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A FRAMEWORK FOR RESOLVING CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

> *Reframing is one of the greatest powers you have as a negotiator.*
> *The way to change the game is to change the frame.*
> William Ury[1]

Introduction

This paper reframes cultural and religious tensions. Toward allowing us collectively to organize our thinking and work through the underlying issues more systematically, we offer two models: a four-level schematic developed by Houston, which we have adapted and apply to the dynamic of culture, and the Model of Positive Opposites developed by Mihaloew and adapted for this purpose.

No matter what problems exist in particular regions of the world, the cultural climate overall is fraught with tension. Instead of dissipating with globalization, cultural and religious tensions are growing more acute. There is urgent critical need for vision and leadership that will allow us to resolve the underlying issues and relieve the tension.

The Model of Positive Opposites transforms opposition from a feared negative into a potentiated positive. People generally distrust and malign their opponents, and thinking in terms of positive opposites moves combative energy towards mutual consideration rather than entrenched polarization. Resolution is possible because we no longer see the opposition as wrong, bad, or evil, but functionally positive, different, and useful.

Intrinsic to the Model of Positive Opposites is the Law of Overcoming via compensation.[2] Psychologically, if we identify with one side we tend to devalue the other. For instance, one who values diligence (column 2 below) may say the opposite is sloth or laziness (4), which has a negative value. The positive opposite of diligence could be leisure or spontaneity (3), but instead of admitting the need for leisure, the person who values diligence may repress this need out of a fear of being seen as slothful or lazy and may over-compensate by obsessive diligence (1).

1	2	3	4
negative excess	**(positive value**	**positive value)**	**negative excess**
compulsive	diligence	leisure	sloth, laziness
workaholic	discipline	spontaneous	unfocused
superior attitude	reliable	playful	irresponsible

obsessive   industrious   contemplative   unengaged

   The central premise of the Model of Positive Opposites is that animosities, acrimonies, and resistances typically result from unconsciously over-compensating (1) for a positive value (3) *perceived* as a negative (4). When a positive value goes into negative excess and people respond to one another from the extremist positions, the resulting dynamic is self-reinforcing and quickly builds from divergence to violence as a means, not of solving the impasse, but of self-preservation through *ad hominem* tactics.

   In mediation, the Model of Positive Opposites asks two questions. The first, *what is the opposite of your (2) assertion/position*, generally elicits the negative excess (4). The second question, *what is the opposite of your assertion/position that is still positive*, is difficult for most people to answer until they are able to view opposition as beneficial. The common response, when one sees the values espoused by one's opponent (3) are valid, is to feel vulnerable and threatened, because these values correspond to a repressed, disowned, and devalued part of oneself that one fears and resists admitting into consciousness.

   Defensiveness makes conflict resolution difficult. Self-protectionism rests on unconscious core issues[3] that must become conscious to allow meaningful engagement. To move beyond conflict, each opponent must see that opening to the other can bring larger, more nourishing benefits than maintaining their defenses. As defensiveness diminishes, by acknowledging that the values the other espouses are as functional and rational as one's own (a positive opposite), the relationship tone or cultural climate gradually shifts from acrimonious, belligerent, stressful, and combative into tolerating, allowing, accepting, and finally honoring.

   This paper separates the issues underlying global tensions into categories: sensory/physical, psychological/historical, mythic/symbolic, and integral/unitive.[4] Resolving tensions in each category requires different approaches. Techniques that work on the sensory/physical level are not effective on the psychological/historical level, and so forth. The paper briefly mentions techniques that have proven effective on each level, but does not expound on them.

