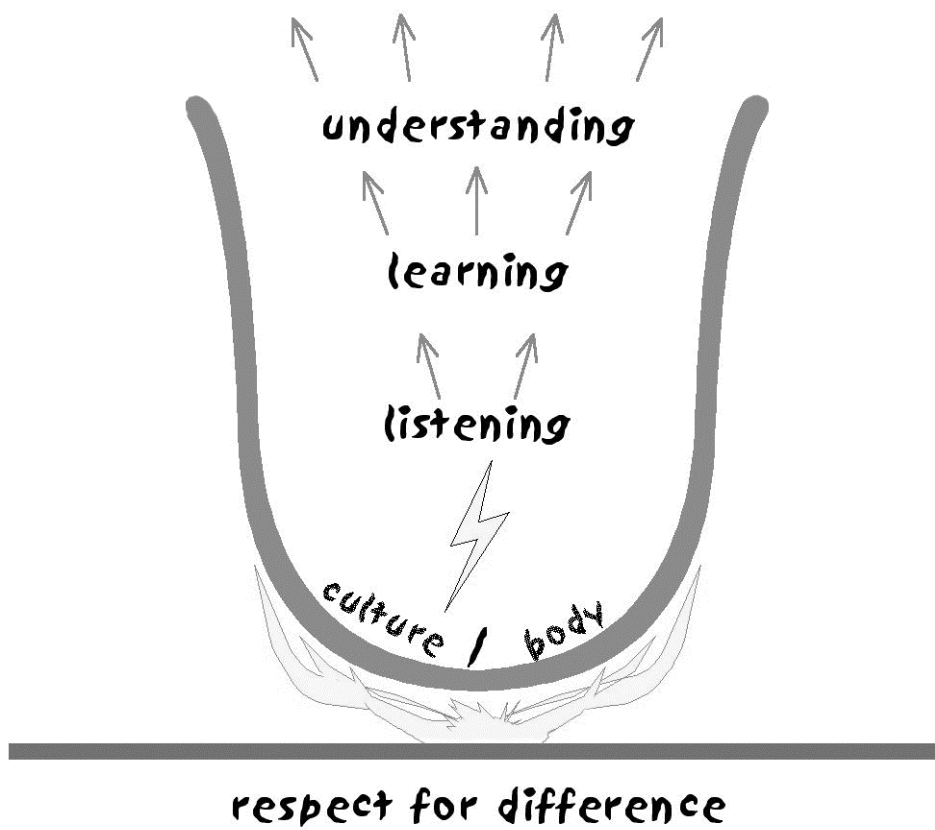


A Metaphor for Process



Sally Campbell

A METAPHOR FOR PROCESS

People work with conflict in many different ways. In North America, the field of conflict resolution has had the benefit of various staged models which identify ways of approaching a dispute and map out routes to resolution. Built into these models however, are assumptions about preferred ways of working with conflict and about what success means. There are also assumptions about peoples' ways of thinking and their order of problem-solving. What works for some may not work for others. Presented here is a humanistic model or framework for process – one that is inclusive, based upon certain universal core values, and has room for an infinity of approaches.

This framework uses the metaphor of a vessel that holds the conflict and creates an environment for working it through. It visually shows the what, how and when of a conflict-resolving process. The metaphor offers a simple and understandable route to moving through conflict within a safe place. It names the fundamental components that make a solid foundation for the work, together with a sense of the open-endedness and creative potential that emerge from good process. The vessel can “hold” any number of different ways to resolution, showing the infinity of ways people will give expression to the core components.

When teachers of conflict resolution and mediation need a starting point for discussion about process, this metaphor may be useful. Working with this framework can help make the whole resolution process more meaningful for students. Treated as a “work in progress”, it offers learners a visual aid to develop their thoughts, clarify objectives, and explore the many ways of approaching the daunting task of addressing an entrenched dispute, either as an intervenor or disputant. Its simplicity makes it instantly accessible to people. I have found it is the kind of tool people take home from a course and discuss with their spouses at dinner!

