

But, I had also been told the same story in yet another work context, while I was curating a photo exhibition *The Invisible Children* at the local Industrial Museum. I was not aware of Riley's painting at the time, but more recently stories, dynamics and her painting in some way all came together, as I have been reflecting on my personal journey and my moving away from the centre and of the process of stepping out of the box, and the creativity, courage, perseverance and endurance it has required of me.

The circle could be understood as any societal context, social structure, or broader system and way of being. The positions of the dot can reflect dynamics and positions within this context or / and a path to more authenticity and freedom. Leaving the centre may require an initial leaving behind, a stepping out, a breaking the silence, a level of visibility. This journey could be viewed as our resistance to a life that betrays our truth and our desire to live more in alignment with our humanity and core values, perhaps in the hope of transcending the old and creating something new, in our own life, but also at a collective level. Sometimes our resistance is our ultimate attempt to exist. In my mind, this journey can only be both an inner and outer walk, for if we do not explore deeply what sustains our life and the underlying dynamics the stepping out of our designated roles or position in the centre of the circle may not be possible. However, this is not easy, fast or risk free and it is definitely a process. While on this journey we are bound to come up against opposition and some form of violence, whether that is violation of rights, stalking and harassment, slander and more severe persecution. Some level of martyrdom usually awaits anyone attempting to 'step out' or 'call out the nudity of the emperor'. Bearing witness and absorbing this violence, through creativity and increasing self awareness, inevitably becomes your path. Creativity provides you with the possibility to navigate this journey.

I think that Plato's cave allegory accurately describes the awakening and the initial turning around, the commitment to a new more awakened state of being in the world, and once one has awakened to the broader and deeper reality, the risky affair of returning to talk about what one has seen and experienced. In a nutshell, Plato's allegory talks about the prisoners in the cave, who have never being able to see anything other than the shadows on the wall in front of them, whom they believe to be real and the totality of reality. Reality has been constructed in such a way as to be understood as only what is within their boxed in reality. The cave is real and yet the shadows on the wall are only the shadows of the real things. It is similar to Foucault's metaphor of a mirror, in which he suggests that a mirror is a utopia because the image reflected is a 'placeless place', an unreal virtual place that allows one to see one's own visibility. However, the mirror is also an heterotopia, in that it is a real object. The heterotopia of the mirror is at once absolutely real, relating with the real space surrounding it, and absolutely unreal, creating a virtual image (Wikipedia).

In the allegory the prisoner who is released painstakingly realizes that what he had perceived as reality had been created by others for him. The process is not easy for his eyes hurt as he comes into contact with the bright sunlight and he feels confused and disoriented and full of uncertainty. This initial 'turning around' is a kind of detachment and a moving away from the centre of the circle or the box. There are many factors that can trigger this initial moment in us, ranging from dissatisfaction, dysphoria and indignation to suffering, losses, unfavorable external circumstances or health issues knocking loudly on our door in an attempt to finally wake us up, but ultimately, I think it is our inherent human need to live aligned with our deepest soul

knowing that there is the possibility of a life with more freedom, more justice, more peace, more ethos, more kindness, more connection, more dignity, more colours and shapes, more diversity and more meaning.

The prisoner that has woken up from the lie is then faced with the phase of commitment, which involves uncertainty, confusion, suffering and endurance, but also a feeling of deeper integration and authenticity. Finally, the prisoner reaches the moment of return, when he has changed and has become a witness to what is possible. In Plato's story, there is a probability that the returning prisoner and witness to the new or to the different bigger reality and the truth could be harmed or killed. And across historical contexts people have been persecuted for leaving the centre, for bearing witness and for simply speaking out. The Greek word for witness, witnessing, torture and martyrdom (μάρτυς, μαρτυρία, μαρτύριο) all have the same root. It is not difficult to see how this allegory is very powerful in describing our micro and macro societal constructions across time. The journey also involves speaking with parrhesia, a Greek word, which summarily involves giving a precise account of what one is thinking, being accountable for what one is saying, revealing personal truths, at times not being afraid to name the naked emperor, and this of course involves risks and suffering and requires some level of willingness to absorb the violence that may come our way as a consequence. As I mentioned in a previous post, we offer our life as a blank canvas on which the violence and the injustices become visible.

It took me a while to realise how invested, people I had never met, but also people close to me, as well as, acquaintances, were to define what I could think, write, do or say, and even worse to punish me in some small or bigger way. The more I walked through the wood, the broader my understanding became on what turns people against those who have attempted to step out of the box or speak their truth. One may comply with societal or group requirements even if this requires some level of unethical behaviour and cruelty, so as to be left alone and to feel safe or because one feels threatened by their own truths and unfulfilled life they find that projecting their stuff on others alleviates the suffering. There are multiple reasons and factors that are conducive to this type of societal existing like ingroup pressure, stereotyping, ignorance, conditioning, our human and more personal psychologies, unresolved personal issues that manifest as antisocial behaviours, theories of scarcity and greed, gain, need of approval and of fitting in or our been taught to live according to others' expectations and rules, etc, etc. However, as long as this way of being is condoned and encouraged by a system and as long as non-compliance is too risky people will sustain and feed the circles of fear and persecution losing their dignity and humanity on the way, even though we have the potential to create circles of light and kindness, respect and acceptance, support and freedom. Every time we persecute someone or feel the need to blow out their candle we have unwittingly created less light for ourselves and our own children or loved ones at least in the long run, for everything is interrelated and everything is eventually recycled back to the circle. Violence births more violence; pettiness generates more pettiness and dignity and love create more love and dignity in the world. Martin Luther King Junior said: *'In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be..... This is the inter-related structure of reality'*.

