

More about who I am responsible for.

Tom Osborn (Self and Society Vol 3 no 9 Sept 1975)

I recently visited a large number of relatives on my mother's side whom I've never met before. When I say large I mean about 70 - though it was quite a crowd and not always easy to see who was in the family and who wasn't.

It happened in Georgia, in the Soviet Union, where my mother comes from and where I'd never been. So it was a culture, and a family, in one way close to me and therefore with which I had an intimate connection; and at the same time strange to me and therefore which I also felt I could look at with some objectivity. This experience gave me an opportunity to think more about the ideology of responsibility implicit in the growth movement. I thought it was worth reporting on.

The prevailing style of behaviour in Georgia is a tremendous generosity and helpfulness. People are always giving you things and wanting to do things for you, paying for your bus-rides, refusing to take back money they have lent you, taking you home by taxi at night from their house. It is strikingly different from here.

The bright side of this is really beautiful. We met a man on a bus journey to a mountain village and exchanged a few words. Three days later we met him again waiting for the return ride early in the morning before we could get any food. He was on a bus before ours and in the next town, when our bus arrived, this stranger was waiting with a large loaf of bread and a half-kilo of cheese to give us. He refused money, of course.

The down-side, though, is that people aren't very good at listening. They help in the way they want to help you, and they give what they want you to want. They listen with difficulty to what you actually want, and they listen even worse if you don't want. What you want, and also what they want for themselves, are hidden in the rush of their giving. I often had this sense that they are not in touch with their own wants: they live through doing things for others. This is of course an interpretation, and many of them would be surprised and upset to hear it. (Nobody reads Self and Society in Georgia - there isn't a growth movement, but more of that later).

While there, I stayed with a fat Babushka (that is, Grandmother). Our visit was organised at the Georgian end by a cousin, and I stayed in fact with his son (aged 24) who lived with his mother (my cousin's ex-wife), her present husband and her mother. Babushka looked after the place while the others went out to work: and she prepared the food. Actually she spent almost all of her time preparing food.

The whole family could be described as overweight (I mean apart from the son). They ate enormously and they were obsessed with food. The man had been Minister of Food, and his wife designed wrappers in a sweet factory. But Babushka was fattest of all. Food was her means of communicating and her way of giving. At breakfast, fortunately the only meal we had there (my son and I were staying in this flat), she would hover continuously, piling not just slices of bread, but fried potatoes, pancakes, spinach, radish salad, several kinds of cheese, dried fruit, cake, and various other things around us, frequently moving them a little like chessmen and saying 'coushet, coushet', which means eat, eat, in a pleading voice.

I swear this is written with no kind of poetic or journalistic licence. If I asked for an apple, then not only would she buy a generous kilo of apples later the same morning to keep us in good supply but next breakfast-time I would find two or three apples ready peeled and cut up into slices - of course whether I wanted them or not. One day she made a rice and pumpkin dish, which I really liked. I soon wished I hadn't mentioned that, because a large bowl of the stuff appeared each following morning, till I got sick of the sight of it.

And this was the trouble. Within a few days of that kind of treatment I was having not-so-jokey fantasies of her shoving her fat breast into my face. For the last week of our stay I was refusing all her food, drank only a cup of tea which I made myself and had breakfast somewhere else! Such cruelty. She would sigh pitifully with each refusal.

She did, however, teach me something about how to cope with all the food-forcing that went on in the many family feasts that we were invited to. It happened like this. The Russian word for why is *pachimoo*. It means, literally, 'because of what?' If you were offered food which you refused, always came the inevitable question '*pachimoo?*' - uttered with a kind of indignant lilt to the last syllable. At first I didn't know what to say, not knowing the language, so I vaguely shook my head and there was stalemate, with repeated offering, repeated refusal, and repeated *pachimoo*. I learned to say 'I don't want it, thank you' in Russian but this didn't work terribly well.

What I learned from Babushka worked much better. I thought I would play the offerers' own game and, when I was offered something next which I didn't want and hadn't asked for, I would say '*pachimoo?*', with the same indignant lilt.

