

## Chapter 6 – Coming to Understanding with Others

### ***Understanding as being***

To think of understanding a problem, as I did in the two previous chapters, is to close off other possibilities for what else it might be. This is where it is helpful to turn to Heidegger and his thorough investigation of the ontology of “Being”.

Understanding discloses itself as something fundamental. It is, as Heidegger puts it, *‘an existential kind of being’* (BT 161). Understanding is consciousness and consciousness is always consciousness of something (BT 83-89). There are then many modes of understanding, which arise from its ontologically primordial position. The business of my being conscious of existing, of realising that I am here, that I am with others rather than alone, and that I have a past and a potential future, gives rise to modes of understanding. In this chapter I intend to explore some versions of these modes of being.

Heidegger suggests that misunderstanding is a deficient form of understanding. Misunderstanding itself is not a problem to be resolved, but a historically effected point of departure which has both limitations and possibilities. This insight changes my orientation towards the question of understanding: I no longer wish to find a way of making it work, because it is already working. Instead I want to know to how it works. I recognise its eventfulness. Lack of effort and capability, exertion of power and violence over what is true, and the distorting effects of modernity and culture are all environmental effects on the event of understanding, they are not the thing itself.

In this chapter I turn to these further aspects of the phenomenon, rejecting its problematic status and developing more clarity on its nature as an ontological situation manifest in the form of being with, paying attention to and inquiring

about. I tell two stories from the period 2001-2008 and document some of the new possibilities that emerged, primarily around understanding as the connective tissue of relationships between you and I.

## ***Truth and lies – my work with pastoralists and an incident of lying***

In this story I explore how understanding arose from an encounter with another when the other claimed the status of a 'Thou' – someone both acknowledged and acknowledging, who gives advice and is heard, someone who is in relationship with me (TM 358). This marks a change from my previous encounters with others who, by contrast, held themselves and were held at a distance.

It was 2000. My husband Alastair was acting as a consultant to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs based out of Nairobi. The international donor community was spending millions in Somalia, but ten years after the war, warlords still controlled a patchwork of competing regions and towns; shootings and killings were rife, food was scarce, crime was prodigious and, while there was plenty of trading and manoeuvring, there was no government. The situation was unstable and unregulated. Nothing worked in a fashion outsiders might have called normal.

He pointed out to the UN that the majority of the rural population of Somalia and its neighbouring areas of Kenya and Ethiopia were pastoralists, whose culture played a fundamental part in the history and direction of thinking even of the urban elites, over whom their authority still persisted at least to some degree. Their culture and way of life had evolved with the ways of the drylands in which they lived. Their lives revolved around keeping, exchanging and trading livestock across large territories. These were mobile peoples, with old religions, deep knowledge of ecology and long-established traditions of clan government. Their antipathy to the centralised and, they would say predatory, nation state and their willingness to get involved in bloody violence was legendary. Yet they were also the ones who starved in their hundreds of thousands when the political wars and droughts rampaged across their lands. It might help, Alastair suggested, for the powers to come to understandings with these people if progress was going to be made with the fugitive social order, in whose reconstruction the UN, the EU, the USA, the Government of Kenya and numerous others were trying to intervene. He also pointed out that the land borders between the countries of the Horn of Africa should not be seen as boundaries impenetrable to dialogue, but the reverse; they should

be lines across which the talking was most intense and the opportunities most appreciated.

We put together an event. Its form emerged between us, his political *nous* and my theory of participation. We invited traditional leaders, business leaders, politicians and aid officials from Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia to a place in the centre of Kenya, and we chaired a meeting using pastoralist rules where they discussed their different interests in and perspectives on the situation. People said afterwards that they had reached some understandings with others who were there. It was a small shift from the *status quo* of unchecked assumptions and parallel existences. Not that Somalia showed any visible improvement as a result. But there was a slight increase in respect and engagement between the parties, especially in Kenya, and there was a spark of interest in Ethiopia.

Alastair and I spent the next six months going in and out of the UK Department for International Development in London, arguing for funding for a project that would take up the idea of developing understandings between hitherto disconnected groups. Eventually we were allotted a six month grant for a project in Ethiopia, which was later extended several times. The project would bring together pastoralist leaders, influential officials and entrepreneurs.

We made some of our early efforts in South Omo, a pastoralist territory in the south-western corner of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia. We also began working in the neighbouring regions of Oromia, Somali and Afar to the north and east. The acacia thorn trees, savannah grassland and stony valleys are populated by wheeling birds of prey, hesitant gazelles, quiet snakes and chirping insects. They make up what has been described as a non-equilibrium ecosystem (Ellis and Swift 1998). Because the rainfall is so variable, it is impossible for pastoralists to predict what quality and quantity of grass will be growing on any one bit of land from one year to the next, and how the ecology itself will change.

Pastoralists move with the variability in their environment. The grasslands go from green to brown to barren and the people move their livestock and some of their houses. They live from raising animals – cattle, camels, sheep and goats, which give them food, clothes and medicines. Animals are shared out in myriad gestures between households, cementing networks of trust, welfare, governance and justice. They are sold in great numbers to buy commodities and assets, and to pay for schooling. Where trees and water are, there are important places for rituals and deliberations by councils of elders. The leaders sit long in the shade and consider and agree on the use of land and water across vast distances. They sit in judgement of crimes and complaints and of difficulties with neighbours and governments. The young men and most capable animals move the furthest, hundreds of kilometres sometimes. The herders take their animals into one another's areas when times get hard, and they cross borders, paying scant regard to the norms of customs posts and border controls. The variability of the environment and the contours of boundaries are opportunities to

maximise their assets. There is a fluidity of movement, communication, negotiation and violence between the peoples of these arid territories. I have understood from them that their way of living is nourished by the liquid movement of animals and people in constant communication with one another and the environment.

