

Surely, We Need Not Only to Be in Harmony But to Sustain it

Rethinking Conflict.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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“Remember that harmony is inextricably bound up with the conflict from which it sprang” —Terry Dobson

I have been a student of Aikido, a martial art based on peace and harmony, for the past thirty years. What I learned on the mat during classes, has helped me, more importantly in my everyday interactions. It has taught me the value of mutual learning (or “blending”), interdependency, and dealing with conflict. I use many Aikido principles in my practice as a psychotherapist to help others be harmonious. George Leonard, who was a former president of the Association of Humanistic Psychology and an Aikido Sensei (Teacher), recommended a simple mindfulness process when you are in conflict or as he described it “taking a hit in life.”



Harmony Source: Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

Firstly, he suggested we experience and acknowledge what it is that we are feeling. Secondly, to ground yourself and breathe deeply as you bring your attention to the place right below your navel. Thirdly, become aware of the additional energy/Ki/Chi (defined as our life force in Japanese and Chinese) that you now have available, due to the circumstances of taking a hit. Lastly, think of all your newly assembled energy as part of the universal Ki/Chi and how to use it wisely.

Dealing with conflict

There are many options in life to deal with the ongoing opposing forces and energy that come our way. The Buddhist doctrine of "suffering" exemplifies a perspective that the world does not always work the way we would want it to. If two people are walking toward each other on a narrow sidewalk, one must give way to make room to pass the other. It usually is the least hassle way that prevails. "Blending our energies in harmony," according to Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido, "is a way to reconcile the world."

In his book *Aikido in Everyday Life*, Terry Dobson, who studied in Japan with Morihei Ueshiba, describes different responses to conflict. We can fight back, withdraw, parley, do nothing or use deception. The problem, according to him, is that we must manage our feelings to make a good choice. Here is where widening one's lens helps us to perceive all elements of the situation. Success "will lie in your ability to find your center and retain it or regain it if it gets lost."

Terry wrote a wonderful essay that was republished in the original *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, edited by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor, where he describes being on a tram in Japan and seeing a man bullying others. His first reaction was to get ready to use his martial art skills to subdue this fellow. However, as he started to approach the agitator, an elderly man sitting in the tram yelled for the bully to come over to him. When the elderly man asks what is bothering him the bully begins to cry, explaining that his wife had just passed away and he lost his job. Terry leaves the bus seeing the old man hugging and comforting this fellow and begins to contemplate the many options to merge and blend with others.

Rethinking conflict

As we approach the holiday season, or for that matter any time of the year, there will be many reminders and encouragements of peace and goodwill. Yet we live in a time of extreme polarization. Will joy to the world prevail or will business, as usual, continue after the holiday season. During World War 1, the war to end all wars, a Christmas truce allowed soldiers from both sides to share moments of being together to celebrate the essence of what that holiday embodied. They exchanged gifts and stories of their lives and families, only to go back into their trenches and resume the horrors of the bloodiest war the world had ever witnessed at that moment in history.

What produces such cataclysms and horrors? Is it the unequal distribution of the resources that sustain us or the lack of empathy and caring for the whole of humankind? In the days immediately after 9/ 11, there seemed to be no division of loyalties. I was able to cross the street near my office met by an almost surreal kindness and caring that before was a life-threatening event met with yelling and middle-finger-pointing.

In surveys seeking how to understand conflict, most say that they are uncomfortable with it. Yet, nature evolves and allows the emergence of life's wonders from conflict. Aestheticism and creativity grow from the grist and energy of conflict.

It seems that when we humans, regardless of our differences, stop and share in a mutual manner each other's needs, desires and different contexts of life, there is an innate rhythm within us that savors collaboration. Greg O'Connor, the author of *The Elements of Aikido*, clearly articulates this as a way that conflict "...takes us to our shared humanity and gives us viable alternative tools of handling life's challenges." I believe, we all know deeply and profoundly that by seeing things in context — even with the ever-present awareness of conflict — there is the mitigating essence that offers us a transition, a liminal moment to create interdependency, harmony, and the opportunity to sustain it.

Here are a few questions that may prime one's motivation to alter beliefs about conflict and move towards harmony

- Have you ever been in a conflict situation where the outcome could have been less injurious had you considered other options?
- How can you create a wider lens and resolve situations of conflict?
- How would creating win-win alternatives influence your day-to-day interactions?
- In what ways would viewing conflict as a means for mutual learning to produce harmony influence your daily life?
- How can you transform being victorious from a personal accomplishment and make it beneficial for everyone in your life?