

CONVERSATION ON RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

A talk with Rama Mani

*Albert Dzur**

Dr. Rama Mani is a peace builder, poet and performance artist. She received the Excellence in Leadership Award of the Global Thinkers Forum in 2016 and the Peter Becker Peace Prize in 2013. Her Theatre of Transformation methodology is based on 25 years of experience of policy and grass-roots work in peace building and justice. Dr. Mani's transformative performances, seminars and teaching raise funds for peace and solidarity missions in countries in conflict and for innovative humanitarian projects. She is the convener of the Enacting Global Transformation Collaborative Initiative at the University of Oxford's Centre for International Studies, which seeks to redefine paradigms of power and shape creative and humane responses to current global crises, as well as the founder of Theatre of Transformation Academy. Her books include *Beyond retribution: seeking justice in the shadows of war* (Mani, 2002/2007) and the co-edited *Responsibility to protect: cultural perspectives from the global South* (Mani & Weiss, 2011).

1. Early experiences with injustice and the gap between the possible and the actual

Dzur: What led to your interest in issues of justice? Can you think back to an early period when you thought, 'That's for me' or 'These people, these activists, are really interesting to me'?

Mani: In my case, there is absolutely no doubt that 'justice' was a word writ large in my brain, my heart, my sinews, so to speak, because I grew up in India. There were many issues that could activate one, but from my earliest childhood, I was on the bandwagon of justice. I was appalled beyond belief at the systemic injustice of the religious system, of the caste system. I belonged to the Brahmin caste, which is the religious, educated caste that controlled people and systems, so I felt a great sense of accountability and responsibility. How can such a system be allowed? How could it have been perpetrated for so long? How can it continue? But I was also aware of the injustice of the political system, and of course, the injustice against women. I think I was equally activated by all three.

I can't think if there was a specific incident, but maybe what made it personal to me was my caste. What the Brahmins did was very clever. Very often, Brahmins were of very modest or humble origins, but they were the only ones who had

* Albert Dzur is Distinguished Research Professor, Departments of Political Science and Philosophy, Bowling Green State University, USA.
Contact author: awdzur@bgsu.edu.

education, and education is power. And they are the only ones who have access to the religious texts, which say what you can and cannot do.

My grandparents, especially my maternal grandparents, who I love dearly, had such huge humanity and compassion and I found that incompatible with their practise of the caste system. Just having argument after argument with my grandparents, saying, 'How can you treat the woman who comes to clean up our toilet and make our lives better as if she were a demon or a cockroach?' I think my sense of justice probably came from that kind of experience – my whole body would be shaking with disbelief.

It was systemic, but it was also individual. Equally, how do we create political, economic and social systems that are so dehumanising? And, how are we humans capable of treating each other that way? It was very personal: how could my grandparents who have such great compassion, humanity and dignity treat others that way just because of their caste?

Dzur: It was a feeling of a contrast or a conflict for you as a child. I'm curious, though, because many Brahmins don't have the attitude that you had.

Mani: Even in my family. My brother – a man from my own generation and background – when he was growing up thought, 'I'm a Brahmin, so of course I'm a superior being!' He used to think of others as being inferior. Thankfully, that has changed recently: with the alarming rise of Hindu nationalism, he has begun to defend Muslims and oppose communalism vehemently.

I think what compelled me most was this: the gap between what I knew was possible in terms of humanity and human beings' behaviour towards others and what they did to each other; that *décalage*, that disjuncture between what institutions could be if they were designed for the human good, and what they actually were. There was always the sense that we are capable of more in terms of individual human behaviour and in terms of the systems that we create in order to have a just society. And there *had* to be change on both levels.

2. Spirituality and justice

Dzur: It is interesting that you mention growing up in a household that was committed to this high degree of knowledge and spirituality. And this is part of your own approach to justice.

Mani: Ta dah! I've never thought about that until this moment, believe it or not!

Dzur: I am curious about that inclusion of the dimension of spirituality along with the other aspects of justice in your theoretical model of transformative justice and wonder how that might connect to restorative justice.

Mani: Because I was so virulently opposed to the injustice of religion early on, my relationship with religion was very antipathetic. And yet, definitely, there was a spiritual element in me. It is interesting because the very thing that brought me to a sense of personal spirituality was the thing that took me away from it. The

Albert Dzur

year before I was leaving India to come with a scholarship to the United States to study, I realised it would be very difficult for my mother to manage without me, because we were very close. At the same time, I developed a philosophical interest in a few Indian scriptures and was going to a teacher who was helping me understand them from a philosophical perspective, which was very different from the religious. I should mention that my parents practise the Hindu religion, but they didn't practise the caste system in the way that their parents did; they took a much more liberal approach – a big contrast existed between their attitude and that of their parents. And they were very pro-feminist, especially my father.