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I: Sensory/Physical Level

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   The Sensory/Physical category involves tensions related to physical needs, environment, and senses, such as access to food, water, shelter, fuel, and safety; encroachment on the sense of space; noise, air, and water pollution; and natural responses to strangers with different language, customs and habits. For example:

   Today, more than one billion people worldwide lack potable water. Rivers in Africa and Asia are drying up, and people are "fighting over the small amount that is left." In China, a third of the people lack water that is safe to use. In India, two thirds lack water. In the Middle East, the water table in the West Bank is "dropping and tensions are rising."[5] Pearce notes the "wider problem between the Palestinians and the Israelis won't be solved until the water problem is solved."[6]

   How the Model of Positive Opposites applies in this situation:

1	**2**	**3**	**4**
negative excess	**(positive value**	**positive value)**	**negative excess**
2:		3:	4:
deprivation	dependent on water	free to use water	take for granted
apathy/violence	physical survival	economic survival	slave to system
disease	need clean water	industry	pollution

no judgment   common humanity   power to decide   domineering

  The issues underlying water related tensions are global. Even in Israel and Palestine, the opposition stems from a deeper ambivalence in the world body as a whole. The opponent is not external, but internal to humankind. We all depend on clean water for our physical survival and well-being. Yet, like Chinese farmer He Chunxiang, "We have to use polluted water to irrigate the fields. We know we are being poisoned by eating the grain. What can we do? We can't just wait to starve to death."[7] The powers that are wreaking havoc with the safety of our habitat have free reign because collectively we do not know how to control the economic system in a way that ensures our physical well-being and sustainability. The world body has the knowledge and technical acumen necessary to create a sustainable system. What we lack is the wanting to, without which there is no motivation and no will.[8] This lack of motivation rests on core issues,[9] which we need to identify for lasting solutions to emerge.

  Thus, the task is not only to apply the knowledge necessary to create a sustainable system but, more crucially, to resurrect humanity's sense of self-worth and desire to live, without going into negative excess. Here, the Model of Positive Opposites provides a means to identify the crucial balance.

  Techniques that have proven effective in relieving tensions on the sensory/physical level include dialogue, Appreciative Inquiry,[10] Heart Math,[11] Open Space,[12] Non-violent Communication,[13] and the Open Question Approach,[14] which engender respectful communication and communal problem solving. Education to develop understanding is, of course, the most powerful technique.

II: Psychological/Historical Level

  The psychological/historical category involves tensions related to historical animosity, subjugation, projection, the shadow dynamic, and sense of belonging. Examples of tensions resulting from historical traumas are regrettably common and visible. In contrast, projection and the shadow dynamic are generally unconscious and invisible. To illustrate the latter, persons who value diligence may repress in themselves the need for leisure out of fear that expressing the need would mean they are slothful and lazy. The shadow dynamic occurs when someone comes along who embodies the repressed part. The diligent person will tend to project onto that person the feelings of distrust and rejection behind the repressed value, and, if the feelings are intense enough, the diligent person may attack the person who embodies the repressed value, sensing the "other" does not belong. In this respect, one could argue the Nazi belief that Jews do not belong in the world body could be an expression of humanity's shadow. The question is what disowned or repressed part is seeking expression through the projection? The following example illustrates tensions on the psychological/historical level.

  The trans-Atlantic slave trade between Africa, Europe and the Americas "was supported by a racist ideology that saw white people as being the most perfectly developed and blacks as being the bottom of the ladder." This ideology was codified and enforced as an edict by Louis XIV of France in 1685, and was adopted in the American territory of Louisiana in 1724. The Code Noir defined slaves as "moveable property" and "people unfit to possess property or contract in their own right." The legacy of the Code Noir and the slave trade, which brutally removed millions of Africans from their homeland, "is still burdening the descendents of these stolen people, and the continent that was their home."[15]

  An example of the lingering burden is the story of Shaquanda Cotton, a 14-year-old African American girl in Texas, USA, arrested for shoving a hall monitor in her school.

Convicted in March 2006 of "assault on a public servant," the judge sentenced Cotton to a prison term of "up to seven years." Three months earlier, the same judge gave a sentence of probation to a 14-year-old Caucasian girl convicted of arson for burning down her family's home.[16]

Again, the question is what shadow content—what repressed, reviled, and disowned part—seeks expression through the blatant projections of racism. The Positive Opposites diagram can help identify the shadow content.

