

Integrity, Integral Vision and the Search for Peace

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*The purpose of life is . . . to know oneself. We cannot do so
unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives.*

— Mohandas K. Gandhi¹

I have never seen a conflict in which everyone could see the *whole*. On the contrary, I have only experienced conflicts in which some, and usually all, of the “part-ies” were identified with the “part.” They were, literally, “partisan.”

This is the basic human condition, the natural worldview of organisms that are born, live and die as seemingly separate entities. When our bodies shout “Me first!” — we listen. We are wired to survive, and to put our survival before others (an instinct which can be trumped by only one other: protecting our offspring). As a natural extension of our survival instinct, we tend to care more about the welfare of those near and dear to us than those who are, by whatever definition, far away. Our language provides convenient words for each: the first we call “us;” the latter, “them.”

The challenge of integrity—or integral vision, which literally means “seeing” or “holding” the whole—is to balance this very natural allegiance to the part (“partisan”) with an allegiance to what it is but a part of.²

If we think of a conflict which affects us—whether personal, professional or political—we notice that we tend to be more identified with “I” than “you,” and more with “us” than “them.” This tyranny of pronouns not only affects our tongue; it is in our cells. Integrity is our fallible, human attempt to counteract this in-built self-centeredness by cultivating a whole-centeredness. (It is worth nothing that in English the word “partisan” is used very often, particularly in election years, but that we have no word for “wholisan”).

This intention toward integrity—from the Latin *integer*, meaning “undivided, untouched whole”—is our first, critical step toward transforming conflict. Because of our commitment to “hold” or to “see” the whole conflict, we can become part of the solution to the conflict rather than just adding our energy to it.

At a dialogue retreat for US House and Senate staff in the summer of 2002, for example, a veteran chief of staff for a Democratic congressman pulled me aside. “We have been told to oppose all Republican amendments,” she whispered to me. “I am told that they have been told to oppose all Democratic amendments. I really have a problem with that.” Then, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening, she added: “*I don’t think that’s leadership!*”

¹ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Bread labor: The gospel of work* (Ahmedabad:1960), cited in “Political Engagement and Service Learning,” by Dilafruz Williams, *Encounter* 15:2 (Summer 2002), p 9.

² I am grateful to Ken Wilber for conversations over the years that have helped me understand the concept “integral,” and to apply it to my own thinking about leadership.



This middle-aged African-American woman, like so many leaders with whom I have worked around the world, sensed the need for political leaders to hold themselves to a higher standard. She believed that leadership meant more than automatically taking one “side” against the other. She wanted the US House of Representatives, the institution to which she was dedicating her professional life, to be “the people’s house.” For this reason, she wanted both Democrats and Republicans to work for what was best for America, not just what was best for their own party.

Integrity in the House of Representatives can make the difference between a partisan free-for-all and a coherent bipartisan legislation. In your house or mine, it can make the difference between endless squabbles that lead nowhere and a family life that moves through conflicts towards greater understanding and harmony. Similarly, in organizations and communities, integrity in leadership can make dialogue highly productive and pull remarkable synergy out of the jaws of conflict. Just as it is hard for our representatives to care for the whole House, so is it hard for parents to care for the whole *family*, or for a mayor to care about a *whole* town, or a CEO to care about a whole *company*, or for a president or prime minister to care about a whole *nation*. (No wonder it often seems to utopian to believe that we can care for the whole *world*!)

To apply this concept of integrity to your own life, think about a recent conflict in which you have been involved, and you will notice how partisanship was absolutely central to it.

- After a period of little communication, my brother and I finally agreed to meet to try to work through an incident that happened at a family gathering. It had been so unpleasant that it left us feeling estranged for months. When we recalled the incident, he remembered the part when I had shouted and been rude, and I remembered the parts where he had been arrogant and judgmental. Each of us, however, had “forgotten” our own misbehavior until the other pointed it out.
- When planning the retreats for the US House of Representatives in the late 1990s, the Democrats referred repeatedly to arbitrary and unfair decisions by the Republican majority. But the Republicans defended themselves by pointing out that, during the several decades when the Democrats were the majority party, they had done the same things.
- In April 2004, Americans’ doubts whether the war in Iraq made sense increased sharply, in large part because it was the deadliest month since the war itself. 136 American troops died between April 1 and April 30. (To make matters worse, photographs leaked to the press of flag-draped coffins being shipped home only increased the number’s emotional impact.) During the same month, at least 1,361 Iraqis were killed—a ratio of Iraqi to American deaths of just over 10 to 1. Despite the exponentially higher figure of non-American deaths, however, it was not cited as a reason to question the war. The reason cited was the much smaller number of American deaths.³

(Note: For most of the Arab world, of course, the numbers have precisely the opposite weight: they do not focus on the American deaths, but on the deaths of fellow Muslims. War is almost always fueled by the symmetrical blind spots of the combatants who, naturally, identify more with “our” deaths than “theirs.”)

