



Eric Wolterstorff: Society under sustained stress

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Dr. Eric Wolterstorff works at the intersection of psychology, trauma, culture, and group behavior (“A Speculative Model of How Groups Respond to Threats,” 2003). In the 1990s, Wolterstorff helped formalize Peter Levine’s work and placed it in the context of a memory-systems approach to healing trauma. He studied the work of Murray Bowen and Arnold Mindel, and created an approach to working with trauma and transference (Wolterstorff and Grassmann, “The Scene of the Crime,” 2014). With Glen Strathy, he is writing *Better Parents, Better Children* (2021) based on the work of Lloyd DeMause. He leads Sovereignty First, a social-impact LLC that helps organizations generate solutions to big problems that cross sectors, borders, cultures, & factions. He advises Cooperative Capacity Partners, a social-impact LLC that increases power sharing, cooperation, and performance in global public-sector partnerships. Wolterstorff lives in Boulder, Colorado, with his fiancée, Jodi Simon, and her son, Liam.

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For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel:
Hi Eric.

Eric Wolterstorff:
Hi Serge.

Serge Prengel:
So you have given some serious thought to what happens to a society when it is experiencing the kind of stress that it is experiencing right now?

Eric Wolterstorff:
Yes. Under conditions of sustained stress, a chain reaction moves through groups of people, whether families, communities, or a whole society. The chain reaction ends with people who are anxious clumped together with other people who are anxious, and with people who are apparently calm, but often actually dissociated, clumped together with each other. You end up with the anxious people who focus on the threat agreeing with each other about the threat, and the other people who appear to be in denial and minimizing the threat agreeing with each other. These groups form two separate camps and tend not to include each other. They tend not to trust each other. It's difficult for them to come to a common understanding of what is and is not real. It is difficult for them to participate with each other to solve problems together. I'd like to focus a little bit on how this mechanism works and what we can do to bring some flow between these two camps. That could be helpful for our families and communities, and for our society.

Serge Prenzel:

Yes. So there's a kind of an isomorphism between what happens at the level of society as a whole at the level of smaller groups within the society, at the level of individual families and society, the same mechanism as happens under stress when some people go into a fight or flight and some people go into collapse and you have a polarization of reactions.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes. The phenomenon happens at both levels because you can pick any three people and the chain reaction will start and spread through the entire group, whether a family or a society. Let me give you an example. Let's say I'm very, very upset about something and I come to you and I say, "Serge, I'm so upset about this terrible thing and I'm filled with anxiety. I'm upset. You must listen to me." You have a choice. Either you agree with me and you're going to be flooded by my anxiety, which is not pleasant, or you disagree with me and spare yourself some anxiety but come into conflict with me. Each of your choices will affect me differently.

If you agree with me and you sympathize with my anxiety, you will have reinforced how I see the situation and slightly reduced my anxiety while you've now become anxious like me. We have an alliance. Now the two of us will go to go tell other people about how upsetting this thing is, and so the anxiety spreads. On the other hand, if you say to me, "No, you're exaggerating, Eric," then I become even more anxious because now you're rejecting what I feel to be true. My anxiety is increased by your rejection, and I leave you to recruit someone else. In an open system—meaning when you and I are surrounded by tens or hundreds of people—this dynamic is not a problem. The chain reaction bleeds out. It dissipates. This happens all the time. But in a closed system, the stress has no where to go. The splitting spreads. The anxiety increases. Families are relatively closed systems and can hold a lot of anxiety. Right now the whole planet is affected by this virus - and by economic stress - and the planet is a closed system, so the splitting is spreading and anxiety is increasing, everywhere.

Right now we're experiencing a closed-system phenomenon. In a closed system there is nowhere for the anxiety to dissipate. If you say "yes" and join me in feeling anxious, my anxiety has stimulated yours. In this way, the anxiety will spread and grow across the world. At the same time, we will run into people who adopt a dissociative stance. They reject our anxiety, which increases our anxiety which increases their dissociation. As more and more people settle into a stance, people begin to merge (when anxious encounters anxious) or bounce off each other (when anxious meet dissociative). It is a chain reaction in which you end up with two camps: the people who are anxious and the people who are dissociated. This split is harmful for us at every level of relationship.

Serge Prenzel:

Yes. So, so that's a very powerful expression of the dynamic. And there is a dilemma when confronted with the anxious person: No matter what you do is not a good option. But there's something about opposing the anxious to the dissociated person. There's an opposition, anxious to calm. So, are we talking about the fact that there are just anxious people and calm people, or anxious people and disassociated people?

