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Developing a Capacity for Concern. The Million Man March as Transitional Object.

JACO HAMMAN

IN HIS ESSAY, "THE MILLION MAN MARCH: CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATION and Transformation," Adetokunbo Adelekan states that The Million Man March functions as a set of strategies for the survival and creative reconstruction of the African-American community. Adelekan describes two scenarios. The first portrays "deep feelings of alienation," as can be seen in "family breakup, the disintegration of civic agencies, and the continued irrelevance of Black religious organizations to the needs and concerns of the young and the poor (Adelekan 2000:3)." The second scenario may be described as follows: "every adult member in the community [now] serves as a surrogate parent for every child (Ibid.: 20)." Additionally, "The Million Man March served to better the self-perception of its constituents by deconstructing regnant images that portray them as objects in history as opposed to willing agents able to engage their environment (Ibid:19)." Between the two scenarios lies the March.

Adelekan describes a shift in individuals and in the community brought about by the ritualization of the March. I would identify this shift as the development of *the capacity for concern* while using the March as a transitional object within the ritualization process. Whereas Adelekan focuses on the group and community, my interest as a pastoral psychotherapist is the individual *within* community. Therefore, I am interested in the psychodynamic factors that prompted the changes (i.e. "reconstructions") in the two scenario's described above; and naturally, in *how we might make psychological sense of the renewal that occurred*.

In this brief response, the insights of the British post-Freud object-relations psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971), will be used to elucidate a psychodynamic understanding of the changes Adelekan indicates. Winnicott is well-known for homespun metaphors such as "good-enough mothering,"

“a holding environment,” “primary maternal preoccupation,” as well as “transitional objects and transitional phenomena.” Three interrelated aspects of Winnicott’s developmental theory will be discussed which may be visualized as three concentric circles. The first aspect (and outer circle) is to identify the process and movement at play in the March as identified by the British sociologist of religion, Bruce Reed. The second aspect (the middle circle) argues that the men of the March, and now those influenced by them, have developed a capacity for concern. The third aspect (the innermost circle) argues that the March functions as a transitional object, i.e., an object that bridges the realms of the subjective and the objective. My claim is that the March actually derives its staying power in that it is used as a transitional object.

OSCILLATION BETWEEN DEPENDENCY AND INDEPENDENCY.

In his works, *The Dynamics of Religion. Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (Reed, 1978) and *The Psychodynamics of Life and Worship* (Reed, 1995), Bruce Reed introduces an “oscillation theory” around the theme of human dependence.¹ While studying human behavior in individuals and in groups at the Tavistock Institute in London, Reed was influenced by Winnicott. Building on Winnicott’s developmental perspective (particularly his claim that a person develops from a state of absolute dependence *towards* one of independence and especially the Winnicottian concept of “regression to dependence”), Reed argues for an oscillation process being a natural rhythm in both individuals and western industrialized societies.² Reed states that we oscillate between periods of dependency and periods of indepen-

¹ The latter work is the *Christ and Cosmos Lecture* (1995) sponsored by the Grubb Institute. In *The Psychodynamics of Life and Worship* Reed simplified his initial theory (1978) and revised the oscillation process. Reed describes his oscillation theory as “a metaphor for life as a psychodynamic process which indicates essential conditions for the well-being of society from a Christian perspective.” Oscillation is distinguished from cyclical in that the former is not repetitive.

² Winnicott believed that a person could never reach absolute independence. Throughout human life, there are periods of relative independence followed by periods of dependency. The movement from the former to the latter is described as “regression to dependence.” Children, of course, are generally speaking more dependent than adults.

dency. Within this oscillation process, which can occur numerous times during a day, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs are met through relationship and interaction with individuals, symbols, and ritual (Reed 1995:11).

There are four steps to the oscillation process (Reed 1995:11-5). The first stage is called *realization*, which is “to say that a person is trying to express what they consider themselves to be or becoming Realization is the actual outward behavior expressing the person’s inward being in a context” (p. 11). In this stage a person also experiences what Reed calls intra-dependence (independence), the sense that one is comfortable being an individual in reality (Reed 1978:32, 131).³ The second stage is called *regression to dependence* and symbolizes the inward withdrawal by a person from engagement in everyday activities. Moving toward such extra-dependence (dependence) can be defensive or creative in nature; and while Reed expects the latter, he is aware that the former often occurs. Creative regression to dependence anticipates reexamining past experience and also implies a withdrawal of a person’s ego-strength to work *with* other individuals. It implies an awareness of isolation, vulnerability and mortality in the midst of community. The third stage is called *identification*. Here one searches for an object or person with whom to identify, which may be a container for the anxiety that has been aroused by the regression to dependence (Reed 1995:25).⁴ This stage relies heavily on myths, dreams, symbols, visions and legends. Emotional, spiritual and psychological wounds can be healed in this phase, which often occurs in the context of a community. The *fourth* and last stage is called *transformation to realization*. Transformation is the stage between identification and the next realization stage. Here newly re-created ego is being transformed so that it can be expressed in relationships. The transformation stage further suggests that the person has progressed on the road of becoming and is moving from symbolic activity to work activity.

