
ENVIRONMENTAL REMEDIATION & PSYCHOLOGICAL REPARATION

INSEAD

Executive Master in Consulting and Coaching for Change
Wave 29

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“We should rescue the Housatonic and clean it as we have never in all the years thought to before of cleaning it, and seek to restore its ancient beauty; making it the center of a town, of a valley, and perhaps – who knows? – of a new measure of civilized life.”

W.E.B. Du Bois

21 July 1930

To my parents for their boundless guidance

To my wife for her boundless support

To my children for their boundless joy

To my wave for their boundless friendship

ABSTRACT

We live in a world filled with unresolved environmental trauma. As governments, industry, and public interest groups grapple to find a solution to the climate crisis, communities attempt to heal the scars that decades of industrial pollution have wrought to their lands and waterways. This thesis focuses on one small community in New England in the United States and its fraught efforts to remediate nearly a century of toxic dumping by one of the world's largest corporations. After decades of protracted disputes and appeals, a recently mediated cleanup agreement has finally been reached by a wide majority of stakeholders. While the agreement provides a path forward for the community as a whole, it has created further trauma for those most affected and involved. Through the lens of object relations and the dynamics of bullying, I attempt to analyze the various forms of psychological regression within a public information session and draw connections to the psychic space and history of the area in order to explore the possibility of a meaningful path towards healing.

KEYWORDS

Environmental trauma, bullying, object relations theory, intractable conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Centuries of runaway industrial growth have gone hand in hand with irreversible levels of carbon emissions, toxic pollution, waste accumulation, and resource scarcity. As the world wrestles with the reality of an existential climate crisis, all eyes are on humanity's ability to steer its way towards a future that is safe for human health and the environment. Beyond any future carbon budget agreement, governments, businesses, and communities must also reconcile with the environmental destruction of the past.

Decades of hazardous dumping, toxic spillage, and carbon pollution by some of the world's largest corporations have altered ecological landscapes across the planet. In 2020, the Toxic Site Identification Program identified nearly 5,000 toxic sites across 50 under-developed and developing countries around the world (TSIP, 2020). In the United States alone, more than half of the country's population lives within a five-kilometer radius of one of the more than 18,000 hazardous waste sites nationwide, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers (Infrastructure Report Card, 2017). The stress and trauma from human-caused disasters have been found to persist longer than those caused by natural disasters (Green & Solomon, 1995).

The cleanup or remediation of these sites requires a myriad of state and federal statutory decrees and agreements. The process can become extremely litigious and end up in appeals boards and courts for decades (Guerrero, 1997). The longer communities live in these hazardous surroundings, the deeper their unresolved environmental trauma grows. Even after cleanup agreements are settled and concrete plans are executed, unacknowledged pain and suffering may prevent members of the community from emotional healing. Unchecked, this could lead to the derailment or further delay of any cleanup or recovery efforts.

This thesis examines the struggle of one small community to remediate and reconcile with its toxic past. A recent environmental mediation agreement between multi-parties has provided a path forward for many in the community. However, in the process, it has also surfaced some longstanding, unresolved trauma. I treat a public information session on the issue as a critical incident to explore the underlying psychodynamics within the various groups. Through the lens of object relations and the dynamics of bullying, I try to connect the complex relationship of its past with its present intractability in order to search for a way towards environmental and social healing.

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

What causes such intractable conflict? Beyond the surface of political, environmental, and legal agreements, what unconscious issues remain unresolved? What prevents part of a community from moving forward? What are the psychological repercussions of prolonged environmental disputes? This thesis will examine these questions through an object relations framework (Klein, 1946). I will analyze a critical incident within the community to uncover underlying factors that contribute to these debilitating conditions. To better understand what is unresolved and unacknowledged, I attempt to observe and highlight what is not being said or addressed. This will enable us to gain a deeper level of understanding and empathy for those who are most affected.

I also explore the deep history of the community and its ties to both business and nature. Through this lens, I will hypothesize how the collective unconscious of a community and a corporation can be understood through the phenomenon of bullying, and based on this understanding, whether it allows for a way forward for all parties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While scholars have written extensively on restorative environmental justice and alternative dispute resolution, relatively little appears to have been written about unresolved environmental trauma suffered by a community *after* such agreements or remediation efforts have been undertaken. Much of the research over the past thirty years has been focused on environmental justice in the context of criminal offenses, and more recently within an environmental law context (Wilson, 2016; Hudson, 2012; and Jenkins, 2018).

Broadly, restorative justice studies indicate that because crime hurts, justice should heal (Jenkins, 2018). Additionally, these studies suggest that there must be a clear violation of the law, the offender displays actions of general remorse, and there is a desire for reintegration into the community (Jenkins, 2018; Preston, 2011; Treisner, 2007; and Retzinger & Scheff, 2000). In environmental mediation, the primary goal centers on reaching an agreement with substantive solutions (Bingham & Haygood, 1986).

However, these studies appear to fall short in addressing cases where there may not be a direct violation of the law but where there were nevertheless clear breaches of environmental and community health and safety. This is evident from cases where corporations polluted waterways with toxic chemicals long before they were discovered to be or legally classified as hazardous. While various degrees of remediation exist, and parties may be held accountable to varying degrees for the cleanup, this does not necessarily result in genuine acceptance or healing for the community involved. In fact, there have been many occasions where “voluntary” environmental mediation is accompanied by the threat of protracted litigation and is devoid of remorse.

Therefore, in my view, there is ample justification to examine these issues which have not been specifically or extensively addressed in these studies. There is a need for future research to examine how a community can still take the necessary steps towards healing from environmental trauma, in the absence of remorse or apology from the offending party and beyond the mediation room. The main theoretical frameworks that support my research focus are Melanie Klein’s (1946) object relations theory, as well as Wilfred Bion’s (1961) use of Klein’s concept of containment. They will be applied using James Krantz’s (2001) method in determining mental functioning. These models will help provide greater access and understanding of the underlying forces at play. Also, the work of Sheila White (2004) on bullying will be used as a framework to understand the interconnected history between a community and industry. Finally, I will be employing Carl Jung’s (1948) notion of the collective unconscious and its application at the organizational level. These frameworks add a new perspective to this issue because large corporations, federal agencies, and even local governments often prioritize the cleanup of long-standing environmental pollution and an expedient resolution over the psychological needs of the community.

To summarize, I argue in this thesis that studying object relations theory, bullying, and environmental trauma has the potential to contribute to the existing critical literature on environmental justice because the deep-seated feelings of injustice and suffering which communities experience will not simply disappear after a legal settlement has been reached and can be properly addressed only if they are more fully understood.

METHODOLOGY

The core of my thesis will be a thematic analysis of a public information session that was held following the announcement of a mediated cleanup agreement after decades of dispute and appeals. Also, I will utilize interpretive phenomenological analysis in my interviews with various participants of the mediation and information session. Through this process, I will explore the mental functioning of the various groups and individuals involved. Specifically, I will examine:

- a) Risk perception and anxiety triggers
- b) Indications of Depressive or Paranoid-Schizoid positioning
- c) Possible narratives and ideological divisions clouding the psyche

This data will be studied for common themes and hypotheses which could offer understanding regarding a psychosocial way forward on an individual and community level.

Further, I will seek to analyze the impact that globalization and industrial pollution have had on the social identity of a Rust Belt community in the United States. I will examine this through the various stages and dynamics of bullying, and thereafter, explore the psychological consequences on the bully and the victim.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH SETTING

Located in the Northeast region of the United States, Berkshire County sits on the western edge of Massachusetts. It is a bucolic oasis surrounded by rolling hills, lakes, and rivers where cultural giants once roamed. The contours of Mount Greylock served as Herman Melville's inspiration for the white whale, Moby Dick. The stately manors, charming hamlets, and small-town life served as a backdrop for the paintings of Norman Rockwell, novels of Edith Wharton, and songs of James Taylor. The open-air music shed of Tanglewood serves as the summer home to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The Berkshires is also home to the Housatonic River whose waters run from Massachusetts, down through Connecticut to the Long Island Sound and spill into the Atlantic Ocean.

