



Co-creation

Wisdom from wherever

The Art of Protection – Part II

In order to create better, more responsible communities, organizations or societies, it is almost always necessary for us to stick our neck out. We cross boundaries. We listen to the previously ignored. We upset the apple cart.

So what happens when such a pioneer meets with opposition? What happens when a change agent meets a protector of the status quo? When a collaborative spirit meets a competitive one? When a people-first corporation merges with one based on strict meritocracy? Or when diverse cultures must share the same city? These are some common situations that lay the ground for conflict. Many of us don't like conflict, some of us tolerate it, and a precious few have developed the knack of seeing opportunities in the chaos.

Conflict is not in itself a bad thing. Of course, it may lead to violence of various kinds; force may be imposed, and the consequent damages may last for generations. However, conflict may also give rise to something new – a valuable lesson, a partnership, a stronger organization, or a dynamic society.

Earlier this year, in a place called Axladitsa-Avatakia, ten people gathered for a dialogue on the subjects of conflict, vulnerability, power and protection. This article is intended to share what we discovered and what we still have questions about. This dialogue, called The Art of Protection, brought together several streams of related thought,

Building Blocks, 2007

Depicts nine million wooden ABC blocks, equal to the number of American children with no health insurance coverage in 2007

See following pages for detail





including:

- Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* – this third century BCE wisdom text seeks to counsel generals on conquering without doing battle.
- *Psychoanalysis* – resolving conflict, both intra-psychic and interpersonal, is a main focus for this discipline.
- *Living systems theory* – seeing the wholeness and interdependence between a living system and its environment informs many disciplines including the social sciences and organizational development.
- *Theory U* – a theory of innovation and change, articulated by C.O. Scharmer, informs organizational development professionals and social entrepreneurs alike.
- *Aikido* – perhaps the least violent of the martial arts, Aikido seeks to disarm or thwart attacks by using the force of the attack against itself.

Informed and provoked by these disciplines, The Art of Protection became a magnet and gathering place for stories and questions about conflict, vulnerability, power and protection. So what you read here is offered in the spirit of an inquiry – this is what we have seemed to learn, and here are our questions.

Why is protection needed?

Interestingly, in our dialogue, there didn't seem to be any question *that* protection is needed. Some people cited the need for protection from oneself, i.e. "I can be my own worst enemy." Some talked about the need to protect one's heart in the hustle and bustle of personal and professional life. Some talked about protecting the places, groups and initiatives that one is working with. And finally some talked about protection against self-deception, both personal and collective.

These various levels of threat -- and probably their associated types of protection – are not all that cleanly separated. As individuals, we find that we have habitual places of reactivity that seem to persist over time, and which show up on more than one of the levels: personal, interpersonal and collective.

What the disciplines say about protection:

From a *living systems point of view*, protection/boundary is what keeps toxins out of a living system and what allows nutrients in and waste

The Art of Protection dialogue will continue through a series of teleseminars beginning in October 2008. Also the work and exploration will continue in Greece in May 2009. For more information about the teleseminar or the ensuing retreat in May, send me an email (bob@robertwziegler.com).

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out. The semi-permeable nature of, for example, a cell membrane became a powerful metaphor for us.

From a *psychoanalytic point of view*, protection is needed to mediate conflict with the unconscious – to ensure that our conscious intentions are not disrupted, or at least not badly disrupted, by our unconscious.

From *Aikido and Sun Tzu points of view*, threats are real, physical and potentially very destructive. Much depends on addressing them with full attention and with minimal violence.

From a *Theory U point of view*, to properly lead from the future as it emerges requires that each stage of an innovation be executed properly – and this would seem to suggest some form of protection at each stage. Skipping a step usually means that those involved will to some extent be re-enacting patterns of the past (downloading), rather than leading from the future (presencing). The pressure/habit of downloading is strong.

A fork in the road

A key premise for all the Art of Protection disciplines is this: vulnerability is a given. If a cell membrane were to become truly indestructible, it would be suicide for the cell – nutrients could not

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Shows piece to scale





enter, wastes could not leave, and reproduction would be impossible. An Aikido warrior does not wear armour. Sun Tzu never suggests that a state can become permanently invincible – he states that invincibility is temporary and situational.

