



Fables and Reflections

Fourteen

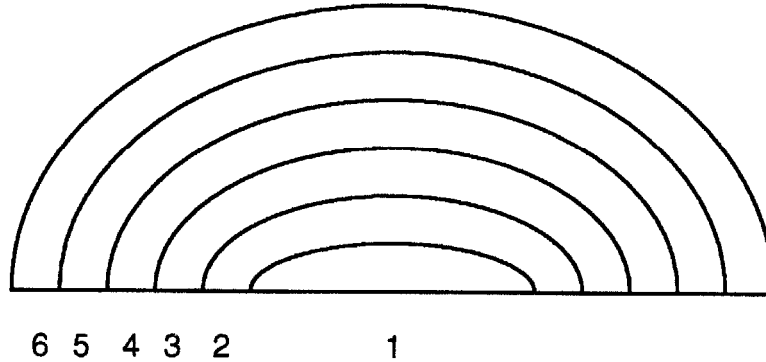
Rome Burning

We live in times when none of us can be sure of the ground we stand on. In effect, the ground moves too fast and in too many directions. The process can make us feel insignificant, meaningless, powerless ; and this does harm to our capacity to act.

Either we fail to act altogether, we “don’t get involved” , so switch off, disconnect, go shopping ; or we act halfheartedly, in despair, confusion, doubt, fear for ourselves ; or we hide in action behind precedent, rigidity, over-simple ideology, conformism, fanaticism. It becomes ever more difficult just to act rightly, with whole conviction, all one’s faculties free and unfearful ; and to know where and how to act with effectiveness and meaning.

In a burning Rome, why iron shirts ? In a burning Rome, what is the point of treating someone for a head-ache ? In a burning Rome, what do you do ?

The diagram below is often useful to me :



The horizontal line represents ground, the ground of our being. The surrounding arcs represent spheres of operation. Arc 1 represents the inner or most immediate sphere. It could be a person, or the core of that person. It could be your immediate family or workplace. The outer arcs, getting wider and wider, represent the different spheres of operation this unit occupies and relates to.

For example, Jane Smith carves her name on the old school desk. She writes : Jane Smith, 3 St John’s Road, Personhampton, England, Europe, the Earth, the Solar System etc. If we apply Jane’s carving to the diagram, she herself will occupy the space created by Arc 1. In Arc 2 is her house and family . In Arc 3 is the street she lives in, her immediate neighbourhood. In Arc 4 is her town. In 5 the country. In 6 the continent. And so on.

Or a community centre, where people otherwise isolated might gather. Arc 1 is the centre. Arc 2 contains its membership. Arc 3 those people's families and communities. Arc 4 local resources, support services and institutions. Arc 5 the centre's place in and relationship to the whole community work scene. Arc 6 that scene's place in and relationship to the country's welfare provision as a whole. And so on.

Or Rome.

Arc 1 contains a Roman official. Arc 2 the office where he works. Arc 3 the aspect of Roman life for which his office has responsibility. Arc 4 the whole organisation of Roman life and culture of which his office is a part. Arc 5 Roman life as it relates to other cultures, for instance there on the walls which have just been breached by barbarians carrying torches.

And so on. We can now put the questions : in which arc, or sphere of operation, does Jane Smith mostly live ? To which arc or sphere of operation does our community centre mostly belong ? Which arc or sphere of operation should hold the attention of the Roman official ? Where should they concentrate their functioning ?

My answer is that they belong equally in all spheres but in different ways. They will function in one sphere more than another, depending on circumstances and character.

I believe the diagram offers guidelines for action. I propose its use has the following implications :

Whatever your sphere of operation, your activities will neither be meaningful nor will flourish unless your centre, the innermost sphere, the core, is in good shape ; is secure, focussed and operational. Literally, your centre must be solid to avoid the outer spheres collapsing on it.

Thus, you need a secure home-base, a secure centre, to go out from, and to return to, and to trust in when you are away.

Wherever you go, in body, in thought, or in action, you need to validate yourself by means of a solid centre before extending yourself beyond it.

If all goes well in the outer spheres, or if colleagues placed there are functioning adequately, then you can concentrate on work close in, without risk to creativity, integrity or meaning.