The metaphor shows the primary goals of listening to one another to learn and to build understanding, and yet its flexible structure allows participants to shape their own process rather than trying to fit what is unknown into a model established by others.

This metaphor has a number of parts all of which affect the whole. Because it is a symbolic framework, it can also be interpreted on a number of levels simultaneously.

THE FOUNDATION:

The vessel rests on a solid foundation of respect for difference. As a disputant, it means respect for the “other” as a human being who sees things differently from me. Respect for a person's entitlement to disagree. Respect for a process that may allow us to speak and listen to one another and to learn something. This does not mean I need to respect the other's behaviour, actions, or even the values and beliefs that seem to inform those actions. I do however need to respect the individual's right to have differing views from

mine. An intervenor “models” this respect for difference from the very first contact with parties in dispute.

THE VESSEL:

The vessel holds the process. It is a container formed of a living, breathing membrane that can expand to hold what is necessary - matters difficult to speak about, the tension, the seemingly vast differences that divide people in conflict. The word “vessel” has connotations of the sacred. It represents something to be handled with great care and reflects the very nature of transforming conflict. This can be the deepest and most important work of our lives. Calling upon all our skills and resources, at times it can feel very dangerous. A safe place is needed to hold or contain the energy within the conflict – the vessel represents that place.

The sacred aspect of the vessel is symbolic of matters of significance. This is as it should be for our conflicts; they are our toughest and best teachers. On another level, the vessel can represent the spiritual challenge of being fully present each moment in order to be able to sense what is needed in the conflict. A mediator or disputant bringing “conscious awareness” to the process, with mindful presence, helps create a place for heartfelt discussion. In that sense as well, the vessel is a sacred space, a space for honouring people’s difference and their attempt to reconcile those differences that are getting in the way, causing pain and difficulty.

The membrane breathes in and out, suggestive of real-life physical processes – we expand and contract in our thinking and our actions. Our allies and supporters can both narrow and broaden our perspective. Prospects of settlement can seem both near and far away. Clarity is with us, then lost in a haze. Hope waxes and wanes. The membrane is flexible and its capacity to expand allows room for parties to move and explore, to create space for thinking and building understanding.

In the poetry of Hafiz, the 14th century Sufi teacher, ¹ a cup or vessel symbolizes the human heart or even the human being as a vessel of love. Conflict and the fear that permeates it can constrict our capacity for love. A constricted state places us within a closed rather than open system. A closed system is reactive, narrow and inflexible. It is connected to an oppositional mindset – them and us, you versus me, the victim/villain paradigm. An open system, as represented by the vessel and its membrane, open at the top, is free to breathe and expand. It is flexible and able to recognize connections and choices.

Vern Neufeld Redekop, in his work on deep-rooted conflict and processes of reconciliation, calls systems such as these “structures of blessing”, which he defines as systems which are open, free, creative, life-oriented, generous, and involving many options. ²

ALCHEMY:

The idea of alchemy provides another aspect of metaphor.³ The potential for transformative change exists within the vessel. On a symbolic level, we have the capacity to turn lead into gold, to take the raw material of the conflict, the “prima materia” as the alchemists called it, and work with it. Alchemy involves processes of refinement of what is rough and unshaped - mining the dross for the infinitely valuable discoveries or gems hidden inside. This is not to suggest that processes such as mediation promise a magic “fix” or sudden transformation. More often, the changes that occur within mediative processes are *slight shifts in perception, tiny openings, new awareness, or movement toward closure*. Disputants are often not fully aware of these shifts until some time has passed. A number of people have told me years after mediation that the experience changed their lives in a positive way, yet they did not know at the time how profound the change would be.

The idea of alchemy also speaks of energy at work, energy not always understood by logical process, by analysis. There is a heat reaction, a spark created, which sets the process in motion. In this framework, the energy- the heat- is contributed by the conflict itself. It is represented in the metaphor by the flames under the vessel. Inside the vessel the spark of conflict engages.

