

Detach! Weak Ties Can Further Social Peace

Section in Chapter 8 “The Humiliation Antidote,” in Lindner, Evelin G. (2006), *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict*, Westport, CT, London: Greenwood Press and Praeger Publishers, pp. 143-146

Mandela’s example seems almost unattainable to most of us. How can one turn even one’s prison guards into friends? One place to start in our search for personal maturity and social peace is to foster the ability to form *weaker ties* as opposed to too *close* and too *hot* ties – within ourselves and our emotions, with others, and with the world in general.

Having *many weak ties*, instead of *a few strong ones*, seems to offer certain advantages in social relationships. Mark S. Granovetterⁱ did research on whether people find jobs through strong or weak social ties. Granovetter builds on Tönnies’ differentiation of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*,ⁱⁱ explaining that in a *Gemeinschaft* people have strong ties and share norms so thoroughly that little effort is needed to gauge the intentions of others. Such settings do not allow for much individual autonomy and are easily disrupted by even minimal dissent. Granovetter suggests having many weak ties to a number of other people provides more individual autonomy.

Robert came to me as a client because he was unhappy in his work. He had sacrificed 25 years to his company and had always been extremely loyal. Now, older employees like him were being bullied out to cut costs.

I have put my soul into the company – I *was* the company – and how does company thank me? My loyalty is trampled on! My whole life’s sacrifice is thrown away. I am so enraged I could set the factory on fire! The more I think about it, the more upset I get. The only solace is my brother-in-law. He has an acquaintance, who

has another acquaintance, and they just started a new enterprise and might need me as a consultant. When I imagine an interesting future with this company, I feel better. But, I get upset again whenever I remember what my old company did to me.

Humiliation in the past captures Robert's attention obsessively and only paying attention to a better future releases him. Some of the weak ties in his social environment open the door to that future. On the global level, knowledge, an expandable resource, and numerous weak global ties – rather than belonging to a closed community – may help protect people from clinging in malign ways to local narratives of humiliation.

It is beneficial to loosen links in other realms of life as well, not least in the emotional realm. Michael Harris Bond, cross-cultural psychologist at Chinese University of Hong Kong, researched the length of time emotions are felt by people in different cultures and how this correlates with the level of homicide in each culture. He writes, "...countries populated by persons who experience emotions for greater lengths of time would, on average, commit more homicide."ⁱⁱⁱ Bond's findings indicate that it is advantageous for social peace to forge cultures that promote *shorter* and thus *weaker* attachments to emotions. Weaker ties are more supple and flexible, less rigid and obsessive, enabling people to *cool down* faster, to perform calmer evaluations of situations, to choose calmly which emotions to hold on to and which to abandon, and to refrain from uncontrolled eruptions into *hot* aggression.

Sometimes it is more important to forget than to remember, at least in the sense Miroslav Volf^{iv} defines forgetting. He is an academician, theologian, and native Croatian, writing from his experience as a teacher in Croatia during the war in former Yugoslavia. He recommends forgetting as an active act of nonremembering. A person who non-remembers, according to Volf, chooses to remember the past, its grievances, and its humiliations, but to forgive and purposively embrace the former enemy in an act of preservation and transformation.

Alistair Little, a former Ulster Loyalist terrorist, murdered a Catholic man on behalf of the Ulster Volunteer Force in Northern Ireland when he was 17, served 12 years in prison, and subsequently renounced violence.^v Early on, Little felt compelled to devote his life to the plight of his people, to "teach" *the enemy* that he could not perpetrate humiliation and murder without cost. As he matured, he disengaged from this *hot* attachment, acquired a larger horizon, and *cooled down*. He regrets what he has done and maintains that his degree of maturity – he calls it *tolerance* – is now greater than that of many of his friends. He can, for example, tolerate the shortcomings of the peace process. Many of his friends get enraged by details they perceive as unacceptably humiliating, "compelling" them to want to call the peace process off, he reports. He understands that his greatest contribution is to help *cool* the situation, not heat it up further. He has disengaged from "automatic" identification with history's fault lines and helps now build a new social and psychological contract with the other side to replace the old

misunderstood and soured one. He has learned to dismantle psychological mechanisms that facilitate atrocities.

