



REKINDLING THE MORAL IMAGINATION

By Matthew Wesley

There is a great deal of conversation around values in the work we do with families. While there is some nuance to the perspectives of various people, I have been deeply suspicious of this work as a whole (and have written a bit about that [here](#)). Too often the “values conversation” provides unexamined cover that ennobles personal needs and even character flaws to control or “align” family members and thereby favors a kind of leaden conformity over embracing genuine differences and communicating through those differences. In this way, the values conversation can become escapist in that it papers over very real disparities that inevitably come out in destructive ways in later conversations or actions.

That said, the impetus behind the desire to talk about values is most often a deeply moral impulse. It is the expression of a desire to aspire to the best of who we are as human beings. My personal belief is that the effort families expend in their attempt to sustain themselves across generations is profoundly moral work. For this work to succeed, the individuals within the family and the family system as a whole must grow and develop – they must learn to inhabit greater swaths of their essential humanity.

Last summer I ran across a book by John Paul Lederach entitled [The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace](#). His book is profound and well worth reading. By way of background, Dr. Lederach is invited to help in societies that have been torn apart for decades by the most brutal expressions of humanity’s darkest side. The core question at the heart of his book is how do such societies learn to function again. In answering this core question of social and cultural transfiguration in the midst of social horror, and based on years of experience, Dr. Lederach suggests that the only solution to moving through this kind of soul-rending conflict has everything to do with the rekindling of the “moral imagination”. In his mind, social transformation is not brought about by peace agreements or the structural shifts of power from this group to that, but rather in the reknitting of the social fabric; and that the only way this reknitting occurs is in a space suffused with moral imagination.

He suggests that what is required for moral imagination to take root is the development of four key capacities: the ability to see ourselves in webs of relationships that include our enemies; the ability to sustain paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on

dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and the pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence. Each of these is worthy of the longer description Lederach gives us in his book and I would encourage anyone with any interest in the question of reknitting social fabrics to read his work in his words.

With that caveat and in recognition that this will be a poor substitute for the fullness of his reflections, I would like to riff on the implications of Dr. Lederach's work for families. What follows is rooted in the text of the book, but also contains my own elaborations and meditations as I have sought to apply this to the work we do with families.

In the context of family dynamics, Dr. Lederach's approach is pure gold. What he describes is an alternative to the linear, phased and staged approach that we in the West tend to favor. We are committed to process and structure. Our heuristics are sequential and logical. We want steps and techniques. We want defined process. Most of all what we want are "tools" to control uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos. Lederach proposes that the transcendence of conflict is a much messier and more dynamic process than that. It is not as though one can walk through the abc's of this work and expect predictable results. That said, there is a path high up that if we engage it with authenticity and courage, we will see its very concrete results.

The fact that there are not surefire stages or tools or steps does not mean that there is no methodology. It is simply that the methodology has far more to do with paying attention to a series of existing and emergent qualities and doing that work in very clear and intentional ways. For example, the ability to see the web of relationships (the complexity of the system) requires a disciplined and focused ability to step out of our own perspectives. It requires of us that we engage and understand the Other (in Dr. Lederach's case – the enemy) not only from our perspective or even from theirs, but as though we were standing on the balcony looking down. He calls this "web work" and spends time talking about those who study spider's webs to draw lessons of what this kind of observation requires. It means not that we get inside the skin of the other (this is not an exercise in "empathic listening"), but that we actually see our fundamental systemic and inalienable connection to the multiple contexts in which we operate and our fundamental responsibility^[1] in those contextual realities. In families, this means that first the consultant and later the family is able to gain some degree of perspective on what is happening in the family as a whole. This is a matter of education, conversation, self-disclosure, feedback and a host of other interventions that allow people to truly "see" one another in the interlocking webs of familial relationships and the varied contexts in which these function individually and collectively. This is not linear work, but there is method to it. There is no "stage 1" (unless we choose to frame it that way), but rather there is a kind of quality of engagement that allows people to "wake up" from the trance states of reactivity they have been operating from and gain a perspective of the "whole".

The second aspect (and again this is not sequential in Dr. Lederach's view), is the ability to deal with ambiguity and complexity without becoming positional. This is very, very difficult to do in conflicted situations. Everyone has sides. Everyone has perspectives. Everyone has interests

they are protecting. In conflicted systems, the entire structure is built around confused ends and means, entrenched perspectives that were years in the making, the demonizing of the “other” side, the inability to understand the interests and perspectives in play and so on. Undoing this knot requires an ability to enter states of curiosity. It requires that we drop our own vantage point long enough to lean into the other’s vantage point. In this work, someone has to go first.