Like so many other mill towns in New England, it was along the banks of the Housatonic River that textile and paper mills were set up in the 19th century. At the turn of the 20th century, Pittsfield, the largest city in Berkshire County, became the center for General Electric's (GE) electrical transformer, plastic, and defense industries (Wildman, 2000). Its facilities were also built along the Housatonic River. Once crowned "the world's biggest company" by *Forbes* magazine, GE was seen by many as an archetypal conglomerate, and its former CEO, Jack Welch, embodied modern transformational leadership (Roberts, 2010). It was there at the GE plant in Pittsfield that Welch rose through the ranks and earned his nickname, "Neutron Jack" (Serwer, 2001, p. 237).

It was also in Pittsfield that workers at GE released over 600,000 pounds (270,000 kilos) of Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) for nearly half a century starting from 1932 (Parnass, 2020b). While they were widely used during that period in hundreds of industrial applications for their insulating properties, PCBs were subsequently found to have possible links to carcinogenic, immune, reproductive, and neurological diseases in humans (Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 1979). It was also discovered that PCBs did not break down naturally or decompose. Instead, they bioaccumulate in the environment and move up the food chain (World Health Organization, 1993). They were therefore banned by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the late 1970s and locations where PCB contaminants were found would need to be cleaned up according to federal regulations (EPA, 1979).

It was not until 1999, after several years of legal jockeying, that GE signed a settlement agreement with local, state, and federal authorities to clean up PCBs at the GE plant in Pittsfield and along the two miles (3.2 km) of the Housatonic River, which were most contaminated. The cleanup of the remaining five-mile (8 km) stretch of the river, which was also heavily contaminated, termed the "Rest of River," would be decided at a later time (Rest of River Municipalities, 2020).

Like the 1999 agreement, the Rest of River cleanup agreement also took years of legal wrangling. During this time, the accumulation of PCBs in the riverbed and floodplains of the Housatonic was so high that in 2004, *The New York Times* cited the Housatonic River as one of the ten most endangered rivers in the country (Depalma, 2004). It was not until 2016 that the EPA issued its cleanup permit for the Rest of River, which was subsequently appealed by five parties, including General Electric (EPA, 2020). GE's main contention with the EPA's

decision was the agency's requirement that GE ship all the PCB contaminated sediment out of state at an estimated cost of US\$250 million (Parnass, 2019).

In 2018, the EPA Environmental Appeals Board (EAB) issued its opinion on the appeals and raised questions about whether the contaminated sediment had to be disposed out of state or if it was more feasible to contain it in a secure landfill locally instead. It was then that the five towns which straddle the section of the Rest of River cleanup decided to enter into closed-door environmental mediation efforts with EPA, GE, and other local and environmental stakeholders (EPA, 2020). The mediation lasted nearly two years and in February 2020, it was announced that most parties involved had reached a final agreement called, the Rest of River 2020 Settlement Agreement. In summary, the main elements of the agreement include (EPA, 2020):

- a) Hybrid disposal approach. The most contaminated sediment would be shipped out of the state and the remaining low-level contamination would be held in a double-lined landfill near the cleanup site.
- b) An additional 100 acres (0.4 square kilometers) of cleanup than the original 2018 agreement.
- c) US\$55 million in compensation to the five towns.
- d) Commitment to research and explore possible innovative technologies as a method for cleanup remediation.

While many viewed the agreement as a historic victory and one that presented a clear path towards an enhanced cleanup of the Housatonic River, others considered the closed-door process unfair and opaque, and the outcome a loss for the community and the environment. Three public information sessions, held within three weeks following the Rest of River 2020 Settlement Agreement announcement, would be the first opportunities residents had to listen to presentations from various stakeholders, ask questions, and share their opinions in a public forum. Knowing that these sessions would be rich in affect data, I decided to treat one as a critical incident. In this bounded space and moment in time, I would be able to observe human behavior and apply psychodynamic principles in order to look for a possible path forward (Flanagan, 1954). In addition, I conducted interpretive phenomenological interviews with several participants who attended the public information session or were involved in the mediated agreement.

DATA AND REPORT GATHERING

Challenges

While the events and participants of my thesis were in the United States, I conducted my entire research and interviews 3,500 miles (5,500 km) away in Europe. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, traveling to The Berkshires was not viable. The only option was to gather my data virtually using recorded videos and online video conferencing.

The public information session on 20 February 2020 was held in a local high school auditorium. I was able to access a video recording of it via the online community television channel for the area, Community Television for the Southern Berkshires (2020). All the information presented in this paper from the session can be referred to on this channel. The recording allowed me to review the event in detail, transcribe the discussions, and observe any anxiety present in the session (Hinshelwood, 2002).

Experiencing the event by video had certain limitations, namely that I could only listen to and observe what was occurring in front of the camera and what was being picked up by the microphone. Nevertheless, I was able to see and hear everyone who stepped up to the microphone to speak, aside from some heckling from the audience.

I initially had concerns that not being physically present in the area would pose a challenge with respect to arranging one-on-one interviews. In small-town communities such as these, people are accustomed to meeting face-to-face around kitchen tables or in local cafes. Therefore, I had anticipated some resistance or reluctance by people to being interviewed online. However, by the time I reached out to people, shelter-in-place COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were already in place in Massachusetts and people had grown accustomed to conducting online meetings. This likely made them more willing to be interviewed virtually. Introducing myself as someone who grew up in The Berkshires also made it easier for me to gain access.

While I recognize that having grown up in the area potentially made me more susceptible to bias, I was not personally acquainted with any of the 200 attendees at the public information session and knew only one of the ten people that I interviewed. Before conducting my research, I was also only vaguely aware of the history and the events that unfolded between GE, the towns, and the state and federal authorities. I also did not live near the stretches of the

Housatonic River where the cleanup decisions are being contested. This has enabled me to be more objective about the issue.

What I found more difficult to contain was my instinct, stemming from my non-confrontational nature, to search for a compromise solution. I also found myself agreeing with whichever person or group I was speaking to. At times, this drew me into the technical details of the cleanup agreement and away from the psychodynamic focus of my thesis. To stay focused on my thesis topic and stay engaged yet impartial, it was helpful to keep in mind that my primary objective was to try to interpret and make meaning of the events that unfolded, rather than to come up with a solution.

Finally, it was difficult for me to reconcile the lack of anonymity in my writing. I did not use any names or personal details of any individuals who are not already public figures. However, anyone reading this thesis who is familiar with the Housatonic River cleanup would be able to easily identify the individuals. Observing real people who have genuine struggles I have never experienced, when they are passionate, emotional, or vulnerable, and writing about them publicly, all without their prior permission, made me uncomfortable. Also, writing about the problem and attaching labels to aspects of it initially made me feel like I was passing judgment. Again, keeping in mind that I was merely trying to interpret and make meaning of what I heard and saw allowed me to move past my initial discomfort.

Public information session findings

There were approximately 200 residents in attendance at the public information session (Drane, 2020). The participants were primarily middle-aged to retired-aged Caucasians, a consistent reflection of the ethnic makeup of the community. The session was held on the evening of 20 February 2020, ten days after the mediated settlement agreement was announced. It was convened just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions imposed in Massachusetts. Public gatherings were still allowed, and no social distancing or facial covering regulations were in place. The behavior, mood, and outlook were all pre-pandemic.

