

In conflict there are always heroes and villains

Three opening paragraphs

1.

Sometimes it is easier to give in to one's partner and feign interest in what interests them instead of going through the rather torturous examination of your relationship; "We never do things together. Are we really a couple or are we just sharing a house?" Theatre is not really my thing, but it is more my thing than ad hoc amateur relationship counselling when I want to watch the footy. So, on Friday night I found myself sitting down to a production of *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller rather than watching Geelong versus Melbourne (no contest really; okay I admit it, I don't like to sacrifice too much!). The thing is, I actually enjoyed it. It wasn't your classic tale of goodies versus baddies and it was exactly this that made the whole thing worthwhile.

2.

When the twin towers collapsed extremist Muslims celebrated, jubilant with glee; it was a decisive blow against the infidels. Osama bin Laden was a hero for bringing their victory. For most; however, he was a villain. While it is easy to mount a compelling argument that he should not be regarded as a hero under any circumstances, this is not likely to dampen the conviction of his followers. The application of the terms 'hero' and 'villain' is a subjective act. All we can say for certain is that in conflicts where life and principals are at stake, someone will be cast in either role.

3.

It is all good and well for Superman to stand proudly, barrel-chested and chisel-jawed in front of his fluttering cape and American flag proclaiming, "for truth, justice and the American way", but life is not a comic book. If it were, we would unfortunately see a lot more people wearing their underpants on the outside of their thigh hugging lycra pants. Perhaps Superman can carry this off, but in reality, few people can. Similarly, few people can represent what is truly good or truly evil in life. His fellow superheroes, Spiderman and Batman, give testimony to this; often there is a tinge of something darker lurking in the human psyche of the seeming hero. The villain might also demonstrate traces of virtue. Sometimes conflict results in natural, human behaviour that doesn't deserve the clear label of either.

'Conflict is a natural state, brought on by people's desire for power.'

Where egoistical, power hungry people are present hostility and disagreement are inevitable, thus rendering conflict to be a natural state. However, these people and their actions are what actually cause conflict and for this to occur an appropriate cultural zeitgeist of antagonism is necessary. On the other hand, conflict is not naturally occurring in the sense that it requires aggrieved people to initiate it. Therefore, while conflict will undoubtedly occur when the need to exercise power and the right social climate are present, it also requires a spark to an action to erupt it.

The naturally occurring competing desires for power and assertion of pride which are rudimentary to humanity, mean that conflict is inevitable. When two people desire the same thing, one will inevitably lose out, thus creating disappointment which, if acted upon can lead to tension. Power hungry people often need material things to assert their sense of dominance. In Arthur Miller's polemic allegory, *The Crucible*, a "land battle" is fought as at this time in Salem society, power was derived from piety, propriety and most importantly property. In fact, Mr Putnam's grandfather's "habit of willing land that wasn't his" and the struggle to be the most prosperous land owner in Salem with the most right to work God's land is a sinister underlying theme of *The Crucible* – based solely on selfish desires. Land has been seen to represent power for centuries and this not only stems from a desire for a large sphere of influence but being able to assert dominance over impuissant people. The jingoistic British Empire was so land hungry that they fought numerous battles over the course nineteenth century. They grew so proud of their colonies that they coined themselves 'Great Britain' - hardly a modest title. In the same respect competing needs of today are just as extreme and damaging. The current conflict between Israel and Palestine over who has the right to own Jerusalem has been raging for some time now and is unrelenting. Hence, due to the fundamental human desire to assert one's dominance and power over others, conflict is inescapable.

Given an appropriate social climate of antagonism and hostility, it is ineluctable that conflict occurs. This social climate may be caused by repression, fear or a need to reassert one's sense of dominance and pride. During the period of British colonisation in India, the Indian people's sense of national dignity was obliterated. This was only intensified by the extreme poverty being faced by the nation. So, it became inevitable that someone rise up in order to attempt to reassert Indian pride – that leader came on the form of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's approach was peaceful yet effective which contrasts highly with the didactic and devastating actions of another patriotic leader – Adolf Hitler. Hitler's rise to power was effortless because he was bolstering the one thing the German people lacked after the devastation of World War I and the Treaty of Versailles – fanatical national pride. It was this need to reassert power on a world scale that led to the brutal battle that was World War II. In the same way, the need to reassert power after years of oppression and subjugation is evident through the young women of Salem in *The Crucible*, led by Abigail Williams. Miller makes the comment throughout the play that repercussion breeds conflict. If society had not been structured to the point that almost all choice had been removed, the girls would not have rebelled and Reverend Parris would not have discovered them "dancing like heathen in the forest". Furthermore, had Abigail Williams been able to freely express her sexuality and lust she would not have had to lie about her actions and be obsessed with ensuring that her name remains "entirely white" in the village. It is because of this repression that when power is offered to the girls in the form of aiding the court by accusing their fellow Salemites of witchcraft, the girls do not hesitate to take the opportunity, even though it means that innocent people will be hanged on fake pretences. Hence, it is obvious that given a cultural zeitgeist of repression or need to assert power, conflict will be inevitable.

