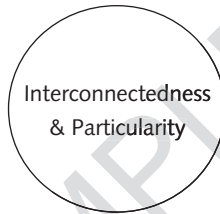


## The Heart of the Matter: Interconnectedness and Particularity



The inner circle addresses the question of the very nature of life. We examine the character of life, of justice and peace. From this point everything else ripples out. The questions at the end of the chapter try to help groups and individuals reflect on their best understanding of the nature of life.

If we believe life to be essentially violent, chaotic, and disordered, then we might imagine that we need a tough, violent justice to tame the evil world. This understanding has often been the approach taken from the time of the Reformation through the Enlightenment and modernity. We continue to see this approach in the rhetoric in our “tough-on-crime” campaigns and in the “war on terror.” We also see this stream strongly coming from some faith-based groups. In some Christian circles, the focus on our essential and innate

sinfulness allows us to treat humans (and the rest of the natural world) as vile or, in the words of the famous Reformation leader Martin Luther, as “totally depraved,” “savage,” and “wild beasts.”<sup>1</sup> Particular understandings of grace, faith, and God sometimes lead toward a violent fight to tame the evil world. The various forms of fundamentalism that have arisen in many faith traditions often play with this imagination, with this understanding of the true nature of life. But is that the only alternative?

The peacebuilders I have studied had a different approach. They worked daily in contexts of violence, disruption, and chaos, but they believed that life in its fullest sense had very different essential qualities.

They believed that life is about relationships, beauty, change, identity, and diversity. They believed that everything that God created was indeed sacred, somehow reflecting the very being of God—justice, righteousness, truth, love. They also believed that we did not have to wait to die and get into heaven before we could touch and taste these essential characteristics of life. When people forget how to reflect those essential characteristics, the task of justpeace building is to help them remember who they truly are. What makes the approach of these peacebuilders interesting is that they did not confine these “family values” to their family and friends, to those who would love them in return. They believed the same virtues could be applied very practically to the ever-widening circles of self, family, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies. Most approaches to justice and peace assume that when we deal with these groups, we

1. Cited by Witte in “Between Sanctity and Depravity,” 728.

need to suspend the normal everyday virtues of friendship, care, respect, and love. We suspend these virtues and rather try to use violence and the administering of pain to encourage people to change. However the justpeace ethic works differently.

Justpeace flows out of a different understanding of the nature of life. Rupert Ross, in his survey of Aboriginal justice in Canada, suggests that Aboriginal peoples work out of an ethic of original sanctity.<sup>2</sup> Similar attempts in Christianity can be found in some forms of liberation theology, Celtic theology, and ecotheology.<sup>3</sup> More and more people are reexamining ethics in light of the inherent sacredness and goodness of all creation. A different ethic emerges from different understandings of the essential nature of life.

In this chapter we examine two virtues that describe the essential characteristics of life from the standpoint of several such engaged justpeace builders.

#### INTERCONNECTEDNESS: THE BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.  
We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,  
tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever  
affects one directly affects all indirectly.<sup>4</sup>

—Martin Luther King Jr.

2. Ross, *Dancing with a Ghost*, 189–211.

3. For liberation theology, see Boff, *Cry of the Earth*; for Celtic theology, see Newell, *Each Day & Each Night*; for ecotheology, see Hallman, *Ecotheology*.

4. King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

Life is relationship. All beauty and all suffering come from this reality. We live in a web of unfolding relationships. This is our “single garment of destiny” where every act has universal dimensions, where my liberty is connected to your liberty. One Aboriginal woman peacebuilder described these thick interconnection as the place “where the pain of one is the pain of all and where the harmony and joy of one is the harmony and joy of all.”<sup>5</sup>

Different cultures and faith traditions have different terminology, all pointing toward the essential and sacred interconnectedness of the world: the Judeo-Christian understanding of shalom (right relationship with the earth, people, Creator, and self); the Buddhist understanding of dependent origin and inter being; the Mohawk Kaienerekowa (Great Law); the Greek understanding of Logos; the Hindu understanding of ahimsa; the Australian Aborigine understanding of Songlines; or the Christian understanding of Christ, in whom all things made hold together (Col 1:15–17). Behind each of these wisdom traditions is an understanding of a deeply interconnected and interdependent world. Everything else ripples out from this vision. Recognition of the sacredness of the other is at the core of this virtue.