I became interested in spirituality because I felt my mother needed some way to cope with me being away and maybe the Hindu concept of *love with detachment*, found in scriptures like the *Bhagawad Gita*, could help her. I tried using all of my teaching of these scriptures to move her beyond the religious interpretation, which she was very keen on, and towards the philosophical or spiritual aspect of detachment in Hinduism so she could cope when I was gone. Actually, when I got to the United States, my academic environment – at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges – was so secular, so much about knowledge devoid of the cultural or the spiritual, that I really felt it was like a divorce. In the United States, I had to give up everything in my spiritual and cultural being – not just my practices, but had to renounce that part of me and with it my artistic and creative self. I felt very dehydrated like that for many years, so when I entered the practice of justice and the study of justice it was as a very dehydrated being.

Spirituality came back just as I was finishing my PhD, even though I was known as someone who was not friendly to it. 'Don't bring a spiritual book anywhere near Rama because she will burn it' was a running joke among everyone who knew me.

Dzur: What was the point at which you felt so dehydrated that you needed to reach out to spirituality to help you through your work on justice? I'm curious about the turning point and the materials you reflected on and made use of once you hit that point.

Mani: It is interesting: I never *turned* to spirituality. It was like spirituality came and hit me on the head. It was the same with art: I wasn't looking for it and it just fell in to me. And with spirituality, literally, until the day it hit me I was bitterly opposed to all things spiritual and not really open to it. And I had a distaste for the American spirituality movement, which I felt was very self-indulgent and an excuse for not working for justice in the world.

It happened in the last year of my PhD. It was February 1999 and I submitted the dissertation at end of August. Our friends at the University of Cambridge, an American-Peruvian couple who were very spiritually oriented, had lent my ex-husband a Buddhist book. 'Oh, of course, be really careful Rama doesn't find it or she'll throw it in the toilet!' And I was feeling despondent – there was nothing wrong with me; I wasn't ill, but I couldn't make it to my office in the department anymore to write. Day after day I would just lie in bed unable to move. Not knowing what to do, I started reading the Buddhist book. And I just wept and I wept

and I wept, because it was like reading my own manifesto: it helped me understand why I picked up the path of justice. I realised what really drove me was compassion, not fury about injustice, and how by divorcing myself from my own source of compassion I had not been able to really see clearly my own passion and mission in life.

This self-discovery didn't impact my thesis directly but it deeply affected me to an extent where I realised, 'Oh my gosh, conflict is a reflection of your own projection, and therefore, injustice and justice as well'. And definitely that was the attitude with which I went, having finished my PhD, into my physical work in restorative justice, starting with my first job based in Ethiopia as a Conflict Advisor for the Horn of Africa for a humanitarian organisation. It was with a deep understanding that what happens out there in the world is a projection of what we are unable to deal with within ourselves. It was very much a psychological approach to spirituality, but it was big, irrefutable.

Dzur: The connection between spirituality and justice has to do with individual motivation and rehydration and opening up your perspective to the kinds of pain and suffering people might be going through. Is that the right interpretation?

Mani: The word that comes to mind is 'accountability'. The way we use the word accountability in transitional justice is, 'You are wrong; you have to pay for the sins that you did', as opposed to a sense of accountability going a bit deeper, saying, 'Oh my gosh, you mean I caused this conflict? And I, in my deeds of omission or commission, caused this injustice?' It is much more about taking responsibility, not just for the perpetrator but even for the victim. 'To the extent that I allowed this to happen to me, to what extent can I become accountable for my rehabilitation, my restoration? Am I allowing myself to remain frozen in the category of victim, because something unjust happened to me? Or am I redefining my own fate by taking accountability and responsibility, even if something completely unjustifiable happened to me as a victim, or if I did something unconscionable as a perpetrator, or failed to do either as a bystander?' That's the first bit.

But the second bit is, I feel, that spirituality has deeply to do with purpose. If I'd read a book that was something about religious rituals, for example, it probably wouldn't have touched me. But the book I read was about the sacred warrior. The Buddhist is presented here as a sacred warrior whose heart is broken. This is the part that touched me – whose heart is so tender that it is broken by all the suffering in the world. But the heart breaking doesn't mean he/she runs away from the pain; that's what gives him/her the desire to want to heal and to end suffering for all beings. The heartbreak reminds us of our purpose in life. So, if I were born with this mission of working for justice, but if I deviated from that mission, it would cause me suffering. It was a way to rediscover our purpose – what is it that makes us tick? It breaks our heart, but it could also heal our heart – our life's purpose that could fill that empty or dehydrated vessel.

Dzur: The way we've been framing it has focused mostly on how an attentiveness to spirituality helps the justice worker as an agent and provides a sense of pur-

Albert Dzur

pose. I wonder, though, if a sense of spirituality helps you interact with others who are going through crises in a different way than a justice worker who doesn't have that background. Does it lead you to have different expectations of victims or perpetrators of violence? Does it attune you to certain things – you are waiting to hear them say certain things and then you follow them down this or that path? I'm curious what it brings to the process that someone without spirituality wouldn't be able to contribute?

