

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the theme of Power. Recent issues have been devoted to Truth, Love, Loyalty and Sex. Power is related to all four of those ideas in various and confusing ways. Power is often talked about as if its meaning is obvious. It deserves a place under Wittgenstein's principle that "the very things that are the most obvious might be the hardest to understand."

Our word power comes from the Latin *potentia* which is the source of a wide range of English terms that includes passive, passion, potential, potency, and possible. Contemporary uses of "power" seem far removed from this fundamental meaning of passive and possible. But as is nearly always the case, the original meaning of the term lives on if one knows where to look for it. Power had a central role in ancient and medieval philosophies. According to these philosophies, power is present everywhere as an element or a principle in every being but it does not itself exist as a being.

The most common use of "power" in our day is in politics. Sometimes people speak as if political power were the only kind of power. When power is largely restricted to a political usage it is sure to be misunderstood as equivalent to force. Political power is then thought to be an attribute of some people, a thing that can be acquired and lost. But if power does not actually exist, then a game of politics becomes grabbing for something that is elusive and can never be possessed. It is, unfortunately, a game that is likely to be played by men who have not adequately dealt with the question of power in their personal lives

That situation may be changing with a new generation of women and men for whom politics flows from coming to grips with their inner struggle over power rather than as a substitute and false solution for it. I trust that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi understands power mainly from her life as a mother and a grandmother. That experience of power does not always translate into politics but she seems to have successfully combined that knowledge with what she learned from her father who was mayor of Baltimore.

At present, politics remains dominated by middle-aged and older men who are chasing a chimerical idea of power to fill up the emptiness or confusion that is common in the lives of middle-aged and older men. In their world of illusion the only clear thing that one can hold on to is money. At least money seems to be real except that no amount of it proves to be sufficient. What is more ridiculous and pathetic than a man who has billions of dollars trampling over people who are in his way of getting a few dollars more?

POWER IS EVERYWHERE

By Gabriel Moran

In Aristotle's philosophy each thing is composed of power and act, that is, of possibility actualized as a single being. One of his favorite metaphors is of a statue carved from stone. The block of stone had several possibilities until the artist actualized one of them. When things change, matter is given a new actuality by something or someone that draws a form from the matter. That was the Greek solution to the problem of change that happens before our eyes.

Thomas Aquinas took over the Greek solution to physical change and applied it to the metaphysical question raised by Christianity (and Neoplatonism): Why is there something rather than nothing? Thomas's answer is that everything is composed of something that was possible but had to be actualized as a particular being. That "act of being" is the basis for the Christian coining of the term "create." There had to be a creator to actualize something out of nothing. In Thomas' philosophy that relation has continued. Creation is a present act.

I doubt that Thomas was entirely satisfied with this answer. To the question whether or not the world is eternal, Thomas answers that we, like the Greek philosophers, would assume that the world has always existed. However, Thomas thought that the Bible requires us to believe otherwise. I think if he were alive today, after two centuries of biblical criticism, he would not assume that a Christian must believe that the world had a (temporal) beginning,

The Book of Genesis is the story of the human beginning or rather two stories of the human beginning. Two stories were needed to do justice to the nature of the human being, one in which the humans emerge humbly from the evolution of the rest of the world and the second story in which the humans are in charge, placed at the center of the world and told that their work is "to take it and keep it." The first chapter of Genesis begins with God saying: Let there be light. Innumerable commentators have pointed out that the sun should have been created before light. But the story makes no pretense of being a scientific account of how the world came to be. Humans need light to see anything so light came first.

There was no time before humans because time is the human measure of change. There was presumably other stuff from which humans emerged but the first year of human existence was year one. The biblical fundamentalists who think that the world is 6000 years old are way off in their counting. But they actually make more sense than people who say that the world is 12 billion years old which is a meaningless number.

There is no logical or religious reason why creation has not always existed. The idea of an "omnipotent" being who created things out of nothing has never made much sense. A creator is related to the created. Omnipotence would be the same as infinite possibility or nothingness. The story in most if not all the great religious traditions is that there is an unnamable reality much greater than the humans. That story makes more sense of human existence than does any scientific account and it is not excluded by any scientific data.

As for political power, the classic statement was made by Thucydides in the *Peloponnesian Wars*. Athens with its military might confronted the small nation of Melius. The Athenians warned the

Melians who were resisting them: “We know and you know that in human calculation considerations of justice apply when the pressures of necessity balance; those who excel in power do what they can and those who are weak submit.”

Power is corrupted when it is exercised to eliminate the human power of mutual relations. The misunderstanding of power as the force to dominate others has continually corrupted organizations in the past. Lord Acton is regularly misquoted as saying “power corrupts.” What he said was “power tends to corrupt” which is more accurate but still misleading. Politics is assumed to be a cynical business that respectable people avoid. But power, including political power, is not corruptive; it is the source of all life and it is indispensable in any organization.

