

Chapter 4 – A Problem of Understanding

In this chapter I look at my experiences in Sudan, Kenya and Somalia between 1985 and 1996, working in the shadow of two civil wars. Understanding is now clearly a problem. I focus on experiences of incomprehension, thwarted expectations and failure. Understanding appears as a manifold of inexplicable crises propelling me to seek for something concrete, true and whole. By the end of the chapter I have neither understood the situation nor how I might come to understand, but I have clarified the grounds of my problem.

Like the last chapter, I divide the narrative that follows into stories followed by commentary. The commentary is guided by Gadamer and introduces the work of Heidegger. From each story I take a resonant incident and, with all that I was attending to at the time as a necessary context, I look at it closely to see what was going on and what I am thinking now. In each case the understanding of the time had various aspects, but partly to avoid being over-complicated and partly because I find that there is always something that speaks more urgently and begs to be brought forward now, I focus on only one or two aspects of understanding at a time.

Everyday life in Sudan

Now the world horizon expands before me and I find it strange and stimulating. I enter into a kind of combat with the propositions of my Sudanese interlocutors because they do not fit with what I brought with me. At the same time I am also absorbed into the wonders of their culture.

It was 1985. The rains came and washed the country with green. There was a *coup d'état* in Khartoum and Jaffar Nimieri's government was overthrown by the army. We heard on the radio that General Swahar el Dahab promised to hold elections within a year, and this he did. Sudanese people talked excitedly about the new freedoms and possibilities after years of dictatorship.

We were a gang of ten young English people who stayed on after the famine doing different jobs in the aid business in Kordofan. My husband-to-be, Alastair, came in and out of El Obeid, the provincial capital; he was the Band Aid representative in Khartoum and he travelled all over the country. Band Aid was a fund raised at a multi-national pop concert for the victims of famine in Ethiopia and Sudan. We had listened to it on a crackly radio huddled in a sandy courtyard as the famine raged around us. Then there was Malcolm, who worked for Oxfam. He was doing nutrition surveys, setting up feeding stations for malnourished children and organising nutrition education. Simon worked with Care on what was called 'food security' and James was planting trees for the United Nations. Judith and Mark were teaching English in Dilling, a town to the south and Ken and Sue were in Kadugli, she a teacher, he a water engineer.

Ben and I worked for Care, an American organisation, on a forestry project. At the village wells we made concrete-lined tanks to collect the water from the rows of dripping taps that were always broken. Ben clambered around with cement and earth on his hands. Our project paid local nurserymen to grow seedlings of the gum Arabic tree, which were sold to the villagers to plant in their sandy orchards. I made cartoons of instructions for seedling care, their lines pricked out with a pin and their pages duplicated on an inky hand-operated printing machine. We learned Arabic and spoke simple things to our Sudanese hosts. Ben spoke well; he could rattle off jokes and proverbs. In the office of the Provincial Commissioner of Forests, I sat on the corner of his desk talking excitedly and he instructed me to sit on a chair. One day when he and I were in Khartoum for a meeting, staying at the same guesthouse, he tried to push his way into my bedroom.

We were invited to merchants' houses and ate dish after dish: stews of onions, tomatoes, okra, yoghurt and meat, bowls of steaming millet followed by custard and jelly puddings. As a foreign woman I could go and sit in the kitchens as well as in the men's sitting rooms. We played with babies and touched each others' skin and hair. At Simon and James' we got drunk on Sudanese *aragi*, a vicious hooch and laughed till we cried. At our place, an Mbororo witch doctor with a tattooed face came round and cast spells to stop thieving in our house. Tubes of toothpaste, pens and spoons that we had not missed reappeared. He gave me herbs to cure me of a stomach bug. We went to the cinema with its ceiling open to the stars and watched *Apocalypse Now* with the reels the wrong way round. We went to the little stadium, an oval of sand open to the relentless blue of the desert sky, to cheer *Hilal* and *Mereikh* (New Moon and Stars) the two local football teams.

We walked along the sandy streets to the market and ordered skirts, *jalabiya* and baggy trousers from the tailors. The men whistled at us foreign women and made coarse remarks. I felt insulted and out-of-place. One day we went to the market wearing the bright veils that Sudanese women wore and no one noticed us. But I felt silly wearing those strange clothes. We bought tamarind and peanut butter, hard cheese and round breads. On

Fridays, the day of rest, we would take one of the project cars and drive out between the sandy millet fields and park at the bottom of great ochre and purple granite outcrops. We climbed to the top, sat with the backs of our legs warmed by the crystalline rock and stared across the endless plains dotted with baobab trees. The sounds of the wind, the cries of children in distant villages and the birds wheeling in the thermals filled our senses. We watched dust devils as they twisted across the brown land. I felt I could see all across Africa.

While we felt welcomed by our Sudanese hosts, we seemed to be separated from them by an unbridgeable distance of strangeness. From what I know now, I would say that we brought with us a threat, of which we were entirely unaware. We blithely entered their society with our interferences and they were polite but circumspect. I had expected to arrive at least at an empathetic understanding; instead I found an exotic blank which I filled with my assumptions and imaginings. Our conversations were short and about simple things: weather, food, customs, money and travel. We agreed what to do in our development projects. The people to whom we gave our aid accepted our ideas and finance, but they did not create projects *with* us. If there was something unacceptable in our propositions, the people would assent to the plan and then not carry it out.

In the years that followed I brought a series of development projects to local people which they unaccountably accepted and none of which did much good, while I pursued my resolution to know more. The old sages, manipulative warlords and admirable women of Africa entranced me. The landscape captured me under its huge skies. I thought that if I questioned, looked and learned more and more *about* them, I would understand them and I would eventually be able to come up with a way of doing development that actually worked for all of us. My impulse, based on my positivist scientific and colonial tradition, was to find out what was going on without including me in the equation. I wanted to overcome error with the force of my knowledge and arguments. I wanted to overcome what was immoral and threatening, and I wanted to understand and co-operate with those who were good and right. The people were charming to me and I found the places I went austerely beautiful. My mission to put the world to rights became ever more insistent.