Here is how conflict can be of great value in our lives. Its spark demands our attention. Ignored, it can develop into a conflagration, something highly contagious and potentially very damaging. Attended to, it signals the need for something to change – our attitude, perceptions, behaviours. Bringing the spark into the vessel starts the process. This is the moment when the parties are openly talking about the conflict. They disagree strongly; tension is high. The alchemical refining in the metaphor includes our willingness to listen to and learn from the messages that are contained within the conflict rather than push them down or blame the other for our difficulty.

When we are avoidant about dealing with conflict, we often become more entrenched by looking for justification and reinforcement of our current mindset. We feed what playwright Joanna McLelland Glass calls “our carefully nurtured sorrows”.⁴ As disputants, we rehearse our anger and resentments, building alliances by how we tell our story. Many times people come to mediation with just such a mindset. Assumptions upon which the dispute rests have often been bolstered by what is or is not let into the conversation; these assumptions have not been brought out of the closet, aired and examined to see if they still fit. *Closed systems make conflict resolution difficult*. The light and heat of new ideas can’t get in. Information that calls into question an assumption will be ignored or minimized. People who don’t agree with us will be dismissed or their ideas dismissed. It is easy to stay locked in the closed circle of conflict.

Given appropriate attention, the spark of conflict generates needed change and growth. Intervenors work with the heat as energy. It has a momentum, a liveliness. When alchemy enters in, something mysterious happens. The heavy lead of the conflict gets shape-shifted, altered in some way that allows its positive potential to emerge. People

start thinking: what can be learned from this conflict? What opportunities does it hold? What choices are presenting themselves through this experience? What does closure mean for me, for us?

Energy is also added to this mix by parties' very intention to engage, to do something about their dispute, which may mean entering into a process that involves risk-taking, moving into the unknown. It may involve reopening old wounds to properly cleanse and treat them, or painful examination of one's own role in creating and perpetuating the dispute. The concept of "growing pains" is truly applicable in the challenging realm of addressing our conflicts. Mediators assist in this alchemical process by normalizing the work being done, gently raising awareness, modelling humanity and respect for all involved, and bringing clarity and compassion.

GROUNDING THE PROCESS:

Within the vessel are held all the assumptions, beliefs and ways of being of the culture(s) of the parties to the conflict. In fact, the process is grounded in the very basic values and beliefs that shape who we are. As a disputant, this means I need to know and understand my ways of thinking and being in conflict, and to try to learn and understand those of the person(s) with whom I am in dispute. I need to remember that these ways are often unspoken, unquestioned and unconscious. Culture is like the water a fish swims in. It so permeates the atmosphere around us that we literally may not notice it and we often do not appreciate how differently those of another culture would approach the same problem. Recognizing and respecting cultural differences are fundamental to good process.

At the same time, there are core values that all humans hold important, values such as respect, compassion, courage, forgiveness, generosity and honesty. These too are brought into the vessel and create the glue between people. Unearthing and naming for the parties their *shared core values* are ways that mediators help to bridge difference and melt the oppositional mindset of those in conflict.

On an even more basic level, we ground the process in our own bodies. We need to be attuned to what our bodies are telling us about the conflict and our response to it. We need to notice our breathing, have our feet on the ground, fully balanced. We need to see with eyes that are focused and clear rather than clouded with judgment. Our minds need to be fully present, giving the dispute the non-anxious attention it deserves. We need to manage our "head noise", the thinking that gets in the way of new learning. When we are in a reactive mode, our thoughts will work to reinforce our positions. We cannot be fully aware of what is happening now if we are clinging to the past, nor if we are "*leaning into the next moment*", as Jon Kabat-Zinn says in his work on mindfulness.⁵

As well, fatigue can shape our thinking in negative ways. It saps our motivation, closes down the capacity to listen, and plays havoc with our sense of possibility. Simply paying attention to energy levels and nutrition makes a difference. The integrity of the process

can be greatly affected by intervenors' attention to the fatigue level of disputants. All participants need to be able to fully concentrate and stay focussed. The goal is to enable people to bring their best selves forward, which very often calls up a similar response in the other disputant(s). So an effective mediator will be sensitive to everyone's level of energy, helping shape processes that ensure parties build in time for nutrition, rest, reflection and consultation with advisors.