Although conflict may seem a natural facet of our lives, it is not a naturally occurring phenomenon as it requires *people* to initiate it. In the same sense that guns don't kill people, people with guns do – 'conflict' as an entity does not harm people, people with need to exercise power or people with grievances cause conflict. An institution or an individual, usually with a personal motive, must start a conflict – it does not start itself. Had Germany not invaded Poland, World War II would not have occurred. Had China not tried to eliminate Tibetan culture by flooding the autonomous state with Han Chinese, riots over independence causing civilian deaths would not have occurred. Had there not been an intense fear of communism, or the 'Red Scare' in 1950s America because of ongoing battles such as the Korean war, McCarthyism would not have been prominent and thus *The Crucible* would not have been written.

The same sentiment was evident during the 1690s in Salem. Were it not for the repression that led the girls to dance in the forest, the "whole town [would not be] mumblin' witchcraft." It is through one party's desire to exercise power, assert pride, escape repression, along with other possible causes, that conflict arises. Abigail can be seen to be unnecessarily creating conflict within the community by accusing innocent citizens of "trafficking with the spirits"; however, she is truly wracked with love and desire for John Proctor because he "put knowledge in [her] heart". Therefore, it is evident that conflict requires a trigger from someone with a grievance for it to occur, rendering it natural in the sense that as long as people are living alongside one another disputes will be inevitable.

Due to the needs and desire of power hungry people, the necessary spark for conflict will always be present. Conflict will remain a natural state as long as the fundamental elements of selfishness, pride and need to assert power are essential facets of human nature.

"Conflict and produce both growth and lingering pain."

Where the skin on their face used to be was wet and mushy. They must have been wearing caps when it happened because tufts of black hair remained on their heads. They had no eyes, no noses, no mouths; their ears had melted off. It was hard to tell front from back. Merely an instant ago, they had looked just like you and me. Those scientists who invented the atomic bomb, what did they think would happen?

I got out my photo albums the other day. It is amazing how rapidly memories come flooding back when prompted by something as simple as a photograph. In a flash, a laugh is recorded, a moment captured, a memory created. Yet in a blink of an eye, so too can the world be changed forever. It took merely a few minutes after Abigail cried "witch" for the hysterical witch hunt to erupt in Salem. In a matter of seconds, the fact of William Thornhill's life was determined in the courts of draconian Georgian England. In a few milliseconds, the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, burning, blistering, irradiating and killing thousands. Events like these do not need to be captured on film. Whilst photos will fade, these memories stay with us forever.

In one moment, after one action, we can find ourselves embroiled in an unforgettable conflict. Hordes of innocent civilians in war-torn countries recently in the news, those in Sri Lanka – find themselves facing hostility on a day to day basis. It was no fault of their own, but they must suffer the painful and unforgettable consequences. For the Indigenous Australians who occupied Australia prior to the arrival of the first fleet, they could not have foreseen the violence, barbarity and racial treatment that was to come. As Kate Grenville's "The Secret River" elucidates, this was a tragic conflict of mutual incomprehension that had severe ramifications that can still be felt today. This warning of the destructive effect that conflict can have on individuals or a family is most poignantly symbolised in the degradation of protagonist Will Thornhill and his wife Sal's passionate, harmonious and innocent romance. Some conflicts can bring about great pain and suffering and will consequently remain with those who encounter it for a long time after the conflict may have passed.

Yet not all conflict is of the real, destructive kind. Without conflict, societies or individuals would not be able to grow. There would be no social changes, and the victories that we have celebrated throughout modern human history would not have been possible – the right to freedom from repression, the right of women to vote, gay marriages, independence from foreign oppressive rule. Some conflicts, although they may take time, effort and commitment, pave the way for incredible growth, but only if we can identify the correct ways to encounter these conflicts of the "good" kind.

