

Wisdom from Our Sources - Chip

An Excerpt from "The Moral Imagination: The Art & Soul of Building Peace" by John Paul Lederach

A Story from Ghana

In the first face to face meeting of the two groups [Dagombas and Konkombas], the Dagomba paramount chief arrived in full regalia and with his entourage. There were designated persons who carried his staff and sat at his feet. In the opening moments of the meeting he assumed a sharp attitude of superiority. Taking the role of the paramount, he wasted no time in denigrating and verbally attacking the Konkombas. Given the traditions and rights afforded the highest chiefs, little could be done except to let the chief speak.

"Look at them," he said, addressing himself more to the mediators than the Konkombas. "Who are they even that I should be in this room with them? They do not even have a chief. Who am I to talk to? They are a people with nothing who have just come from the fields and now attack us in our own villages. They could have at least brought an old man. But look! They are just boys born yesterday."

The Konkomba spokesman asked to respond. Fearing the worst, the mediators provided him space to speak. The young man turned and addressed himself to the chief of the enemy tribe:

"You are perfectly right, Father, we do not have a chief. We have not had one for years. You will not even recognize the man we have chosen to be our chief. And this has been our problem. The reason we react, the reason our people go on rampages and fights resulting in all these killings and destruction arises from this fact. We do not have what you have. It really is not about the town, or the land, or the market guinea fowl. I beg you, listen to my words, Father. I am calling you Father because we do not wish to disrespect you. You are a great chief. But what is left to us? Do we have no other means but this violence to receive in return the one thing we seek, to be respected and to establish our own chief who could indeed speak with you, rather than having a young boy do it on our behalf?"

The attitude, tone of voice, and use of the word Father spoken by the young Konkomba man apparently so affected the chief that he sat for a moment without response. When finally he spoke, he did so with a changed voice addressing himself directly to the young man:

“I had come to put your people in your place. But now I feel only shame. Though I insulted your people, you still called me Father. It is you who speaks with wisdom, and me who has not see the truth. What you have said is true. We who are chiefly have always looked down on you because you have no chief, but we have not understood the denigration you suffered. I beg you, my son, to forgive me.”