The Spiritual Dimension:
a gerotranscendental take on Akira Kurosawa's film, "Ran"

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Hidetora runs from the burning castle in Kurosawa's *'Ran'*

I come here today to speak with you about ageing, diversity and spirituality. I am currently working on a review of the literature on these topics for a project in the UK[1]. Since I am at a point in the review where synthesis is beginning to happen, I thought it might be a good idea to use this opportunity to begin a dialogue with you. Research synthesis, according to Kirkevold (1997, in Raholm et al 2002: 5), encompasses a process of theory development and creation of a holistic interpretation. I offer a few thoughts, ideas—even a few challenges to our current thinking –in order to encourage dialogue around this intriguing area of study.

I think all of us as social scientists have found it necessary in recent times to come to grips with the reflective nature of the work that we do. In other words, why are we doing it in the first place and what is it about ourselves that draws us to the work/subject/people that we investigate? As collage-makers, narrators of narrations, dream weavers—it is my belief that even the most quantitative of us still approach work with the 'hidden agenda', if you will, of our background, culture, experience, preferences and prejudices. Part of being post modern in our approaches includes acknowledging as much of these things as possible and being vigilant in discovering the more hidden ones. By clearing the air in this way, we not only can attempt to produce more transparent data, but also can often find keys to understanding that we may have otherwise overlooked.

My background is in gerontology and social psychology. My research preceding this project used a biographic narrative method to look at meaning and the informal care role. Because of the nature of biography, I am also very interested in adult development, particularly development in older adults. I mention these facts because they reflect the way that I have approached the topic of ageing, diversity and spirituality: from a developmental and socially constructed point-of-view. For me, point-of-view is best conceptualised in filmmaking terms: in other words, from what angle am I looking at a subject and, therefore, producing a particular personal picture of it. I also come from a background of years of working with older adults in community settings in the US. This greatly influences my work today; many of the people with whom I have worked over the years sit permanently on my shoulder, whispering in my ear when I am hard at work.

A year or two ago, I was reviewing a book by Hollway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently.* One sentence of theirs—almost an aside or afterthought—grabbed my attention then and has held it since. In the afterward of their book, they ask researchers to begin to see the subjects of research represented with the complexity we currently associate with literature and works of art more generally (Hollway & Jefferson 2000: 156). In fact, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) find that qualitative theoretical development is, increasingly, taking place at the intersection of science and the humanities. Since a part of my background is in the arts, I welcomed these statements. Urged on by what I thought at the time was a quite brave declaration, I began to look at other disciplines in the humanities and the arts for ways of understanding within my own discipline. For example, I later explored the work of French playwright, poet and actor Artaud for potential clues to understanding the physical in the interview setting[2]. I also wrote and produced a performance piece based on the works of psychologists Ken Gergen and Klaus Riegel for a conference in Berlin[3].

Perhaps by this point you are not quite so surprised that I have decided to talk about spirituality, diversity and ageing today through the lens of Japanese filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa. Nonetheless, I think it would be a good idea to move backwards in time (a very post-modern arabesque!) and explain the journey from spirituality and ageing to the film '*Ran*."

The intersection of several seemingly disparate terms always fascinates me. When I was asked to review literature on diversity, ethnicity, spirituality, end-of-life, health and ageing I immediately removed all the commas in that instruction. As I began to search the literature (and, therefore, combine search terms) I found that the places where the individual search terms interfaced consistently held the most promise for new discovery. As I continued to explore and then to read the literature, I found the *ah-ha* moments to be in that fertile ground where ideas and concepts collide, producing new and interesting growth of ideas, more than the sum of the parts.

Returning to the initial search and the some of the findings, I would like to put forth Lewis' definition of the spiritual dimension as one that "tries to be in harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite, and comes into focus when the person faces emotional stress, physical illness and death" (Lewis 1999: 336). The definition is distinguished from and independent of any particular spiritual system or religion; it is a universal attribute of persons, with varying individual degrees of awareness and manifestation. It is that part of the person concerned with meaning, truth, purpose or reality—the ultimate significance of things (Hiatt 1986: 737). It many ways its concerns are similar to the concerns of those of us who pursue

qualitative research and its meaning-making capacity. Like our findings, the spiritual dimension in rooted in a non-tangible domain, fundamentally experiential and intuitive. It is in constant, dynamic flux, but moving toward some end-point in an evolutionary way. There are efforts by the mind to concretise meaning. The spiritual dimension has an integrative function for the individual. Unity provides context and meaning and it is toward such unity that the person is striving (1986: 737).

