

From The Editorial Board: The Nature of Conflict

Nancy Geist Giacomini
Sullivan University

The butterfly's beauty was vaguely visible in the shroud of society. For her alone it was an adventure big enough for both of us. Time has done nothing but saturate our minds with inspiration. An eye for natural and a heart that doesn't waver to protect it. Separation has allowed us to flourish into amorphous balls of existence. Splendor, aptitude, customs, passion are we now rich with the more wholesome our companionship will be. An eternal friendship that lies on top of a connection, a bond, a tie, a link, a river which flows, guides us to an unknown region...

(Author Unknown)

The articles selected for this our second JOCM publication speak of metaphor, conflict analysis models, and the interplay of intelligence and personality. Humans have evolved a unique knack for conceptualizing and giving rational expression to complex and natural phenomenon. We are in a constant quest to make meaning and one-up nature. Models are developed to represent order from seeming chaos. Many seek to analyze and control natural social behavior with fixed systems that artificially freeze the cyclic and interconnected expression of conflict, change and life itself.

In wisdom and fallibility, humankind is part of a beautifully designed living system, vast, and interconnected to all other living things. To separate from this truth causes some to feel disconnected and discounted in the world. Others spend time chasing the illusion of control to order a sense of chaos. Paying attention to connections between actors and experiences and the influence one has on the other is at the heart of a peaceful existence and loving human experience. One part of a personal story is influenced, shared and layered onto the next, with lessons learned at the feet of conflict rich and textured.

It is no accident that noticing and accounting for connections and relationships where others see roadblocks and enemies is also the essence of managing conflict and change. Though often shrouded in metaphor and buried in layers, the fundamental human need is to belong. Without connection as a condition of life, the chrysalis withers, infant's cries go unanswered, nations fall, buds drop, and great boulders are rendered as mere crystals. To trust the order of things is to trust the unseen process of life itself.

Nature might be considered the inspiration and essence of the common mediator's mantra "trust the process". Mediators mimic nature's own processes to encourage conflicting parties to engage one another through discomfort, disagreement and impasse to the "aha" of creative problem solving with mutually satisfying and sustainable results. Early problem solving models prioritized control over trust, and institutionalized neutrality over multi-partiality (Wing, n.d.). Well intended mediators trained to impose structure down to the equity of parties' pencil points and paper pads, while pretending it possible to leave their own personal stories at the door.

Neutrality was enforced and is still guarded today as a staple in resolution processes from dialogue to adjudication, along spectrums that miss their roots in restoration and social justice (Schrage and Thompson, 2009). Today these manmade notions of control and neutrality continue to wane as newer resolution models including transformational and social justice mediation honor

the natural connections between multi-partiality, community, and justice. Imbedding restorative justice and social justice as foundational in a resolution process deepens time honored values of empowering all people, creating fair and collaborative win-win solutions, and resolving conflicts at the lowest and most effective interpersonal levels; all in a physically and emotionally safe and just context. The use of ground rules often gives voice to shared expectations related to safety, privacy, active listening, creative problem solving, future focus, and agreement follow through. The words “ground rules” themselves prove oddly appropriate nods to the ironic partnership of Mother Nature and human nature. The irony travels well with the notion of authentic neutrality.

The renewed vigor of spring, as U.S. weather patterns warm and the earth greens and buzzes with frenzied new life is an ideal time to reconsider the cyclic and sustained order of things, and to take heart that the nature of conflict is itself interconnected in complex and lasting ways, even when the universe seems random and at odds with coexistence. To honor this awareness opens us to not only trust the process in conflict and change management practice, but to trust order within a seemingly chaotic world. Interconnections, internally and one to another, are the deep and lasting building blocks that support all life. We share the ultimate common ground of earth, and are only as removed from fellowship to our fellow living organisms as our cognitions and illusions of control, models, symbols and expressions in metaphor allow us to be. Here then, a brief reflection of the nature of conflict through common metaphor to shape a shared path into spring.

The Nature of Conflict is Like ...

