

Sacred Transformation

Blurb

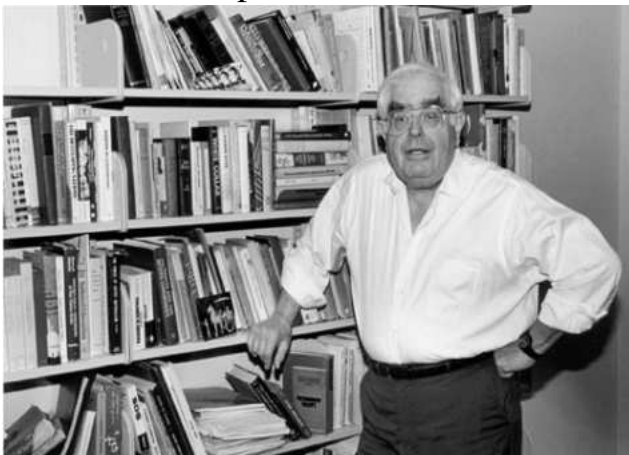
What is sacred? Is it beyond question, or is it something to wrestle with? Or is nothing sacred at all? Among people, nations and religions, these answers can change over time. According to the late political theorist Manfred Halpern, how we obey, deny or grapple with purpose shapes the central drama of our lives. Kevin will explore Halpern's transformation theory and its application to relationships big and small.

Talk

Over the past year, I've spoken here about permaculture and soil ecology. These are my current passions as a gardener. But today, just for fun, I thought I'd take a break and discuss the most interesting, useful thing I learned in college.

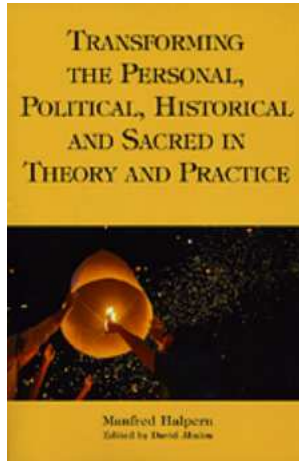
In my senior year, I had a blank in my class schedule. So I asked all my friends which course they felt had been indispensable to their education. From a long list, seven classes actually fit my schedule. I enrolled in all of them. By the end of the first week, I dropped six, and bought the books for Politics 325.

As an astrophysics major, I would never have thought to take a Politics course. But to the Professor, Manfred Halpern, politics was not about power and the tediously redundant battles for it. It was about any problem that concerned more than one person, and how they dealt with it through conflict and collaboration. In other words, politics was about relationships.



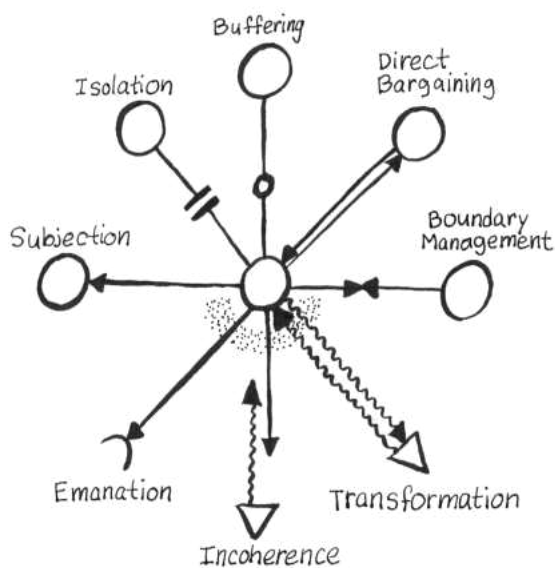
Halpern was an interesting guy. As a forward scout in World War II, he was a go-getter: he captured Hitler's publicist! As a professor, though, he was a

dawdler. He spent decades crafting a grand theory of politics that remained unpublished when he died in 2001. But colleagues and former students picked up the project, and the University of Chicago Press finally published his theory in a 400-page tome in 2009.



Halpern’s theory was still very much under construction in 1986, when I took the course, but its key concepts were already solidly established. I think I can convey these in the next 10 minutes or so.