The strong tendency in human beings is to want to resolve ambiguity quickly. In Chris Argyris’ terminology, we move rapidly up the ladder of inference from raw data through assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs, into direct action. Or, as Arthur Schopenhauer said, “Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.” The ability to suspend one’s own perspective – and the vulnerability required to do that – is a necessary skill to finding common ground and reweaving the social fabric. The ability to metabolize ambiguity is something every consultant understands. Families are filled with unresolvable paradox and unsolvable problems. The only way out of these is to find paths of transcendence that ensure that the paradoxes will find inherent resolution in themselves through their own collapse into unity.

As Dr. Lederach points out, this is not as simple as understanding the perspective of the other with empathy. It requires a kind of willingness to live in paradox. As Adam Kahane points out, most social conflict arises from impulses deep in the human heart towards Love (belonging) and Power (autonomy). As Kahane suggests, these are not “choices” but comprise a paradox – to belong, I must be myself and to be fully myself, I must be in relationship with others. This paradox – the fact that autonomy and belonging – are not merely two faces of one coin but are actually made of each other, means that to exercise the moral imagination requires that freedom not be sacrificed on the altar of community and community not be sacrificed on the altar of freedom. To allow these to become polarized results in static conflict. To find paths both into the fullness of the paradox and through the paradox to points of transcendence undoes these knots. It is not so much about fixing a problem as it is about holding the problem with a certain amount of grace until it resolves itself.

The third aspect of Dr. Lederach’s view is the fundamental belief in and the pursuit of the creative act. At its heart transformational change is creative. What emerges in conflict is the unexpected. To gain sensitivity to these serendipitous events opens the possibility of the creative act. The attempt to produce results – to force outcomes – becomes counterproductive in conflicted situations. It is seen as one more move that demands a countervailing move. As Dr. Lederach suggests, “I found myself reflecting on the notion that my greatest contributions to peace-building did not seem to be those that emerged from my “accumulated skill” or “intentional purpose.” They were those that happened unexpectedly.” This adheres to a view of reality that everything around us is fundamentally in process. The “real” world is one of constantly shifting environments and constant adaptation to these shifts. Creativity (and destruction) surround us and envelop us at every turn. We live in the dance of Shiva. This is particularly so in conflicted situations. While things may appear static or stuck – under the surface there is constant movement and that movement opens the possibility for the creative

act. Rigid intervention robs the practitioner and those in the conflicted system of the peripheral vision, learning and flexibility needed to engage in creative transformation.

The final aspect of the moral imagination is the capacity to risk. Here is where things become uncomfortable. Dr. Lederach tells stories of people who, with remarkable courage, risked everything to walk a path of peace. To engage this work of peacebuilding requires a kind of hazarding ourselves in the world. There is a great deal of talk about vulnerability these days – and such conversation is most welcome and salutary. But in my experience there are essentially two kinds of vulnerability. In the first, there is a kind of vulnerability that arises from genuine inner strength – a confidence large enough to own and display weakness. This is vulnerability that in Brene Brown’s words “looks like pure courage”. There is another kind of vulnerability that lacks a compass in this inner strength and comes across as needy, weak and ineffective. Of course the world is not so neat that these two can always be easily separated, but we tend to know each when we see it. What is required for peacebuilding is the first kind – it is vulnerability rooted in personal integrity, power and deep authenticity. Resolving conflict is never easy, and it is often risky. Few of us will ever have to engage at the levels of personal courage that Dr. Lederach tells us of in his stories, but to create peace, we may be called upon to hazard less tangible things of value such as emotional safety, reputation, self-image and the like as we risk very real possibilities of failure.

I must say that this has been one of the most difficult blogs I have posted. It has taken months to conceive and write this. Yet I find that this notion of “moral imagination” sits close to the heart of the work we do with families. Beneath all of the process and intervention, beneath the skills building and capacity building, this work is fundamentally about weaving a social fabric in which paradox is both embraced and transcended in recognition of interconnection, ambiguity, creativity and risk. It is a privilege to do this work. It is demanding to do this work. And this work is rewarding beyond measure when done well.

[\[1\]](#) And by responsibility here we might take this to mean both our moral participation in a system we co-create as well as our “ability to respond” within that system.

Matthew Wesley is the founder of The Wesley Group. He graduated from Stanford Law School and practiced as an estate planning attorney with successful families for over 20 years. Matt left active practice to help families do what estate documents alone could not - help to ensure successful intergenerational wealth transfer. In addition to his legal background, Matt has extensive consulting experience and a deep background in psychology, personal development and family systems, and organizational communication and development. Matt works closely with his wife, Marcia, who is a licensed psychologist with over 20 years of counseling experience.

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Contact: 425.647.6066 | matt@thewesleygroup.com