

Encountering the other in three acts

Appreciating a poem by Barry Oshry

Oshry, B. (2018). Encounters with the "Other". A History and Possibilities. Triarchy Press.

Alison Piasecka and Bob MacKenzie



About Barry

To put this poem in context, it might help to say a little about Barry's distinguished career. He is a pioneer in the field of human systems thinking. His life's work has been to empower individuals and organizations by transforming system-blindness into system-sight.

The educational programs he has developed include The Power Lab, the Organization Workshop on Creating Partnership, and the When Cultures Meet Workshop.

In 2013 he launched The Worldwide Week of Partnership, during which Power+Systems trainers across the globe conduct pro bono partnership events for educational, charitable, advocacy, and service organizations in their local communities. In 2015 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Organization Development Network.

Barry is a past contributor to this journal, and only last year, in our Autumn/Winter 2017 edition, David McAra [reviewed](#) an advance copy of Barry's latest book '[Context, Context' Context'](#) (2018). If you'd like to know more about Barry's life and work, you can click on these links: www.powerandsystems.com; <https://www.triarchypress.net/barry-oshry.html> or send him an email at; oshrybarry@gmail.com.

What this poem means to us

As members of the core Open Source Thinking hosting team, we (Alison and Bob) were drawn to this poem for several reasons. We've long acknowledged Barry Oshry as a highly-respected and important contributor to thinking about the ways in which organisations and individuals relate and interact. When we read the poem, we both felt it would be important to draw attention to it in this special edition, as it speaks powerfully to the issues underpinning Open Source Thinking (OST) as we understand them. It seems to us that the poem itself exudes strong resonances with our interest in Open Source Thinking, as variously illustrated by several contributions in this edition. And [Triarchy Press](#), who have published the poem on its website, are long-standing supporters of AMED's various writing initiatives. The poetic form chimes nicely with the artistic nature of this particular edition.

So a poem on 'system blindness' and 'system sight', which are central themes in Barry's life's work, is in itself a startling and creative way of articulating a powerful message. Here, Barry introduces many other concepts which we think are highly relevant to our understanding of OST praxis, including 'Relationships', 'Power seeing', 'Love seeing', 'demagogues' 'catastrophes', and 'Love as the disruptor', We have system sight when 'we understand that how we experience the "other" is a consequence of the pattern we have fallen into' [page 20].

Why Barry wrote the poem

The poem identifies a pre-condition of re-setting problematic intercultural relationships

'What does matter is recognizing our human capacity for reacting viciously and lethally to the "other" in the service of one form of Purity Solution or another'.

[Encounters, page 25]

In view of this, we asked Barry if he could write a few words for this edition elaborating on how he came to write this poem. Here is what he said:

How could this happen? How could people do this to other people?

This question has been with me for more than seven decades, ever since, as a 13-year-old Jewish boy, I first learned about the Holocaust: six million murdered. An inconceivable number. Men, women, and children...children, like me. Gassed and thrown into ovens. Then the pictures came: emaciated bodies heaped into piles like so much garbage, the skeletal and bewildered survivors, the gas chambers and crematoria. And the mission underlying all of this: to rid Europe (and beyond) of this pestilence: Jews, along with other so-called impure beings – homosexuals, gypsies, and the intellectually and physically impaired.

I had had a few childhood experiences of anti-Semitism: the Mulberry Street "gang" who harassed and taunted us as "Christ killers," the customer who ended an argument with my uncle with "The trouble with Hitler is that he didn't kill *all* you Jews. "Such confrontations frightened me. Could these people really kill me or stand by as willing witnesses while others killed me? So, fear was one response, but curiosity was another. Over time, and to this day, I have learned of many other purity solutions that have led to the oppression, exile, and annihilation of hundreds of millions. So many different types of oppressed and oppressors, from so many diverse cultures, each with its unique reasons (justifications) for oppression.

We experience these atrocities. We react with shock, anger, shame, guilt, vengeance, or denial.

In this piece I try to do something else; I try curiosity, a rationalist's investigation into my 13-year old's question:

How could this happen? How could people do this to other people?

Encounters with the “Other”

A History and Possibilities.



By Barry Oshry

About the poem

Here, we can only give a flavour of this work. If you'd like to read the entire poem, you can click [here](#). It's a stirring read.