A widely accepted distinction made by Joseph Nye between “soft power” and “hard power” misses the actual meaning of power. His distinction equates power with using force to get one’s way. U.S. policy makers love the distinction. We can either bomb people into submission or we can use economic and political power to get them to submit. We win either way but the second strategy makes us look like gracious winners. However, in contrast to assuming that power is force, *human* power involves a mutual sharing of life’s possibilities. Because power that is specifically human is capacity or openness to what is, then the way to be humanly powerful is to be attentive to other people and open to all the things of the world.

The actualization of power can take a variety of forms, none of which should be the force to dominate. The crucial moment is when someone who misunderstands power as force attempts to dominate in a violent way. By resistance to all forms of violence what has been thought to be weakness emerges as the human exercise of power. In responding to violence, people have to do so non-symmetrically, with nonviolent actions. To meet violence with violence means that both parties lose.

The misunderstanding of power as the force to dominate leads nations to prepare for war. The means of war have become more violent over the centuries. A decisive line was crossed in World War II when the United States and Britain began carpet bombing cities as a means to defeat the enemy. The final bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been prepared for by the bombing of dozens of German cities and 267 Japanese cities.

The atomic bomb means that it is now possible to end the human story. The United States’ possession of 3000 nuclear weapons supposedly makes it the most powerful country on earth, but since the use of any of those bombs would be insane they do not represent any power that can be actualized. The U.S. constantly brags about having the greatest military force in history but it has been unable to impose its will by military might on any country from Korea to Afghanistan. In contrast, the US showed its greatest power by helping European countries to recover after World War II and by forming mutually beneficial treaties with many nations.

Anyone who understands power lives with a constant awareness that he or she is not in charge of the world, and indeed not fully in charge of his or her own life. Many middle-aged people imagine themselves as having begun life as a powerless child and then to have gradually acquired power over their lives and their environment. Eventually, however, everyone has to be

reacquainted with their childhood which was filled with power, possibility and vulnerability. Adulthood is a movement toward an attitude of childlikeness or else it is headed for a crash.

We would not have survived infancy without human care and help. That fact becomes blurred as we grow older but it remains the human condition. We are dependent on the love of a few people and the kindness of strangers. In his excellent book on human rights, Henry Shue writes: "For everyone, healthy adulthood is bordered on each side by helplessness, and it is vulnerable to interruption by helplessness, temporary or permanent, at any time."

I have one objection to Shue's description: human beings are never completely helpless. They retain some power, starting with the power to say yes or no. But Shue is right that "the infant and the aged do not need to be assaulted in order to be deprived of health, life, or the capacity to enjoy active rights. The classic liberal prescription for the good life – do not interfere with thy neighbor – is the only poison they need."

There is some danger in the use of the phrase "the infant and the aged." It can support the stereotype that the old are to be treated as if they were children. Childlike and childish are not the same. There are stages of infancy in which the child learns to exercise its powers, There are also stages of old age which can last an indefinite length of time. We can easily distinguish between what a six-month old child and a five-year old child can do, and what kind of help each of them needs. But society is often unclear about stages of old age; nobody but the old have been there. The old could tell everyone what old age is like but there may be nobody to listen.

I have often complained about being asked when buying a train ticket, whether I am an adult or a "senior." There are benefits in being treated as old but I am doubtful that they compensate for no longer being recognized as an adult. The age at which one ceases to be an adult is in question today. AARP thinks that being old starts at age 55 but that is just to sell more memberships. In the late 19th century, the age of 65 was set as the entrance to old age but it is increasingly felt to be wrong for many people. Some people who are in physically trying jobs are worn down by age 50. In other jobs, a professor or a therapist may only be hitting his or her stride at 65. But everyone does begin to need more help at some age. The presence of the very old and the very young is a reminder to people in the middle that what they think of as their power is a phantom that can and eventually will disappear. They will be left with the human power to accept.

Society is at present going through a sexual revolution that is unlike any previous change. Women have been the leaders in rejecting the way that sexual power has traditionally been misused. However, there is an often repeated statement that rape is not about sex but about power; that assertion is a dangerous misunderstanding of sexual power. For a lengthy part of his life a man's exercise of power has a strong sexual dimension to it. Sexual desires increase the tendency to think of power as a force to control and dominate others. This dangerous tendency, which is inherent to male sexuality, is tempered by intimate sexual relations. But in the absence of that outlet for sexual power, the control of others is likely to turn violent. Rape is sexual power at an intolerable level of frustration leading to violence. Women and children (though not exclusively) are the likely targets of such violence.

Both men and women can have aggressive and receptive expressions of sexual power.

The integration of those expressions is needed for a healthy and productive life. Starting in childhood, human beings need to experience power embodied in mutual exchanges. Ideally, the child experiences mutual exchanges of power in the interaction of the parents. Throughout life we all need institutions that encourage such exchanges of power. In authoritarian institutions sexual power has to be suppressed because its expression can give support to political revolutions. Repressed sexual power will eventually explode or else find unhealthy expressions that corrupt the institution. The individual is responsible for his or her acts but the institution can be a co-conspirator in encouraging the dangerous tendencies of the person.

