

Ignacio Martín Baró's wisdom of birth - Creativity, Activism and Solidarity

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On the cover of *Writings for a liberation psychology* - his big glasses, gentle smile, warm and welcoming pose - this psychologist and priest was the literal embodiment of 'heart and soul'. Ignacio Martín Baró did not look like a person whose life had been repeatedly threatened by men breaking into his home and bombing his office; whose colleagues, friends, students and parishioners were murdered, 'disappeared', imprisoned, tortured and raped. He looked like a man who played the Spanish guitar. Despite the tragic oppression and violence around him his heart remained firm and soft: firm in his commitments to justice and soft in his unyielding faith in love; a love too soft to break. His last words, "this is an injustice!", as government soldiers stormed his residence in the middle of the night assassinating him along with 7 others, both a challenge to senseless death and a clarion call to the living. The enormity of who Ignacio was and what he represented was well known to the authorities who wanted to eradicate it. Gunning him down was not just a heinous act of murder, but as Aron and Corne (1994) suggest, an 'attempted sophicide' (p.1); an attempt to kill off knowledge and wisdom. Despite this attempt his legacy lives on.

The greatest testimony to Ignacio's tremendous faith was his belief in psychology's 'potential to grow up and make a serious contribution to human knowledge' (Aron & Corne; 1994, p.3). He challenged psychology to be its better self and explicitly take the side of "the poor". Although he echoed the views of many before him (eg W.E.B DuBois; Paulo Freire etc) Ignacio specifically pointed to psychology as it is: limp, lack lustre and reactive, and to psychology as it could be: in the service of people's struggles for freedom and justice. This was an inspiring proposition; a refreshing and honest criterion by which to review the usefulness and value of psychology, not typically taken, then or now. His faith in such challenging times was an example of being open to what can be, rather than constrained (and limited) by what is; the heart of activism and activities of the heart.

Stories of activism suffused my childhood and gave the challenges of my life meaning. I grew up with Chomsky, Davis and Pilger as my staple consumption, dedicated to unveiling the lies powerful institutions told (what Ignacio referred to as "collective lies") not just about their power but about our ability, and propensity, to unite, resist and create alternatives. Long before Noam, Angela and John filled my mind with their stirring words my parents told me stories about the people of their Nigerian town (Abẹokuta) who found refuge in the holes, crevices and

caves of the sacred Olumo rock and by dwelling among the scattered rocks over the open country, during inter-tribal wars, slavery and colonialism. The 137 metre high Olumo rock was also an important vantage point to monitor the enemy's advance leading to triumph, protection and survival. Many important people came from Abeokuta, such as prominent feminist Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, her son world famous musician and activist Fela Ransome-Kuti, her nephew Nobel Prize winning playwright and political commentator Wolé Sokinya as well as former unofficial, but lawful, president and human rights philanthropist M.K.O Abiola. Abeokuta people are socially-conscious, undefeated and vocal.

Outside my family stories of activism were not as actively told as I expected. Although my UEL clinical psychology training had a strong social constructionist and critical emphasis, and my KCC Systemic and Narrative Therapy training built on this critique, it became clear to me that liberation was not the typical yardstick of success used by mainstream mental health services, commissioners, policy makers, managers or journal editors.

The mainstream stories I did hear often presented activism as a relic destined to 'tarry with yesterday' but hide from tomorrow. Of course there were important historical moments worth remembering. I live in East London, and the anniversary of the battle of Cable Street has just passed, when on the 4th October 1936 hundreds of thousands of Jewish people, Irish Dockers, Socialists, Labour Party Members, Trade Unionists and residents of the East End united against the BUF Blackshirts (Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists), echoing the anti-fascist activists of the Spanish Civil War, "¡No Pasarán!" / "they will not pass". There is also important activism happening in the present day. On 3 September 2011 the English Defence League (EDL) were similarly prevented from marching through Tower Hamlets by local residents of diverse backgrounds, trade unionists, socialists and faith leaders. The EDL had planned to assemble on Cable Street and march past Altab Ali Park (formerly St. Mary's Park, renamed in 1998 in memory of a 25-year-old Bangladeshi clothing worker, who was murdered on 4 May 1978 by racists), and past the East London Mosque routinely subjected to islamophobic attacks. Ignacio's example suggests that 'recovering historical memories' serves to water the seeds of resistance happening today. Growing under the surface of existence there are networks developing, people coming together, waking up, speaking out and changing their circumstances.