Undeniably, a conflict of this benevolent sort would be active, non-violent protests as is encompassed in Mahatma Ghandi's philosophy of Satyagraha; this methodology focuses on truth, and advocates active non-violent protest and civil disobedience, which successfully brought independence to India and is an approach that has been followed in other countries, from Poland to the United States to Burma.

On a micro-scale, however, personal growth, too, can be achieved via conflict. Often as third party observers, or in retrospect, we can analyse the nature of conflict and learn valuable lessons which may help us in the future. It is through experiencing conflicts both first hand and at an arm's length that we cultivate our tools for the encountering of future conflicts. Of course, not all of our experiences with conflict will lead to growth – in "The Secret River", we witness the repression of Thornhill and his family in Georgian England, depicted by Grenville in an almost Dickensian way. Unfortunately, this severe oppression Thornhill and the other settlers of NSW

had to endure resulted in the subsequent oppression, habitual mistreatment, colonial injustice and cultural genocide of the Aborigines in Australia. Whilst some encounters with conflict may in fact lead to further confrontations, it is undeniable that conflict can also bring about incredible social and individual growth.

Some conflicts could have led to growth, should have led to growth, but for one reason or another, their effect was subverted, and longstanding pain was initiated. We, especially as modern day Australians, must ask ourselves, would our history have been any different if Australia had not been established as the jail of infinite space? Certainly. The pasts of these convicts were effectively obliterated, and in this way, the very nature of Australia – from its landscape, to its animals, to its people – were also banished. Instead, what was left was a vast historical blankness which rendered the brutality and violence that ensued as justifiable, even nature, and, as through harshness were now deeply ingrained in the Australian psyche, manifested itself in the unjust treatment of contemporary refugees. This degradation of a culture which could have been learnt from in so many ways is presented in Grenville's text in the character of Scabby Bill, whilst the way in which Australians have denied the truth of our heritage, this so-called "white-washing" is effectively captured in the recurring references to silence – The Great Australian Silence. We witness the blossoming of a harmonious relationship between the "cultures in collision", yet tragically, one that is destroyed by the lure of ownership. The cultural confrontation between the Indigenous Australian and early British/European settlers could have brought about great lessons and immense growth for both sides, yet instead, our colonial disputes were violent and destructive, and even more incongruously, their very occurrences tacitly denied. Where there could have been growth, instead lingering pain was created.

Often in a conflict, especially violent hostilities, rather than grow, we may in fact go backwards, and discover things about ourselves we wish we had not. The Mai Lai Massacre is remembered as one of the incredible abandoning of morals by upright men. In this case, conformity pulled the wrong way. Such long periods of isolation and recurring exposure to violence had results in a collective shift in moral code that meant extreme violence was right, and stigmatized any shying away from it as cowardly. Moral constraints fell away, and these men, many of whom had lived upright lives up until then, massacred, raped, butchered and slaughtered an entire village of innocent civilians. This conflict did not see them grow, but in fact had quite the opposite effect.

Yet often we can surpass any limitation we or others may have placed on us; this growth is so incredible as it is completely unexpected. Dick Thornhill transgresses the moral expectations of his family, and like the tragic figure Thomas Blackwood, finds a way to peacefully co-exist with the Aborigines, offering hope, conciliation and even reconciliation. The message of compromise is undoubtedly what Grenville was trying to present via his stance. Sometimes the personal growth that occurs as a result of conflicts experienced surprises us and those around us, and will inspire us in our future encounters with hostilities.

So, as I looked through my photo album, I was reflecting on how a picture speaks a thousand words, but only if you are willing to listen. In life, we must learn from our mistakes, and the same principle should be applied to the way in which we encounter conflict. Whether a conflict has brought about extended pain, or perhaps resulted in extreme growth and social change, there are important lessons to be learnt. Perhaps the real winner in a conflict is he or she who can transmogrify their pain into growth. Whether we win or lose does not matter if we do not learn from the experience. "Success is not measured in the number of mistakes we make, but in never making the same mistake a second time."