But in the following circumstances, you are obliged logically and morally to function in the outer spheres, remembering that you will function better there the more solid, meaningful and operational your inner centre, your home-base, remains :

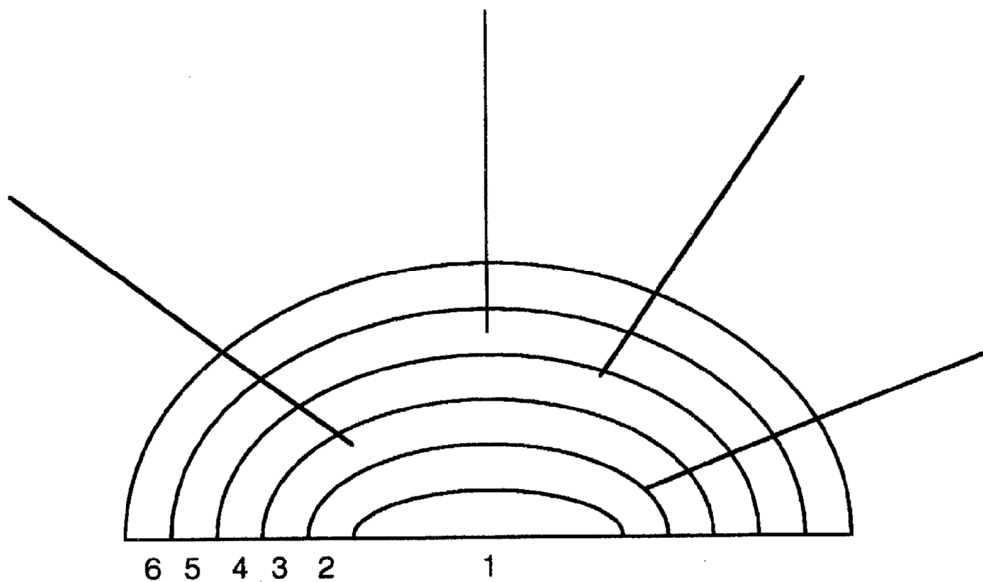
- if your centre, your home-base, is threatened from without, in literal terms, or in terms of principle, meaning or credibility, and the appropriate organisations or people in authority are not providing adequate protection or articulation.

- if what you have or do in your inner sphere, or home-base is of special value, meaning or relevance to other spheres, and is not already in evidence there, for whatever reason.

In these circumstances, you do not need an end in view and should not presume to know one. You should merely extend your functioning outward from sphere to sphere as far as resources allow and only so far as your initiative remains meaningful, relevant and solidly based. What results, what follows, cannot be planned for and to try would be both presumptuous and unwise. All you can be sure of is that if the original position is sound, the *products* of that position are likely to be sound as well.

In uncharted territory, lost in turmoil, I have used this diagram of the arcs, of the spheres of operation, both as a kind of map and also as an anchorage. It is my Jane Smith. At a time when it is harder and harder to hold centre-ground, when out-dated concrete and linear thinking (in steely bright new guise) have such a powerful and all-conquering attraction, the principle and system given shape by this diagram have acted almost as a platform, a foothold in the midst of breaking ground.

I have used it too as a system of prioritisation, as a way of selecting action from action. To develop the use of the diagram to offer detailed help with prioritisation, the diagram itself needs to be developed. Thus :



In this developed version, the additional lines, the “rays”, represent events, or claims upon the attention of the person or persons in the inner sphere. If the rays have a direction, it is inward, in towards arc 1, and they come to rest at different points relative to arc 1, depending on the sphere of their chief impact.

For example, if four events have just now taken place, or there are four claims for attention simultaneously pressing in on the actor(s) in sphere 1, the following simple principle can be used to help with the decision on how and in what order of priority to respond :

In normal circumstances, the more close in is the point of impact of the event , the more immediately it should be attended to. For instance, a client in crisis comes before the need to write the centre's business plan. A fire in the office should be tackled before keeping an appointment for a business lunch.

In times of threat and crisis, however, it would be consistent to reverse this rule. If an event takes place in an outer sphere that threatens the whole operation right through to the centre, then that outer sphere requires an immediate response and all available resources from within must be co-opted to help face out.

The Roman official, for example, presented with Rome burning, would do well to forget the untidy state of his office, his anger with his boss, or his personal career ambitions ; he needs to face out ; and offer what help he can at the point at which the fire is burning.

Rogan Wolf