

Rev. Linda Simmons
The Moral Imagination
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As a minister, most of my days are spent listening. And as I listen, most of what I am hearing from folk when you speak about the world and your sense of what this year will bring is anxiety, anger, fear, a sense of helplessness and despair.

I have been considering that peace itself is not only something that we arrive at with good policies and through thoughtful politicians, though that helps of course, but it is also a way of life to which we are all accountable.

I recently stumbled upon a book written by Paul Lederach, The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peace Building. It saved me a little bit and you know as a former Catholic that I am always open to being saved!

Lederach states the problem of peace building this way: “How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?”¹ The answer he proposes is this: “Transcending violence is forged by the capacity to generate, mobilize, and build the moral imagination.”²

He calls the defining characteristic of the moral imagination “the capacity to give birth to something new that in its very birthing changes our world and the way we see things.”³

I think our world today is in need of some moral imagination; a capacity to give birth to something new that changes us and the world. The moral imagination of peace building is the capacity “to imagine and generate” new ways of seeing and responding to the violence around us.⁴ To imagine a world in which all people can live without violence is a moral obligation bequeathed to us by our children and their children and their children.

Lederach defines the moral imagination of peace building. Has having 4 key components he calls disciples.

The first is the capacity to imagine ourselves as embedded in a web of relationships. This of course is our 7th principle, Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

¹ John Paul Lederach, The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 27.

⁴ Ibid, 29.

Lederach pushes us further though and even tells us that patterns of violence are broken when the moral imagination can recognize that we are entwined in a web of relationships with all people: that we have co-created each other in a complex dance of human history and as such, must find the way to undo the cycles of violence we are in as one people who have co-authored these multi narratives.

Lederach writes about how violence can only occur when a web of relationships is denied. He goes on, "Breaking violence requires that people embrace a more fundamental truth: who we have been, are and will be emerges and shapes itself in a context of relational interdependency. Such vision requires humility and self-recognition. People don't just take notice of the web. They situate and recognize themselves as part of the pattern."⁵ We must recognize ourselves in what we find as our current reality and then imagine ourselves together into a world that does not require violence as its primary strategy. Peacebuilding requires an understanding of mutuality and relationship.

The second discipline of peace building is a curiosity that moves beyond the easy dualisms of good and bad and right and wrong, which is not to say that a good and a right do not exist. It is to say that naming good and right or bad and wrong can strip us of a capacity to live into more than that, to see what is possible as a next step, as a strategy, as a possibility for finding a way forward. When we can live in the paradoxes of life, in the imaginative and complex landscape of human history and interchange, when we can be present to the confusion and fear and anger of not knowing and continue to ask questions and learn new responses, conditions for peace can be built.⁶

As Bruno Bettelheim wrote, "Violence is the behaviour of someone incapable of imagining other solutions to the problem at hand."

This paradoxical curiosity, the Latin root for curious being *curiosus* formed on the term *cura* literally meaning 'to take care of' and having to do with both 'cure' and 'care' as in spiritual and physical healing, does not move beyond dualism into a simple shared humanity, that we are all the same inherently, but is capable of holding and recognizing differences, of living in their discomfort, of not moving to easy solutions or comforts but allowing difference to be without needing to erase or be repulsed by them.

From this place, comes the possibility of that which we cannot yet see, the place where imagination is allowed to create peace.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 36.

The third discipline of peacebuilding is creativity itself,⁷ the belief that there is something that we have not yet created that can be created, something that we do not yet see that can be seen, something that we do not yet have the ability to know that can be known if we build it together in a suspended, imaginative, non-judgmental collaboration remembering that all of the outcomes have not yet been birthed because we have not grown enough to create the conditions for their birth.

“The final discipline at the essence of this imagination can be described in simple terms but requires heart and soul that defy prescription. It is the willingness to take a risk. Risk is to step into the unknown without any guarantee of success or even safety. Risk by its very nature is mysterious. It is mystery lived, for it ventures into lands that are not controlled or charted. People living in settings of deep-rooted conflict are faced with an extraordinary irony. Violence is known—peace is the mystery. By its very nature therefore, peacebuilding requires a journey guided by the imagination of risk.”⁸ Risk in other words requires that we make ourselves vulnerable together, that we recognize that we do not have all the answers, that we are afraid sometimes, that the way forward is not clear and that we stay in the questions and keep showing up and seeking a way forward together in our confusion and angst.

I was talking about all this with a friend who said, “Well, this is all wonderful Linda but what about when the constitution is eroded and human rights are put at risk? Are not peaceful groups then supposed to act?”