Eric Wolterstorff:

That's a good question. Each of us have tendencies toward calmness, toward, anxiety or toward dissociation. Some of us are more phlegmatic, more slow and calm. Some of us are more "wired," more sympathetically tuned. And some of us are more traumatized and passive because of that. So,

yes, there are tendencies, but this chain reaction dynamic overrides those tendencies. For example: My brother is an emergency room doctor, so he's normally in very active around stress and threats. People come into the emergency room and he is active in solving problems. But imagine that he's in a car wreck; he's trapped in a car and can't do anything. Then some slow-moving or traumatized person walks past. Well, that normally passive person is going to call the police or pull my normally active brother out of the car.

So you're right that we tend to go to the tendency that fits us best. Nevertheless, circumstances and the chain reaction dynamic will override our tendencies. Some of you may be reminded of Murray Bowen's mapping of anxiety in family systems. Bowen's research contributes to our understanding of this chain reaction. But Bowen is talking about habits and stances and dynamics that have formed a homeostasis in a family over many years, if not generations. The dynamic I am describing is happening at high speed and spreading like a chain reaction. Bowen's advice for interventions works with this high-speed either-or dilemma; we'll get to that later.

Serge Prengel:

Yes. There is very strong sense that this situation is not normal, and everything is now taking place within the crucible of a crisis. And so the normal tendency that we might have, for instance, to be calmer under pressure is going to be affected by the fact that there is intense pressure here. It's way beyond what we're accustomed to. And so that's why we're talking about stress. This is a very extreme situation of stress.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes, that's right. Of course we have two stresses going on. We have the stress of the virus and we have the second stress, which is arguably larger, which is the stress to the economy, but they're both stresses. We have solutions to both. Individuals may be traumatized, people may get sick, people may die, businesses may shut down. But the *societies* are stressed, not traumatized. Neither crisis a traumatic overwhelm for society. They are each sustained stresses that are putting societies into anxiety crucibles. Right? So in this conversation we're separating paying attention to individuals and paying attention to society. Our focus here is on society as a whole. Still, it makes sense to talk about the experience of the Murray Bowen folks and what they can tell us about how to handle this kind of stress. Okay, then.

To simplify this even more than with the metaphor of a chain reaction, you could think of anxiety as electricity, and that when the electricity touches a person, the person can accept the electric current (the anxiety) and allow it to run through them and that feels terrible—thus anxious people create rapport with other anxious people. Or they can choose to throw the circuit breaker and no current (anxiety) goes through; that's the dissociation or cut-off response. So the dilemma seems to be all or nothing. So as the Bowen people taught us, a way that we can serve ourselves, our families, our communities is by refusing either of those options. We do this by disagreeing with the other person while we staying in rapport with that person. So if you're anxious, if you'll come to me and you say, "This is so terrible, Eric," and my response will be to take your anxiety only seriously enough to maintain rapport with you. So if enough trust and connection is alive between us, and I demonstrate just enough rapport with your anxiety, you will be able to tolerate disagreement with me beyond that. You will stay in relationship with me.

The energy will flow, the anxiety will flow. But I will disagree with you as to the extent of the anxiety. So you come to me with an anxiety sandwich and you want an anxiety sandwich back, I will

give you half a sandwich and you will be dissatisfied but will accept it. So when we have the interaction, I didn't cut you off, but I didn't fully agree with you. So I'm basically suggesting that the way we can be most helpful is to have unsatisfying interactions with each other all the time. Right? You see? And so you will say, "Well, I can basically trust Eric. It's okay between us, even if he doesn't really get it." What's happening is I'm acting as a rheostat, right? Like a light switch dimmer. So I'm accepting some of the anxiety, but I'm disagreeing with the rest. You don't get to escalate with me. Okay?

Serge Prengel:

Yes, that's beautiful.

Eric Wolterstorff:

I could belabor this metaphor.

Serge Prengel:

No, no, I love the metaphor. I absolutely love the metaphor and I want to just take a breather to get people a chance to digest it. And I'm going to recap a little bit some of what I'm hearing. First, we're hearing the level of the metaphor and the metaphor involves two individuals as opposed to society—we'll come back to society. So just to clarify, we're in the individual part of it. What I love about the metaphor is that you have various ways of expressing it at many levels. And I love the metaphor of the dimmer. And I love the metaphor of the half sandwich. And what I want to highlight is that in doing this, it's not just a mechanical cutting of the sandwich, but there is a profound thing that's happening; as the person who is listening to the anxious person, you're not just passive. You're not confronted with the either/or of just all-or-nothing, but you have a moment to really experience, you know, yourself as a dimmer—to say, "I have the choice of being somewhere in that continuum between all and nothing." Yes. And you have a chance to say I respect the other person and I want to be in connection with them, but I respect myself and I want to be in connection with me. And the part of cutting the sandwich and two is best. Having some respect for one and some respect for myself. Yes. And the metaphor of the dimmer I love because thinking of myself as a dimmer means I have agency, you know, the outside circumstances are what they are, but I can take action in order to achieve that respect for the other and for myself. So that's a profound paradigm change where instead of being simply passive in front of the crisis, I have the opportunity to ask, "What can I do?"

