

Essay

Conflict Resolution Strategies: Lessons from Nature

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ABSTRACT

In a series of articles,¹ the author tries to impress the reader with nature's superiority, beyond biomimicry and her advanced technological supremacy. He argues that we can equally learn a lot from nature in the area of sociopolitical dynamics. He attempts to stimulate the reader to ponder whether the amazing nature is a product of aimless chance or superb intelligence.

Key Words: conflict resolution strategy, humans and non-humans, animal kingdom, nature, music.

Throughout human history, individuals and nations have continuously waged senseless wars against the perceived enemy. Some such conflagrations have been for sheer power and domination, some for access to natural resources, some for "glory", some for "honour", and some supposedly for love. For humankind, cross-culturally it seems that, when interests are at odds, there is no better solution, but to drop the gloves and appeal to violence. Murder and war have always been the most common solution for conflict resolution among the human species. A typical correctional facility in any country is tightly packed with individuals who find murder as the only viable solution for conflict resolution and have no qualms in using this gruesome approach. The same jingoistic approach is the strategy of choice for "civilized" governments that easily go to war as soon as a conflict surfaces. From ancient times to the modern era, the mere basic elementary weapons have evolved into horrific super-sophisticated weapons of mass destruction. This prehistoric annihilistic form of conflict resolution has been intact and seems forever unchangeable.

Consider the following mindless case: legend has it that in ancient Greece, the Prince of Troy falls in love with the Queen of Sparta. The Prince steals the Queen from her husband, King Menelaus. The devastating consequence of that was, the two nations descended into a ferocious war that lasted for 10 years and resulted in the death of thousands of innocent people and the destruction of natural and manmade environments. In the end, the city of Troy was burnt to ashes, all for the sake of one man's odious obsession with desiring a piece of flesh, fixated upon the lust of another man's rightful wife.

From the ancient era, the use of violence, the rise of aggression and the use of conquest as a remedy have continued up to the 21st century. In the 20th century alone, we experienced two devastating World Wars, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, the Arab and Israeli war, the India and Pakistan war, the Falklands/Malvinas war, the Iran and Iraq war, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the 1st Persian Gulf war, the Balkan war and several other regional conflicts in the Far East Asia, Africa and South America, each with enormous casualties. It is estimated that about

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¹. Banaei, Mehran (2012), *Being Ant-worthy*, Scientific God Journal, February 2012, Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp. 213-126.

170 million people died and an incalculable trillions of dollars spent on wars during the 20th century. A shameful report card of recklessness and absolute lack of concern for human life and properties, yet humanity is still unwilling to learn and accept the crucial lesson to find an alternative non-violent approach to settle its differences. We know one thing for sure: that the high economic, environmental, psychological and human costs of this faulty and quixotic conflict resolution strategy reverberates for many years to come, yet we are still adamantly addicted to use murder and war as a practical strategy. It is hard to fathom that the remarkable complexity and evolution of the human brain which self-servingly distinguishes and prides itself from the rest of creation by the gift of reason should often forsakes reason and allow to be governed by emotion, greed and the paltrification of short-lived desires. Desires that blind him to realize that there is nothing poetic and glorious about killing and destruction.

Compare this human approach of conflict resolution with that of other social species, like birds. Birds use only diplomacy to resolve their differences, yet they are superfluously considered by humans as one of the dumbest creatures on earth. Thereby, derogatory terms such as “birdbrain” and “featherhead” are coined to refer to unintelligent individuals. Far from being unintelligent, birds employ the most effective form of conflict resolution in the animal kingdom that deserves to bring shame to homosapiens – a swift blood-free approach. When it comes to communication, birds are classy and eloquent, for they communicate with each other and to other species in magnificent style. Among most birds, singing a musical song is the weapon of choice to resolve, for instance, a territorial dispute or mating rights. A bird by singing, first and foremost establishes his presence in the area, which alone can favorably influence the outcome of a potential situation. He likes his neighbours to know that he is rightfully in charge of his domain and that ought to be respected. Some birds have large repertoires, where each song is performed for a different purpose or performing a particular song that members of a particular species would only recognize. In their songs, birds pass on encrypted messages to their opponents, i.e. “take a good look at my physical fitness, strength and beauty”, “go away”, “keep out”, “no trespassing”, “do not get any closer”, “back off” or “come in”, “stay with me”. A dragged standoff only results in a prolonged musical complexity between the two challengers. Some birds can play as many as 50 different notes: in both high and low pitches. They can sing solo, duets or harmoniously with other birds in what could resemble an orchestra. The music masterfully played has structure and identifiable rhythm, indeed they never sing out of tune.

