



excerpt from

The Power of Collective Wisdom and the trap of collective folly

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SEEING THE FUTURE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT: HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

The Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants (CERI), in Oakland, California, is a powerful example of community, mediated by love. The fact that it evolved as a response to the wounds generated by war, torture, and genocide makes it a telling illustration of what power lies in the group. Empowerment came from amplifying existing elements of group cohesion, respect for interior realms, and desire to repair and renew the community.

Mona Afary, who helped found the center, tells this story as testament to the Cambodian community that she has come to know:

"PERSEPHONE, IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY, was fourteen when she was abducted and taken to the underworld. The underworld was dark and gloomy; it was the realm of the ghosts, dead and lost souls who had no connection to what had happened to them. Like Persephone, they were abruptly stripped of what they knew as life and brought to darkness, confused as to why this tragedy had come to be. With the support of her powerful mother, Demeter, the goddess of Earth, and Hermes, the god of communication, Persephone was eventually able to leave the underworld for three seasons a year, but was doomed to go back every winter. In spring when she would return to earth, all would blossom and flourish....upon her return to the underworld in winter, the whole earth would mourn and perish.

"Year after year, Persephone lived in utter depression in the underworld. At one point, she eventually regained the strength to communicate with the dead who were twisted in their tragic losses. One by one, they began sharing their stories and for the first time were honored for them. The silence and confusion and fear began to gradually dissipate."

"The Cambodian refugees at CERI have somewhat of a similar experience as this myth. The majority of them were living a peaceful life as children, teens, or young adults in the rural parts of Cambodia. The brutal regime of Pol Pot, also known as the Khmer Rouge, took over between the years 1975 and 1979, and before they knew it, their beloved country was transformed into their own concentration camp, in which they were forced to work twelve to sixteen hours, with only one meal a day, consisting of a cup of water with a few grains of rice."

"One million seven hundred thousand Cambodians died, many from exhaustion, illness, and starvation. Every evening, when the sun would set, the Khmer Rouge would enter these people's homes, taking families to an area which is now referred to as the Killing Fields, beating them to death."

"Our clients are the survivors of this atrocious genocide. Forced to flee their homeland, they sought safety in dangerous Thai refugee camps. Years later, when they were finally able to settle in Oakland, they were placed in poor and high-crime neighborhoods.

When Mona Afary was first hired as a mental health counselor, she faced the clients' stories alone, seeing and feeling their acute pain in the form of their nightmares, insomnia, flashbacks, panic attacks, depression, anxiety, fear, un mourned grief, and physical disorders that accompany such psychological pain. What hope could they have of a future?

And then something startling happened one day. Afary came out of her counseling office and encountered, in the waiting room, a Cambodian community drinking American coffee and Persian tea. They were talking and laughing and knitting together. What, she wondered, would happen if the possibility for healing were already present, sitting here amid the group, in the waiting room? This was the small spark that gave rise to CERI, but not immediately. First, there needed to be validation that this idea could attract others, this notion that the group itself could truly be a source of its own empowerment. How could the same informality of gathering and sense of affection for each other that Afary witnessed in the waiting room be retained and extended?

Collective wisdom holds the possibility of creating new organizational forms that are inclusive, invitational, and sacred without being overly earnest. This is how CERI emerged. In short order, Afary developed a partnership with a Cambodian woman, Lucy Dul, who had arrived as a child refugee herself and had started a nonprofit agency to address the social needs of her community. Soon, a group interpreter was found, a genocide survivor, and many other gifted part-time people followed, contributing their talents, including offering counseling encounters in the streets with Cambodian children who were cutting classes during the day. An experienced homeopathic clinician began volunteering her time, and soon two other practitioners were also contributing their talents. When the emerging group lost the services of their psychiatrist, a board member of the community agency that Afary had worked for volunteered to substitute and soon "fell in love" and committed himself to offering pro bono support. Afary's clinical supervisor and her former dissertation chair also joined the growing movement as did the Cambodian monks who were already part of the community.

A nurturing field of relationships was born, animated by activities of belonging that showed that life had come into the group. A sewing machine, knitting, painting, chanting, prayer, yoga, mediation, movement and massage therapy all appeared as part of a community forming itself into a whole. A year after Afary's experience in the waiting room, the organization was formally born. It was hard work but also play.

Collective wisdom can be an act of transcendence, as a testament that we are not as separate as we think. Psychologist Daniel Goleman, addressing the role of mirror neurons in the brain reminds us that humans are capable of not only mimicking the actions of others but reading intentions and emotions that allow for a "shared sensibility, bringing the outside inside us: to understand another, we become like the other at least a bit."

The implications of this are essential for the emergence of collective wisdom in groups because it tells us that we can know what others are feeling and intending. Quoting the developmental scientist Deniel Stern, Goleman goes on to say we can "no longer see our minds as so independent, separate and isolated, but instead we must view them as "permeable" continually interacting as though joined by an invisible link. At an unconscious level, we are in constant dialogue with anyone we interact with, our every feeling and our every way of moving attuned to theirs. At least for the moment our mental life co-created, in an interconnected two- person matrix."

Mona Afary is one of those individuals who did not see herself as separate. She knew that healing comes for the impulse for creating, for reaching out and extending ourselves to others. "Now here is where our story deviates from the myth of Persephone and the underworld." She told us. "Our Cambodian friends have changed. They know that they are pillars of strength and inspiration for one another. They have gained the strength to be with their losses without allowing the pain to ruin their lives any further. This community has started a new chapter in its life. They are the co-founders of CERI, and they want to use it as a means to leave the underworld as a community."