Purpose and format

The purpose of the session was to provide a detailed overview of the 2020 settlement agreement, explain the process and next steps, and finally allow time for questions, answers, and statements from attendees. After presentations from representatives from the towns, state and federal agencies, and environmental groups, the floor was opened for questions and

answers. People were given three minutes to ask a question or make a statement. The session was moderated by a retired State Supreme Court judge who was from the area.

There were also four police officers assigned to the event. For some, this was seen as a precautionary measure to ensure a safe space for such a large public gathering. However, others perceived the presence of the officers as either fear or intimidation on the part of the organizing authorities. As one resident observed during the session:

And you noticed how there were four policemen here. I think maybe you're a little worried about what these people might do. You know, they're upset. They're really upset.

Boundaries

While the session was announced to begin at 6 pm, there was no specified duration for the meeting (EPA, 2020). This signaled the intention of the organizers to allow every person an opportunity to speak. The only limitation participants were given was a three-minute limit to ask a question or make a statement which the moderator stated would be “strictly enforced.”

Presentations took up the first hour of the meeting and this was followed by 45 minutes of responses to 24 written questions. The remaining live question-and-answer period lasted the remaining three hours and 15 minutes. After five hours, the session finally closed at 11 pm.

The public session was open to all who wanted to attend. Everyone in attendance was a resident of the local community or someone involved or interested in the cleanup plan or mediation. Beyond their ties to the community or the cleanup project, what connected them, even more, seemed to be each individual’s personal experience with environmental pollution and trauma. On multiple occasions, people’s self-introductions included how they or their families have been affected by toxic contamination. It appeared to be a way of establishing their credibility. Within the first minute of the session, the moderator’s self-introduction included his family’s link to PCBs.

(My brother) had PCBs in a plume under the business where he was located.

The EPA representative also referenced his relation to toxic contamination.

(In the) town I grew up in, they linked leukemia to the drinking water that we were drinking. When I was a kid...eight kids in my community had leukemia right within a mile of my house.

Other speakers also shared their own battles with cancer and of the health issues faced by their family members or their community, which they believed to be linked to PCBs in the Housatonic River.

I have cancer...I'm sure that's where I got my cancer because I live in Housatonic.

My grandfather died from cancer living across from the Housatonic River at the age of 56. He also worked for GE.

My mother-in-law died of lung cancer. And then 20 years ago I had my first bladder tumor. And then 10 years later, another bladder tumor.

Faultlines

Of the approximately 200 attendees, 40 people spoke. There was a clear divide, or faultline, that split the entire auditorium into two homogeneous groups (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). The 15-person panel there to give presentations or answer questions were in favor of the cleanup agreement. In addition, these were representatives of parties who participated in the decision-making. The 25 residents who waited for hours to ask their questions or make their statements were, to varying degrees and for various reasons, opposed to the latest agreement and felt like they had no say in the decision.

The panel of town representatives was seated behind a long-skirted table on stage, perhaps symbolizing their ability to have a seat at the mediation table. Other presenters, such as environmental groups who had signed on to the agreement, were seated in the first two rows closest to the stage. Although the moderator asked those seated in the upper-back rows to move closer to the front, perhaps in an attempt to bridge the divide, they did not comply. Therefore, there were several empty clusters of seats between the two groups.

With the groups seated so far apart from each other, people shouted out that they could not hear the person who was speaking on multiple occasions. This first happened right at the start at 21 seconds into the session and was repeated six other times from the audience. Watching the recording, I found no trouble hearing anyone who was speaking into the microphone. I found it curious, but not surprising, that despite not being able to hear from far back, there was no effort made to move closer to the front section of the auditorium. This appeared to be a symbolic move to demonstrate that people were standing firm in their opposition to the agreement and were not interested in being persuaded to change their stance or even to meet in the middle.

On a dozen occasions, people speaking also asked, “Can you hear me?” The repeated requests for affirmation that they could be heard was perhaps an unconscious manifestation of their frustration at not being consulted or given a say during the closed-door mediation in the first place.

Control and Containment

Knowing this would be a sizeable audience coming to voice their displeasure with the agreement, I had initially thought that the retired State Supreme Court Justice, with ties to the community, was an appropriate choice for the moderator. His experience keeping order within a courtroom would serve him well during this public meeting. The ground rules he established appeared to be clear and fair to ensure respect and decorum so that everyone had a chance to ask questions, make statements, and respond to questions.

This was the case during the first hour of presentations from representatives who signed onto the agreement. I had assumed this would continue throughout the session and that as an experienced judge, the moderator would serve as a container by moderating and channeling the energy and emotions of the group, providing calm and affirming signals amidst the tensions in the room (Higgs & Rowland, 2011). In fact, the moderator began to lose control of the meeting not long after, during the written questions segment of the session. As the response was being given to the first written question, the moderator interrupted to ask someone in the audience who was speaking, “*Could you please wait your turn?*” At this point, the EPA representative jumped in to explain that the person in the audience who was speaking out of turn was the one who penned that written question and was trying to ask a follow-up clarification question.

This marked the point where the role of container for the meeting shifted from the moderator to the EPA representative, who seemed far more responsive to the audience and was better able to contain the anxiety in the room through his calm approach in answering their questions. This could be observed once again two minutes later when a hydrogeologist was explaining what happens to the liquid (leachate), that seeps to the bottom of the landfill containing low-level toxic PCBs. As he was explaining the process, he was challenged with clarification questions by a chorus of audience members.

H-geologist: *...how frequently the (leachate) tanks fill, how frequently those tanks need to be emptied.*

Audience: *Where will they go?*

H-geologist: *They’ll be pumped? They’ll be pumped.*

Audience: *Where will they be pumped?*

H-geologist: *It gets treated.*

Audience: *How will it get treated?*

H-geologist: *I'm not exactly sure what the process will be...*

Audience: [a chorus of varying questions and grumbles from the audience]

Moderator: *Wait a minute, you're all out of order.*

EPA rep.: *[taking the microphone from the hydrogeologist] Well, it's the same treatment process as your typical wastewater treatment system. You're using carbon. You're running it through a carbon system just like the filters you have in your home...*

Audience: *[Quiets down and listens to EPA representative's explanation]*

This demonstrated the EPA representative's ability to take control of the meeting by addressing people's concerns in a measured and clear way using concrete explanations. Written questions continued for another two minutes before the moderator again lost his composure by asking the police officers to remove an audience member because the latter continued to ask follow-up questions out of turn. As a result, the auditorium erupted in anger before the EPA representative stepped in to diffuse the situation.

EPA rep.: *[Taking the microphone from the moderator] All right, hold on. Let me, excuse me, let me answer the question...*

By responding to the question, the EPA representative prevented the audience member from being removed by police officers. If this had indeed transpired, it would have been seen as adversarial. The opponents of the agreement would have perceived it as retaliation for trying to hold decision-makers accountable. It would have certainly resulted in an escalation of tensions and a derailment of the entire session.

For the remaining four hours of the session, it was the EPA representative who answered most of the questions and continued to serve as a container throughout the evening. People stopped heckling, speaking out of turn, and talking over each other. He was able to tolerate people's frustrations and fears, sometimes empathizing and other times clarifying misunderstandings. Of the approximately 130 questions which were fielded by the panel of representatives, he answered 90 of them, or 70% of all the questions posed that evening. Although he started on stage, he gradually moved down to the audience level and was either seated at the edge of the stage or standing with the audience. He explained to me that this was a conscious effort to avoid perpetuating an us-versus-them dynamic.

A chance to be heard

As the session moved on to the live question-and-answer segment, audience members began lining up to have an opportunity to come to the microphone to speak for the allocated three minutes. The first speaker was a representative of an environmental group that had initially participated in the mediation but pulled out when it realized the agreement included a local low-level toxic landfill near the cleanup site. Introducing himself as the “Riverkeeper”, he received immediate applause from the audience. Near the three-minute mark of his speech, there ensued another challenge to the moderator’s control.

