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Building a Non-Violent Organization

Abstract: Leadership literature asks how to build healthy organizations; conflict literature asks how to make global peace. Both ask how people are shaped by leaders, but connections between organizational and peace theories are minimal, as are connections between peace in local and global contexts. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the role of leaders in building non-violent organizations and the role of organizations in cultivating habits of peace, thereby preparing people as peacemakers. The education of leaders and leaders' education of organization have power to foster peace in the larger world.

As a dean of a theological school, I am aware of mighty challenges facing leaders as they seek to inspire vision and build robust communities of leaders in their own contexts. Every day I encounter the overwhelming responsibilities carried by leaders, the vital mission of the institutions in their care, the complexity of structural and cultural systems, the challenges of changing institutional structures and ethos, and the complex human personalities in living tender communities. These very challenges point to the value of the emerging field of leadership studies. They also point implicitly to the potential for a fruitful dialogue between the research on leadership and that on peacemaking in situations of conflict. Both fields of study are generating new insight on leadership in complicated human situations in which the quality of human lives and the goals of human communities are at stake. This is an educational task that has potential to shape a culture of just peace.

Leadership literature engages questions of building healthy organizations, while conflict literature addresses global peacebuilding. Both are concerned with how human persons are shaped by leadership practices, but connections between organizational and peace-building theories have not been fully made; nor have connections between just peace in local and global contexts. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the role of leadership in building non-violent organizations and the role of organizations in cultivating habits of peace, thereby preparing people as peacebuilders. The education of leaders and leaders' education of organizations have power to foster peace and justice in the larger world.

This study will draw upon case studies in dialogue with literature on leadership, organizational behavior, and peacemaking. The brief cases are not from my own leadership setting, but are merged from two or more cases in diverse settings, thus offering a case for reflection without identifying markers. The dialogue between these cases and the literature promises to yield a multi-faceted perspective on the potential of human communities to embody and build peace. It also promises an approach to leadership and peacemaking in organizations that cultivates what Pierre Bourdieu described as *habitus*. The hope is that the dialogue and the

leadership toward which it points will contribute to a life-bearing theology, the *habitus* of honoring the dignity of all persons, lessons in peacemaking, and vision for the future.

Four major themes in the peacemaking literature are important to this study: (1) dignity; (2) empathetic listening, or the mutual hearing of issues and hurts; (3) building relationships; and (4) imagination. The connections among these practices need further investigation, as do the connections between these practices in small communities, complex organizations, and larger societies. Alongside the peacemaking literature is an increasingly robust literature on leadership and organizations, focusing on: (1) the dynamics of change; (2) the importance of centered, ethical leadership; (3) the importance of leadership practices attuned to contextual realities; and (4) the potential of leaders to effect change. This literature suggests a dynamic interplay among the practices of leaders, the dynamic movements of communities, and the complexities of cultural-political contexts. As leaders take account of these many influences on themselves and their communities, they have potential also to take account of the relationship between the communities they lead and the larger world.

What is needed is a merging of theories to shed light on the values that are essential for peacemaking in organizations and larger societies, the qualities of leaders to cultivate those values, and the potential of peace-rich organizations to foster the human qualities, skills, will, and hope to foster peacemaking in other contexts. These are the goals of this study. The initial dialogue leads to four major themes, or practices for building a non-violent organization: honoring dignity, cultivating empathy, building a community of leaders, and leading toward vision.

Honoring Dignity

Case Study in Educational Institution: A group of students is angry about an event in their community, and they express their anger with force. They direct it first toward the person who is seemingly most to blame but, receiving no satisfying response from that person, they turn their anger to the community in general and to the leader who can supposedly intervene and solve the problem. That person is faced with alternatives: to step in and seek to resolve the practical issues at stake, to create a conversation among the several parties, to speak individually with all of the players, to insist that the person responsible for the particular concern find a way to resolve it, or to do some combination of all four. In this case, the leader decides to do all four, beginning with individual meetings, working with the leader who has responsibility in the areas of concern, convening a sharing session with all of the parties, and resolving some of the issues through direct administrative action. The leader also deliberates with others the deeper issues beneath the immediate one and then seeks ways that the community can continue to name and address those larger issues over the coming months.

