Let's get awkward
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Let’s get awkward

In my early years as a career academic, I attended a conference for servant-leadership, and I recall distinctly a rather awkward moment. One of the keynote speakers had opened the floor for questions and a woman stood up from the audience and said two things. First, she commented on how curious it was that people find servant-leadership so revolutionary: women had been engaging in this form of leadership for generations. There was scattered laughter and applause in the room. Secondly, she commented on how the distinguished panel of keynote speakers was exclusively male and white. This time, there was a viscous moment of silence. For me, a person who tends to avoid conflict, this was excruciatingly awkward: but what a moment to relish. I admire this woman for having the courage to create a publicly awkward moment.

Conflict is awkward. We are experiencing these moments of awkwardness and discomfort increasingly, as the silenced masses leverage the tools of modern society both to expose the injustices entrenched and enacted through inequality, and to reveal the darkness and pain in the hearts of those who feel oppressed by enlightenment. The awkwardness of conflict is penetrating many areas of disagreement, as crisis after crisis sets in: whether a #metoo hashtag, a BLM protest, decrying ‘covidioy’, the public arena is flooded with awkward encounters of conflicting views and values. We are living in an age of crisis; yet crisis can bring key revelations as to the entwinement of human relationships and opportunities for transformation that failed (Branicki, 2020).

Echoing the words of Shann Ray Ferch in his chapter in this anthology: we are harmed. Indeed, we are harmed; we are all harmed. We are hurt; we are indignant; we are suffering. We are all harmed because we are all inherently vulnerable. We face challenges, among these, the struggle for equality—not just for women, but with an understanding of a critical feminist philosophy that strives toward dignity for all marginalized groups. To better
deal with these conflicts, we need better means to push through the awkwardness and get us to the other side without hurting each other: a consistent and intentional pursuit of integration. We need a language for taming conflict, holding environments for suspending vulnerability, and protocols for shaping resilience to ease the journey on rocky paths along which egos, hearts, minds, and souls are scattered.

People who wield political and economic power often appear to forget the vulnerable nature of humanity. They are under the illusion of immortality, existing in bubbles of false invincibility. Prime ministers, presidents, Hollywood moguls, and everyday toxic individuals permit themselves to harm others with hateful words and spiteful acts, dismissing their behavior as “jokes,” “banter,” “satire,” or “alternative truths.” But words hurt. Mere facial expressions hurt. The mere presence of an oppressor hurts. All forms of communication have intention, motivation, meaning and impact. Those who wield and enact power must recognize the impact of their language, and the moral imperative to dismantle inequality and division. If the masked knife-throwing magician no longer cares to avoid impaling the lovely assistant, don’t we need to ask ourselves: are our psyches evolving such that we no longer desire to escape harm and instead voraciously lust after schadenfreude? Even if we tire of “political correctness” we need people to stop being political-correctness snowflakes and start being more “woke” to the cult of care-lessness enacted through the collusion of social violence and systems of androcentricity.

The post-truth society is both blessed and plagued by the paradox of transparency, which reveals both individual worthiness and collective cruelty. Standing by as we watch a person be degraded, assaulted, even murdered is symbolic of the collusion of which we are all guilty through our ignorance, indifference, and inaction. Our globalized and technologically interconnected society has created a hyper-public town square of ubiquitous soap boxes. It has simultaneously empowered the masses to become their worst selves behind
masks of technology-enhanced anonymity. The solipsist creates anarchy and chaos by labelling everything except their own truth as “fake” and are so bold as to refuse to mask their toxicity. By daring to get awkward, those who shackle themselves in the stockades of social media, defying collusion to take a stand, subject themselves to invisible hands that freely and proudly sling rotting insults and putrefied death threats.

Marshall (2002) stated, “Integrity is doing the right thing when you don’t have to—when no one else is looking or will ever know” (p. 142). Curiously, despite technology enabling us all to be looking all the time, it seems collective integrity is fading, as the firing squads are shrouded in anonymity, firing at will for all who will look on. More than ever, in a post-care global arena, as we all throw ourselves to the proverbial lions, society needs a beacon. We need a code. A code for human potential, a code for embracing the social imperative of human existence and human survival. That beacon is the inalienable right to human dignity. May we vigorously pursue integration with intent and commitment by mounting the beacon of human dignity on a three-pillar foundation: appreciative inquiry, an ethic of care, and servant-leadership. Appreciative inquiry can provide the language for conflict mediation, servant-leadership—the culture, norm and protocol for resilience, and an ethic of care—the framework for managing vulnerability. This structure to uphold the beacon of human dignity should keep us right so that we can resist using conflict to destroy each other.

Crisis creates consequences for well-being and opportunities for learning. Instead of deploying weapons of mass division and mass humiliation we choose to deploy the tools of appreciative inquiry and commit to what is life affirming, not life destroying.

The task of AI is the penetrating search for what gives life, what fuels developmental potential, and what has deep meaning—even in the midst of the tragic. In so many times of disruption, there is always the
radically increased potential to summon our better humanity.

(Cooperrider & Fry, 2020, p. 269)

Gilligan (2011) challenged society to resist losing our humanity and losing the grounds that make us human: the capacity for empathy, for relationality—the capacity to care. We must practice caring responsiveness. The difference between a caring approach to crisis management and the traditional, rational approach lies first in the criteria for success: qualitative value (e.g., quality) of care and relationships versus a cost-benefit, cost-loss calculation of human and financial costs; second, in the aim or purpose of the crisis response: social transformation (e.g., learning and progress toward improving quality of life and social justice) versus a return to normalcy; and third, in the means or praxis of the response (e.g., ongoing attention to relationships versus performance goals) (Branicki, 2020). With a care ethics approach, communities can promote the stability, efficacy, connectedness and affirmative learning necessary to emerge stronger (Dückers et al., 2017).

In times of crisis, servant-leadership, not only has potential for meeting the emotional and psychological needs of its recipients, but can also enhance resilience:

Leaders with a high level of resilience are able to respond in positive ways to crises their organizations may encounter and, by exhibiting that resilience and those positive responses, are able to increase the level of resilience of those around them. (Eliot, p. 12)

The inherent core of all ethical action must be to do no harm; and the inherent core of leadership must be to empower each other, enhance relationality, and build resilience. The leaders we choose must commit to deploying appreciative inquiry, servant-leadership, and an ethic of care to harness the generativity of conflict to strengthen our collective values, including the pursuit of equality.
With this anthology, we aspire to get awkward and raise awareness of the crisis of care exemplified in leadership inequality. We aspire to challenge assumptions of neoliberal capitalism and provide insight into the alternative pathways that appreciative inquiry, care ethics, and servant-leadership can provide both in times of crisis and in times of perceived normalcy. It is our hope with *Servant-Leadership, Feminism, and Gender Well-Being* to inspire and equip our readers with language to approach conflict with courage, to stand and create the awkwardness we need to evolve.

—Kae Reynolds, 2020

**References**


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