalness. The second is controlled by a volitional choice of individuals and groups toward spiritual transformation that consciously welcomes and accepts our traditional limits and rebuilds a society based on a new wholeness. This transition to wholeness is not inevitable but will require concerted human effort and collective action. In Schmookler's words:

If we are lucky, the evolution of civilization to this point may prove to have been a transitional period in the history of life. It may be a period of anarchy and destruction between two eras of synergetic order. In the beginning, there was the biologically evolved order that gave and protected life. Then the break of a single species from that order brought into the world the reign of power which now threatens life with destruction. But perhaps before power has a chance to fulfill its worst threats, mankind will be able to use its growing opportunities to shape a new order which, like the old, will control the actions of all to the degree needed to protect the well being of the whole. (1984, p. 33).

The creation of this new order requires an end to inter-societal anarchy which has been the overarching context of modern, civilized life. Global, wholistic consciousness—an individual and collective spiritual transformation—is the solution to the problem of war.

This new wholeness will emulate the ancient wholeness from which we arose, but it is a new kind of wholeness. This new whole might be called the “bio-civisphere.” Like the biosphere that evolved by wholly biological means, the bio-civisphere will embody the harmonizing of relationships and the cycling of resources that safeguard the system’s stability and long-term viability. (Schmookler, 1988, p. 311)

This new wholeness that Schmookler speaks of will have multiple dimensions including cognitive, emotional, spiritual, ecological, political, and economic. Indeed, the bio-civisphere “will require a consciousness of a very different sort, a consciousness that is the expression of the harmony and integration that characterized the system of life before civilization” (Schmookler, 1988, p. 311). The chart below, adapted from Wink (1992), may help to clarify the possibilities between the current power-maximizing system and a global system of harmony and wholeness.

<b>Cultural Dimension</b>		<b>Power-Maximizing System</b>	
		<b>Global System of Wholeness</b>	
Power	Power over; power to take life, control, destroy Win-lose Domination Competition	Power with; power to give, support, nurture life	Win-win Partnership Cooperation
Politics	Conquest Pseudo-democracy Autocracy Authoritarian Centralized Militarized	Diplomacy	True Democracy Enabling Decentralized Communalized

Gender	Patriarchal; difference implies superiority/inferiority Equality of sexes: Difference may lead to specialization but not ranking	
Economics	Exploitation, greed, privilege, inequality, corporate capitalism, “globalization”, privatization Sharing, sufficiency, responsibility, sustainability, social development, economic justice, public-good	
Religion	Male-God—jealous, wrathful, punishing, lawgiving, “redemptive violence” Inclusive God-images— Mother/Father, Goddess/God loving/judging, compassionate/severe, merciful/demanding	
Relationships	Ranking Domination hierarchies Slavery, classism, Racism, We/they, Rigidity	Linking Actualizing hierarchies, State of beingness, Equality of opportunity, we/we, flex
Transformative Mode	Violence, coercion, intimidation, force, war	Nonviolent confrontation, negotiation, inclusiveness,
	Suppression of conflict	diplomacy, conflict resolution
Ecological Stance	Exploitation, control, contempt, anthropocentric Harmony, cooperation, respect, sustainability, non-anthropocentric	
Logic	Either/or, analytic, rationalistic, linear Both/and, analytic/synthetic, intuitive, cyclic	

Ego	Self-centered, bounded by individual, inter-psychic awareness Affiliation-oriented, expansive, web of relationships	
Education	Indoctrinating, memorization, elite-benefit	Enabling, creative, free-public
Sexuality/Sensuality	Subordination of women's reproductive capacities and sexual expression to male control, body-mortification, limited to humans contact Control of sexuality by individuals in the light of community values, body-honoring, sensation with all of natural world	
Eschatology	Status quo, holding and keeping power; this evil world; life to come; eternity in the future, injustice in the present Cultural and spiritual transformation; the reign of Goddess/God, the coming aeon; eternity in the present, justice in the future	

It would be incorrect to assume that the problem of war can be reduced to individual salvific transformation. According to the parable, the age old argument as to whether the end to violence can be achieved by individual wholeness or by the emergence of group wholeness is not the strategic dilemma. For Schmookler, while the source of the problem of violence and war is an anarchic system rather than attributes of the individual, this does not necessarily equate into a single emphasis on systemic change. His analysis suggests

that individual transformation depends on the transformation of the entire world. “The parable of the tribes shows why the level of the individual life—of spiritual salvation, of right conduct in daily living—cannot suffice” (Schmookler, 1989, p.85). “Only the creation of a new, overarching order that fosters harmony and wholeness will enable the members of humankind to become whole....And only when the human elements of the system are whole can the greater whole we need to create be established.” (Schmookler, 1988, p. 311).

For Schmookler, the solution to world peace lies in individual *and* collective action toward the establishment of some form of global governance based on biospheric and human values; although it may not yet be clear what form that authority may take. The global community must be built on the foundational supports of community building in the context of our personal lives. The only way to global wholeness is through individual wholeness. However, individual wholeness will not be achieved in the absence of global wholeness. These remarks of Schmookler (1989) suggest the optimism he brings to this challenge:

People often feel despair that there is nothing they can do to heal the world. Admittedly, the problems of the world are huge in comparison with the abilities of us individuals to address them....But the good news is that we are nonetheless each in a position to contribute to the healing....Feeding goodness and love into the system makes a difference wherever it occurs. In the raising of our children, in the way we treat our friends, in the way we fill our role at work—all these arenas afford us an opportunity to contribute to the healing of the world. Metaphorically, we are living at the ground-level and above us some thirty or forty feet there is a ledge to which we need to raise ourselves. All we have available to build something for us to climb up are a number of stones. The stones are our positive actions; each time we act constructively in the world, we place a stone. In the arena where the great decisions are made—say on war, peace, or the environment—this can be likened to the very top of the pile. To say that the only efforts that contribute to our reaching the higher level of civilization are those that directly involve those

great issues is like saying that we will climb up a narrow column of rocks...But if we place many, many rocks down, gradually there will emerge a rock pile that goes high enough and that has a stable base to support it. It is still important to keep the top of the rock pile rising, but the rocks along the side play an indispensable long-run role. The many rocks along the side are the countless small contributive actions we all can do in our daily lives that can build the base that supports the peak. All that we do to nourish one another, and to raise the level of consciousness, adds up; cumulatively it builds the foundation of love and understanding that must nonetheless someday culminate in wise global policies.(pp. 106-107)

### ***Conclusion***

The Parable of the Tribes suggests that the march of systemic anarchy and war in cultural evolution is not inevitable. Humankind can and must undergo a transformation of individual and collective consciousness based once again on the ideas of wholeness and harmony. The revitalization of a spiritual and religious emphasis in social work theory and practice provides the profession with a uniquely timed opportunity to be about the same work of transformation and renewal spoken of by Schmookler. Indeed, social work has always been about calling the larger culture to change and regeneration.

This article has explored the message of the Parable of the Tribes and what it has to say to us about the sources of war and peace, and how humankind may avert its own self-induced apocalypse. This is especially relevant in these days when the war drums beat incessantly and the talk of heroic battles, smart bombs and sacrifice for flag and fatherland cloud our collective vision of peaceful tomorrows and brighter worlds yet to come.

The distinction between a world haunted by war and a world ruled in harmony and peace may not always be easy for us to visualize. It is important though that we not allow the difficulty of the task to narrow our capacity to create and dream. And, it is important for us as social workers to join in these visionary efforts to create a just and peaceful world.

This is a part of our professional legacy and must become a cornerstone of our future aspirations.

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