

Meeting the Other – Present-day Dilemmas

We live in a world of distinctions and divisions, one of them being the distinction between “us” and “them”. According to Bauman, however, it is from this antagonism, that something very important comes into being, namely our identity. It may be said that “each side is given an identity thanks to the simple fact that it recognises itself in contrast to the other. This leads to a rather surprising conclusion: “the others” constitute a contrasting image, which we need for our own identity (...)”¹. Kapuściński, in turn, adds that “the Other is a mirror in which I examine myself (...)”². Therefore, I must go to meet him, because then I will get to know not only him but also myself.

In order to meet the Other and enter into a dialogue with him we set out on a journey, which is certainly not going to be a tourist adventure. The journey is, as Kapuściński says: “a challenge and an effort, toil and sacrifice, a difficult task or an ambitious project to carry out. While on the journey, we feel that something important is happening, that we are participating in something that we are at the same time witnessing and creating, that it is our duty and that we are responsible for something.”³. We are responsible for the route. It happens that the route we have chosen, the journey we have embarked on is the only one and unique. We must not, therefore, shed, miss or lose anything from it. After all, we will have to report it and examine our conscience⁴.

Therefore, those of us who intend to make this journey, those who have a passion for travelling and are filled with longing to meet the Other, will have to prepare for the journey. This preparation also applies to the journey towards the disabled, to meeting him and to the encounter with his otherness.

I suppose that these words are spoken to a community of people who have undertaken the special journey towards the Other and, as a result, have undertaken to coexist with him, help and support him. Most of us have prepared or are still preparing for this journey. We prepare our students for it, too. We focus their and our attention on reflecting upon texts referring to meeting the Other (the ideas of M. Buber, E. Lévinas and J. Tischner are very

¹ Z.Bauman, *Socjologia*, Poznań 1996, s.49.

² R.Kapuściński, *Ten Inny*, Kraków 2006, s.72.

³ *Ibidem*, s.12.

⁴ *Ibidem.*, s.12 i nast.

often an inspiration here). In the process of educating students we also reach for the richness of pedeutological thought, reflecting upon the person of the teacher--form tutor. We wonder what features should characterise the travelling companion of a disabled person if he or she is at the same time a person helping the disabled by profession. Taking a new look at writings that one could consider "outdated" (eg. those of M. Grzegorzewska or J. Korczak), we find universal and up-to-date threads which facilitate the development of the ideal of meeting the Other.

Speaking about preparing for the meeting, we could, I think, refer to the reflection made by Bauman in his text "Dar i wymiana" ["Gift and Exchange"]. He points out that relationships between people are governed by two rules, which very often stand in opposition to each other: the rule of equal exchange and the rule of gift. In the case of the former, one's own interest becomes the most important. Bauman says that "what counts here is only fair payment for services rendered to another person. 'How much shall I get?' 'What shall I gain as a result?' 'Would something else be more profitable'?" (...)"⁵. In the case of a gift, the situation is different. We "give some good or perform certain actions only because the other person needs them and he or she is the one who has the right to expect that we will cater for his or her needs."⁶ Bauman adds that at the source of a pure gift lies the respect for the other person's humanity, whereas the reward that the giver receives is moral satisfaction.

The pure gift will certainly be, according to Bauman, voluntary work for the needy, i.e. the disabled. Therefore, for many of us or for our students, this kind of relationship will mean the fulfilment of an ideal meeting with the Other. Shall we allow, however, that such an idyllic vision lure us? Can we base our professional identity on it? Will it not be shaken as a result of confrontation with the "harsh reality", in which we will have to meet the Other? So what shall we, i.e. people helping the Other, be like?

Reflecting upon the model of a special educator, Kosakowski rightly observes that this model cannot be separated from the social changes that are taking place⁷. Hence, in the course of my considerations, I am going to demonstrate certain flaws that may appear on the ideal model of meeting the Other in confrontation with the reality and current social changes.

It happens ever so often that we are filled with ideals when we embark on the journey towards the Other and then continue with the Other. We are equipped not only with the humanistic model of the meeting, which constitutes a framework for our professional or

⁵ Z.Bauman, Socjologia, op.cit., s.97.

⁶ Ibidem,s.97.

⁷ Cz.Kosakowski, Węzłowe problemy pedagogiki specjalnej, Toruń 2003.

human identity, but we also possess specific skills and professional competence which enable us to support a person with a disability. Unfortunately, the outside conditions in which we happen to be working with a disabled person, often violate our vision of the meeting developed on the basis of theoretical criteria. The reality we are confronted with cannot fulfil the promises we were given during our theoretical journey and reflection upon the issues connected with the meeting.

Many times we hear from our graduates (or we experience this ourselves) that our places of work and the rules that are in force in no way match their expectations about the ideal. The space where the meeting with the Other takes place simply turns out to be an institution rendering specific services, governed by its own rules and functioning in accordance with a definite institutional knowledge. Kowalik characterises this knowledge as a set of formalised written rules of different kinds, which determine the way in which a certain institution functions. On the other hand, there are standards of conduct established by tradition. We do not have to accept these standards, but we do have to obey them, if we want to obtain employment at a given institution⁸.

Hence, there appears the first flaw on the model of the meeting, so arduously constructed. “It was not supposed to be like this” – will say a graduate of pedagogy, psychology or any other major preparing people for helping the Other. Unfortunately, the job market forces him to comply with certain requirements and either he will meet them or another graduate from the list will be employed. Consequently, the majority of graduates comply with the requirements, although with a feeling that perhaps they did not want to work in such a place or in a way that requires them to apply methods which they do not approve of but which are in force at a given institution.

