From Emotions and Bodily Changes ... – in the Personal Body
to Bodily Changes and Emotions – in the Social Body
:
the organism in its environments
:
both inner and outer

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Robert Charles Powell, MD, PhD

“It is uncomfortable to become aware
that we live in a sick society ....”

At first glance –
at first consideration –
viewing ourselves as part of a social body –
as a personal body embedded in a social body –
may seem a bit confusing,
yet we do deal with this reality all the time
We just usually don’t talk about it.

An example somewhat easy to consider
is that presented in
Anton T. Boisen’s essay,
“What War Does to Religion”.

He was studying the comfort –
or discomfort –
of personal religious experience within “a world at peace”
as compared to the comfort –
or discomfort –
of personal religious experience within “a world at war” –
that is, of
a personal body embedded in this social body as compared to
a personal body embedded in that social body.

We may or may not have paid that close of attention,
but Boisen’s entire research life actually focused on
“personal experience in social situations” –
as, indeed, he subtitled one of his books.
Likewise, we may or may not have paid that close of attention, but
a recurring phrase in [Helen] Flanders Dunbar’s writings concerns
“the organism in its environments – both outer and inner”.

While she is most famous for her explorations of the inner world –
how the mind and personal body interact –
in both directions –
her essays,
“What Happens at Lourdes …?” and
“The Medieval Mass in the West”
constituted explorations of the outer world –
how the social body and the mind interact –
in both directions.

Dunbar, for example, noted that
those visiting the healing shrine at Lourdes
fared well or fared ill according to whether they identified more with
the social body of local helpers or identified more with
the social body of those being helped.
That is, she observed
how the outer environment –
social bodily changes –
impacted intermediating emotions – and then
how intermediating emotions
impacted the inner environment –
personal bodily changes.

Similarly, she noted
how engagement in the rituals of the medieval mass
had a powerful effect upon both
the personal body and
the social body;
as the personal body embedded in the social body,
the two bodies, in essence,
became one.

As already was noted, at first glance –
at first consideration –
viewing ourselves as part of a social body –
as a personal body embedded in a social body –
may seem a bit confusing,
yet we do deal with this reality all the time.
We just usually don’t talk about it.
At this plenary this year, we are talking about it.

Please let me detour for a moment, to consider another Dunbar – not our [Helen] Flanders Dunbar – but, rather, a notion referred to in anthropology as “Dunbar’s number” – the correlation between average brain size and average social group size.

For humans “Dunbar’s number” calculates that each person can maintain somewhere between 100 and 250 – roughly 150 – stable, persistent, consistent social relationships.

Theoretically, in terms of meaningful relationships, a big-brained primate could maintain more and a small-brained primate could maintain less.

For the sake of argument, let’s say that members of The College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy have about an average brain size – which would suggest that our plenaries have been coming out at about the right size each year.

CPSP also, quite consciously, has based itself upon more intimate and enduring chapters during the year as well as upon still intimate though more fleeting small groups during plenary.

That is, CPSP has created – somewhat consciously – somewhat unconsciously – structures for ensuring that our personal bodies and minds are embedded in our social bodies and minds – with attention to our emotions – conscious and unconscious – as the “glue”.
Our Dunbar, by the way, explicitly wrote of emotions as the intermediating variable – that one needed to study “emotions from the point of view of [both] their physiological significance on the one hand and their social significance on the other”.

In many ways, through pushing both the psychodynamic and the crucial public health aspects of professional chaplaincy, our Dunbar was among the first to focus on both the personal body and the social body simultaneously.

There is ample reason why this clinical pastoral chaplaincy organization has “psychotherapy” in its name. There is ample reason why this clinical pastoral chaplaincy organization views collegial “supervision” – up, down and sideways – as essential.

We recognize that our internal relationships indeed mirror our external relationships.

We are – each of us is – our brother’s and sister’s keeper.

The goal is to reflect on all this – to carry out all this – with tolerance and encouragement.

Back to our opening quote, by one of Dunbar’s close friends:

“It is uncomfortable to become aware that we live in a sick society ...."
Once upon a time I probably would have had to explain that –
the notion of ours being a “sick society”.

    Taking into account the current entire human race,
    that phrase now seems to be all too self-evident.

For the sake of argument,
please consider even one point in time:
    that day we’ve come to call “Nine Eleven” in the year 2001.

As a personal body embedded in a social body,
were you the same individual a month
    after Nine Eleven as you had been a month
    before that point in time?