... an Iceberg

Conflict is rich with nature as metaphor. Humans have a unique capacity to distance themselves from authentic meaning even while trying desperately to be understood. We hide behind poetic nuance, at once inviting others to dig deeper and to stay away. As suggested by the popular “conflict is like an iceberg” metaphor used across mediation models, those in conflict often float a safe expression just above the water line demarking what feels safe from what feels vulnerable. This assertion positions them in conflict and anchors a claim to being “right”, while all the while tamping down beneath the surface, a vast store of the true self; a self-layered and molded by personality, emotions, interests and needs, perceptions, expectations and unresolved past issues. (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011). People universally long to find interconnection to one another, yet have evolved complex systems and riddled verbal and nonverbal language that serve to keep us apart. These manmade efforts may seem to keep heads above water, but treading water seldom results in finding a shared foothold. Popular authors John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber (2005) engage the iceberg metaphor in “Our Iceberg is Melting” to explore eight steps to successfully navigate change through a fabled tale of Emperor Penguins adrift on an ill-fated iceberg.

... a Crystal

It serves a similar metaphor to note the recent discovery of an “Oz Crystal” in Western Australia. The crystal is some 4.4 billion years old, and too tiny to be seen by the naked eye. “The crystals formed just tens of millions of years after an early proto-Earth was melted by a violent impact with a Mars-size object. The crash created the moon and turned our young planet

into a red ball of molten rock.” ((Greenfieldboyce, 2014, line 4). This bright rock has since crusted into the layers of planet earth, leaving intact, that tiny bit of crystal. It can be said that today’s land masses and the life onboard fit together and share connections as fine as that first crystal, despite artificial borders, boundaries and watery divides. Humans as living entities are connected at the core of being, a truth taken less for granted when positions soften and melt away to expose common ground. The Oz Crystal seems aptly named to mimic the fantastical Emerald City’s “Wonderful Wizard of Oz” himself. The children’s tale by L. Frank Baum’s follows Dorothy as she searches for an illusive Wizard to transport her home, only to find that what she and her unlikely companions searched for – belonging, wisdom, courage and heart – was in them all along.

... a Butterfly

Making connections between science, math, nature, conflict and chaos might seem a stretch until we consider MIT Professor Edward Lorenz. Now deceased, Lorenz, is known as the father of chaos theory, thanks to an early paper he authored in 1972. His now infamous theory hypothesized that interconnections in weather can be likened to the mere flap of a butterfly’s wing that sets molecules of air in motion, in turn moving others and others still, until a distant weather event like a tornado or hurricane builds unforeseen on the other side of the planet (Andrews, A. 2010; MIT News, 2008). While scientists scoffed, the theory grew wings in popular culture, and conflict practitioners later adopted the concept as metaphor. Kenneth Cloke and Joann Goldsmith found the butterfly effect an apt expression of the subtle influences that grow from personal effort to global impact in the “international culture of resolution”:

We think of this as a conflict resolution ‘butterfly effect,’ in which every tiny effort at resolution ripples outward to produce a subtle, yet cumulatively positive effect on a local level in our families and workplaces, and on a global scale in the cultures and attitudes of people toward their conflicts and the resolution process. (2011, p. 8)

When students are challenged to test the butterfly effect in safe and personal ways, they net positive results. It seems that one person really can influence and model constructive conflict transformation even in a destructive or avoidant culture of conflict, often with a single, cumulative gesture towards building understanding, collaboration and reconciliation.

... an “Apple”

Ask a teen, “Who invented the World Wide Web?” and she may venture a guess that flirts with Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg or Apple guru Steven Jobs. More likely she will text “IDK”, code for “I don’t know” (eye roll icon imbedded). In reality, apple little “a” is closer to the truth. The internet’s social network may trace back to the early 1970s when “dial-up” technology began a fast and steady evolution into today’s manmade wired world but the Oz Crystal is 4.4 billion years old. Readers might do the math. The social network of today did not invent twitters and tweets any more than man invented the capacity to turn energy into thought, thought into intent, and intent into action. Living beings are hard wired by nature to make connections, internally and one to another in order to relate, communicate, and survive. We are fundamentally

parts of a whole that work in harmony, tandem or friction with notably different constructive and destructive results.