So a key distinction to be made is between protection and being defensive. Protection is forward-looking and aware, being defensive is conservative and self-centered. Protection seeks to create a future; defensiveness seeks to preserve a past. Protection is often for something larger than oneself; defensiveness is often not.

However, the starting point for both protection and defensiveness is the same: vulnerability. And that vulnerability may be mixed with some amount of fear – maybe a lot, maybe a little, or maybe none at all. In any case, what is crucial is what happens in the next moments. The defensive posture recoils from vulnerability, closes down, and looks to the past for guidance. From that hunkered down place, the defensive mind then reacts instinctively – perhaps with violence or perhaps with an impulse to please or appease the threat.

The protective mind, also starting from the position of vulnerability (and again, maybe fear), does not recoil but rather steps in. Stepping in may be literal (as we learned from practicing Aikido), but it also involves looking, sensing, being present, and perhaps even becoming intimate with what is threatening (in aikido, blending with the attack). Only from this position of close contact can the protector move skillfully to pacify, incorporate, redirect or disarm the threat.

So every occasion of vulnerability is a fork in the road and an opportunity. We may be vulnerable in the face of an insistent thought pattern that begins, “I should ...” or “I must ...” Or we may be vulnerable in the presence of someone who scares us. Or we may be daunted that a task is too big for us. At whatever level, we can become closed and defensive – or open and protective.

Generally speaking, we know the places where we are habitually defensive, which in the Art of Protection, came to be called “hot spots” or “hot buttons.” One can simply reflect on one’s history to see the times that the reaction was too fast and/or too powerful to be open and protected. Knowing one’s hot spots is the first step toward slowing down and redefining one’s response when a similar situation re-arises.

We adopted a slogan that helps differentiate defensiveness from protection: not too eager in acceptance, not too violent in rejection . It is important to note that the defensive response may appear pleasing, adaptive, or even flexible and diplomatic – but in our heart of hearts we know whether we are genuine or “too eager in acceptance.”

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Redefining victory

Generally, when faced with a threat, our minds turn to winning and losing – the defensive mindset. However, all of the Art of Protection source traditions point in a different direction, the direction of taking whole.

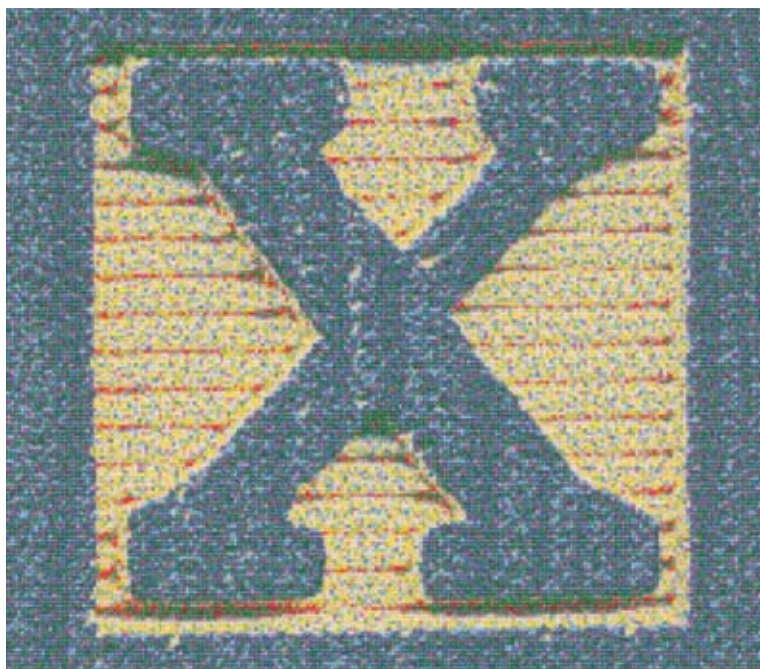
Taking whole is the language of Sun Tzu, but as we will see, all the traditions embrace the idea in some form.