Symbolic activity is a mode of experiencing that is dominant in dreaming, artistic-creation and appreciation, ceremony and religious activity. It is concerned with value and meaning rather than fact, and with what people and things symbolize for the individual rather than with their behavior and properties in themselves. Its content is emotionally charged images. *Work*

³ Reed argues that the crucifixion and resurrection invites the reader to oscillate between dependency (death) and independency (resurrection).

⁴ Reed refers to the dynamic that Walter Brueggemann identified in the Psalms: orientation, dis-orientation and re-orientation. See, Brueggemann (1984)

activity is a mode of experiencing which characterizes all those activities in which we seek to know, understand and modify or adapt to the people, objects, institutions or events. Work activity is concerned with differentiating between objects and understanding a world that is not part of ourselves and cannot be magically known or controlled. Its contents are constructs that categorize things as they are, but remain open to revision in light of further experience or information. Additionally, movement from the community to the individual occurs. This process is one of transformation, which gradually merges into the next stage of realization.

I believe that the March led its participants (and now those who are remembering it) through these four stages. The individuals arrived at the March in an independent mode. Driving to Washington, and especially being surrounded by thousands of men led participants out of this stage of individuality, through regression, and to a stage of dependence. The stage of creative regression to dependence reached its pinnacle while the men listened to, for example, Farrakhan's speech stating that race functions as a source of division in society. Speeches such as Farrakhan's initiated the stage of identification, which was supported by song, prayer and bonding with other men (symbolic activity). In this stage the men found many images and narratives, such as the narrative of slavery, with which to identify. In being given the opportunity for transformation through identification, the participants in the March was then led back to the stage of realization to leave the March as an individual in the independent mode, ready for outward action (work-activity).

DEVELOPING THE CAPACITY FOR CONCERN.

Winnicott identified certain capacities in individuals, including the capacity to play, the capacity to believe and the capacity for concern. The capacity for concern is intricately linked to the ambivalence a young child between the ages of 5-18 months experiences when realizing that he or she hates the same object (the mother) that also is loved. This ambivalent dynamic is called *the depressive position*, and is a developmental achievement that Winnicott believed should be negotiated (Winnicott, 1992).⁵ The depressive position introduces the paradox of love and hate, in which the child feels guilty about hating and possibly destroying the loved object. The in-

⁵ Melanie Klein, another British psychoanalyst who had a big influence in Winnicott's formation, first identified the depressive position.

fant therefore wants to bring reparation to the object, reparation that is seen in his or her capacity for concern. The unconscious process of the depressive position is associated with guilt feelings belonging to the destructive elements inherent in loving.

As early as 1935, Winnicott wrote periodically on his understanding of Melanie Klein's concept of the depressive position. In "The Development of the Capacity for Concern" (Winnicott, 1994), he argued that for a child to grow up so as to discover the deepest part of his nature, someone has to be defied, and even hated at times, without danger of a complete break in the relationship (Winnicott, 1994). In fact, Winnicott stated that the depressive position should actually be called "the stage of *concern*," for concern is the positive side of guilt, which is the result of the depressive position (1992:264). With this statement he wanted to move beyond the pathological, claiming that the depressive position is an achievement of normal development. Additionally, the infant does not pass through a stage of *depression*, as the term would indicate.⁶

The depressive position can thus be summarized as follows: In development, there is a stage when the infant can be perceived by others as being ruthless, implying that there is no concern yet as to the results of instinctual loving and hating of the infant. [Thus, an infant in the dual-union stage, where there is distinction between the ME (i.e., the purely subjective) and a Not-ME (i.e., the pure objective) will bite his mother's nipple, for example, without having any concern for the mother. However, as the infant differentiates between an inside and an outside, and reaches the stage of unit status (i.e., the awareness that there is a ME and a Not-ME) and object relations, the infant realizes that his or her aggressive impulses (or ruthlessness) are directed to the outside, i.e., to another person.] The paradoxical tension between ruthlessness and concern (also referred to as "ruth" by Winnicott) is inherent to being human. At first the change from ruthlessness to "ruth" will be gradual, but the infant will reach a position of concern for the other.