Strange and familiar cultural meanings

And so it was that an idea that comes from my tradition, of changing people, being a missionary, civilising them, putting them to rights, was allowed its largely uncontested space. I continued to believe that if I paid someone else's culture enough attention I could influence it, in a respectful but nonetheless patronising manner. History, lying behind and beyond culture, was of course not amenable to being changed. But I did not appreciate that history and culture are the past and

present of the same phenomenon and it did not occur to me that deliberately developing a culture in a certain direction is a very foolish notion.

The world horizon expanded. The people I met were strange. The landscapes were profoundly different to those I had grown up with. I was foreign here and there was no pretence of sameness. The language I used to understand was of my own tradition, the simple Arabic I talked was translated back to English in my head, and I construed the places I went, the offices, huts, cinemas, houses and hills as being odd, simple, sometimes dusty and uncomfortable, sometimes brightly lit and gaudy, often beautiful and exotic. I knew they meant something different and more sensible to their inhabitants and owners but I could not gain that perspective. Where our sensibilities met, in the hospitality they showed us and our gratitude, we built meaning and laughter together. Where they did not, in all the mysteries of our disagreements about progress and modernity, or justice and individuality, we faced each other across a gulf, or ignored each other as too odd to contemplate. The new world I was in seemed to be separate from mine in its difference. It had a paradoxical quality of being extra bright and extra detailed, because of its difference, while being generally inexplicable and undifferentiated. Provoked by strangeness, I saw and heard things and people with a crystalline distinctness but not with understanding, and I began to feel the world fracture and splinter. I wondered at whose history and beliefs were right and whose were wrong. I wanted to pin it down with scientific investigation, ironically distancing it from my grasp.

I was immersed in a new culture, a system of meanings that invited my curiosity and challenged my sense of the order of things. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains that culture and history work together to create webs of significance, grammars and links, complex structures of science, aesthetics, architecture and engineering, possibilities and impossibilities, desirabilities and terrors and they are all expressed in language (Geertz 1973:89).

When cultures meet, there is potential for different kinds of fusion. On the day the Mbororo magician came to our house, I remember the laughter and mischievous suspicion involved in making a new meaning out of our fabulously contradictory

cultures. It seems that where there is a discontinuity in meanings *and* an openness to explore it makes culture visible and mutable. In our aid worker meetings, or when our gang sat on a granite hill together and gasped at the glory of it, we did not notice that we had a culture. We did not need to observe that our notions of truth and rightness were historically rooted and different from those of other people. Gadamer points out that life orientations can happily co-exist, even when they are quite contradictory. In my encounter with the magician I gained an enriched horizon of what was possible in the world, even if I did not believe all his tricks. Abram talks about the same thing when he describes how an Indonesian family he was staying with put out rice for the spirits. He crept out at night and watched the rice being taken away, grain by grain, by ants. He felt an urge to go and tell the family of their foolishness. Ants were taking the rice, not spirits. He then realized that the ants could be said to be mediating with the spirits (Abram 1996). Gadamer draws on Karl Otto Apel to suggest that in the business of conversing across cultural boundaries about ways of life, *'we are not dealing with relationships between judgments which have to be kept free from contradictions, but with life relationships. Our verbal experience of the world has the capacity to embrace the most varied relationships of life'* (TM 448).

Mostly I felt I was cloaked by my own horizon of strangeness. Yet Gadamer would point out that any sense of a closed horizon around a particular individual is a fiction, a *'romantic refraction'* like Robinson Crusoe and his island (TM 304). I was aware that this was a *'life-world'* in which I and the Sudanese were immersed, quite normally. I probed it by asking questions. The Sudanese were careful; I and my like posed a threat. We did not have together the naturalness of interaction between people of a single culture, language, or family, who understand each other without much effort and know how to deal with the threats as well as the opportunities. We had hardly anything that we already agreed on, no suppositions that Gadamer would call *'enabling prejudices'*, the element of belonging to a culture that we could base our conversations upon.

Connective tissue

Does cultural distance have the same qualities of connectedness that Gadamer describes when he talks of temporal distance? Of the distance between past and present, he says *'the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us. Here it is not too much to speak of the genuine productivity of the course of events'* (TM 297). Is it possible to trace the same sort of ground lying between me and the foreign other? If past is connected to present by myriad links of event, tradition and language, is here connected with there, and us with them? How can we know the thing that a stranger is addressing, except in terms of our own that bear no relation to the idea of the other? Is it here that the possibility of a real chasm of understanding opens up?

Take, for example, the incident in the Forestry Commissioner's office. I put forward an idea about forestry and he told me to get off his desk. I wondered if the subject of forestry was actually two different subjects, his and mine. Perhaps we did not intend the same object at all, even if it had the same name. His notion of forestry related to acreages, resources and his position of power, my notion of it to people, their orchards and our charity. But this is an easy mistake to fall into. We were talking about the same thing, but our descriptions and ideas were different aspects of that thing. Our connection was one of disagreement, and we understood each other on that front surprisingly well. Our protocols demanded that we should not mention any of this. So we dissembled and the result of that was a form of connected distance.

Gadamer's temporal distance is not only bridged by the ground that lies between the past and the present, by our being part of an unbroken linguistic chain originating in prior events. He also points out the immediacy of the relation between past and present, in the present (TM 305). The text may be old, but it is being read now. The culture may be different, but it is being met now. The connection is here and now and the understanding is whatever is heard and interpreted in the moment.

There were understandings in the Forestry Commissioner's office, and they were not comfortable ones. In the moment of encounter between our two cultures, our two traditions met in a dispute with which I was actually quite familiar. Neither of us affected to notice. I was being my tradition, my presuppositions and ways of thinking, coming up against him and his tradition. If I look at the encounter carefully I find the productive connective ground between us. I was sitting on the corner of his desk; I was expressing my culture of easy informality, enthusiasm for speculative technical ventures and a momentary forgetting of gender and protocol. When he responded with an annoyed instruction for me to sit in a chair, he was expressing his status, post-colonial annoyance and the legitimacy of an attempt to exploit my weaknesses. The ground between us was a dance of clashing propositions framed by our traditions. The clash itself was no surprise to me, I had experienced male expectations of female stupidity and availability quite often by then. My hopes of influence over his office were part of the prejudices I carried into my encounters in my work. He had ideas about me and I about him. His ideas of forestry, development, progress, investment, aid, colonialism, leadership, desks, foreigners, women and so on were alive in that room at that moment, as were mine.