Much has been written about spirituality and ageing, both in Europe and the US. There is also a great deal of literature on diversity and culture and religion, particularly of the guidebook or cookbook variety. Even some of the latter touch upon ageing within a specific culture and/or religion; nothing that new or that we could not have guessed, really. Tornstam has referred to this as "common sense science" (Tornstam 1992: 318).

Diversity frequently means different things to different people (Calasanti 1990). The dictionary defines diversity as variety. It is interesting that a search of the term diversity uncovers a mountain of information in the world of business. Diversity is good business these days. Perhaps it is time that gerontology took its lead from this kind of thinking. The concept of variety in ageing is quite intriguing and opens up the possibilities for multiple theoretical approaches to ageing, or, as I prefer, the consideration of several approaches simultaneously. In the UK for example, there is a long-standing cultural myth that British society has a tolerance for and even an appreciation of diversity or variety through the concept of eccentricity. Eccentric people, particularly eccentric older people, have a colourful history in British literature—in characters created by writers from Charles Dickens to Alan Bennett. Looking at variety in personal approaches to ageing—in other words, personal choice in ageing perspectives—leads me to consider the positive aspects of eccentricity. The dictionary defines it as: "deviating from an established or usual pattern or style" or "deviating from conventional or accepted usage or conduct especially in odd or whimsical ways" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, online).

Ah, yes, but wasn't diversity in ageing supposed to be a reflection of multi-culturalism, migration, immigration, asylum seeking and other current newspaper headlines? This may be so, but perhaps it is our task to stubbornly refuse to join this popular chorus and, instead, consider diversity and ageing from the standpoint of variety and eccentricity. As I was reviewing the literature on spirituality, diversity and ageing, my own kind of eccentric, tangential thinking brought me, in this instance, to Swedish gerontologist Lars Tormstam and his theory of gerotranscendence. I was intrigued because his theory seemed to fly in the face of more commonly invoked theories of ageing—particularly activity theory—and indicate that older people may approach old age differently than we had imagined. Perhaps the last 40 years or so of getting granny out of the chair and into a hang glider had been at cross purposes to not only what granny wanted, but also what nature/the gods/her muse had intended her to do.

In Tornstam's (1992) manifesto in The Gerontologist, he sets out a passionate foundation for his theory of gerotranscendence. He exposes some of the myths of gerontology, particularly related to stereotypical negative images of ageing. He attacks the practice of considering those who are supposedly unproductive, ineffective and dependent (including most older people) as contemptible or worse, as people to be pitied. Tornstam decries the fact that "stereotyped ideas about aging and elderly people are linked with the need to categorize and systematize the reality that surrounds us" (1992: 32). He adds the point that midlife values (and anxieties)

seem to dominate research thinking, particularly those of white Western middle-class males who, in gerontology, force upon the elderly their value-dependent theories.

Tornstam calls for a phenomenological approach, allowing new images of ageing to emerge from reality and an emergence of the importance of individual meaning to describe phenomena (1992: 323). He declares that the "old ingrained paradigm must be transcended" (1992: 324) and introduces his new theory of gerotranscendence, a fresh understanding of disengagement pattern. He defines this kind of disengagement as not negative, but rather a positive development towards new perspectives and wisdom, indicative of persons who have come far in their individuation process –a condition of gerotranscendence.

Further development of the theory states that the process of gerotranscendence is an ongoing process during the individual's whole life (Lewin 2001: 397). Eight dimensions posited by the theory of gerotranscendence are:

1. view of time and space
2. view of life and death
3. self-understanding
4. decrease in self-centeredness
5. transcendent wisdom
6. meaning and importance of relationships
7. mystery dimension of life
8. attitude to toward material assets

<div align="right">(Lewin, 2001: 400)</div>

In sum, according to Tornsam, "the gerotranscendental individual typically experiences a redefinition of 'self' and of relationships with others as well as a new understanding of fundamental existential questions" (2001: 395).