Babushka was the first offerer after I hit on this plan who offered me something. She offered: I said '*pachimoo?*' She was only flummoxed for a moment, and then came back with a new word for me: '*patamoo*'. *Patamoo* means, I quickly found out, because, or literally 'because of that'. So now, thanks to Babushka, I really did know what to say. Next time I refused and was asked '*pachimoo?*', I said '*patamoo*'.

Much later I learned that the easiest way to deal with unwanted food was to let them put the stuff on your plate and then just leave it. You still sometimes get asked '*pachimoo*', but leaving food is much more acceptable than refusing it. Vast quantities of food were piled on the tables, full dishes actually piled on top of other full dishes because there wasn't enough table space and obviously huge amounts of it must have been thrown away because often much more than half was left at the end and couldn't possibly have been finished off in the following days.

I'm describing these experiences because, vivid enough to me in themselves, they soon began to gel around my continuing desire to relate the characteristic defensive structures of individuals to the characteristic defensive structures of social groups and societies; and they began to illustrate for me how our ideas of individual responsibility are expressions of such composite systems.

First, then, something about individual character structures. I used the term food-forcing deliberately. It's often said, and the paediatricians write, that the commonest cause of food refusal is food forcing. Certainly when Babushka fussed round me I started to feel like a little child. I got a real insight into the way food is pushed into children. And I was asking myself, how on earth do they survive? They do survive. They do it through a characteristic avoidance strategy.

I began to discern some signs of this strategy and its postural expression in the son, i.e. Babushka's grandson. His face displayed a kind of supercilious nonchalance. That's to say his eyebrows were rather permanently raised and he concealed his warmth. His mouth was held in a pout, as if dismissing every approach of concern. When he talked to someone, he looked slightly downwards and from side to side. The sideways motion was carried up from his body through his neck, with a great deal of strength.

He'd developed a considerable ruthlessness. Babushka herself he excluded with a set of the shoulders and neck that produced an almost visible energy barrier. When he spoke to her he was peremptory. If she offered him food he didn't want, or put something on the table inappropriately, he was polite but curt and superior. He seemed determined in his effort not to allow her to disturb his enjoyment of the

food he wanted. I don't think he would stand any nonsense if his real interests were challenged. Yet short of such a real challenge I often experienced him as drifting along, with compliance but not commitment.

I want to emphasise that this was his *defensive* posture. He adopted it often. When he was being harassed by Babushka, when he was driving a car and was in competition with another driver, when he was quarrelling with his mother, when he was arguing with anyone, when he was talking about what he wanted to do in the next few years. But it wasn't fixed. When there were no pressures, he dropped it. When he was recognised or accepted, he dropped it. One such situation (i.e. without pressures) was when he was with people of his own age. This seems important and I shall come back to it.

I perceived him as disliking his situation with Babushka. However, he didn't reject the arrangement. He accepted the food and the attention she gave him, to the extent that he wanted it. She took, and was given, the responsibility for serving food. She didn't seem to get much in return, more than a kind of family servant would. That's how the situation looked to me.

To describe my own relationship with Babushka in terms of responsibility, we could say this. She felt a responsibility to provide me with food and decide what was good for me and what wasn't. I refused to respond to this, and decided I was not responsible for keeping her happy by pretending to like what she gave me. But the way she tried to relate to me seemed to exert some pressure on me to respond (words: respond; response; response-ability) in this way, and I was conscious of denying her this response.

I want to formulate right now two questions which seem crucial. What is the genesis of a pattern of relating which makes it '*normal*' for her to assume this responsibility of providing and deciding, and to expect a receptive response? And what is the genesis of a pattern of relating which makes it '*normal*' to refuse this response?

Babushka was a kind of extreme caricature of the way the social organism of which she was a part seemed to function - and which I want to look at now in terms of its '*social character structure*'. I mean the social organism which is my family there and its connections, possibly even the Georgian society as a whole.

Food was the most important form of communication. It was difficult to communicate in another way. (To be quite clear, I am certain this was not a language problem. I know neither Russian nor Georgian, but we spoke in various other languages and through translation). When we visited anyone, food and drink were pressed on us. Food and drink obviously occupied most of the energy anticipating our visit. Food and drink were, together with talk about relatives and old times, the main topic of conversation.