Yes! Peacebuilding is not inaction! Peacebuilding is action. Peacebuilding is response.

The best way to illustrate how the moral imagination works in the world is with an example. Lederach offers us one from Kenya:

Located in Northeast Kenya, Wajir District is made up mostly of Somali clans. With the collapse of the Somali government in 1989, Wajir soon found it was caught up in interclan fighting. Dekha Ibrahim recalls one night in mid 1993 that shooting erupted once again near her house. She ran for her first-born child and hid for several hours under the bed while bullets crisscrossed her room.

While under the bed she had distinct memory of huddling with her mother as young child under the same conditions. By morning she had decided this had to stop.

Other women shared similar stories...[T]hey gathered less than a dozen of them at first. We just wanted to put our heads together, they

⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁸ Ibid, 39.

said, to see what we knew and we could do. We decided the place to start was the market. They agreed on a basic idea. The market should be safe for any woman of any clan background to come, to sell and to buy.

Access and safety to the market was an immediate right that had to be assured. *This is an example of the discipline of mutuality, leveraging and being accountable to the web of relationships in which we live.*

Since women mostly ran the market, they spread the word. They established monitors who would watch everyday what was happening at the market. Whenever issues emerged a small committee of women would move quickly to resolve them.

Their initiative resulted in the creation of the Wajir Women's Association for Peace. *Here we have creativity, the willingness to live into the creative space and give birth to what was beyond any one of these woman's sight or knowing as the bullets crossed above their heads.*

They soon discovered that the broader fighting still affected their lives. Sitting again they decided to pursue direct conversations with the elders of all the clans. Getting the men on board was not an easy thing to do in this highly patriarchal society.

So they sat and thought through their understanding of the elder system, the actual key elders, and the make-up of the Somali clans in Wajir.

Using their personal connections, they succeeded in bringing together a meeting of the elders. They found one of the elderly men, quite respected, but who came from the smallest and therefore the least threatening of the local clans. In the meeting he became their spokesperson, talking directly to the other elders and appealing to their responsibility.

'Why, really,' he asked, 'are we fighting? Who benefits from this? Our families are being destroyed.' His words provoked long discussions. The elders, even some of those who had been promoting revenge killings, agreed to face the issues and stop the fighting. They formed the Council of Elders for Peace. *Here is an example of the discipline of curiosity, a life beyond dualism, easy classification, understanding of the complexity of relationships and identities and a willingness to live into the places where we and others are more than our labels and assigned roles.*

Soon the question became how to engage the youth, particularly the young men who were hidden and fighting in the bush. They formed a new initiative Youth for Peace and soon discovered that if the youth were to leave their guns and the bush, they would need something to occupy their time and provide income. The business community was then approached. Initiatives for rebuilding and local jobs were offered. Together, the women from the market, the elder's commissions, the youth for peace, the businessmen and local religious leaders formed the Wajir Peace and Development Committee.

Here risk comes into play, risking relationships with youth they no longer understood who were radicalized, who had guns, who could hurt them, who were hurting them. They made themselves vulnerable to others, they risked their assumptions, their frameworks of what was possible, they risked their ways of knowing each other and what each was capable of offering and becoming.

Ceasefires came into place. Local Commissions were created to verify and help the process of disarming the clan-based factions in coordination with local authorities and the District Police. Emergency response teams were formed who would travel on a moment's notice to deal with renewed fighting, rustling, or thievery.⁹

Peace building is response. Peacebuilding is action.

As we have been discussing these disciplines of peacebuilding that make up the moral imagination: knowing ourselves as a integral and accountable piece of the interconnected web of relationships, recognizing the world and each other beyond dualities, living with not knowing, allowing the creative space more license, being more vulnerable with others, I have been thinking about what this New Year might mean for us and how it might be a wonderful time to make resolutions together for peacebuilding. And we have this doorway.

In your order of service, you have a blank card. I ask you this year to answer this question: What can you shift in your life so that you can build more peace within and around you? Please take your time and when you are done, address the card to yourself and I will mail it back to you in the fall. And when you are done, come to the doorway.

⁹ John Paul Lederach, "The Moral Imagination: The Art And Soul Of Building Peace Association Of Conflict Resolution," Sacramento, September 30, 2004. *European Judaism* Volume 40 No. 2 Autumn 2007.

In front of the doorway is the past, inside of the doorway is the present and on the other side of the doorway is the future, this New Year.

Drop your card in this basket in the future, where all things are yet possible.

Come.