ECSP Pathways to Peace: Stories of Environment, Health, and Conflict

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Edited Transcript — Aaron Wolf

Aaron Wolf:
Thanks, Geoff, and thanks both to the Wilson Center and the Fetzer Institute. It's a really exciting partnership and it's always a joy to be here with the Wilson Center whom I know and am now learning more about Fetzer. It's a very exciting relationship to be developing.

I want to ask for a lot of sympathy from the audience for a number of reasons. I'm an academic who thinks in 55-minute blocks and I've been asked to keep it to 10 minutes. I'm a PowerPoint addict and I've been told to tell stories. So, if you're sitting like this, can you just kind of open up, give a little bit of sympathy, and a lot of empathy toward this recovering PowerPoint addict.

Stories -- so, I think the easiest way to do it is kind of weave what I've learned over the years with how I've gotten to be able to investigate what I investigate. I grew up both in California and in Israel. We went back and forth a lot between the West Coast and the Middle East, and both are places where water is subtext of politics. I mean, the Middle East has certain tensions, but Northern California and Southern California -- whew! -- that's some real tension, and especially over things like water resources. And so, I knew, inherently, that water and politics were intertwined, and I spent time in Israel later as I started to get trained getting really interested in the idea that water resources were intertwined with the Arab-Israeli conflict because it seemed so practical. I'd always been involved in politics growing up and as an undergrad. And at some point you get tired of banging your head against the political wall. There's only so far to get when both sides are telling accurate, true, believable stories and neither side can agree beyond that. And then when you find out that there is a resource that's shared, that both need, and there is a history of people talking about it, it starts to get very exciting.

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Now, at the same time, I should say, in the academic world, there was growing documentation about how the coming wars of the 21st century were going to be about water resources. Water will be the new oil and so on. And so, a couple of things happened. One, I decided I needed technical training, and I worked for an agency. I don't know who's here from federal agencies so I won't name it. It's a federal agency that surveys geology.

[laughter]

I was a groundwater flow modeler. I only knew water in its digital form and was pretty bad at it, to be honest with you, and also got that that wasn't where my passion was and that the technical sides weren't really where the action was. Over and over you could show an optimized solution where it made such logical, rational sense that somebody should make decision "X," and over and over and over again they would make decision "Y". So I recognized that the technical was important to understand. It gave me a lot of credibility in the room, but it wasn't sufficient. And so I went back to school then to get training in conflict resolution and policy analysis, and, again, what we are taught is a fairly rational model and I'll get back to that in a sense.

At this point, I want to tell a story because I promised I would. I go to Israel to do my Ph.D. dissertation on the impact of scarce water on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And there's a beautiful story of the creation of the Jordan River that I hope Gidon is not going to tell, but if he is, I got there first.

[laughter]

The three branches -- those who know the geography, there are three headwaters of the Jordan, and originally they were three separate streams -- they would all bicker amongst themselves over which was the most important stream. And so they called on Lord of the Universe to come and judge between them. There's actually a spot still today: Tel Dan in Hebrew, or Tel el-Qadi in Arabic. It means “hill of the judge” in both, and it's actually the source of the Jordan's name. Jordan means *yarod dan* -- comes from, flows from the judge, flows from -- and so God descended and he said to them, "Rivers, you are dear to me, all three. Unite together and you will indeed become the most important stream." And that kind of became a theme for understanding how, even as people were talking about the conflict potential, everywhere you looked there were people talking about water, uniting together across boundaries, being willing to share, in a lot of cases, because there was no choice.

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The Middle East was the classic example. So I went, looking to investigate how water had been a source of conflict over history. And it has been -- tension, certainly, and small-scale violence -- but more so there has been explicit and implicit cooperation going back to the beginnings of the state which got me as the scientist starting to think, "Well, if that's true in the Middle East, that everybody is pointing to as the source of water wars, what's going on in the rest of the world?" And that turned out to be the case all over the free world where people were talking about conflict. India and Pakistan signed a treaty and it has held since 1960, and Azerbaijan and Armenia had been quietly negotiating and making their governments allow them to talk even when they won't talk about anything else, the Mekong Committee, everywhere you look around the world, there is this case of people being willing to talk about water when they won't talk about anything else.