Moderator: *I want to point out you have 15 more seconds.*

Audience: *You have 3 more minutes because this man [the next speaker behind the Riverkeeper] will surrender his minutes to you.*

Riverkeeper: *Thank you*

Moderator: *No, you have 15 seconds. You have 15 seconds. You have 15 seconds.*

Riverkeeper: *You know, I’ll take your 15 more seconds. I’m very used to you guys trying to throw me out of meetings.*

Moderator: *You have 3 minutes per speaker.*

As the 2nd speaker approached the microphone and introduced himself, the voice of the Riverkeeper could be heard telling the 2nd speaker what to say into the microphone.

Riverkeeper: *[Talking to 2nd Speaker] How bout...*

2nd Speaker: *How bout...*

Riverkeeper: *[Talking to 2nd Speaker] Around the Hudson River*

2nd Speaker: *Around the Hudson River*

Riverkeeper: *[Talking to 2nd Speaker] The project has failed*

2nd Speaker: *The project has failed*

His phrases were relayed another four times before the EPA representative again stepped in to establish order by saying, “Just talk, just talk. Tell us, with the time, tell us what you want us to do.” This allowed the Riverkeeper to have the floor for another ten minutes. By dropping the three-minute ground rule, which was essentially established to manage time and maintain order in the first instance, the EPA representative re-established some semblance of order for the rest of the evening. At no time did he look for visual or verbal approval from the moderator. From his tone and demeanor, he appeared collected and willing to let people pose their questions, make their statements, and tell their stories. While emotions still ran high on several

occasions, people felt free to express themselves. Most importantly, eliminating the three-minute rule opened the possibility for dialogue. Of the 25 speakers from the audience, the average length of their speaking time was six minutes, double the three-minute limit.

Pro-agreement depressive position

I will next endeavor to describe the mental functioning, according to Melanie Klein (1946), of the two main groups throughout the public information session. During the first hour of presentations and throughout the question and answering period, the pro-agreement group set a sobering tone. As they explained the history and reasoning that led up to the mediation and agreement, it became clear they were operating in a depressive (D) position. As explained by James Krantz, this is “a state of mind in which one maintains contact with the full texture of inner and outer reality, where one can mobilize resources to confront those realities effectively, to collaborate in a sophisticated fashion and learn from experience” (2001, p. 138).

After a local toxic disposal site was permitted at the first two-mile stretch of the Housatonic River cleanup, representatives from the five towns involved in the Rest of River cleanup were deeply concerned about the possible risk of having up to one or more PCB landfills within their own town limits. They felt a genuine threat to the safety of their towns because most of the EPA toxic cleanup sites in Massachusetts and around New England had local toxic landfills next to the cleanup sites. Acting on this concern, they formed a five-town municipal committee with the following objective, according to one town representative:

Our main purpose of joining together was to stop any type of a landfill in [Southern] Berkshire County.

This seemed to go their way when the EPA issued their Rest of River Consent Decree in 2016 requiring GE to dispose of all the PCB out of state. However, after the Environmental Appeals Board (EAB) issued their opinion in 2018 agreeing with the EPA’s cleanup permit on most counts except for the issue of an out-of-state versus in-state storage for the PCB contaminants, the five towns were once again facing the real threat of a local toxic landfill. This fear was compounded by the prospect of *three* local toxic landfills after GE purchased three plots of land within the cleanup area during this period.

The following statement by the town representatives that evening illustrated how the five towns were able to process and contain the real possibility of failing at their primary task of preventing landfills from being in their towns. As one town representative explained it:

Now whoever lost on the remand, the only option really was to appeal to federal court. The first circuit, maybe eventually to the Supreme Court. If EPA and the towns won and the waste had to be taken out of state, GE would have appealed. If GE won, EPA and the towns' only option would have been to appeal that. And so here we go to federal court. That was a very uncertain process, a very long and uncertain process.

They went on to explain that further litigation would not have been to the towns' advantage not only because the EAB had already questioned the validity of an out-of-state disposal, but also because the PCBs from the first two miles of the Housatonic River cleanup were disposed of near the cleanup site, in state. Furthermore, the towns did not have the financial resources that GE had to endure a prolonged legal battle. Litigation, as they described it, would have also been a very confrontational and winner-takes-all process.

When you enter into litigation, you've elected to take an adversarial approach with your opponent... It is a highly argumentative, highly formalized approach, and it tends to get people's backs up against the wall.

They were trying to paint a realistic picture of the path down which appeal and litigation would lead. As one town representative put it, even if they won their case with the EAB, there was a strong possibility they would ultimately lose.

I want to ask you to think again about if we were to win, we lose. In the sense that GE will appeal. They have a 100-million-dollar cap. What do we as five towns have? That's their market capitalization. What's ours?

Instead of risking this all-or-nothing approach where they felt the cards were stacked against them, the towns decided to enter into mediation which would be less adversarial and more collaborative. Instead of feeling like their backs were against the wall, mediation allowed them to explore alternative options. This mediation process served well to contain their anxieties and enhance their ability to adapt to the challenges and remain in a D position.

It's terrible that we live in a system where we can't force them (GE) to clean it up. But we can't... What we're trying to do is what we can do.

The mediation, we thought, would be a way to find another path, outside of the federal court system, and a path where we could get more control over the ultimate solution for the river, more local control, more input, and something that was much more protective of human health and environment than the risky position of if GE won.

The mindset of the five towns now can best be described as, a "sober appreciation of the challenges," where there is an, "integrated frame of mind to complex problems" (Krantz, 2001, p. 138). They described this revised outlook during the mediation process.

If there was to be a landfill. Your select boards and my fellow committee members were absolutely determined that that landfill would be designed to be protective of human health and the environment. We wanted the highest protection possible.

This approach allowed them to, “assess reality from multiple perspectives” and consider other demands that would enhance the cleanup and ensure their safety (p.138).

...And also, only the lowest level PCBs would be located at that in-county landfill. And the highest level PCBs would get out of state. We also had the opportunity to demand more cleanup. Something that the 2016 permit had to sort of stop short on. We always knew EPA would have rather seen more cleanup, and this was an opportunity to do that, to design a settlement that had those points in it. And so, we achieved all of those demands.

We were guaranteed, as a result of the mediation and the resulting settlement agreement, there would only be one in-county landfill. We were facing the prospect of three.

Another sign that the pro-agreement group was in a D position was their pragmatism and ability to live with ambiguity. They recognized that although the outcome of the mediation was not ideal, they could accept it because there was *no* perfect solution. Through the process, they had shifted from their initial sole objective of denying any toxic landfill from being allowed in their own towns, to the recognition that if it was not in their backyard, it would be in another community’s neighborhood.

There is no perfect solution. You know no matter where we take this material, it’s going to be the same type of solution, it’s going into someone else’s landfill somewhere else.

Anti-agreement paranoid-schizoid position

Nearly all the audience members posing questions were against the latest mediated cleanup agreement. The timeline and trigger for this anti-agreement group were slightly different than the pro-agreement group. Before the final mediation agreement was announced, just two weeks prior to the public information session, many individuals were unaware of the developments to the Rest of River cleanup. When they learned that a decision had been reached without a vote from town residents and that the decision included a local toxic landfill, their heightened anxieties were triggered. One audience member described this feeling as she stepped up to the microphone.

Ever since this started when I heard about this dump, it's really stressing me out. I'm getting heart palpitations sick to my stomach, loss of sleep, because we want to have a dump in our backyards.

