

What might a life of learning require?



*Kerry Coastline, Ireland, 2024
Anita Schriver*

Prelude

“In my early days as a (conflict resolution) practitioner... I was a Lederachian, you know, zealot. It was biblical for me. I was like this is The Solution because I had come from community-based conflict resolution that was very prescriptive and the part of the field that he (Lederach) was critiquing. So, I had a complete religious conversion to Lederachianism and I was like, ‘This is the solution to doing peacebuilding right.’ Later, I was in Beirut doing some work with Iraqis on peacebuilding and I was sitting with a Lebanese-Armenian peacebuilder... one of the few people doing real active peacebuilding (there) at that time. We’re sitting in this cafe in Beirut, and he’s smoking and we’re having strong coffee and I was preaching this elicitive approach. I felt like I was speaking the right language and he said ‘Yeah that’s bullshit.’ And I was so shocked. Then I was like, ‘What would you... what do you mean? I’m showing up. I’m anti-colonial. I’m deconstructing. This is dialogic. This is Freirean and this is Foucauldian’ He’s like ‘That’s insane. If you show up and you don’t say what you think and what you know, it’s essentially saying that we as people in this space are so stupid that we can’t differentiate between something that’s good for us and bad for us.

It really denigrates our agency to withhold.' And I was like 'Oh my gosh. So, what do I do?' I'll never forget that conversation, because it really shocked me. I'd had a shock when I read Lederach in 1999 and I had another shock in 2003 talking to an actual peacebuilder in Lebanon, who was living this work."

- Global Peacebuilder

1.

I recently became a post-script author.

A PS scribe is one who adds a few notes from experience, or perhaps expertise, to a well-developed and researched draft article that unexpectedly arrives by email, and who then graciously receives an offer to become a joint author.

2.

I recently re-faced the bullshit meter.

For a practitioner-scholar, the BS meter arrives when a concept, an idea, a theory of change you hold dear and have ventured to offer the world, faces the simple response: *That does not hold. The emperor has no clothes!*

3.

The opening citation in this dispatch certainly caught my attention when I first read it. This quote is also the first citation in an [academic article](#) developed by the research team of Peter Coleman, Lan H. Phan, and Anupriya Kukreja.

4.

Peter sent their near final draft asking if I had any thoughts or responses to their findings. We had been in

conversation for some time around their interest in exploring how elicitive approaches to peacebuilding have evolved since I first published the conceptual framework on this topic in the 1990s.

I sent the team an email. You can read that first response nearly verbatim at the end of [the article](#) now published in The Negotiation Journal. A few days later, they suggested I join them as a co-author.

In one small exchange I became a PS author facing the BS meter!

5.

If we are lucky in life as peacebuilders, social change activists, practitioners, researchers, and theorists, good questions and challenges to our thinking and practice will show up early and often throughout a career.

Good BS meters, challenges to our views, will always be a gift – especially when they come from people with deep practical experience.

When that meter does show up, what matters most is rarely the *content of response* but rather the *quality of respect* we bring to our complex and ever-expanding journey of discovery, practice, and knowledge. My best guides and mentors taught me that learning is not what we do. Learning is what we embody.

That is what I mean by respect.

6.

Respect (v) from the Latin *specere*, to look at; *re-specere*, to turn and look again; from which other parallel words are derived such as inspect (to peer into or examine); spectator

(to watch something); prospect (to look forward); and aspect (a specific thing to look at).

7.

Living into that quality of respect is not easy.

A life of learning requires holding courage and humility together – the courage to speak to what we hold dear and the humility to explore what remains uncertain and what is challenged. We should never be fearful to let our understanding deepen when the vastness of the complexity we inhabit confronts our lived experience and cherished truths.

This is why I have always felt that the BS meter offers a gift, but only if I can live into four simple steps. Stop. Turn. Look again. Look inside again.

8.

The discussion around this research paper took me back to my experiences in the 1980s and the struggles to arrive at the conceptual framework I eventually published in the book [*Preparing for Peace*](#) (1994), my first book in English.

One key aspect of this team's finding was that prescriptive approaches still dominate much of our field and practice. The gist of my response focused on how with time and through tough questions, enduring relationships, and hard-won experience, my own thinking became clearer about the complexities of crossing cultures and understanding privilege and power. While nuanced, I still hold to the need for transparent learning, discovery together, and an elicitive-oriented approach to transformation.

9.

It has now been a year since I wrote the more detailed response you can read in the article. I have been mulling over a few things about humility and truth, grace and steadfastness. Odd polarities that seem in short supply these days. I suppose these keep coming round because they pose a life-long wisdom inquiry.

How do we hold to the insights we have gained while remaining open to discovery of that which still emerges?

It may be captured in a simple phrase: Hold your truth lightly and hold fast to mutually seeking the light.

10.

One note on what this might mean. Without the *mutuality* no amount of enlightenment will deepen enduring understanding and change.

11.

Maybe visuals offer some help. Two photos accompany this dispatch. The first by extraordinary photographer Anita Schriver captures vertical sunlight landing on the sea just off the Kerry Coastline. The second, my photo that catches a moonset one early morning in late winter on a pond near our home in Colorado.

These photos might add something to the question of how to hold truth while committing to the unfolding pathway.

If truth lands vertically, like the light creating a circle amidst a swirling sea, our response to being challenged by a different view or facing sharp criticism can easily tilt toward locking down and defending our known light as the only Truth.

On the other hand, surrounded by depths and breadth of unknowns around us, the moonset offers something invitational, like an opening – the permanent impermanence that the next step is always just the beginning.

Both involve perceived and received light. Both sit on moving water. One suggests a bubble, one a pathway.



12.

With that in mind, I wish you light, unfoldings, and a wealth of meaningful BS meters for many years to come.

Our Century needs them.

P.S.

Maybe this last photo of my grandchildren, taken by my daughter Angie, captures what learning together means. Beginners mind. Awe. Wonder. And openness to the world of learning that lies before us...



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