To arrive and sit together, finding out where everybody was at, letting people be how they wanted to be, this just didn't happen. It did happen with very young people, i.e. in their early twenties, which is important. But for most of the people we visited, food and drink were the *here and now* contact, and also the here and now defence. When a pause threatened in the talk, one was immediately offered more food. When the meal was over it was time to go; when it was time to go, the meal finished. And food was the major symbol of giving and helping.

I think there's a historical factor in the genesis of the character structure of this social organism. Georgia has a vivid and glorious and sophisticated past, going back to the time of ancient Greece and before. The Golden Fleece was hung in Colchis, which now forms the Western part of Georgia. It probably represented the country's extraordinary beauty and its enormous wealth even then, in rich farmlands and in mineral resources. These, together with its position as a defending outpost of Christianity against the Moslems, have led it to be fought

over a good many times, by Romans, Persians, Mongols, Arabs and Turks. (More recently, i.e. 1918-20, it was used as a base for White British and German counter-revolutionary forces). A renaissance flowered in Georgia while Europe was still recovering from the Dark Ages. It is embodied in a great epic poem *The Knight In The Panther Skin*, written some 100 years before Dante's *Divine Comedy* with which it has been compared, and some 200 years before our own much more earthy Chaucer's *Tales*.

The Georgians developed a tradition of proud, generous, brave chivalry. Some of their everyday greetings embody the salutations of warlike struggle. Thus the ordinary vernacular equivalent of our 'hullo' or 'how d'you do' is 'wishing you victory'. The equivalent of 'goodbye' is 'wishing you peace'. The equivalent of our toast 'cheers' is 'be victorious'.

Now, although Georgia today remains breathtakingly beautiful, still has its rich farmlands and its natural resources, and is one of the most admired areas of the Soviet Union, the people that I met, who were I believe ordinary Georgians, some of them in solid positions in the Government and in the professions, seem to live in some important way through a legacy from the past. It's as if giving, helping, drinking, toasting (they are eager and eloquent makers of toasts) are part of a character structure.

So if the giving and the helping that goes on are defensive, then defensive against what?

Let me try an analysis. The Georgians have lost their past glory and its purpose and meaning. In the growth and development of the structure of the individual ego, the Reichian psychologist Alexander Lowen recognises three major kinds of disturbance. These are deprivation, suppression and frustration. He summarises them in this way. (I am extracting from a brief summary at the end of the chapter on character formation and structure in *The Language Of The Body* p.158):

'... the infant has a need to take in energy. If this energy (food, love etcetera) is not forthcoming, there is deprivation. At about the age of three, the child has a growing need to give, to express his affection, to discharge energy. His libido, formerly turned inward, is now directed out into the world, and it needs an object. The lack of an object or, what is the same, of response by the object, causes a frustration.'

Lowen continues: 'Bioenergetically, frustration describes the inability to discharge, deprivation the failure of lack of charge. Suppression involves a denial of right. The child is forced into a passive position.'

Suppose we do a rather free translation, into the area of a social organism and the effect that its situation has on the development of the characteristic behaviour of the individuals who grow up as part of it. Then we could say that to lose meaning is a deprivation, to lose purpose is a frustration, to lose glory is a suppression.

Deprivation in very early childhood is supposed, in the genesis of a character structure, to lead to an oral element in the character, one of whose basic features being, when not covered over, a sense of inner emptiness. To constantly give to another can result from projecting ones own inner emptiness onto the other and keeping him fed and supported.

To draw again from the Georgian vernacular, two terms of endearment which are the equivalent of our 'darling', are made compositely from the two phrases 'your sorrows be on me' and 'let me be your substitute for you in your difficulties'. If the other also has his own inner emptiness, then he will reciprocate and both are mutually defended. A whole social organism could build up a way of behaving like this.

I'm not very committed to this specific analysis. It begs questions, it is an incomplete conceptual picture, it goes beyond the evidence which I have put forward, it has no settled methodology. But I am totally committed to an *approach* which sees the social organism as an entity within its environment, with energy and character dynamics, and with a parallel relationship between the dynamics of the social organism and the individual organisms within it.