Gadamer notes that '*application*' to the present situation mediates between the parties in an encounter in the present and is their connective tissue (TM xxxiii & 309). It is the moment of interpretation itself, in context. Here was the play and dance of the unspoken present between us, here too was the play of strangeness and familiarity that I incorporated into my horizon. The Commissioner and I were on common ground in the play for dominance, within which dwelt the unresolved matter of forestry activities. What at first appeared to be a chasm of disconnection was in effect a connection in the matter and the anti-matter of our conversation.

It was from the things that I saw, heard and thought that my horizons expanded to encapsulate new textures of prejudice and deeper insights into being a foreign aid worker in Sudan. My worldview was enriched by the foreign language and culture that I was invited to meet. Provocations of strangeness and failures of communication stimulated my determination to learn, for I was concerned for my

own and others' success and I felt that we should co-exist and come to agreements. But I had no idea how to achieve these agreements. I did not appreciate what was actually there, so much as search for what was absent: a more theoretical ideal of agreement on technical, social and economic propositions. I paid attention to the distance and not the connections. The result was a rather fragmentary understanding clouded by wishes and hopes, informed by bright and perplexing encounters. I was not a tourist, however, but a person who was part of an intervention and our interventions turned out to be less benign than I had initially thought.

The returnees to the South Sudan war

In this section, as I spend more time in Sudan and become a professional development worker, I look at the phenomena of moral experiences, irrelevant questions and inconsistent answers. The situations I come across are at first full of harmonious potential and then emerge as distinctly frightening and contradictory.

I built a career as a development professional. I was happy to be in Sudan, asking questions about what people were doing and wanting, sure of my good intentions. I moved from West Sudan to Khartoum, from Khartoum to the south of Sudan. I moved from one organisation to another, in search of a way to be true to the people and the places I was learning to co-exist with. From Care, an international non-governmental organisation based in Atlanta, with which I worked during the famine and its aftermath, I moved on to the Canadian Embassy in Khartoum where I gave out financial grants to women's groups for grain mills and schools. Groups of bright women would gather outside the school building or the hut that housed the mill and sing for me in five and six-part harmony. I was flattered by their gratitude and excitement, but it seemed like a drop in an ocean of poverty.

Then, following my husband, I moved to the United Nations World Food Programme in Nairobi, assessing relief food needs in the war zones of South Sudan, and then on to the United Nations Children's Fund, monitoring education and health programmes for children and women in the same war. While I was hoping to provide solutions to practical problems, I was also in search of an answer to the question raised by the famine and the war. It was, to me, a question of how cruelty happened, and I looked for the answer under every sack of donated American grain, every burned-out armoured car and every roofless schoolroom with bullet pockmarked walls, where the flyblown children chanted from our donated

blackboards. Every week brought a new provocation of violence. One after another we had to abandon places in a hurry where we had been training teachers or equipping health centres. When we returned after the fighting had died down, the buildings were blackened shells and the people had fled. It was dawning on me that our aid was largely ineffective against the monstrosity of the war.

It was 1991, I was sitting at my desk in the Unicef office in a shady corner of Nairobi's United Nations compound. Little sparkling streams ran through rock gardens overarched by bright flowers and gentle trees. Our office looked like a chalet, but it was filled with filing cabinets and computers, procedures manuals and the crackling of the radios talking the never-ending story of weather, war, bombings, trucks and officials moving about South Sudan. Ranks of white Toyota four-wheel drives with shortwave radio aerials and UN in big blue letters lined the car park. I was called to the radio to pick up a message. "Refugee camps in Eastern Ethiopia closed. Hundred thousand Sudanese refugees return Sudan next few days. Send aid."

I got on a plane. My husband, who worked for the UN on political relations and situation assessment, came with me. We arrived at Nasir, a thousand miles to the north. A great curving snake of a river wound itself across a bright green plain. As we banked and turned in the eight-seater Cessna, the sunlight reflected from water spread in great sheets across the horizon. A row of conical thatched buildings marked the land above the floodplain, a levee along the river's edge. A bombed-out town of perhaps 30 buildings, of which only two or three had roofs. We landed bump, bump, climbed down and the plane took off and disappeared into the big distance.

Ten hours in a leaky aluminium boat heading up that sinuously winding river towards Ethiopia, seeing only brown water, grasses, snakes, birds and sky. Then we saw the people coming, at first one and two, tall, carrying bundles on their heads and backs: an aluminium cooking pot, half a sack of grain, a child. In an unbroken line marking the course of the Sobat river, the tens of thousands of Sudanese ex-refugees came towards us.

Then we heard it, a slow deep throb. The walkers heard it too. I saw them turn this way and that, put their bundles down and crouch with them, looking up into the huge white sky. It was one of the Antonov planes from the North, come to drop bombs. I felt a familiar stomach-clenching fear as the sound got louder and louder. A tickling relief when it began to fade. We saw the bombs as they dropped, perhaps ten miles away, on the border crossing at Jekau where the people were coming through from the camps in Ethiopia. A plume of black smoke smudged the horizon. The people stood up and continued their determined walk. After talking briefly to a few of the first walkers, we turned our boat around. We had seen and heard enough to know that it was true that the people were on their way and they would need shelter, food and medicine.

Back at Nasir we set up a camp. We called in doctors and medicine, food, water systems, tents, journalists and experts. The people, on foot, took three days to come. When they arrived they formed orderly encampments, populating the muddy narrow winding strips of land between the ox-bow lakes and the channels of the river. Every day a transport plane would come and drop bags of grain and shelter materials onto a roughly cleared grassy pitch. A smaller plane would land, laden with medicines and tins of food for the workers. We organised food distributions, set up a clinic in the burned-out bat-infested ruins of an old hospital, went about registering people and stores. We lived in tents, and went about in gumboots in the black mud, avoiding the snakes. In the evenings our multinational crew got drunk on vodka and stories of bravado.