1 negative excess	2 (positive value	3 positive value)	4 negative excess
inferiority complex	"black"	"white"	superior attitude
superstition	soul	reason	analyze to death
distrust	natural rhythm	civilization	uptight/formulaic
impoverished	generous spirit	materialist	decadent/opulent
subservience	humility	abstract mind rarified	

On the psychological/historical level, it appears the same rules inhere in the psyche on every level of complexity, from the psychodynamics of the individual, to the family dynamic, to the global holon and the dynamic of culture. A basic law of psychology is that until a shadow content is de-repressed and integrated into consciousness it is projected.[17] Thus, to resolve racial tensions in the dynamic of culture requires external adjustments in the social structures and institutions that reflect the historical influence of the Code Noir and slavery, but more significantly, resolution requires identifying and integrating the repressed part—the shadow content—into consciousness. We must ask difficult questions. What part of human nature are we collectively repressing? Why are we repressing it and why are persons of color carrying the projection? Strategically, to resolve cultural and religious tensions we must address issues in both the external and internal realms.

Techniques that have proven effective in relieving tensions on the psychological/historical level include initiatives such as Swamp Gravy (www.swampgravy.com) and the Truth & Reconciliation process developed in South Africa. Again, education is the most powerful tool. Here it is promising to note, in 2006, the U N General Assembly adopted a resolution commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The resolution acknowledges the painful legacy of slavery and urges Member States to develop programs to "educate and inculcate in future generations an understanding of the lessons, history and consequences of the transatlantic slave trade."[18]

III: Mythic/Symbolic Level

The mythic/symbolic category involves issues related to story fields, purpose, meaning, identity, role, and archetypal patterning in the dynamic of culture. *Story fields* are "fields of influence or patterns of dynamic potential that permeate psychosocial space and influence the lives of those connected to them. A story field paints a particular picture of how life is or should be, and shapes the life within its range into its image,"[19] as the story field of creationism shapes the lives of Christians. The following example illustrates tension on this level.

In May 2007, a Creation Museum opened in Kentucky, USA. The aim of the museum is "to bring Genesis—the first book of the Bible—to life for all ages, and promote the belief that the Earth is less than 10,000 years old."[20] According to Ham, the museum founder, the aim is to rebut the scientific story of evolution. "We're going to show you that we can make sense of the different people groups; we can make sense of fossils; we can make sense of what you see in the world."[21] For Christians living in the story field of creationism, "this museum provides a kind of

relief: Finally the world is being shown as it really is, without the distortions of secularism and natural selection."[22]

On the opposite side, Dawson, curator at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History says, "Genesis is a tale that was handed down for generations by people who really knew nothing about science, who knew nothing about natural history, and certainly knew nothing about what fossils are."[23] In *The God Delusion,* Dawkins writes, "Natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance."[24] Silver claims, "Darwin's explanation of how and why evolution exists … completely eliminates any role for God in the process."[25] Dawkins clarifies, "As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debouches the scientific enterprise."[26]

The practical ramifications of this tension are tremendous. Polls show about "40% of Americans believe God created man in his present form, sometime in the last 10,000 years,"[27] and 59% believe world events will unfold in the pattern described in the book of Revelation.[28] To the extent that such beliefs shape U. S. policies and responses to world events, the story field of creationism is having an effect on the dynamic of culture, which extends far beyond the boundaries of the United States. Opposition between monotheism and secularism, between those who consciously live in conformance with divine law and those who live in conformance with the laws of Nature, is central to the friction between the secular world and the Islamic world.[29] We live at the interface where worlds intersect, and differences between our story fields is a root source of tensions at this intersection.

Regarding the opposition between evolutionists and creationists, a Positive Opposites diagram might yield the following.

