

**COLLAB ORATE**  
***Peacemakers #1***  
**Red Bird**

*[This is the first of a series of twelve short essays about peacemaking. Like all stories about peace, its salient moments detail conflict within oneself, between others, and among cultures. I begin with confession.]*

Our judge delivered her oral decision. Black robes swished as she bustled out. This hellish divorce trial had raged for ten days, spread, due to senseless wrangling, over ten weeks. Exhausted, opposing counsel and I rocked back in our courtroom chairs, sore from their dead padding and torn upholstery. Counsel glared at me, war-weary: “The one upside here is that I will never have to see you again, you corrupt turd.” I searched for something appropriate to say, then settled on the truth. I growled, “Back at you,” without a smile, without making eye contact. In her defense, opposing counsel was battling cancer. For me, I have no excuse.

I came to law mid-life. After the bar exam, I drafted a philosophy of legal practice. One part reads: “Courts exist to end intractable conflicts and should be the forum of last resort. Litigation benefits no one except attorneys. Litigated solutions necessarily involve coercion, forcing unchosen change on unwilling participants. The results dismay. When litigation cannot be avoided, courtesy and candor must temper advocacy. Ethical probity and personal trustworthiness are the essence of practicing law.” In the mud of client frenzy, I found this, like every aspiration, easier to say than do. An unholy alliterative trinity of ambition and anger and angst crowded my heart, hobbling its better impulses. I came to law to help. I came to law to serve. I saw that most often I achieved neither. I began searching.

The east African Bushmen tribe tells a story:

*Young Gimbe knelt at a rock-hollow pool in his tribe’s desert. Reflected in the mirror of the pool’s surface, Gimbe saw a red bird of startling brilliance. Gimbe knew he must possess the scarlet wonder. The young man leapt to his bow, notched a bird arrow, and swung its killing end skyward. But the desert sky yawned empty. Gimbe sought sleep, but the fantastical red image danced upon his heart. Gimbe hunted the red bird, fruitlessly. As he aged, Gimbe widened his forays across his tribal homeland. He pestered strangers. None helped. Years piled. Gimbe’s skin thickened and cracked, his joints ached. Finally old, Gimbe had walked the land, never spying the red bird. Gimbe pointed his curling toes homeward, defeated. An unexpected message arrived: red bird soars at a northern mountaintop. Gimbe limped the desert to those foothills. Tired to death, he scrabbled skyward. Always, Gimbe scanned horizon, hill, and heavens for his avian mystery. Gimbe crawled upon the peak and lay gasping upon his back. For Gimbe was passing. In his final breath, Gimbe searched the sparkling mountain sky for red bird. Dimmed eyes saw nothing. Gimbe sighed, closed his eyes, and savored the childhood crimson reflection that had driven life’s journey. As Gimbe joined his ancestors, a red feather drifted from above, settling slowly into Gimbe’s limp hand.*

I adapted this story from Peter Matthiessen, *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, who adapted it from Colin Turnbull, *Tradition and Change in African Life*, who adapted it from the Bushman tribe’s fireside myths, who adapted it from their ancestors long dead, who adapted it from longings of the human heart.

Peace is a red bird—furtive, hiding in plain sight, watching. The strength of peace is reticence. Peace, unlike war, declines force. Peace waits while the assertive coerce. Peace listens. Peace craves invitation. When beckoned, peace may, with breathtaking rapidity, dominate the self, a family, even tribes and nations. Before the beckoning, peace appears impossibly distant.

Peace exceeds mere absence of conflict. Peace is not absence, but fullness. In peace, life brims. In peace, the best human urges unfurl and dominate: sympathy, empathy, compassion, giving, sacrifice, understanding, forgiveness, community, reconciliation, resilience. Even within peace, ripples of human distress bestir still waters. Yet, peace addresses conflict differently. Most conflict is jumbled, diseased, shoddy peace. Some people redirect conflicts toward peace. As lawyers, we are well-positioned to do so, to make peace. Conflict, after all, is our business. Are we making peace, or merely generating process and money? Each of us must answer. I do so late at night, awaiting sleep.

Will I die with a red feather in my withered palm? Will you?

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