A month went by, then two. Why were the people not going home? They were in their own country now. Some perhaps came from places where the war was still raging, but 1991 was a time when the rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, were in the ascendant, and they controlled large areas of South Sudan. This was their territory now, so we assumed the returnees, as we called them, would be free to choose where they went within it. We were wrong.

One day I walked along the line of sagging green tents where a few hundred child-soldiers were being looked after. Wasted and dying. I was sweating under the unremitting sun. I flicked a fly off my face. One of the children gazed at me with gaunt old eyes; he was twelve or thirteen years old. I felt like kicking him. What's wrong with you? And then I understood what I was looking at and what I was part of. The children were being starved just for us. So we would keep on feeding them, so the troops could get their food and medicine. The high-energy food, the antibiotics and the blankets we gave to the children went in the front flap of the tent and out the back to be sent up to the frontline. The children couldn't complain. The tens of thousands of Sudanese people who were being held there, forbidden by the soldiers to go home, were attracting ten tonnes of food a day, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars to fly in from Kenya. The supplies were being used by the local commander to finance his moves to take over the rebel movement by force.

Gradually those who came from the closest places had filtered out of the camps by night, but enough remained to keep our teams of helpful relief workers in a constant state of exhaustion, and to keep photojournalists fed with ghastly pictures of death and suffering. We were part of a great exertion of power over people, and we thought that we were doing good.

I could not fit together what I was seeing and hearing. I thought I would understand if I inquired all the time. I went to talk to women in their little shacks of fluttering material, I sat with old men outside the tall thatched cattle byres, I met the rebel commander with his red and gold epaulettes and gawped at his tales of victories and divided loyalties, I met the man who later was executed in the town jail for speaking out against the commander. I saw his desperate eyes. I talked to the suave UN special

representative who came, apparently, to discuss peace, and to the pragmatic man from the US embassy who came to discuss US interests in the untapped oil reserves that lay under South Sudan. I talked with my colleagues and we wondered about the intractable situation. We asked why things were not improving. We felt a kind of despair as we began to understand the reality we were part of and could not speak of. If our aid saved one life we could not stop bringing it, even if it was contributing to the destruction of thousands. Then four of our colleagues were shot dead by the rebel army in cold blood. And my husband, travelling towards Nasir from the south saw, hanging from trees at the sides of that long road, murdered children whose skulls had been smashed together. The killers were those very commanders and soldiers we were being so polite to.

We aid workers imagined that we were helping to save the lives of the former refugees while their passage home was being sorted out. I eventually realized that we were actually helping to prolong their suffering, indeed we were helping them to come very close to death, or even to die, as part of forced service to a war. I ignored the insistence of this noticing. I allowed the insistence of my own industry and culture to prevail. We projected ourselves as helpful, problem resolving and superior. Near the end of my stay I was bitten by a poisonous snake and was unconscious for three days. I sat for a week by the river, my swollen purple foot propped up on a chair, watching the brown water moving its great weight past the door of my tent. The snake reminded me about the perils of wilful blindness—I had not seen it, I had nearly stepped on its innocent head.

We had seen ourselves as heroes, fighting noble humanitarian battles. Everybody would live, there would be peace, an administration, hospitals that functioned, all financed by the oil that would be shared between all the citizens. But when we eventually faced the question of the difference between our dreams and what we were actually contributing to, we realised that we had no answers. Who exactly would share the oil? Who was to be a privileged citizen of this unformed country and who wasn't? Who had to die for this future? How is it decided who leads and who follows? On whose terms would it be? In our haste to build a perfect society out of the malleable mud of the Nile valley, we were busily helping the elite opportunists. They were the ones building a society. And even if that meant killing, oppressing, destroying, lying and stealing, that was the way it was going to be. We helped out because we wanted to appear to be doing something useful, and we couldn't think of anything else to do. Naïve tools of a political-economic enterprise, we like our colonial forebears, got on well with the locals, as we added to the troubles of the poor and the coffers of the rich. As the insistence of the actual events made it ever more clear that we were being lied to and were lying to ourselves, I considered what to do. All I could do was leave.

A few months later I stood up to speak of my outrage at a conference on humanitarian approaches I found that I was literally unable to speak. I

opened my mouth and nothing came out. My colleagues and I wrote an article in a journal. We received no comments. We had no evidence, no proof, only our own shocked testimony (Dodge, Scott-Villiers et al. 1993).

Moral sense

The first aspect of understanding that this story raises for me is a question of morals; questions of the distinctions I make between right and wrong. How does my sense of morality operate and what part does it play in understanding? The situation in Nasir was a life and death struggle, with the actions and beliefs of different cultures and powers adding to the excruciation of the moral situation. I judged it, in the end, as a tragic situation and myself as an immoral actor.

Gadamer, drawing on Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, points out that moral knowledge always requires self-deliberation, it is not something pre-ordained, nor is it taught. Even if we have an ideal of goodness in mind, the perfection required is in the *'perfect deliberation with oneself'* as an active principle at the time in question (TM 321). He emphasises that moral knowledge is not technical knowledge – 'knowing how' – although it has the similarity of being fully realised in its application, which happens only in the givenness of each situation. Moral knowledge *'contains a kind of experience in itself, and ... is perhaps the fundamental form of experience'* (TM 322).