Halpern and his students began in the 1960s by cataloging all the ways people or groups of people have of relating to one another, or to parts of themselves, or abstract concepts. What they found was a bit shocking: everything boiled down to just 8 archetypal relationships, which Halpern called “polarities.”



Let’s explore them.

In Subjection, both parties are separate, creative and aware, but one party has overwhelming power over the other. Master and slave, empire and subject, click it or ticket: this is the domain of power and resistance. The powerful suppress conflict. Justice means survival in exchange for obedience.

In Isolation, both parties agree to make no demands on each other. In this case, justice means self-determination. In isolation, you can change yourself, but not the other. Many artists and scientists need isolation to do their best work.

In Buffering, the relationship progresses through an intermediary, whether a living mediator or broker, or via a concept, custom, habit, stereotype or ritual. Buffering allows parties a limited ability to change one another through a mutually agreed medium. Here in this fellowship, our medium is liturgy: for example, Joys and Sorrows. Other examples of buffering include potlucks, games, sports, common interests and ceremonies such as graduation and weddings.

In Direct Bargaining, both parties interact on the same terms. Justice is a fair bargain, a fair exchange, a free market. Collaboration and conflict are two sides of the same coin. Ethical businesses do favors for competitors all the time. Gift economies keep people involved through constant indebtedness. Many years ago I realized that I tended to shy away from this polarity. I had a lot of fun haggling at swap meets and garage sales, and this stood me in great stead in my later business start-ups.

In Boundary Management, each party has autonomous jurisdiction. Change comes through shifts in the boundary. No matter what your domain, you have the right to defend or expand it. Borders. Political parties. Who cooks, who does the dishes, who gets to work, who gets to vote. All of these situations involve boundary management.

The next three polarities are special. As I describe each in turn, see if you can sense what sets them apart.

In Emanation, one's identity is just a piece of another, mysteriously more compelling personality. This sacred source has total power over the other party, who relinquishes their individuality and creativity in exchange for total security. Conflict is completely repressed. I picture Greek Orthodox penitents, identically clad in hot, black, itchy robes, crawling up from the waterfronts of Naxos, to grovel and kiss the doors of the church.

Anything we refuse to question, whether it's ancestors, our role as parents, patriotism, God or free markets, has emanational power over us. There is no greater security than to surrender to it. But that surrender has its costs: our creativity. Our consciousness.

In the next polarity, Incoherence, relationships break down. People don't understand each other and cannot agree on anything. Conflict proceeds without shared rules. Collaborations happen by accident. Nothing feels fair. There is no justice at all. Even in 1986, Halpern regarded incoherence as the pervasive relationship of our time, especially in America.

In Transformation, new and better relationships are born. Both parties are fully creative, both as individuals and together. They feel free to explore with their senses, intellect, values and feelings. They feel free to act and to be acted upon. They can make and woo new relationships into being.

Many times, the new and better relationship involves a new polarity. I caught up with an old friend once, and life had beaten him down. I was doing great, basically living all of his dreams (he wanted to be an astronomer). We wanted to hang out, but we just couldn't relate. Then he found an old telescope he bought as a kid. I had some binoculars. So we went star-gazing. Together, we found the moons of Jupiter, the rings of Saturn, the blue and gold double star albireo, dozens of clusters of stars, the mountains of the moon. In star-gazing, we had discovered a new buffering polarity, and it transformed our friendship for decades.

Emanation, Incoherence and Transformation are more than mere relationships. They are entire ways of being. Any of the other five polarities can serve them. In the example I just gave, Buffering served transformation. But what about the other polarities? Let's try Isolation. The isolation of a cloistered monk serves Emanation. The isolated lives of many urban dwellers serves Incoherence. The isolation of an artist's retreat serves Transformation. Emanation, Incoherence and Transformation are overarching archetypes. Everything we do serves one or the other.

And they don't stand still. The three grand archetypes relate to each other in a three-act drama.

Act I: Emanation. God is in heaven, and all is right with the world.

Act II: Incoherence. The hero falls from grace.

Act III: Transformation. The hero finds redemption by discovering a better relationship.