Government officials, posted to tiny mud brick towns, preside over little networks of patronage; a few jobs to distribute, food aid from the international community, an NGO project, a school building or a veterinary campaign to hold over people for their loyalty. Higher up in government the webs of patronage extend to minor empires, which distribute flows of wealth and power. These ones are able to arm militias and put people in prison in arbitrary ways. Strange things happen; villages go up in flames, trucks are impounded, schools get built where there is neither water supply nor teachers, fancy residences are built in the administrative capitals. When they speak at meetings with their pastoralist constituencies, officials often speak for a long time, saying little that will cause any trouble from higher up. They often express in these speeches their dismissal of the backward ways of their fathers and of the people they are addressing. It takes a very long time for an outsider to understand what is going on in any depth, who is who, and why things happen as they do.

It takes an equally long time to gain any trust with the pastoralists: they know quite well how odd, unreliable, ignorant, untrustworthy and domineering outsiders can be. And anyway, besides them trusting us, there is always the problem of us trusting them. Their moralities are different from mine, for instance. Their politics and survival strategies may be more oriented towards fleecing us or laughing at us than doing any other kinds of business with us. They test us with their proverbs and their requests for small gifts. They want to know where we stand.

I had been working with my colleagues on a series of meetings to try to get pastoralists involved in holding a big new World Bank project to account. We wanted them to first understand what the multi-million dollar project was proposing to do in their areas and then to agree to be involved in a system of monitoring and adjusting it. How naïve I was. There was no way on earth that the World Bank and its counterpart, the Government of Ethiopia, would allow pastoralists anywhere near such sacred bureaucratic territory. The conversation below took place in early 2003. I was employed as a consultant to the World Bank to help design a system of monitoring and evaluation for the project. I wanted the system of accountability to be led by pastoralist men and women. We held an event in Addis Ababa to which pastoralist leaders from all over Ethiopia came and we laid out the project before them.

I then went to Turmi, in the far southwest of Ethiopia and facilitated a meeting about monitoring systems. I thought that the project had already been agreed between the Bank, the government and the people of Dassanech, Nyangatom and Hamar. By the time the conversation that follows took place, I had learned that the government had decided not to

take the project to Kuraz District, where the Dassanech and Nyangatom live, but only to Hamar. The alternative offering of the government to these two peoples was by no means as financially important or as long term as the World Bank project. Our team went to tell them the bad news and then Lotikori of the Dassanech and Lopiding of the Nyangatom asked us to come with them to the administrative capital at Jinka, to find out the truth of it.

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*Lotikori's face was hard and dark. He was addressing Awoke, the Government Administrator. The mosquitoes were playing around our ears. We were sitting in a dimly lit room in a small hotel in Jinka. I was picking at the plastic tablecloth – hoping to be a mediator.*

**Lotikori:** 'My fellow elders and I came to Addis Ababa from Kuraz and we came to Turmi to your meetings and after that we went back home and talked to our people. You told me and Lopiding that this World Bank Pastoral Development Project would start. We would decide our own activities in the project. At Addis and Turmi we only talked about this one project and this is the one we knew about. Now it has been replaced by another one, belonging to the Federal Government. Where has this new one come from and how is it going to be done? I don't know. Our discussions were about one thing only – we only know about one project and it is the project we discussed at Addis and Turmi. It was to come to Nyangatom, Dassanech and Hamar. The people have been involved in discussing this project, in agreeing with this project. It was going to bring together Nyangatom, Hamar and Dassanech. At the moment there is a lot of conflict between us, because of hunger. People from all levels of the government and the people all met together at Addis and Turmi and we decided for this project to come. What has happened? I was very surprised because we had all sat together. At the start Lopiding, from Nyangatom, Aiyke from Hamar and I all asked each other, "Can this be true?" In the end we decided it was true and we went and told our people. You said there is another project, but we are not hearing it.'

**Awoke:** 'You say that you have no information about the Federal project, but many of our experts have been down to Kuraz and have been discussing the project. If you look around you will see things have already begun, for example the water pipes at K... Even federal level experts have come down to Bubua, Toltalle and Omorate and you have seen them and talked to them and how can you say you don't know about this federal project? Around Omorate, the federal government has brought an irrigation project, but due to the killing of the government officer, the project stopped. Who has created this problem? The government has been doing every activity for the people, we are trying to treat all people the same way, so when we saw that Kuraz has two projects, [the World Bank project and the Federal Government project], we had to take one away.'

*Awoke looked tired. He too seemed to be suffering, but he remained composed. It was his livelihood as a government officer against theirs as pastoralist leaders. He was also a Hamar, one of the groups that were to get the World Bank project. He had complicated loyalties.*

**Lopiding:** 'I have heard. Did we join in with these experts you talk of? Who did the research and the studies? The ones who came have not met with me. The only people who we know, who brought us together in meetings to discuss, are these people.'

*He waved across at us three sitting to the side. We were trying not to feel betrayed or betrayers.*

'We made decisions at Turmi about the project. I don't understand. If this project was not for us, then why were we ever called to these meetings at Addis and Turmi? After all these discussions I was just waiting for it to start. The things that I know are the things that I see. I've *seen* things happening with the World Bank project. In Turmi we drank coffee and ate with the Hamar and it made me happy.'

