Hiep N. Nguyen

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4 Pillars of Conflict Transformation Reflection

"Violence is the behavior of someone incapable of imagining other solutions to the problem at hand" - Vicenc Fisas

Even though this was a quote from class and not from one of the readings, it was most memorable to me when interpreting the material presented from class. The 4 pillars of Conflict transformation are Trauma, Restorative Justice, Peacebuilding, and Nonviolence. The quote relates to these 4 since they all deal with relationships and interconnectivity. Trauma must be realized and overcome with the aid of those around one dealing with conflict or tension. Once trauma has been identified and dealt with, restorative justice steps in which is the procedure of healing for both the victim and the offender involved in the conflict. Peacebuilding follows where those involved who have discovered their relationship set out to repair and restore what was broken in the conflict. The best approach to resolving and putting an end to the conflict would be nonviolence since conflict leads to more conflict; the only way to cease the continual cycle of violence is to end it at this final step. Through the four books that were assigned in class, I have realized not only how conflict manifests but how best to deal with and resolve it.

The first book called “My Grandmother’s Hand” by Resmaa Menakem starts with a narrative from the author’s memory of his grandmother who had rough, callused hands. Her hands are that way because she had picked cotton as a child. This was something the author did not experience but was told about and was a prologue to the content of the book. The book revolves around the author’s categorization and contemplation of race, trauma, as well as social construct. Menakem categorizes pain or trauma that passes on from one generation to another as “dirty pain.” It can turn into a culture within a family and could be tumultuous in the sense that it does not allow one to move forward. In the author’s case, his grandmother’s circumstance and upbringing could very well have transpired unto him as dirty pain, and Menakem could have been warped in the trauma of slavery and discrimination against colored Americans. The spillover effects of a whole generation of African Americans had carried over into today’s contemporary issues; however, Menakem had moved past repression. He had, in my analysis from reading the way he breaks down racial relations, that he had turned potential dirty pain into “clean pain.” Instead of choosing to inherit the trauma from his previous generation and funneling it into expressions of anger, malice, or denial, the author had acknowledged his racial background. He had also named this trauma and chose to delve into it and explore it. This author is a prime illustration of my interpretation of his thesis. Resilience is the capacity to heal and bounce back from trauma, and by dissecting the ideas behind his racial trauma Menakem wants to portray what he believes to be the realities and aid others in seeing from his point of view, and to recover through his resilience as well.

One idea that I found interesting is the way Menakem had laid out the social dynamics of race relations today, built upon historical events and its gradual transmutation into modern thought behind race. Actions, behavior, thought, and trauma (as the book heavily emphasizes) manifest from past experiences. In the 5th and 6th chapters, historical context was presented in the narrative of a foundation for racism. I learned that the idea of race only emerged in the 16th century under mercantilism and colonialization. Before, people identified and pledged themselves to their nationality, faction, or country of origin. Those who held power over others, namely landowners and colonizers, had imposed a system of pain upon slaves, refugees, immigrants, and those under exploit. The post-traumatic slave syndrome had caused the trauma rooted in microaggression and belligerent racism witnessed today.

Initially, I was muddled by what the author calls the “lizard brain.” This became evident to me that what he meant to describe was our primal human instincts. It is the first reactions that are triggered when individuals are introduced to external overwhelming stigma like the fight, flight, or freeze response. With the introduction of this concept, my views were aligned with the author on a case-by-case basis. Many today are almost entrenched and tangled in the past, in the history of slavery and racism in America, that they refuse to move beyond the pain. This in turn becomes what the author described as dirty pain. The hate and disdain towards “black body people” and “white body people” is rooted in this history, and instead of calling it out and transforming it those who hold onto the trauma transfer it onto other around them. Although I would personally describe the “lizard brain” with a more conventional term like primal instinct or primitive cognition, I do believe that the way to move forward and assuage this conundrum of racial tension is to show resilience and acknowledge that this trauma can be overcome. Hate is not conscious; it emerges from the “lizard brain” and is transferred to become the form it is today through hundreds of years of oppression, propaganda, and prolonged demonstration of power.