Gadamer links the ability to be moral (whatever the canon of morality), with being aware of what is there. It is thus a moral act to know well, not to have knowledge as such, but to be able to understand the happening itself, ourselves in the situation, and all that is demanded of us in the situation. *'Thus a knowledge of the particular situation (which is nevertheless not a perceptual seeing) is a necessary supplement to moral knowledge. For although it is necessary to see what a situation is asking of us, this seeing does not mean that we perceive in the situation what is visible as such, but that we learn to see it as the situation of action and hence in the light of what is right. ... The opposite of seeing what is right is not error or deception, but blindness. A person who is overwhelmed by his passions suddenly no longer sees what is right to do in a given situation. He has lost his self-mastery and hence his own rightness – i.e., the right orientation within himself – so that, driven by the dialectic of passion, whatever his passion tells him is right seems so'* (TM 322). In Nasir, in my desperation, I focused

on minor things: mud, tents, planes and boxes of supplies. I watched the sky, the river and the waving grasses. The strangeness was acute. All of our common sense was in suspension, and without signposts to guide it, it dissipated into confusion. If my own experience is anything to go by, it is the way idealistic aid workers wrapped in their sense of pity and panic often confront crises. I was troubled as much by the suffering of the returnees as by my blindness to the workings of the situation. Awareness is not just vague knowing, it is application. In this case, the task was to be engaged with the reality that was in front of me, not with an imaginary situation. It demanded that I deliberate well with myself and thus with others on the central matter at hand instead of paying attention to tents and boxes of supplies.

Tragic sense

Looking back at it now, I see that I was more sanguine at the time than I was afterwards when I raged about it. At the time I understood the fatefulness and tragedy of the situation and I knew that all I could do was act as I thought best. Part of the moral knowledge that is brought to bear and developed in the action of these situations is an appreciation of the dramatic. It is what Gadamer calls 'tragic pensiveness' (TM 131) in which we are able to accept what is going on, what we are a spectator to and part of, because this is the way it has come to be. Without this primordial ability to accept we would not be able to live through what is appalling and what we cannot prevent. These two aspects of understanding, blindness and tragic pensiveness, arise, mollifying moral horror. Emotions and responsibilities fight with one another. Even as I am acting, pensiveness calms me and brings acceptance of tragedy and absurdity into the compass of my capabilities.

Experiences like these cut closer to the bones of living than mere propositions about things or demonstrations of magic. I see and hear more acutely and act more decisively when these things are happening, however much I doubt what I am doing. The working out of an acutely moral situation shows the part played by application in all understanding. The situation demands decisive action, perfect self-deliberation and tragic pensiveness at once.

Understanding came too late, and it came in a rush, like the bursting of a dam. Why? There comes a point when it is no longer possible to lie. Up to the point when understanding broke through, I was protecting myself from howling demented at the gods of that place.

The hermeneutic circle

The hermeneutic circle is a description of the way we that we match our projections of the whole of what we are encountering with each part of what we encounter so that things make sense (BT 194). In any encounter we bring forward an expectation of its content and look for coherence. As we hear or see more in the encounter, we reconsider our projection to fit with what we are hearing, seeing or sensing. This rapid and constant iteration usually goes unnoticed, but it comes to notice when there is a difficulty in making the adjustment (Warnke 2003:87).

Gadamer explains that *'we find that meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way. Just as we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot stick blindly to our own fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another Not everything is possible; and if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning'* (TM 268). The achievement is when the contradictions are worked out and opened to renewed question.

As we interpret based on what we have already understood, Heidegger shows that we project 'fore-structures' such as fore-sight, and expectation in order to interpret and understand. Without foresight we would understand nothing, because we would have no words with which to ask a question. The effect of foresight is not to make a vicious circle of confirming what we already know, but to make possible *'the most primordial kind of knowing'* (BT 195) by opening ourselves to the possibility that it offers. Heidegger goes on to say, *'to be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but*

rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.'

The hermeneutic circle becomes visible when it is broken by contradiction and surprise. My colleagues and I did not expect what happened to these people at Nasir. We thought of them as victims about to be relieved, the commanders saw them as contributors to a war effort, and they thought of themselves as something else altogether. For the relief workers these parts of the story did not fit with our overall expectation. The camp was to be temporary. It persisted. The Sudanese, now in their home country, would go home. They stayed. The children, now being fed with high energy food, would get better. They wasted away. I wondered if the biscuits we were supplying were bad. I did not consider that the food was never reaching their shivering hands, at least not until I was forced to give credence to the idea by a series of other signs that, in retrospect, I could easily enumerate: the soldiers patrolling the camps, the commander's disarming and arrogant charm, the way the people looked at us in desperate resignation, and our failed attempts to get the children onto the planes that we repeatedly organised to take them home. These were matters of politics and war that were not supposed to be under the rubric of my job. I was aware of all these things, but I was not paying them enough attention to bring them forward for consideration, at least not at first. Each of us, the relief workers, the commanders, the ex-refugees, the children, the journalists and the politicians were voicing a single explanation: the foreigners were being helpful but inefficient and inadequate. That explanation fitted with the lie we were all part of, but it did not fit with the evidence.

When questions and answers refuse to coalesce, the suppositions that frame interpretations are brought into question. Gadamer suggests that understanding is always an event, and this particular instance illustrates it well (TM 309). The moment of insight about the diversion of our aid to the front line of the war was, for me, a turning point in my understanding. I could not hold on to suppositions of helpfulness any longer. Other understandings were waiting in the wings, things I had seen and heard, but not fitted together. I reached a point where I could no longer ignore the contradictions in the story we the aid workers were

telling ourselves. Gadamer argues that it is in the nature of being a conscious being that I test what I find against what I have provisionally concluded (TM 268). My prior conclusions may be brought starkly into question.

Care and solicitude

Why be concerned if the parts and whole do not add up? What is it that drives us to question at all? While to be is to make an assertion, to be a *being* is to be concerned and to pose unceasing questions. That we find ourselves in the world and with others is an ontological situation from which, philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer and others suggest, all our behaviours ultimately originate. One aspect of this is what Heidegger calls '*care*.' (BT 83, §12; 157 §26). Because being is being towards what is possible, we comport ourselves with concern for what is coming. We know ourselves to have a future and so we feel a sense of unspecified anxiety for ourselves, concern about things and solicitude for others. In '*care*' we project ourselves into the world and into the future with the formal structure of a question about what is and what may come.