THE PROCESS:

The core elements of good dispute resolution are the opportunity to listen and to be listened to by the other, in ways that work for all involved. This can be easier said than done. Third party intervenors offering process assistance need to recognize how their presence alters and impacts the climate, how they bring their own cultural conditioning and body energy to the container. Sometimes mediators can actually get in the way of the parties' listening. Too many of their own ego needs may be involved, so they take up too much space in the vessel. They make it their process, their responsibility, their success. They unconsciously place themselves in the centre and crowd the disputants to the edges of the process. If they bring respect, humility and self-awareness to the vessel, however, intervenors – be they professional mediators or trusted friends - can greatly assist the listening process. Mutual listening begins to unlock the elements of the dispute and creates movement toward resolution.

Often a mediator, not personally caught up in the heat of the conflict, can assist the process with reflection on the dynamics at play. The complexity of the dispute may call for detailed analysis and design of an effective approach. In this case, the metaphor of the vessel can be a tool for “conflict mapping”, a visual way of examining the various aspects of the conflict and the relationship of the disputants to one another. Parties may need to consider and place in perspective the impact of legislation, policy or regulations upon their dispute. How essential are these to resolving the matters in issue? Where do they “fit” in the picture? The scope of their mandate may need clarification. What else may need clarification at the outset? What conflict styles are emerging? Who else needs to be “in the vessel”?

The metaphor can also help disputants see what needs to be “outside the vessel”, out of the parameters of their process. They can use the membrane concept to acknowledge *outside influences* that will affect resolution, and develop ways to accommodate them. Conversely, they can use the idea of the membrane's capacity to breathe and expand to envision how their process will impact others who are outside the vessel. What will seep through? Is the conflict poisoning the environment of others? How will others discuss this conflict and its resolution five or ten years from now? What potential exists to learn from the conflict itself, and transform it from a negative experience to one that has actually become positive?

As for choice of process, parties may wish to follow an interest-based model, exploring interests, uncovering mutual needs, and identifying criteria and standards upon which

they will rely. Such a model can fit within the vessel. Parties can use the diagram to talk about the needs and interests that they want to include. Which do they share? Which need to be acknowledged to build understanding and go forward? Which will need more exploration and discussion? Which need to be addressed in some substantive way in order to reach agreement?

It is helpful to remember there are many ways of working with conflict. Naming core values may be the basis of the resolution process – we may use dialogue or “appreciative inquiry” to raise and explore our fundamental beliefs and see where there is a bridge between us. Creating a quiet space and giving genuine empathic attention to the other may be the route to resolving the dispute. An apology made sincerely and appropriately may create a breakthrough. We may use Peace-making or Talking Circles to work through conflict. Intervenors –a mediator, facilitator or trusted advisor or friend may or may not be involved. Sometimes in conflict, we may simply take a walk together as our process choice, reminding ourselves of our common connection to the earth, to something larger than ourselves. The vessel can hold any of these approaches.

If listening truly happens between people, there will be learning. New learning leads to understanding the situation in different ways. As Jack Kornfield says in his book, *A Path with Heart* :

Denial and confusion are unsuccessful strategies to avoid conflict and seek peace. When we acknowledge them consciously, they become transformed. They can lead to a spacious acceptance, a resolution that holds all the voices in conflict, in harmony. Through working directly to transform their energy, we can find true peace. ⁶

Understanding leads directly to opening of the mind, to a deeper kind of knowing. It is at this point- this moment of a new insight, of a fresh way of perceiving the dispute - that “magic” can occur. Debate becomes dialogue. A closed system starts to breathe, expand and find new life.

