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A Review of Adam Kahane's *POWER AND LOVE*

POWER AND LOVE is the second of Adam Kahane's three magnificent books on his 25 years of work on some of the world's most difficult social problems. Although not a formal trilogy, the three books build on a cumulative body of work, and each develops a separate discovery.¹

The first was *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking Listening, and Creating New Realities*. Published in 2004, *Solving Tough Problems* concluded that "the key to creating new social realities is to open ourselves up and connect: to our own true selves, to one another, and to our context and what it demands of us." In the preface to *POWER AND LOVE*, Kahane writes:

Five years and many experiences later, I can see that this conclusion was right, but only half right, and dangerously so.

POWER AND LOVE picks up where *Solving Tough Problems* left off and reports the second discovery. In order to address our toughest challenges, we must indeed connect, but this is not enough: we must also grow. In other words, we must exercise both love (the drive to unity) and power (the drive to self-realization). If we choose either love or power, we will get stuck in re-creating existing realities, or worse. If we want to create new and better realities—at home, at work, in our communities, in the world—we need to learn how to integrate our love and our power.

In just 140 pages, Kahane lays out his astonishingly clear vision for that integration, and weaves together a wealth of illustration and insight, drawn from his own work and from an array of dialogue colleagues and experts in other fields.

The starting point is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s conception of power and love as polar, colliding opposites:

Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change ... And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. Now we've got to get this

¹ The third book is *TRANSFORMATIVE SCENARIO PLANNING: Working Together to Change the Future*, published in 2012.

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right. What [we need to realize is] that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic ... It is precisely this collision of immoral power and powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.

Kahane's definitions of "power" and "love" address the stereotypical conflict alluded to by Dr. King—power as the denial of love, and love as the resignation of power—and are borrowed from one of the book's key references, theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich:

Power [is] "the drive of everything living to realize itself, with increasing intensity and extensity. So power in this sense is the drive to achieve one's purpose, to get one's job done, to grow" ... *Love* [is] "the drive towards the unity of the separated." So love in this sense is the drive to reconnect and make whole that which has become or appears fragmented. (p. 2)

Kahane argues that tough social challenges can be solved only by understanding "power" and "love" as a "duality" or "unity" and by applying them together:

None of us lives in *terra nullius*. We can pretend that our world is empty, but it's ... increasingly full of people and buildings and cars and piles of garbage ... Our society is increasingly full of diverse, strong, competing voices and ideas and cultures. This *fullness* is the fundamental reason why, in order to address our toughest social challenges, we need to employ not only power but also love. (p. 4)

He says that the "toughness" of a social challenge arises from its complexity, which has three aspects (dynamic, social and generative):

... *dynamically complex* when cause and effect are interdependent and far apart in time and space ... cannot successfully be addressed piece by piece, but only by seeing the system as a whole ...

socially complex when the actors involved have different perspectives and interests ... cannot successfully be addressed by experts or authorities, but only with the engagement of the actors themselves ...

generatively complex when its future is fundamentally unfamiliar or undetermined ... cannot successfully be addressed by applying "best practice" solutions from the past, but only by growing new, "next practice" solutions. (p. 5)

Much of Kahane's work and writing—and the heart of this book—is about what it means to be "stuck" and what it takes to become "unstuck":

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When we pretend that our world is empty rather than full, and that our challenges are simple rather than complex, we get stuck. If we want to get unstuck, we need to acknowledge our interdependence, cooperate, and feel our way forward. We need therefore to employ not only our power but also our love. If this sounds easy, it is not. It is difficult and dangerous. (p. 5)

Kahane's theme of "duality" extends to both the nature and relationship of power and love. Each has two sides—one generative and the other degenerative—and each complements the other. He credits feminist scholar Paola Melchiori for pointing out that these two sides can be seen in historically constructed gender roles:

The father, embodying masculine power, goes out to work, to do his job. The generative side of his power is that he can create something valuable in the world. The degenerative side ... is that he can become so focused on his work that he denies his connection to his colleagues and family, and so becomes a robot or a tyrant ...

The mother, by contrast, embodying feminine love, stays at home to raise the children. The generative side of her love is that she gives life, literally to her child and figuratively to her whole family. The degenerative side ... is that she can become so identified with ... her child and family that she denies their and especially her own need for self-realization, and so stunts their and her own growth.

