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Moving On, Going Forward

MARK FURLONG

Everyday we hear the refrain: ‘it’s better to move on’. Business representatives, sportspeople, media figures — respectable figures who make up the informal, and often formal, commentariat — offer us many iterations of this familiar theme. Perhaps we have heard so many variations of it, with such frequency, that its sense, or lack of it, has become opaque. Here are two examples.

Vignette 1: Sandra Nori, a NSW MP, reported to be the victim of domestic violence (Four Corners, Dirty, Sexy Money; 14 April 2008). Ms Nori decides not to pursue the matter legally against her ex-partner, the alleged perpetrator (it so happens he is a major NSW Labor figure). The reason for not pursuing the matter?

...the best way forward for me and my young family [is] to empower and liberate myself by putting the past behind me and create a new life. [Emphasis added.]

Of course, one might not necessarily agree with her decision, but all of us understand the disposition.

Vignette 2: During a closely contested Australian rules football match, the captain of one of the teams ‘sledges’ an opponent, Andrew Lovett, an Indigenous opposition (Essendon) player: ‘You bash your fuckin’ missus, mate’. The St Kilda player concerned is later identified as Captain Nick Riewoldt by St Kilda coach Ross Lyon. Unfortunately for Nick this gem was picked up and broadcast on national TV through a live microphone worn by an umpire.

In a newspaper account of the incident and its aftermath, Samantha Lane (The Age, 22 April 2008) reports there was constructive communication between the clubs since the event. According to her, the St Kilda coach is of the view that ‘both parties were keen to put the incident behind them’. Lane then quotes Lyon directly:

What I can say is that the two clubs have spoken and Andrew Lovett doesn’t want to take it any further, St Kilda has moved on, so we are all moving on.

In each instance, the emphasised words are variations on the root metaphor to ‘move on’. How are we to understand this ubiquitous homily?

Mantra and moral injunction, to ‘move on’ is taken in contemporary parlance to be a practical attitude and orientation to life. In the latter vignette, all the stake-holders — the ‘neutral’ newspaper reporter, the competitors from each team, club officials and at least one coach — are joined in agreement. It is better to just move on. Together with the readers, it is presumed, all have joined hands, refusing to be side-tracked, waylaid or bogged down. Indeed, we have all collectively gone on our way. Like an episode of Star Trek, we have decided to move forward, to go where no man has gone before — onwards and outwards, having committed ourselves to move on to new frontiers and to do what we must. It makes sense. Each of us is our own agent; we each must face up to the demands of our future: to move on.

Yet isn’t this picture collusive, even a little surreal? Isn’t it distinctly counter-articulate, even insane, to ignore what should be attended to? At the level of logic and ethics, to just move on is often simply not feasible, or right. Isn’t it impossible, for instance, to just move on if you have had your character assassinated on national television by the blond-haired celebrity captain of the opposing team and member of your broader workplace fraternity?

Taking the ‘just move on’ injunction into the larger social sphere, does the same logic apply? What if you have heard you are about to lose your job, and with this the identity you have lived for a generation? What if you have been locked up illegally and are now sitting in gaol — is it possible or right to think that you could or ought to ‘just get over it’?

The moving on/going forward metaphor is a kindred spirit with other
figures of speech that share the same beguiling root — the 'get over it', 'leave it behind', 'get on board', 'get ahead', 'the longest journey starts with a footstep' kind of pap. They are examples of a linguistic category, a hub of references, that might be termed the 'journey metaphor' — non-reflective iteration'. And doesn't the recycling of this renewable help! By summoning up and then employing the proposition that it is proper to move-on, I hold out against, and hopefully ward-off, all those difficult feelings: the uncomfortable experience of a sense of impotence, injustice or confusion.

