

Some Reflections on Martial Arts and Conflict Resolution

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In 1981, Roger Fisher and William Ury published their now iconic *Getting to Yes, Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, in which they introduced the concept of “negotiation jujitsu”. Susan Hackley, the current director of the Program on Negotiation at the Harvard Law School[1] explains:

As in the “martial arts of judo and jujitsu, avoid pitting your strength against theirs directly; instead, use your skill to step aside and turn their strength to your ends.” Negotiation jujitsu means breaking the vicious cycle of escalation by refusing to react. Resistance should be channeled into activities such as “exploring interests, inventing options for mutual gain, and searching for independent standards.”[2]

The enduring insight of Fisher and Ury is that in normal communication during negotiations, there is a tendency to conflate not only a position (fixed and often ideological) with the underlying (and unstated) interest – the truly desired outcome-- but also to conflate the person or messenger with the message, which leads to personal attacks instead of substantive discussion. By unbundling these communicative tendencies, the authors offered negotiators a new pattern of communication that opens up the potential for empathy and consequently possibilities for mutual gains. Mutual gains, sometimes called win-win, posits a basic assumption that there is abundance, i.e., a multiplicity of options. This contrasts with the accepted orthodoxy in our world, which embeds scarcity as the default assumption--where the only possibilities are polar antinomies. Such a fundamental –but false--paradox creates cognitive difficulties for those, for whom a “win” necessarily implies a “loss”.

We live in a universe of apparent and constant conflict and we humans internalize this conflict first through notions of the Self and Other. The ego wants to protect the Self and either destroy or keep the Other at bay. In other words, we resist—“ We react to the presence of conflict with aggression, denial or resistance . . . None of these responses really work. Have you ever truly solved a problem by yelling at someone? . . . Yet we repeat these same knee-jerk responses, day-after-day, year-after-year.”[3]

Many fundamental precepts of martial arts acknowledge this paradox. There is no small irony in the fact that the adjective “martial” is defined as “of or appropriate to war; warlike” and that the martial arts, like judo, karate and kendo, which mainly originated in Japan, teach physical skills of self-defense and attack using the unarmed human body alone. However, the Japanese etymology of “jujitsu” reveals “ju” from ‘gentle’ + “jutsu” ‘skill’, strengthens the relevance of the metaphor for use in resolving conflict situations.

Can a new generation of negotiators deepen Fisher and Ury's concept of jujitsu negotiation by suggesting that the actual physical practice of martial arts be integrated into the conflict resolution process? Master H.F. Ito [4], a practitioner of Shintaido [5] explains:

- Accept and redirect instead of counter-attacking and defending,
- Change your position and face in the same direction as the counterpart
- Understand the timing to react to the attacks
- Keep your mind clear and your body flexible

These prescriptions mirror those of Fisher and Ury, however, there are physical commands as well: "Change position and face the same direction", "Keep your body flexible". Master Ito, who has been pursuing the study of peace through martial arts, understands that body language plays an important role in negotiations. We can easily envision the clenched jaw, the dismissive wave of hand, the cold smirk, the foot tapping agitation but dare we ask participants in a negotiation, not only to get up and stretch or take a coffee break but instead to attempt the redirection of an oncoming attack. Could mediators/facilitators ask parties to observe how their bodies use energy differently in a direct frontal defense and a side stepping defense that throws the opponent off balance without a counterattack? Is it possible for the body to learn what the mind cannot and thereby weaken positional rigidity? Can we gain a more intimate and profound knowledge of the nature of conflict through precisely sequenced and timed body movements? Master Ito and many other masters of martial arts know that the body learns in a special way that the mind cannot.

The questions posed above can only be answered through a willingness of negotiators and parties to a conflict to engage in this novel experimentation—of physical martial arts exercise-- before and during actual negotiation sessions. Judith Warner outlines the "3 As" of conflict resolution: acknowledgement, acceptance and adaptability:

Parties to a conflict must acknowledge its existence-rather than trying to avoid or deny it, accept their involvement, appreciate the feelings and viewpoints of all parties to the problem-without making judgments, and be open to new ideas that might lead to solutions.[6]

In martial arts, the student is taught to relax, to release tension, to stay in the present moment. One is taught not to fear even in the face of attack. He or she is taught to use the aggressive energy and power of the opponent as one's own energy and power. This is why a smaller person can vanquish a larger one using these techniques. A deep empathy manifests itself while carefully observing one's opponent; one literally steps into the place of the Other not only to use their force but also to discern their mind and anticipate their moves.

It would seem that learning about the points of view of others in this physical way --“facing in their same direction” --requires an internalization of difference within the concept of "rightness". Since it is so often “[c]ertitude [that] clears a way for violence”[7], maybe a part of what we are trying to achieve when we work for peace is the acknowledgement and acceptance of how profoundly uncertain our epistemologies are. By shining a strong light on the reality of bodily combat [8], the practice of martial arts and the consequent knowledge obtained from their persistent practice may finally instill in us the logic that gentle skill triumphs over harsh force. “Once they have discovered that there is a way for them to be powerful and nurturing at the same time, they want to learn” [9] and the desire to learn is the precursor to both wisdom and peace.

[1] This program PON emerged from the book and has been in operation now since 1983 and has trained thousands of negotiators in the art and science of negotiation and conflict management.

[2] Hackley, Susan “Become a (negotiation) Jujitsu Master” adapted from “Can You Break the Cycle of Bad Communication” October 22, 2009, accessed at www.pon.harvard.edu

[3] Warner, Judith. “Aikido and Conflict Resolution” accessed at www.bodymindandmodem.com

[4] Master Ito began his martial arts training with the legendary karate master Shigeru Egami. He later studied for many years with another of Master Egami’s students, Master Hiroyuki Aoki, who founded the modern martial art of Shintaido. Master Ito established Shintaido of America in the United States in 1975, and has been instrumental in supporting and developing the Shintaido movement in Europe since 1982. More information <http://www.ito.shintaido.org/>

[5] a somatic (body-based) movement art that embodies the modern desire for peace, cooperation and mutual understanding among all cultures, www.shintaido.org

[6] See note 3

[7] Rodriguez, Richard. “The God of the Desert” in *The Best Spiritual Writing 2010*, ed. Philip Zaleski, (New York: Penguin Books, 2010) 175-199, 194.

[8] Martial arts represent a formal stylization of combat and therefore abstract the violence of war.

[9] Warner, See note 3.