... *Disease*

In the absence of order in a living thing, connections and systems seem to fall away with often tragic results. Firsthand field studies include a mother in law's journey into Alzheimer's disease and a sister's lost battle to Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS). Alzheimer's disease diminishes the brain section by section and synapse by synapse like the deepening shadow of a storm, until connections and systems are short circuited and gray matter fades away, irretrievable. Confusion devolves into chaos rendering the victim lost within themselves, untethered to reality without conscious connection to time, space, memory or loved ones. In ALS, the body's systems are turned against one another for similarly unknown and untreatable reasons, unhinging the mind-body network and robbing the patient of directing mental intent into physical expression. ALS proves unnaturally cruel by destroying the body while leaving the mind and spirit to bear helpless witness to its own undoing. It seems we cannot exist without maintaining parts of the whole within internal and communal systems. Failed reconciliation of conflicting parts of the whole often proves destructive; even terminal.

A Conclusion and Beginning: Connecting Biomimicry, Sustainability and the Nature of Conflict

Many humans show a renewed respect for nature in the quest for sustainable futures. Sustainability itself has become a field of practice and inquiry, with themes that transcend manmade creation and exploitation. Often likened to a three legged stool, sustainability models represent the balanced relationship between environmental, human and financial resource interests (Willard, 2010). In other words, if the proverbial iceberg melts, humankind will "sink or swim together" (Deutsch, 2006, p. 24). A heavy fiscal leg alone will drop like a rock rather than serve as life boat or paddle.

Biomimicry is another field revolutionizing human creation by simply returning our attention to the study of nature's own timeless prototypes. Notable efforts include building structures improved for height, strength and airflow inspired by beehives, spider webs and sea sponges. The beak of a kingfisher provides a blueprint for crafting the head of the Japanese bullet train for faster, quieter speed. New fabrics block the elements of sun and rain courtesy of weather screening textures found in nature. Solar panels track the sun because sun flowers did it first. Pesky burrs from the burdock plant prompted the development of Velcro to hold things together (Longwood Gardens, n.d.; Paige, D., 2014).

The point is that if humankind mimics *things* with great success, we mimic *processes* too. Mimicking nature as a sustainable process is the same stuff that informs the flight pattern of snow geese, migration of salmon and dance of the honey bee. A quick peek at plant life suggests similar evolutionary supports for mutual survival including the tiered layers of the forest, climate adaptations, renewal after fire, and parasitic to host partnerships. Living things are hard wired for coexistence. We share an earth diverse with systems and cycles as fundamental as those that transform living synapses of nature's creation, the brain, into the internet. There are great lessons there, with Mother Nature as teacher.

The human experience does not want for company, context or pattern. When systems fail, life as we understand it on earth is compromised individually and to extinction. The nature of conflict invites us out into the world, not only to lift awareness but to return us to entangled roots deep within a rich, supportive and shared medium. As suggested by the unknown author whose words preface this reflection, it is a fool's errand to shroud the beauty of the butterfly under the weight of society. The butterfly is inspiration and adventure enough. We are not "amorphous balls of existence" separated from this ball of earth; rather mother earth is the heart and soul of what it means to exist. Living beings are companions with "an eternal friendship that lies on top of a connection, a bond, a tie, a link, a river which flows, guides us to an unknown region..." Regardless of how we conceptualize a personal faith, living things are all interconnected and we might ultimately find comfort and constructive resolution in our own lives and conflicts, by simply trusting the process.

Authors note: In addition to teaching conflict management and mediating special education disputes, I draw inspiration from the outdoor classroom as a seasonal educator at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Themes connecting conflict as it relates to biomimicry and sustainability were inspired by professional development opportunities and unpublished lesson materials created by Longwood Gardens' Education Department. More fundamentally, my personal reflections on the nature of conflict are informed by nature herself, as I walk through the gardens and introduce children to a shared common ground.

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