



Thoughts from Linda:

The Moral Imagination  
*The Art and Soul of Building Peace*

John Paul Lederach  
2005

Let me begin by saying that I love this book and have had it by my bedside for years.

The dictionary defines *moral* as an adjective to mean “...concerned with the principles of right and wrong behavior and the goodness or badness of human character.” It defines *imagination* as “the faculty or action of forming new ideas, images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.” To some degree, these definitions apply, but this book represents concepts and imagines things in ways that even the dictionary gurus cannot perceive. I find it brilliant in concept, beautifully written, and well... imaginative.

As an individual who has devoted his life to peacebuilding, John Paul Lederach wrote this book to help practitioners of this work understand it as a craft that goes beyond technique to the heart and soul of the process. He defines moral imagination 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.*”

Clearly, we are in a time on the planet today (April of 2022) when our major events and patterns demonstrate the antithesis of what Lederach brings to us in this book. That makes this the perfect time to explore another way, reflect on our global situation, and know that, as Einstein once said, “Imagination will take you everywhere.”

I can think of no better guide along this journey of imagination than John Paul Lederach. He is an American Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame and a Distinguished Scholar at Eastern Mennonite University. His Ph.D. is from the University of Colorado in Sociology, and he was the founder and first Director of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on conflict resolution and mediation, having worked all over the world in peacebuilding efforts.

He frames the fundamental question that the book attempts to answer as: “How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?”

For me, part of the joy of reading this book is the explanation he offers of his own discovery process, which led him to move beyond technique and complexity to a frame of art and simplicity. This attitudinal shift and re-framing of the essence of the work reflects a seminal level of sagacity that all practitioners should learn.

In his own ‘haiku moment,’ he discovered the four necessary ideas for the journey. They are the requirements of the moral imagination and include:

1. The capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that include our enemies
2. The ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity
3. The fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act, and
4. The acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.

Here is his thesis in summary:

It is that a certain kind of imagination is within reach and necessary to transcend violence, and it requires that we explore the four disciplines in two broad directions:

1. First, we must understand and feel the landscape of protracted violence and why it poses such deep-rooted challenges to constructive change. This is not easy. It calls on peacebuilders and other actors in the process to set themselves firmly in the culture and know at a deep level the challenges of the realities that people experience this destructive experience and what the legacy damages do to individuals at a fundamental emotional level.
2. Secondly, peacebuilders must explore the creative process itself, venturing into unknown territory as a naïve learner, and understand and exemplify the work to move beyond what he calls “tangled inquiry” to the “wellspring that feeds the building of peace.”

This calls for moral imagination.

It calls for the artist in all of us to emerge and find new ways to develop to break cycles of pain and suffering. He uses this small book as a tool to take the reader along his journey in fifteen beautifully conceived and written chapters. A few examples include: “On Simplicity and Complexity: Finding the Essence of Peacebuilding,” “On the Gift of Pessimism: Insights from the Geographies of Violence,” and “On Time: The Past That Lies before Us.”

He offers stories from the field of his work in Ghana, Kenya, Colombia, and Tajikistan. He takes you through his haiku practice and his approach to doodling. You will learn the origin of the word *serendipity* and the charming lesson that it offers. I appreciated his connection to David Abram, whose book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, I reviewed last year. Both Abram and Lederbach have found meaning by studying spiders and how they create their intricate webs. In the Chapter "On Web Watching," he illustrates how web-watching is a journey into a "micro-universe" and how the process itself requires three disciplines so critical to the soul of peacebuilding: stillness, humility, and sensual perception. And along the way, you will learn a lot about arachnophiles in this little section!

There are innumerable lessons for all practitioners of peacebuilding in this book. He offers a set of significant ideas in his closing chapter with specific practical ideas for us all. Let me conclude with his concluding advice:

Reach out to those you fear.  
Touch the heart of complexity.  
Imagine beyond what is seen.  
Risk vulnerability one step at a time.

Today is a very good day to order this book.