Love is what makes power generative instead of degenerative. Power is what makes love generative instead of degenerative. Power and love are therefore exactly complementary. In order for each to achieve its full potential, it needs the other. (p. 7)

Throughout *POWER AND LOVE* the generative side of power is referred to as "power-to" (the drive to self-realization), and power's degenerative, shadow side is called "power-over" ([the abuse of] force and compulsion to suppress or oppress or dominate another. Degenerative power-over arises out of generative power-to:

When I am exercising my power-to and I feel myself bumping up against you exercising yours, and if in this conflict I have the capacity to prevail over you, then I can easily turn to exercising power over you. My drive to realize myself slips easily into valuing my self-realization over yours, and then into believing arrogantly that I am more deserving of self-realization, and then into advancing my self-realization even if it impedes yours. (pp. 17-18)

"Power-over" can take many forms, from highly visible, personal and charismatic, to hidden, underground, bureaucratic, systemic and societal. Kahane uses Ken Lay, former CEO of Enron, to illustrate how difficult it can be to resist—or even to recognize—personal, charismatic

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power-over when its holder is flying high. Post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Canada are presented as case studies in systemic, societal power-over.

Kahane's account of his work in Canada on Aboriginal relations provides examples of two of the book most appealing qualities: the embedding of pithy, powerful insights in compelling stories; and the author's unflinching honesty. Kahane tells us that after four years of frustratingly slow progress in working with a team of Canadian government officials and Aboriginal leaders on a project to reduce suicide rates among Aboriginal youth, he complained to his friend and activist, Michel Gelobter, about difficulties in trying to communicate with the staff of an Aboriginal-run conference centre. Gelobter's response, followed by Kahane's reflection, are compelling:

"Why are you surprised that oppressed communities exhibit serious dysfunctions? These dysfunctions have to be recognized and dealt with; they reinforce and maintain oppression by diminishing the capacity of these communities to heal." The degenerative impacts of power-over are resolutely persistent.

I also noticed that within our microcosmic project team, we succeeded in re-creating the stuck relationships that characterized the macrocosm we were trying to change. The government wanted to remain in control and to "fix" the aboriginal problem. The aboriginal leaders didn't want to be controlled or fixed or developed by anyone. And those of us who were consultants dispassionately kept ourselves apart from and above the situation. We all had our own different roles and powers and trajectories of self-realization, which never really moved and never really met. So we made no progress on the challenge that we had set out to address. (p. 23)

A seductive element of *POWER AND LOVE* is its elegant use of references, and its name-dropping. Peter Senge appears several times, endorsing various undertakings by Kahane and his colleagues. Also frequently referenced is Joseph Jaworski, a Generon partner, son of Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski, and co-author (with Otto Scharmer, Peter Senge and Betty Sue Flowers) of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*—a well-known study that introduced "U-Process"² to the dialogue world.

Kahane describes as a "radical aspect" of the U-Process concept "its emphasis on uniting the creative leader with other stakeholders, with the larger context, and with his or her own higher self." (p. 37) In a marvelous piece of writing that's succinct, fluid and full of nuggets, he pivots

² A general theory for understanding and implementing the creation of new realities, involving three "movements" represented by the letter "U." Left side of the U: "sensing" – developing a felt sense of the current reality of the system that we are trying to understand and change. Bottom: "presencing" – tapping into ... a deeper knowing about our role in the system and what is needed of us. Right side: "realizing" – acting from this place of deeper knowing to bring forth a new reality. (p. 37)

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to a discussion of the process of “collective innovation”—described as “generative dialogue” in *Solving Tough Problems*—and then to the dangers of “degenerative love”:

Love without power—unity without space for self-realization—is not merely sentimental and anemic [King's terms] but is deceitfully reinforcing of the status quo ... Love creates opening, potential, and opportunity, but power is required for these to be tested and realized ... Love without power is unity that constrains or undermines self-realization ...

In working on social change, love without power manifests in a feel-good connection that is impotent: it does not and cannot produce real change. Otto Scharmer points out that the practice of what he calls “downloading,” of reenacting the status quo by saying what we always say and doing what we always do, produces a polite, conflict-avoiding, counterfeit wholeness ... Hidden beneath the surface of counterfeit love without power is a self-deceiving and self-serving power without love.

Love without power is dangerous because power is never absent—only sometimes concealed ...

This problem of love that conceals power often shows up in the helping professions, where power is always present but frequently undiscussable ...

And as a facilitator, I have noticed that people are most aggrieved when they feel manipulated by me: when they think that their voice and power are being ignored or twisted in the supposed service of a larger or higher unity. **The most degenerative, perverted form of love is that which denies or represses or covers up self-realizing power.** (pp. 36-48)

Compressing those 12 pages into these few lines doesn't do justice to the depth of Kahane's thinking and the richness of his prose—in this passage on degenerative love and throughout the book. Every page rewards reading, reflection, and re-reading.