Does this drama seem familiar? It's the basis of all feel-good fiction. Even tragedy refers to this arc: a tragedy is a failure to emerge from Act II.

The three acts also follow Thomas Khun's stages of scientific revolutions:

Act I (Emanation) The theory appears to explain all phenomena. (Sun goes around the Earth in circular motion).

Act II (Incoherence) The theory starts having trouble explaining new phenomena. The troubles increase. (Mathematicians have to add extra little circles to explain observed planetary motions).

Act III (Transformation) A totally new paradigm is discovered, which explains both old and new phenomena better. (Earth and planets go around the Sun in elliptical orbits).

Notice the circularity here? At the end of Act III, a totally new and different paradigm resolves the troubles with the old paradigm. Now it becomes the new paradigm and you're back to Act I, where it seems Kepler's laws of planetary motion explain everything (of course they don't anymore).

According to Halpern, a religion evolves this way, too. But to its followers, the history of a religion usually begins in Act II: the old ways have fallen apart. People wander in the desert, worship craven idols, can't agree on anything. Then comes Act III: a powerful revelation changes life for the better. This is usually the start of a new religion. Its adherents consider this new revelation so powerful and profound that they literally enshrine it, so that it may last forever. Thus, they arrive at Act I, Emanation, the end state of a religion.

Halpern called out a phrase from Islam that captured this drama perfectly. "There IS no god..." (Act II, Incoherence) "...but God!" (Act III, Transformation) "and Muhammad is God's messenger" (Act I, Emanation).

This is a political theory, so let's apply it to nations. Fundamentalists of all stripes crave a religious state. Such a nation would appear to offer the total security that only Emanation can provide. By contrast, secular states always seem mired in incoherence. The polarity of Incoherence offers no security. To a fundamentalist, that's a nightmare.

Even a nation utterly devoted to transformation (should one ever exist) must spend significant time moving through Incoherence as part of the drama of Transformation.

Secular humanists resist the religious state because Emanation eclipses personal identity and creativity. Fundamentalists resist the secular state because it offers no security.

What a dilemma! Halpern offered a framework for resolving it. In his view, we are only whole as individuals, families, religions or states when we recognize life as a process of continual change. While we may enjoy the understanding of current theory, the security of known revelation, the comfort of custom and habit, we must not cling to them too fiercely in the face of changing circumstance. Nor should we let them go too easily. It is this lively tension between tradition and change, piety and creativity, that makes us whole.

Let's face it, relationships are mysterious. Where do they come from? Halpern called that unseen place the sacred. In Emanation, the sacred has a personality that we must not question. In Incoherence, nothing is sacred, so relationships are either mechanical or random.



In Transformation, however, we are like Jacob, who wrestled with God and won the name Israel. In finding new, better relationships, we find ourselves connected in a rich tapestry with other sacred events.

One day a student asked Halpern to tell the story of Adam and Eve from the three overarching polarities. Here's Halpern's immediate reply:

“In the tradition of Emanation, God made everything and it was perfect. He made Adam and Eve, and sought to test their perfection. He said ‘don't eat of the fruit of this tree.’ They failed the test. So God flung them out of Eden and they and all their descendants were condemned to misery. Ever since then, story of Man has been one of failed attempts to regain God's perfect grace.”

“In the tradition of Incoherence, there was no God, nor an Adam or Eve. If you need a bedtime story, consider this a parable explaining the concept of Entropy, whereby the universe began in a high-energy, relatively ordered state, and tends always to disorder and decay. There is no meaning to this. It's just the way of the world.”

“In the tradition of Transformation, God made Eden and it was perfect. He made Adam and Eve, and they were good. Several years went by, and their behavior remained impeccable. Nothing ever changed in Eden. Eventually, God grew bored. He decided to stir things up. He made a tree and said to Adam and Eve, ‘eat not of it.’ They were four years old, but miraculously, they obeyed. God was so disappointed. Eventually, having exhausted all alternatives, he appeared to Eve (the more creative one) as a snake!”

Well, that's the tool kit. Give it a whirl. I hope you will find it as useful as I have in making sense of change and discovering new and better relationships of all sizes.