

MOVIES AS METAPHOR AND MIRROR

Why do we go to the movies? Quick answer—for entertainment and escape. There are other answers and other questions. Who do we think we are?¹ Consciously or unconsciously, we use the movies as a mirror. Does this mean that the movies reflect who we already are or that we want to believe that is who we really are? If the latter is true, to any extent, then the movies can be helpful in changing a society that, while individualistic, status seeking, and competitive, gives indications of transitioning to a more collective or at least collaborative approach to conflict.

The July 2007 issue of the magazine, *Fort Worth, Texas*, featured an article by an attorney, Steven Laird, on collaborative law. In the first paragraph Mr. Laird used the movie, “War of the Roses,” to frame his message: divorce is war and everyone loses. Readers may remember that at the beginning of that movie the divorce attorney, Danny DeVito, counsels his new client to forget divorcing his wife and go home and reconcile. His argument is that divorce is costly and can even be lethal. The divorcing couple, the Roses, actually die in battle and the house they are so determined to win is destroyed in their war, leaving their two children orphans. Why do movies send a message so emphatically? Is it because most of us are visual learners and the screen is big and colorful and as we sit in the dark the sound envelops us? Is it also possible that we learn by example and the characters in fictional drama give us an opportunity to find new meaning in our own dramas? In this column I suggest that referencing movies, telling their stories, just as writers do, can be a tool for helping embattled parties find a way to reach consensus without losing face.

I am reminded of the teaching movie, “Don’t Forget the Children,” produced by the Texas Young Lawyers, which has been shown to many divorcing parents prior to mediation with Family Court Services in Dallas. Real survivors of custody battles, including a child, participate in the movie. The message is stop fighting; use mediation, not the courtroom as the decision process. Somehow the advice given by actual survivors of divorce, the documentary approach to enlightenment, has an impact that the advice of counselors does not. Why are we seeing so many documentaries or docudramas lately? We have to question why this form of social change has become so popular as a means of changing social behavior such as smoking, gun use, violence in schools and substance abuse. Movies have the power to change us.

In the book [Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking](#), by Malcolm Gladwell, the powerful and unconscious impact of our culture to create implicit associations in our mind is discussed. If you want to see how your mind has been affected go to www.implicit.harvard.edu and take some of the implicit association tests. You will be amazed to learn you have many biases as a result of your cultural programming since birth. In the race implicit association test, for example, you will probably have a pro-white bias, irrespective of your ethnicity, if you grew up in the U.S.A. You cannot consciously change that bias, as Mr. Gladwell who is himself half Jamaican discovered, but you can reprogram your mind by, for example, watching hours of films such as one of Martin Luther King, Jr., making his “I Have a Dream” speech. This phenomenon has been documented.

Our culture differs from many others in our preferences for individualism, winning through competition, use of public trials and emphasis on materialism. In some older, more collective and less diverse societies, mediation is the forum of choice. In the Navajo culture, the Peacemaker Court operates openly and in parallel to the judicial system. In the Polynesian islands, Ho'oponopono, or "making right the pain", an elaborate multi-step process for families, has been adapted to labor disputes. In New Zealand, family group decision-making is used when children are neglected or abandoned and has now been incorporated into the Family Protective Services agencies in Texas and elsewhere in the U.S.A. In China, the People's Court offers a very different approach to publicly resolving disputes than our version of going to court, and in international arbitration, the highly sophisticated international arbitrators continue to encourage and facilitate a mediated outcome because that approach is so integral to the Chinese culture.

In cultures in which shame for bad behavior still can be used to motivate apologies and reconciliation, collaboration has a fertile ground in which to grow. Psychologists agree that the power of shame exists in all cultures because it is a primary emotion.² What has happened in the United States with regard to shame? Dr. Joyce Brothers has addressed this topic and illustrated her points with movies - the mirrors of social change.³ Beginning with the Hays Code of the thirties, shame showed its face in the movies all the time. The culture of that era had clear rules for behavior. In the sixties, the hippies declared war on shame, and were very successful. According to Dr. Brothers, today's freedom to be vulgar can be traced to that decade. Now of course, we are seeing in the Family Values movement the backlash to that war on shame. There is always a price to be paid for the loss of shame in a culture. One psychiatrist, Dr. Leon Wurmser, summarizes this cost: "Where there is an unrestrained exposure of one's emotions and of one's body, a parading of secrets, a wanton intrusion of curiosity, [it has] become hard to express tender feelings, feelings of respect, of awe, of idealization, of reverence . . . The culture of shamelessness is also the culture of irreverence, of debunking and devaluing ideals."⁴