Even the new sciences are recognizing the interconnected and changing nature of the world. From the science of quantum physics to that of global warming, we see new understandings of the essential interconnectedness of our world.

Yet most of us have been raised with a different understanding of the world. We have been taught that the world

5. Thakur, *Circles*.

is chaotic, violent, and dangerous. We have been taught that we are in a struggle to impose order where only the fittest survive. We have been taught that to be free is to be an autonomous individual, independent of all foreign influences. Individualism, materialism, and capitalism have led us to view life as a fight to extract and secure resources for “me and my kind”—at anyone’s expense. This perverse vision clouds our thinking.

In this view, justice is imposed from the top down, dealing out punishment and pain in the futile hope of taming an essentially violent world. Again, the implications of this vision are profound. From state violence that is legally sanctioned to interpersonal violence that is not, from structural violence that systematizes the unjust order to violent revolutions that try to lift the order, we hold a common vision of a chaotic world where the path to justice involves the same cruel behavior we wish to stop—the unilateral imposition of my will over yours. This is the logic of both the criminal and the criminal courts. Not surprisingly, this kind of hierarchical justice is rarely healing.

In this dominant worldview, the way to truth is through dividing up and breaking apart, and through adversaries conflicting. It is also the logic of our approaches to health, education, and sometimes even spirituality. We divide up the world into many little boxes, be it through a personal day-timer or through an organizational structure kept in such places as prisons, schools, or hospitals. We even divide the world in our thinking through various dualism and dichotomies: subject/object, them/us, oppressed/oppressor, private/public, either/or. We believe that by taking things apart, we can get

to what is truly essential. However, we are often just left with many broken pieces.

We have become better at taking apart than at putting back together, better at defending our territory than at meeting the needs of the other, better at assessing blame than at making things right, better at creating knowledge than at creating wisdom, better at ruling over than living alongside, better at breaking than healing. In our search for truth, we discover many facts but unveil little meaning. For too many, the search for truth and justice is a process of losing their own identity and their capacity to taste and see the fullness of life.

Justpeace ethics begins with a vision of an interconnected, relationship-centered world. The beginning and the end of justpeace is a vision of community. It is a vision of beautiful right relationship. Martin Luther King Jr. called it the “beloved community.” Hear his poignant words: “The aftermath of *nonviolence* is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.”<sup>6</sup> Howard Zehr’s classic text on restorative justice, *Changing Lenses*, describes a biblical justice rooted in such a vision of interconnectedness, or shalom.<sup>7</sup> With this imagination, Zehr sees penetratingly through the current system and orients us toward a kind of justice based on respect and common connection rather than on disrespect and isolation.

Interconnectedness is both the end goal and the means to get there. What we strive for in every step of the path is not primarily about ending conflict, that is, cutting off or resolving conflicted relationships, but about building a peaceful beloved community. It is a holistic ecological vision of liv-

6. King, “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” 8.

7. Zehr, *Changing Lenses*, 126–57.

ing full and joyful lives where all the many seen and unseen relationships continue in symbiotic balance, where we are encouraged, enabled, and compelled to become part of the creative, liberating, and communal song of creation. This is the end goal and also the means.

As a category of conflict analysis, the virtue of interconnectedness shows us that injustice is broken relationships. While noting the substance of a conflict, we would give primary attention to tracking the people and relationships involved. It is through becoming mindful of these that we are able to enter meaningfully into the tangled web of relationships and to help engage transformation.

As an intervention strategy, **interconnectedness** leads us to work collaboratively across conflict lines rather than dividing between conflicting parties (defense/prosecution, them/us). It focuses on building relational networks and connecting with the community of people already engaged in the context. It focuses on creating a multiplicity of strategies alongside local people rather than a single-track strategy run by outside experts.