In each of these three cases, we can see the human tendency to magnify the meaning of one’s own pain or loss or hurt and to minimize the other’s. Integrity as a value stands for our

³ “Iraqi death toll much higher,” Lee Keath, DC 5/1/2004

commitment to recognize this human tendency and to transcend it, as best we can, in order (following Gandhi) to “learn to identify with all that lives.”

Just as a whole number (or integer) is different from a fraction, the whole is different than a part. The challenge of integrity is to recognize that, while each of us come from a particular part, healing conflict requires that we seek to identify with the whole. As astronaut Russell Schweickart put it after repeatedly circling our small planet, we need to identify with “the whole thing.”

For those of us who have not spun around the planet like a whirling dervish, identifying with “the whole thing” remains elusive on every level of our lives. In families, we marry or are born into a particular role (first-born child, second wife, etc.). In schools, we are enrolled in the system in very different ways (student, teacher, administrator, etc.). At work, we have very different job assignments and fit into the hierarchy in specific roles (chief financial officer, vice president for marketing, director of R&D, etc). And in public life, we all have different economic interests and political affiliations (lobbyist, legislator, citizen activist, etc).

On this level of assigned roles, we are *expected* to view the whole through the lens of the part. To put it in the language of our era, we are “hardwired” and “programmed” to be partisan in virtually every conflict of our lives. We are supposed to take sides with *our* part against the *other* parts. So the most fundamental dilemma of leading through conflict is how to hold the whole in our hearts while, at the same time, tending to identify much more strongly with one part than another.

During my training as a family therapist, for example, one of the most basic lessons my supervisors taught me was to identify with the whole family, not with a particular member. It is so easy to enter a “family system” and, usually unconsciously, feel very close to one person—say, the lonely teenager whose parents are critical of him or her. If family therapists get “sucked in,” and consequently see everything through the eyes of one family member, it is unlikely that they will be effective.

Whether the “whole” is a family, an organization or a community, it is tremendously difficult to truly grasp it. “If only our company knew what we knew,” said one CEO, who was lamenting his organization’s efficient information flow. What stopped them from “knowing what they know” was the inability of the entire organization to be aware of the whole.

I recently consulted with an organization that consists of Americans and Israelis, both Palestinians and Jews, and in my interviews with them I consistently heard the same refrain:

- “No body seems to get the whole picture.”
- “They see only their part, not the whole organization.”
- “We are suffering from myopia... we can’t see past our noses.”
- “Isn’t there some way we can all get on the same page?”

The bad news was: they were all seeing the same organization through different lenses. But the good news was: they knew it. Even though they were not succeeding at “seeing from the whole,”⁴ at least they were committed to trying.

Integrity, the intention to identify with the whole, does not mean that we have to blur the distinctions between the parts. On the contrary, it means learning to see them more clearly, or more “holistically.”

⁴ Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski, C.Otto Scharmer, Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (New York: 2004), Chapter 3.

“Wait a minute!” someone shouted at me, in one of my recent workshops. “In a world where someone who hates me can blow me and my family up at any moment, when ‘smart bombs’ or ‘suicide bombers’ can attack without warning, how do you expect me to identify with the whole? There’s ‘us’ and there’s ‘them.’ Doesn’t my survival and my safety depend on knowing the difference?”

Of course the answer is yes. But *knowing* the difference and *identifying* with the difference are two different things. The more we identify with the part, the less clearly we will see the whole. We are safer if we know our “enemies” very well. And knowing them very well requires that we learn to see them clearly, not through the distortions of our partisan lens.

Integrity grows out of the humbling realization that there are many ways of seeing the world, and that we cannot take our worldviews for granted. Doing so blinds us to the possibility that our worldviews may be incomplete, skewed or—to oversimplify—“wrong.” If this is so, then no matter how noble our intentions may be (“freeing the people,” “creating jobs,” “protecting human rights,” etc.), everything we do will backfire.

The challenge of developing this kind of integrity is captured beautifully by a 10-year-old who, one week after the attacks on the World Trade Center, wrote the following:

Last Monday it was easy to be open-minded. All we had to do was listen to other people’s ideas at recess. But this Monday, we all wonder, can we be open-minded? Can we comprehend, listen to, and reflect on all sides of the story? And more than that, can we understand the conflict and what got us to where we are now?⁵

While many North Americans and Europeans contracted in fear, others, like this 5th grade student, reminded themselves to open their hearts. They recommitted themselves to the path of seeing the whole—of integrity.

To practice integrity, we must ask ourselves three questions:

- How I am connected to the world outside the borders that define “us?”
- How does what we call “us” and “them” fit together into a larger whole?
- How can I become more aware of “the whole thing?”

When we ask these questions, and live the answers, we are practicing integrity. We are developing integral vision. And, I believe, we are making a modest but significant contribution to peace and justice on this small and precious planet.

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⁵ Niki Singh, “Becoming International,” *Educational Leadership* October 2002, page 60.