*Taking a state whole is superior,
Destroying it is inferior to this ...
Therefore, one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the most skillful,
Subduing the other's military without battle is the most skillful.*

In the warring states period of ancient China, when The Art of War was written, each state was one among many. A costly victory could easily mean a mortal vulnerability vis-à-vis the next neighbour. Likewise, we have to consider the full costs, not just our costs, when we engage in a conflict. The unhappy object of a hostile corporate takeover may exact an additional, intangible price for years or even decades to come. The first Gulf War, while militarily a rout from the US point of view, involved enormous Iraqi casualties, and it is naïve to think that there are no long-term consequences of these.

Taking whole has significance and a place within Theory U, as well. As we traverse the downside of the U, first seeing, and then sensing and

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then presenting the current situation, we are progressively opening ourselves to ever larger and deeper understandings of the entire system. The whole intention of the U process, after all, is to innovate within systems of larger scale and complexity than have been addressed by the current way of doing things.

In living systems theory, there are a number of touchstones on taking whole. While a single cell may regard something as “waste,” and something to be gotten rid of, there is no doubt another organism for which that “waste” is “food.” Similarly, a toxin for one may be nourishment for another. In social systems, it is important to see what would benefit the whole population, not just isolated groups. Supporting the self-organization of an organization or community is far less costly than imposing organization from “above”.

In psychoanalysis, the very word “health” comes from the same root as “whole.” In general, the work of psychological healing involves coming to a larger and fuller acceptance and appreciation of oneself and others.

“Waste” is “food”

In Aikido, violence is anathema. The goal in Aikido is not to use force, but to let the attacker’s force play out without damage. Ultimately an attacker is subdued without doing battle.

Aikido: learning from the body

In the Art of Protection, we practiced Aikido every morning and reconnected with our physical experience throughout the day. Aikido was therefore not just an idea, but rather an embodied learning. What we learned in the dojo (Aikido practice area) invited translation into other domains.

Are you a wall or a door? We did various pushes and pulls to notice the contrast between offering resistance and not. Sometimes not offering resistance, in itself, destabilizes the pusher. When in our work do we offer resistance needlessly? When is our flexibility skillful and grounded?

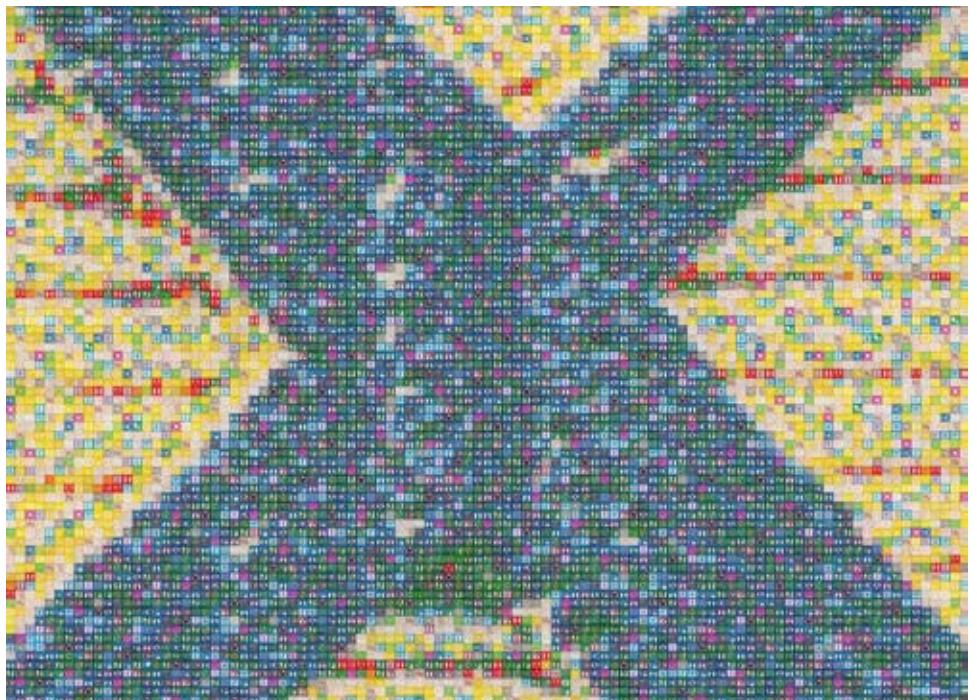
Redirecting. We then progressed to redirecting – taking the attacker’s energy and direction, and furthering it while stepping out of the line of attack. This is definitely destabilizing for the attacker and involves little or no effort to do. How might we take the energy of attack or resistance and allow it to harmlessly run its course? What are the stories from our collective work that involve redirecting “negative” energy?

