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Weaving Indra's web: The gift of metaphor

David Oddie

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Το άρθρο αυτό μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί δωρεάν για έρευνα, διδασκαλία και προσωπική μελέτη. Επιτρέπεται η αναδημοσίευση μετά από άδεια του εκδότη.

Weaving Indra's web: The gift of metaphor

David Oddie

Abstract

This paper shares reflections on the emergence of the Indra Congress (International Development of Reconciliation through the Arts), a network of practitioners, young people, educators and others who seek to develop theatre and the creative arts as unique resources for reconciliation and the peaceful transformation of conflict. The paper identifies the important contribution American writer and mediator John Paul Lederach has made to the ideas underpinning Indra. As an experienced peacebuilder Lederach found that insights into seemingly intractable situations occurred when he was “thinking like an artist”. This led him to ask, “What if we as peacebuilders saw ourselves as artists”? In unravelling the implications of Lederach’s question the dominating metaphor of the linear structured “project” is questioned and the need for more flexible guiding metaphors to achieve meaningful change is discussed.

Key words: Theatre, drama, arts, artist, conflict, transformation, reconciliation, metaphor, Indra.

Reflections

The Indra Congress is an emerging, global network of young people, artists, educators, academics and others who share a commitment to develop, promote and use the arts as a resource for reconciliation and the peaceful transformation of conflict. In this paper I would like to share some reflections arising from Indra’s journey over the past 8 years.

In 2004 I was teaching at the University College Plymouth St Mark and St John, known as Marjon. I found myself reflecting on the world around me; the war in Iraq, fallout from the 9/11 incident, racist inspired tensions across the UK, and I asked myself “what can I do?” As an arts educator I could set up a programme specifically committed to using theatre and the arts to address issues of reconciliation and the peaceful transformation of conflict.

I had been very impressed with the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, established by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. I recalled Tutu describing the Committee as a platform, a stage on which people could listen to and share their stories. I thought, “that’s what we do as community artists”. I wrote to him and one week later I fell off my chair when he responded, describing my proposal as “exciting, especially as it is so apt for the times.” We called the programme ARROW (Art: a Resource for Reconciliation Over the World).

I also came across the writing of the distinguished mediator and writer, John Paul Lederach. Lederach reminded us to get back to basics: conflict was about human beings in relationship. He identified an urgent need for innovative, creative approaches to relationship building, at all levels of society; for initiatives that took into account the very real “gut level” feelings of hatred, anger, mistrust, fear, aspiration and hope that people experience in conflict (Lederach 2002; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). Again I thought, “that’s what we do as community artists.”

Lederach is an experienced peacebuilder who comes from a traditional social science, academic background. However, he noted that moments when he found a way forward in a seemingly intractable situation seemed to occur when he was “thinking like an artist”. He asked himself, “what if we as peacebuilders saw ourselves as artists (Lederach 2005: 161)?” He explored what this might mean in his book, *The Moral Imagination*: “Time and again, social change that sticks and makes a difference has behind it the artist’s intuition: the complexity of human experience captured in a simple image and in a way that moves individuals and whole societies. The true genius of the moral imagination is the ability to touch the art and soul of the matter” (Lederach 2005: 73).

Lederach was struck by the direct impact of arts activities and performances in settings of protracted conflict. He recounts, for example, the deeply moving experience of watching, at Enniskillen in 1997, young people present a performance of dance and photography inspired by Paul Brady's "The Island", a controversial song criticizing those who try to "carve tomorrow from a tombstone" and waste children's future "for the worn out dreams of yesterday." As Lederach noted, "the whole of the Irish conflict was held in a public space, captured in a moment that lasted fewer than five minutes" (Lederach 2005: 153).

Lederach was mindful of the fact that most peacebuilders are not necessarily artists per se. He wanted to understand what it was about the artistic process that could be integrated into and enhance the processes of peacebuilding in a wider sense. To this end he developed further the concept of the moral imagination: "To imagine and generate constructive responses and initiatives that, whilst rooted in the day-to-day challenges of violence, transcend and ultimately break the grips of those destructive patterns and cycles" (Lederach 2005: 29).

The opening of the Desmond Tutu Centre on the UCP Marjon campus provided an example of the moral imagination in practice. Our special guests for the occasion were Ismail and Abba Khatib. Twelve months previously their son Ahmed had been shot by Israeli's soldiers whilst on a raid in Jenin refugee camp, the West Bank. Ahmed had been taken to Haifa hospital where he died of his wounds. In an extraordinary gesture Ismail and Abba donated their son's organs to the hospital to be used for surgery - without prejudice.

Consequently, 4 Israeli and 2 Arab people benefited from life saving surgery. The gesture reverberated around the world. The family generously accepted our invitation to be special guests at the opening of the Desmond Tutu Centre and to unveil a plaque in memory of their son. Ismael spoke to the invited guests in Gandhi-like, direct language. He urged the audience to "teach our children to love before you teach them arithmetic." It was an address and "gut level", felt experience the audience of M.Ps, bishops, academics, students and others would never forget. For many of us present it was a moment of transformation.