1	2	3	4
negative excess	**(positive value**	**positive value)**	**negative excess**
2:		3:	4:
zealous	creationism	evolution	dismissive
terrorist acts	trust/faith	proof/evidence	blind to soul logic
dogma	divine law	law of nature	no meaning
exclusive/superiority	divine selection	natural selection	no purpose
distrust/devalue body	spiritual essence	material form	attached to object

For a person living within the story field of creationism, it would seem a breach of faith to admit the positive value of evolution as a means of defining one's self, and vice verse. The idea of acknowledging the validity of evolution makes creationists feel vulnerable and threatened; as the idea of acknowledging the positive value of creationism makes evolutionists feel vulnerable and threatened. The threat is potential annihilation or loss of identity, and the natural tendency to overcompensate drives both sides into negative excess. Instead of valuing the other and holding the tension of opposites, creationists and evolutionists relate to one other from the extremist positions, which wreaks havoc in the dynamic of culture.

The challenge on the mythic/symbolic level is creating a context that allows each side to see the value of the other. The challenge is multi-dimensional. A story field is an unfolding narrative, and the value of a narrative generally remains invisible until the story develops to the point where the thematic tensions are resolved. Perhaps for humankind to see value of both creationism *and* evolution, the story of Creation and the story of evolution must unfold a bit further. We keep telling ourselves the two stories are incompatible and irreconcilable, but time

may prove us wrong. If resolving cultural and religious tensions on the mythic/symbolic level depends on giving birth to meaning gestating in the womb of time, we have a hand in the delivery but not in the timing.

In addition, for the world to see the positive value of narratives like the history of slavery, racial segregation and integration, these stories must be retold in a way that brings home the positive meaning. This is a difficult and delicate task, because stories such stories touch on aspects of human nature about which we collectively are strongly ambivalent.

Techniques for resolving tensions on the mythic/symbolic level entail cultural narratives. "Often a breakdown within a culture or society occurs because the story has been lost or caught up in the frustration of current events. To renew a person or a culture is to renew, charge, change and deepen their story."[30] For example, the story of racism needs to be changed; internally in how people see themselves and others and externally in terms of the structures of society. Specific techniques for changing communally perpetuated stories include exercises such as those used by Houston in her work with community leaders around the world under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program.[31]

IV: Unitive/Integral Level

The unitive/integral category involves issues related to unity and diversity, integration and differentiation, completion and dissociation, and balance. The world body is comprised of many parts. For the dynamic of culture to be fully enlivened—for the world body to experience its full vitality and completeness—each part must contribute fully. No part can be repressed, disowned, dissociated, split-off, reviled, or subjugated. The question is how can we integrate all parts of the world body into a cohesive whole without sacrificing, negating, or weakening the uniqueness of the separate parts?

Researchers in organizational dynamics and leadership say that a shared vision of the goal,[32] a vision of what we want to create,[33] is the key to integration. The lack of alignment with the vision of what we want to create results in "deep incoherence"[34] in the dynamic of culture. Senge explains:

> By focusing on the "purpose story"—the larger explanation of why the organization exists and where it is trying to head—leaders add an additional dimension of meaning. They provide what philosophy calls a "teleological explanation—an understanding of what we are trying to become. When people throughout an organization come to share in a larger sense of purpose, they are united in a common destiny. They have a sense of continuity and identity not achievable in any other way."[35]

Currently, we lack a shared vision of our goal. The challenge is to articulate a purpose story that resonates with all parts of the world body and elicits a sense of common destiny. By definition, such a story cannot enunciate interests endemic to only a portion of the world body, at the exclusion of all the rest, but must divine our most deeply held *common* interests, hopes, expectations, and aspirations. For example, the vision of what we are working to create cannot affirm the value of creationism, without also affirming the value of science. At this point, it seems most likely an overarching purpose story will develop through an understanding of the creative process and our creative purpose—an understanding of how, why, and what we are trying to create in the world and the roles different people and groups perform in this process.

