

A Blind Spot? – Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings

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A couple of weeks ago I came across a poem by the Native American writer Joy Harjo, entitled "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings." The title made me curious, as might be expected for a mediator. You can find the whole poem online on the [Poetry Foundation website](#), or you can buy the book of poems of the same title and read all the poems, which I warmly recommend.^[fn] Joy Harjo, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, 2015. See also <http://joyharjo.com/>.^[/fn]

The poem has six sections each headed in bold and each reading like a guideline for a conflict resolution mindset or skill that could be taken from a generic training programme, such as "2. USE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS THAT DISPLAY AND ENHANCE MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT", or "3. GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK," and "5. ELIMINATE NEGATIVE ATTITUDES DURING CONFLICT." Beneath each section is a verse of differing length which challenges the heading it is placed under and puts it in a surprising context, some of which is directly referring to the history of the oppression of Native Americans, while other parts offer ways to address conflict, and others tell stories in bold pictures. There is great beauty in this poem, and much of it puzzles me. The final verse is strikingly simple:

6. AND, USE WHAT YOU LEARN TO RESOLVE YOUR OWN CONFLICTS AND TO MEDIATE OTHERS' CONFLICTS

When we made it back home, back over those curved roads
that wind through the city of peace, we stopped at the
doorway of dusk as it opened to our homelands.
We gave thanks for the story, for all parts of the story
because it was by the light of those challenges we knew
ourselves—
We asked for forgiveness.
We laid down our burdens next to each other.

There were – and are – many feelings in me reading this. It evokes hope, warmth, belonging and peace. It also makes me envious. There is a wish to be able to "make it back home", tell the story, say thank you for it, to "ask for forgiveness" and lay "down our burdens next to each other." This relates to conflict in my own life, and also to my work as a mediator, which should be of more interest to readers of this blog. If this verse is a call to "mediate others' conflicts," it also hints at wise ways of doing this that resonate with me because I do not have them at my disposal.

This poem seems to highlight the blind spot in the rational approach to mediation – with its clearly defined process-leader mediator role, its phases, its focus on interests, its solution-driven impetus, its aim to get negotiated settlement, its strategic moves, its obsession with control of the process, and probably a lot more besides. In mediations I conduct, the approach I learned to use sometimes seems to be lacking a deeper purpose, and – frankly – not to be useful. I recall a group of some ten partners in a long-standing business, who needed not settlement of business differences but acceptance and reconciliation of their "stories." The problem was how to get there.

Some "parties," I feel, would do better asking each other for forgiveness, letting their stories speak, and "laying their burdens down together." Yet, I do not have this tradition to draw upon, and my mediation training had no spiritual (for want of a better word) guidance to offer me. Nor would it be easy, working with parties from Western Europe, to introduce shared meditation, prayer or spirituality into mediation. We are schooled to rationally assess all the time, and this schooling goes deep.

In academia, the conflict resolution model of the West has been criticized for its individualistic, rationalist approach that is not appropriate to indigenous ways of addressing and resolving conflict, which are heard less in a postcolonial world where the Western model has been and is exported everywhere, leading to a denial of difference.^[fn] In particular, see Morgan Brigg, *The New Politics of Conflict Resolution*, 2008.^[/fn] I do believe that all mediation training should at the least include some critical reflection on the appropriateness of the model in different settings.

My aim here is not to enter into an academic debate. I sometimes wish I had the tools (or is it just the guts?) to guide parties down a less rational path. I am reminded here of the story told by [Emma Lee in Rosemary Howell's recent blog](#) about how the indigenous people of Tasmania worked on conflict. Lee concludes: "Old songs and old ways will always have important messages that are created anew when we really pay attention them." Harjo's poetry is about precisely that.

Which "old songs and old ways" are open to mediators from Western Europe? There were none in my mediation training and there were no such traditions in any of my learning. Could I draw on Christianity? Possibly. Does anyone have any ideas?

Am I just being sentimental? Am I wrongfully projecting myself onto something that cannot belong to me? I do not think so, though I can imagine these possible reactions to my thoughts.

Meanwhile, let me recommend the poetry in the collection *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. The title says it all: if we see ourselves and others as "holy beings" conflict resolution is going to be a completely different thing we do.