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes, and if we interact and, about the coronavirus social distancing policies, and you're on the dissociation side, and you say to me, "Can you believe all these news reports? This is just a plot to hurt the economy." My task is to be in rapport with you in your dissociation, and then to feed anxiety to you, as much anxiety as you can tolerate without cutting off from me. So I can say yes, I hear you. And my aunt is in the hospital with the virus right now. And you say, "Oh well that's, well that's tough," because you care about me as a person and so you care about my family and you care about my aunt. And if she really is in the hospital, now you're feeling some anxiety. So it's the other half of the sandwich. So, again, if you're presenting no anxiety, then I want to bring you half an anxiety sandwich. And if you present anxiety, I want to bring you half a calm sandwich. It's always a half a sandwich.

Serge Prengel:

I'm thinking of the whole concept of polarized roles. If somebody is exclusively at one pole, occupying the other pole is going to increase polarization. So if we see that a person is in one pole, we find in

ourselves the part that is experiencing some of that anxiety, not necessarily for the same reason—it might be we have different content to it—but we pay attention to our own anxiety and express some of it. So that emotionally there's not one person who is on the anxious camp and one person who was on the calm or apparently calm camp.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes.

Serge Prengel:

Okay.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Shall we take a break here?

Serge Prengel:

No, but actually I appreciate the break because, as we follow this, there is a logic to it and it seems relatively simple, but I think the brake is really warranted in the sense of the magnitude of the work, the emotional work that is involved in order to be able to do this. Because these situations are situations of intense pressure and we tend to actually break down under the pressure of the other person's anxiety on our own, trying to manage it. So I think it's kind of a break is about honoring the difficulty of doing this.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Very much. If it works for you, I'd like to leap from handfuls of people with family or friends up to the societal level for a moment.

Serge Prengel:

Great.

Eric Wolterstorff:

I am going to use an expression from Murray Bowen again. He would say there are no angels and devils. He would say it doesn't make sense when we want the light switch to be on or off, all-or-nothing, because that's not actually how reality is. But it can seem like reality when we're polarized. We have had progressively more polarizing presidents over the last few decades. Each one has become more, more polarizing and to say the source of all problems, the source of all evil in the world is Donald Trump is ridiculous. It's not accurate. One can criticize his personality, his moral code, his effectiveness, his policies, everything. But that does not make him a devil. And one can go to the other side, to somebody who loves everything that Trump does. But his not an angel either, neither was Obama—and the point of this is not to create an equivalence. There is right and there is wrong. Some people are much better at some things, some people are a little bit better, some people are more moral than others. This is not an equivalence. It's simply to say that the two extremes of angel and devil is simple for the mind but it does not help relationship. It stops the flow and it's not helpful. It degrades. It excludes everyone who's in the other position. It degrades trust between the two positions. It makes it almost impossible to have common understanding and it makes it almost impossible to participate with people from another point of view to find solutions.

Serge Prengel:

You started from Murray Bowen's concept of no angel, no devil. The thing that makes it very difficult for people to follow this in practice is the idea that, if the person who, on the whole, I favor, and the person who, on the whole, I really have tremendous problems with, are neither angels nor demons, then, does it mean they're the same because there's somewhere in the middle—and actually that's not at all what you're saying. It's simply for argument's sake, you might say there's a continuum that's quite big and one is going to be more on one side and the other is going to be more on the other side. It's not a question of saying you have to agree that they are the same. There is a lot of space between the two poles and that the discussion is better served if we're saying that we're somewhere on this continuum as opposed to on one of the camps at one of the poles.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes. I think politically, the most well-known example we had of this was, in 2008 when John McCain and Barack Obama were competing for the presidency and things were becoming more and more extreme in the rhetoric of both candidates. There was concern about violence that might arise, in particular, with some of the aggressiveness of Sarah Palin's characterizations of Obama. Then John McCain stepped forward and said, "Barack Obama is not an evil man." He said, basically, there are no political angels or devils. He said Barack Obama is a family man. He's a good man. I happen to disagree profoundly with his policies and his vision for the country." So that was an example of him saying no angels and devils. But there was a huge difference between them, a gulf between them.