Mani: The big shift, when spirituality made a real difference in my approach to justice and my approach to people who are suffering injustice, came later, but definitely what it already did to me in those early years since that realisation – from 1999 to 2012 – was a huge amount of empathy and a deep belief that anyone can be transformed, whether you are a victim or a perpetrator or a bystander who just doesn't give a damn. You can, in fact, both be transformed yourself and be an agent of transformation in your society.

The big change came when I was the head of a local organisation working in a conflict zone in Sri Lanka, and unwittingly, I myself became a victim of the conflict. It was in early 2008, as the conflict was worsening and a year before the brutal 'war victory', and I was targeted by troublemakers and extremists. My life was in danger, and therefore, I had to flee the country with my young son. For two years after our escape I refused to even recognise I was traumatised let alone do anything to deal with the acute post-traumatic stress I experienced. I rationalised: 'Nothing happened to me. It's normal that we, as peace and justice workers, go through some disruption, but it was the many people who tried to save me who really suffered, not me, as they were persecuted for long thereafter for having tried to protect me'.

I had this iron blanket around myself. It was Radhika Coomaraswamy, one of the most eminent people in the human rights area and the person who had recruited me for the job, which had been hers before she left the post to become the UN Under-Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, who confronted me. She said to me, two years after the event in Sri Lanka, 'I myself was traumatised sitting in New York by what happened in Sri Lanka. You act as if everything was hunky dory and Sri Lanka was the best experience in your life. And you laud the people of Sri Lanka for saving your life. But you were targeted! You were traumatised and you need to deal with it'.

That sent me into a spiral between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2012, and into actually a recognition: 'Oh my gosh, I had gone as an agent of justice and then I became a victim of injustice and I refused to acknowledge it.' That led to a deep realisation of how much we – as justice and peace workers, as human rights workers – get traumatised ourselves without recognising it. All we do is add layers of iron or ice to protect ourselves from it, but in the process become more and more dysfunctional and truly unable to fulfil our purpose in the way we had originally intended and what had drawn us to this work. The situation doesn't really change but we may be doing ourselves great harm. I see this writ large across the UN and the humanitarian system today as well as specifically in peace and justice work.

3. Towards transformative justice

Dzur: So, the Sri Lankan experience catalysed a shift in thinking for you.

Mani: The other interesting trigger factor was actually the wake-up call coming from – unbeknownst to him – Stephan Parmentier, who had invited me to deliver the keynote address on transitional justice at the Global Symposium on Victimology. I kept refusing and kept making excuses, and he'd say, 'Oh that's not a problem. We can manage that'. And I ran out of excuses and so I had to interrogate myself: 'Why am I making such a fuss to go to a conference for someone I really admire and respect and like?' And I realised it was the word 'victimology'.

The combination of those two factors is what led to the approach I now call 'transformative justice'. My attitude towards people who had undergone injustice really changed on a quantum level when I was willing to acknowledge my own victimisation and my refusal to stay in that category and to work towards transforming that in myself, however painful that was. That is when I moved from just believing on an ethical level to experiencing that anyone can be transformed: victim, perpetrator or bystander. That is how the penny dropped. As I prepared the keynote address, I asked myself, 'What would make the difference between regular transitional justice and justice that is actually transformative – for society as a whole as well as for all individuals in the society?' And that's where all these dimensions (of social, cultural, ecological and spiritual justice) came in to formulate an integral or holistic approach to transformative justice.

Dzur: Are there texts or people you turn to when things are dark and unpleasant?

Mani: Growing up, definitely Gandhi was a huge influence. I would often think of the moment he got thrown out of the first-class train compartment in South Africa. What is the turning point in people's lives that changes the sequence of events? He could have just gone on being a rather Anglicised lawyer. That's exactly what I talk about when I teach the Theatre of Transformation methodology – that there's a wake-up call, a turning point moment. And that's when nothing has changed in your environment – there's the same injustice, the same bombs are falling at the same rate, the same rapes are going on, but it's as if your eyes witness reality in a new way. And you step from being a victim or a bystander to becoming an activated witness. That's when everything starts changing.

I realise when I think about Gandhi's influence, it's very often been, 'Oh, when is my moment going to come? When do I get that equivalent of being thrown out and I'm really able to fulfil my purpose to a greater extent?'

Another influence was Vera Schiller de Kohn, a woman who very nearly became a Holocaust victim. Her family was able to escape Prague in late 1939; they managed to hide the first few months after Hitler had invaded the city and then they fled to Ecuador. She became a frozen victim. She was pretending that life was fine. She was even acting in theatre and doing all the things that she should do, but inside, she was dead. I could totally relate because that's exactly what happened to me when I came out of Sri Lanka. I was hyperactive, pretending everything was fine. I'd just met my husband and we got married in 2010, so

Albert Dzur

everything was superb. But inside, I hadn't addressed the trauma. And it was between the ages 45 and 50, in Vera's case, that she discovered Zen Buddhism and became both a Zen master and a psychologist. And from the age of 50 to the ripe age of 100, she worked very actively as a psychologist with everyone from the president of the country to peasants and villagers.

