

The Value of Conflict

Excerpt from *The Hand That Rocks the World*, by David Shackleton

The aspect of human nature that has the most to do with knowing the truth about ourselves and the world in the field of human behavior (that controversial field that I have suggested includes psychology, sociology, politics, economics, etc.) is wisdom. Several of the above quotations suggest that wisdom has to do with the balancing of opposites. I will develop this idea into a clear and useful concept and discover why attaining wisdom is difficult.

Historically, one way that life wisdom was captured and offered to us all was through proverbs. These days, we tend to think of proverbs as simply amusing or interesting sayings, but only those that struck a wide resonance and found a genuine utility survived to become well known catchphrases.¹

Here's a little known fact about proverbs;² many of them contradict each other. Our ancestors knew that true wisdom is paradoxical, contradictory. For example: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Good advice to take careful consideration before making big decisions. Yet, "She who hesitates is lost." Do it, don't think about it, just do it right away. What can we make of this contradictory advice? Another example: "Two heads are better than one." And its opposite, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." Or the more recent, "A camel is a horse designed by a committee." The realm of proverbs is full of contradictory advice like this. So what use are they?

Proverbs remind us that wisdom cannot be reduced to one-sided advice, to a formula. Right action is circumstantial and situational. To hold the complexity to address any situation, wisdom has to be paradoxical. It is, in a word, balanced. There are times when caution is wise, and times when it should be abandoned. There are tasks for which individuals work best alone, and tasks which are best approached by a team. To be able to make the best of any situation we need to balance *ourselves*, to develop our capacity to work well alone, and also our capacity to work well with others.

The psychologist Carl Jung developed this idea into a formal theoretical system. He proposed that the natural process of adult psychological development is to develop one side of a set of dualities, then switch over to developing the other side, and finally to integrate the two sides into a balanced set. For example, consider the general pattern of human development through childhood and into adulthood. As infants, we are emotionally expressive, moving from joy to rage to tears in moments. We are comfortable with intimacy, with cuddling and touching, and likewise we are comfortable with being dependent on others. Then we enter adolescence, and often find that in this stage we become fiercely independent, unemotional and distant. In the third and most difficult stage, as young adults, we attempt to integrate the opposites of the two earlier opposite stages, to become interdependent, for example – capable of dependence when that is indicated or independence when that is needed. To become emotionally integrated – capable of feeling and expressing our emotions, but able to suppress them also (for instance, in an emergency when lives need to be saved). To become comfortable with intimacy but not needful for it, so that we can be fully our own person, yet enjoy close relationships with others.

It is clear that most adults fail to fully integrate many of these opposites and this is understandable; it is difficult to do. It is difficult *because* they are opposite, challenging to reconcile. But without that integration, we remain on one side or another of all of the dualistic balances, so that only one approach feels right to us, and its dualistic opposite feels quite wrong, mistaken, immature or immoral. This is why,

¹ A proverb is the wisdom of many and the wit of one. - John Russell

² The wisdom of the wise and the experience of the ages is preserved into perpetuity by a nation's proverbs, fables, folk sayings and quotations. - William Feather (1908 - 1976)

for instance, the political right and left are so hostile to each other, each group convinced that they have the whole of the answer and that the other is quite wrong. In fact, mature politics, wisdom, is an integration of these two partial systems.

We will consider some particular dualities and the difficulty of balancing them in order to get a sense of this issue, beginning with one that offers little difficulty, where most people already are comfortable with both sides.

The first sentence in M. Scott Peck's famous *The Road Less Travelled* is "Life is difficult." Peck explains that once we really get that this is true, and that it *should* be true, it ceases to matter to us that life is difficult. We stop feeling sorry for ourselves that our own lives are difficult and get on with the business of living *well*. In other words, we let go of the concept of *ease* as a major life goal. We come to understand that a life lived in pursuit of ease, avoiding things that are difficult, will be a shallow life of little worth or accomplishment.