In looking at longer term responses to conflict the term transformation is increasingly favoured rather than resolution. Resolution seeks to find a solution to immediate problems and in some situations this may be what is required: there is a problem and it needs fixing. On the other hand the concept of transformation provides a window of opportunity through which we can look beyond the immediate, presenting situation to see and explore the web of relationships that energise and sustain the conflict. This will enable us to identify and address deeper rooted issues that may be personal, relational, cultural or structural (Lederach 2003; Thompson 1997). We are not talking about a "quick fix" but the promotion of awareness, understanding and shifts in perception through which genuine change can take place.

The framework of *Cooling Conflict*, devised by John O'Toole and his colleagues in Australia, provides an example of practice for this more complex way of seeing. *Cooling Conflict* is a whole school approach to conflict and bullying in schools and arises out of a critique of Boal's Forum Theatre (O'Toole, Burton, Plunkett 2005). Some Forum Theatre practice tends to lack depth and is too often seen as a "quick fix" solution to complex life issues. Enhanced Forum Theatre, as devised by O'Toole and colleagues, sees conflict arising in three stages; latent, emerging and manifest. A situation is explored in these three stages and subjected to an array of process drama techniques, such as hot seating and thought tracking before the forum process itself begins. A further scene may be explored outside the given framework, for very often the negotiating role of people not in the immediate frame may offer the key to moving forward a tricky mediating process.

For shifts in understanding and perception to take place we need appropriate language and metaphors that help us break the boundaries of conventional, restricted thinking. In their book, *Metaphors we live by* (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), Lakoff and Johnson tell the story of an Iranian student's response to hearing the phrase "the solution of my problems", from his American colleagues. His classmates associated the word solution with a mathematical image which indicated a solution through analysis. The Iranian student associated the word with a chemical metaphor, the image of liquids mixed in a beaker, dissolving, changing colour, components being agents of neutralisation or toxicity. Here was the solution of the problem! Perhaps, thinking like an artist.

In the world of the arts we live in a bidding culture in which the dominating metaphor is linear, project based. A project has defined objectives, time span and outcomes that can be measured at the close. This is convenient for the "gatekeepers" to funds, such as arts councils, foundations and cultural committees. However, much of our work in the arts and in peacebuilding is more complex, moving forward in spirals, circularity and repetition. For example, after the signing of peace accords there is, in many instances from N.Ireland, Rwanda to the Balkans, evidence of an increase in violence towards women. It may be that after the peace accord a community returns to previous, unresolved patterns of behaviour and attitude; attitudes that ironically may

well have been instrumental in causing the conflict in the first place. Formal reconciliation processes may by-pass these deep rooted patterns in a relentless effort to seem to be “moving forward.” Hence vulnerable people within the community feel they have “no voice” and that peace agreements are made by others in big, inaccessible buildings behind closed doors.

It is our responsibility as artists to find ways to give “voice”, to persist in challenging rigidity of mind and the status quo. As theologian Walter Brueggemann writes: “Every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of the imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one” (Brueggemann 2001: 40).

As arts practitioners we must continually challenge and remind ourselves, “who do we really work for?” The young people and communities we seek to serve, or the gatekeepers through whom we sometimes desperately seek funding for our “projects”?

As artists we look for the transforming metaphor, but as the Khatib family demonstrate you don't have to be an artist to have a deep intuition for metaphor. In recent decades the cruel civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia have traumatised a generation. When the fighting stopped ex-combatants reappeared from the bush. Pictures of misery; child soldiers and child mothers, with dirty, bedraggled hair, they could neither enter their villages nor exist in the bush. In one small village mothers watched as these desperate youths gathered under a tree outside the villages. The men and the elders skirted round the youths, ignoring them. Gradually the women began leaving food, began talking to them. The women told the boys that their long hair frightened people, so the mothers offered gently to cut their hair. Beneath the tree the haircutting became a symbolic act, a ritual through which the youths were enabled to return to the village. Unfortunately, the men and the elders then took control of the situation and marginalised the women: they were again voiceless. In this instance the child soldiers stood by the mothers, “These are the mothers who have brought us into the community. You must listen to them” (Gbowee in Lederach & Lederach 2006: 149).

The practice

When we initiated the ARROW programme we were helped by a grant from DFID (Department for International Development) in the UK, which enabled us to set up a network of young people and artists in Palestine, Kosovo and South Africa with Burnley and Plymouth in the UK. This began a process of dialogue through which young people in diverse contexts were encouraged to share their ideas, thoughts and aspirations through the language of the arts. Later we opened the Desmond Tutu Centre on the campus of UCP Marjon. The first phase of the programme culminated in the 2010 ARROW Global Congress, attended by over 100 young people from Palestine, Kosovo, South Africa, Sierra Leone, India, Brazil, Malaysia, China, Portugal and from Derry and other towns across the UK. The young people shared their practice in some deeply moving performances, worked collectively with a team of artists to devise a carnival that paraded through the streets of Plymouth, and for a memorable week they exchanged ideas, played, laughed and cried together.