I didn't meet Vera very often – maybe once every year or two (the last time was at age 98 when she was present as a spiritual guide at our wedding in 2010, just two years before she died) – but she's very much the living inspiration of the transformation that's possible. That is, letting your old self and your suffering die in order for something new to be born. She became timeless and lived in timeless presence. Vera truly taught me: 'Every darkness contains a point of light'. In fact, she inspired not only transformative justice but also the Theatre of Transformation, as hers was one of the early real-life testimonies I enacted in 2014.

Likewise, Viktor Frankl was another huge influence in terms of his belief that those who find meaning – even in the depths of suffering – will survive and those who don't will simply not make it. If we don't answer the Viktor Frankl question, 'What gives me meaning?'; if we don't find a way, both individually and as a society and in the systems that we recreate after injustice and conflict, to find that meaning for us, we are in trouble. For me that's the definition of 'spirituality'. Can one find meaning, not because your priest tells you or god said so but because you find it within yourself, and you can find a way to express it with others? And if we overlook or ignore that dimension, how can there be hope to restore anything either at the individual or the systemic, institutional level?

Dzur: I had the privilege of reading Elie Wiesel's *Night* with my youngest daughter, who is 14. And it was very powerful to read it with her because he was roughly her age when he was forced into the camps. And what was so striking to me was his feeling of shame. He was not thinking that the Nazis should feel ashamed for being brutal; *he* was feeling ashamed for being brutalised. It seemed like such an honest depiction of victimhood and so easy to see how one could be frozen in this kind of limbo.

Mani: That is so touching, Albert, and that reminds me that I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* when I was about your daughter's age and then went through a phase of reading every single book about the Holocaust and about the hope that led to the building of Israel. That was a huge other source that set off my thinking about justice: what was happening in my country, Gandhi, combined with the story of Anne Frank and the world out there.

4. The power of art

Dzur: To get back to your own work, you mentioned the Theatre of Transformation and I want to ask how you combine activism and artistic performance. I'm wondering if that aesthetic dimension or cultural dimension is particularly useful at addressing trauma, at getting at this frozen victim issue that you've raised. What are the connections you've made between justice work and art work?

Mani: As I mentioned, I first had this huge spiritual bang on the head in 1999. I had landed up right after my PhD in my first job with Oxfam GB in East Africa. They'd recognised they needed to have a conflict advisor because they were working in all these conflict zones but with no understanding of conflict. Within about six months I was already beginning to feel that something was missing as I was going back and forth between diplomatic, intergovernmental-level decision making on these issues of conflict and the grass-roots level of communities actually affected by conflict on a daily basis. It just felt like there was a huge piece we were missing at the international policy level. And again, it was not me that turned to art, but it was art that came hurtling down to me. I was in Somalia just falling asleep under my mosquito net. The generators had been turned off, and my colleague and I had worked until 2 a.m. writing up the mission report. And I had this huge download, my biggest epiphany in life: without art, you cannot either prevent conflict, end it or rebuild peace.

Somehow it was very, very clear to me that we are not talking about the Tate Modern Gallery; we are not talking about some artist who gets 500 million Euros for a piece of animal turd flung on a piece of canvas. We are talking about the art that emerges from crisis as an expression of both the pain of conflict and the potential of renewal. Very much that alchemical process, you could say. And, in the beginning, my reaction was that the epiphany had obviously fallen onto the wrong mosquito net. 'This is so removed from my trajectory and what I do. I'm not an artist; what am I supposed to do with this?'

That was the beginning. That revelation about art was so powerful that I spent more than a decade trying to understand it. Already in my thesis, which led to my *Beyond retribution* book, I had called attention to culture (Mani, 2002/2007). I always thought that we are really making a big mistake if we ignore culture. Every time there has been a culturally nuanced, culturally adapted, culturally grown local mechanism for transitional justice, it has been so much more effective. Or it has been an important complement to the official mechanisms. But now it was specifically art, and the kind of art that came to me in this epiphany is very culturally embedded, culturally endogenous, but it is also spiritual in the Viktor Frankl sense of a search for meaning in situations in which it is hard to find meaning. It's the creation that comes out of that existential, ultimate, essential search for what is meaningful – especially when everything seems to have lost meaning in deadly conflict and injustice.

Dzur: It's interesting that you weren't an artist by inclination or training when you had this epiphany. I'm wondering if that lack of training actually helped you connect with people through art. Because it made it seem like art was not your job, it was the job of everybody in this room.