Over 31 pages, 'Encounters' unfolds in three Acts, and introduces a selection of 17 'Catastrophes' - destructive breakdowns in inter-"Other" relationships to illustrate his theme.

Act I

How Our Culture and the Culture of the 'Other' Came to be

In Act 1, we learn that all of us are taught through all manner of influences that our respective beliefs, values, rites, rituals and styles and forms of expression are better than anyone else's. When we meet an 'other', our respective taken-for-granted cultural assumptions often clash or are challenged.

Act II

Our Culture Encounters the “Other”

Loose and Tight, Liberal and Conservative, Pure and Conflicted, Tolerance and Purity Solutions

In Act II, Barry identifies different ways in which these encounters occur, such as through immigration, conquest, or forms of colonisation. This can result in one of four different knee jerk responses in how we react to ‘the other’, depending on our values, and they likewise to us. Any such response is problematic.

He answers his own question ‘How can we know the “other”?’ by suggesting that we do so through what he calls ‘substitute knowledge’ – through our projections of our own fears, desires and biases. We all carry ‘genetically transmitted wariness of the “other”’. Inherent in these attitudes is the mantra:

‘Save our tribe!

Purity, purity, purity!’

[page 15]

Act III

Seeing the “Other” Through Power or Love

Act III flows from the question ‘What might change the way we **see** the “other”?’ Barry proposes two possible options – what he calls ‘Power seeing’ and ‘Love seeing’. Power seeing regards the “other” as different or separate, and Love seeing embraces commonality and connectedness. ‘Robust seeing’ is grounded in both Love and Power. This is a more hopeful way of encountering the “other”. But why is it so rare?

Can we avoid future catastrophes?

‘What does matter is recognizing our human capacity for reacting viciously and lethally to the “other” in the service of one form of Purity Solution or another.’

[page 25]

When relationships between respective ‘others’ occur, Barry observes that catastrophes erupt. He defines catastrophes in this way:

‘Catastrophes are clothed (justified) as sacred missions.

- *A perceived sense of long-standing injustice erupts in revenge, resulting in the wholesale slaughter of the perceived oppressors.*
- *The beliefs, practices, rites and rituals of the “other” are experienced as violating the sacred beliefs, practices, and rituals of the host culture.*

- *The very existence of the “other” in the territory held sacred by the host culture is experienced as a contaminating influence resulting in the slaughter and expulsion of the “other.”*
- *The host culture develops a new social or political ideology, and the behavior of the “others” is seen as blocking the implementation of that ideology, resulting in the re-education, massacre, or expulsion of the “other.” ‘*

[page 23]

Towards the end of the poem, Barry lists 17 examples from recent history ‘to emphasize the breadth and depth of catastrophe as a human possibility’. This list – which he acknowledges is incomplete and contested - includes Eugenics and so-called ‘ethnic cleansing’ practised by Nazis and others before and after the 1930s, the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, and the enforced exodus of Rohingya peoples from Myanmar since 2017.

*‘Catastrophes are an imminent possibility
as long as there are cultural differences –
skin color, race, religion, ethnicity, political ideologies –
as long as there are demagogues ready to exploit these differences,
selling us messages of our superiority and purity
and the inferiority and impurity of the “other,”
and so long as we are needy and naïve enough
to take these messages to heart
and fall into relationships in which our experience of the “other”
is grounded in Power without Love.’*

[Stanza 5, page 24].

Changing the pattern of our interactions with the “other”

‘Change the pattern, and our experience of them will likely change.’

The poem ends thus, with a plea to transform the way we see each “other” to enable more positive and authentic encounters.

Enough.

So, there it is.

Purity is one solution to encountering the “other,”

and Tolerance another.

*Both are grounded in varying degrees of Power over Love.
Both exact their terrible costs on the oppressed
while diminishing the humanity of the oppressors.
And there is a third possibility,
one that requires a fundamental transformation in
how we see and experience one another,
a transformation based on the understanding that:
the interaction patterns we fall into
shape how we see and experience one another.
What seems to be a real and solid picture of the “other”
is merely the consequence of the pattern we have fallen into.
Change the pattern of interaction
and our experiences of one another will change.
The possibility of Power and Love will emerge.*

Further inspired by this poem, we hope that the Open Source Thinking initiative can contribute in some small way to bringing about the kind of transformation that Barry urges.

References

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