Are you the same individual now –
    almost 15 years later –
    as you had been
    before that event?

Again, for the sake of argument,
please consider another point in time:
    that evening in Pittsburg in 2012 when,
        in the CPSP governing council meeting,
            the chairs were arranged differently
                than they ever had been arranged before.

Yes, little changes here and there
for several years had been leading up to
that point in time, but
    the changed arrangement of the chairs signaled
        that something was amiss
        and that CPSP had to begin
            re-thinking its situation.

CPSP
    as an entity,
        had to
            crumble
                a bit
                and
            to arise in a new form.
The personal bodies embedded in the social body –
the clinical chaplains embedded within CPSP –
were impacted by how the social body, CPSP, felt that evening –
and they realized that the social body had to
accept experiencing a new stage of growth.

The social body had to change in minor
but important ways in order
not to change in major and essential ways –
so that the embedded personal bodies once again
could feel comfortable belonging.

In Dunbar’s terms,
the central organism –
the CPSP Chapter – realized that
the organism’s outer environment –
the world of CPSP –
had to grow in a manner that would
sustain comfortable homeostasis within
the organism’s inner environment;
likewise,

the central organism –
the CPSP Chapter – realized that
the organism’s inner environment –
the world of clinical chaplains –
had to grow in a manner that would
sustain comfortable homeostasis in
the organism’s outer environment.

During 2012 and ‘13 and ‘14 and ‘15,
CPSP,
its chapters, and
their chaplains
found a slightly new path
toward wholeness.

As a final thought,
let me go back to
Boisen’s essay:
“What War Does to Religion”.

The world –
the outer environment –
the larger social body –
now has been at war –
whether clearly declared or not –
for a good 15 years.

Has it been assumed
by clinical pastoral chaplaincy –
year after year after year –
that the war will end tomorrow?

Perhaps we should be considering,
“What Religion Does – or Could Do – to War”.

Certainly clinical pastoral chaplaincy’s stance of
ministering
to all –
to anyone
who is suffering, bewildered, or vulnerable –
is a start.

This stance can and does serve as
a model of how to relate to others –
especially “the others”
who in some way are different from us.

Is there any way in which
the impact of the professional chaplaincy movement
on the broader world
can be magnified
and multiplied?

Is there some way in which
a multitude of personal bodies –
clinical pastoral chaplains –
can exercise larger influence
on the world-wide social body?
The College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy organized itself in 1990 as a clinical pastoral chaplaincy movement that was “back to Boisen – back to Dunbar”.

With some help from a congenial outside consultant, the movement now examines more closely the dynamics of what that orientation means and how it carries into the future – and perhaps also into the broader world.

Endnotes:


   Dunbar, Helen Flanders. “Third Annual Report to the Council for the Clinical Training of Theological Students,” August 1932, “Dunbar Materials,” Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York, NY; p.7, “the relation of the total organism to its environment, inner as well as outer ....”


   Dunbar, Helen Flanders. “The Medieval Mass in the West.” circa 1923-24. typewritten draft in the Mary Anita Ewer Papers, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, accessed through Olin Library, a division of Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY; Ms Ewer was one of Dunbar’s secretaries – one who shared some of her research interests.

7. Dunbar, R. I. M. “Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates”. J Human Evolution. 1992;22 (6): 469–493; p.469: “… It is suggested that the number of neocortical neurons limits the organism’s information-processing capacity and that this then limits the number of relationships that an individual can monitor simultaneously. When a group’s size exceeds this limit, it becomes unstable and begins to fragment. …”


11. Traditionally, those on the Governing Council sat around a large table in the middle of the large room – while other miscellaneous general members sat in chairs lining the walls at the periphery of the room, facing the Governing Council that conducted its business in the middle. It is totally unclear how or why but in 2012 the meeting started out with the chairs arranged all facing forward toward a podium and with those on the Governing Council vague seated in the front rows with the miscellaneous general members sitting in the rows directly behind. There was no clear boundary between those on the Governing Council and those not – and instead of the equality of members of the Governing Council there was that podium suggesting that there might be a specific leader – or a rotating leader – or something. What developed was the person standing at the podium being addressed by miscellaneous vaguely identified folks sitting in the back rows. The situation was totally confusing. Finally, one of us suggested rearranging the front rows to face in the opposite direction, so that it could become clearer who actually served on the Governing Council – and the podium was abandoned. While the situation probably was more accidental than not – perhaps arising because the size of the organization had increased significantly – the situation did illustrate that the previously understood structure of CPSP was breaking down.