How did I ignore the exploitation of the returnees, something that was demanding attention, and instead focus on providing relief that kept me busy? Heidegger clarifies the existential roots of how we ignore things that matter. It is a '*deficient*' form of solicitude, he suggests (BT 158). There was a buzz of agreement that the relief was important, the buzz was all around me and I contributed to it. It anesthetised my discomfort in the debate about what to do. In a mode of short-term self protection, I made dangerous things unquestionable and argued that they were ambiguous. I paid attention to things other than those that were central to the moral question. I took account of them in only a rather limited '*tranquillised*' way, reducing the scope of my cares. I increased the level of my hustle about small things (BT 222).

Loss of clarity

Where have you come from? Where are you going to? How do you live? What do you need? I asked the returnees. The answers were given patiently, slyly or in exasperation, 'we are from Upper Nile, Equatoria, Jonglei, we have only these

leaves, this fish, these damp grains to eat. We want to go home, but not yet, we cannot go yet, we do not have enough food, it is raining, we are waiting.’ The fore-projections that carried my questions and assimilated the replies were hardly about the supposed subject itself, the returnee family’s real situation. They were about my own cares. I was asking the questions set for me by the agencies for which I worked, the objectives of which were to give out as much food and medicine as we had the capacity to supply. Then maybe we might try to get the people home, where we would continue to assist them and show the whole thing on the TV and in the newspapers. My questions were formed by my concern to fulfil the expectations of my position and my framing of the situation was set by what I felt I was there to do. The questions paid less regard to what was actually there than to the loyalties they were unconsciously fulfilling.

I did not ask why the returnees had not gone home yet, and even if I had, they would not have seen a reason to tell me. I phrased those inane questions as part of an innocence of the tragedy of which I was a part, but also and no less strongly as a member of my culture and institutions. The organizations I worked for and the institutions that guided my community expressed their will through me and alongside me. I was a living expression of the self-concern of these bodies.

Even beyond the participation of my own organisations and institutions, it is possible to see a vague and generalized mode of behaviour in all of us: aid workers, journalists, politicians, victims, oil prospectors, aid grandees, soldiers, government officials—I could go on. ‘I am only doing and thinking what everybody does and thinks!’ This is Heidegger’s notion of ‘everyone’, an unspecific being-together-with-others that is a vague and conforming kind of solicitude. *‘One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. ‘The Others’ whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one’s belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part ‘are there’ in everyday Being-with-one-another. The “who” is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the “they” (BT 164, §27).*

The inadequate but nonetheless normatively acceptable questions that I asked the returnees on my daily rounds half dulled my worries, because I was doing what

was expected of me. The responses confirmed some of my presuppositions: I had certain powers over resources that people wanted, so they told me what resources they needed and I arranged for them to be delivered. But I also rephrased my questions over and over to try to get below the surface of the situation, with little success. I was making an attempt to understand, but in my bland anxiety the phrasing of the questions that I posed could not penetrate the hiddenness of the matters we all feared to talk about. Invisible backdrops of malign history bore down on our every interaction. Picked from the orderly welfarish notions of our own world, my questions did not reflect the reality of a different world.

Fitting questions

Gadamer tells us that *'what man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now'* (TM xxxvii). In Nasir there was an urgent need to make good moral decisions. Those decisions, as we have seen, might have saved a life while promoting a war, or vice versa. I was deliberating with my own tradition, for the most part with its careless, deficient modes, but also with its ever-renewed moralities. I was deliberating too with the authentic matter of being me, there, then. This embracing hermeneutical structure of small encounters and broad, historically effected preconceptions was fundamental to the movement of my understanding.

While my realization in that camp at Nasir was hardly productive for the practical needs of the people who were there, in a philosophical sense it eventually produced radical understanding. At length I saw the fore-conceptions that I have now described, until then veiled by norms of politeness and institutional position. And then I could see the concrete situation in that place and my relationship to it. It was a long time afterwards, but I took on board how only when we have worked out fore-projections and fore-meanings do our questions disclose the reality that is needed for moral knowledge. We have to be looking straight at the moral issues themselves. At the time I was looking after my own concerns and those of my institutions, and my inquiries were framed by the kind of 'slanted' questioning that avoided the matter at hand because they were actually looking at something else. I return to the question of the true and the slanted question in the

next chapter. First, though, I turn to the effort that I made to overcome the confusion that was the residue of my experiences in South Sudan.

A place at the end of all the roads

In this section I tell of the years I spent trying unsuccessfully to find a new way of interacting with people in the world of development and humanitarian relief in East Africa. Just as the experience of the famine in the North Sudan had left a great unanswered question waiting to be tackled, so the experience of South Sudan left its own sting. The story now has a mood of vagueness and evasion. I examine how even these states are part of the movements of understanding.

I felt guilty. I had seen terrible things. I believed that I came from a tribe of oppressors and my idealistic industry was, despite its claims and hopes, an oppressive one. The world I was in was coloured by selfishness and cruelty.

We turned away from Sudan, went off into the drylands and lived for three years in the tiny Kenyan border town of Mandera at the end of all roads, in the borderlands where Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia meet. There was one bar and a few restaurants that served tea and spaghetti, two mosques, an army post, a contraband market, barbed wire border crossings and a war going on in neighbouring Somalia. My husband and I set up a small charity and gave goats to people who had lost everything in the war. People liked us in the villages, were suspicious of us in the towns. We laughed and argued and drank Pepsi in the 45° heat.

It was another attempt to do something useful, simpler now, fewer grand questions and grand disasters, but another iteration of what I suspected was patronising intervention. The pastoralists and farmers we worked with told us we had at least a respectful attitude that they could approve of: we gave out resources in the form of animals, with which they were absolutely expert in both technical and political terms. We no longer made the mistake of handing out commodities that could so easily be annexed by the powerful. But the work made hardly a dent on the inexorable difficulties faced by the people of that region. For some time I held on to dogged insistence about the ability of the rural herders and farmers I was working with to be separate from the influence of the warlords, politicians, aid potentates and wealthy families. But I came to see it was these patrons who held so many of the keys to survival, their followers drunk on the power of their rocket propelled grenades, religious texts, sound bites, aid manuals and money.