Having been in multiple situations that resemble the one in this case, I am aware of how much time is involved in any of the actions taken here, much less in taking all of the actions in turn. I am also aware that those actions do not produce guaranteed results, and they certainly do not produce quick changes that satisfy all concerned parties. While the leader might exert major effort to respect the dignity of all involved in such struggles, some of the leader's actions may be interpreted as aggressive, apathetic, micro-managing, and/or overly passive. The leader is then faced with accusations or silences, which tempt the leader to harbor blame or anger against one

or more of the parties or to create emotional distance from the fray, thinking of all parties in negative terms in order to preserve one's own sanity. All of these responses are natural and any one of them can be appropriate in a given situation; however, the leader may be sorely tempted to ignore the dignity of all the players in the midst of a chaotic situation, especially when the leader is giving his or her best to facilitate resolution, to cultivate a non-violent culture of dignity, and to do so without losing a sense of centeredness and balance.

The case itself and my initial reflections on it reveal both the urgency and the challenge for leaders to honor the dignity of all parties. The challenge is to create a culture in which all persons honor the dignity of all others in the community, and to foster one's own valuing of others' dignity. In times of cultural or institutional change, this is particularly difficult; however, the literature on dignity and on leadership and change are both helpful. Donna Hicks (2011) has identified dignity as having a central role in resolving conflict, an idea that arose from her work in international peacemaking as she "came to understand the traumatic and emotional experiences of war as assaults on people's dignity" (xii). She came also to recognize that peace negotiations can often be undermined by "emotional riptides" arising from the emotional undercurrents of political issues. She concluded that, at such times, the strong human reactions that undermine negotiations are "the result of primal insults to dignity" (xiii). Her hope for such situations, and for all relationships near and far, is to make dignity "a way of life" (xv). In Hicks' view, and also in that of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (2011, ix-x), dignity is a practice that stands at the center of peacemaking and it can be learned.

One needs to ask of the case study how can dignity be magnified and taught as the several players seek to resolve an anger-filled stalemate. In this case, all of the leader's responses were appropriate on the surface. Listening to the individuals is attending to their voices and honoring their dignity as people with views and responses that matter. Encouraging them to listen to one another is encouraging them to honor one another's dignity. Encouraging the responsible leader to resolve the issues is honoring that person's dignity as a leader, but can also be seen as a lack of trust in the other leader's past and present actions. Stepping in to resolve some of the immediate issues oneself is respecting the dignity of the people bringing the complaints (honoring their complaints), but might be interpreted as undermining the other leader. The case, though short, reveals how important and how challenging it is to embody dignity within a situation of conflict.

These challenges are informed by the leadership literature, particularly studies on the dynamics of change. To honor dignity in the real world, a leader needs to comprehend the dynamics of cultural change and the resistances to change within individuals, communities, and larger societies. This work has been addressed freshly by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2009), who emphasize the inner work that is needed for individuals and communities, recognizing that this inner work can reshape one's leadership. What is needed is "your ability to develop yourself, your people, and your teams" (11). Kegan and Lahey recognize that change is difficult, requiring a great deal of support. Because external pressures are mixed with internal ones, they advocate self-reflection as "a central aspect of any organizational work" (78), an emphasis found also in the peacemaking literature (Gopin 2012, 6-7). Kegan and Lahey recognize that both individuals and organizations "are in the grip of competing commitments and constraining big assumptions," which add to tensions and resistances to change (87). This is why change requires a holistic approach. In popular language, they urge people to lead from the gut

(internal motivations), head and heart (thinking and feeling simultaneously), and hands (engaging mindset and behavior simultaneously) (210-222). A single narrow approach will not be sufficient.