Another point that I liked about the book is how the author notes that the trauma of racism was not exclusive to race and slavery alone. Colonization during the 16th century had also brought forth white on white trauma, which was the reason behind the influx of immigration to the Americas. Like in any situation, pain would become “dirty” if it is not allowed proper resolution or is masked in denial and external aggression. Menakem states that “white body supremacy” provides belonging to white people while black body people base their belonging in the history of their people’s past struggles. This manifests into racism, a narrative of us against them as we see today, and it can be resolved when everyone stops using their “lizard brain” and cleans the trauma of the residual pain. From reading the book, I agree with Menakem that trauma is something that affects body, behavior, and brain as it is being put into situations that are more than body can handle. Consequently, everyone must maintain their resilience and needs to recognize trauma to recover from it. The account from the perspective of “police body people” was thought-provoking as well. Their profession requires tenacity over primal instinct of defensiveness, and this lizard brain can potentially be dangerous in high stress situations. Menakem points out the issue that “police body people” do not look at their own source of trauma but must deal with everyone else's in their line of work. They may not have knowledge to deal with trauma correctly which drives them closer to one day potentially snapping. The author does offer the solution of offering consolation to these high stressed individuals: becoming a “settled body” which can lead to less stress. Being at peace can be achieved through picking up hobbies, exercising, positively configuring one’s diet, or being around a “settled body.” Settling one’s body is about self-care and stress management according to Menakem, and I would also agree with this. In my personal life, settling my body was achieved by clearing of my mind through exercise, diet, and taking care of my health overall.

From an introspective standpoint, there are specific points made by the author that I do enjoy digging deeper into. There are also certain criticisms I have of the book, like the lack of sources being cited or scientific reference when bold claims are made. An example is the statement that “trauma can pass through sperm and is in blood.” This may simply be an assumption but, nonetheless, needs a stronger base. Charter schools are direct contradiction to this idea, pulling children out of poor, crime ridden, and traumatic family backgrounds and turning them into valuable members of society. Another point made was how white body supremacy and racism is something embedded in the body, not just the brain. This is valid from the accounts of racist tattoos and demonstration of physical aggressions. However, my opinion in this is that human emotions are what people are born with and are embedded in their body and brain (i.e. differentiation, indifference, confusion, etc.). How one deals with these emotions is taught (hate and racism) instead of being embedded. Social imagination is heavily evoked in the analysis of Menakem’s book, and like many works that have emerged in recent times due to the tensions of our time My Grandmother’s Hands is a piece that is added to the collection of conversation and dialogue starters. Through such openness to discussion and contemplation, people can build upon their resilience, their ability to move beyond trauma. Menakem introduces the workings of trauma and advocates for one to open up to it instead of denying it to move beyond its cause.

Once trauma is identified and moves out of repression, the next step is for the parties involved to consolidate and begin the healing process. The second book “Changing lenses: A new focus for crime and justice” is written by Howard Zehr and introduces the concept of restorative justice in an explicated and contemporary manner. From a Christian worldview, Zehr was able to define and promote the system of restorative justice in a societal context with applications that can be adapted to secular society without bias. This propagates restorative justice with mass appeal and shows its propensity for future utility in litigation; it may also shine a new light on the understanding of victim and offender relationship in the future. Restorative Justice was first introduced in our Conflict Transformation class and defined as “an approach to achieving justice that involves (to the extent possible) those who have a stake in a specific offense or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things as right as possible.” Crime represents damage in relationships, and this damage is both a cause and an effect of the crime. However, unlike the widespread criminal justice and imprisonment system observed in modern times, the damage of such relationships is contextually humanized to imply mutual obligations and responsibilities. This leads into the three pillars of identifying harms and needs, then emphasizing accountability and obligations, and finally engaging the parties who are affected by the incidence to bring about closure. Learning what restorative justice was in class beforehand was extremely helpful in understanding and dissecting what it entails as well as how it is to be practically applied, which is what Zehr’s book focuses on: its pragmatic, systematic, and beneficial application.

One of the major debates sparked by lawmakers, citizens, and all other participants of the juridical society is the issue of the justice system. In the United States specifically, criminal proceeding and legislation of law offence punishment is mostly privatized. Many agree that the justice system is broken because it doesn’t meet victim's needs. Zehr suggests in his book that there must be some changes to fix it and make it fair for everyone. The capitalized justice system in the States currently has more incentive for prison quotas and monetary acquisition from fines. This falls in line with the author’s narrative that victims are not getting the closure that they need from the justice system.

What made Zehr’s writing stand out from other books about the same topic is the way he adequately ties in common themes between justice and ethical piety. He mentions that there needs to be repentance and forgiveness in the sense that the past is not ignores the victim should let go of the power that the offender has over them which turns them into survivors. In other words, the victim needs to practice forgiveness, and the offender needs to feel guilt. Guilt that is accepted by the offender becomes anger at oneself which leads to effective change in character and conduct. Guilt must, therefore, be assigned and be persecuted. However, locking someone away in the current criminal justice system only creates more problems because the offender is being sheltered away. This is the reason why I believe that, like the changes in scientific paradigms over time, restorative justice could be applied on a more extensive scale in the future. As seen in class and observed through having guest speakers, it can already be observed as a system that is increasing in utility and applications.