We may stay mired in conflict for extended periods of time - years, generations, sometimes centuries. **Turning the energy around to a path of reconciliation is a process with its own pace.** It is a process of movement. It can happen between two people in a moment of recognition and letting go. Where the dispute is complex, it takes more time. Harm may be done by pushing people to “reconcile” before they are ready. The idea of flow and flexibility within the vessel includes acceptance of the parties *finding their own pace* for resolving issues between them.

In some instances, only one of the parties is ready and able to find the path of reconciliation and forgiveness. For that party, the process involves letting go of the perceptions, the judgments, the sense of being wronged that has kept him or her in conflict with another. By forgiving the other (which may happen internally and privately), this person is able to find closure and experience a change of consciousness beyond an oppositional victim/villain frame. A unilateral move such as this, from a closed to an open system, is an empowering alchemy of the heart.

THE RESULTS:

When an open system is in place, we have a system that is creative, life-oriented, and generous. Julia Cameron, in her book, *The Artist's Way*,⁷ says that creativity is a fact of one's spiritual body. It is not something that must be invented. It is within all of us, and we tap into that wellspring of imagination when we are in tune with who we are, with our deeper selves. Allowing and indeed *encouraging* our creativity to inform us offers the possibility of many options. When earlier there was rigidity, now there is flexibility. When there was a sense of confinement, there is now freedom and empowerment. When the mindset was one of scarcity, there is now a feeling of abundance of choice.

The metaphor of the vessel is open at the top, symbolizing a sense of limitless possibility. Sometimes understanding something in a new way is all that is needed for people to go forward. The new understanding may be as simple as the recognition that trust is low and therefore all agreements need to be carefully recorded, reviewed and signed by the parties at each stage of the way. This too is a step forward, working with the realities of the dispute and its fallout. In other instances, new understanding will lead toward a specific, articulated course of action.

Mutual understanding gives us the clarity necessary to form a plan, to take next steps. When we are in the rhythm of good process, we find that we have many choices and increased capacity. The sky is the limit.

Notes:

1. Hafiz, whose given name is Shams-ud-din Muhammad (c.1320-1389) is one of Islam's greatest poetic and religious voices. He lived at about the same time as Chaucer. He spent nearly all his life in the city of Shiraz in Persia, where he became a famous Sufi master. 500 to 700 of his estimated 5,000 poems have survived. cf. *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, in translation by Daniel Ladinsky, New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
2. Vern Neufeld Redekop, PhD. is a leader in the field of conflict resolution in Canada. His most recent book is: *From Violence to Blessing: How an understanding of deep-rooted conflict can open paths to reconciliation*. St. Paul University, Ottawa: Novalis, 2002. He directs the development of the Conflict Studies programs at St. Paul University, Ottawa. http://webustpaul.uottawa.ca/en/fac_prog/human_sc/conflict

3. Thomas Moore is an inspiring writer and thinker who has drawn upon the concept of alchemy in his writings. Reading his work, I found many parallels between this “ancient art of transformation” and the shape-shifting that can occur in mediation. A former professor of religion and psychology, he is the author of numerous books, including *Care of the Soul*, *Soul Mates*, and *Original Self: Living with Paradox and Originality*, New York: Harper Collins, 2000.
4. Joanna McClelland Glass is a playwright born in Saskatchewan in 1936. The quote is from her play, *If We Are Women*, which premiered at the Williamstown (Mass.) Theater Festival in 1993.
5. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. New York: Hyperion Books, 1994. This is a simple and wise book about integrating spiritual awareness into everyday life, through the practice of mindfulness.
6. Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, New York: Bantam Books, 1993.
7. Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering Your Creative Self*, New York, Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 1992.

Acknowledgement:

My thanks to the many colleagues who have assisted me with this “work in progress”.

Sally Campbell