

# Conflict and Energy: A Metaphoric Symbiosis

by  
Asif Majid

## About the Author



**ASIF  
MAJID**

received his MA in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University. Currently, he is the Research Fellow for The Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics.

What is conflict? A defining moment for me in thinking about conflict was an experience I had when working for a peace-building organization that brings together youth from conflict regions, putting them in dialogue groups to talk about their respective conflicts.

During a session that I facilitated, one youth took a little bit of time in gathering their thoughts – meditative, contemplative, and not quite sure of what to say. Despite the sensitivity of the topic we were discussing, I thought the young person was beating around the bush. Trying to speed things along, I interrupted: “Stop wasting my time.” Immediately, something changed in the atmosphere of the room, and I was put on the defensive.

That moment has troubled me for several years. As a current student of conflict studies, a colleague and I developed the idea of using metaphor as a way to understand this phenomenon. Metaphor is a powerful cognitive instrument for understanding, especially given the intricacies of an idea as complex as conflict. While a number of concepts can connect to conflict, this article considers conflict’s connections to energy—that which transfers from one state to another, rather than that which is ethereal or spiritual—and the practical implications of such connections.

### *Consider a rainstorm.*

Rain does not begin to fall unless a number of tiny raindrops – a critical mass – have accumulated in a cloud. Similarly, a raindrop does not exist unless droplets coalesce. As the kinetic energy of multiple droplets causes them to collide, more and more droplets come together. As soon as enough droplets unite, rain begins to fall. Critical mass enables the moment of a rainstorm’s eruption.

As peace researcher John Paul Lederach notes in *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, it is in similar moments in conflict situations that “we stop and take notice that something is not right.” Just as we can feel an oncoming rainstorm, so too can we feel a change in the air when conflict occurs. A demonstrable and noticeable shift takes place, one that is contingent on the right conditions and

context. In a rainstorm or thunderstorm, the right conditions are appropriate humidity, gathering of charged water particles, and a critical mass. In conflict, the right conditions often include a complex mix of structural, interpersonal, cultural, socioeconomic, and other factors. The move from latent to manifest tensions, the moment of eruption, is present in both conflict and energy.

### *Consider a wave moving across the ocean’s surface.*

Energy is dynamic as exemplified by the motion of waves. When we watch a wave, we are watching the transfer of energy. Imagine a surfer riding a wave. She is always moving and shifting with the height, length, and velocity of the wave beneath her. The surfer adjusts her body according to the situation, bending her knees or standing straight as the wave changes. Conflict’s fluidity

requires a similar and prerequisite sense of flexibility.

A surfer’s connection to her board—the metaphorical toolbox of the conflict practitioner—is intimate. Her connection allows her to interact with and read the dynamics of the wave. The board responds to her every shift, embodying the flexibility and nimble attitude that allows her to thrive in uncomfortable situations.

Conflict and energy are both dynamic and in a constant state of flux. Conflict is not an end product. Rather, it is an experience and process that works itself in and out of the status quo. This constant change creates a sense of energy, developing into momentum that gives conflict a life of its own. This ongoing change results in an iterative process of adaptation, evolution, and opportunities for growth.

Consider the story of epidemiologist Alice Stewart, told by entrepreneur Margaret Heffernan.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with x-ray technology a popular tool for diagnosticians, Stewart determined that using x-ray technology on pregnant mothers damages fetuses and increases rates of childhood cancer. Stewart was so accomplished only because her

assistant, statistician George Kneale, took it as his *raison d'être* to try to prove her wrong at every step and “actively sought disconfirmation.” Her productivity was predicated on a conflict-based relationship.

When used effectively, energy is a generative and creative force that can emerge from conflict situations. Conflict can create new identities, experiences, and levels of excellence. While energy can destroy as in a natural disaster, it can also be harnessed as in electricity on a power grid.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

What practical applications exist for these metaphors, particularly in reference to the connection between conflict and energy? I have found that there are four components: hold, sit, adjust, and repeat.

**1. Hold** conflict and energy together, simultaneously. The energy in a room is tied to the conflict that is happening in that room. It is not that the conflict in a room is separate from the energy in the room. Rather, they are intrinsically linked—witness the energetic creativity reflected in the experience of Stewart and Kneale. Responses to conflict situations must take into account the danger of conflict and the potential of energy, without preferential treatment for one over the other.

**2. Sit** with discomfort. There is tremendous value in sitting with discomfort, as it pushes introspection and deep self-reflection. When classroom teachers look to elicit responses from students, they wait in silence after asking a question. Silence is uncomfortable, and requires an adjustment from those experiencing it. Responses to conflict situations are much the same. My struggle in sitting with dissonance, exemplified by the story that opened this article, was a lesson I needed as a facilitator. High-energy situations are hard to control and trouble those looking for a sense of order. No matter the context, conflict and energy create distress. Rather than avoid or look away from dissonance, we should sit with such disturbances when responding to conflict.

**3. Adjust** to the dynamic between parties after attending to its nuances. Adjusting continues the trend of introspection and self-assessment that discomfort demands. For those working in conflict, adjustment includes monitoring and changing our body language,

what we say, and what we avoid saying. We must go where the energy takes us, making small movements to guide it in productive ways.

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**4. Repeat.** This entire process is cyclical and iterative, one that reflects the recurring nature of conflict. As conflict evolves and changes, given its dynamism and multiple moments of eruption, so should our responses. Assessment could include informal and frequent check-ins with conflicting parties, personal reflections, and notes on a situation's development. Continuous assessment allows for an intimate understanding of conflict and energy as intertwined.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Conflict presents an opportunity for growth that reflects energy's value: out of complex conflicts, transformational and profound experience can emerge. Just as surfers search for the right wave that offers the most fun, conflict practitioners should push toward opportunities for growth that emerge from conflict. ■

## References

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