While the town representatives had the opportunity to explore alternative options to an out-of-state PCB disposal through a year-and-a-half of mediation, many residents felt they had been given a *fait accompli*. These residents, especially those who lived closest to the proposed landfill, were the ones who ended up feeling like their “backs were against the wall” and left with no other option than to be “adversarial”. This can be seen in various statements from the audience.

How can we stop this? I will go to my grave, trying to stop this dump!

You're backing people into a corner, putting them in a compromised place where they suddenly, you know, go a little rogue.

Without access to mediation, let alone a seat at the table, this heightened level of anxiety led to failed containment for some. The issue was already an extremely sensitive one in the community. Any mention of GE and the river would trigger visceral levels of pain, fear, and anger. Hearing that GE was given the final approval to situate the PCB contaminants right back into people’s “backyards” and knowing that their own local representatives had agreed to it, caused even more unbearable anxiety. For many, the only way to psychologically cope was to split-off their extreme anxiety and fall into a paranoid-schizoid (PS) position. Krantz (2001) describes this as a form of psychological regression where primitive destructive psychic social defenses are relied upon. To protect us from painful feelings, our capacity for reality testing is diminished and the tendency to develop unconscious phantasies, persecutory objects, rigid and catastrophic thinking is enhanced. I will attempt to give examples of this from the anti-agreement group.

Reduced capacity for reality testing

It is certainly understandable that people trying to read up on the details of the project can sometimes get their facts mixed up. However, there is also the possibility that from a PS position, residents had formed a frame of reference which was at times catastrophic or grandiose. For example, one resident had overinflated the height of the landfill by 750%.

Resident: One million cubic yards will be put on the (landfill) site. That's five football fields goal to goal, 150 feet (45.7 meters) high. That's a lot of, that's a lot of stuff to put up there.

When it was pointed out that the actual figure was not 150 feet but 20 feet (6 meters) high, she responded by saying:

Resident: I got this off the internet. If I was wrong. Sorry about that.

Even then, the EPA representative tried to show empathy and avoid embarrassing her.

EPA rep.: It doesn't sound that great still, but it's not 150 feet at least.

This could be seen again when another resident became worried when she mistakenly inflated the duration of the cleanup near her property by 150%.

Resident: [Referring to a section of the previous two-mile cleanup] It was a three-year part of the project and it turned out to be 11 years. This is projected to be 15 years. And so, if you take that, how many years will it really be, the impact of all this.

EPA rep.: I would say maybe a year, maybe two construction seasons...but it is a significant impact. I'm not minimizing that at all.

The proximity of the cleanup and landfill to some people's property, combined with an altered frame of reference, turned the issue into a real and present danger for some residents.

Resident: I never seen such a disaster my whole life...You guys are ruining my life. You're ruining my neighbor's life. You're ruining the town's life... You guys forgot about us and now you're trying to kill us, you're trying to kill my family.

There seemed to be little which could be said to assuage people's fears. Some presenters tried to explain that removing the PCBs from the river would be much safer than leaving them there.

Environtlist.: Right now, the river is an unlined uncapped toxic waste dump, allowing PCBs to spread into the air, the water, the land, and up the food web PCBs last virtually forever.

EPA rep.: I'm more concerned, one hundred times more concerned with what's out there right now in the river, and in the floodplain than I am with putting it in a safe landfill.

They also tried to give assurances that the specifications for the proposed landfill would go beyond what was federally required and would be one of the safest in the state.

EPA rep.: There are dozens of PCB landfills, most of them frankly not lined in Massachusetts with the same levels of PCBs.

None of these points seemed to alleviate people's fears. Questions continued to be asked regarding the longevity of the plastic liners and why the towns agreed to accept a local toxic landfill.

Unconscious phantasies

For some, one way to protect them from this unbearable level of anxiety and fear was to create an alternate scenario which allowed for an unlimited, everlasting, "magic bullet" solution. For one resident, this was described as follows,

Take the 500 million dollars from GE, put in the bank, five years you'll have a billion dollars in five years you might have a simple solution of tanker trucks going up to Woods Pond dumping chemical. Bang! Clean! Could cost you \$10 million, and the towns could have billions of dollars to spend on all your new roads and bridges and everything like that.

For another resident, money from wealthy neighbors was implied to be the quick-fix phantasy solution.

So, here's another thought...Okay, so it's seventy million dollars, that's a finite sum. Fifty million dollars, that's a finite sum. There's a lot of rich people around here, I don't know if you noticed, there's a lot of rich people. We don't have to have a dump.

Persecutory objects

The final example to demonstrate the PS position among individuals would be their projection of feelings of frustration, anger, and distrust onto a persecutory object. It should not be a surprise that for many, this persecutory object was General Electric, given its history in the area. GE is seen as a bully who gets what it wants, escapes punishment, and cannot be trusted.

It seemed to be the best that you could do given the intimidation and fear tactics of GE, and it seemed to be that fear and intimidation about the worst-case scenario is what's driving this agreement.

Why did you roll over and allow GE to get away with virtually murder?

They (GE) have a history of being dishonest and they really don't care about how much they poison our community they have shown us that very clearly in the past.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Risk perception

From the public information session, several people opposed to the 2020 mediated agreement were in a PS position. I would not, however, describe their response as totally irrational. Instead, what they were expressing was their fear, which could be considered, “a rational response to an imagined or actual threat” (Wandersman & Hallman, 1993). No amount of facts or figures, presented in the most logical way by credible authorities, could allay their skepticism at the public hearing.

While the pro-agreement group, in their D position, saw the situation in a nuanced and pragmatic way, their focus on the risk assessment of the cleanup plan did little to address the high levels of perceived risk others had. Beyond the quantitative, scientific data used to assess risk, people's perception included contextual factors such as social, political, and ethical characteristics, also described as risk outrage factors (Hance et al., 1998). As Wandersman and Hallman put it, "the more outrage factors that surround a risk, the more likely people will be concerned (or outraged) about it, despite scientific data indicating that a risk is low" (1993, p. 683). For many, the 2020 mediated cleanup agreement had less to do about the details of the mediation and much more to do with the fraught relationship GE had with the community.

Nameless dread

Naturally, there was a great deal of animosity directed at GE, the entity that polluted the local lands and waters, and that had pushed for decades for minimal cleanup and removal of the toxic waste. Residents were unconsciously looking for a container to help process their primitive feelings of pain, fear, and loss. However, there was no representative from GE at any of the three public information sessions. When the explanations came back that the low-level toxic landfill was safe and that this was the extent to which GE would be held accountable, this could have been perceived by the residents as a rejection and even an indictment that the lives of those nearest to the proposed landfill were of less value. It is also plausible that what was being projected back to the residents was the towns' own collective unconscious feeling of its inadequacy or failure to protect its residents and its inevitable compromise with GE. Therefore, the aggression that was projected outward found no object of containment and came back around to these individuals in a persecutory manner (Elliot, 2002). This left residents unable to process their own distress and would be described by Wilfred Bion as 'nameless dread' (1962, p.96).

Despite its physical absence during the public information sessions, GE's presence was still strongly felt. Its name was evoked over one hundred times that evening, but the questions and sentiments residents directed towards GE went unanswered. The persecutory object, actual or perceived, had again managed to leave residents of the towns with this sense of 'nameless dread.' To get a deeper understanding of this dynamic, it is important to analyze the objects and their relations beyond just the public information session and even the PCBs in the river. In examining this relationship, I will attempt to demonstrate GE's ability to push psychological

boundaries to bully and utilize the local area and its residents as a container for its own “toxic” history.