We do not go to the movies to learn how to behave, but we do seek out connections to and mirrors of ourselves: the ideal and the actual self.⁵ In some award winning movies we are given the chance to have a few hours of proximity with amazing public figures such as Howard Hughes, Ray Charles, and James Barrie. Or we are given the chance to see the pain of the scorned as in "Broke Back Mountain," "I'll Walk the Line," and "Schindler's List." The question is, do we learn who we are or do we just satisfy a curiosity about the famous and infamous? More importantly, can we learn from art, be it written, cinematic, painted, danced, or sculpted, anything about ourselves that helps us in conflict? Some art critics believe that the artist makes public the *private dream that we are ashamed to expose*.⁶ If movies are a mirror, particularly in the culture that made them a major form of artistic and populist art, let us learn from some of the greats as much as we can about the resolution of conflict. If William Ury is accurate, our human tribe is endangered by conflict.⁷ More people go to the movies than read books generally, let alone books about the techniques of collaborative problem solving. As a source for social change, the movies offer mostly untapped, fertile fields.

I have chosen to highlight some movies that provide particularly poignant, provocative, or funny examples of conflict. The values conflict depicted in "Other People's Money" is beautifully scripted with Danny DeVito expounding the virtues of the get-rich-quick capitalist approach to security, while Gregory Peck stands up for the hard-work-and-corporation-as-father

ethic. The real lesson about collaboration comes at the end in a very subtle, and probably mostly ignored solution, offered by the female lawyer, hired by her stepfather, Peck, to keep the company functioning. She has neatly sidestepped the values clash, gone beyond compromise, and truly found a value-creating solution for everyone: turn the obsolete wire and cable company into a manufacturer of car air bags (made from that same wire) with capital and technological infusion from a Japanese company that already produces the product. As a further value, DeVito hopes to marry her and presumably her stoic stepfather will have to acknowledge that she has earned his respect.

Drama, by its nature, depicts conflict. We are complex creatures, often competing for status, cultural identity and sometimes for scarce resources. When the competition escalates, when the stakes are high, waste and tragedy can result. One former best actor Oscar nominee, Don Cheadle, played the owner of the “Hotel Rwanda.” He used every persuasive means to save the lives of people whose only “crime” was to belong to the wrong tribe. Another movie scene which clearly depicts the destructive force of conflict, this time a competition for scarce resources (water), occurs in the first few minutes of the Stanley Kubrick film, “2001: A Space Odyssey”. Two troops of oddly human-looking apes fight to see which will get the water and which will die. In the night, the smaller and weaker of the two troop leaders gets a message from an alien species and has an insight. He picks up a leg bone from a pile of carcasses and imagines killing an animal with it, then pictures what he could do to his enemy and for his thirsty troop. He and his followers, bones in hand, attack and prevail. The enemy leader is killed. Because the scene is so primitive, actually pre-human, many viewers failed to get the message. These creatures could not communicate, negotiate, or collaborate. They killed to survive. We don’t have to, but we still do. As an example of pure primal response to conflict, this scene is beautiful, graphic and powerful. As a teaching tool, the viewer is left with the question: what have we learned since then?

We know that a picture is worth a thousand words. What is a movie worth on that scale? Some movies intend to teach us something, but any benefit derived by most moviegoers in terms of changes in behavior is unconscious. Yet if we do seek connection to the characters in the movies, which many commentators seem to agree is happening, then let us, as conflict specialists, remember to consciously reference movies to help our message.

One of my mental health colleagues tells me that when we try to push parties from the cognitive directly to consensus, we will always cause resistance. Only by letting disputants express and acknowledge their feelings can we facilitate change. If she is correct, there is an opportunity to find, in some movies, the feelings, the meanings, and the awareness we have failed to see in our own life because it was too close to us. Up there, on a huge screen, well scripted, costumed, filmed, with beautiful music and sound effects, in a dark, public yet somehow private, theatre we see ourselves and sometimes we connect.

Art is the purest and the most joyful expression of cultural identity. Conflict resolution techniques are our best hope for managing and transforming destructive, primal forces that resort to power rather than problem solving. Some mediators use stories to help parties find a new way to view conflict. Some use humor and others reference popular culture. Two very different films, “1776” and “Gandhi,” illustrate two abstract concepts that are hard to explain but readily

apparent. In each movie a famous leader illustrates emotionally mature behavior that changes the conflict, their country, and even world history. They employ very different techniques to accomplish their objectives, consistent with the cultural context in which each conflict is occurring. These two men are legendary examples of mature leadership. Neither was a military nor heroic figure in the classical sense of Napoleon or Alexander the Great. Gandhi was a lawyer, trained in England. Franklin, who began as an indentured servant, became an inventor, publisher, and diplomat. Each believed in a simple lifestyle and in the ability of the individual to be self-sufficient. Each stood for human dignity and yet for diplomacy.