Resistance – her name is Today

The stories I heard in my family of resistance, creativity and solidarity made me open to their pervasive existence. Resistance is not romantic. People risk their lives: in Saweto Peru indigenous leaders are being killed protecting their land from loggers/poachers turning invaluable trees into valuable wood, to satisfy the global appetite. Resistance is often borne out of desperation, and yet can be hugely impacting: Following the effective use of social media in the Arab Spring, and the historic occupations of Wall Street in 2011, the Occupy movement has shown unity on a mass scale, perhaps more than any other time in history. Ordinary people in almost every continent are coming together to highlight, challenge and transform social injustices of the corporate and financial world, towards a new political and economic system that puts people, well-being and the environment before profit. Increasingly we are suspicious of the mainstream emphasis on individual treatments for illnesses of the mind and are calling for changes in the social fabric of our lives. The viral spread of multiple justice-based movements highlights how increasingly awake we are to the ways we are wantonly exploited and harmed by machine-like systems and how determined we are to occupy spaces to reverse the moral lack. All over the UK community workers commit themselves to empowerment work and work tirelessly to advocate on behalf of those who are marginalised and voiced over. In my neighbourhood the Focus E15 Mothers are putting social housing on the social agenda. Focus E15 was a hostel accommodating 30 young mothers under 25 surviving homelessness, domestic violence and/or social services care. In August 2013 the 30 young mothers were issued eviction notices from their housing association to be out of their homes by 20th October and then told by Newham council to uproot themselves to Manchester, Hastings and Birmingham. These women sought advice from the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG) about starting a campaign to fight the council's decision and staged an occupation of a vacant Newham council home on the Carpenters estate, turning it into an Open House social centre of free music, debt advice, children's cookery lessons and storytelling, with a play room and food bank. They also occupied the housing association and council office demanding local social housing. The flats on the Carpenter Estate are ready for occupants despite standing empty for 6 years, to be sold off to private landlords to build luxury apartments for the rich. Although the women won their case to be rehoused in Newham, they now live in very expensive private rented homes on temporary 1 year contracts. These women's actions have had an impact beyond their immediate circumstances; their fight for the right to local social housing has given birth to a campaign group forging links with other tenant campaigns across London for just housing for all. As a (very proud) single mother of working class origin, I salute them!

No longer trusting that those who run our country can be ethical and socially conscious, people are voting less, yes, but are far from less political. From the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle (where 3,000 tenants and leaseholders were evicted to be replaced with 2,500 luxury

flats with only 73 dedicated to social housing) to the Carpenters Estate in Stratford, local people are fighting back, gaining support, joining together and achieving results: taking back ownership of their lives, their communities and their environment.

What is Solidarity?

My family's emphasis on being part of a global community meant that we felt a strong affinity with other oppressed people and the special qualities you acquire as a result of surviving oppression. I admired the courage and resilience of my gay friends, routinely excluded and living in a world that does not respect their full humanity. 'It gets better' for others when we all get better; when we talk to each other, learn from each other, love each other and enact that love.

I remember as a child watching three civil rights workers being murdered by the KKK in the film *Mississippi burning*, and noticing that two of them were white. Years later I happened upon a speech by political economist, professor, author, political commentator and former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, speaking during an *Occupy California* rally, and he talked about his childhood friend Mickey who protected him from bullies. Michael Schwerner was one of the two white men (the other was Andrew Goodman) murdered with their African American friend (James Chaney) portrayed in the film. Michael and Andrew were Jewish; they did not just care deeply about equality, they took racism *personally*, and died challenging it. Another story often not told is that of the anti-racism Jewish-Black unity that was so common during the American civil rights movement.