Returning to the case study, the leader did take a holistic approach, which is to be applauded. The brief case does not give details about the responses and counter-responses of the various parties, nor about the internal struggles and self-reflection of the leaders. In such a case, dignity will only be honored if all of these factors are taken into account. The actual cases upon which the brief composite was based became messier before they became more settled. Dignity was honored in many of the actions taken, and it was undermined in others, pointing to the ongoing need to build a culture of dignity that will never be fully realized but can potentially contribute to a healthier organization and also to the dignity-bearing of a people. Viewed from the theological perspective of a theistic tradition, this kind of action is a way to honor the goodness of God's creation; it is a way of wonder and appreciation for God and the gifts of God. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "There are three ways in which we may relate ourselves to the world – we may exploit it, we may enjoy it, we may accept it in awe" (1986, ///). Honoring dignity is the pathway of awe.

Cultivating Empathy

Case Study of Interpersonal Conflict*: An educational leader is faced with two staff members who are angry with one another. Each has reason to be angry, but the depth of their anger is quickly escalating and each is gradually involving others. The leader in this case speaks with each person individually, and with others who have been brought into the conflict. The leader asks the key players if they are willing to have a conversation together, which they are both willing to do. The purpose is to give space for each person to express the anger and the reasons for the anger, and to give space for each to hear the other. The hope is that the mutual listening will lead to awareness (even acceptance) of what cannot be changed and to some ideas regarding how to proceed in the future. The three people do not have high expectations for this meeting, but they are all open. The meeting begins, the conversation is intense, each person speaks directly and clearly, each person listens intently, and the small dialogue surprises all three by moving the conflict to a new place of honesty, acceptance, and even respect. None of the problems can be undone, nor can the attending hurts, but the angry parties agree to move on to a new place in their work together.*

This composite case reads like a success story, albeit one that was risk-filled. Not every case of this sort will have positive endings and the two cases from which this composite case was drawn both had residues of tension. Even so, the change in each case was dramatic and surprising to the participants, pointing to the wisdom in Marc Gopin's belief that real movement toward peace comes when people listen carefully to one another's stories and the pain therein. That includes both personal and community stories (2004, 83-126, 177-198; 2012). Such thinking makes its way into blog posts on peacemaking as well. Cat Zavis (2014) writes about recent outbursts of violence in Israel and Palestine:

> It is not enough to know … that people are doing things that are causing great harm and suffering and that this needs to stop, you need to understand how to contribute to a healthy discussion of what are strategically sound and smart ways to respond – ways that

will lead to empathy, compassion, understanding and ultimately peace rather than feed the fears of either or both sides.

Such a perspective represents a minority voice in the popular media, but it is a common theme among people engaged in peacemaking and reconciliation – people who recognize that empathy has potential for renewing human relationships even in the most difficult situations.

What is needed is empathic listening and then the exercise of centered, ethical leadership that is informed by that listening. The empathy generated may be of a deep personal nature, or it may be more generalized, as in the case of understanding-based empathy, which arises from close listening to others' ideologies to grasp why others hold a particular view strongly. Wesley Wildman (2012) makes a strong case for the potential of understanding-based empathy to enable people to disagree respectfully and peacefully even when they disagree strongly.

Empathic listening is not a panacea to problems, and it is difficult to do. It requires a retraining of one's natural reflexes, a suspension of one's own need to assert one's position over all others, and a willingness to walk into messy situations without guaranteed outcomes. The three people in the composite case expressed this kind of willingness, simply by being willing to talk individually and then to come into a common space in which the aggrieved parties could talk with one another in the presence of a leader. This takes courage; it is an approach to human relations that requires people to "build the bridge as you walk on it" (Quinn 1996, 83-90). It does not allow escape from the messiness of a situation, but engages people in the chaos and messiness of reality and asks them to look carefully at the whole situation and its interconnected parts. In fact, it begins with a recognition that human beings cannot control chaos; rather, "we are being called to encounter life as it is: uncontrollable, unpredictable, messy, surprising, erratic" (Wheatley 2005, 125).

The case itself reveals this messiness and lack of predictability, but it also reveals the potential that comes from such a situation for empathetic listening and restoration of relationships. This calls forth the inner strength of everyone involved – the courage to face into the messiness and to listen to another human being, or many others, even when the messages are difficult to hear. The same leadership theorists who encourage such listening recognize the complex systems and structures in which the listening takes place and the depths of trust and integrity that are needed for leading others in empathic listening. Some of these theorists emphasize the importance of the inner spiritual journey in leadership (Palmer 2000, 73-94), and others emphasize the potential of such leadership to reshape the larger social world toward gentleness, decency, and bravery (Wheatley 2012, 123). Wheatley argues that brave leaders know how bad the social systems are, and they continue their work anyway: "They know how systems of power work and they try to discern wise actions … they strive to keep their hearts open and not to succumb to anger and aggression" (7).