Mani: You've put your finger on it. I was in such a state of shock: 'What am I supposed to do about it? I'm not an artist!' So, what I did was seek to meet and learn from artists in all the countries, in or emerging from conflict, that I worked in – not the most famous ones but those few who seemed to really speak for their wider communities through their art. I met all kinds of artists – visual and per-

Albert Dzur

forming artists, musicians and dancers, poets and filmmakers – in conflict areas on all continents.

What I noticed was the way I started listening to people had completely shifted. I had no clue then that years later I would actually be enacting their stories via the Theatre of Transformation. There was nothing instrumental in the way I listened. But it was as if I were looking for their essence. I was seeking to understand how did you journey from a normal life, through losing everything, then through your art finding meaning, and not just for yourself but in a way that it was of meaning and support and healing and reidentification for your whole society.

Still, I was looking upon art as an observer, as a witness to it. A very attentive, deeply interested witness, but still witnessing it. The next shift, which again was completely out of the blue, and unpremeditated as every other shift in my life, only came five years ago, in December 2013. Just like I had to become a victim in order to really be able to talk to or support or help transform victims, or indeed, perpetrators, I'd done enough talking about art and writing about it; I actually had to become it. I see now myself how transformative that is. That is the power of art, especially when there is that meaning or spiritual dimension and it is culturally rooted.

And yet we see so often, of course, how societies culturally regress post-conflict for all kinds of understandable reasons. So how can transitional justice, if it is transformative, be a process of cultural renewal? And how could art play a role within cultural renewal?

Dzur: I understand how artistic expression on the part of somebody who has gone through a conflict might be a form of bearing witness and also a form of hope and an expression that there is beauty and we can create it together. You're doing something different, though, when you enact scenes. You're doing something other than bearing witness and showing hope for the future.

Mani: It was only in writing *Responsibility to protect* that I realised that art has multiple functions. You look at the graffiti and the artwork on the walls in Palestine. The art that comes out can be defiance, outrage, denial, resistance. You look at the Apartheid art, the a cappella songs coming out of South Africa. It's not just hope and healing. That's a part of it, but it can also be something else. In Kosovo it was, 'Oh my god, who are we?' It was identity seeking. It was very provocative, conceptual art: 'We need to break with our old identity, which was very conservative and very ethnic and therefore very petty minded and will lead us back into conflict. But now we have an empty page. Who the hell are we?' So, artists were at the lead in defining a new identity. It was not just healing and hopeful, it was also angry: 'We're not kids, you don't tell us what to do, international community!' There are loads of different facets to that. Denunciation is very important. Eventually, that led me to a whole typology, in *Responsibility to protect*, of all the kinds of art across all continents that have emerged in countries in conflict (Mani & Weiss, 2011).

How the Theatre of Transformation came about, yet again, was as a bolt from the blue. In November 2013, I received a small peace award – the Peter Becker Peace Prize at Marburg University, Germany. After using two-thirds of the modest 5,000 Euros award to support the initiatives of two justice and indigenous peoples' activists, I used the final part of it to go to Palestine for the first time, with my very dear colleague and friend Zahira Kamal, the peace activist and former (first) Women's Affairs Minister of Palestine. Right after this, on 12 December 2013, at a meeting of women scholars we convene at Oxford every year, people asked me, 'Give us a report of your mission in Palestine'. I had been writing up the testimonies of women we had met, and without premeditation, I spontaneously started enacting my first testimony. I was simply reading out what the women had shared, but in the first person – I had written all the testimonies as 'I', and I started sharing or 'incarnating' them as 'I'.

It was as if a Pandora's box had opened. In just a month, in January 2014, a dear colleague of mine, Professor Jean Houston, with whom we were planning a meeting in the United States of the global women's movement we co-founded, didn't quite ask me but literally informed me, 'Oh Rama, you will perform a recital on the second night of our conference. I've invited 40 people'. These were actors, writers, artists and all kinds of eminent people. And there, having never having performed in my life, I gave my first public recital! It was unbelievable to me.

By the way, in the Theatre of Transformation, I have always performed only the real-life testimonies of people I have encountered or worked with personally, throughout my experience in peace building and justice in different countries, spanning all continents. I started with Palestinian testimonies as they were the trigger, but by my first public performance at the United Nations in Geneva in March 2014, I was enacting testimonies of women I had met in Wajir, Kenya, in 2000 while working as a conflict advisor for Oxfam!

In a sense then, the Theatre of Transformation, like transformative justice, goes beyond just giving a voice to the victims we work with. First, it is about literally putting ourselves in the victim's skin and becoming the 'other'; that is, it is about radical empathy or unity with the other. Second, it is about giving them the stage and enabling them to both restore and re-story their own lives – in their own idiom, their own unique expression.

