Review Of "The Moral Imagination: The Art And Soul Of Building Peace" By J. P. Lederach

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In The Moral Imagination, John Paul Lederach expands on his previous works, Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures (1995) and Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies (1997), and like some of his former books, he writes conversationally, drawing extensively on his experience working “in support of conciliation processes” (94). If he has been known for holistic models in the past, his approach in this book surpasses them as he turns inward to examine elusive potentials within peacebuilders that include intuition, imagination and creativity. The book does not offer systematic data or engage bodies of literature in depth, but the author, nonetheless, encourages us to think about peacebuilding sociologically, even as he uses artistic modes to do so.

Lederach rightly asserts, for example, that the central challenge for peacebuilding entails transcending violence from within conflict scenarios, and he focuses on people who are caught in the middle of conflicts—battle-hardened realists, in their own way—who are consequently best prepared to develop constructive responses. In each of four orienting stories from Ghana, Wajir, Colombia and Tajikistan, the author illustrates anecdotally how people living in ethnopolitical conflicts have broken cycles of violence through local empowerment or by artfully inducing opponents in ways that opened paths for constructive negotiation and the rebuilding of relationships. Lederach claims that, in each of the stories, people developed solutions that were imminently local and powerful, and that probably would not have been facilitated by conflict resolution experts, though I would add that some of the tactics featured in the stories would be quickly recognized by students of nonviolent action and third-party nonviolent intervention. Still, Lederach’s focus on local knowledge and empowerment is well-placed.

The remainder of the book focuses on ways in which conflict situations that demand urgent responses paradoxically require patient listening, careful examination and perhaps even song and dance that nurture creativity. Does this amount to fiddling while Rome burns? Perhaps, but Lederach takes the long view and asserts that otherwise well-intentioned local actors or intervention experts are less likely to perceive or imagine the right move at the right place and the right time that could support a constructive outcome.

For Lederach, “imagination” means an ability to see beyond that which is immediately apparent. Introductory sociology texts almost inevitably refer to C. Wright Mills’s The Sociological Imagination (1959) and promise students that they can learn to see beyond their personal experience to a rich world of interdependent institutions, culture and power dynamics. (John Brewer’s recent book, C. Wright Mills and the Ending of Violence, complements Lederach’s on this and other counts.) Creativity and innovation, however, distinguish Lederach’s imagination, which he defines as “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist” (ix).
He believes this perception, the *moral imagination*, can be cultivated through personal development in a way that departs from traditional conflict resolution training and its focus on procedural technique, such as the proper implementation of shuttle diplomacy or interactive problem-solving workshops. As part of his call to the moral imagination, the author presents a friendly but firm challenge to conflict resolution practitioners and what he considers an overly-rationalized approach that focuses on short-term objectives and fails to address the deep emotional, psychological and relational chasms that must be crossed in order to slowly build a just peace. He calls on practitioners to embrace the unexpected or serendipitous, since many insights can only be stumbled upon accidentally or gleaned obliquely out of one’s peripheral vision. Thus, Lederach asks us to be “smart flexible,” and open ourselves to unexpected opportunities (126).

The author uses much of the book to suggest ways peacebuilders can cultivate the moral imagination. He proposes that at least four disciplines hone the moral imagination: comprehending conflict as a web of relationships; embracing complexity over dualisms; creativity; and risk-taking. To address the complexity of social life, especially in the midst of pervasive conflict, he calls us to an aesthetic he compares to the Japanese form of poetry, haiku, which captures deep experience in few words. Peacemakers, he says, should similarly develop “the ability to touch the heart and soul of the matter,” an appealing phrase that, like others in the book, will no doubt leave many craving such wisdom, but they may nonetheless feel it is an elusive talent described elusively (73).

Peacebuilders must also appreciate the importance of relationships and conceptualize them in terms of social space, the “know who” that discerns an “invisible web of social relationships” (75, 78). In one of his many metaphors from nature, Lederach celebrates the ability of spiders to create intricate webs tailored to be both strong and pliable within complex and changing spatial arrangements. Spiders, he argues, are able to identify the most secure anchor points and construct patterns that use strategic connections within the web to make the structure robust. Similarly, one who can perceive the daily flow of social action and the relationships that shape it can better envision flexible but sustainable social change processes that reflect and respond to local circumstances. Unfortunately, there is no reference to the proliferation of social networks research over the past decade that could empirically ground Lederach’s metaphor.

In one of the book’s most useful contributions, Lederach encourages his readers to adopt nonlinear approaches. He illustrates this early in the book by quoting Professor Abdul in Tajikistan, who was closely involved with negotiations during the Intertajik War: “In this part of the world you have to circle into truth through stories” (18). Chapter 12, “On Time,” explores various ways of comprehending time across cultures. Members of the Mohawk Nation, for example, believe the present comprises fourteen generations. A participant in a conference in Nairobi shared her tribe’s view that the past lies before us or that we essentially walk backwards into the future, looking to our past to navigate a future that is largely unknown. Of course, the construction of collective memory and identity is a widely recognized feature of many allegedly intractable
conflicts, and Lederach believes transforming the future means renegotiating the past as well.

Anyone who feels the call of peacemaking should read this book and reflect deeply, but social scientists should not expect to find methodology or analysis. In fairness, Lederach does not pretend to offer systematic evidence. In fact, he flatly states that he tends to intuit and "feel more than quantify," and he anticipates the critique of those who would prefer reduction through empirical research, saying, "I wish to hold myself close to the actual messiness of ideas, processes, and change. . ." (x, 76). Here lies a central dilemma: how to acknowledge the messiness of each and every conflict and yet be able to influence it. Lederach proposes to see each conflict more clearly to take advantage of critical moments and resources such as relationships and cultural norms; his peacebuilding is a reverent and active opportunism.

The Moral Imagination continues Lederach's project of developing something like a grand theory for peacebuilding. He updates models for sustainable relationship-building that were developed in previous works, but in this book, Lederach incorporates life concepts and skills. The result is a book of sensitizing concepts that, like Building Peace, is bound to provoke discussion among practitioners, but The Moral Imagination leaves ample room for others to make connections with empirical research and social scientific theory.

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At Peace and Unafraid, written largely by and for Mennonites and Brethren in Christ, engages a fresh, provocative question for historic peace church thinkers. Over and above the commitment to do and make peace at home and in the church, this volume asks what it means to live responsibly in one's larger, mundane context. Affirming that One Divine God created, loves and supports all humankind (and creation) in all human situations, responsibility in the "holy community" means engaging with the whole world God loves, not simply the community of nonviolent, peacemaking believers. The writers engage seriously their social, economic, ethical and political contexts, always with an eye to the fact that Mennonite World Conference constituents live in over sixty countries. Simply put, what is our responsibility in and for nurturing the whole human community in the places in which we live?

A Colombian Mennonite, Ricardo Esquivia, called peacemakers to work to build peace in the structures of shared public life because peace functions in institutions and nations much like water in a pitcher. That is, peace exists only in a containing structure. The structure's shape is secondary. Even a "bad" institutional structure allows for security and order to exist. Without it, a society descends into violence and chaos. By the same measure, when the social order is corrupt and oppressive, the need for good order is all the more urgent.