"It's very easy for that lack of understanding to turn very quickly into fear...fear of the 'other' is universal, we all feel it... this hysteria of Chinese whispers" -K.Grenville

Fear of the unknown is the basis of that initial instinctive suspicion of 'the other'. When applied to a mass group of people, especially those in conservative societies, or those wholly ignorant of any wisdom in the outside world, it can generate hysteria. This hysteria often becomes a tool to be taken advantage of by those who are power hungry, as seen in many aspects of human history, such as during wars, and as an elemental part of media propaganda.

An obvious utilisation of widespread fear is seen when warring nations depict their enemies as grotesque inhuman demons or beasts in an attempt to unite the people of their nation in fear against an 'unnatural' opposition. By dehumanising them, it becomes difficult to empathise at all with the enemy and thus, war fever is maintained within a population. The idea is, that the enemy is shrouded in an impenetrable cloak of mystery and fear, which leaves plenty of unaddressed space for myth and rumour to become solid fact in the mind of the collective.

Similarly, the colonisation of Australia relied heavily on a collective fear of the 'other', the indigenous Australians. In her book, 'The Secret River', Kate Grenville explores the reactions of the early settlers to the original presence of the Aboriginals on the land. The protagonist, William Thornhill, is a settler with little worldly experience, and is accustomed only to the environment in England. As he arrives in the new land, He marvels that "air, water, dirt and rocks" can be so different on the same planet, and the "outlandish" appearance of the place generates in him a fear because of its alien nature to him.

Moreover, Thornhill is curious, yet afraid, of the "naked black man" he first meets in Australia. In the encounter, his immediate thoughts are of concern for his family, "those soft parcels of flesh", and he becomes hostile as he calls "anger, that old familiar friend" to his side. Before he has even communicated with the man, and before being swept up by the mass fear of "the poxy savages", he has assumed hostility of the indigenous, suggesting we humans have an innate suspicion of what is unknown to us. His fear is shared by the other settlers, and the British authorities exploited this fear by using it to band the settlers together in a bid to strengthen their claim on the land, and to fuel violence against the aboriginals in order to "[ex]terminate them".

However, it is not only world powers that use this collective fear, as this can and does occur on a much smaller scale in society. The playwright Arthur Miller writes allegorically about the McCarthyism that "gripped America" with fear in the 1950's in his play, 'The Crucible', where he illustrates the extent to which fear of the unfamiliar can blind those with little knowledge or understanding of the world outside of their own. The teenage character in the play, Abigail, demonstrates how easy it is, with some manipulation, to whip up a town of conservative Protestants into a frenzied fear of "the devil" because of their ignorance of the true nature of the group of "wild" girls whom she leads. This lack of understanding is a springboard for terror, and thus it is the more open-minded approaches to conflict that are the most lubricating and leave room for tolerance and a more achievable resolution.

The issue is, the suspicious 'guilty until proven innocent' approach to foreign elements in conflict, appears instinctive. Curiosity and fear are fundamentally linked reactions, basic animal behaviour tells us this. Curiosity, in conjunction with suspicion, causes an animal to approach something new or different in its environment with caution, (but approach it nevertheless), and perhaps sniff, observe

or even provoke the new addition before deciding on its harmlessness. Although humans are capable of higher reasoning, the congenital approach when confronted with an alien concept is with caution, suspicion and sometimes violence before acceptance of it as "the norm". Grenville's fictitious Thornhill realises, "if black skin was all there was to see, it...quickly... became the colour that skin was", implying that when we become accustomed to the unfamiliar, it no longer scares us. This was also a motive in giving names to the local Aborigines such as "Whisker Harry".

Nowadays, with technology advancing at an unstoppable pace, societies have been forced, out of necessity due to rapid progress, to become more tolerant and accepting of new fads as the norm. The most ongoing of these is in areas of scientific advancement, where technologies such as genetically modified foods, gene therapy with stem cells, clinical testing and drug trials were all once opposed, pondered, attempted and then finally accepted and integrated into contemporary culture. Often views against technological progress voice the concern that it is unpredictable and we should not be 'playing God'. However just as often, these opinions are generated by lack of understanding and ignorance of the procedures themselves; so eventually, once they have been understood, they are no longer feared and thus face less opposition.