Hearts and minds

For many decades, GE had occupied a special place in the hearts of Berkshire County residents. By the end of the 19th century, Pittsfield had become an old mill town that would have stagnated had it not been for GE (Chakrabarti & Bologna, 2016). Opening its first transformer plant in 1907, GE grew to become the largest employer in the area and the main corporate sponsor to many local charities. In the 1950s, three out of four workers in the city of Pittsfield were employed at GE (Wildman, 2000). At its peak, GE employed close to 14,000 people from Berkshire County. As the local saying went, “Graduate from high school on Friday, start working at GE on Monday” (p. 46). Wages were relatively high, and the area grew to become quite prosperous (Cohen, 2019). Opportunities for advancement were numerous. Of all the promotions awarded to GE employees in the area, none brought as much pride as that of a Chemical Engineer who grew up in nearby Boston. Jack Welch joined GE Plastics in Pittsfield in 1960 and by 1981, he had become the company’s youngest and most famous Chairman and CEO (Byrne, 1998).

With such a vital role in the area, GE was naturally able to occupy a special space in the minds of the local community as well. Space here could be considered “psychic space” which Sheila White describes as, “the space in which an individual grows in and through his or her relationship to other subjects” (2004, p.272). People’s identity, particularly their social identity, had become tied to GE. For over a generation, the community’s sense of self and belonging were proudly linked to this company which provided so much prosperity, security, and fulfillment to their lives (Hogg et al., 1995). GE had become such a central part of the community that locals referred to it as “The GE” just as they would refer to THE GOVERNMENT (Chakrabarti & Bologna, 2016). The social fabric of the community was so intertwined with the company that for two weeks in July each year, the company would close for “Vacation Shutdown” and the whole area would go on summer holiday (Cohen, 2019).

This close dependence and interdependence could have made it more difficult for some individuals to clearly define and develop their own sense of self in relation to others. Without these firm boundaries, they become more malleable and prone to the influence of others. Their identities become more susceptible to be re-defined, with or without permission (White, 2004). Ruth and Gary Namie (2000) explain this by saying, “Much of a person’s identity and self-

confidence comes from having appropriate boundaries in place for protection against assaults by bullies who seek only to control and hurt their target” (as cited in White, 2004, p. 273).

After several decades of prosperity and security, beginning in the 1970s, these boundaries would be tested. It was around this time that GE, as did many other companies, migrated operations to the non-unionized South and overseas. GE soon became a shell of what it once was in the area. As the employment numbers shrank, so did the tax base and corporate philanthropy on which the city was so dependent. Finally, in 2007, GE sold its last division in the area. Since then, nothing has been able to take its place (Cohen, 2019).

A toxic legacy

People could no longer proudly peg their sense of self or social identity to “The GE” which they had for so long. It became clear that GE was cutting ties and moving on. Under the stewardship of their former Pittsfield colleague and boss, Welch made it clear that the company’s foremost allegiance was to profit, not to any community or location. As one of the most successful corporate titans, Welch commonly argued the primary obligation of public corporations was to maximize shareholder value. GE was going to lower costs and maximize profits by moving to wherever was cheapest. In 1998 he even went as far as to say, “Ideally, you’d have every plant you own on a barge to move with currencies and changes in the economy” (“Where America’s Jobs Went”, 2011).

This is not to say GE left nothing behind. Indeed, Welch steered GE’s tough-minded, bottom-line driven Darwinian culture to become, at one period, the “biggest” company in the world. Under his leadership, GE was also notorious for being responsible for the greatest number of Superfund (highly hazardous toxic waste) sites in the US, according to the EPA (“America’s Worst Toxic Polluters”, 1993). In the Berkshires, this toxic legacy made it exceedingly difficult for residents to reconcile what GE represented for them. As one local put it,

After GE pulled out, the people didn’t blame GE so much for that, but they did start blaming GE for the pollution. For the problems that they left behind. It was all well and good that the company was here, and provided steady employment for many decades, but now look at this big mess (Chakrabarti & Bologna, 2016).

Another resident who worked for GE for 41 years, whose father also worked for GE, also had mixed feelings. One moment, he would say, “It ain’t right, what they did to this area. They devastated it. They polluted it.” And yet, as he scanned his kitchen filled with GE appliances, he added the very next moment, “Look at that emblem on the refrigerator, I [am] still dedicated to that little GE emblem” (Cohen, 2019). For so many years, their lives were tied to the

presence of GE in the area and were, in part, a reflection of how they saw themselves. How then could they reconcile the fact that the “inexhaustible breast” which had comforted and nurtured them and their community for so long had turned into such a devastatingly “bad breast” (Krantz, 2001)?

The cleanup in and around GE’s sprawling 250-acre (one square kilometer) plant site was originally thought to be a standard hazardous waste cleanup. However, in the late 1990s, nearby residents discovered that their yards were filled with PCBs which GE had provided to employees and the city. As reported by *The Wall Street Journal*, tests showed that the levels of PCBs at their homes reached up to 44,000 parts per million. Under Massachusetts regulations, the safe level for residential properties was less than 2 parts per million. When it was discovered that GE both knew about these problems as early as 1981 and failed to disclose this information to the EPA, fury erupted within the community. To make matters worse, it was also discovered that PCBs were found at an elementary school and playground near the plant site. However, due to a technicality, GE was not required to remove the PCB sediment from the playground. It only covered it with two feet (60 centimeters) of clean soil (Carley, 1997). Any lingering goodwill had now been replaced with distrust and anger.

As CEO, Welch personally fought the government’s mandate for GE to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to have PCBs cleaned from the Housatonic and other rivers in the Northeast (Murray, 2001). In Berkshire County alone, GE ran 28 full-page ads in the local newspaper claiming that the levels of PCB were so low in the area that it would only be a health risk if someone ate, “large amounts of dirt” (Carley, 1998b). GE also aired video infomercials on local television and mailed hundreds of CD-ROMs arguing for “Monitored Natural Recovery” of the Housatonic River (Winn, 2011). It maintained a hardline position not to agree to any cleanup and for the river to be left untouched and only monitored (Wildman, 2000).

Ownership and space

Despite vacating the area and moving to lower-cost locales, GE was nonetheless able to continue to occupy both the physical and psychic spaces of the community. The hundreds of thousands of pounds of “forever plastic” PCBs physically remained in neighboring yards, children’s playgrounds, and local waterways. They were essentially used as receptacles, or containers, for the company’s own toxic history. In addition to the physical space, GE’s storied legacy had rendered people’s sense of self and boundaries vulnerable. First and foremost, GE’s success in claiming innocence from violating any environmental laws allowed it to continue to

go on the attack. Its ability to get away with suppressing key cleanup information and push back against government regulators through appeals and legal technicalities furthered the already-existing power imbalance.

Doing so made it easier for the company to push the boundary and occupy the community's psychic space as well. Any collective sense of remorse or ill-feeling regarding its role in polluting the local environment or leaving the area a hollowed-out version of itself could be conveniently projected into the psyche of the towns and its residents and then be denied by the company itself. As one GE Vice President said regarding an EPA risk assessment of the Housatonic River, "It's based on things like a one-year-old playing on steep riverbanks five days a week, seven months every year, for five years, wearing only swimming trunks" (Carley, 1998b). Long after he retired, Jack Welch steadfastly maintained the same position he had articulated in a 1988 shareholder meeting that, "PCBs do not pose adverse health risks" (Lyons, 2014). According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Welch was even issued a letter from the EPA Administrator in 1998, "urging GE to stick to disseminating 'accurate' information on PCBs" (Carley, 1998b).

GE had succeeded, as bullies do, in taking ownership of its victim's space (White, 2004). It had, as Herbert Rosenfeld would say, unleashed its "gang" into the minds of the residents and denied them their psychic freedom (2003). One resident I interviewed, who lives along the Housatonic River, also described GE's actions within a spatial context.

Like the hoarder or the person with mental illness who lives in one room of their house until it becomes unbearably full and dirty and then moves on to the next house. This is a sickness. [For] GE, it became unrealistic for them to stay in this hotspot.