The capacity for concern is thus an achievement that should follow naturally in human development. Winnicott emphasized the role of the mother during this phase of development, since the infant cannot accept that the mother, who has held it since birth, will be ruthlessly attacked during excited phases. The mother must be able to withstand the child's attacks, thus returning as the loving mother. A benign circle can be found in which the child

⁶ Depression as an affective disorder is not a sign of psychological health. Winnicott wanted his discussion of the depressive position not to be confused with a psychopathology.

moves from being caught in the ambivalence caused by ruthlessness to a position where concern for others can be found. In this dynamic, identifying “the other” as separate from ME is pivotal. The child can experience repairing the damage caused to the relationship by his or her aggressive impulses.

If concern does not develop, guilt will color the emotional landscape of the child, for the child will live with the experience that his or her hate and aggressive impulses annihilated the mother.⁷ However, if the mother can withstand the attacks, guilt will turn into concern. In fact, “Concern implies further integration, and further growth, and relates in a positive way to the individual’s sense of responsibility, especially in respect to relationships into which the instinctual drives have entered. Concern refers to the fact that the individual cares, or minds, and both feels and accepts responsibility” (Winnicott 1994:100).

Appealing to Reed’s understanding of the dynamics of religion discussed above, my claim is that the March became an event that assisted participants not only to oscillate between independency and dependency, but also to re-experience the ambivalence between loving and hating. This provided an opportunity for reparation as it became a holding environment, a setting that facilitated psychological, emotional and spiritual growth. The March gave its participants the opportunity to develop a capacity for concern, a capacity that may have been there before, but was “frozen” through societal and interpersonal forces. Its participants could leave the March with a sense of responsibility and a need for reparation, towards themselves and towards others, born out of the experience that the instinctual hating did not annihilate the Other. This can be seen in the lives of the men of the St. Paul Community Baptist Church. Hence, the March was a sign of hope, for it allowed the participants to return to the stage of “ruth”, or concern, which is a developmental achievement.

THE MILLION MAN MARCH AS TRANSITIONAL OBJECT.

Developmentally speaking, I could have discussed the March as transitional object before discussing the capacity for concern, for the stage of concern follows the ability to use and relate to objects. Nevertheless, since the St. Paul

⁷ The emotional experience of annihilation is more severe than the emotional experience of destruction.

community often revisits and recalls the March in community rituals, identifying it as a transitional object within those rituals offers one way to understand the continued transformation the March facilitates.

Winnicott’s understanding of transitional objects may be summarized as follows: Between their fourth and twelfth month, infants develop behavior that can be described in terms of transitional phenomena (Winnicott 1992:232). Transitional phenomena suggest that an individual uses “illusion” and imagination to cope with the need to relate objective reality and subjective fears. Winnicott believed that between objectivity (the not-ME world) and subjectivity (the ME world), a third reality is found. This third reality is the world of transitional phenomena and transitional objects, and is also referred to as an *intermediate area of experiencing*.

In his paper, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study in the First Not-Me Possession” (1951), Winnicott referred to the fist- or thumb-sucking behavior of infants as well as to the fact that infants bond with a doll of some kind after “a few months” (p. 229). That small children have a special bond with a soft toy or blanket is common experience, Winnicott noted that mothers typically tolerate such behavior and the corresponding use of transitional objects. For example, a teddy bear or a special blanket may become vital to the infant at the time of going to sleep, i.e., the period of transition from objectivity (reality) to subjectivity (sleep). Hence, it is called a *transitional* object. From a theoretical perspective, the infant is fighting off disillusionment as a central characteristic of the inevitable weaning process. The infant thus *uses* an object as a defense against the anxiety disillusionment brings. Using an object should be distinguished from exploitation of an object.

An extensive discussion of transitional objects lies beyond the scope of this response. In light of our discussion, however, the following characteristics of transitional objects can be mentioned:

- The infant assumes rights of complete ownership and control over the object and the parents agree.
- The object must survive instinctual loving and hating, which may manifest pure aggression. The object cannot be annihilated. When the object is not annihilated, feelings of reparation and concern are experienced.
- The infant experiences the object as having a vitality of its own.

From an adult perspective, the object comes from without; but not so for the infant. However, neither does it come from within, for it is not a hallucination. Rather, the object comes from the intermediate space. This paradox must be accepted and not solved (Winnicott 1992:233). Additionally Winnicott believed that it is the fate of the transitional object to become part of the whole cultural field. In adulthood, many transitional objects can be found. Specific loci are religion and art, where transitional objects are used to bridge the chasm between objectivity and subjectivity (Winnicott 1994:55).

