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Review of *Staying with Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes*

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THE BOOKSHELF

STAYING WITH CONFLICT: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ONGOING DISPUTES
(Bernard Mayer). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2009.

Reviewed by Carl Schneider

Bernie is at it again! And we can be thankful for that. For the past three decades, he has consistently provided leadership in our field. A central part of his work has been his invitation for us to rethink just what our field is. Through his work, he has offered us an expanded definition of our role.

Last time around, with *Beyond Neutrality*, he argued for a *broader* field—one that encompassed more roles for us than simply that of the lonely ‘neutral.’ Our involvement can be much more diverse, to include such roles as third-party, ally, and system roles. We need to see ourselves as “conflict engagement specialists,” helping people through the “entire life cycle of a conflict—prevention, . . . management, escalation, de-escalation, resolution and healing.”

This time, in *Staying with Conflict*, he wants us to consider how misleading and confining our tag line of “conflict resolution” is. So much of what we deal with cannot be resolved! If that is our self-concept, he argues, we will often be irrelevant in our work. We need to stop equating “progress with solutions.”

We would do better, he proposes, to think of ‘constructive engagement with conflict.’ So many of the important conflicts of both our personal and political life—for example, “those involving global climate change, human rights, limited resources . . . and values about families”—“don’t readily end,” because they are “embedded in structures, systems, values, or identity” and connected to “differentials in power, privilege, and responsibility.” Yet, “as conflict professionals we exhibit a strong tendency to ignore the ongoing aspects of these conflicts and to focus only on those aspects that can be resolved.”

That does not mean those conflicts are simply at impasse. “Enduring” conflicts are not the same as “intractable” conflicts. Such binary thinking dooms us into feeling ineffective, or trying for solutions that miss the mark.

Instead, it is *how* we do conflict that matters, especially when it comes to long-term conflicts. How we do them can escalate and worsen a conflict, leading to violence or defeat. If, instead, we help people prepare to “stay with conflict over time constructively,” they may “have a more measured response, be more likely to sustain themselves in a protracted conflict, accept incremental changes as necessary and positive, think strategically, and learn to work with power effectively—not fearing it or abusing it.”

In reading Bernie’s book two strong associations came to mind. One is the work of John Gottman, a leading researcher in family and marriage therapy. Gottman has urged practitioners to realize that most conflicts in marriage do not admit to having a solution. Instead, Gottman suggests, the human condition is that we all, in effect, choose a set of conflicts to live with in our relations—whether it is a morning vs. a late night person, family time vs.

personal time, or being parsimonious vs. generous. A good relationship, he contends, is one in which couples learn to *play* with the conflicts while recognizing that the differences do matter. Successful couples find a way to acknowledge the differences in a way that enables them to stay connected over time, while respectfully disagreeing. Gottman's work has transformed the field of marital therapy; Mayer invites a similar shift in our field.

The second association I had was to the pesky and persistent issue of *styles* of mediation. Though Bernie works out of a *facilitative* approach, in this work he has bridged a lot of the ideological impasses in the debate about styles. Facilitative mediation is enhanced and expanded in at least two significant ways.

First, he offers a strong caution that we can't always get to "yes." It is an ideological trap to think of ourselves simply as "problem-solvers." "The story we often tell is that conflict is a problem . . . that . . . can usually be fixed." We need, he urges, to let go of trying to reach an agreement as our primary role. "Instead of asking, 'What can we do to resolve . . . this conflict?'" we need to ask, "How can we help people . . . prepare to engage with this issue over time?" This approach, adds Mayer, is not about "separating the people from the problem." In enduring conflicts the two are often inseparable.

I believe Mayer has also gone a long way toward bridging the divide with transformative mediation, incorporating much that Bush and Folger have invited us to see in their work. In long-term conflicts, our attention, he urges, needs to be devoted to *how* the parties are doing the conflict as much as *what* they are conflicted about.

Our aim should be to help empower parties to be their best in engaging the conflict—neither shying away from it, nor over-reacting to it, but responding with "courage, vision, resources, skills, and stamina."

Mayer also urges that we integrate *narrative* mediation with facilitative mediation. We need, he states, "to work with disputants to construct conflict narratives that encourage an effective approach to long-term disputes." Mayer helped me integrate my interest in both framing and narrative mediation, when he suggested that *framing* issues in conflict means dealing with "altering the conflict *narrative*" (emphasis added).

Mayer has also reflected long and hard on the issue of power throughout his career. His chapter on "Using Power and Escalation" rejects the conflation of power with "aggression, coercion, or force," recognizing it instead as "the ability to accomplish one's goals and have an impact." This chapter has a valuable accompanying section titled "Effective Uses of Power." The reader will benefit from his perceptive comments on escalation: "Because escalation looks like jumping into a conflict, it is easy to overlook that it is essentially avoidant." "Escalation as a form of avoidance is fight as a means of flight." Gems like these are scattered throughout this book.

Bernie reminds us of the task in enduring conflicts: "Like the old Jewish proverb, I may not solve the problem. But I am responsible to engage the problem." This book will be both a textbook and an inspiration for those of us who deal with the hard stuff—the enduring conflicts. As always, thanks, Bernie.