

Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

by Douglas Noll
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Many will recall the plaintive call of Rodney King, the man whose vicious beating by members of the Los Angeles police department was caught on video. Mr. King cried out, "Why can't we all just get along?" The reason we cannot always get along seems to be based, in part, on our brains.

Recent advances in the neurosciences have established an irrefutable fact: Human beings are emotional, not rational. Nevertheless, on the strength of Descartes' rationalist philosophy, the Enlightenment opened the doors to modern empiricism and led humanity into the Scientific Revolution. No one doubted the power of rational thinking to solve problems and unravel the mysteries of the observable universe. From these observations came the belief that humans were distinguished from all other creatures because of their rationality. To be irrational was to be something less than human.

This belief deeply influenced English and American law, foreign policy, and economic theory. Legal standards were set by comparison to a prototypical rational person. Foreign policy was based on the assumption that rational beings could sit together and work through international disputes and conflicts. Economists built an entire field of study on the assumption that consumers acted "rationally" in maximizing their utility. People engaged in peacemaking, from the interpersonal to the international level, assumed that despite the emotions of conflict, people fundamentally were rational.

The truth is that we are 98 percent emotional and about two percent rational. Thus, the assumptions underlying many disciplines and practices, especially peacemaking, need significant revisions. Much remains unknown, but the implications of the research so far demonstrate that we must be far more aware of neuropsychological factors of human conflict. These factors explain much about conflict behaviors. They also provide insights about new interventions in serious and intractable conflicts.

To understand how our brain deals with conflict, consider a simple emotional model. In this model, conflict starts with some problem. The problem is serious enough to cause anxiety, reflected in a feeling of insecurity. When anxiety or insecurity is first experienced, we have a choice between reactivity and reflection. If we do not make a choice, our default mode is to be reactive.

By being reactive, we might reject the problem, give up, or feel inadequate to deal with the problem. If the problem is persistent, we might struggle or exit. As the conflict develops, we perceive it as a threat, and we may blame, attack or withdraw. These behaviors constitute our fear reaction system. I like to call it our self-protective system. The brain systems associated with fear reaction are very, very old, dating back to the earliest vertebrae animals. Although highly adaptive in the uncertain and dangerous environment of 20,000 years ago, the system is largely maladaptive in our modern, complex culture.

If the choice for reflection is made, we have learned to reflect, relate, and relax. The insecurity arising from a conflict situation is recognized as pointing to a pathway of growth towards greater peace and self-realization. We are led by our curiosity to discover something new, find what is lost, or complete unfinished business. Success leads us to wholeness, authenticity, power and wisdom.

The path, however, is not easy. From anxiety and insecurity, we experience inadequacy (we don't know what to do) and a drop in self-esteem (we don't feel good about self). We ride on a broad emotional river and often experience fear of death, a drowning sensation, being shaky, or cold. Along this journey, our fear reaction system could pull us off the path of peace.

At the end of this emotional drop, we end in a calm pool that represents the essential peace within us. In this state, we hold an unshakable foundation of belief in ourselves. We are authentic; we are present in the moment. We exhibit a full spectrum of self as robust, rainbow colored, and multi-faceted. From this place, we can be compassionate, tolerant, exhibit loving-kindness, and embrace peace. This is what I have observed many people experiencing as they engage in conflict resolution and achieve peace.

These behaviors come from our brains' altruistic, cooperative social attachment systems. The social attachment system in the brain controls pair bonding, such as the mother-infant dyad, pair bonding, and the formation of families, extended families, and communities. It is the system that allowed us to become highly social and create complex, interdependent societies. However, our self-protective system will override our altruistic system unless we choose otherwise. Because it is not the default choice, mobilizing the social attachment systems in conflict situations is challenging. The last thing a person wants is to feel altruistic towards her conflict cohort. As has been said to me many times, "I don't want to sit around a campfire and sing Kumbayah!" Yet lasting resolution of difficult conflicts can only occur when our brains altruistic systems are fully operational. Thus, one challenge for peacemaking is to recognize when and why a person's fear response system is dominating them, then craft an intervention that will allow the altruistic brain systems to take over.