Since transitional objects are found in the cultural field, Winnicott indicated a relationship between transitional objects and symbolism. In his essay, "The Fate of the Transitional Object" (1959), Winnicott identified the cultural life of an individual as "a sort of third area of existing" (Winnicott 1994:57). The first area refers to the fundamental area of individual psychic reality, meaning that from which the individual "hallucinates," "creates," "thinks up," or "conceives of." It is the ME world of subjective reality, seen in the stage of dual union and in the dream life of an individual. The second area refers to the not-ME world, the world of objectivity, where the infant has reached a sense of unit status. Living occurs in this third area, which corresponds to the infant's transitional phenomena. This third world, which for Winnicott is an indicator of health, is tolerated by society. Furthermore, the distinction between ME, not-ME and transitional phenomena continue into adulthood.

In his discussion of the St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Adelekan states that the men often revisit The Million Man March during worship rituals and at other times. This indicates that the March functions as a transitional object to the men of St. Paul within its rituals. In revisiting the March on its anniversary and at other times, the men not only oscillate between dependency and independency, but also have the opportunity for reparation and for claiming responsibility. The March thus becomes an object of the intermediate, transitional world. It is no longer part of merely the objective world (history), nor is it a purely subjective experience. Rather, it straddles subjective feelings of alienation on the one hand and the objective disintegration of society on the other. As Adelekan writes, "The MMM for these men is not simply a national "holiday," but rather a religious "Holy Day" (Adelekan 2000: 27). Furthermore, Adelekan himself notes the danger of the March becoming a fetish-like object, an object empowering men at

the expense of the women (Ibid). Using the March as a transitional object, then, the men of St. Paul's assumed rights over it. They did not subjectively conceive of the March, and for them it was not a one-time event in reality. Rather, it remains an event that can only be understood in the intermediate area of the transitional sphere. "Objective" evaluation of the March *as it is experienced in the lives of St. Paul's* is thus impossible. This paradox, that between subjectivity and objectivity lies the March, should be tolerated and not be challenged by (either) the women of St. Paul's or by others. In revisiting the March, it emerges as an object with a vitality of its own. Hence, those who were not there on October 16, 1995, and who cannot "find" the significance the event had—and still has—for the men of St. Paul's, will continue to be challenged to experience the March with much vitality and actuality.

CONCLUSION

In a society that continues to alienate black men from their communities, the MMM became a transitional object that assists men in managing the anxieties that such alienation brings. Remembering the March allows entrance and re-entrance, again and again, into that transforming psychological space from which renewal and restoration emerge. The restoration is primarily of a kind that can be described as having concern for others, repairing damaged relationships and claiming responsibility. By actively participating in rituals which entail the MMM being used as a transitional object, its participants are invited into an oscillation process, oscillating between feelings of independency and feelings of dependency. This natural, rhythmic oscillation process continues.

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Ritual and Responsibility: A Response to Adetokunbo Adelekan

CALLIE PLUNKET

AS I APPROACH THIS RESPONSE, I REALIZE THAT I AM BEING ASKED TO DO a difficult thing. I am a white woman, and I cannot even pretend to be otherwise. I realize that the words I say are coming from such a perspective. I do not claim to be speaking for African American women or even all white women, and I am certainly not speaking for all white people. I am speaking as an Old Testament scholar who is white and a woman. As I approach the topic of the Million Man March (MMM) and its appropriation by a Christian community, I am asking questions about the results or the possible results of such an appropriation.

Rituals have the potential to be destructive or empowering events in a community. Societies have used them to play important roles in meeting the social and spiritual needs of people in times of crisis throughout history. They are very powerful tools that can serve to uphold or challenge the dominant culture. In the case of the MMM, a ritual was used that was intended to empower African American men and to serve as a public critique of their environment. A large group of African American men gathered on the Mall of the capitol. They prayed together, reflected upon the past, present, and future, and listened to the speeches of various leaders in their community. According to Adelekan, the MMM "sought to intervene in civic society in order to expand democratic options for marginalized communities" (Adelekan 2000:4). The MMM had the potential to be a source of strength for the African American males who chose to participate. While recognizing this potential, I argue that the language of Adelekan and the MMM itself reveals a number of reasons why the appropriation of the MMM by a Christian community is problematical.

To begin, certain language in Adelekan's paper causes me concern. In his discussion of biblical religion, he makes some rather sweeping generalizations. There are two points that I want to make about this section. First,