GE had entered the psychic space of local residents, filled one corner of their minds with its dirty corporate mess, and then moved on. Who then is left to bear this physical and psychic mess but the residents themselves? Would it be so hard to imagine that those left behind had unconscious feelings of isolation and abandonment?

The boundaryless company

It is hard to overlook the uncanny coincidence that during the same time GE was testing the boundaries of the community in Berkshire County, Jack Welch was rolling out his innovative organizational philosophy which he coined, "the boundaryless company." As he put it in GE's 1990 annual report, "We knock down the walls that separate us from each other on the inside and from key constituencies on the outside...where we recognize no distinctions [and]...ignore

or erase group labels” (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992,p.104). While he may have been referring to functions and titles within his organization, it was also a fitting description of GE’s bullying tactics with business and local communities.

Welch’s legacy was replete with examples of GE’s ability to prey on the vulnerable and test their boundaries. As GE relocated its operations to the South and overseas, its strong-armed methods and threats of annihilation tested the boundaries of their suppliers. For example, during GE’s “supplier migration seminars,” parts suppliers would be told to fall in line and, “migrate or be out of business” (“Where America’s Jobs Went”, 2011).

The starkest example of GE’s “boundless” ability to exert its influence was in 1997 when the EPA moved to designate the Housatonic River cleanup as a national Superfund Site. This would have given the EPA sweeping powers to conduct the cleanup as it deemed fit and force GE to reimburse triple the cost of the cleanup (Moore, 1998). Despite the EPA’s efforts and the public’s overwhelming support, however, GE was able to rally local politicians and businesses to lobby against the designation (Carley, 1998b). Months later, the EPA dropped its request. Without this designation, the legal appeals process continued to be an option for GE to delay cleanup efforts (Bellows, 2017).

Recognition or lack thereof

By denying any sense of remorse or ill-feeling and projecting it onto the community, GE was able to make the community take on any shame it may have held collectively within the company. This is known as the organizational collective unconscious which, “represents the reservoir of experiences of the organizational collectivities” (Koçoğlu et al., 2016, p.297). As a result, it became difficult for community members to process how they themselves felt and made sense of the situation.

More importantly, they were denied recognition, which according to Jessica Benjamin, “is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self” (as cited in White, 2004, p. 273). It is a reflexive process in which meaning is acquired through our reflection of our own reaction to someone’s response to us. Recognition is a natural desire, which if left unfulfilled, leaves one to question his/her value and place within the community.

GE’s tactics of deflection, projection, and denial essentially meant a lack of recognition of the people and the community. Did they not matter? Were their lives less valuable than that of a

corporation? One resident I spoke with expressed this sentiment when he said, “*people’s own life experience...have been denied for so long and been subverted to people who have organizational, authoritarian control.*” Another who had lived along the banks of the Housatonic River for over 60 years succinctly explained to me, “*GE was out of line, shitting in my backyard and being allowed to do so without being required to clean it up.*” There was a sense of helplessness, humiliated fury, and narcissistic rage. Unacknowledged and unprocessed, these feelings eventually became unbearable, resulting in splitting and the PS position which was demonstrated during the public information session.

A tangled web

The victim - in this case the community - was essentially left in search of a way to have their feelings acknowledged and their anger quelled. According to White (2004), in the search for the acceptance and recognition which was not available, and desperate to avoid the sense of isolation, victims tend to try harder to please and deny the reality of the situation. In this struggle to break free and find meaning, both bully and victim become “psychically intertwined.” Boundaries become blurred and, in this case with GE, even rendered “boundaryless.” The aggression and anger the victim is made to feel are experienced by the bully as persecutory. The bully now assumes the role of innocent victim and the victim takes on the role of bully (White, 2004).

GE’s colossal downfall and noble ascent

By the end of his term as CEO, Jack Welch had been crowned “manager of the century” by *Fortune* magazine. In 2000, *The Financial Times* had deemed GE “the World’s Most Respected Company” for the third straight year. With him at the helm, the company’s share value had soared from US\$14 billion to more than US\$410 billion (Lohr, 2020). But less than two decades on, as one *New York Times* financial columnist stated, “Hardly anyone considers Mr. Welch a management role model anymore, and the conglomerate model he championed at GE has been thoroughly discredited, at least in the United States” (Stewart, 2017). Its stock price, which peaked under Welch, plummeted 86% and its dividends fell 99% to one penny per share in 2020 (Hansen, 2020). GE went from being one of the wealthiest companies in the world to one that appeared to be on the brink of bankruptcy.

For decades, the battle between GE and the community over the cleanup of the Housatonic River appeared to be akin to that of David and Goliath. At every stage of the cleanup, the wealthiest company on the planet, armed with lobbyists and lawyers, seemed to outmaneuver

the small rural community in New England. Its unwillingness to thoroughly remediate the Hudson and Housatonic Rivers, as well as numerous other toxic sites across the country, made it one of the most hated companies by the environmental movement (Roberts, 2010). However, by the time the Rest of River mediation talks began in 2018, it was perceived by town representatives as vulnerable and financially unstable. One of the main risks of prolonged litigation was GE's possible insolvency. The towns made sure the amount of financial compensation promised to them was placed in a security bond in case GE became insolvent. During the recent public information session, EPA and town representatives could even be heard expressing hope and concern for GE's financial welfare.

EPA rep.: We're all hoping GE doesn't go bankrupt.

Town rep.: We shared your [townspeople's] concern about the possibility of bankruptcy. We've seen what's happen to GE over the last 10 years.

Had GE become the vulnerable, righteous victim? During the announcement of the 2020 mediated agreement, the GE representative positioned the company as doing what was reasonable and moral in his statement:

We decided to do something a little different. Rather than dig in stronger on our legal positions, which would only delay action to clean the river for years through the courts, we decided instead to pursue an olive branch (Parnass, 2020a).

One town representative I spoke to described the new way she viewed GE:

I will say this is the first time I've ever negotiated with GE, but I felt they were fair. I felt they were responsive.

Environmental watchdog turned pit-bull

To demonstrate the victim-turned-bully phenomenon, I will next highlight the role played by a local citizen-based environmental watchdog, the Housatonic River Initiative (HRI). According to its website, HRI is a self-described, "broad-based coalition of local environmentalists, sportsmen, and political leaders." In its manifesto written nearly twenty years ago, HRI has been committed to having the river and its tributaries, "cleaned of all toxins, including PCBs" (Clean the Housatonic, n.d.). Its main spokesperson is the Riverkeeper, mentioned earlier in the public information session. HRI was among the parties at the most recent mediation discussions; however, it did not sign onto the 2020 mediated cleanup agreement, mainly due

to its opposition to the local toxic landfill and its strong preference for an alternative, in-situ bioremediation technology.

Since its inception, HRI has clearly expressed the lack of recognition and isolation felt by the local community. At a 1993 meeting with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MADEP), where it had mobilized 300 residents to attend, HRI complained that:

MADEP has not sought to include the citizens of Berkshire County as active participants in the clean-up process. This isolation from the process has often meant that we do not know what our public agencies, let alone General Electric, intend to do in regard to the clean-up (Clean the Housatonic, n.d.).

HRI had expressed the helplessness and alienation which so many victims of bullies experience. A member of the group described the situation as being, *in loco parentis* because higher authorities were given the legal rights to decide on the welfare of the local citizens and the river. Could this description also be an unconscious nod to the lack of love and recognition which one would feel in the “absence of parents?” Would it then not make them push harder against these boundaries in an effort for acceptance and recognition?

Perhaps it was this push that allowed them to gain agency. One founding member of HRI described the group’s approach to me:

We were living with consequences which we had no way of affecting...we had to become the squeaky wheel which gets the attention and that's what our organization had to do.