That doesn't mean that we stop valuing ease as a worthy part of life. A pleasurable vacation as a break from work or a reward for accomplishment is important. Resting from our labors is vital – but so are our labors in the first place. In short, neither ease nor effort should be made the prime goal of life. Laziness and workaholicism – ease or effort carried to excess – are both destructive of a good life. The key is to have a reasonable balance between the two. To achieve this balance, this integration of opposites, we need to become comfortable and competent in both areas, able to work hard and well, and also able to rest and play. Notice that healthy balance between these opposites takes the form of *alternation* between them, periods of effort alternated with periods of rest and recreation. Balance does not mean a middle way, ease mixed with effort in some 50/50 mixture, like warm water is a mixture of hot and cold.

Most of us already appreciate the right relationship between these opposite concepts of ease and effort. We know that, even though ease is pleasurable and effort is difficult, these feelings are not adequate guides for living our lives. We must discipline ourselves to endure some distress as we strive towards a difficult goal, or simply earn what we need to survive. Following our natural inclinations towards ease and away from effort would be to undermine much that makes life worth living, and would ultimately make life impossible.

I have spent time describing a duality that most people already understand because I want to use it as an analogy to bridge to others that are more of a stretch. Let's now move to the concepts of peace and conflict. Peace is like ease and conflict is like effort. A life lived in pursuit of peace and in avoidance of conflict is ultimately as empty and misguided as a life lived in pursuit of ease and in avoidance of effort. Once we really 'get' that this is true and that it *should* be true, it ceases to matter to us that life is conflictual. It ceases to be a problem and becomes just part of life's nature. In other words, we let go of the concept of peace as a main life goal.

This is more challenging. The notion of peace as an ideal state that we should strive towards, and conflict as an unfortunate product of immaturity or dysfunction on somebody's part, is well entrenched in modern culture. We have put a polarized value structure on top of the concepts of peace and conflict: the former is good, the latter at best a necessary evil, at worst totally wrong. I don't want to reverse this value structure, I want to remove it. This common value structure simply represents our natural human inclination to seek ease and avoid stress. Conflict is stressful, it feels difficult. But as we saw in the case of ease and effort, these feelings are *not* good guides to life. They are incompetent guides who will steer us wrong.

What evidence can I present that conflict is a fundamental, inherent and valuable part of life? Consider the nature of the human psyche. It is inherently oppositional. It is oppositional because it is a regulated system, and every regulated system achieves control through balancing opposing energies. For instance, we have a human need for social interaction but also for solitude. We are always in the process of

balancing these opposing needs. We need autonomy but also relationship. Our need to go out and discover the fresh and new is opposed to our need for security, for the familiar. And so on.

All major systems of modeling the human psyche reflect this oppositional nature. Freud saw the psyche as tripolar: the natural urges and drives of the id being opposed by the socialized ‘conscience’ of the superego, with the balance between the two mediated by the ego. Jung’s model of the psyche is bipolar, a continual dance of conflict between dualistically opposite psychic energies. The oppositions that he saw as foundational for the personality (popularized in the Myers-Briggs personality typing scheme) are introversion vs. extraversion, intuition (visionary possibility) vs. sensing (factual here-and-now), thinking vs. feeling, and open-endedness vs. closure. The healthy psyche, these pioneering thinkers all affirm, is a psyche in *conflict*, one that embraces and manages the dynamic tension between inherent opposing forces.

What is structural and foundational for the individual human psyche will, of course, also manifest between people. As individuals with unique personalities and histories, we choose various solutions, differing rest-points or comfort zones on the oppositional continuum, and we constantly run up against people who have made different choices. Oppositional social dualities such as hawks and doves, conservatives and liberals, represent large groups of people who have made similar one-sided choices about what to value and what to devalue or demonize. Each sees the dualistically opposite group as completely wrong-headed about the issue that divides them. Neither group recognizes that they both have pieces of wisdom, and they both have components of error. In particular, neither group sees that integrated wisdom could be achieved through intense dialogue between them, by debate that is characterized by subordination to truth – in short, by conflict, competition around their differing ideas. Like a healthy psyche, a healthy society embraces and supports conflict and competition in diverse forms, seeking the wisdom that comes from integrating – valuing and accommodating, not eliminating – difference.