The journey metaphor has tremendous traction in our current period — a time dominated by an amoral pragmatism: 'Get over it — the dogs may bark but the caravan moves on'. If the reflective, morally developmental 'Iliad' aspect of the journey story is part of what is meant, well, fine. But any such deep reference is unlikely; sure it can be good to be 'on the road' — but given our busy and complex times, isn't the anodyne 'just move on' simply a balm for troubled minds?

The muscular tone of the utterance suggests that human beings can and should always choose an active route. Anything other than the upward and outward action sounds passive, weak: the domain of whingers and losers. Rather than let an awkward issue — a feeling, a problem — occupy our focus, we need to put it out of the way.

The use of the frame moving on/going forward and all its permutations are onomatopoetic from a cultural point of view. They have accrued a positive valence, associated with 'advancing', 'betterment', 'progress', at the individual level. It appears to be embedded in an ethical language — a certain kind of heartbreaking, individualised responsibility.

But this is the logic of a hard-nosed pragmatism, not the language of ordinary humankind, where memory, feelings, reputation are not simply commodities that can be moved like a pallet of goods. In so far as this kind of language and logic makes compelling sense to us, it casts us all as machines, not as people. Don't worry about grief, regret, shame — just get over it.

Susan Faludi recently said, 'Americans are just so wedded to saying OK, let's just turn the page and everything is going to be fine' (The Age, 12 April 2008). Yet this kind of thinking is not only apolitical, it's a comic book version of action. In many circumstances it is impossible to get-over-it-and-move-on without there being a political, symbolic or practical process that acknowledges, and to a degree relieves, the injustices and traumas that have taken place.

The importance of remembering — of not succumbing to the let's move on mantra — was reiterated in June this year by Mary Simon, an Inuit spokesperson. Simon was speaking on the occasion of the Canadian Prime Minister officially apologising to the country's Indigenous people for the long-standing official policy of 'killing the Indian child within' by separating children from their kinship groups:

Let us not be lulled into believing that when the sun rises tomorrow, the pain and scars will be gone. They won't. But a new day has dawned.

The same logic applies whether it is a nation, a team or a single individual: one does not really move on by forgetting. Real progress occurs by repairing — by doing the remembering that reconnects.

Mark Furlong teaches Social Work at Latrobe University.

Free Market Foreclosures

DON MONKERUD

The current US housing crisis grew out of politicised government policy and a shared commitment among business elites to support a laissez-fair, free market, anti-tax economy unhindered by regulations. As David M. Abromowitz, Senior Fellow for the Center for American Progress, has said:

The foreclosure crisis is a man-made phenomena ... It's not just the side effect of a normal market cycle. There was a push to boost home ownership and a pattern of under regulating financial services and support from all kinds of businesses to allow the free market to take over.

The crisis originated in Allen Greenspan's decision to lower federal interest rates to protect the economy from recession after the internet stock bubble and 9/11 imperilled the economy. While the Fed kept interest rates low, investors sought higher returns and real estate appeared undervalued. With a plentiful flow of funds and exotic new unregulated investment instruments created by financial institutions, the real estate market took off.

Although housing costs had risen at a yearly rate of 1.8 per cent over inflation since the Carter presidency, they shot up an average of 7 per cent a year until 2004, although they are now receding. Easy money under Bush's policy of an 'ownership society' increased ownership rates by 1.4 per cent and pushed the cost of the median home from $130,000 in 2000 to a peak of $221,900 in 2006.

Unlike other times of economic expansion, since the last recession wages have remained stagnant; adjusted for inflation, hourly wages fell below those of 1972. In 2007, the Census Report found median household income was $1000 less than in 2000, and those living in poverty increased by 5 million. While the minimum wage remained unchanged for the longest span since 1938, a Pew survey found workers experienced 'less job security and faced more on-the-job stress than twenty or thirty years ago'.

Max Wolff with Global Macroscope has put it this way: 'Americans have been struggling to live middle class lives without middle class wages for 25 years ... Every member of the household is now at work and they still can't make ends meet in a consumer society that now demands an enormous amount of debt'.