In a highly competitive courtship pursuit, their musical performance is often accompanied by an extravagant visual display similar to a stunning fashion show and/or to a bodybuilding competition, as birds show off their beautiful vibrant feathers to exhibit their wide array of accomplishments. If that is not effective enough, most birds’ techniques of persuasion also include extraordinary dancing rituals.

Whether birds are conscious of it or not, there is an in-depth therapeutic connection between music and peace, between beauty and peace, between art and peace. All three elements are conspicuously used in birds’ diplomacy. Their life comprises of constant beautiful musical and artistic presentations, followed by a mating act in the background of a lavish green forest with a blue sky above and the constant breeze of clean refreshing air, living in a niche with plenty of renewable resources available, with the ultimate reward of raising a family. Thus, the objective

of their existence, the continuation of life seems to be satisfyingly achievable, then why be greedy and create conflicts.

It certainly seems to the eye, that bird singing is motivated and generated by some form of inner pleasure, as there is no sign of anger – while singing to resolve a dispute with a rival. This innate attitude is indeed what should make birds the envy of all, over and above their sheer physical and vocal beauties. The stark fact is that throughout a dispute they maintain their cool temperament, and consciously respect and submit to the laws of nature. It is perhaps for these characteristics that birds symbolize freedom, love and peace, a joyful species that is never discontent, seems always too busy to celebrate life, while humans oftentimes are languishing in the doldrums of an empty purposeless existence rolling in their own self-created mess.



The exotic South American macaw parrot, a social bird that hardly stays quiet.



Singing bird of Prairie

Likewise some primates such as the Siamang gibbon extant in the rainforests of Malaysia and Sumatra appeal to the same strategy – singing as opposed to a bloody duel. The Siamang gibbon has a large throat sac that is used to amplify sound, which can be heard from miles away. Their throat functions just like an air sac of a bagpipe. Howling melodiously is their stunning form of effective tactical communication to an intruder in order to avoid the situation unnecessarily escalating to the use of force and aggression causing bodily harm. The message being communicated is similar to that of birds.



Siamang Gibbon howling, male and female pairs call in unison.

In the same manner, during the night, the boisterous yet rhythmic sound of many insects fills the air like a unique orchestra with cicada and crickets chirping, and the choirs of colourful frogs and toads continue to be heard until dawn, carrying the same messages to others. The loudness and frequency of each call made are indications of the male's stamina and versatility. A tiny male cricket can produce a loud sound by rubbing together certain parts of his body such as his wings. The message being broadcast is that "I am the lord of this block".

A tropical rainforest is indeed such an acoustically noisy place like a concert hall, an opera house or a cathedral. There are always countless musical symphonies being performed by various species. Musical echoes that constantly resolve conflicts, not the sound of bombs and bullets being fired and dropped. Unlike the human approach, the conflict resolution approach employed by birds and chimpanzees enhances the environment, rather than harming it. Their battlefield is nothing short of a popular musical venue in an everlasting festival of life.