When our evaluation focuses on how well we are doing with regard to the virtue of interconnectedness, we move away from linear approaches of adding up inputs to achieve certain outcomes. Outcome-based evaluation may work well in fixed environments but often falls short in environments of ongoing changing relationships. It limits our vision to our current perspective. Our goal in evaluation of the interconnectedness perspective is to increase our capacity to learn about our relationships and about how change happens. Evaluation is about entering into the web of relationships and learning how to be present in ways that lead to beauty for all. To some people, the goal to work for beauty for all will be

seen as naïve and idealistic. Perhaps it is rare, but such sentiment does have some precedent in the Hebrew Bible. Moses is instructed to cultivate a community capable of responding to harms in such a way that all go home in shalom, in right relationship with God, land, self, and stranger (Exod 18:13–23). Here we see the need to cultivate means of conflict intervention that create peace across diverse sets of interconnected relationships so that all go home in peace.

From the perspective of interconnectedness, context, relationships, history, social structures, and systems may all be relevant factors when harm is committed. However, these factors may not be used as excuses not to address the direct harm or its victim. These must be addressed if justice is to be experienced fully. The virtue of interconnectedness calls us to deal with both the case issues and the larger systemic issues.

Aboriginal justice circles demonstrate the virtue of interconnectedness. The facilitators gather people with various connections to the victim, offender, and others affected by harm. They first address the obligations to the victim and, second, the interconnected relationships that caused the offender to harm a relationship in the first place.<sup>8</sup> When the circle includes not just victim and offender but family and a broad cross-section of the community, new opportunities for justpeace building emerge. In Aboriginal contexts, this larger circle does not respond just to the incident, episode, or presenting symptom. It digs at deeper issues of identity, peoplehood, connection, patterns of behavior, ways the community and the surrounding systems may have contributed to the harm, and ways they might contribute to harmony and wholeness.

8. Pranis et al., *Peacemaking Circles*; Canada, *Four Circles*.



Interconnectedness is a vision of reality. Our task as peacebuilders and justice workers is to root our project conception, intervention, and evaluation in the very character of life. The following questions are designed to help us think concretely of the virtue of interconnectedness in various conflict settings.

**Ethically Guiding Questions Rooted in *Interconnection*:**

*Eliciting Vision Questions:* We would do well to examine our own traditions to see what they teach about the nature of life. Is life essentially violent or essentially a sacred gift? Is it something else entirely? Where are the resources that teach about interconnection, beauty, and the fullness of life? Where are the resources which teach about the essentially violent nature of life?

*Design/Analysis Questions:* How do you respect and create space for many and different voices? How do you connect with and strengthen existing peacebuilding initiatives?

*Intervention Questions:* Does this program move you toward a shared interdependent future where peace and justice coexist? Does the intervention consider the social, systemic, ecological, spiritual, and personal implications?

*Evaluation Questions:* How is the program being received by those doing similar work? What are the unintended consequences? Does the program help people to find their way back to a balanced life?

**PARTICULARITY:**

**THE ROOTS AND FLAVOR BUDS OF JUSTPEACE**

Taste and see that the LORD is good.

—*Psalm 34:8*

The fullness of life is meant to be tasted, seen, and touched. This justice is not bitter or sour or ugly. When we draw from

the rich diversity of particularity, we learn that justice is a rich feast, a good, satisfying, beautiful feast. Particularity forms the roots and the flavor buds of justpeace. By “roots,” I mean the capacity to draw out or absorb from the surrounding environment that which is needed for life. By “flavor buds,” I mean those almost invisible qualities that allow us to appreciate the texture, spice, and temperature of the experiences we need for a full life. As with interconnectedness, the beginning and ending of justpeace finds its place in particularity.

Particularity is about valuing particular identity. Whereas interconnectedness examines the relationships between all elements, particularity examines the particular identity of each element. Whereas interconnectedness draws on our commonness, particularity highlights our distinctiveness and difference.