I was blown away and moved when I first saw the film *In the name of the father*. I was intrigued by Gareth Peirce, given her name! I learnt about her decades of campaigning for the rights of innocent people along with Gerry Conlon (one of the Guildford 4) who died recently. Gareth understood the oppression and injustice of Irish people that underscored what happened to the Guildford 4/MacGuire 7 and Birmingham 6 and others, and was motivated by a deep desire to challenge this oppression. In 2010 Gareth Peirce, Gerry Conlon and Moazzam Begg (one of many British Muslim men unlawfully held by the U.S. government at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba) shared a stage at *Marxism 2010* to discuss their common experiences and campaign for justice.

Like stories of resistance, significant moments of unity are rarely told in mainstream social stories, serving to obscure the very real potential for genuine solidarity. In solidarity we allow ourselves to experience anyone else's oppression as ours, which not only fundamentally challenges forms of domination that separate us, but also brings us closer to the ultimate truth of our inter-being. When my white gay friends challenge racism, or my male friends challenge sexism they often do so because they feel it personally. I equally challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism because I take them personally. There is always a danger of course of over

identifying with each other's experiences and losing sight of our differences. For example, my white friends who have experienced forms of xenophobia that help them relate to racism, might take for granted that their white skin still affords them many privileges that my black skin would not afford me. Likewise I might take for granted that I had easy access to role models in my family of origin to help me survive oppression, the way many of my gay friends did not.

Solidarity is not about sameness but connection and there is a palpable and vitalising quality to it. Beyond the utilising of a United Front form of political organisation, there is pleasure in supporting each other and challenging barriers to unity. For me solidarity is a warm embrace; it does not necessitate complete agreement. In fact our differences can be an asset. On the 17th October 2014 I was handed a copy of an "alternative Evening Standard" newspaper outside of Stratford tube station, called the *Standard Evening* a spoof copy written by the Radical Housing Network, a "group of groups", made up of a diverse range of people calling for homes for people not for profit. Talking to members of this network it seems it works because it is organised "*from below, rooted in people's everyday housing needs*"; they cooperate with each other even though they do not necessarily share the exact same Politics. When MIPIM (*Le marché international des professionnels de l'immobilier*) the world's largest property fair for around 20,000 investors, developers, local authorities, property developers, estate agents, landlords and banks looking to profiteer from UK land and property, came to London's Olympia in October, the Radical Housing Network joined local people in affected communities, along with a range of other groups, to oppose the contribution such a fair makes to the housing and homelessness crisis, operating to increase the profits of the rich rather than provide decent homes for all.

Why focus on "the poor"?

We all experience some form of suffering in life despite our social position. Ignacio's explicit aligning with "the poor" came from Liberation Theology's emphasis on siding with the oppressed in order to be close to God. I regard "siding with the poor" as a metaphor for siding with the most marginalised and dispossessed in society. My sister Funke in her work as Chair for Afiya Trust often talks about challenging the discrimination faced by the "minority within the minority". This is important for 2 reasons: 1) liberation trickles up not down and 2) a more liberated society is better for us all.

The politics and experiences of the most disadvantaged make visible the invisible workings of oppression, which is a necessity for liberation. For example Black and minority ethnic (BME) feminisms have highlighted the ways in which liberating white middle class women did not necessarily trickle down to the liberation of black or working class women. Dean Spade writes about this when highlighting the limitations of a human rights and Law-based approach to liberation. Dean Spade is a lawyer,

writer, associate professor at the Seattle University School of Law, activist working to build racial and economic justice based on Critical Trans Politics and founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, a non-profit collective that provides free legal help to low-income people and 'people of colour' who are trans, intersex, and/or gender non-conforming. Dean argues that the commonly promoted idea that liberation should be sought through legal change is erroneous and potentially dangerous to liberation movements as the law often exists to codify and enforce systems of oppression. For example in the US there is a popular story about how Black people were liberated from slavery and apartheid by legal reform, and therefore racism is now over. Although seeking "equality" under the law is one approach to liberation, Dean argues that in doing so we might take up narrow demands for symbolic inclusion, leaving more pressing concerns such as poverty, housing, health care, and structural/institutional violence untouched. Indeed, being declared equal under the law has not eradicated gender-based, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, classist, xenophobic or ageist violence. Human rights organisations often approach liberation by starting at the top in view of a 'trickle down' effect. Speaking about the ways in which trans resistance is often expected to follow in the footsteps of the gay and lesbian rights framework, Dean turns this upside down and argues that if we start with those under the worst and most dangerous conditions, liberation trickles up to those who are the least vulnerable within an oppressed group.