In nature, there are firm rules of conduct that are well established for all the participants and are not subject of deviation. Based on these rules, inter and intra species disputes are settled in an efficacious and expedited manner. The costs and benefits to the overall balance of the ecosystem is the sole criterion to be considered. The interesting point in any dispute is that there are no judges or juries, no mitigation or litigation, no bargaining or appeals allowed to determine the fate of a dispute. There are no enforcers to enforce the verdict either. The participants are the judges themselves. In the absence of arrogance and egoism, "defeat" for lack of a better word, is accepted graciously. There are no cases in nature that a dispute results in the destruction of habitats or the decimation of species, quite to the contrary, it contributes to sustainability. Nature's model is all about *conflict prevention* at the root, for so-called "Mother Nature" knows that prevention is better than the cure. Nature creates conditions that are conducive to life, not to destruction. Senseless killing is not a practice of nature, not even between predators and prey. For example, zebras have no fear of a pride of lions in close proximity if they know that the lions have already had their lunch. A parasite could, but would not kill its host, since he knows that he would then have nowhere to go. *Any blood that occasionally sheds between "adversaries" is for the maintenance of the overall equilibrium not domination of one over another.* Nothing is farther from the truth than misperceiving nature, as being an ad-hoc system of manipulative domination that disrupts equilibrium; rather, nature's conflict resolution strategy has always managed to effectively keep the ratio of predator and prey in balance and the fragile ecological equilibrium at bay for the past 4 billion years, confirming its practical results and value. Indeed, where Nature's laws rule, it is the most truly civilized and trouble-free part of the world, as all resources are guaranteed to be distributed justly to all the inhabitants.

However, there is only one area where nature's diplomacy fails, and that is when a species' interests are at odds with that of the human species. Here, for the egotistically selfish Man, right is always equal to might. When humans betray their own fellow species in the quest for more profits under lies and false-propaganda, which always accompanies the onset of mass violence, respect for other co-habitants of this planet is never in the picture and is consigned to the black-hole of ignominy. Nature's natural way is always violated for the sake of the protection of Man's interests, even if it results in the extinction and the endangerment of myriad species and habitats.

Let's have no illusion here or be overtly romantic, although nature's model of conflict resolution is far superior to the best that humanity can ever construct, it will never be emulated by the self-serving Man. The only way humans can implement a preventive conflict model like nature, is if resources are fairly distributed, thereby eliminating scarcity, tension and suffering. Such a model will never be emulated, as long as 40% of global assets are owned by 1% of the world's population, as long as 50% of the world's population owns only 1% of global assets, as long as 20% of the world's population continues to consume 80% of the world's resources, the human model of conflict resolution will remain what it has been for millennia. Conflicts and wars on a massive scale that could be avoided would continue to be generated under the name of spreading democracy, freedom, religion, protecting minority rights and other such obtuse and false pretexts for usurping the wealth and resources of other less militaristically powerful nations, rather than through mutual trading and co-operation, where disputes can and ought to be settled amicably for overall peace, stability and fairness. "By way of deception, Thou Shalt Do War" is the philosophical outlook of warmongers. Conflicts and wars have deliberately become a profitable business venture for the elite 1%. It first and foremost sustains their power and domination. Furthermore, for corporate war profiteers, peace means recession leading to an inevitable bankruptcy.

This egocentric and criminal business model, however, is symptomatic of a deeper problem: the total disconnection of reckless Man from understanding the deepest and most basic principles of nature and what lessons we ought to learn from them. This is the lesson that every bird, cricket and frog keep on melodiously chirping into our ears day after day, but we are too deaf to hear it, drowned as we are by the louder reverberating sounds of the war drums, beckoning us to yet another avoidable battlefield of destruction.

A bird does not have a conscious choice to resolve a conflict in any other fashion contrary to the bird's designed nature. However, the human species does have a choice – the choice and propensity to go for avoidance, tolerance, compromise, reconciliation, cooperation, sharing and love as they should all be available options on the table and are a much better alternative to war. To quote Rodney King: "We can all get along together". The choice to live in harmony with nature and humbly submit to its life sustaining laws like every other species, or conversely to walk on earth with arrogance in pursuit of our insatiable whims and self-indulgence. Sadly, humankind in general has chosen the latter, to be an injurious parasite, that out of greed would rather kill and destroy its host, the whole planet earth, than to preserve the dynamic balance of life for an endless future benefit for the entire global family.

Mehran Banaei is a freelance writer with a Masters Degree in Social Philosophy from York University. His area of interest is to follow Nature's path, identify endeavors that the animal kingdom has marvelously succeeded where humankind has failed terribly.