Serge Prengel:

Yes. I was very moved and I still remember that situation and feel very moved when I remember it. One of the things that is very moving about it is it takes a strength to say, "He is not an evil man," and to say, "I disagree," because "I agree or disagree" puts the emphasis on the other person as a human being as opposed to good and evil. If something is good or evil, I have no responsibility for it. I just happened to have identified what is good. So, looking beyond the good and evil is actually includes taking responsibility for the fact that we may not be right. And that ours is a subjective opinion. Yes.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes. So this goes back to what you were saying before about having agency in this time, to interact with other people, and to move away from the angel-and-devil position, to neither fully agree with the anxious, nor fully agree with the disassociated, nor fully agree with the calm, while connecting with the person, keeping rapport with that person as a human being, politically, personally. Whether the interaction is with our spouse, a member of our community, a member of another political party, our task is to keep emotional rapport and respect while pushing against a position we disagree with.

Serge Prengel:

Yes.

Eric Wolterstorff:

This would help dampen the extremes and help bring us together as a society, to be able to create the conditions to be able to come to the many agreements that we need to, we must have. We have so many challenges right now from, from taking care of our families, to how much social distancing to keep, to how to help small businesses that are falling apart. There are problems with us on all sides and we need everyone—or at least we need a lot more than half of us—to be able to solve these problems.

Serge Prengel:

Yes. So as you've restated, I find it simple and eloquent to separate the person and the position. The difficulty in my mind is that we tend to identify with position because it doesn't feel as solid to say, "I believe this," and it's easier to believe something if we believe it's an absolute truth. So, to do this, requires us to grow into accepting that my belief is potentially questionable. It's not an absolute truth. I am not safe by simply stonewalling others by saying, my position is correct because it's the truth and the rest is false. Yes. So how do we deal with that inherent vulnerability, the vulnerability of saying, "It's just my opinion. I believe strongly in it. I disagree violently with the other position. But you know, after all, I'm realizing that it's only one point of view. It's not absolute truth. It's not absolute science, you know, and I'm vulnerable about stating that." I think that's kind of what makes us harden into wanting it to be an absolute truth.

Eric Wolterstorff:

I agree. Arnie Mindell says that roles are bigger than people, but people are more complex than roles.

Serge Prengel:

Yes.

Eric Wolterstorff:

And so it's easy for us to be swept away by the power and simplicity of a role when we're much more than that as people.

Serge Prengel:

Yes. We're much more than say a Democrat or Republican, a progressive, a conservative, a Trump hater, a Trump lover. So how can we, in practice, find a way to grow into that sense of self?

Eric Wolterstorff:

This comes back to the theme of our talk today, which is that in a time of sustained stress, which we have with the virus and with the stress on the economy, our task is to track the stress in ourself, or the disconnection or dissociation or lack or apparent lack of stress in ourself—to just track that one thing and prepare by reminding ourselves: "When I interact with somebody else, if they're calmer than me around this current stress in our society, then I want to be in rapport in the person, and I want to share more stress with that person. Or, if the person is more stressed than I am, then I want to be in rapport and I want to bring in some calmness. It is to simple do that. In doing so, we'll dampen the polarization and open the flow between us and the other person.

Serge Prengel:

We're in the realm of human communication and human communication is partly about ideas, but is partly about how our nervous system, moods, and emotions. States of nervous systems interact with each other. So communication in a time of crisis and stress is probably much more about the level of stress and how each person is responding to the stress than about the ideas themselves. When we get seduced by simply focusing on the ideas, then we start arguing with them. But we're missing out on maybe what is the most important part of the interaction? You said distress is affecting all of us, so we need to respond to the stress first and then the content, rather than simply arguing about ideas.

Eric Wolterstorff:

Yes. Allen Schore writes about an unconscious conversation that's happening in groups all the time at the level of the nervous system. If we address that first, there's more space for ideas. But if we focus on the ideas, then what's happening with the nervous system runs the show. If we focus only on the ideas, we are captured by the dynamics of the nervous system.

Serge Prengel:

Yes. Literally hijacked, so that's a trauma reaction. If we try to avoid dealing with the nervous system in order to deal with the ideas, in fact we're only acting out within the nervous system dynamic. Just as in therapy, as we come to a more mindful place, it's possible to address things. We're doing the same thing here at the level of society. So this feels like a great place to end. I want to just check if there's something that you might want to add?

Eric Wolterstorff:

Nothing else. This has been a pleasure. Thank you, Serge.

Serge Prengel:

Thank you, Eric.

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