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Reflections

Art and the building of peace

George Kent

The meaning of conflict

Meanings are not inherent in things, but are socially negotiated. Like the meaning of a work of art, the meaning of a conflict is not inherent in it. Its meaning depends on what the observers bring to it. Meaning is always subjective. Conflict is like art. The parties should not see themselves as helpless victims of it. They participate in the construction of it. They have the potential for deconstructing and reconstructing it as well. Like art, conflict, well used, can be a wonderful opportunity for learning for all concerned.

Conflicting parties and the conflict specialists working with them generally seek some sort of middling compromise between the parties' polar positions. The guiding principle is that each must give a little to get a little. Transcending conflict, however, aspires to something much better – a new synergy that leads to new, previously unimagined possibilities that are superior for all concerned.

In traditional approaches to conflict management, the initial description of the conflict serves as the basis for the subsequent work. In contrast, efforts to transcend conflict are based on having the parties review and reconsider the fundamental meanings of their conflict.

The essence of a conflict is the incompatibilities in the parties' preferences. The core concern is not over differences in the parties' histories, grievances or philosophical values, but over incompatibilities in their concrete preferences about how things should be. One party feels that things should be arranged in one way, another feels they should be arranged in another way, and it appears that those

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different realities that are envisioned cannot coexist. One party insists the border should be here, and the other insists the border should be there. It cannot be in both places. These positions are incompatible; thus the parties are in conflict.

The reasons why they have these particular preferences may be interesting, but it may not be necessary to know them. The essential *description* of any conflict is about the incompatibilities in the parties' concrete preferences. The grievances – those different readings of history – are about *explanations* for those preferences, and thus for the conflict.

So long as a conflict is defined in terms of the history of hurt on each side, the parties are trapped by the fixity, the embeddedness, of that history. The parties need to break out of that history and instead focus on the essence of the conflict itself.

Artful remedies

One can help conflicting parties resolve their situation by asking them to jointly review their positions and the meanings of those positions. Their historical stories help in explaining and understanding those positions. The parties can also try to formulate understandings in an ahistorical way, saying what the incompatibility situation is currently, and projecting what it could be in the future.

The parties could be asked to formulate a joint statement describing the current situation. Where exactly are their preferences incompatible? That is, before pressing them to adopt a jointly acceptable *solution* to their dilemma, it would be useful to first ask them to come to a jointly acceptable *description* of that dilemma. What exactly is the question before them? The exercise of formulating a new joint account of the situation remakes the meaning of the situation and establishes a new jointly negotiated meaning.

Being compelled to accept others' interpretation of things is a sign of disempowerment. An art teacher who tells students the meaning of a painting and then quizzes them to see if they can reproduce that answer is a bad teacher. In much the same way, a history teacher who tells you how to understand an historical era does you a disservice.

The liberatory pedagogy advocated by Paulo Freire (author of *Pedagogy of the oppressed* [1970]) and his followers is based on the idea of 'finding one's own word', discovering that you have the capacity and the right – and perhaps even the obligation – to put your own meanings on things. A teacher who supports you in expressing yourself by making your own meaning, strengthens and empowers you. An historian who invites you to abandon the encrusted meanings of history that have been passed down, and to instead create your own new meaning, empowers you.

It can take enormous courage to break the chains of memory. At a seminar on peace in Norway in the summer of 2000, two young Macedonian girls from Skopje said they would like to wash the feet of the Albanians present. They did so, in tears, in an act of historical cleansing. Such an act opens new, transcendent possibilities.

In 1999, Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said had a vision of using jointly created music as a means for breaking inherited chains of meaning. They founded the West-Eastern Divan (orchestra), bringing together young musicians from all sides of the Middle East conflict. Years later it is still promoting understanding among them. It has not produced miracles, but there is no doubt that it has done a great deal of good, building many small bridges.

If conflicting parties are able to unlock themselves from the chains of historically embedded meaning and create new meaning together, they thereby gain new power over the situation. It is no longer fixed by inherited memory.

The architecture of peace

In this way, joint efforts in any of the arts could help to transcend conflicts. Consider the possibilities in architecture, for example. We can look at, say, Jerusalem, as the concrete manifestation of conflicts, now embedded in stone. Or we can see it as a great work of art, one whose meanings are not fixed, but may be reconsidered as we bring a new spirit to it.

