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Goodnight, G Thomas, "Commentary on Campolo" (2003). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 15.
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Commentary on: C. Campolo's "Treacherous Ascents: On Seeking Common Ground for Conflict Resolution"

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"Reasoning together is, among other things, a way of responding to the sense that we need to repair or establish intersubjectivity. Or to put it another way, it is a way of restoring or initiating purposeful coordination to our several actions or behaviors."—Chris Campolo

In this paper, I wish to call attention to the notion of the "interruption" in the space of intersubjectivity developed by Professor Campolo. His cases follow rather neatly, I think, contexts established in American argumentation: the surgeons being part of the technical sphere of argument; the house builders being confronted with a condition of social reasoning; and the threats of crime or warning being part of a public issue. In each case, I think it is important to illustrate that "interruptions" work differently, with alternative causes and solutions. Expert reasoning and practical argument are contextually defined and repaired to sustain intersubjective conditions, I think. Often in the public sphere, however, repair work is limited to building a common cause rather than restoring common ground. Questions of intersubjectivity are suspended in political bridging. The worry that "higher order" principles threaten spurious agreement in the context of the politics, I show to be an unwarranted concern.

First, examine the common ground afforded by the technical sphere of argument. The reasons of surgeons aim at decision-making within a circumstance where a specialized predicament has arisen. On the one hand, there are sets of expectations that define a project as a common enterprise with everyone familiar with one another's role or part to play. The common enterprise has a shared history, is regulated by established procedure, involves the skilled, sequential use of tools for defined ends, in a time limited circumscribed operation. Cutting a person open from sternum to stomach becomes "reasonable" only because of such an elaborated specialized code of understanding, and such activity is the very common ground upon which activities stemming from expert training and professional identity are undertaken—individually or in teams. In this sense, common ground is not an abstract, overarching principle minimizing difference. Rather, it is the hard-won stuff of state of the art practices backed by the epistemic certification of relevant fields.

The case of the "interruption" in routines is a quite interesting moment, and illustrates the problem with reasoning and the technical sphere or systems world. Campolo sees a disruption as repairable if a choice falls within the domain of expertise of the cooperative actors: two surgeons are more likely to know how to make a choice about organ slicing than about repairing equipment or resolving a power outage. However, interruptions have a way of problematizing practice more deeply, sometimes.

Failures to unfold expectations stirs an interesting variety of argument because when something does not happen like expected, one cannot know exactly why, strictly speaking, and not knowing why, one cannot know the extent of departure from the norm, even if a set of backup protocols are in place as correctives to situations that appear anomalous. In fact,

interruptions have a comic way of confounding reason, as efforts to correct a situation sometimes don't work for a different reason and exacerbate the problem. Moreover, under limited time pressures arise to put things back in place quickly and mistakes are made. For such reasons, interruptions stress and test the competencies of cooperative reasons. Interruptions in technical reason sometimes generate "cascade failures" where a weakness in one part of the operation gets passed on by the system such that operations can appear to be going smoothly while the system itself is failing. The army corps of engineers, smoothed kinks and damned tributaries of the Mississippi—each collaboration a success—never dreaming they were collaborating in producing a monumental flood in a season of record rain. Finally, there is no guarantee that state-of-the-art itself will not someday be seen as unjustified. For years, surgeons got rid of bad humors with leeches and bleeding; clearly not in the health interests of patients, although correct by state of the art standards. Better technical reasons sometimes exacerbate rather than overcome blind spots.

Turn, next, to common grounds afforded by practical reason. If we switch from cooperation in the context of expertise to that of the world of practice, we find a different set of issues. Campolo's loose alliance of builders are confounded by two predicaments: What does one do when the authorities will not accept work as sound? What does one do when nature intervenes to stop work? The kind of reasoning required here may be technical in nature; that is, attorneys are consulted and the risks of winning litigation assessed. More likely, the situation calls for ingenuity. It is a long standing custom in many counties to simply bribe inspectors, play politics with boards in asking for variances, or ignore detail specifications. A house is a matter of workmanship not blueprints in the end. Solutions are invented. When nature intervenes, invention replaces guidelines. In Texas this spring, an alligator was found in a children's wading pond. A contractor roped it, dragged the animal—jaws flapping and all—behind his pickup, and shot it. This action, though not an aesthetic triumph by current animal control standards, was effective. Ingenious solutions tend to be short term, seat-of-the-pants, seemed-good-at-the-time reasons that are vulnerable to second-guessing over the long run. Just as technical reason risks cascade failure, improvisation risks legitimation problems.

Finally, examine common ground in relation to changes that transcend expertise and individual initiative, and can only properly be addressed collectively, through public argument. The problem of interruption of the lifeworld happens when there is some change effecting the collectivity that cannot be resolved either through expertise or improvisation, although I would suggest that social change—like a crime wave—brings on both efforts to expertly deploy police resources and to take individual initiatives (like gun ownership, alarms or self-imposed travel restrictions). At some threshold point, both individual initiatives and institutional initiatives are recognized to be insufficient. Now, at this level "intersubjectivity" may not play a role in restoring the capacity to reason effectively together; how my generation is going to be effected by global warming is not the same as another, the crime rate in my area is not the same as in yours. With larger problems, reasoners have to confront the fact that argument moves from common ground, with its intersubjective security and repair issues, to common cause.

Argument by common cause is defined by a sufficient fund of reasons for collaborative action that is more worthwhile for individuals or groups to act in concert rather than to ignore or oppose one another, at least for a while. To achieve common cause, interlocutors do not have to reach a meeting of the minds, much less assume a position that discloses a full reaching intersubjective bond of mutual identification. Common cause is practical politics, a way of reaching agreement while acknowledging difference in interests. Common cause reasoning

results in temporary solutions that ameliorate rather than resolve issues. Typically, its arguments reframe political alliances rather than reinforce old divisions

Common cause is not built primarily on trust but on interest and the bridges among different groups do not need to be repaired, nor can they, because the only traffic that counts is the particular link that serves the individual interests of a joint activity. This is true for market logic, where individual interest is sometimes maximized by restraint of trade. It is also true in the realm of politics, where joint opposition to pornography on the part of feminists and fundamentalists achieve a joint goal, whereas one group sees itself undercutting the lynch-pin of patriarchy while the other extending proper patriarchal protections.

Common cause arguments are of a particular kind, and are not at risk to the same type of disappointments as Dworkin's "higher principles" that somehow would entangle opposing groups in an abstract premise leading to misestimations of the domains of agreement or false as[c]sent. When issues are abstracted to a high enough level to squeeze agreements out of difference, then the notion of "common ground" finds a "common" denominator but at the expense of losing its standing as "ground," for the grounds of argument are not premised statements but broad territories of invention from which arguments are uttered from the contexts of specialized training, artisanship skills, or streams of public discourses. Abstractions are abstractions precisely because they do not ground but provide a vantage from which the imagination can spin criticism, critique, commentary, and even foresee possibilities of Utopic revision. Sometimes abstractions provide disruptions immediate and compelling enough to shake the grounds of practice, but whether such interruptions such as the Declarations of the Rights of Man or the Emancipation Proclamation create useful common ground or submerge difference is not automatically dangerous, but more of an open question.