

Peacemakers #7 Cob Corn

How does human conflict emerge? Some proffer economic analysis: conflict emerges when many seek scarce resources. Others prefer a social systems perspective: conflict emerges when some oppose change that others advocate. A theological tale tempts many: conflict emerges when evil persons oppress God's chosen. I suggest a fourth alternative, which I call the cob corn theory of conflict genesis.

I volunteered with some thirty-five others, most of them strangers, at Food Lifeline a few years ago. Food Lifeline collects bulk foods from agricultural producers and repackages the foodstuffs for distribution at local food banks. On this particular August day, the agricultural donor was Kroger. The donation was cob corn, those little three inch frozen cobs one finds in the frozen food section at any big grocery. These cobs, however, arrived in palletized bulk cartons, thousands of cobs per container. The task for our daunted thirty-five was to don blue hair nets and disposable gloves, then divide the contents of these huge containers into family-sized bags of twenty or so mini-cobs each. Food Lifeline staff, vastly experienced with volunteers, merely showed us the pallet jack, freezer bags, labels, pallets, corn, and abandoned us to our own lights.

Tentatively, we probed the task. Muscled workers slowly organized boxes and pallets. Kids distributed bags. Small groups plopped twenty cobs into ziplocks, then filled boxes with them. Boxes stacked on pallets. Pallet-loaders applied labels. The burly among us moved our product away on rolling pallet jacks. Within twenty minutes, without an authoritative word or leader, the group coalesced into a corn cob bagging machine. All labored for three hours without conflict, amidst much laughter, despite sundry mishaps. When our shift ended, thousands of pounds of cob corn were reconfigured, and back in the freezer awaiting Monday delivery to area food banks.

The Food Lifeline cob corn project tapped a pre-programmed script buried deep in human brains. In small groups, we work to common ends hand in hand with friends or strangers, suppressing conflict by accommodating others generously in good humor. This is a normal human state. We evolved these collaborative tendencies in Pleistocene Africa on fluctuating savannahs that were home to our distant ancestors. Humans lack fangs and claws. What saved nascent humanity was task cooperation and social smoothing.

If one erodes the premises of the cob corn phenomenon, another pre-programmed response emerges. If one excises from the cob corn regime its face-to-face component, its common goal, its physical activity, or its accommodating sense of humor, then at each hiccup, humans bare teeth and raise fists. Even when prepared to fight unnamed opponents with inimical purposes, persons whom we have never met, groups with whom we have never cooperated, humans prefer to rattle sabers, withdraw, and emigrate from the problem. This human tendency to avoid violent conflict when possible has been a huge challenge for military organizations. In World War II, eighty to eight-five percent of American soldiers could not pull the trigger when face-to-face with enemy soldiers (Report of S.L.A. Marshall, Brigadier General. Subsequent Army training changes resulted in a ninety percent firing rate in Vietnam). Humans, despite our ignominious history of slaughter, brutality, and genocide, turn homicidal only under limited and quite specific conditions. Violence demands that victims be depersonalized. One must kill enemies without taking personal responsibility, say, upon command by a superior, or in "saving" one's comrades. The opponent must be stigmatized, rendering him a detestable cipher. A mere whiff of shared humanity can trigger the cob corn phenomenon and derail homicidal intent.

Our litigation system, unfortunately, fails to promote the cob corn phenomenon. Litigation opponents, though named, seldom meet. Antagonists are discouraged from speaking directly. Their disputes are framed not as common problems to be solved, but as polar opposites, only one of which has merit. Litigation rhetoric often dehumanizes opposing parties. In courtrooms, attorney proxies wage battle. Judges adopt attire, position, and tenor designed to mimic the divine seat of judgment. Legalese, incomprehensible to clients, makes them itinerants in a foreign precinct. Courtrooms quash cob corn impulses.

Conflict emerges when the collaborative cob corn predicates suffer.

In making peace, we pack cob corn.

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