I have experienced this now in so many crisis-affected countries where I undertake peace and justice missions and give Theatre of Transformation workshops – what I call 'the voices, visions and wisdom' of these victims who emerge as community leaders are so inspiring. I turn the tables, or 'redefine the paradigm of power', then, by enacting their testimonies when I perform at international venues for the UN and governmental leaders, scholars and policymakers to get them to completely rethink their approach to peace, justice and global governance.

One of my early performances was the final core session of my first course on Transformative Justice, which I taught at the Global College of Winnipeg University in Canada. It was held at the Winnipeg Art Gallery's auditorium as a public event. In this early stage of the Theatre of Transformation, I was performing stories that showed the whole trajectory: people who are still caught in victimisation,

Albert Dzur

who haven't found the way out, and I would end the performance with one or two cases of someone who had. But very soon – within the first 6 to 10 months – I just naturally was drawn to only focusing on cases of the individuals who had transformed themselves, and almost always, who also landed up transforming their communities or societies as a consequence.

Bad news is everywhere. You can find any newspaper that talks about the two million victims of whichever conflict. What was important was to know that people can transform regardless of how bad things get. Then, I discovered – once I had enacted 100 or 200 real-life testimonies of people I had met or worked with on every continent and of every age and many cultures – that there is a common process, even if every individual story and every individual context is completely different. And that's what became the four-step methodology of the Theatre of Transformation.

People from very different disciplines say, 'Wow, that's the process I use when I'm working with organisational change or when I'm composing a dance or a theatre piece or designing a monument or a social movement'. People from very different fields say there's a relatively similar four-step, full-circle process that they use. Certainly, the integral approach underlying both transformative justice and the Theatre of Transformation methodology is also informed by the Integral Worlds framework and numerous publications of my husband, Professor Alexander Schieffer, with his colleague Professor Ronnie Lessem. But this was the process that emerged from simply enacting or 'becoming' people who have faced great injustice and trauma and managed to transform.

Dzur: Can you briefly state the four steps?

Mani: The first step of Theatre of Transformation I call 'becoming a witness of reality'. And it's that moment I described earlier when I picked up that book or that vision that fell into me or Gandhi getting thrown out of his train. What is that moment when suddenly you shift and become a witness? Because it is in that moment that however hopeless the situation seems – the bombs will keep falling, they will keep saying 'no' to negotiated peace – whatever it is, you still say, 'Well, I see the situation differently, so I take a step'. And then it seems like there is a momentum that comes in because with that 'yes', even though the situation hasn't changed and the constraints, obstacles and impossibility remain, it's as if that 'yes' opens the door to the second step, which I call 'awakening possibility'.

What I've seen over and over again is that simply by that 'yes', by that wake-up call, it's as if that very ordinary person literally acquires Herculean strength. I guess that's why these archetypes and archetypal stories are so important. And that's what reawakens their human potential – Viktor Frankl's point about those finding meaning finding a way to survive, however impossible. It awakens that human potential he is referring to as well as awakening thereby their creative potential because in order to survive crisis we have to abandon business as usual and find highly creative ways to do it. That would also explain why art work is produced or why culture can be then in an optimal state for renewal or democracy can be creatively regenerated or revitalised anew at that point. Suddenly you can't

go straight down the road. You ask, 'What is that way that is going to get me out of that situation?' So that's the second step.

The third step I call 'envisioning change'. By that what I mean is normally in all our processes – and now the poor NGOs have become beholden to that as official agencies used to be in the past – it's all about identifying the vision out there, beyond our reach. Whereas what I've noticed in every single case it is that there is an inner process. The example that very much is resonant in our field is that of Nelson Mandela. The Mandela who went into jail and who spent all of those years literally breaking stones was no longer the same as the one who came out. It was as if he was actually whittling away those parts of his own being that were no longer going to serve the cause of reconciliation. The person who had the courage to say, 'Yes, I will negotiate with the tyrants', who had the ability to get his own comrades on board with such a decision, was not the same as the one who went in. It is the inner change process. That's why envisioning means, how does the vision and the person become one? How do you begin to radiate that vision by being willing to change your own self and not just the outside situation?

I see it in so many cases that have gone through this process, it's like you literally feel that inner light in them. Look at Vera Schiller de Kohn, the woman I mentioned who escaped the Holocaust, who says, 'I died. I allowed my old self, with all of its suffering, to die, so the new me could be born'. Though actually she died at the age of 100, in fact, this new being was only 50 years old. You feel this new light that radiates from these people, the magnetism, because their self and their vision have become one. It is like the inner mirror has been polished.

And then the fourth stage I call 'enacting transformation'. That's the stage where I've seen this ripple effect because the change they want to enact becomes literally like a stone thrown into the middle of a pool. And it is magnetic: people just get attracted to this cause, they feel however impossible it is, that 'We can do it'. Almost everyone I've seen who goes through this process, it's like they lose their arrogance. That 'I'm the saviour' attitude drops off. It's the recognition that the change will come from 'us', from the 'we'. It's the creation of the transformative ecosystems or sometimes of transformative spaces, like Gandhi's Tolstoy Farm.