'You were at Turmi. Why didn't you explain to us then? It would have been much better if we hadn't been invited, if the meeting at Turmi had never happened, if we had not told our people. I'm not an educated person, but if someone makes me a promise, then I expect it to happen. We have problems of hunger and not enough rain, and I was expecting with this project we would be able to sort out some of our problems.'

**Awoke:** 'There is nothing I can do. The government has decided.'

**Lotikori:** 'Now we have heard everything that has been said. Yet we said over and over again at the start that if what you are saying is not what you are going to do, please don't tell us you will do it. If this decision was known, why were we not told? You said it was certain.'

'You said it was certain.'

'You said it was certain.'

'So we told our people.'

'How can we trust you now? When are you going to start telling the truth?'

'Is it a priority to help hungry people and to keep the country peaceful?'

'In our area there are no health services, no education, nothing. You said we would be able to help our children get health.'

'Now we see nothing.'

**Awoke:** 'The people who decide these things are at the regional and federal level.'

*[His shoulders slumped, he was defeated. We were all defeated –for the moment.]*

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I felt my responsibility for being one of the naïve representatives of a dirty little process of divide and rule, of bureaucratic ineptitude, or whatever combination it was. The elders seemed to see it as important. As far as I was concerned, their level of emotion, and their willingness to be in town that night when they could have been at home in the smoky warmth of their homesteads, attested to that. I had been asking for many years why it is that officials, aid workers and community leaders find it so hard to come to true understandings with one another. The elders' questions of that night, while addressed primarily to Awoke, the government representative, were also addressed to me.

Although it may seem normal to be promised something by government and then for that promise not to materialise, for the community leaders who were speaking it was yet another betrayal. Lopiding and Lotikori, old leaders respected in their communities, had made promises to their people on the basis of the promise given to them. They were saying that they would be accused of having taken a bribe to look the other way when the decision for investment of a large amount of money into their areas was changed in favour of another, neighbouring community, with which their own were in active conflict. During the conversation I had a strong feeling that I needed to understand why I had ended up playing a part in so uncomfortable a situation. I was feeling guilty – for it had been me who had facilitated the meetings at Addis and Turmi at which these promises had been made. I had made it look like I was guaranteeing the promises, and in a way, I was.

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So we facilitate lies. Three months before this conversation, we were together at Turmi, and one of these old leaders had fixed his eyes to mine and spoken to me of truth and lies, at length. It was the end of the three-day meeting that I was facilitating, under a beautiful shade tree next to the river bed, with 30 elders of three tribes and district and zonal officials, to begin to design together how this World Bank project would work and be held to account. What account? At the end – Aiyke, with his fellow elders behind him sitting on their wooden stools in a half moon, stood and spoke to me about truth and lies and all was quiet. He explained that lies are not just deliberate deceits or cruelties, they are also failures to recognise and admit what is obvious, they are times of too much optimism, when we make promises we can't keep. We do this because we care more for ourselves than for others. He explained that truth is simply being plain about who we are, what we know and what we can and cannot do or be sure of. I sat gazing up at him; I could feel the awkward stretch of my neck. I needed to keep on looking into those very old eyes. Behind me were my people, the foreigners. To one side were the government workers, some of whom were children of those tribes, now suspended half way between the

bureaucracy and their ancient culture. Behind him were the elders, who repeated the last words of each of his sentences in a rhythmical rumble. The tree arched over and the sun was setting. When he had finished I said, 'Yes, I hear you. I will keep my promises.' His word had gone right into my heart and lodged there. The elders blessed us. They blessed their land, their animals and their children. They called for rain and peace.

And here I was three months later coming back to tell them that their forebodings were right. It had indeed been a lie. I thought my work was about facilitating truth and I found I was facilitating lies. For the first time I think I realised that I was lying too, just by taking part and being hopeful. I at last saw that truth was not a statement of objective reality, but an ability to speak clearly on what is and what is not present. I saw lies in a new way too, a tendency to project a spurious certainty into an unknowable future. I suddenly wanted to find a way not to lie, I wanted to question and find clarity. I guess it occurred to me then that there were only so many times when someone would look you in the eye and tell you something really useful. And there were only so many times when you had a chance to put things right. It underlined that my whole working life had been about these kinds of false promises and I was still getting it wrong. I had not expected to continue to get it wrong even after 20 years. I decided that if I didn't act now I would never get it right and all my great ambitions would be just empty dreams. So it was serious that I wised up.

### **Letting something be said to me**

As I noted in chapter 4, Heidegger gives prominence to the ontological significance of '*care*', which arises out of the fundamental state of existence that is *Being-with*. As forms of care, Heidegger draws a distinction between the '*concern*' I have for things, and the '*solicitude*' I have for others (BT 157). Because I know that others are as much conscious of being with me as I am with them, I do not know them as things that are available to me (or '*ready-to-hand*' in Heidegger's parlance), but as other beings that I care about. He points out that solicitude has many modes: '*being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not "mattering" to one another – these are possible ways of solicitude. And it is precisely these last-named deficient and indifferent modes that characterize everyday, average being-with-one-another*' (BT 158). My presence at those meetings in Addis Ababa and Turmi with the South Omo elders was an outcome of my solicitude. The elders mattered to me because I was trying to work on a way for our worlds to live better together. But then again, they did not matter to me, because the demands of my industry, the World Bank and the Government of Ethiopia mattered to me more (I

felt overcome by their powers to decide things). And then again, when they spoke simply and wisely, the elders mattered to me tremendously and solicitude slipped into a fully active mode. It was solicitude between the elders and me, each for the other and each for ourselves.