Of course, we must not forget the historical meaning of a great city like Jerusalem. We must remember the history of our conflicts to ensure that we never have to relive their horrors; never again. But we should acknowledge that historical memory is selective and political, and can be used and abused for human purposes. We have to be deliberate and selective about what elements of that history we highlight, if we are to avoid being trapped by our own constructions of history.

In *The cathedral within* (1999), Bill Shore points out that those who launched the construction of the great cathedrals of the world knew they would never see the final products. They did not know how the projects would be completed. Nevertheless, they shaped such compelling visions that others gladly carried the projects forward, for generations and even centuries. Shore's book was written not for architects, but to empower those who need vision to address the world's major social issues.

We always have choices regarding what meanings to put on the events that influence our lives. Misery is optional. Viewing with fresh eyes, we might find that positions that had seemed wholly incompatible really are not. Instead of having the border where one party or the other wants it, or somewhere in-between, they could perhaps look for ways in which it can be in both places, or perhaps neither place. This was done in a border conflict between Ecuador and Peru. They transcended the original conflicting understandings and established a jointly managed public park in the space between the two countries. Opening minds to the possibility of new meanings opens us to possible futures not previously imagined. A liberating pedagogy applied to the world as it is, opens us to transcendence to previously unimagined possibilities.

A transformative pedagogy that encourages individuals to make their own meanings opens new possibilities in individuals' lives, allowing new ways of being.

An approach to conflict that encourages the parties to jointly remake the meaning of their situation opens new possibilities for using conflict constructively. Transcending inherited understandings can create space for entirely new ways of being together.

Paulo Freire asked Brazilian peasants to formulate their own social analyses by asking them to respond to pictures of different sorts of social situations. This was a pioneering initiative in the deliberate use of art in the service of peace. The peasants were supported in producing their own analyses of their own situations in their own terms. One can only imagine what might have taken place if this exercise in interpretation were undertaken jointly by the oppressed and the oppressors – perhaps through some sort of facilitated dialogue.

We need to have more joint analysis by the parties to conflict, perhaps through their writing joint history. Their remedies, too, need to be built out of what they can jointly imagine. The exercise of imagination is art. The joint exercise of imagination by parties to conflict is the exercise of the art of peacefulness.

Issues of form cross the boundaries of what is conventionally understood as art and what is conventionally understood as social science. The design of sound political structures is a kind of applied art. Just as in designing a toaster, there is a need for a certain artfulness, as well as an attention to function, in the creation of new political forms.

It is much too easy to criticise political actors and institutions. The challenging task is to say what ought to be done, what ought to be the case, and to say it together with others. Much more attention should be given to the constructive art of political design. What should be the design of institutional arrangements for global governance? What should be the design of any specific political action?

Opportunities for collaboration

Given decent opportunities, people everywhere can be wonderfully creative – in the arts, in industry, in institution-building. They create new kinds of meaning, new ways of saying things at a breathtaking pace. The problem is that often they insist on doing it alone. Where is the *joint* making of meaning? Where and how do people of your country collaborate with people who are different from them, to produce things that are new and better? Some people seem to want others to step aside while they build their soaring monuments and bridges and cathedrals. That won't do.

We need more international projects based on true collaboration, in art, architecture, trade, humanitarian assistance, diplomacy, dispute management and everything else. Relationships need to be genuinely dialogical, rather than instructional. There needs to be an openness to learning, to the creation of new meaning on all sides.

Development projects should not be about us instructing them. They should be about learning, and thus development, on all sides. The best development projects would be collaborative, with a strong component of artfulness not only in material terms, but also in spiritual and institutional terms.

Consider the possibilities there might be in starting a collaborative effort to design a new temple, to be used by all religious faiths, to be located in the centre of Jerusalem. If the different parties could work out a process that would make this happen, this would truly be a building of peace.

Opening minds to the possibility of new meanings opens us to possible futures not previously imagined. The joint exercising of imagination by parties to conflict is the exercising of the art of peacefulness. Designing new political structures together would be like composing new music together, creating new meaning that goes beyond the capabilities of any of the parties acting alone.



RELATIONSHIPS ARE STRENGTHENED WHEN PEOPLE
WORK TOGETHER IN PURSUING GOALS THEY SHARE.

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