I thought of myself as being purposefully insignificant. Propelled by exasperation and hopelessness, I stopped thinking very much about the

questions I had been trying to understand and entered into a time of everydayness, attempting just to get things right on a mundane scale. I made deals with warlords to hire cars and with village elders to organise distributions of livestock donations. I did the accounts and trained the staff. I felt comfortable with the Somali women. We set up savings and credit clubs together, sitting huddled close in colourful proximity in reed thatched huts. We talked about the money that was stacked in oily piles in tin boxes in the middle of our circles and when we had finished we talked about the difficult ways of men.

I still felt a sense of responsibility for doing something big about famine, war and injustice, but I had not found a way to do it. So I was looking around, vaguely, for a new way of doing things. I was failing to put a clear name to the troubles I could see and was part of; failing to see how I could do something on anything like the scale that seemed to be needed to make a difference.

I knew by then that the aid industry was doing real harm. The simple equations, empty promises, lack of rigour and dishonesty of our work had come firmly into the foreground of my consciousness. I came to understand the actions of the African elites and aid organisation leaders of all stripes in the light of the most lurid narratives of corruption, exploitation and power. I had believed that I was helping people. My culture suggested to me that our work was good, and I assumed that authorities would have a notion of responsibility and service comparable to the standards I imagined of authorities at home. I expected that people and institutions that had taken on the task of leadership would be pressed into moral intentions and would at least make an effort to be truthful and egalitarian. I found that neither the authorities running the wars, nor those running the aid had these ideals. Instead they lied to us and to themselves; they feathered their nests and looked after their own. When I looked back at what I did in Sudan, Kenya and Somalia, at my attempts to do crisis relief and anti-poverty work, I saw approaches that were opaque, arrogant, fearful and capricious. Hoping for conversation and co-operation, I had instead been co-opted. I spoke development jargon, went to development workshops and could barely think. I realised that lack of consideration and disrespect did not belong exclusively to the bad, to the Other Person, to that power-hungry government or those cruel warlords. Lack of consideration, lying and disrespect belonged to all of us polite people, functions of our failures to come to understandings. My understanding was lost in a miasma of vague sentiments, ideals, theories and anxieties.

Evasion and silence

Telling the story of this period revives in me the torrid inertia of those days. I write a little, get up, drink tea, sit down, erase a sentence, write another, get up, go into the garden. The story speaks of something important but evasive. In

exaggerating the business of alienation, vagueness, incoherence, anxiety and silence, it brings these conditions forward. I am interested in the silence. What, if any, role did it play in understanding? Was it merely pathological and psychological, or was it an ontological element of understanding? I talk of it as if it were pathological, it felt that way – it was a bodily reaction not an intellectual stance. But now I review it, I see a world-induced retreat in preparation for a new assault on the question of understanding itself. I had realised something awful about what we were contributing to. My world structures tottered and fell like old buildings in an earthquake.

In his book on Auschwitz, Primo Levi talks of a '*center of a gray cloudy emptiness*', a place to which he has been eternally opened and from which he will never be freed (Levi 1986). Giorgio Agamben hazards a look into this terrifying place beyond tragedy – the place where there is no humanity left. In interrogating texts from survivors and guards at Auschwitz (not those who faced the Gorgon itself, for they are no longer able to witness), he observes that the shame of having been a part, whatever part, is a confrontation with a dark absence. '*It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own*' (Agamben 2002:105).

Was silence and self-care also a way to stop contributing to procedures I now saw to be dangerous? Was it a way out of a maze? Gadamer points out that a person who wants to understand has to be prepared for the other to tell her something (TM 269). Being-prepared-for-something means making a move towards it. Shutting down might stop the otherwise inexorable repetition of what I already knew how to do, what I was already running from and make space for understanding something new. My tactical retreat was also about taking a rest, which is a state of preparation for what comes after and separation from what went before. And then, it becomes '*tarrying*' as Heidegger calls it, *alongside* things rather than in full engagement with them: '*on the basis of this kind of Being, and as a mode of it, looking explicitly at what we encounter is possible. Looking at something in this way is sometimes a definite way of taking up a direction towards something – of*

setting our sights towards what is present-at-hand' (BT 88). It is a distancing that is at the same time an acceptance of future engagement with what we belong to.

Everyday vagueness

As vague misunderstanding rather than authentic agreement and disagreement became the norm of interaction for me, I began to wonder what was standing in the way of change. During my time in Mandera and afterwards I joined in with what everyone else was doing, the everyday vague understandings, where no one spends much effort to look at phenomena properly; we just talked, did things and made a living. We were all influenced by the generalisations and ambiguities embodied in our institutions, practices, politics and history. Everybody was embodying the situation and was influencing everybody else. It is an everyday state of being in which I was just a busy part of the ebbs and flows of people, notions, news, orders, grumbling, worrying, visiting and so on. I assumed, presumed and was knowing, while sensing that I was waiting for something to change.

Ontologically Heidegger has pointed out that we dwell for the most part in a kind of average state of mind, that comes about precisely because we are concerned with ourselves, the world and others and we are comforted in being at one with the generality (BT §27). While we look and listen for the differences and the distance between us and others, we also ignore them. While we are aware how situations are living up to our hopes and expectations and opening up possibilities, we also divert our attention to small problems. While we sense threats and project resistance, we also pretend their absence. We categorise and theorise about what is typical and predictable to get ahead of what comes at us, yet we muddle the theories together into contradictory notions. We are inexorably part of the push and pull of others around us and contribute to what they are and think. In our everydayness we look for safety in numbers: *'we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as they shrink back; we find 'shocking' what they find shocking. The "they", which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness'* (BT 164).

Being part of the averageness of what Heidegger calls “the they”, when we are most of the time being an average part of everyone, is the time when our understanding is most imprecise. When we are immersed in this averageness, we do not need to listen acutely, or be deeply considerate, we only need to pick up and pass on generalizations and indifference.