Western culture generally values universality over particularity. Universality says that we are essentially the same, have the same needs, and need the same access to power and resource and even the same methods, in order to become fully human. In fact, universality tries to reduce our many particular stories into one universal human story. The blindfolded Lady Justice, with scales to measure out sameness and a sword to make it painful, aptly illustrates this sense of universal justice. To ignore the identity of those before you (as indicated by the blindfold on Lady Justice) and to dish out equal amounts of pain is the iconic picture of ugly justice. And yet the empirical evidence is very clear. Universal processes do not liberate; they oppress. They impose on people and pressure them to lose their own identity and assimilate to the dominant culture. This is a dominator’s sense of justice. The disproportionate number of, on the one hand, African

Americans in U.S. jails and, on the other hand, First Nations people in Canadian jails demonstrates the racist tendency and deep failure of universal justice systems.

Sometimes those in the fields of conflict transformation and restorative justice criticize the “universal” state system of justice only to advocate replacing it with another single-track process, the mediation process or Victim Offender Conferencing. Yet this change is still inspired by the hope of the old imagination: “if we could just find one good process, everything will work out okay.” Not true.

Particularity takes us down a different path. Particularity says that the identity, culture, and context of those involved in harms and healing must be a central source for understanding and intervening in all conflicts. Rather than beginning with a process like mediation, courts, or war, and trying to apply it to all situations, particularity begins with the situations, with the people involved, and with their cultures and contexts. It begins by claiming and building on the understandings and capacities of the local community.

Particularity trusts that there are already resources in place locally that have the capacity to enter respectfully and transformatively into this situation. State justice tends to take conflicts away from communities and thereby weakens them. Even now although some areas of justice are being returned to communities, state rules often impose impartial expert interveners or judicially supervised agreements.<sup>9</sup> Thus the virtue of local resources, of particularity, is severely limited. Blind Lady Justice stands where elders and community circles once stood. When the particular identity of peoples is respected,

9. United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Basic Principles*.

they are freed to determine for themselves who would best facilitate an intervention or supervise an agreement or even determine if interventions and agreements are really what are needed. A foreign process (the law) and an outcome that removes people from their roots and relations (prisons) might not be the wisest strategy.

Particularity sees the world as diverse. Justice is not seen as some abstract, distant principle but rather something that is experienced, or tasted, in relationships. Those relationships, together with the context and the culture in which they are set, need to be central for justice to be experienced.

One example of this particularity comes from Family Group Conferences (FGC) in New Zealand.<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s New Zealanders went through a long process of wrestling with how their justice and social-service systems were institutionally racist toward the indigenous Maori people, and not all that effective for the Pekah (white) people either. Their first step was to change how they approached harmful behavior in young people. They shelved their previous youth criminal-justice legislation, and in 1989 introduced the Young Persons and Their Families Act. This act laid out principles of the FGC. To some degree, this act tried to build on a Maori understanding of harm, namely, that in responding to harm, the family must be strengthened at every step. But the act did not proclaim FGC as preset technique or process. Although many treated FGC in this style, the original vision was that FGCs were a principled vessel, which the youth worker needs to fill with the relevant people, places, and questions appropriate to the context. According to New Zealand law, Family Group

10. MacRae and Zehr, *Little Book of Family Group Conference*.

Conferencing is not a process but a set of principles. Every FGC in New Zealand looks different, depending on the context and ethnoreligious identity of the people involved in the harm. This should be the case with all peacebuilding actions.