So, a couple of things came out: one, that water is a wonderful way to have regional dialogue. It's an entry point that people are willing to enter. It's a language that people have in common. And when we talk about water, because it's connected to everything we do, we end up talking about our shared vision of a future and can use that as a way to have wonderful conversations at all scales, from international down to the local. The other lesson for me was that, as a scientist, we need to know way more before we start making projections about war and peace. And so, that launched for me a project called the Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database where we tried to compile the rich experience of people's interactions over water, both conflictive and cooperative. Brian Blankespoor is here. He was with us as a student for years and years and helped build this into a major facility. Now he does -- I don't know -- he runs the GIS for the World Bank or something like that, so it's been downhill, clearly, since leaving Oregon State. But the idea is that you need data and you need good technical understanding in order to have these very deep passionate conversations.

I think I've got a couple of minutes.

So, half of what I do is that. It's count stuff. It's looking at trends. It's looking at data. It's being able to make more accurate projections about what may or may not happen in the security realm. The other half of my time is spent as a practitioner in the room with generally angry people, trying to get them to talk about these issues, which got me interested in the second track in my career, which is how do we have those conversations better? And those of us trained in Western ADR are trained in a rational model -- the idea that conflict is

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about interests and when the interests of cooperation are greater than the interest of conflict, people will cooperate. That's nice but nonsense. Not nonsense; it works to a point, but anybody who has been involved in conflict knows -- anybody who's in a relationship -- that conflict is not necessarily all about rationality and that there's other sides to it. And so that got me really interested in this process, the transformative moments in discussions. There's a technical, political science term, the “aha” moment, when people in a room suddenly see things differently.

And so, as a scientist, I start to ask, "Well, how do we learn more about those moments of transformation?" And you look around for models and they don't exist in the rational world because in the rational world it's just about piling on the benefits. They exist in our experiences in the real world. If, God forbid, we get sick or somebody we know gets sick or we have a child and our world is suddenly transformed, I mean, in a moment, suddenly transformed. And -- and this was the hard part for me as a scientist to even think about -- and it exists in spiritual transformation, which leads to the very interesting set of questions: If there are these spiritual traditions around the world that, for millennia, have focused on transformation, are there contexts and lessons that we can learn from those constructs that can help do our jobs better in facilitating dialogue?

Now, two things happened at this time. One, I got tenure so I couldn't be fired for asking that question, and, two, I had a sabbatical so I could spend the following year going around the world, sitting in different spiritual contexts, learning about constructs of anger, learning about constructs of conflict, and learning about the tools and settings that people in these settings use to help aid in transformation with an eye toward using them in facilitation, mediation. So, this is now a whole second part of my work. It's funny. One week I'll spend a meeting talking about satellite photos of melting glaciers in the Himalayas and the next talking about helping to calm people's anger by matching their breathing and slowing it down. This is a Buddhist meditation technique that I've learned to use in conflict settings.

So, I think my time is just about up. These are the tracks that I've taken to get to this very kind of complex and holistic and, I think now, more balanced world for me in both having the grounded rational data to approach a problem, but also understand the less tangible, the more spiritual, the more esoteric side of the conversation.

I want to end with just one more brief story. It turns out that the Buddha was a water mediator. I don't know how many of you know that, but he actually did facilitate. There

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were two tribes who were fighting over a river in a classic water conflict. Buddha saw it from afar, instantly transported there, hovered above in the center of the river -- it's not something I've gotten down just yet -- and asked the warring parties, he said, "What are you fighting over?" "We're fighting over the water." "And what's the worth of the water?" "It's our livelihood, it's this, it's that." "Is the worth of the water greater than the worth of the blood you are about to spill?" And that stopped it on the spot.

Thank you very much.

[applause]

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