*'The 'Thou','* says Gadamer, *'is not something about which one speaks, but is that to which one speaks'* (TM 536). He outlines three kinds of experience of the 'Thou,' starting with its most deficient, where the person tries to *'discover typical behaviour in his fellow men'* and thus comes to know and predict *'human nature'* (TM 358, Warnke 2002:90-93). This way of being with others is arguably the way I was in previous stories. I often objectified other people for being the objects of my industry's efforts – not people, but materials to be made into something. Then, in this story, one of them made himself very clear to me. He was perhaps forgetting himself and the history of our hopeless interrelations, or perhaps he saw that I might actually learn to cross the chasm between us.

The second kind experience of the Thou is an appropriating one. I acknowledge the Thou as a person who has relevance to me, but whom I already think I understand. I claim to know him or her better than he or she knows him or herself. In this and previous stories I demonstrate repeatedly that a habit of thinking that I already know the person, having categorized him or her as poor or different, as an official or a traditional leader, as a woman or a man, is a habitual mode which functions to *'keep the other person's claim at a distance'* (TM 360). When I was in this mode, I reflected myself out of the relationship with the other and I destroyed any moral bond that we could ever have had, whatever I might have been imagining about my moral purposes. In neither the first nor the second mode did I or they understand anything new from one another.

Of the third kind of experience, Gadamer says:

*'in human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine*

*human bond. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person “understands” the other. Similarly, “to hear and obey someone” does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires. We call such a person slavish. Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one forces me to do so’*

(TM 361).

To give the Thou full recognition would then involve appropriation of what is alien about them into my own horizon while maintaining recognition of their distinctness (TM 252). Under that tree, I did just that. A wise and tricky old man gave me some advice, and I heard it. It is, for me, one of Gadamer’s crucial and most simple insights, that for understanding to be at its least deficient, I must be prepared for the other to tell me something (TM xxxv).

## **Advice**

It occurred to me that in all the time up to then there had not been much in the way of good advice that I had noticed. Apposite advice turns out to be an important element in understanding, not just for its content, but for how it illuminates the reliance of understanding on the ‘I-Thou’ relationship. Whether it arises from the communication of a conscious being or the simple but absolute disclosure of a thing that is ready-to-hand, understanding depends on relationship. The quality and nature of what is understood depends on the quality and nature of the relationship and its potential for opening me to disclosure.

If advice comes from a quarter that, for whatever reason, I deem worthy of respect, it offers me precious openings towards understanding what is being said to me. The broader is my sense of respect, the wider will be the scope of advice that I can hear. In some cultures, this extends to respect for the non-human world, which then gives all sorts of good advice (Abram 1996; Cheney and Weston 1999). Advice poses a question that I can hear and I make a genuine attempt to answer truthfully. If I do not behave in such a way as to attract it, no advice comes my way. It arises from circumstances in which both the advisor and the advised are attending to each other as a Thou. At Turmi it happened to be my opinion that

this old man and all his fellows had full authority to address me as they did at that moment. As I saw it, they were venerable sages, trained for many years in the arts of clarity, effective argument and leadership. They came from a tradition that emphasized dialogue and clarity. I stopped wandering about in a fog of wishes and arrogant generalizations and, for a moment, engaged in a real exchange that had the intent of creating understanding. My respect for those people increased and the likelihood that I would be able to hear them again likewise increased.

I was used to pastoralist leaders sighing and turning away when they heard unthinking promises. That this time they were willing to be so forceful marked a change in my (our group's) relations with people who had been so distant from us. We came a little closer together. I think that the elders recognised our efforts to work on a way to hear what people were really saying as a move of respect. It made it possible for the elders to address us and potentially fruitful for them to do so. There was a mutual step forward into an engagement. This was not, I hasten to add, an engagement of perfect friendship and trust. It was one of being willing to be a little firm and straight with one another. Whether we used this new kind of engagement to be helpful to one another, to let each other down or to engage in a fight remained an open question. How each of us used the new directness would determine whether and how it continued. Whatever came next, however, it was for the moment a respectful engagement.

## Expectation

Just as the hermeneutic circle requires the parts and whole to add up and is provoked by contradiction, so is understanding provoked by thwarted expectation. It is when expectation is challenged, notes Gadamer, that I truly experience something (TM 353). Experience is the surprise of something different than before, something more fitting. Having an experience at its most phenomenal is when a person is open to what is disclosed and how it is fitting into her own horizon. People say, 'in my experience...' and mean 'as I have come to understand it...', and if a person is truly experienced, they are most likely to know not only what they have come to understand, but also that they do not know what is coming.

I did not *expect* to be held responsible for the promises of the World Bank staff, with whom I felt connected but not a part, but when I thought about it, I could recognize my responsibility. I did not expect that the pastoralists would address me so directly. I thought of myself as a neutral intermediary. But at that hour under that tree, I heard what the old man was saying to me. Just before he had said it, as the sun was slanting through the lowest boughs, someone had pointed out to me that pastoralists do not continue with their deliberations when the sun has gone down. Sunset, said my advisor, is a tangible moment when we must take things seriously and conclude. It made sense to me. The elders and I gathered the meeting to its close. We sat more closely in a tight circle and concentrated. The elders became a potent group and spoke their last words of the day, of the whole event, through the old man. This appreciation of the import of the moment of closing, which was something of their own experience being brought forward by all of them together, gave the moment and its words a particular force. I was addressed pointedly and I listened seriously to what they were saying. They spoke with an intensity of emotion and clarity that expressed their expectation that what they were saying would be understood and their advice would be taken.

I did not think twice about agreeing. I brought the notion of the easy promise from my years of experience with aid. I would make plans that were paper simplifications of reality and disingenuously claim that they were practical and good. I pretended that they would achieve ideals what we all should have known were impossible.

