

Mark Binder's The Art of Harmony— a Discussion Guide

Stories and essays to help resolve conflicts

by Beth Hellman

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If you have any questions, comments or suggestions

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This guide is to help promote discussion from the program or the book, "The art of Harmony." If you have suggestions or ideas to improve the guide, please send us an email and we may add it to the next edition

A Note from Mark Binder

I have spent many years studying, practicing and teaching a "martial art for peace and harmony." A strange concept, you'll have to agree. It's not, "I'm going to beat you up for peace." Or even the old "Mutually Assured Destruction" model of peace keeping. For me, the art of harmony is something both subtle and powerful.

The steps are simple. Start with yourself and your center. Learn and discover what you intend to happen. Create a relationship with "the other." Align them with your goal. Go. You'll either succeed or fail. Either way, let go and move on.

This sounds kind of abstract and a little fuzzy written down.

In practice, each one of those steps done by itself is incredibly powerful.

For example, if someone is shouting or disruptive, taking a moment to "center" yourself produces a different result from reacting immediately. If a student tries to talk her way out of a bullying situation but fails, if she stays stuck in the failure she is lost, but if she can move on, then she can learn a new strategy and become stronger.

When we put these possibilities together as a series of actions, regardless of the order, then the old expected outcome vanishes and new options emerge.

— Mark Binder, Providence, RI

Questions and Conversation Starters

After these few beginning questions, we have arranged these questions and conversation starters by chapter. Obviously, you don't have to use them all. Remember: during brainstorming, there are no "right" answers, only ideas and possibilities. If someone centers themselves by making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, that's marvelous!

What does Harmony?

How do you know harmony? Is it possible to create harmony? Is harmony peace?

Why or why not?

Introduction

In the Introduction, Mark writes, "War stories are exciting. Your heart races and your breath quickens. You feel alive."

Is war exciting? Is this your experience in situations of conflict? What books or movies have you seen that involve "exciting" war stories.

Is there a way to diminish or downplay or divert the "excitement" of war into something more harmonious?

What are the costs of war?

Cinderella Spinderella

Mark wrote Cinderella Spinderella as a way to share his stories with diverse audiences.

Do you think Eleanor is handicapped? How?

Why don't we like the stepsisters?

What do you think the lesson of this story is?

Why do you think Cinderella said "No" to the Prince? What is the power in that?

In what way is **Cinderella Spinderella** a story for harmony?

The Bully and The Shrimp

"The Bully and the Shrimp" is a story that Mark Binder has told many times. It was originally written to blend his work as an author and a storyteller with his study of the martial arts. The number of "rules" has also changed. The first version of the story (which appeared in Cricket Magazine) included only four "rules." In his book, It Ate My Sister, Binder wrote, "All of my stories are true, and some of them really happened."

Do you think Adam should have told an adult about the bullying earlier?

What do you think of Uncle Morris's advice?
What kinds of "secret weapons" can you think of that don't involve violence?
How does the idea of showing compassion for your enemy make you feel?
Is that something you could do?

Could the other people in the story (the narrator and other observers on the playground) have made a difference instead of just watching?

Have you ever been a bully? Why? Did you stop? Why?

Does it make a difference if "The Bully and The Shrimp" really happened?

Have you ever resolved a bullying situation? How did that happen? Why? Why not?

Tell a story about a time you showed compassion to someone who was opposing you.

Two Monks and the Gross Slimy Monster

In the original Zen story, one of the monks carried a woman across a puddle, upsetting the other monk.

In **The Two Monks and the Gross Slimy Monster**, the younger monk loses his composure. How does he regain it? What lessons does he learn?
Is this something you could do by yourself? How do you develop peace of mind?
Can you tell a story about a time you were upset, and still managed to create calm and harmony?

What do you do when you are in a scary situation?
Do you "run away" or do you confront the fear?
Obviously, this depends on the situation. What changes fear into an ability to engage in conversation?

Are you able to leave conflict behind or do you carry it with you?
How do you do that? What tricks can you share with others?

The Wall

Cyber-bullying is a new phenomenon. It frightens adults because they have never experienced it and don't know how to control it. Often young people minimize it because it is part of their culture.

What is the difference between cyber-bullying and teasing?

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How do you know?

Have you ever been cyber-bullied or teased?
What made one thing more hurtful than the other?
What did you do about it? Did it work?

Have you ever cyber-bullied or teased someone else?
How did that make you feel?
Did you stop? Why?

Do you think children who cyber-bully should be prosecuted? Should adults? Why or why not?

What's the best way to prevent cyber-bullying?

Divide and Conquer

One man stops an entire army.

Is this story completely unrealistic? Why? Why not?

How do the events in the world reflect this? When has a single person changed history?

What is the difference between a warrior and a soldier? Does it matter?
What is the difference between a warrior monk and a warrior soldier? Does it matter?

Are there good wars?

The Olive Orchard

War is destructive.

How does this story make you feel?
Where in the world is this story set? Can you think of other similar places where it might be set?
Why do you think the soldiers were cutting down the trees? Did they feel justified?

