

Making space for peace: John Paul Lederach on mediation

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

A commitment to mediating conflicts has taken John Paul Lederach to all corners of the globe. He is professor in the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, and he recently won the Reinhold Niebuhr Award given each year to a member of the Notre Dame community whose life and writings exemplifies a passion for social justice. His books include The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace (Oxford, 2005).

How was your approach to peacebuilding formed?

My spiritual formation comes from the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition. I first worked with the Mennonite Central Committee. After my sophomore year in college I worked in a student housing project in Belgium that had students from French-speaking Africa and from South America. Those conversations, those people and those experiences gave me an early understanding of how to resolve conflicts. I wasn't doing anything but cooking meals, fixing pipes and occasionally helping students resolve issues at the university. The vast majority of the work was listening.

When you write about peacebuilding, you often describe it in a way that makes the mediator invisible. What exactly does a mediator do?

We often think of mediators as bringing to a situation of conflict a new way of doing things. What's less easy to grasp is the idea of opening up a mediating space. A mediator accompanies people so that they can begin to engage each other. This might mean helping people who have been voiceless to make their case coherently. It is equally important, and maybe harder, to accompany those who have been privileged by power as they shift their attitudes. The goal is for groups of people that have been in violent conflict or in complete disengagement to find a way to engage more constructively.

What do you make of you, a Mennonite, from a pacifist tradition, winning an award named for Reinhold Niebuhr, a defender of the just war tradition?

The conversation between the two traditions has always been framed as involving a yes or no to pacifism. But I think the question has to be: What can we do to the best of our ability in a given circumstance? On that issue, the two traditions have far more things that connect than separate them.

I'm working on a project in Colombia that unites Catholics, Mennonites and evangelicals. We located 15 communities that are the hardest hit by violence but that have chosen to respond without taking up guns. Some have declared peace zones; some are looking at reparations to restore their areas. Protestants and Catholics in these areas have similar experiences and have creative ways of cooperating.

A lot of your work requires finding outside sources of funding. What is your wish list for funding peacebuilding?

I would like those who fund these projects to operate with a ten-year perspective rather than a one- or two-year perspective. I've been working in Colombia and the Philippines since the late 1980s, so I am involved in a two-decade process in those places. But in the professional mediation circuit, most people think of bringing people together over several weeks to solve a dispute. When I speak about the need for long-term engagement, I often feel like I am speaking a foreign language in my own professional community.

One has to think both of a long-term strategy and a short-term response. Often in relief work, people focus on the short-term response—but without a sense of the horizon, you become a firefighter. On the other hand, if you are a long-term strategic thinker but don't respond to people's immediate needs, you become irrelevant. People say, "Peace doesn't feed me. What am I going to do this week?" So you are constantly moving between thinking about what you are hoping to build and thinking about how to respond this week or this year.

Do you think that grassroots efforts are more effective than negotiations at the highest level of politics?

We need both. People often see international mediation as the effort to get an agreement that will filter down to the people. There is some truth to that. You need to find a way for political structures to function well, and you need to change the way that people do politics. But the political process is very easily manipulated and very easily discarded. So you need a foundation that will hold the political process

accountable. People's everyday problems are not likely to be solved with a dictate from the highest level. If people are going to start relating to each other, responsibility has to be taken at the local level.

What is your analysis of peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is a place of many different traditions, with a lot of local nuances related to clan structures, which are constantly in motion. The U.S. has operated too much with the notion that it can change the situation by force. The British and the Soviets made that mistake.

It is probably best to build Afghan society using traditional methods of dialogue, and then see what constructive means of engagement arise. I don't have a lot of confidence in the current administration. I think we are headed for huge pitfalls. But perhaps good innovation will come out of it.

Has the U.S. learned anything from the war on terror?

If you'd asked me three or four years ago, I would have said no. The war on terror sets up a world where, as Bush said, you are "either for us or against us." The world is far more gray and shifting than that equation allows. The concept of the war on terror is that you change people by isolating and eliminating them. For three decades my work has been to engage people who are in the midst of violent conflict and create a shift through relationship and opportunity—through engagement, not isolation.

Recently a more nuanced approach is evident. I was very encouraged by Obama's speech in Cairo. I don't know how far this shift will go.

Peacebuilding is demanding work with an enormous amount of travel. How do you sustain yourself?

That is a really important question. The mechanisms that have worked for me are, number one, an absolutely normal day-to-day family life. I learned the hard way to build a schedule around basketball games and school functions.

For me poetry and the natural world have been really important. The key is *noticing*. Victor Frankl wrote about how people coming out of a concentration camp have an inability to see or hear. Violence destroys your capacity to perceive yourself as an integrated part of creation. In monastic writings, like Thomas Merton's, there is a

spirituality of noticing the beauty of simple things. We walk. We breathe. We eat. We pay attention. I have gained an appreciation of this recently through poetry. Often poetry is just noticing something and then lifting it up. In this work, I need enough space and time to notice.