The whole experience encompassed the scene three months later, when we sat around a table at the little hotel with its mosquitoes and sadness. I was not going to be able to ignore the consequences. I sat there with the angry elders and the wilted administrator, listening to that bitter conversation and felt guilty and powerless. The expectation that empty promises did not matter suddenly look very doubtful. However much I blamed the structures of aid and patronage for the betrayal, I could see my own part. I could make the distinction now between what was mine to promise and what was not. The fruitlessness of broken

promises and questionable plans became clear then and a much fuller meaning of what Aiyke had been saying three months before came home to me.

These elders suggested to me in their conduct that truth is a comportment of being towards other beings, of each person towards each other person, rather than objectively acquired universal fact. I am not suggesting that all optimisms are untruths, but rather that in those circumstances optimisms were indeed lies. Hope is not often a lie, but it can become one in certain conditions, such as when a person like me turns from hope to optimism, from optimism to empty promises and from empty promises to broken ones. The important thing here is that taking up a stance towards *being clear together* was more important even than the million dollar World Bank project and all its possibilities. This was the advice that they were giving.

## Experience

Georg Simmel said that experience is an adventure. We venture out. It is exciting and uncertain and we return to the everyday enriched and more mature (TM 69). Experience, Gadamer says, is a negatively productive process. When we really experience something in the true sense of the word, we refute previously held false generalizations and we acquire knowledge that is valid, and often repeated, until we have a new experience (TM 353). When we experience, the false generalization of the “typical” comes into the foreground to be refuted, whereas up to that point it has been invisible. The new experience has now become a new horizon for the one who experiences, who now ‘*recognizes*’ herself in what is ‘*alien and different*’ (TM 355). In my case, I had not appreciated the potential import of a false promise up to that point. To me it was just another day in the regular round of promises that made up the world of aid and government. My lack of appreciation was helped, of course, by the fact that this particular aid and government was neither aiding nor governing me. False promises seemed like nothing because in my previous experience I had never seen the intensity and scope of the insult and danger that they brought with them. But on the matter of insult I had plenty of opinions, so when I saw insult I was able to understand afresh.

Now that I had a new experience of how much the promises of my industry mattered to these people, I might be able to predict their reactions to future events to which they were called by aid agency and government officials. I would read the expressions on their faces and their careful words in a new way. And I would also rewrite my own history, remembering all those instances in which hope, hardness and resignation were written on faces that I had faced. I wanted then to avoid making false promises or imagining that I could be more knowing or more powerful than the processes by which human historicity played itself out. The way the World Bank, the Government of Ethiopia or any other institution emitted decisions meant that there was a game to be played which required clarity, not credulity. It would be better for understanding, I realized, to try to make only the kind of promises that were an accurate expression of my own understanding and nothing more. What kind of promises would they be? They would involve no lies, no generalizations and no appropriations of the future behaviour of others. Where someone else's assertion or interpretation was involved, what I hoped I would remember to say was '*I heard him or her say this or that*', rather than '*I believe this or that to be the case*'.

Experience lays the foundations for its own renewal, as we notice how it constantly arises and overturns what we thought we knew and the plans we had made. Experience, says Gadamer, drawing on Aeschylus, gives a fundamental insight into the finitude of being human. We really do realise that we are '*master neither of time nor the future*'. We accept that '*all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain*' and '*dogmatism reaches an absolute barrier*' (TM 357). Contrary to the expectations of my culture, that everything could be planned and understood in advance of its happening, experience tells me differently. The truly experienced person, says Gadamer, is someone who is '*radically undogmatic, who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its own fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself*' (TM 355).

## **Understanding together**

Just as with any other thing that is understood, my appreciation of understanding evolved as the prejudices I held about it were brought into the foreground in the course of experience. From an expectation that I would gain understanding only by inquiring from an objective distance, I experienced directly that understandings arise in eye-to-eye interaction with the Thou and the Other. In the listening and speaking with the Thou, what I understood was not the other person, an elusive goal that I had long thought was a necessary end of understanding, but something true that they were saying to me. Or as Gadamer puts it, *'what is so understood is not the Thou but the truth of what the Thou says to us. I mean specifically the truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it. It is the same with historical tradition. It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves'* (TM xxxv).

In this story of truth and lies, I found the central importance of the Thou to understanding, and I also noted how experience emerges in communication with the Thou. When I acknowledge another person and am acknowledged, I appreciate something new and as such I gain experience which I could not have gained alone. The finitude of historicity and its different expression in each of us shows its productive nature. I glimpse an insight into our basic state of Being together, which is, as Heidegger puts it, *'already essentially manifest in a co-state-of-mind and a co-understanding'* (BT 205).

## ***The Beast of Bureaucracy – a risky and collaborative enterprise***

In another version of my coming to understanding with others, which developed at the same time as I began to see what Thou can mean, I now tell a story from another part of the world of development in which collaboration makes for understanding from unexpected places. In 2002 and 2003 I was working with a

colleague from the Institute of Development Studies to try to understand and be helpful to colleagues in a large bilateral government aid agency in Sweden.

In the same year as I was making promises in Ethiopia, I was also involved in an inquiry with a group of eight people in the Swedish International Development Agency, Sida, in Stockholm. It was called *Lagom*. We were investigating together what it meant to foster an ideal of participation in the work of the agency. At the end we wrote a small book about it, calling the office Valhalla and the city Nordstad.