In the musical, “1776,” John Adams, a representative to the Continental Congress from Massachusetts, aggressively advocates that the colonies revolt against England and declare its independence as the United States of America. He is an unpopular, rather unpleasant person and does not enjoy much respect or adherence from his fellows. He seeks the advice and help of the persuasive statesman, Ben Franklin. Ben knows what John is after and has already formulated a strategy that John’s frontal approach would never contemplate. Ben realizes that what is needed is a *proposer* of independence who is popular. The modern way to put this is a proposer with more emotional intelligence than John Adams. Ben uses an elegant, open-ended-questioning technique on John Adams and with Richard Henry Lee, a charismatic statesman from Virginia. By asking questions of Lee that evoke the “yes” answers Ben intends, the Virginian gains insight and comes to see himself as the hero of independence. He rushes off to get support for his newly found affiliation with the cause of revolution. The questioning techniques look familiar: we see the mediator, the integrative negotiator, and the collaborative lawyer in his behavior. The rest, as you know, is history!

In “Gandhi” we see a very different culture caught in the grip of destructive religious conflict. Gandhi has employed a hunger strike as a peaceful way to achieve change. If the fighting doesn’t stop, and he doesn’t believe that it will not start again, he will publicly starve himself to death. Because he is beloved and recognized for his exceptional spiritual and emotional maturity, his ultimate sacrifice has power to cause change. Suddenly a crazed person runs to his bed and throws bread upon it. Gandhi questions the man as to why he says he is doomed to go to hell. The stranger tells his story which tragically begins with his own son being killed by his enemies and his retaliatory behavior toward the sons of his enemies. There is silence followed by Gandhi saying very quietly: “I know a way out of hell.” The instruction Gandhi gives the killer is to go and adopt a young boy, the same age as his dead son, and to love him and teach him religious values. After a pause, Gandhi adds, almost as an afterthought, that the boy must be the son of an enemy and the religious values taught must be the religion of the enemy. The killer cries, seems to have an insight, and kneels at the bed of Gandhi, who then ends the hunger strike. This scene displays the use of role reversal – stepping into the shoes of your enemy – and compassionate communication. Instead of chastising the killer, Gandhi helps him to reframe his tragedy and to become more compassionate. One is reminded of the truth in the statement, “You cannot hate a group if you have ever loved someone of that group.”

In these two powerful, short, visually and aurally beautiful scenes, we see the best of human nature transforming the worst. We also see the intelligent deployment of persuasive communication used in a devastatingly effective way. There are few Franklins and Gandhis among us today. But in their writings, their teachings, and what has survived in terms of cultural

changes they affected, we have an opportunity to grow a little ourselves and to have an insight into the nature of effective conflict resolution.

¹ Helpmates and Heroes, New York Times, Feb. 13, 2005.

² Joyce Brothers, Shame May Not Be So Bad After All, Parade Magazine, Feb. 27, 2005.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Helpmates and Heroes, New York Times, Feb. 13, 2005

⁶ Paul Grimley Kuntz, Art as Public Dream: The Practice and Theory of Anais Nin, A Casebook on Anais Nin (1974).

⁷ William Ury, Getting to Peace: Transforming Conflict at Home, at Work, and in the World (1999).

Addendum: In Oklahoma couples expecting a baby are given an opportunity to receive free coaching in conflict prevention and resolution by attending a class that uses film footage of couples communicating in a mature way. Couples in the class, coached by a facilitator, are then asked to comment on what they saw and compare it to the way they deal with each other. NPR broadcast this story on June 26, 2006, because of the need for couples, married or unmarried, who are having a baby, to stay together for the sake of the family in a culture where 35% of all children are born to unmarried parents! What other social problems could we effectively address using movies and films? Why have we not harnessed technology in ever more creative ways to reflect mature, problem-solving behavior, especially in cultures where reading skills/literacy is low? Maybe Bill and Melinda Gates could figure out a way to influence vast numbers of remote cultures on social problems such as the dissemination of disease, population explosion, destruction of our eco system and conservation of wildlife and natural resources, utilizing digital footage done in many languages and locales? Huge amounts of culturally appropriate information could be delivered from a satellite to any village that had a dish to pick it up on a TV set.

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