The theory of gerotranscendence is akin to certain contemplative traditions (Lewin 2001: 396), including Zen Buddhism. It does not assume that gerotranscendence is necessarily connected with religion (Thomas 1997 in Lewin 2001: 397). In fact, gerotranscendence is a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one (Tornstam 1997: 17). One criticism of Tornstam's theory is that the approach has been unable to free itself from the positivist legacy, by using standard survey techniques and quantitative analyses to support his qualitative studies (Jonson & Magusson 2001: 324). Research has begun, however, on gerotranscendence in different cultural settings (Lewin and others) and this seems a promising avenue for exploration, particularly from a hermeneutical narrative perspective. This progress also opens up possibilities for discovery of intercultural common ground in the ageing arena.

In the process of this re-exploration of gerotranscendence, I happened upon a BBC programme on the work of Japanese filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa. Tornstam's theory in the back of my mind, I began to take a fresh look at the character, Hidetora, in Kurosawa's late-life film, "*Ran*." *Ran* has been translated from the Japanese as 'chaos.' This, in turn, recalled for me the opening sentences of a journal article that began: "Death creates chaos. It creates a total upheaval in the entire family structure" (Kagawa-Singer 1998: 1752). The end-of-life consideration of death as an existential crisis is a contrivance that Kurosawa had used in films preceding *Ran*; This device "very quickly launches the character and his audience into the limbo of the transcendental perspective" (Gordon 1997: 138). Kurosawa's concern for the

existential crises of 'man' in the face of death and the apparent meaninglessness of life's' struggles are central to his films, particularly his later films and specifically, *Ran*.

I was intrigued by the fact that many Western writers, in reviewing Kurosawa's Hidetora character, assume that the old King is 'descending into madness.' I wondered, if, perhaps, they have got it wrong. Perhaps the old King is not mad after all, but 'gerotranscending'. Tornstam tells us that Western cultures rarely accept the gerotranscendent state-of-mind; displays of this sort usually run the risk of being judged deviant or mentally disturbed in the West. Suddenly, for me, Kurosawa's old King and the Western description of his "decent into madness" began to strike parallels between this King and Tornstam's description of gerotranscendence.

A brief synopsis of what is a rather complicated plot (very loosely based on King Lear) follows: King Hidetora, 70 years old when we meet him, has decided to retire and leaves his lands to his three sons. He chooses the eldest as his successor and the second-born as support to him; his youngest son objects to his father's plans and is, therefore banished by his father. Greed and rivalry begin amongst the sons. Later, Hidetora is refused refuge by his sons; but unable to commit suicide, he leaves the castle and begins to wander around the plains, by one description, "completely mad" (Serper 2001: 146). The youngest son, the only one who had loved his father, comes to rescue him; they are reconciled and Hidetora returns to "sanity" (ibid). The son is shot and killed, however; Hidetora is heartbroken and he too dies.

Kurosawa is said to have used the medium of film as an expression of his own spiritual search. He was an old man himself at the time of the filming of *Ran*, about the same age as the King he portrays through film. It has been expressed that Kurosawa, as he aged—like many ageing artists—"appear(ed) to become more spiritualised, expressing transcendence, resignation and/or holy rage" (Geist 1992: 26). One of the more enlightened reviews describes *Ran* as a lesson in "how the evil seeds of egoism sprout and grow into catastrophe" (Pearse 1998: 3). He describes a decreased interest in material things and greater need for solitary 'meditation.' Hidetora confronts the backdrop of his past and tries to find a way to integrate his present with his earlier self (Bovens 1999: 228) or, in Tornstam's terms, through self-confrontation or the discovery of hidden aspects of the self –both good and bad (Wadensten & Carlsson 2001: 636). Life's "paths may also become altogether unrecognizible in a sincere confrontation with the past. This is the fate of *Ran*'s Hidetora" (Bovens 1999: 236). Similarly, Tornstam returns repeatedly to the theme of ego transcendence, how the individual experiences a redefinition of self and relationship of self with others.

The film's intensely felt humanist message, its all encompassing hallucinatory effects, the obscuring of characters in a landscape of time and space, its insistence upon Buddhist principles of redemption, forgiveness and lack of hatred and its overall description of a decent from power and a confrontation with past deeds –all present evidence for the consideration of the character through the lens of gerotranscendence. Tornstam's gerotranscendent themes specifically abound in Kurosawa's *Ran*:

1. Themes of time and space, particularly the borders between past and present, are visually manipulated in the film.

2. Connections to earlier generations, a contemplation of life and death, acceptance of the mysteries of life are subjects raised in *Ran*.