It started at a short training course we held at IDS for staff of Sida, on the subject of people's participation in development. At the end Katja Jassey of Sida, Andrea Cornwall of IDS and I gave an open invitation to anyone who wished to join us in forming a co-operative inquiry group to look at participation and Sida. Eight people from different parts of the organisation signed up. They expected that Andrea and I knew what we were doing, because we had researched participation in development. We believed that the approach should not be the same as previous approaches, because it should arise with its circumstances and the unique questions it sought to answer. We had very little experience of inquiry groups, except for the one we were running inside our own team at IDS.

Andrea at IDS and Katja at Sida were the ringleaders, with Seema Aurora Johnson from Uppsala University and I giving insights and helping with recording and facilitating. We met once every couple of months for a day and explored ideas about what participation was and about what Sida was and how and where the two fitted together. Hermod one day accused Andrea, Katja and I of using them as guinea pigs in an experiment. I protested, I said we were all being guinea pigs together, but I worried that he was right. We wanted to understand participation and aid bureaucracies and we might well have been using them to do it. Except that we believed that they wanted to understand it too.

They named the group *Lagom*, which in Swedish means 'not too much, not too little, just right'. Or at least Vidar named it, in the pub after our first session in Stockholm and the name stuck. That was how things generally happened in that group, someone had an idea and everyone followed it. It wasn't always the same person. It was a delightful group of people. We laughed a lot, and questioned each other. Each one was serious yet in some way light, worried yet in some way relaxed. As Hildr put it, the group was made up of 'firesouls' which is a direct translation from Swedish and speaks for itself. I think too, when I look back and ask myself what the group of otherwise quite different characters created, I see people speaking so fluidly with one another and I remember that there was an openness that I hadn't come across in our work before. Free questioning, I realised, was normal neither my world nor theirs. In more formal settings our public questions would always be careful ones. We could not afford not to have a ready-made answer already available. Our private questions were a confusion of intimations that things were not entirely adding up.

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Helped by a curator, we put together an installation in the basement of the block Sida occupied in downtown Stockholm. We opened the doors to the organisation's juniors and seniors. Katja, Seema, Andrea and I wrote this:

*'The group was woven together with a disparate collection of wants and worries: of spending too much time talking, of spending too little time thinking, of having a structure, of not having any structure, of being forced to swim, of simply treading water and of drowning in the depths. It became clear that it was going to be impossible to please everybody. Hermod put his finger on it, wryly observing that all the doers will think they have no time, and the thinkers will make it more complicated... And so it was.'*

*'The elevator vestibules of Valhalla were covered by posters with photos of well-known Valhalla characters from the 1970s entitled 'in the head of a Valhalla-ite'. These unconventional invitations were to entice as many staff as possible to come to the basement late on a Thursday afternoon. The posters made a promise of drinks, but the rest was left up to the imagination of the reader. And people came. One after another, they found their way down to the big Valhalla exercise room way below the streets of busy central Nordstad. Within a very short time, over a hundred people – managers, support staff and desk officers from all age groups – had gathered to find out what on earth these posters were all about.'*

*'They found a sparsely lit room. The huge mirror covering one of the walls was decorated with Christmas lights. On it were charts of how much Valhalla had spent on development since its inception in the 1960s, how many people Valhalla had employed in the field throughout this time and what had been said about participation. A Lagomite asked people to write their own memories of significant events at any point in time on post-its and add them to the wall. In another corner, a video was running with images of people at Valhalla stating the words that they associated with participation – 'grassroots', 'something good', 'democracy', 'an impossible mission'. On a washing line, photos of a Valhalla officer taken every day at the same time were hung next to the billboards from that day of the biggest Nordian daily newspaper. The officer was usually next to his computer, while the billboards shouted out the daily angst of the world. A fridge in the corner was covered with 'fridge poetry', using the vocabulary of bureaucratic life: one of our team encouraged the visitors to create 'Valhalla poetry'.'*

*'Valhalla and Nordia are characterised by utredningar ('inquiries') and seriousness when it comes to presenting results and problems. Yet those supposedly serious bureaucrats participated wholeheartedly in the creation of poetry and a common history with a glass of wine in one hand (paid for by the foreigners in the group as the Nordian State does not allow such expenses) and a pink post-it in the other. Valhalla is a place known for its problem-solving, not for its fun or questioning. It is inhabited by people on a passionate quest for a just world.'*

*'As we sat analysing what people had said and how they had reacted, sharing stories of how a senior official had arrived – furious at the apparent flippancy, only*

*to become totally engaged in telling her own story of change in Valhalla – and as we exchanged snatches of conversation we'd overheard, we felt a strange mixture of thrill at our own brilliance and daring and fear that we really had gone too far and been too obscure. Had we lost those we'd tried to reach in the process? We had held an Event, a Happening, with the kind of lighting and lingering questions you might find in the Modern Museum of Art, but was it the right thing for Lagom to do and was it the right thing to do at Valhalla?*

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*'A year later, at the close of our work together, we decided we needed to make some kind of report, so we had a meeting to decide what it should contain. The document that emerged looked and read like any other document that Valhalla might produce. It was clearly written, comprehensive, and informative. It couldn't be faulted for what it said. But it wasn't Lagom. And some of those from Valhalla strongly felt that it didn't represent the real spirit of Lagom. We'd wanted to express ourselves, but we'd become a secret that couldn't be told to the outside world. Something of our intentions needed to be communicated beyond the group, but how to do so was difficult to imagine, and we became anxious once more. Then Freja had an idea, recruited others to help and produced a document that was unlike anything that had ever before been written by or for Valhalla.*