Ki. We did a simple strength test – first trying to keep the arm straight with muscle power and a partner trying to bend it (bending was difficult but possible), and then keeping it straight by pointing to something at a distance (impossible to bend). The latter, the directed hand, invoked more *ki* or life force rather than muscular strength. How do we invoke *ki* when forming intentions in collective work?

Use of weapons. Throughout the training we used the bokken (wooden sword), mindfully keeping it at our side throughout the day. In the dojo, we practiced strikes, and stepping in as well as stepping back. What are the weapons that we use in collective work? How do we hold those weapons?

Suburi. We practiced *suburi*, the repetition of overhead sword strikes over and over. One day, in lieu of a verbal check-out, we performed *suburi* for 200 strikes. It was a lesson in overcoming imagined limitations (“will I make it?”), and each strike is unique, a unique moment. Clearly *suburi* is as much a training of mind as it is a strengthening of body and *ki*. What are the practices that we use to strengthen mind, body and *ki* in our collective work?

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Aikido: both metaphor and direct experience

Aikido was seen to be quite useful and spoke directly to the heart questions of the Art of Protection. In some cases, Aikido created a metaphor (e.g. redirecting) that became applicable in other domains. In others, the Aikido acted directly, rousing our *ki*, and training us to pay attention. Safe to say: Aikido holds a lot of promise for further training and inquiry.

One idea born of this juxtaposition of disciplines is what we came to call “verbal Aikido.” This encapsulated the aspiration to translate the lessons of Aikido to various kinds of organizational and community contexts. We could see promise for many of the Aikido capacities – e.g. slowing down, respecting, cutting sharply, embodying, and listening to one’s entire being. We see that there are many needs addressed by these capacities, such as pacifying inner critics, making conflict visible, finding common ground, and reintroducing respect into negotiation.

The capacities of individuals and groups

What are the strengths and capacities that support hosting and collective work based on living systems principles altogether? How does one build those strengths and capacities?

One approach we took in the Art of Protection is to look at people who do protection for a livelihood, and ask – what is it about their work and their way of working that’s valuable? We contemplated militaries, police forces, fire departments, body guards, and security professionals, and asked what about them is translatable to hosting or other collective work? In other words, we made an appreciative inquiry about these professions and organizations. What did we find?

Steadiness. Being present is absolutely critical to be a protector of any kind. Related to being present is having good posture (*viz.*, standing at “attention”). Meditation and Aikido alike emphasize the need for good posture in order to do the respective disciplines properly.

Paying attention to details. Forms, formality and procedures generally characterize any protector organization. There is a pride in the forms, the details and in the discipline needed to embody them. There is utility in these forms – they clarify communication, they simplify movement, and they attract and convey power. In collective contexts, what forms do we use as hosts – or might we consider using – that have a similar quality of waking people up powerfully? Or that support people to act powerfully?

Co-creation

Clarity of purpose. Having a focus (a mission, in military terms) is critical in all domains. Clear objective should not be confused with rigid execution. Clear objective goes best with fluid execution. “If you can’t get destination, go for direction.” In collective contexts, is our focus clear and our means flexible?

Ki. Related to clarity of purpose is *ki*, life-force energy. The arm pointing has more *ki* than the arm trying to stay straight. In collective contexts, are our intentions result-oriented or process-driven?