Scripted, rigid processes do not give space for the role of particularity of identity or culture. Particularity demands space for flexibility and creativity. Justpeace is not imposed but is created alongside those most intimately involved in the harm. One of the critical tasks of any life-giving initiative is to resist being co-opted, universalized, and overstructured. When a flower gets plucked from its roots, it will die. The Australian police noticed the success New Zealand was having with youth crime and decided to introduce Family Group Conferencing as a tool of state control. They took something that was to be flexible and made it rigid and scripted. They took something that was meant to liberate the country from systemic racism and used it to further state control. They took something that was meant to strengthen extended families and used it as a rationale for uniformed police officers shaming children. Before the Australian model failed and was discarded, Canada imposed Family Group Conferencing (Australian-style). The introduction of Family Group Conferencing to Australia and Canada are two examples of just how quickly we overlook the virtue of particularity. A creative way of responding to harms that drew on local Maori culture in New Zealand became an instrument of state control when imposed from the top down with a very uncreative script and very little local connection. Peacebuilders and justice workers should be suspicious of any prepackaged foreign method to deal with conflict. While there is much we can learn from others, the journey of justpeace is the path to rediscovering

our place and our identity in this world. Imposing foreign understandings rarely leads to such a rediscovery.

Peacebuilders should rather develop culturally contextualized, elicitive approaches that draw upon concepts in the local culture.<sup>11</sup> Particularity recognizes that conflicts are the property of particular communities, not states or professionals.<sup>12</sup> Rather than focusing on the role of an external facilitator/intervener, we should work to facilitate the emergence of peacebuilders and an infrastructure for peace within the conflict setting (elders, family, and community). To do this will require great courage and trust. We will have to let go of the basic assumption that any one method of decision making (even democracy) is good for all situations. We will have to trust that creating space for difference that is rooted in authentic identity will lead to a more fruitful life.

From the standpoint of particularity, stability comes from complexity and diversity more than from uniformity. Valuing particularity is about creating space for diverse complexity where many particular identities are all connected and interacting. Through this lens, monoculture and the globalization of culture are seen as more of a threat to global stability than a help. Life flourishes in its fullness: not when we become like robots, mechanistic and all the same, but when we learn to be fully distinct and fully connected.

The psalmist, who dares us to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” also tells us to “look to [God] and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed” (Ps 34:5). Here is an understanding that the true nature of life is good and can be tasted and seen in this world. The good understanding of

11. Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*.

12. Christie, “Conflict as Property.”

life is reinforced by the admonition that we are to be radiant rather than ashamed. The path of justpeace is one that moves from shame to radiance, from fear of a violent world to participation in the sacredness of this world.

**Ethically Guiding Questions Rooted in *Particularity*:**

*Eliciting Vision Questions:* What are the resources in your tradition for respecting difference, dissonance, and disruption? What are the practices for loving each individual? What are the reminders in your tradition to let things take root where they are so that they can bloom beautifully?

*Design/Analysis Questions:* Is the analysis and design coming from the perspective of those involved in the conflict? What are the natural and healthy ways by which a conflict gets dealt with in that context? Are victims given space to articulate their own experience of harms and healing?

*Intervention Questions:* Are there respected people within the setting who are or could be facilitating intervention? Are you creating space for identity searching and forming? Does this intervention impose outside ways of dealing with conflict, or does it build internal resources? Is this intervention rooted in local cultural and/or spiritual resources?

*Evaluation Questions:* What was learned about what worked well with that particular group, context, and time? What local infrastructure could be enhanced to build toward long-term justpeace? What is being learned about the local vision of justpeace, and how could this understanding change future conflict interaction?

**SUMMARY: HOLDING TOGETHER**

**INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND PARTICULARITY**

Interconnectedness says that we are connected, and that harms create responsibilities to those most affected (victims, community, family). Particularity adds that while we are con-

nected, we are not all the same. Justpeace must respect both our connections and our particularity.

This is the most basic ethical tension in life. How can I be fully true to who I am (particularity) while at the same time fully and respectfully connected to others (interconnectedness)? The intersecting point of this quest is finding meaningful belonging and respectful coexistence in community. This type of belonging is precisely what is lost for victim and offender when the ripples of unjust harms shatter relationships, community, identity, and meaning. This is what justpeace seeks to restore.

I have sometimes heard Aboriginal people speak of how planting corn, beans, and squash together in one hill leads to healthier plants than growing them apart. Aboriginal people say that people and communities are meant to be like that: each plant helps the other to grow—distinct yet interdependent. This is a beautiful picture of balancing our particularity and our interconnectedness.