That said, you could skim *POWER AND LOVE* in an evening, and come away with a fair understanding of Kahane's basic message: our seriously complex problems defy both unilateral and off-the-shelf action, and call for the commitment of our individual and collective energy to engaging and balancing our twin drives of self-realization and reunification—in supporting inclusive, generative dialogue, out of which new solutions sometimes emerge. The beauty and value of the book lies in the inspiration offered through its stories, and the insights embedded in them.

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Chapter 1 explains “The Two Sides of Power.” Chapter 2 reveals “The Two Sides of Love.” Chapter 3 unravels “The Dilemma of Power and Love,” explaining the importance of finding a way to reconcile these two fundamental drivers of social change—rather than trying to choose between them. Chapters 4, “Falling,” 5, “Stumbling” and 6, “Walking” use a series of brilliant two-legged metaphors to, in Kahane’s words:

... lay out a progression of three modes of employing power and love—from the most polarized and stuck to the most integrated and fluid—in working collectively to effect social change: in “Conclusion: To Lead Means to Step Forward,” I suggest a way to work individually through this same progression, from falling to stumbling to walking, and so become more capable of addressing our toughest challenges. (pp. xi-xii)

POWER AND LOVE closes with an explanation of the importance of looking inward for the keys to co-creating new social realities; that seems a good way to close this review of a truly majestic little book:

In the previous chapters I have outlined the challenges, pitfalls, and requirements of walking together. But we cannot walk far and fast collectively if we cannot walk individually, on our own two feet. To contribute to co-creating new social realities, we have only one instrument: our selves. We cannot rely on others to effect change for us; nor can we, without violence, **get** others to change. **If we want to exercise leadership in changing the world, we must be willing to change ourselves.** (p. 127)

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APPENDIX: A Few More Nuggets

1. How to Walk – [Build and Use a Container] (pp. 121-122)

An African proverb says, “If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.”³ Our tough social challenges increasingly require us to walk fast and far and together. When we are on smooth and familiar ground, we may be able to do this easily, even without paying attention. But in order to move forward fluidly on the uneven and unsteady and unfamiliar ground on which we increasingly find ourselves, we need a way to build our capacity for employing both our power and our love collectively.

How can we support the deliberate practice of collective walking in such complex contexts? By carefully constructing a container within which a team can address the tough social challenges that they all want to resolve but that none of them can resolve alone. ... [A] container must be at the same time both spacious enough and delimited enough to enable a team to experiment, play, and practise both creatively and safely.

2. Mitigating Climate Change in Canada (p. 113-120)

This section is a brilliant short essay in itself!

At page 114: [C]limate change epitomizes, in the extreme, everything we know about tough social challenges: how they arise, why they get stuck, and what it takes to get unstuck and to move forward. It demonstrates the extreme fullness of our world and the global interdependence this produces. It exemplifies extreme dynamic, social and generative complexity: cause and effect interlinked and separated by decades and continents; deeply differing perspectives and priorities among the worldwide actors involved; and a situation that no one has ever faced before. And it provides an extreme answer to the question of what it is that belongs essentially together and is therefore driven to reunification: all of humanity, plus the ecosystems on which we depend. **Climate change demands that we co-create new low-carbon social realities on a scale and at a speed that is without precedent. It demands that we learn collectively how to exercise 100% of our power and 100% of our love.**

³ Note that Lorraine Mitchelmore, President of Shell Canada, channeled Kahane and this African proverb in an op-ed piece published by the Globe and Mail—the day after Premier Notley announced Alberta’s game-changing carbon plan:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/shell-canada-president-why-our-industry-got-behind-albertas-carbon-plan/article27465831/>

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3. Buckminster Fuller Quote (pp. 112-113)

“You never change things by fighting existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

4. On Tackling Generatively Complex Problems (pp. 118-120)

By definition, we cannot address challenges that are essentially unfamiliar and unpredictable simply by implementing an already proven or worked-through plan. My partner Marianne Bojer suggests that **faced with such overwhelming complexity we have two choices: to give up or surrender. Giving up means abandoning our effort to co-create new social realities and so reverting to either aggressive war or submissive peace. Surrendering means acknowledging that we can neither calculate nor control the outcome, and plunging into carving our way forward.**

Deng Xiaoping ... was referring to such an emergent approach when he explained the challenge of navigating China's unprecedented transition towards a socialist market economy: “We are crossing the river by feeling for stones.”