At no time in history has the need for centered, ethical leadership been more important (Fluker 2009; Barsh and LaVoie 2014). One of the cornerstones of such leadership is empathic listening, which contributes to a full-bodied exercise of leadership, embracing what Fluker describes as the interactive dimensions of character, civility, and community. To build a non-violent organization, and to shape a society of just peace, people need to embody and teach empathic listening in every aspect of their community life.

Building a Community of Leaders

The last pair of themes is deeply rooted in religious traditions, which are often shaped in moments of rapid change themselves. Rather than begin with contemporary cases, I will refer instead to narratives in Jewish and Christian scriptures. Consider, for example, the Israelites wandering in the wilderness forty years after they crossed the Red Sea, leaving their slave masters in Egypt and moving into a new world that required them to reshape all of their life patterns. Ronald Heifetz (2014) argues that Moses' leadership of the people out of Egypt was the easy role he had to play as a leader (Exodus 3-15). The people were convinced they wanted to be free and God provided immediate, visible support to Moses. The difficult leadership challenge came after the people had crossed into freedom and faced the long, slow tasks of creating a new culture (Exodus 16-40; Leviticus; Numbers). One sees similarly difficult leadership issues in the early Christian church of Acts, as revealed in the tensions between gentiles and Jews and the clashes regarding eating taboos and factional loyalties. Similarly the church of Corinth was torn as people tried to discern how to live the ways of Jesus in a society that was socially and economically stratified and divided by diverse perspectives and values (I Corinthians). These glimpses into biblical narratives reveal the challenge of building a community of leaders and inspiring a vision.

Building a community of leaders is hard work but it begins with listening. Even the biblical narratives paint pictures in which listening permeated critical moments of community-building. God listened – to the cries of the people and to Moses' pleas. Moses listened to God's call from a burning bush and many other calls thereafter. The early church leaders of Acts and Corinth listened to the turmoil of their communities and to God's revelations. They also listened to one another, both in conflict and agreement. The relationship between listening and community building can be pursued more thoroughly in another work, but the concern for community is compelling in these narratives, both when it is present and when it is absent or torn asunder. The hope for community continually asserts itself as a value.

The value of community-building is also a major theme in the leadership literature. Two of the primary features of adaptive leadership, according to Ronald Heifetz (2009), is giving the work back to the people and generating more leadership. Studies of effective leaders corroborate this community-building theme. In one recent study, Jessi Micah Steward interviewed 20 women leaders in public universities of the Pacific Northwest U.S. She discovered that these women shared certain primary leadership practices: "collaboration, communication, and information sharing." She also discovered that the women described their approach to conflict in terms of community building: they "addressed conflict to build relationships, establish trust, and inspire a shared vision" (2009, xii). Building on these accents is the strengths-based model of Tom Rath and Barry Conchie (2008), who draw upon Gallup studies of executive teams, discovering that "the most cohesive and successful teams possessed broader groupings of strengths" (22). Their work illustrates the virtue of team leadership to join diverse people with diverse strengths. In sum, the leadership literature is clear in accenting the importance of spreading leadership (Heifetz) and building teams (Rath and Conchie).

The peacemaking literature adds another accent, often highlighting the urgent need for building interpersonal and communal relationships. Drawing upon biographical accounts and case studies, this research reveals that building friendships invigorates efforts to bring equality,

nonviolent social change, and reconciliation to warring peoples (Gopin 2012). The picture that emerges from peace and leadership studies, taken together, is one that accents the potency of relationships, including friendships, in peacemaking and the potency of collaboration, responsibility-sharing, and team-building for effective leadership. With this in mind, the effort to build a non-violent organization will require the development of trust-worthy relationships in which people engage with one another on matters of importance to their community, including those matters that evoke conflict. It will also require the development and implementation of shared goals, which leads to the final theme.