My personal experience with the book is an introduction and illumination to restorative justice, something that was unheard of in Vietnam where I come from. As the author states paradigms construct our reality. Like the changes in science and physics, definitions of reality are constructed by culture and are models or paradigms working to explain things. However, what works for some things may not for others. The paradigm of justice specifically organizes reality to define problems and appropriate solutions. In context, the retributive and criminal justice paradigm is applied only when settling disputes through the legal system. However, a lot does not go through legal system. In the faulty paradigm itself, the criminalization process is variable and arbitrary while the reality of cases is perceived differently by the parties involved. Therefore, I agree with Zehr on the point that outcomes in the current criminal system are imposed with little participation from victim and offender. Paradigms change with new understandings which lead to the creation of new common sense and reasoning. Zehr illustrates how restorative justice will replace the criminal system by presenting the history of how the precursor of the retributive paradigm was the punishment system which was grotesquely severe. The enlightenment changed that to be more rational and palatable as to forge punishments that would fit the crime. Prisons became popular to replace the antiquated system with a more civil punishment paradigm; the retributive paradigm emerged. For a brief time, rehabilitation was also introduced but was then replaced by the retributive prison paradigm again. The book highlights how the victim compensation and assistance system may be next.

I find the concept of restorative justice to be extremely attractive and presentable in practice. If applied ideally, it would almost be revolutionary. If it was full-proof, who would ever doubt its everlasting effects on societal jurisdiction and system of compensation? However, I am also cynical of how much guilt it can inflict on an offender. The cases described in the book and seen in class were petty crimes that had monetary or physical damage but reparable or replaceable, nonetheless. The assumption by the author from a pious worldview is that forgiveness would follow hand in hand with atonement and finally peace. This comes from the assertion that the parties involved are rational and have formal intent after the fact of the crime. The most heinous crimes, however, are not rational. This is where the restorative justice paradigm, like Newtonian physics with particle science, starts to break down. I do believe that it is a progression and advancement from where we are now with the commercialized criminal justice system. I want to see how it is developed and harnessed over the years to be more extensive. I also, nonetheless, feel that it is not infallible. Nothing is, but this is the way forward. Restorative justice seeks to explore the relationships between offender and offended, and this allows for a transition into the next phase of conflict transformation.

Once the trauma that is caused is explored and the associations between parties is established, peacebuilding between them can begin. Written by John Paul Lederach, the book “Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace” explores the act of peacebuilding and direct mediation in a more creative manner. Formally written for those in the professions of peace building in areas with protracted violence, most like myself would find that the book portrays a reformed mindset of learning to look for the important web of relationships that lay hidden behind the violence of a conflict. This is often overshadowed in cases of turmoil where people would focus on the victim and the offender with a good vs. bad, black and white punishment model. In contrast to this, Lederach explores the evolution of his understanding of peacebuilding by reflecting on his various examples in the field. Peacebuilding, in his view, is both a learned skill and an art. Finding this art requires a worldview shift. Conflict professionals must, therefore, envision their work as a creative act - an exercise of what the author terms the "moral imagination."

In chapter 2, the book introduces real life micro-case studies. The case studies aim to further the understanding of how people experiencing violent conflict throughout the world have worked to “transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch the community,” building on Lederach’s thesis that conflict contains interwoven relationships and not just violence. Based on this, Lederach suggests that operating under the assumption of current day peacebuilding and conflict management is not working as well as it should. He believes there is something more that needs to be involved in current strategies and models. I agree with his proposal that conflict transformation must move from looking at actors in a conflict as separate involved parties and instead view parties as “a web of relationships which include our enemies.” This requires a shift in thinking of peacebuilding and for those involved in the conflict, but in making this shift, we can look at conflicts as existing within our communities rather than between our confines of cyclical tension or violence. Personally, I took from Lederach’s thesis in the book about peacebuilding as something communal where people could come together to resolve an issue instead of dividing into factions with views of animosity towards each other. I had lived in Iran before moving to the United States. It was there that I witnessed the Arab Spring in 2010 when the fundamentalist regime governing the nation met with violent and often deadly protests from citizens who want change to what they saw as a rigged and corrupted tyranny. Reading Lederach’s book showed me how most conflicts like that of the Arab Spring are met with immediate, intuitive dissention of people tearing down relationships instead of building them. It was in Iran that I witnessed what Lederach calls a “far too familiar landscape of violence.”