Searching for “roots” may sometimes attach people too tightly to the past, when what we need to focus on is a shared sustainable future. It seems more beneficial to strengthen attachments to constructive visions of the future and to weaken ties to destructive visions of the past, particularly to pasts that call for revenge for bygone humiliations. Peaceful social relations call for weak and flexible bonds with regard to memories, roots, the past, and cultural differences as well as somewhat stronger ties to constructive and common visions of the future. Earth citizens might use the sunflower as a model for constructing their identities – in the middle a large common ground of shared humanity and at the periphery numerous flower petals signifying the diversity of idiosyncratic personal attachments and identifications: I may love Buddhism and cherish this attachment on an equal level with my love for Christianity, or I may hold my love for Asia alongside my attachments to America, all embedded into my core identity as a human being. When asked, “Who are you?” or “Where are you from?” I could reply, “I am a human being from planet Earth, and this is my primary identity. Apart from that I have a great number of emotional ties to different geographical regions on this planet, to different people from everywhere, and to different occupational, intellectual, and spiritual realms, however, all this is secondary to me being a human being.” We need to think in layers of identity, with commonalities forming the highest order of identity, and differences the lowest. Universality can contain diversity, but diversity cannot always contain commonality. World peace requires us to stop giving priority to differences. As long as I believe that my culture is separated from yours by an unbridgeable gulf, we are going to have a problem. Only when I make clear that *my* being different does not threaten *us* as human beings who are equal in dignity, can I invite *you* to celebrate our diversity together.

By the same token, disagreement can be constrained to the peripheries of identities and identifications and must not be essentialized. Did the Taliban have to blow up two enormous Buddhist statues, dating to the third or early fourth century and sculpted from a cliff overlooking Bamian, in order to introduce “superior Islam” in Afghanistan? Robin Cook disagreed with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the necessity of the 2003 Iraq war. However, did he demand that Blair step down, or did he plan an assassination? There was no need to destroy Buddhist statues or Tony Blair physically to send the intended message.

Incidentally, war is a minefield for “messages.” The incursion of American tanks into Baghdad was designed as a “show of force to send a powerful message to the Iraqi people and their leaders.” It seems that “powerful messages of courage and resolve” would benefit from being conveyed without physical and material destruction.

Developing many weaker ties – as opposed to a few dominating ones – allows for a new and stronger “frame” for personal autonomy (a concept not to be confused with rugged individualism). Erving Goffman,^{vi} an “ethnographer of the self,” has described how people negotiate and validate identities in face-to-face meetings and establish “frames” within which they evaluate the meaning of their encounters. Developing many weaker ties allows for the installment of strong *personal manager* or *self-government*, akin to the *third factor* proposed by Eileen Borris.^{vii} She describes a *third factor* as an element of strength and faith that can be labeled in a variety of ways, such as closeness to divinity, appreciation of compassion, or faith in shared humanity. *Mindfulness*, a Buddhist concept, carries similar connotations. Victor Frankl’s^{viii} notion of *self-observation* in the framework of *logotherapy* is related, as well.

How did Mandela acquire his unique mixture of *humility* and *pride*? Perhaps there is no recipe, but perhaps we can still learn from his experience. Flexible and weak ties to one’s emotions and past experiences and flexible and weak ties to a great number of fellow beings seem to be advantageous for social peace. Robert Jay Lifton calls this kind of personality the flexible *protean self*.^{ix} Conversely, being tightly integrated into few and homogeneous social bonds, rigidly attached to identities of difference that foreclose common ground appears less propitious for the peaceful maintenance of social cohesion. Little’s example shows what it means to grow up. He transformed into a courageous adult who took charge and stepped out of being caught in historic victimhood. His new approach entails humility, warmth, and respect, all of which he uses to form links between himself and fellow human beings and to sustain these relationships in spite of conflicts, misunderstandings, and differing views. Being an adult person means having a *self-government* that treats both self and others with calm respect and warmth. It is the task of all players in the *global village* to forge stronger ties to common ground and a constructive future and weaken and marginalize those ties that obsessively link up with painful pasts.

Social identity that furthers social peace could be envisaged as layered like a sunflower. The core is a person’s belonging to humankind. At the periphery, in a loose fashion, are multiple diverse cultural identities. Thus, in the same individual or group, a strong identity of global human unity may combine with comparably weaker ties to local cultural diversity, enabling diversity to flourish in an inclusive way.

ⁱ Granovetter, 1973.

ⁱⁱ Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) was a major contributor to sociological theory and field studies. Tönnies is best known for his distinction between two types of social groups — *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bond, 2004, p. 67.

^{iv} Volf, 1996.

^v On May 23, 2002, he was interviewed by Tim Sebastian in BBC World *HARDtalk*.

^{vi} Goffman, 1974.

^{vii} Borris, 2000.

^{viii} Frankl, 1963.

^{ix} Lifton, 1999.