*'Freja realised that if Lagom were to produce a written document, it had to have that extraordinary factor that worked like speech worked on people. This kind of document would make a difference precisely because, unlike the documents that ended their lives within those immaculate cloth-bound official covers lining Valhalla's shelves, this one would be read and talked about. It would be different. It would make an impact; it would be daring, funny, brilliant. It would be Lagom. The new document, 'Voices of the Bureaucrats – Crying out for Help' featured a diary of a desk officer, inundated with emails and meetings and grappling in the midst of it all to have any space to think or do anything differently. It captured the urgency of action, the sense of purpose and the frustration – anger, even – that many of the group members felt in relation to the grindingly mundane bureaucratic process. It did so in prose packed with verve and allusion. It was a totally different document and those who liked it loved it; others hated it. It was a dangerously different piece of writing, something that implied taking a real risk: stunning if it came off, perhaps worse than embarrassing if it didn't.*

*'This evocative account of donors' everyday lives – the perks, as well as the hardships – was, some felt, too close to the bone. It would upset people. It would annoy people. It would put people off. For some of the group, the 'Voices of the Bureaucrats' document was delicious because it was so different; for others, it compounded the kind of risks the group had taken with the Event. As agreement on the final version began to coalesce, Lofn took a position of steely nerve and spoke out to stop its publication.*

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*'What makes the "passionate bureaucrat" tick is a sense of connectedness with action, with seeing things done. This was the impatience manifest in Vidar's*

*restless energy, in Hildr's indignation, in Lofn's careful strategy, in Heimdall's quiet passion, in Hermod's desire for things to be done properly and in Freja's fiery frustration with business as usual. At first those who lived their daily working lives in Valhalla didn't admit that they needed time to think, time to play even. This didn't fit with the image of what a responsible – let alone a passionate – bureaucrat is supposed to do with their time. But being Lagom and tangling with the Beast of Bureaucracy created the space to think and to play; and how good it felt to have, in the midst of the routines of a daily life full of emails, meetings and documents, that time to stand back, to laugh, to muse, to give voice to feelings and half formed ideas, to learn. Words like fun, pleasure, laughter are not generally part of the vocabulary of writings on institutionalizing participation. It is almost as if no-one would dare suggest that so serious a matter as participation could actually be tackled through people's everyday lives because it is important and enjoyable, not simply because it is a duty. The image of the faceless bureaucrat of the public sector organisation is at odds with the diverse personalities and passions of the people who work within them.*

*'For all our hopes and aspirations, Lagom was never able to really be red [formal] enough to succeed in its struggle with the Beast of Bureaucracy and achieve what many of us had hoped for: to bring about significant changes in the organisation. But that was Lagom's strength as well. Lagom allowed the space to be uncertain, questioning, indecisive, undecided, and the time to mull over an argument or to reflect on a question that had been needling. As Vidar explained, "I spend all my working life trying to be so damn effective. It's such a relief not having to do that, I can even be creative." Lagom became a place in which a group of very different people from different corners of the organisation could find kindred spirits and bring meaning to their work. They could strengthen their resolve to persist with small acts that might, over time, make a difference – and find a space for taking pleasure in everyday working lives that can all too often be such a source of stress and frustration. The Beast of Bureaucracy remains untamed, but the spirit of Lagom remains undimmed – and for those who were part of it, bureaucratic 'business as usual' will never be quite the same again (Cornwall, Jassey et al. 2007).*

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We were embarrassed and intrigued. We were experimental, not in a scientific sense, that's why we were so worried, but in a creative-artistic sense in a place where art just wasn't. There was rebellion, no longer putting up with being an ordinary hardworking part of a structure of vagueness. There was bravery. There was edgy moral knowledge. We were pushing at an invisible boundary and seeing what would happen. We did it together because we could not have done it alone. Our questions about how an organisation could do good and how we could do good within it were in effect versions of a single question we all raised at once. Why do our bureaucracies stifle us and what we do to shine nonetheless? They started as 'what can we do?' questions, but they turned into a magnificent exploration of 'what is happening?' that we could only do because we did it

together. It gave us a quite unexpectedly strong sense of experience and co-operation, feeling it and doing it together, rather than dreaming about it.

The beast of  
bureaucracy



## Risk

We did not come to understand of participation as a disembodied practice offered to others; we understood that what we were really exploring together was ourselves and the place we were in, (which, if you think about it, is true participation). We felt and gained clarity on the frustrations, achievements and hopes of being actors in development institutions. As we untangled the bureaucracy in which we were embedded in our various ways, we unpicked, with the help of insights that each of us gave from our different perspectives, the formal and informal possibilities of our positions, a kind of second-person action research (Reason and Torbert 2001; Coghlan and Brannick 2005:110).

When we began to plan the final document and could not agree on what to write, we realized how helpful we had found the privacy and trust of our meetings. They had allowed us to be free and distinctive questioners in a world in which questions had lost their character of openness and surprise. Our questions started as uniform affirmations of a way of doing things deemed correct by general consensus, and they lacked innovation and possibility. But inside the safety of our days together we achieved a degree of liberation from the confinement of leading questions (such as, 'how do I do participation?') and began to ask other questions out loud like, 'what on earth am I doing every day?' Speaking them aloud gave to each of us the opportunity to hone the real questions that each wanted to pose about what we were all doing. Although it was not at all easy to see our way, we did begin to untangle the hitherto hidden confusions of our positions and unresolved experiences. It is not surprising that at the end we could not write a

report about our collaboration. We had stipulated a formal inquiry into participation and had achieved an inquiry into being ‘passionate bureaucrats’, as Andrea put it.