3. As indicated earlier, Hidetora's self-confrontation is the overarching theme of the film; his decreasing self-centeredness is shown through his willingness to cede power to his sons.

4. Bodily transcendence is depicted through Hidetora's throwing off of his battle garments and assuming simple dress.

5. His altruism is demonstrated by his giving up his worldly possessions.

6. He returns to the child within through dreamlike wandering in the plains.

7. The character confronts, possibly for the first time, that the pieces of life's jigsaw form a whole.

8. He becomes less interested in superficial relations, exhibiting a need for solitude through his wanderings.

9. Hidetora abandons his role as power figure to his sons, giving up his possessions and wealth and choosing asceticism over the material.

10. He begins to see the duality of right and wrong and the possibilities of transcending it.

> (based on Wadensten & Carlsson's [2001: 636-37] synopsis of gerotranscendence)

Ran is sometimes seen as a pessimistic film that shows the deterioration of an old man who forfeits his identity but then never regains it (Geist 1992: 35). This brings up an often-overlooked point in theoretical development; that is, the misconception that a theory of ageing will only provide positive examples that support it; sometimes, as in this case, a negative response can be just an enlightening. Hidetora is sometimes reported as the protagonist who rejects the option of setting out on a spiritual ascent and ends by rushing headlong toward his doom (Bock in Goodwin 1994: 71). Kurosawa tried to make it clear, however, that Hidetora's power rested upon a lifetime of bloodthirsty savagery. Kurosawa explained: "Forced to confront the consequences of his misdeeds, (Hidetora) is driven mad. But only by confronting his evil head-on can he transcend it and begin to struggle again toward virtue" (Kurosawa interview with Peter Grilli in Goodwin, ed. 1994: 60).

Near the end of the film,
> Torrential rains force (Hidetora) to take cover in the hut of a blind man. The blind man turns out to be a victim of Hidetora's past savagery. His eyes were put out by the King and he was allowed to keep only a flute. Under the piercing melody of the flute, Hidetora is force to face his past with sincerity. A self-image that was built on illusions of heroism and glory shatters and Hidetora is driven mad.

In the case of Hidetora, do we see an example of gerotranscendence thwarted, ending in a nightmare? Does Hidetora's reflection on his wicked and bloody life result in an inability to transcend? The character does seem stuck in limbo. After all, the film ends with 'Blind' humanity—in the guise of the boy Hidetora blinded years ago—tapping his way along a cliff to disaster. Perhaps the film is itself a lesson in transcendence—but a dark one.

Like Tornstam, "Kurosawa has borrowed and altered, shifted and inverted many of the formal and philosophical values of Zen (Prince in Goodwin 1994: 225). Again, like Tornstam, Kurosawa searches for a meeting point for East and West (1994: 225) and a dialectical use of East and West (1994: 227). If common sense tells us that bad things happen to good people, perhaps *Ran* demonstrates the inverse: good things (like *gerotranscendence*) can happen to bad people. What the individual makes of the process is ultimately up to them. One view posits that a shift to and emphasis on spirituality is frequently the most profound response to suffering (Raholm et al 2002: 12); this seems to fit Hidetora's dilemma. The fact that he may have been unable to transcend suffering is no less support of a theory of gerotranscendence. As seen from a gerotranscendent vantage point, Kurosawa's *Ran* offers us a sound perspective on the landscape of ageing, diversity and spirituality.

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[1] The review developed from ageing, spirituality and diversity into one that investigates the qualitative literature on end-of-life issues and ethnicity/race/diversity, employing qualitative methods and philosophical concepts. The papers are available on the Centre for Evidence in Ethnicity, Health & Diversity website at: http://users.wbs.ac.uk/group/ceehd/home/end_of_life

[2] "Beyond the Text: An Artaudian take on the non-verbal clues revealed within the biographical interpretive process" is available from the author's website at: http://www.angelfire.com/zine/kipworld/Beyond.pdf

[3] "The Birth of Constructionism! Or On a Train from Morgantown, West Virginia, 1976, with Klaus Riegel & Kenneth Gergen" is available from the author's website at: http://www.angelfire.com/zine/kipworld/Morgantown_script.pdf

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