The Media has undoubtedly employed an opportunistic approach to both nationwide and global fear. The American media heads the pack, using scare tactics and fear mongering schemes generously to both inflame fear of the 'other' and thus manipulate public opinion accordingly. Michael Moore's documentary, 'Bowling For Columbine', clearly illustrates the role America's media has in directing the collective fear of its people. For example it has in the past raved on about an approaching "wasp swarm" which was later proved to be fake, but at the time, was used to shape views on African Americans by personifying the 'wasps' with "African-like aggression". Similarly, police reality TV shows always showed guilty criminals youths of African American descent. The misassumption that African Americans are more violent or aggressive than the Caucasian population is founded in ignorance and lack of understanding, so it is unsurprising that fear of them has been an issue in White American history for quite some time, especially in the early 1800's.

While it seems then that fear can reign over whole nations with damaging effects, we cannot forget that this is a product of the conscious effort of the multi-billion dollar enterprise that is the media. What we must always consider is how deeply this fearful nature is rooted in the human spirit, and the reason it is so virulently infectious. Perhaps we gravitate towards a sense of unity after all. Although it may mean being scared out of our wits, we feel gratified in being united in a common cause, and satisfied in pointing at others to conceal our own incomprehension. However; what is comfortable is not often right, and there is no doubt that fear of the 'other' is found less in an educated mind. Sadly, this education is not always accessible, and thus a substitute that allows for conflict resolution is a broad-minded attitude, and an acceptance of others after our initial cautionary response.

Domestic Pet Violence

I have two fish at home, they swim around in their tank and keep me company at my desk. 'Tubby' is your everyday fat-bellied fantail goldfish, and 'Zing' is the little zebra fish that can never be caught at cleaning time. Both get along fine, despite their differences. Well, that's most of the time anyway...

It seems that if ever I'm a little late to feed the two, Tubby gets a little impatient. His hunger seems to let him think it's okay to prepare Zing for the night's feast, and so, at timely intervals of about 20 seconds, Tubby pecks at Zing and in response, Zing zings around the tank like mad.

Of course, I quickly settle this conflict with the sprinkling of a few flakes, and the odd couple are back to normal again.

The voracious hunger of my fish draws parallels in my mind to Thornhill, from Kate Grenville's 'The Secret River'. Thornhill describes how he and his siblings grew up forever hungry. For the Thornhill family, survival unfortunately meant having to steal and from their perspective, 'there could be no sin in thieving if it meant a full belly'. This made me wonder if Tubby thought the same. Was he prepared to take Zing's life to fulfil his needs? After all, isn't this how we humans developed? And why is it that Zing has to suffer; wasn't I the one who put the pair together in this confined space in the first place?

It seems that throughout the ages, humans have had to fight in order to survive. Without the weak, there would be no strong, just like there would be no way of climbing without the rungs on a ladder. Without our ancestors winning and losing, humans today would be very different; it's hard to get your head around, but it's amazing how little differences make great changes in the long run.

In addition to evolutionary conflict, we also witness conflict based on individual feelings and emotions. What if the resolution makes you feel complete and that is all that matters? In a relationship, whether it be grounded in love, friendship, or work, sometimes you may not be comfortable with the arrangements as they stand. Perhaps "taking a break" is what both sides need and a mutual resolution can be achieved; however, if an individual decides they are not completely comfortable, they may just walk out. Therefore, what one loses, another will gain. So in the end, nothing is lost or gained.

Perhaps we need a loss in order to completely win. Just like a son or daughter realises how much they have neglected their parents after they pass away; it's a little too late, yet this leads them to help their own children not to make the same mistake. Thornhill, for example, realises that perhaps there was a way that the indigenous Australians and the early settlers could have worked together, just as 'the two cliffs completed each other into something peaceful and perfect'. He knows it is too late; however, he learns his lesson because every day he sits watching the two cliffs at dusk. Thornhill "won" his land, but his victory was hollow.

Sometimes, although an individual would like to reverse the outcome of a conflict, it is not possible. Like a 'knot in old rope', unable to be undone, the knot seems to have been tied together so tightly and for so long that the knot itself shines with a coating of what seems like glue. The only way to get rid of the knot would be to cut it out, but that would only mean the rope would be forever damaged. In a conflict, tangles such as this happen frequently; a person's reaction and subsequent actions will determine what they may then have to live with forever. If Tubby, one day did in fact eat Zing he would live a lonesome life in the tank. He would win a feast and lose a friend.

So when we encounter a conflict, we never really do win or lose. But it seems that both are required for a compromise to occur that will allow us to continue our lives as normal. Where a conflict is preventable, it seems silly to let it happen because of the destruction that can occur. So for now, I'll make sure I feed the odd couple that live on my desk, on time.