Why do we avoid such debate? Why do we prefer the company of those who already agree with us? The answer is not difficult. We see these issues as win/lose propositions, we feel sure that they have just one right answer. Obviously we do not fear to win; that would be great. The other possibility in our imagined scenario is that we might lose. That is what we fear. But this fear must be dysfunctional. Clearly, every time we correct a misapprehension that we hold, every time we discover an error, we improve ourselves. Provided that we are indeed surrendered to truth, losing means that we gain a better, more accurate understanding of life and how to live it. It is better to lose than to win, for only the loser gets to improve his worldview.

By this analysis, we are suffering not from too much conflict in the world today, but too little. Having enshrined peace as the only worthy goal of social progress, and conflict as largely dysfunctional, we are unable to bless ourselves through conflict, to be improved and chastened by it. We have removed its sacred role and vulgarized or demonized it. Most of the conflict that we do have has lost its healthy focus on discovering what is true, and instead has become ego defense, defense of one-sided stuckness, purely dysfunctional. It is hard to see the value in genuine conflict when we are surrounded by such ineffective examples.

In the world’s oldest recorded myth, from Mesopotamia (Iraq), the great king Gilgamesh is without peer and therefore lonely. The Gods, seeing his distress, create an equal companion for him, a man called Enkidu. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu first meet, they fight. Why? They fight in order to know each other truly. If you want to know who someone truly is, don’t watch them at their ease, in their comfort zone, composed and in control. Anyone can look good under those conditions. To truly know someone quickly and deeply, fighting them is a good strategy.

Note how different this is to our conventional wisdom. In our overvaluing of peace, we see conflict as bad, or at best a necessary evil. We see it as divisive and destructive of relationship. But Gilgamesh and

Enkidu fight in order to *build* a relationship, in order to discover if they can become *friends*. And they do indeed become the closest of friends.

This is an aspect of conflict that we have forgotten and have a hard time accepting. We see only the dark side of conflict, where it is about domination, hate or control. We don't see its light side, which is about respect and striving for truth and excellence. We come closest to remembering this in the area of ritualized conflict, i.e., sports. Ask a professional athlete whether they respect the opposing team or athlete – and most will tell you yes. Athletes know how difficult it is to excel at a sport. They know that to win a match or a tournament requires discipline and excellence, and losing athletes usually respect the ability of the team that beat them.

Who doesn't love to see human performance at its best – Olympic competitions, for instance? Some of our best, most intense, most memorably alive moments are when we strive to beat a worthy opponent, or watch others in that striving. Competition can bring out the very best in us. To put it bluntly, we are currently very unwise, meaning unbalanced, about peace and conflict.

In his book *Iron John*, Robert Bly says, “Conscious fighting is a great help in relationships between men and women. Jung said, ‘American marriages are the saddest in the world, because the man does all his fighting at the office.’”ⁱ

Let me be clear here. I am not saying that all conflict is good. I am saying that not all conflict is bad. There is bad, harmful, dysfunctional conflict as well as good, productive conflict, just as there is harmful, dysfunctional peace (for instance, fearful avoidance of confrontation) as well as good, healthy peace. The difference between healthy and unhealthy conflict is whether we are open to truth, which means open to discovering that we are wrong, and whether we are fighting from love, which means in order to build relationship rather than destroy it.

Most of the debate in families or on the internet is ego-motivated, between people whose minds are closed, already made up, and so it devolves into acrimony and frustration – useless, dysfunctional conflict that *is* destructive of relationship. But conflict that is a genuine search for truth is a wonderful thing to see, all parties are enhanced by it. It is in the tension, in the conflict between the competing views, like the tension and conflict between political left and right, that wisdom lies. In workshops that I conduct, I hold space for *sacred conflict*, for intense confrontations between deeply held beliefs and perceptions of men and women, having faith that such conflict is the fertile ground out of which new integrations, new insights, new wisdom can grow.

ⁱ Robert Bly, *Iron John; A Book About Men*, Addison-Wesley, 1990, p167.