This book presses its readers who dwell in conflict management to move beyond simplistic and linear conceptual framings of issues – the ‘us vs. them’ renderings that are unhelpful – and instead begin to see the systemic and dynamic complexities present in most conflicts. In Chapter 11, Lederach depicts his views from a more optimistic approach. The chapter builds upon how people involved in conflicts can grow, taking what happens in a beneficial way and being able to recognize opportunity for advancement beyond near-sightedness. He implies that if one is too set on personal goals and motives, he or she might achieve the prioritized agenda at the expense of potentially missing out on an opportunity. My analysis of this permeates into a setting of relationship building where those I see as rivals or schemers may potentially be mediated to become future allies.

I found Lederach’s various notations in the book about an artistic essence to conflict transformation to be most interesting. The author suggests that the essential sense of art – “the creative act that underpins the birth and growth of personal and social change.”— may have been lost. Art, in the form of Haiku poetry, music, bodily expression, or visual arts, offers a critically important alternative lens through which one might more clearly visualize the scope and essence of a conflict. Lederach’s active encouragement of the inclusion of the awareness of art and development of an intuitive sensibility in conflict resolution training has also given me a new perspective on its visualization. I saw this as an application for pragmatism, viewing conflicts to be three-dimensional and expressed through various outlets through which turmoil and potential reconciliation can be exhibited. During my time in Iran, I had lived in a protected neighborhood reserved for diplomats and foreign emissaries who were not viable for domestic and national unrest. Being in a secluded and detached area also meant that it was a target for a nationalistic platform. Partisans and protestors wanted to express their conflict to foreigners like my family but knew that we neither had the language nor the legal authorization to communicate with those deemed by the internationally recognized, autonomous government as rebels and troublemakers. Therefore, graffiti was the most common outlet for them to express conflict through their art. One piece I particularly remembered was an American flag painted to completely cover the side of a four-story building adjacent to our neighborhood wall. But instead of stars, the flag had white skulls, and instead of red and blue stripes, the flag had bullet and bomb trails of the same color. This was a message that protestors blamed the United States for the economic conditions and hardships that the country faced. They saw the US sanctions as one of many things to have caused the Arab Spring unrest in the country. This was not evident to me at the time when I was younger but through Lederach’s lense I saw that the conflict was not to be viewed as “us and them.” It was a social conflict that has interwoven relationships between politicians and their people, household providers and their families, and foreign expats and the separatists who want their call for change to be heard by the international community. Building peace takes immense effort and participation from all parties, and all have to maintain the integrity of not turning against one another again. If this happens, the continuation and cycle of violence will only restart. Therefore, in order to build peace once and for all, nonviolence is the approach used to restore relationships and begin a cycle of healing.

In times of war, violence is perpetuated. In peace, healing can flourish. The book “Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War” is an account written by Leymah Gbowee about her life as a young woman in a time of death, terror and destitution when the Liberian civil war had tarnished the nation in every aspect. The war was a brutal conflict that tore apart Gbowee’s life and claimed the lives of countless relatives and friends. The years of fighting had destroyed her country and shattered Gbowee’s girlhood hopes and dreams. She was also trapped as a young mother in a nightmare of domestic abuse but found the courage to turn her bitterness into action, being propelled by her realization that it is women who suffer most during conflicts—and that the power of women working together can create tremendous momentum for change. Using her charisma and passion, the author in 2003 helped organize and then led the Liberian Mass Action for Peace, a coalition of Christian and Muslim women who sat in public protest, confronting Liberia’s ruthless president and rebel warlords, and even held a sex strike. Gbowee brought Liberia’s women together—and through their cumulative efforts they led a nation to peace through nonviolence. With an army of women, she helped lead her nation to peace—in the process emerging as an international leader who later won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. This book is a chronicle of a journey from hopelessness to empowerment that encourages progression and vision for a better world.