What else could the old woman have done?
How does the old woman change the young soldier's mind?
How do you think the soldier behaved?

Listen to the Child

Do you talk with your parents about global issues that worry you?
Who can you talk with?

Do your children read the newspaper? Listen to radio? Watch TV? Follow news on the Internet?
Where do they get their information? Is it "filtered" or "approved"?

What happens when your child comes to you with a difficult question?
What happens if your child says something "politically incorrect"?

Is the message "Stop" enough?

Chiribim

In literature, the village of Chelm is a village of fools...

This story is silly. Does that make it invalid?
Can laughter and song create harmony?
Where and when?

Can you think of other ways that we can resolve problems between "tribes"?

The Boy Who Hated Pizza

Mark Binder notes, "Of all the stories, I tell, this is the only one that really happened—more or less."

What would have happened if the father had refused to listen to the son, or the son had refused to budge from his position?
Do you think the father really would have refused his son dessert for seven years?
Did the boy believe it?
How else could this situation have been handled?

Can/should we negotiate with our children?
In which situations does this work?
In which situations does this not work?

Can we negotiate harmony with our parents?
In which situations does this work?
In which situations does this not work?

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Does the fact that this story is "true" make any difference?

The Grasshopper and the Ant

This story is a reversal of the Aesop's fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper."

How does "The Grasshopper and the Ant" differ from "The Ant and the Grasshopper"?

Which version of the story do you like better? Why?

Who do you think is "right," the ant or the grasshopper? Why?

Why is this story included in this book?

Presenting the Past

How is the story of Rosa Parks relevant for today?

What else needs to be done to complete her legacy?

Mrs. Parks was familiar with Gandhi-style nonviolent protest.

If she had "planned" her protest would it diminish its impact?

Why aren't there more stories with female characters in this book?

What stories would you like to see?

Can non-violent protest succeed in a society without a free press?

Is today's Internet sufficient to inform the public?

What are the dangers of non-violent protest?

How does a non-violent protester differ from a soldier in a cause?

What would you be willing to protest, to change?

Would you be willing to give up your life for those changes?

What stories do you tell about peace? What stories do you tell about harmony?

Do you tell your own stories or stories about someone else?

How do you choose what information to include and what to omit?

How does this "essay" differ from the "stories"? Does it have a greater or lesser impact on you because it is an essay?

The Subway Story

Mark Binder notes, "This story by Terry Dobson remains an inspiration to me."

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In the story of Terry Dobson on the subway, Dobson prepares for battle, but sees how an old man resolves the conflict without violence.

What do you think of the narrator at the beginning of this story?
How do you think he changed?

Have you ever been threatened or engaged in a physical altercation?
What happened? How was it resolved?
What would you have done differently?

Is this story true? Why?
Does that matter?

Conflict, Centering and Harmony

Discuss the circle/square/triangle model of conflict.

How does it "fit" your experience?

If you are in a conflict, which is your habitual or automatic response: circle, square or triangle? Would you like to change that?

Have you ever created a conflict "on purpose?" Why? How did that work for you?
What is your intent in conflict? Why?

Can you imagine a situation where you could have responded with a different strategy and produced a different result?

Is being a circle better than being a square or triangle?
Can you argue the other side of that question?

What do you think about the idea of "being centered" as a powerful place to start?

Are you centered now?
How do you know?

Who are you?
(Hint: One way to answer this question is to say, "I am my name .")
Is that who you are? How do you know?

How can or do you center yourself as a daily practice?
What can you do in the moment to find your center?

What events in your life have changed your opinions or path?

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How are you still growing and learning?
What practices for growth and development do you have in your life?

How many ways can you think of to create relationship with other people in conflict? Don't disregard any positive (or negative) ways.

What innovative ways can you invent to create harmony?
What actions can you take to create harmony?

How can you create harmony in your own family?
How can you let go of your failures? Of your successes?
What would you like to do next?

Where in your life or your world could you create harmony?
When will you start?
Who can you ask for help?

Cyberbullying Tips

Do you agree with these tips?
Do you have other tips that aren't included in this list?
Why is this chapter near the end of the book?

Ten Practices for Creating Harmony

What do you think of this list of practices?
How many do you practice?
What is your favorite practice? Your least favorite?
What else would you add to the list?
(If you come up with something good, please send it to us!)

Acknowledgements

Here are a few questions about a part of a book we rarely consider...

Who are the teachers who have made a difference in your life?
Who in your life would you like to acknowledge? Why do they deserve acknowledgement?
When will you acknowledge them? Why? Why not?
Why do other important people not deserve acknowledgement?
What would you like to be acknowledged for?

Thank you!

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Thank you for engaging in these questions. We hope they have been helpful.
If you have new questions or answers, please pass them along to us.
May your life be happy, centered and full of peace and harmony.
—Beth Hellman and Mark Binder

Please take a moment and sign up for Mark's newsletter. You'll hear about his tour dates, and get articles, stories and news about new books and audio.

Please visit <http://markbinder.com/harmony-news/>

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Brief Bibliography (available in print and ebook)

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