I said that a whole social organism could build up a way of behaving like this. But, more likely, a social organism could be *left* with a way of behaving like this, when the original reality situation, leading to this kind of behaviour absolutely appropriately, has changed. The social organism is saddled with it. It is encased in a particular kind of character structure which is a leftover from a past reality.

This reality must ultimately be environmental, economic, practical in its basis. It depends on how a social organism makes its living out of its surroundings; on how that living is threatened; on how the organism specialises within itself; on how its energy flows; on how it can and cannot afford to distribute its energy. And the change also must ultimately be environmental.

This is the really crucial point. What brings about change?

Because one of the things that struck me forcibly during my stay in Georgia is that there are strong pressures for change, at a personal level. In terms of my subjective antennae I felt this acutely. It seemed to me that people were not satisfied with the way they were interacting, and I don't think this was just my projection. Yet, this way is accepted. There seemed to be more tension than in this country, perhaps precisely because no change is happening. Here, when there is pressure for change something usually starts.

This seemed like a contradiction, strong pressures for change and yet no change process. There are no neurotics either! Here, people I meet who are going through a transition (and that is most people I meet) can be perceived also as evolving out of a neurosis. In Georgia, it's not that people are specially integrated or fulfilled but the neuroses are not visible, there is no process of evolution which can be recognised in 'therapeutic' terms.

The relationship between Babushka and her grandson seemed tense. There was a pressure for change. Yet it didn't change. The tension was contained on Babushka's side within her long-standing, solidified character structure which to her made her assumption of particular responsibilities seem normal.

It would have been extraordinarily difficult to *equalise* the relationship. The only way I could actually relate to Babushka in a way that worked for her was to accept her food. I tried giving her flowers, but this was only a gesture, not even received well because Babushka had no developed ability to receive. I emptied the dustbin for her one day and she was astonished and rather horrified.

My other relatives were the same. To get them to agree to let us pay for a meal once for a change, we virtually resorted to threats, and even then the meal was about one quarter the price it should have been through some trickery which we never managed to unfathom (i.e. it could have been them, or the restaurant, or a collusion between the two, but I couldn't find out!)

So from Babushka there would be no pressure for change, and she might have great difficulty in responding to it. The tension was contained on her grandson's side by his defensive character system, which I've already described. One situation in which he relaxed his overtly defensive posture was with people of his own age. Here, with young people, it did seem possible to leave space, to let things happen a little.

However, there is no general movement *out from under* in Soviet society, as there is

here, so far as I could see. And at this point it begins to seem extraordinarily difficult for someone in his position to take responsibility for himself in a way that would make sense for us here.

Look at his situation. He lives with his family. Now this is absolutely the norm in his society. Almost everyone lives with their parents at least till they marry and often long after. Living space, though very cheap, is allocated by the local authorities. Everyone must register their address. There are no squats, and no communes. There is no dissent, and no dropping out. (Well, almost none, and it can be dangerous). He earns little, no-one earns very much, there are a few ways of earning more but they are difficult and some of them are risky, and to get round the allocation system is expensive.

Most people, just accept all this. How can he relate to his grandmother, or his mother and step-father, with responsibility when all his life they have taken certain sorts of responsibility, when it has been normal for them to do so and is built into the structure of the social organism and into the character structure of individuals?

Within the relationship between him and his grandmother there is some pressure for change from his side. But does it come *from* him? The small social organism which is formed by the two of them is not an isolated system. Both the pressure for change, and the resistance to it, have to be related to the larger social organism of which they are a part. The vital question, again, is: what is the nature of the energy which will change this situation? And how can we move with it?

To me it is quite clear that it is an energy which affects the social organism (the social group or the society) as a whole. That it's not isolated individuals making separate decisions. That the change impulse arises from pressures which are widespread.

Babushka actually is not Georgian. She comes from the Ukraine. This led me to wonder whether all this food-dependence in, and on, grandmothers is a characteristic of the whole Soviet Union, or the whole Slav and Caucasian people. (Using the term Caucasian to mean the people who come from the area around the Caucasus mountains).

And then I came to wonder how it would be to visit *THE FAMILY* in Scotland; or Somerset or Lincolnshire or Finland or Belgium or Provence or Umbria or anywhere. Do all grandmothers everywhere try to take responsibility for what I want to eat?