These are places that hold that transformative potential, which otherwise wouldn't have been possible. These are the transformative spaces that attract people and where key decisions can be made that will have that seismic effect. Thereby, these people who individually transformed are actually able to shift the paradigm. They literally make what seemed impossible become possible. The black will rule. Who would have thought that possible? The colonised will be decolonised. All of those shifts come from that sort of flipping around.

When I enact stories, I may differentiate and share a certain person's testimony to depict, say, witnessing or awakening, but if you look into that person's life journey you'll see the passage of all four stages. They may be slightly differently sequenced. Sometimes a person didn't need to go through a crisis, they were just born with a sense of purpose. I'm thinking of my very close Congolese colleague, Neema Namadamu, for example. She had polio when she was very small, way before the war. Everyone said, 'Girl, polio, throw her in the dustbin; she's just a

Albert Dzur

curse, she's a witch'. Yet her mother, who was uneducated and had ten or twelve kids, would carry her polio-ridden child daily to school. She would tell Neema daily, 'Every person is born for a purpose – don't forget that, Neema'. So that was just seeded in her: nothing is impossible and I as a woman with polio can become an agent of transformation and serve others. And that is what Neema is still doing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It could be that which makes you a witness or triggers your awakening as much as it could be getting chucked out of a train.

5. Women as agents of transformation

Dzur: This gets to the role of women in post-conflict situations as agents of transformation even while women are often the targets during and after the conflict. You see a lot of possibility for women getting involved in this way.

Mani: I'm seeing a couple of incredible things emerging, which I was completely blind to much earlier in my work on transitional justice. I'm seeing how women in conflict support each other and are able thereby to become forces of change in society. In society after society I work in, I see how women in these situations of acute victimisation come together in circle. They share their stories with each other and help each other to *find their inner power* and transform from victims to community leaders. In a sense, it is ancient; it's been happening since time immemorial.

What I experienced already with the women in Wajir, Kenya, in 2000, I have also experienced more recently in Palestine, in DRC, in the slums of Mumbai, which are like a warzone of daily violence for women – these are all our partner organisations in the Theatre of Transformation Academy.

The seed for the Theatre of Transformation was already planted in the first 6 months when this germ of an idea started turning within me. It was November 2000, during the famous election recount between Al Gore and George W. Bush, and I flew in a tiny plane to a little Kenyan village in Wajir, a Somali district, and I met this group of women. From my very first performance, I've been telling their story because they are a typical case of the four-step process. They're a great case, too, in the way they went about it, of coming up with a restorative justice or democratic policy framework. These Somali women had been passive, docile women. 'When our men go off to war', they would say, 'we must stand outside and sing heroic poems, sing "Go, go, kill, kill"'. And that had been their pattern for thousands of years. And these women said, 'No'.

'But what do we do?' They were victims; they were passive. They didn't feel like they had any power to do anything. And what we did was, 'We met in a circle. We sat together in secret until we knew what to do'. They had the courage. They said, 'We asked for a meeting, a Shura Council meeting, with our men. It had never been done before. Men were outraged. But we all went together. We sat together. And then, when the clan leader gave us the chance to speak, the eldest woman spoke on our behalf. We were there together and we presented our three

conditions: first, we want our village to be a weapons-free zone; second, we want you to negotiate with the other clans, but not with vengeance, thinking only of the future for our children; third, we want you to accept us women as part of the Shura Council’.

Coming back to my emphasis on culture, these women, you could say, were betraying or going against their culture. But what they were doing was what you and I would call both cultural renewal and democratic renewal. Outsiders might feel the need to be politically correct or ‘culturally sensitive’ and say, ‘Oh but in this culture the women are treated like this; we shouldn’t offend their sensibilities; we shouldn’t try to push for change’. But the women did it and the clan leader said, ‘Oh my gosh, you have reminded us of who we really are’. And that started a whole movement for cultural and political renewal. It didn’t just bring peace to their village. But they became a movement. The same women were involved in 2009, when the elections led to the start of an incipient genocide, and one of the leaders, Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, who helped to quell the violence there then was a woman from that village I had met and worked with in November 2000.

These Wajir women manifest, as I mentioned, all four stages of the Theatre of Transformation. It is becoming the responsible witness of reality: ‘We cannot just sit and watch when our past and future are in flames’. It’s awakening new possibilities by doing something that would be impossible for women to do in that culture. It’s envisioning change, by coming up with a strategy of how we are going to go about it. ‘We ask for a Shura Council meeting because that’s the way decisions are made in our culture. We have to get the men on board’. And then they enact transformation together, because the men, the women, the parliamentarians, the police all begin to act together so that whenever there is threat of violence they all would move together to that place and stop the violence before it would break out. They developed a strategy to prevent violence.