The book begins with pre-war anecdotes of the author’s life which gives the impression that she was content with her life, but like most young people yearned for a more prosperous future. Gbowee reflects on pre-war Liberia as a young woman with great promise and ambitions, but who was ultimately oblivious to the tensions brewing from her country’s history of political repression and economic inequalities. This section of her story resonates with me personally and, I conject, with a lot of us as well. Growing up in a diplomatic household, I travelled with my parents to various countries with completely different social and geopolitical climates. I was not concerned or was too young to fully grasp the nuances of culture around me. Being in Singapore, I was comfortable with a free market, modern, and commercial society filled with abundance and peace. It wasn’t until I moved to Iran that I was made aware of my surroundings instead of focusing solely on myself like the author had. Singapore was stable and anything afflicting the population was kept to a minimal, out of my vision. The political and social tension in Iran that immersed everyone in the country made me realize, like the author had when conflict arose, that I was part of a collective and what happens to society affects and can be affected by individuals’ actions. It is as Gbowee writes reflecting on scenes of horror at such a young age, “when you move so quickly from innocence to a world of fear, pain and loss, it’s as if the flesh of your heart and mind gets cut away, piece by piece, like slices taken off a ham. Finally, there is nothing left but bone.” As I stood behind the walls of our enclosure in Tehran, I witnessed people being set on fire and beaten to the point where their bodies, unknown whether they’re still alive or already dead, were dragged away from the scene. Sights with such immense violence stay with one’s conscience indefinitely.

Gbowee’s life during and after the civil war was heartbreaking and going through it with little family supervision and support made her efforts more admirable. Being a refugee for so long, she returned home to begin a courtship with someone who would for years abuse, humiliate, and neglect her. She had written that with the four children she bore to Daniel, at least two of whom were forcibly conceived after Daniel had beaten her, made the pain and suffering somehow more bearable. It took self-realization and courage for her to leave her abusive husband and further her education as a single parent, something that is not easy to overcome even for people experiencing domestic violence in the first world without the constant fleeing from war. When Liberia slipped back into civil war after two short years of stagnation, Gbowee had a dream compelling her to organize Liberian women to pray for peace. Her dream culminated into the Christian Women’s Peace Initiative which began as a group of Christian women meeting every week to pray for peace and snowballed into a movement encompassing thousands of women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Dressed all in white, these women would organize demonstrations, sit-ins, and audiences with warring factions to lobby for a peaceful resolution to the war. The author worked at the public level with Liberian women who, like her, were physically and mentally devastated from years of war. After being nominated as the Liberian coordinator for the Women in Peacebuilding Network, Gbowee began establishing herself as a prominent figure in an evolving women’s peace movement. She had adopted the nonviolence movement to usher change in her country and inspired many beyond the conflict to continue fighting for tranquility and progress.

Gbowee’s memoir provides the world with a first-person perspective into the harsh realities that Liberians, especially women, experienced throughout the war. It illustrates the tenacity of the human spirit and depicts the author’s indelible will to survive in a tumultuous world that she hopes to improve for the future of Liberian women and others around the world. The author states that “in the end, tyranny will never succeed, and goodness will always vanquish evil.” Therefore, she embodies nonviolence to bolster her movement as she believes what she is advocating for is indubitably reasonable. Gbowee ends her book by heaping praise on the Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for becoming Africa’s first female head-of-state and entertains a future political career herself. The women’s peace movement in Liberia did not end the war but was a voice that was sounded to further the cause to end the conflict. What resonates to me about the author’s memoir is the lessons that can be drawn from her personal history. She had gone through trials and tribulations in her life and yet has not given up the mission she had envisioned, carrying out the cry for peace no matter her circumstance. Women in my country still fall under the patriarchy that had been established since antiquity. However, this is changing with the country in the period of peace after the Vietnam War. My aunt had come from similar backgrounds as Gbowee, being looked down on by her husband’s family because she was female in a misogynistic society. She quit her job as a teacher to open a motel and two decades later was able to fund both her daughters’ education abroad by her own determination. Instead of perpetuating violence against her offenders, she turned to nonviolence and built something better for herself and her children. My aunt recognized her trauma, dealt with it through restorative justice with her in-laws, began to find peace in her life, and overcame adversity in a nonviolent manner.

The 4 pillars have one thing in common: relationships. Once this interconnectivity is realized, conflict resolution is transformed. This has given me a new perspective when looking at conflict. Trauma should not be internalized, and healing is routine with an approach that time and time again has proven to be much more effective than falling back into the cycle of relationship destruction. Even though reparation of relationships to transform conflict is tedious and requires effort from all parties, it is how things can finally be resolved once and for all.

“The work is hard, the immensity of what needs to be done is discouraging, but you look at communities that are struggling daily and you see that they keep on with hope so you too must keep on. You are not at liberty to give up.” – Leymah Gbowee

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