'I am not in this world to live up to your expectations. . . '

In analysing what responsibility means, I came to think of it in four parts.

1. I am responsible means: I am true to my own sense of experience; to my feelings; to my own perception of what's going on. And I have an urge (in the sense of a moral urge) to accept those even when painful; to experience them; to *enjoy* them if possible; and to develop my ability to sense and feel and perceive for myself.
2. I am responsible means: I am independent. I am practical in providing for myself. I make my demands in accordance with my needs. I am not dependent on anyone else for my well-being.
3. I am responsible means: I take care of others who are growing up or have needs which they depend on me for; making sure, however, that I am not taking care of others for my own projected needs, that I am not compromising my own needs without my clear choice, and that I am not sitting on the power of those others to themselves become independent.
4. I am responsible means: I am looking after the resources available to me and

my fellow men and women. I am responsible for the renewal of these resources, for storage of a part of them, for improving their availability and their distribution to everyone, and for guarding against their exhaustion; in fact, together with my fellow men and women, for their management.

This looks a pretty absolute and ideal statement. This is full responsibility. In fact each one of these meanings is relative.

How many people can just be true to their own feelings? What does it even mean? During the Chinese Revolution of 1946, the Eighth Route Army set up what were called 'speak bitterness' meetings in the villages. For the first time many people spoke openly about their experiences under the old feudal system. In this process of sharing made possible by a structural change in the social organism, they expressed and it seems even recognised their own feelings for the first time about events that were previously a part of the nature of things.

Who can be just independent, provide entirely and demand freely for themselves and be well in isolation? I like these goals and think they're important, but I also believe they are romantic ideals. What I see in reality is that the people who glorify them most are too often some group leaders and therapists in fact surrounded by adherents who give up to them their own power and support them in financial and other ways.

As for taking care of others, yes, to give freely without thought of return, either in the future or in the present in terms of my needs, to those who need what I can give, that is a fine ideal. It is a kind of love. But a better kind, surely, is one that is reciprocal, within the realities of the situation, and is recognised as such.

And managing our resources with my fellow men and women, this is the most clearly political meaning. I call it political because unfortunately the social organism where joint responsibility is anything like real is a rarity. For this reason when it comes to managing our resources we are most of the time responsible to someone else with greater ownership, higher pay or more power (usually all three), rather than to a collective of which we ourselves are a part.

The development of individual responsibility is a relative thing. What it is relative to is the state of development of the social organism of which that individual is a part.

Saying that, I still want to achieve responsibility in all four of these meanings as far as *I* personally can. And I still believe it is, in all four of these meanings, a part of a humanist ethic.

A social organism has needs and it has a defensive system. We have to ask, how does a social organism express its needs through individuals? How do individuals mediate the needs of a social organism?

The characteristic defensive structure of an individual forms largely in response to what happens in babyhood. We have to ask why the parents relate to that individual baby as they do. What are they transmitting, in the total pattern of the social organism? And how does this connect with the here-and-now response of that individual to the structure of that social organism? We have to understand the ways in which 'social structure' and 'social structures' (to use two sociological terms); and the defensive structure of a social organism (to extend the use of a Reichian term): how these two sets of phenomena relate to each other.

At present, we are not asking these questions.

After my article last December (*Who Am I Responsible For*), I received a letter from Jenner Hoidale in which she said she didn't think we were *preventing* change by working with individuals. I thought about that for a long time. I agree that we

should work wherever the energy is. But people who are involved in a change process as individuals or at the level of individuals too often don't have any consciousness of the social organism of which they are a part. They get better at making individual choices, but they don't see how these choices take place within the life of a social organism and are a part of its expression. This blindness does, I believe, prevent change.

Much of the individual work that goes on reproduces the existing structures of the social organism within which it takes place. And much of it fosters the blindness to those structures. I have never yet seen anyone acquire a consciousness of the social organism out of individual awareness or development alone. The two have to be deliberately related.

Anyway. For anyone in a therapeutic process, I recommend a visit to the family.

(note 2011 - reading now my formulation of how I see responsibility I can say that this remains part of a humanistic ethic that we have a moral obligation to follow. See the article Tough Humanism).