It was HRI’s unwavering efforts that helped to expose the over one hundred residential properties under which GE had buried PCB contaminants during the first two miles of cleanup (Carley, 1997). For the people in the area, HRI had come to represent David to GE’s Goliath. Emboldened by these and similar victories, HRI and the citizens it comprised of continued to form “a noisier chorus” to demand full accountability.

However, after twenty years in the trenches, HRI’s dogged commitment to participate and agitate in each stage of the cleanup process had led some in the community to label it as over-emotional and even vengeful. In 2011, the local newspaper went so far as to write,

The desire for revenge and retribution motivates many area residents to demand that the cleanup of PCBs from “The Rest of River” be massive and as costly to GE as possible. That kind of simplistic thought process based on understandable emotion rather than rationality motivates leaders and members of the Housatonic River Initiative (Fanto).

There were several people I spoke with who also pondered what decades of fighting the good fight had on the Riverkeeper. As one resident put it,

He has a lot of anger from all of the problems they've run up against and the years of foot-dragging and denials and I'm sure people have lied to him so many times... When you engage in a fight like this as an environmental activist for this long, what happens to your readiness to be nimble and adjust to changes and negotiate. I think in his case, he really hardened on it and clamped down. You can't say he got to that position easily, he was forced there...

During the recent public information session, nearly a decade later, it appeared that HRI was still desperately searching for that recognition it felt it had been denied. In that auditorium, HRI and its main spokesperson, the Riverkeeper, stood firm with the anti-agreement citizenry. For his first three minutes at the microphone that evening, the Riverkeeper's main focus appeared to be demanding recognition and credit for HRI.

I get a little bit of amusement because everything pretty much everything in this plan, not the dump, but all these other things you talk about that are in the plan were already in the plan way before you guys ever even got going... We got them into the agenda of putting them into this plan, and all you guys are sitting here taking credit for this... It was all there before you guys got there, it was all laid out for you. And it's just funny to hear you take credit.

This was acknowledged by multiple people throughout the evening.

EPA rep.: Let me just say I agree with you. A lot of what's in the settlement is things that you and a whole bunch of other people here have been talking about for years. We listened to you... So just to be clear again to give kudos to you.

Resident 1: Last night I asked for [The Riverkeeper] and wanted to hear his perspective because he's worked so hard over the years on this.

Resident 2: I want to thank this gentleman up here, who spoke so eloquently and did all this homework and cared for all these years. Beautiful. That man right there. [Riverkeeper], thank you.

Despite these acknowledgments, the Riverkeeper did not appear satisfied. In fact, he continued to speak for another ten minutes at different times throughout the evening - sometimes at the microphone, other times interjecting from his seat in the back. Many times, he blamed and condescendingly diminished the contributions of other players in the process:

Through the years, EPA has made some really, terrible errors.

The project has failed, EPA didn't cut the mustard.

I've been working with you twenty years, and you guys messed up a number of times through the years.

You do a lot of good work, but you also flubbed up sometimes. You need to take some ownership of that.

While GE was the persecutory object that was not present that evening, the Riverkeeper's manner and comments suggest that he may have inadvertently assumed the role of bully in that auditorium.

An imperfect path forward

It remains to be seen if the PS position, held by various residents and groups like HRI, as displayed during the public information session, can force a material outcome which provides an even more comprehensive cleanup devoid of a local toxic landfill. Could their uncompromising, philosophical stance force a more creative solution? Even so, would that break the cycle of bullying and provide healing to deep-seated emotions rooted in such profound unconscious forces?

Perhaps what they are truly seeking lies beyond their demand for the river and its surroundings to return to its original state, "clean of all toxins." It could also run deeper than any desire for accountability or revenge. Ultimately, their drive to restore and remediate the river to its original, idyllic state could be a fundamental yearning for a return to the ego state of earlier psychic life, according to Christopher Bollas. The river itself could serve as that "transformational object" which has the potential to comfort our psychic state just as the mother once could for her infant (1987). However, as the situation stands, unless the cleanup plans meet the conditions laid out by HRI and residents opposed to the current mediated agreement, both the cleanup by way of dredging and the local toxic landfill have greater potential to be the "persecutory object."

In Kleinian terms, only when we have the ability to tolerate or accept the fact that we can never return to this idyllic state and can never have it all, are we able to move towards a holistic sense of social and psychic repair (2002). This then allows us to move towards a more D position where we can mourn for this loss or realization that the river can never be returned to a state of Eden. After all, we live in a tainted, modern world where the quest for economic and social progress has been achieved at the cost of environmental degradation.

It is also worth acknowledging that environmental pollution cannot be merely attributed to modern corporations, but also the actions of local communities themselves. Even before General Electric first started releasing toxic PCBs into the Housatonic River in the 1930s, towns alongside its banks had been using it as an open sewer for human, livestock, and textile

waste from the 1600s all the way up until the 1970s (Housatonic Valley Association). In accepting our own role, we begin to share in the responsibility for its past. This allows us, as Irma Pick describes, to “bear the guilt for what cannot be repaired and to make appropriate reparations where possible; in other words to do the best that can be done under the circumstances” (2012, p.136).

A new reparative narrative

For decades, the victim mentality has pervaded the sense of identity of the community in Berkshire County. It has led to excessive splitting in the PS position where the narcissistic self is idealized and the other is demonized to the point of intractable conflict within a portion of the community. With the newly agreed cleanup plan on the horizon, there is potential for a new narrative to emerge. Events such as the public information session were an important first step towards the creation of this new narrative. Many individuals attended the session mainly to be heard (acknowledged) and there was a sense of collective mourning for their suffering and injustice. Such platforms could be instrumental in helping communities strive towards a new collective healing and hope by offering a reparative path forward, in the same vein as “Truth Telling” in South Africa and “Speak Bitterness” in pre-cultural revolution Communist China (Retzinger & Scheff, 2000). Today, as corporations face more intense scrutiny and pressure by an increasingly discerning public to integrate environmental and social responsibility in their corporate practices, they may potentially be more open and motivated to participating as genuine stakeholders in the communities where they operate and bear witness to the sometimes-costly environmental and human impact of their business decisions.

LIMITATIONS

Despite several attempts, it was regrettable that I was unable to speak directly to some of the most vocal opponents to the mediation agreement. Also, I was unsuccessful in my attempts to interview a current or former representative of GE. Therefore, I had to interpret meaning from public statements and news reports. I would have much rather had the interpretation come from clinical socio-analytic interviewing and observation which would have allowed for transference and countertransference. Nonetheless, the unscripted public information session and the ten people I did interview provided considerable affect data.

FURTHER RESEARCH

I propose further research on the influence the collective unconscious of an organization has on individuals outside of its corporate boundaries. In addition, while much has been written on bullying, more can be explored in terms of the workplace, or corporation, as a bully. As companies, such as big-tech corporations, continue to grow in scale and increasingly encroach into people's everyday lives, the unconscious influence they wield will only grow.

CONCLUSION

After decades of denial and inaction, the existential threat of climate change now looms large on national, international, and corporate agendas. Even if the collective path forward has not been agreed upon, from Davos to the United Nations, it has become a top priority. The Black Lives Matter movement has recently shown that a system built on centuries of social injustice and economic inequality must inevitably reckon with its past as well (Coles, 2018). And as demonstrated in a small corner of the world, unresolved environmental trauma will continue to haunt a community and a corporation for generations until they are able to work through it together. In the words of Rubin Saufkie of the Hopi Water Clan,

We have to take a deep look within ourselves. We've all made mistakes. Even from our ancestors all the way up to now. But today we are the ones that are living, breathing, and alive. Because of water, which is life. We must find the compassion within to forgive ourselves first. Only then can we truly begin the healing. (The Voice of Water, 2019)

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