A simple democracy is not feasible in today's complicated institutions of thousands or millions of people. But an administrative structure need not take the form of a bureaucratic pyramid of control. Numerous big institutions are trying to find new ways of acting that are effective for the institution and not destructive of the individual. The Roman Catholic Church is in such a crisis that it might be open at some point to radically rethinking its structure. As institutions do, it will probably stumble along putting patches on problems as they arise. But it would be a fascinating case if the Roman Catholic Church sought for a new way to be Catholic.

A new way, of course, would be in large part an old way. The human race long ago discovered that individuals need affection and identity from a community. A larger organization has to provide that sense of belonging while it also draws upon the talents of all the members to serve the mission of the organization. Karl Marx did not discover that truth in the 19th century. Unfortunately, neither Marx nor anyone else in the past has figured out how to construct a large organization that has a communal structure so that the talents of all its members are used while at the same time it serves their needs.

The Christian Church set out to be "a people" that was not based on ethnic, racial, national or geographic origin. Was it naïve to think that an organization of such a people was possible? The people were to be united by worship of the nameless true God revealed in the history of the Jewish people. That history was given a surprising twist by the Jewish people's greatest prophet, the man from Nazareth. The life of Jesus conveyed the paradoxical message that power is revealed in what seems to be abject weakness and vulnerability. The death of Jesus was proclaimed to be not the final word. Somehow that message of triumph survived and was conveyed to future generations by a community that embodied the belief that power is best manifested in a sharing of life with other people.

The Christian community did not succeed in constructing an organization that could retain that sense of power in all aspects of its life. The old problem of some men dominating other men quickly reappeared. The church could not immediately overcome all the differences of peoples across the earth. However, there was one major contrast that could have and should have been immediately addressed, namely, the relation between men and women. Jesus was hardly a modern democrat but he had at least pointed the way toward a mutuality of women and men. The church to its credit did make improvements in the lot of women but the changes fell drastically short of what was needed. The church's original sin was its assumption that men understood power and could run the world while neglecting the talents of half of humanity. Organizations, including the church, are still a mess but perhaps we are closer to discovering that the mutuality of women and men is the human power for building future organizations.

WOMEN AND POWER

By Hanna Rosin

The spectacularly florid feminist-classicist Mary Beard has helpfully chronicled how from the start of recorded history silencing females was a critical rite of passage for men (Jupiter turns Io into a cow; Echo can only echo; when Philomela is raped, her tongue is cut out to keep her quiet). Even in isolated moments when women do wield power, they have a hard time seeing it, because it is so unfamiliar and uncomfortable. There is some irony in this political moment that when women have the collective power to fell titans of the patriarchy, they are using that power to insist on their powerlessness. When it comes to power they – we – are chronically ambivalent.

There are a few forms of female power that don't seem to violate anyone's sense of norms: sex or beauty, the witchy power of the dispossessed. And then there is the most acceptable: wielding power in the service of others. No one bristles at, say, a mother storming into a principal's office to demand a new teacher for her son, or a female head of HR fighting for her employees. But how unfair is it to be denied the right to be selfish?

Lately all my feminist rage and confusion over obstacles to power are focused on the Xerox dilemma: Are we women doomed to be "helpful" forever? Will we ever learn to block out the needs of others to attend to our own dominance? Will we ever learn to be selfish? Is selfishness a blessing or a curse? Can't they find a male intern to do the damned stapling?

The proven biological differences between the genders barely amounts to a standard deviation; Darwin believed women were intellectually inferior; women were not allowed into scientific society until late into the century; the maternal instinct is a myth; and the patriarchy is a cultural creation, not a biological fact. I am not sure what I believe about the biological differences between men and women. My sons *do* only play with cars and video games; and the girls I know are in fact deeply relational. I read books over and over, like a prayer, to try to drive the cultural poison out of my head. Because the fundamental truth is that in 2019 there is no earthly reason, biological or otherwise, why men should have more power than women.

In her lectures on power and women, Mary Beard proposes an elegant grammatical solution: Change *power* from a noun into a verb. Instead of a trait or a possession, turn power into an act. Someone doesn't *have* power they *do* power. The advantage is to turn power into a baton that passes from hand to hand, a temporary action that comes and goes and doesn't have to define you. The aim is to break our addiction to mystical qualities like "genius," which we still associate almost entirely with men. The hope is that women can move past their ambivalence one act at a time; call it what it is, revel in it.

Do I wish for women to be free to subject total strangers to their whims? I do, or at least I wish for a critical mass of women to behave like this in public so we purge the cultural stereotype. And then I hope that phase passes. Maybe this is my delusion of gender, but deep in my heart I believe it is better to liberally use the second person. There must be a way to have power and be communal, to take other people along. This phase of winner take all that we're in now isn't leading us anywhere good. In the best of all worlds, everyone – men and women – stop for a minute on their way to the party and help the guy staple.

THE POWER OF THE EROTIC

By Audre Lourde

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence. It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distantly inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters. But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough. The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation.

For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves..

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do. For instance, how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult? The principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread for ourselves and those we love. As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects - born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the

erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our loving, our work, our lives.

It has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic - the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings. Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling.

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women. When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean only on external directives rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, we begin to give up being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of the others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse. In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.