Andrea and I had imagined that people needed ‘a safe haven’ because of fear of embarrassment and loss of respect if they were to put their apparently foolish questions at risk in open debate. We saw protection as a necessary response to the power of authority to inhibit the imagination. In practice, we found the concept of risk was more complex. We found, for example, that *Lagom* was an arena of potential built not only on safety but on collaboration. Consideration for one another in a situation of risk made it possible to find and pursue the questions that occupied the open edges of each of our horizons. Anxious as we were, I believe we felt the kind of authenticity that Heidegger speaks of as ‘*freedom to be*’ (BT 232), meaning, I suggest, that we accepted ourselves as real, risk-taking and extraordinary and in so doing we lived a little more intensely.

I felt that we were communally responsible for the risks we were taking. As we put ourselves repeatedly at risk by asking questions to one another and to Sida that we had not previously dared to pose for fear of seeming disloyal or illogical, I, for one, came to understand risk as essential to understanding. As I noted above, Gadamer observes that it is when we put our prejudices at risk that they are brought properly into play and made positive. Bravery, in the form of deliberate self-exposure to something risky, makes accessible at last that which was merely potential. It seems it is fundamental to our projecting ourselves into new horizons. We were confined by a measure of carefulness and we were also liberated by a degree of recklessness.

Heidegger suggests to me that ontologically, a feeling of risk is a mode of anxiety that arises from ‘Being-in-the-world’. My anxieties about threats that may lie in wait are a projection into future potential, grounded in my consciousness of being-with. They also draw on my experience of trouble and my historically-affected understanding of what is bad for me; but this is over and above the general state of anxiety that comes from just existing. This understanding of being generates a mood of anxiety about nothing in particular (BT 230-9). Care is not,

Heidegger points out, concerns and solicitudes about the Self, rather it is more generalized care about the whole. Care is a way of characterizing understanding, and taking risks is elemental to its projecting itself into the world. At the same time from the basis of care comes my tendency to become immersed in what is normal, familiar, acceptable, and safe. Thus do I, says Heidegger, restrict my options and reduce my possibilities (BT 239). Collaboration expands potential once again by drawing me back toward the risks that open me to new possibilities.

## Comedy

*Lagom* sometimes had the quality of a play – we transformed the scenery, conducted fugues of conversation and played King Lear and his fool. Gadamer observes:

*'The transformation [of a play] is transformation into the true. It is not enchantment in the sense of a bewitchment that waits for the redeeming word that will transform things back to what they were; rather, it is itself redemption and transformation back into true being. In being present in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn. Someone who can perceive the comedy and tragedy of life can resist the temptation to think in terms of purposes, which conceals the game that is played with us'* (TM 112).

So did we touch on and accept the absurdity of the very concept of a public sector organization providing aid for millions of people in what it called 'developing countries' and then inviting those people to participate and us to organize it all. We enumerated the failures of aid and looked for ways out. Gadamer, when he is talking about the participation of the spectator in a tragedy, suggests that something essential speaks to us out of the sadness, impossibility, intractability and black humour and we recognize it as truth. It is a communion.

*'The spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present. The real emphasis of the*

*tragic phenomenon lies ultimately on what is presented and recognized, and to participate in it is not a matter of choice (TM 132).*

We found aid's redeeming moments. We understood the historic finitude of *Sida* and its potential for a great variety of expression and engagement. *Lagom* broke us out of our everydayness for a short while each time we met, discomfiting us with its absurd challenges, and keeping us endlessly amused with anecdotes and mischief. We pilloried our own efforts to do good and searched for other ways of doing things, and then collapsed into laughter and affection. It liberated, I think, what Gadamer calls '*the free sweep of invention and the originality that creates new models...*' (TM 53). It also clarified another side to understanding, which is that which arises when we are together with friends.

## **Coming to understandings**

At the beginning of this chapter I noted that seeing understanding as a problem was not enough to encompass all that it is. In the exploration of the two stories above, I have considered some of understanding's real-life happenings in engagements between people, and I have touched on the fundamental essence of understanding and even misunderstanding as being and being-in-conversation-with-others. I have left behind the notion of the problem and made understanding more concrete and alive.

Misunderstanding, rather than being a problem, or a mistake, turns out on closer inspection to be just a version of understanding with others. For Gadamer, the difference between understanding and misunderstanding is more a matter of the degree to which our prejudices find '*full play*' in any particular circumstance, because it is this degree of play that makes prejudice '*able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself*' (TM xxx). The 'mis' in misunderstanding is its lack of play; it misses opportunities to project into possibilities.

As I noted above, the I-Thou relationship has different modes, each producing a different understanding. In the open modes, conversations are not dominated by

one party, but are characterised by being interested in what the other has to say.

*'Listening to one another and addressing one another are essential aspects of a conversation. These provide an openness that simultaneously renders a conversation both unpredictable and fruitful'* (Figal 2002:106-108). The thread that binds the participants together is the thing that is being talked about, and the participants allow the thing free play to disclose itself. They offer contradiction, interruption and disagreement as well as confirmation (Marshall 2004). It is '*the coming into language*' of meanings (TM 474). When they are open to it, the participants do not hinder the conversation, but let it happen. Sometimes it is surprise, shock or thwarted expectation that generates this mode of being, sometimes it is respect and trust that opens us to advice and sometimes it is the shared experience of risk and absurdity.

If I accept Gadamer's argument that understanding arises as language, handed to me by tradition and all those who have made it by speaking it, then there is no understanding that is not a conversation of some sort. Even if the Thou is speaking to me from my own memory, or from a historical text, a work of art, or a brick – it is still an I-Thou relationship because it is framed in language. The I-Thou relationship is at the centre of all events of understanding. With this new insight I move on to examine the suggestion that understanding is the conversation with others that makes up our lives.

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