I went to workshops and meetings, filled in progress reports and got on with my work. We all talked, we all made claims, we all knew what we were doing, we all told others what to do, yet I had no clarity on the matters with which we were concerned. Despite wanting to know what was real and wanting to be aware, I also enjoyed being vague and part of the mass; I liked being certain rather than doubtful, supported rather than alone, belonging, not standing-out, appreciated even, part of *‘the tranquillized “they”*’ as Heidegger calls it (BT 165). It is the state we all must live in for much of the time. Bill Torbert has a similar thought when he talks about not doing first-person inquiry as much as he would like, *‘I could go days at a time in my everyday life without a single moment of intentional self-observation. Among all my teachers, as well as among all the members of my immediate circle of lifetime friends, I have known of none from whom it seemed easy to fashion her or his version of making-love-as-a-lifetime-act on a moment-to-moment basis. Geniuses have their special arts into which they pour their love ... and they typically have equally strong shadows, arenas of daily life in which they are inattentive, unloving, ineffective’* (Torbert 2001:250).

Sokolowski says of vagueness that it is an ordinary condition wherein we speak without clear thought. We may be failing to *‘pay attention’*, be unaware of the *‘meaning of what we are saying’* or perhaps *‘reciting something by rote’* (Sokolowski 2000:105). He notes that many people talk about politics and other public issues in especially vague terms; terms that they have not examined carefully. When we are incoherent, he suggests, whether in what we think to ourselves or say to others, we are not communicating truly, but we are together. The threads of deep communication have been broken and in their place we have fallen back on the camaraderie of fragmentary ideas, false correlations, misty encouragements and vague wishes that we press upon one another.

There are times and places, like the times and places in my story, when vagueness and incoherence develop into deeper vagueness and more incoherence. My colleagues and I designed projects for the betterment of poor people in the same way that we had always designed them, using a series of development theories that promised success just around the next corner. We talked of social change, empowerment and poverty reduction. Vagueness responded to vagueness. I would pick out of the inchoate mists of these bits of jargon some concept—like good governance or gender equality—that I thought was self-evident in its meaning and utility, and assumed that I had agreed something real with aid donors and co-workers. This was all part of what was generally known to be the right thing for development. Heidegger notes that we become lulled by our self-certainty and decidedness as it gets spread abroad. We *'drift along towards an alienation'* and we are *'closed off from 'authenticity and possibility, even if only the possibility of genuinely foundering'* (BT 222).

Even as I was being vague, I hated vagueness, construing it as a manifestation of our failure: our disrespect, inaccuracy, distance and complacency. Heidegger notes, *'when, in our everyday Being-with-one-another, we encounter the sort of thing which is accessible to everyone, and about which anyone can say anything, it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine understanding, and what is not'* (BT 217).

And what lifts the fog of vagueness? I was pulled out of it, I think, by the very questions that it raised. As I realised that I understood little, and as I found myself unable to form a coherent sentence about the issues with which I had struggled for so long, the question of clarity itself moved into the light. Where had clarity gone? Where will it come from? What is it? A *'vague, average understanding'* suggests Heidegger, is the ground of clarification: *'in it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed'* (BT 215). Just as without pre-judgement there would be no direction to our inquiries, without vagueness there would be no reason to make the effort towards clarity. Clarity is an achievement grounded in the everyday.

Problems of understanding – a philosophical attitude

Understanding, it seems, has its own time. The hermeneutic circle can persist incomplete, with the parts disagreeing with the whole, for years. It is never in fact complete. Gadamer asks how our presuppositions come to be suspended so that new understandings arise. What puts them at risk by opening them to question? He suggests that at a certain point they simply cannot stand up to repeated contradiction (TM 268). In familiar circumstances, when another person addresses me with something in which much has already been agreed, the balancing play of our ideas meets little resistance and our perspectives fit into each other. A fusion of horizons is effortless but the change is small. Where there is discontinuity, as in cultural surprise, we might embrace a kaleidoscopic expansion of our perspective of the world horizon. But I have also experienced, and I hope shown, that discontinuity is not always immediately productive. Where there is discord, contradictions may make not for interplay but for rejection, concealment and vagueness.

Nonetheless, it was the degree of shock and unexpectedness of some of my experiences that threw me into the beginnings of a phenomenological attitude towards my own understanding. Sokolowski describes the phenomenological attitude as a special stance that contemplates the intentions of consciousness and apprehends what is given to it (Sokolowski 2000:63). Normally I perceive, remember, project and engage without paying attention to the relation of the acts to the things perceived or remembered. But from time to time, says Sokolowski echoing Husserl, we adopt a philosophical attitude and attend to the self that is doing all this in as part of the environment. With me, because the parts and the whole still did not add up, because all my understandings remained inadequate, because I was appalled by my encounters, distressed by my moral failures and unable to speak clearly, I began to discover the philosophical comportment towards understanding which grew to become the core of this thesis.

My experience in Sudan was of famine and war. I came up against situations for which I had no preparation, bringing forward a maelstrom of questions about what was right. I brought with me what I held as achievements of learning that I

was unwilling to abandon, prejudices about the way the world worked and the way it should work. It was only repeated challenges from the world that gave me any idea of reconsidering. Some of my experiences, shocking, depressing or wonderful, called forward moral ideas to be tempered as only those situations could temper them, along with an understanding of what it means to be actively moral. I gradually worked on the questions raised by famine and war, foreignness and distance. Pensiveness, silence and retreat to everydayness played its part in being able to mull and understand.

As time went on, when I had returned to East Africa to work on a new project of dialogue as I will detail in later chapters, I noticed how my own tradition had simply entwined with the traditions of those foreign others. This fusion of horizons was not deliberate. I accepted variety and possibility in place of universality and certainty. This historically effected becoming, which was a fusion of cultures, had its own unique expression in me. I see versions of it in many of my contemporaries.

In the next chapter I look at the theory and theorized interventions. Theories about development, about how to understand it and what should be done with it, is strongly influential within the development business. For the most part its panopticon viewpoint gives it a distance from what is happening. It is an industry of prejudice that has the potential to challenge, provoke or ossify understanding.

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