Leading toward Vision

In the three biblical narratives cited above, the larger vision is clear. The Israelites responded to the promise of freedom and a new life with God in a new land, but it required many small and large steps along the way. The early Christians sought to be "followers of the Way," but that required them to construct new patterns of living. This summation is overly simple, but it points to a critical element in peace studies – imagination – and another in leadership studies – purpose. Imagination and purpose have potential to inspire a new culture and to guide the practices that can shape it.

I made a case in an earlier study (2006) that imagination is essential to peacemaking, and this is a major theme of John Paul Lederach (2005). Lederach draws upon case studies and historical analysis, noting critical moments when imagination marked the turning point in peace building. Similarly, leadership theorists have accented purpose. One of the early leaders of the contemporary field , James MacGregor Burns (1978, 19), described the "crucial variable" in leadership as purpose: "I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – *of both leaders and followers*." One finds similar accents among other leadership theorists, who focus on leaders' ability to effect change in the direction of a communal, social, or organizational vision (Hagiya 2013; Sandberg 2013; Coutts 2013; and Livermore 2010). Building a non-violent organization is a particular vision that does indeed require imagination and a strong common vision if its counter-cultural potential is to become a reality.

Vision is not a simple phenomenon, however. Another strong theme in the leadership literature is the distinction between visionary leadership and maintenance. One of the earliest theorists to emphasize this distinction was Burns, who distinguished between transactional and transforming leadership: (1) transactional leadership involves the exchange of valued things (e.g., goods, votes, or hospitality) to satisfy existing desires or needs, and (2) transforming leadership engages leaders with others to raise motivation and morality, thus mobilizing and inspiring people toward goals (Burns 1978, 19-20). More recent theorists argue that Burns did not take sufficient account of contexts, so the entire idea of transformative leadership has been nuanced in more recent years. The new literature retains the power of vision as a motivating factor in leadership, but it is seen as more entangled with social realities. One example of this nuancing is Ron Heifetz's appeal to adaptive leadership, as contrasted to technical. Heifetz (2009, 31) emphasizes the need for leaders to meet adaptive challenges, but this requires considerable diagnosis of the social situation, e.g., analysis of the adaptive challenges and envisioning of adaptive responses. He defines leadership as a practice of "tackling tough

challenges," mobilizing people to make progress on these challenges to contribute to a challenging world.

Such thinking places a high value on vision, but another nuance is needed. Gil Rendle argues that the world is changing and leaders need to be increasingly flexible and imaginative to lead agile and purposeful organizations. He builds upon the work of Charles Handy to describe the difference in terms of convergent and divergent environments. A convergent environment is "one in which the question is the same for everyone and the answer is the same" as well (2011, 1; 2007; Handy 1998). A divergent environment is "one in which the question is the same for everyone but the answers are different" (ibid). Rendle argues that organizations are increasingly dominated by divergent questions and a divergent ethos; they face complex situations that cannot be defined as problems with solutions, but as "conditions of a changed world" (2007, 1).

I suggest that such a world requires a third conceptual alternative beyond convergence and divergence; it requires people to be open to transvergence. Though I invented this word, it can be found in works on art, architecture, digital discovery, and globalization, to name a few. In all of these areas, it is associated with the unexpected, the novel discovery, new forms of integration, breaks with convention, and a transcending vision that holds together radical differences. Leadership that is open to transvergence will be drawn into paradigm shifts that *no one* knows in advance – the unexpected new direction that breaks through and claims the community for the next moments of time. I suggest that building a non-violent organization is itself a transvergent possibility. Even as we honor dignity, cultivate empathy, and build a community of leaders, we lead toward a vision that seems elusive, but may just break through as a transvergent possibility in a form that we cannot now imagine.

What I have offered here is a vision of building a non-violent organization, along with leadership practices that can potentially foster that vision. What remains for the future, even as people engage the vision and the practices, is to discover, invent, and be surprised by the shape of a non-violent organization that fosters a justice-building, peace-making world. Is this possible? I hope so!

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