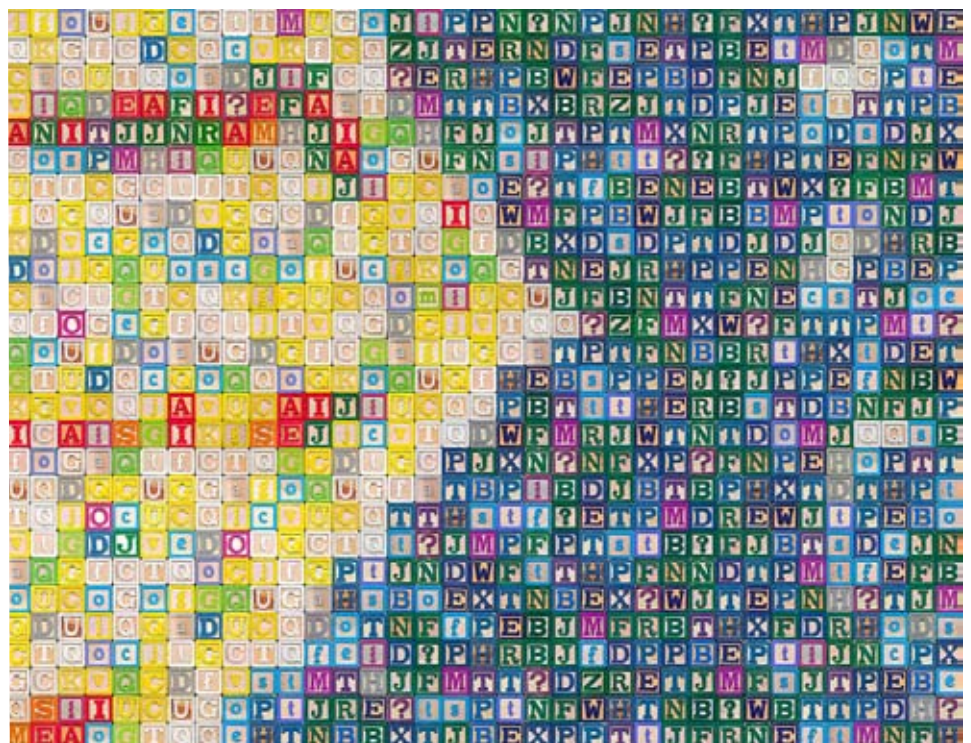
Courage and decisiveness. When we connect with a discipline like Aikido, our bodies naturally settle into an unconditional confidence, i.e. a confidence that is not dependent on this logic or that ideology. In collective contexts, how do we rouse and reconnect a group to this basic kind of confidence?

Flexibility and humour. One of the principles of cooperation we identified for the Art of Protection gather was: “Don’t take yourself so f---ing seriously!” Seriousness leads to fixation which hampers the effectiveness of individuals and the groups that they contribute to. In collective contexts, what is it that generates a genuine lightness of being beyond having a good laugh from time to time?

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All photos courtesy of Chris Jordan

www.chrisjordan.com





Summary: questions and implications for hosting

The Art of Protection was a marriage of two mindsets – training and dialogue. Training assumes that there is wisdom to be imparted to people who need it. Dialogue assumes that wisdom is already present, and that “imparting” wisdom is unnecessary at best and undermining at worst.

How do we reconcile these mindsets? How do we effectively differentiate between places of wisdom-need and places of wisdom-uncovering?

In our experience, all the hosts held the training-dialogue paradox, but in different ways. Aikido, as a physical discipline, is obviously a place where we rely on a teacher. Other disciplines, and their respective hosts, were less clearly identified one way or the other.

As we translate Aikido out of the dojo – into the spheres of interpersonal communication, for example – do we leave the dojo behind, or do we create a new form of dojo? If the latter, what would the Verbal Aikido dojo look like? What is the nature of the training there?

From the point of view of supporting the U process in organizational and community change initiatives – what is the protection needed at each of the six inflection points (suspending, redirecting, letting go, letting come, enacting and embodying)? Or, more simply, how do we protect open mind, open heart and open will?

More simply still, there is a sense that protection has a different feel going down and coming up. Going down the U (seeing, sensing and presencing) involves creating safety, suspending (or cutting) fixation, and slowing down. Going up the U (crystallizing, prototyping, and performing) involves accountability, rapid learning and follow-through. How do the protectors of such processes perform in each of these domains? What are the weapons for each?

The dialogue, inquiry and training around the Art of Protection is ongoing. Starting in October 2008, there will be a bi-monthly tele-seminar and dialogue convening professionals with an interest in protection from Europe, North America and beyond. In May of 2009, the second annual retreat focusing on the Art of Protection will be convened at Axladitsa, in Greece. For more information about the teleseminar or the retreat, please send me a note (bob@robertwziegler.com) and I will ensure you receive complete information.