In addition to this trickle up argument, research suggests that it is the large gap between the richest and the poorest in the UK that causes unhappiness. In their 2010 book *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett highlight that inequality hurts us all, rich and poor, by demonstrating that more equal societies enjoy better health and less crime. The West's racist indifference to the decades that West Africans were dying from Ebola is coming back to haunt them.

'Being more': possibility as birth

One of the biggest tragedies of mainstream psychology is that it regularly and unashamedly presents a restricted view of what it means to be human - the self-promoting, self-sufficient individual who is ultimately motivated by personal satisfaction and desire. Whereas I believe human beings are *nature* and therefore drawn to connection. It may not yet be the human being we always see, but it is the human being we essentially are.

As well as being a black, African, working class, single parent woman, I am also the happiest I've ever been, which seems an important context to name as I suspect that it shapes the lens I am currently writing with. Right now I am watching my daughter smiling in her sleep. With a loving stare I take her in; my hand goes to my chest and I gasp, or sigh, or something in between those polar opposites, as the transport of pure rapture makes

everything not her, stop. Experiencing this love is a sure-fire way of connecting to Ignacio's faith. I believe, with everything that I am, in the transformative nature of love, available to us when we act in relation to others. As Aron and Corne (1994) point out, Ignacio was interested less in 'the division line between being and nothingness' and more in 'the frontier which separates *being* from *being more*' (p.7). 'Being more' than individual, rational and material existence perhaps. For Ignacio *conscientización* was the process of acquiring 'a consciousness that will permit us to go beyond the limits imposed by our socialisation' and was a process of '*posibilitar*, making possible' (p.8). Creativity itself could be viewed as our natural ability, and desire, to convert impossibility into possibility; to give birth to something new. This is why for me *conscientización* is so fundamentally linked to creativity, and is made possible in the context of unity; the unity that arises from understanding our nature as deeply and invisibly braided together. Perhaps 'being more' also refers to a tireless determination to include more and more people in our solidarity than we initially deem possible; a determination to liberate us all.

Stories of activism and solidarity challenge the prevailing view in society that we are passive, conforming, selfish robots. They highlight the ways people develop 'consciousness' in community and the ways in which resistance can be mobilised and sustained. Not the temporary pleasure of a Mexican wave, but rather, sustained forms of coming together make us feel 'right'. This does not mean that concepts such as solidarity, altruism and community are without complexity. They are messy, unfinished and imperfect and perhaps, like everything else in life, they are supposed to be. After all, perfection is not liberating. What seems to be important is *what we create together*: does it have 'heart and soul'? does it give birth to possibility?

The wisdom of birth

We are not where we begin;
Not when the apple tree
Captures the sunset
As though it were not passing,
And the apple is me
Even before I ingest it;

Its willing flesh so juicy,
Bitter core and potent pips
Contributing to a new being.

Knowing its destiny
From what it has been,
Despite the appeal of rosehip,

The allure of lavender, etcetera,

It is apple. And *she* knows
Not to be any other
Child, but her.

Like the heart's glow
On hearing a child's laugh,
There's radiant infinity, rich and vast,
Way above what's known.
From its orange awe, thrown against me
As if there's no me to catch it,

There is gossamer wisdom
Stitching back
All that's become
Unstitched.

Ask any baby if they
Want to be alone,
As they spring into a world
Flaunting days
Of skin caressing bone.
We all came from the child,

And the magnetism of play.
Born to spread our lungs
The way wings do in air.
Even after the protest is over
Freedom calls us together;
Calls us to respond.

Because, as my father
Would say,
"Anyone
Is everyone".

Aron, A and Come, S. (1994) *Writings for a liberation psychology* (trans. And eds.). London: Harvard University Press.

Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*. London: Penguin.