However, dark clouds were gathering. New management had been appointed to the College. The previous Principal and management had been hugely enthusiastic about ARROW meeting the Mission Statement of the College and providing an exemplar of its commitment to the concept of the public good. This sense of mission has historically provided a thread of discrete counter cultural awareness to Marjon's purposes and mission. The week following the Congress I was asked to meet the new Principal of the University College. She expressed her very positive appreciation of the event and for the considerable publicity it raised for the College. However, UCP Marjon would now be under extreme pressure arising from the UK Coalition Government's proposals for higher education and could not continue to support directly grassroots activities of ARROW's nature. There would need to be a reorientation of its activities to “the Marjon offer”, with a focus on research, short courses, student numbers and income generation.

I discussed this situation with the ARROW partners in the UK and overseas. The overwhelming consensus was that it was not deemed worth our while to engage in a legal wrangle regarding ownership, so ARROW would be left to the College. I would create a social enterprise company to continue the previous grassroots practice of ARROW and build new partnerships with a range of HE institutions and arts organisations worldwide.

We had to re-invent ourselves and find a guiding metaphor that would express our underlying purposes. There were features of the ARROW experience that is was crucial to maintain. As originally, we would seek to create innovative and creative approaches to authentic relationship building. We would provide a network through which young people, artists, educators and others could dialogue and exchange practice and ideas.

We would be made up of small groups across the world, small enough to provide the proximity for direct conversation through which diverse voices could be heard. We would evolve a spiralling programme of local activities, Congress events, research and advocacy opportunities.

The metaphor of Indra's Net

The metaphor of Indra's net was developed by the Mahayana Buddhist school in the 3rd century scriptures of the Avatamsaka Sutra, and later by the Chinese Huayan school between the 6th and 8th century (Jones 2003: 16). The metaphor can be simply described:

Once upon a time the god Indra made a large net to cover the whole world. Each point of intersection consisted of a beautiful, precious pearl. None of the pearls existed by themselves except as a reflection of each other and of all the pearls in the net. In turn the whole net relied on each individual pearl for its existence.

This struck me as a moving and powerful expression of our intentions and an image which is also referred to by contemporary physicists, e.g. Fritjof Capra, to describe the concept of cosmic interconnectedness (Capra 1982).

The idea of Indra's net caught the imagination of the previous ARROW partners and we decided to use this as the core image for the new company. The use of pearls in the net adds a further dimension as pearls of great beauty arise from situations of conflict, abrasive grit and aeons of patience.

Our aspiration now is to develop a web of Indra groups around the world who carry out creative projects in their own communities and share their experiences and ideas with partners in other countries. To date we have groups in England, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Kosovo, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, India, Brazil and Portugal and have emerging partners elsewhere. The groups may be attached to a school, theatre or other centre.

Many young people in the network experience conflict and isolation, whether it is through military occupation (Palestine), domestic abuse (lower caste girls in India) or racism (young people of colour in Plymouth, UK). The Indra groups engage in creative, committed projects in their own communities. The Congress provides a platform to give "voice" to this activity, an opportunity to share their experience, practice, hopes and fears with their peers around the world. In parallel with the ongoing grassroots activities, we aspire to create an ongoing programme of training, research and communication that engages young people directly with the wider field of practice and ideas.

In the initial 2010 Congress in Plymouth it was as revelatory for young people in the UK to learn, through the language of theatre, music, dance and poetry, about the experience of discrimination and abuse faced by lower caste girls in Lucknow, as it was surprising for the latter to learn of the daily abuse faced by people of colour in the streets of Plymouth. The evidence of enhanced activity, local initiatives and ongoing virtual communication prompted by the experience has motivated us, despite serious setbacks, to persevere with our vision and ambition. We seek to make a creative contribution towards the mosaic of grassroots change that challenges dominating ideologies and all pervading corporate values; change that endorses and celebrates our plural identities.

We are planning our next Global Congress in Derry in the summer of 2013. In the build up to this event we have been given our first "project" grant from the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), to develop a collaborative programme of activities linking young people in Derry with young people in Beit Jala, Palestine. They will use the framework of Cooling Conflict to help themselves and their peers develop strategies for dealing creatively and effectively with conflict in their own lives and communities. They will train together, communicate virtually and meet up in Derry to share their experiences and practice. The journey continues.

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David Oddie, after teaching in secondary education and working as an actor he founded the current Plymouth Barbican Theatre company and then Barefoot, Plymouth's Art Education Agency. In 1999 he was invited by UCP Marjon (University College Plymouth St Mark and St John) to write a BA programme for drama and in 2004 he established the award winning ARROW programme (Art: a Resource for Reconciliation Over the world. The ARROW programme involved David working in Palestine, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, South Africa and elsewhere. In 2006 David became a National Teaching Fellow of the British Higher Education Academy and in 2008 was awarded an MBE. At UCP Marjon David wrote an MA programme, 'Creative Conflict Transformation through the Arts', drawing together the threads of his experience in the field. David left UCP Marjon in 2011 to set up the Indra Congress, an independent social enterprise carrying forward the grassroots work of ARROW. Throughout 2011/12 he toured the one man show *Albert and Equiano* to venues across the UK. In June 2012 David was invited by the University of Plymouth to become Visiting Research Fellow in Applied Theatre.