It was there at the time, but I hadn’t picked it up yet. Now I see it in South Africa, in the Congo, in Palestine and also in situations of ongoing protracted injustice. I see it in the slums of Mumbai, where it’s violence against women, so you could say it is like a case writ large of a war against women, except there’s no declared war so we won’t normally deploy our mechanisms there. It’s women coming together in a circle and exactly that happens: ‘We can’t continue to be passive victims like our mothers and grandmothers; something has to happen’. And vroom! – their creativity and their human potential opens, they come up with a plan and actualise it, always together.

The slum women I work with in Mumbai started off first with their storytelling circle, then a mechanism to stop the men when they are actually raping the women, then a process to train their own women to be counsellors to prevent the violence from happening and then a practice whereby the slum women become ‘fellows’, believe it or not, just like scholars in universities, though many are school dropouts or uneducated. And they conduct real research with questionnaires and so on, on topics, laws and policies that affect their lives. They come up with policy proposals that they present to and debate with their parliamentarians and government officials. And many of them have led to policy changes.

Albert Dzur

These slum women have created a women's federation, which would be an amazing case to look at in terms of democratic renewal, where they said, 'Well, just because our politicians don't do it, we women can create a federation which is a genuine democracy, which is totally accountable, where there is no money, there is no corruption, there is no buying votes, there is total accountability to our stakeholders'.

I've seen the power of women to be agents both during conflict and in post-conflict restoration of justice. It comes especially in those cases where despite the factors of violence and injustice trying to keep the women apart they have found ways. That's what gives them this ability to undergo the process of finding meaning, that spiritual approach, and finding the creative outlet. And likewise, I think of my dear friend Zahira Kamal, the first women's minister in the Palestinian National Authority. They were trying in the period of hope after 1994, with a process similar to South Africa's but, unfortunately, we don't document it because we don't see it as transitional justice – a nationwide process of trying to come up with a new constitution, a parliament, which includes everyone and includes the most extremist mullahs as much as it includes the most liberal political activists. The most conservative, the most radical, everyone has to be part of it. And they, too, used street theatre and poetry and the arts as a way to imagine what was so new that they couldn't articulate it any other way.

6. A great person is like a great nation

Dzur: We should finish up with a last question. Your sense of optimism comes through strongly in your writing and in our conversation, and yet, you've been through so many difficult situations. I'm wondering, how does that positive view keep re-emerging?

Mani: I really believe it comes because of my own experience, looking at myself and the person I had become when I was sure that I was on the holy trail of justice. I'd become a pretty nasty, obnoxious piece of work. A self-righteous advocate, hating anyone who wasn't devoting every ounce of their energy to being as angry about injustice and stomping about and telling people what to do as I was doing. I might express it or not but I felt that they're just a waste of oxygen. I was quite an unbearable person. I'd become that – I wasn't like that as a young child. Growing up in India, I had a lot of compassion, but being on this path made me quite unbearable. I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to be struck down time and again. And I'm still working at it, to let go of that arrogance when it emerges, let go of any sense that I have the answer, that I know better or this is 'the way' and to become very humble in my search for meaning.

That next level of empathy is becoming the other, feeling like there is no human being that I cannot become, however hurtful the things that they have done. And just knowing that transformation is possible – always. I have to practise a huge lot of reiterating that belief when I think about an Assad, for example; I've written innumerable poems about him not changing until his dying day,

regardless of how much he destroys the culture, the ethos and the ancient civilisation of Syria, as much as he is massacring daily his very own people. I have to remind myself that even Assad is capable of transformation.

Dzur: That's a powerful part of the non-violent tradition and the civil rights tradition of never seeing the other as an enemy even when they do terrible things.

Mani: Yes, and I knew already when I was quite young I began to realise the pattern that anyone I really disliked at school or university would eventually become a very close friend. There is a verse by Lao Tzu that is my favourite. And I think everyone who plans to go into politics could be given this one verse and told, 'Please meditate on it before you run for election'. It reads, 'A great person is like a great nation. He or she, having made a mistake, admits it. Having admitted it, she corrects it. She looks upon her critics as her greatest teachers; he looks upon his enemies as the shadow he himself casts'.

And that's been a guiding lesson in my life and in all my work in peace and justice. If we can just remember not to project all our ill will on the person who critiques us and think they're the demon and just remember that I create my enemies myself or choose to make them enemies because there's something within me that I can't integrate or accept.

I think it's really this belief that we as human beings are capable, yes, of terrible things, but also capable individually of finding, following and realising our purpose. We can thereby create systems that do not perpetuate injustice but actually help human beings fulfil our purpose in life, be of service to each other and flourish.

References

- Mani, R. (2002/2007). *Beyond retribution: seeking justice in the shadows of war*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Mani, R. & Weiss, T.G. (2011). *Responsibility to protect: cultural perspectives in the global south*. Abingdon: Routledge.