Balance is an issue on all four levels, but the issue has added import on the unitive/integral level because here we are dealing with a dimension of otherness commonly attributed to divine Providence. Understanding the dynamic of culture as a creative process entails awareness that the dynamic is self-organizing. "The creative process is an intelligence

that knows where it has to go."[36] McNiff explains, "Trust in the process assumes that there is a force that moves within a group, an individual, or a situation that is distinctly 'other' and not subject to control. 'It' finds the way through problems and complex interactions among people and as well as through conflicting forces within ourselves."[37]

Globalization is raising issues on the unitive/integral level. The following Positive Opposites diagram illustrates some of the tensions.

1 negative excess	2 (positive value	3 positive value)	4 negative excess	
boredom	unity	diversity	anarchy	
mish-mash	integration	differentiation	segregation	no voice
loss of autonomy	self-organization	free will/choice	unrelated	
can't see trees	non-local	local	can't see forest	
tyranny of commons	communism	capitalism	unbridled	

Balance is the ability to hold the tension of opposites (2 and 3) in a creative synthesis, without going into negative excess. An advantage on the unitive/integral level is being able to tell when the world body is out of balance and knowing how to remedy the situation. Living in negative excess is like a voice out of pitch. Living one-sidedly, entrenched in extremist positions (1 and 4), produces tension and anxiety and gives rise to *patterns in the dynamic of culture* that on a vast scale match those described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*[38] used by psychologists and psychiatrists. Existing patterns in the dynamic of culture replicate the patterns that manifest in individuals in conditions of neurotic inner conflict, dissociation, splitting, and borderline disorder. Primarily, such patterns in the dynamic of culture indicate humankind is out of balance.

Coming into balance requires a new kind of trust. For generations, humankind has worked to control Nature—the medium of life. Now, the challenge is to surrender our controlling attitude. However, the idea of relaxing our hold on reality is very threatening, for in our obedience to reason, we fear if we let-go, the world situation will spiral out-of-control and devolve into anarchy or utter insanity. Fortunately, we have immediate feedback to tell when we find the right balance. Just as the voice when it finds perfect pitch is free of tension, the world body becomes free of tension with creative synthesis. Synchronicities affirm the alignment[39] and life takes on a timeless quality, a sense of being in the flow.[40] Objectively, the somatic indicator of the proper balance is that world affairs run smoothly and the symptoms of excessive pressure and tension disappear.

Techniques for resolving tensions on the unitive/integral level require a two-pronged approach involving the external objective and internal subjective realms. Resolution that does not involve both realms cannot endure and be sustained. Thus, for example, efforts to treat the external symptoms of racism, by removing visible signs of systemic imbalance in the justice system, education system, and so on, are doomed to failure unless we also integrate into consciousness the repressed shadow content underlying the subjective projection.

Conclusion

The framework outlined above offers a systematic approach. Houston's four-level schematic and Mihaloew's Model of Positive Opposites have proven effective in helping individuals, couples, families, and organizations sort through and resolve issues, and have changed the ways people perceive, enter, and handle disputes. While this approach will not work in every configuration of conflict, it brings out an internal layer of understanding needed in order

for cultural and religious tensions to dissipate in the dynamic of culture.

      Primary challenges to this approach are the skill it takes to encourage conflicting participants to move into deeper areas of reflection rather than staying entrenched, and the ability to recognize and honor participants so impacted by past traumas they simply cannot develop empathy toward their opponents. Mediators need a multi-partial (not impartial) attitude and respect for the intrinsic value of intransigence as a real and therefore legitimate expression of the unconscious shadow dynamic. Persons who "act-out" and disrupt the smooth running of society perform the unenviable role of forcing us collectively to notice, examine, accept, and learn to love parts of human nature and the world body that we currently distrust, disown, and repress. Until we integrate such parts into consciousness, cultural and religious tensions will continue to exacerbate the dynamic of culture.

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