Another flaw may refer to the feeling of disappointment with the Other. Lured by the ideology of meeting the Other, naively delighted with the values that the meeting could bring, we tend to exaggerate. Rzedzicka draws our attention to this issue, quoting after L. Witkowski the key axiological thesis, “according to which values, especially those associated with good, do not tolerate exaggeration. It is exaggeration that neutralises these values. Falling into fundamentalism or giving lavish praise even for something very necessary or valuable, turns into its own opposite and acquires a different meaning.”⁹.

⁸ S.Kowalik, *Psychologiczne podstawy rehabilitacji osób niepełnosprawnych*, Katowice 1999.

⁹ K.Rzedzicka, *Pomaganie Innemu – misja czy umiejętność* [w:] *Poznańska pedagogika specjalna, tradycje – osiągnięcia – perspektywy rozwoju*, red. W.Dykcik, Poznań 2006, s.117.

This problem is also noticed by Kowalik, especially in the context of changes which have occurred in our society as regards the improvement of relations between people with no disabilities and the disabled. Kowalik suggests that demonstrating our humanistic attitude (which is what becomes us – K.K.) through “emphasising the nobleness, dignity, special spirituality of the disabled may paradoxically lead to the effect of the holy cow.”¹⁰ . Kowalik points out the negative consequence of showing excessive appreciation for the disabled, who then start to believe that because of their disability they should be treated with special respect, which may result in the adoption of a demanding attitude.

Yet another flaw that I notice is connected with the fall of the welfare state, which is in retreat these days. According to Bauman, the welfare state, in return for their loyalty and obedience, gave its citizens a promise to protect them against redundancy, exclusion, rejection and the effects of accidents or to prevent them from being turned into “waste people”¹¹ . There is no such state any more, and the effects of its disappearance afflict especially the disabled, which is confirmed by the research conducted by Ostrowska, Sikorska and Gąciarz. Their findings reveal that the introduction and reinforcement of market economy, limiting the power of the welfare state as well as the introduction of health care and other reforms have considerably influenced the living conditions of the disabled. As the authors mentioned above write, “the changes that have occurred in the system afflict especially those who are objectively weaker and who have found themselves in a new, more difficult situation, in the face of a limited access to many goods and services.”¹² . This includes services which involve assistance essential for their for them to make the best of their lives. In many cases insufficient funding of rehabilitation (at least in the case of services contracted by the Polish National Health Fund) causes us to work with a feeling that we do not provide effective assistance for the disabled person. Are we obliged, therefore, to give him/her the “pure gift” mentioned by Bauman, as a result of which we will experience moral satisfaction? Should a therapist working with an autistic child for several hours a week, devote a few times as much time to him in the form of a “gift”, because only then can he/she count on improvement in the way the child functions? This is impossible, because the therapist has more than one child in his/her care and in addition to this, has other professional or family duties.

¹⁰ S.Kowalik, *Psychologia rehabilitacji*, Warszawa 2007, s. 109.

¹¹ Z.Bauman, *Zycie na przemiał*, Kraków 2004.

¹² A.Ostrowska, J.Sikorska, B.Gąciarz, *Osoby niepełnosprawne w Polsce w latach dziewięćdziesiątych*, Warszawa 2001.

As a consequence, the confrontation of the humanistic model of meeting the Other with the harsh reality in which we live may be painful for its enthusiasts. If putting this humanistic model into practice seems impossible, perhaps it is worth abandoning the ideals that we have preserved so far and start treating the space in which we meet the Other as a service market governed by the rule of “equal exchange”¹³ . and the disabled person as a customer, which word more and more often replaces such terms as charge, for example. This way of perceiving the disabled is more and more common. If the state no longer provides free assistance or rehabilitation for people with disabilities, various institutions and professionals can render these services on condition that the disabled as buyers of the services can afford them. The fact that the disabled person is a solvent buyer results in approval for his/her presence. It also entails friendliness and tolerance towards the person¹⁴.

However, does the form of contact presented above make an authentic meeting possible? Whom do I see (if we quote Kapuściński’s words) while examining myself in the mirror of the Other? A traveller taking responsibility for the journey, interested in having an authentic meeting with the Other? Or maybe only an enterprising professional who wants to seize the opportunity and cheat his client out of his money? These two possibilities are obviously extreme cases. The former refers to the humanistic ideal of a meeting with the Other, whereas the latter is its caricature.

We should however ask ourselves how we could deal with the question of helping the Other in the context of meeting him. Shall we treat this help as a “pure gift” or rather as an “equal exchange”? In my view, in the days of reforms and a free service market, choosing the latter option becomes inevitable. We should take into account professional ethics, however, so that we could avoid a situation similar to the one that K. Dunin has noticed in the health care system, where the question of profit obscures the idea of helping the Polish patient, “who then humbly asks: have I got the right to have any expectations, if a doctor in Poland earns so little? It is as if professional ethics applied only to people earning over PLN 7,000 per month.”¹⁵.

One cannot separate the question of providing assistance from the changes occurring in society. Nor can one separate it from market laws as this connection is inseparable these days. Let us not then promote the ideology of an idyllic model of meeting and helping a disabled person and let us not expect of ourselves or others unconditional implementation of

¹³ por. Z.Bauman, Socjologia, op. cit.

¹⁴ por. A.Krause, Człowiek niepełnosprawny wobec przeobrażeń społecznych, Kraków 2005.

¹⁵ K.Dunin, Poradnia „S”, „Wysokie Obcasy” 2007, nr 33 (434).

this model. Such implementation will always entail a conflict between the ideal we strive for and reality. We should rather seek our own, ethical way on which the question about our identity, i.e. “Whom do I see while examining myself in the mirror of the Other?” will serve as a signpost.

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