

Conflict through the Eyes of Genesis, Old Man Coyote, and *Genome*

By Cory Francis

General conflict is a natural, and in most cases a beneficial, thing. From the time we are born our genes begin a power struggle. In our lives we encounter people and ideas that bring up disagreements. Our whole lives seem to be centered around a type of discord. While generally conflict is not an overbearing master, it can be a steering force in our everyday lives. In chapter four of Genesis, the Crow story “Old man Coyote makes the world”, and the chapter entitled “X and Y: Conflict” from Matt Ridley’s Book *Genome*, we can learn of different peoples, or groups of people’s thoughts on why conflict is a part of our world. The question is why do we have conflict in the first place? Each group has their own ideas and while they are not the same, common themes can be seen. For some it is a great thing to have conflict, others look down upon it. In the end, conflict based upon jealousy or hate is destructive and has negative side effects. On the other hand, conflict based on survival of the fittest or striving to be better than someone or something else leads to great things.

In chapter four of Genesis and “Old Man Coyote Makes the World”, the reader finds a unifying theme in the cause of conflict directed at other beings, jealousy. Jealousy arises in the world through Cain’s inferiority complex put in place by his brother Abel according to Genesis. Cain wants to be just as favorable, if not more so, in the eyes of God as he perceives his brother Able to be. When Cain takes his brother out into the field, he kills him. All of this is brought about because of Cain’s notion that he needed to be better than his brother. We find a similar set up in part of the tale “Old Man Coyote Makes the World”. The bear is a very proud creature and wants to be better than all the other animals, especially when it comes to dance. At first the bear

believes that he should be given his own dance. After all he did give up a claw so that Old Man Coyote could create the prairie chicken, the very first animal to dance. After receiving his own dance the bear is still not satisfied. He believes that he should be the only creature that can dance and begins to threaten all the other animals. If it had not been for Old Man Coyote, the fate of the smaller animals probably would have been the same as Abel's. These parts of the two stories show how conflict based upon jealousy lead to negative things. Able is killed and the bear is banished to the cave.

While the previous example gives us a rather bleak look at conflict, there are other accounts that look upon it as a positive part of the human existence. In the chapter of Genome entitled "Conflict" genes are made out to have human qualities in the way that they try to outdo each other, especially the X and Y chromosomes. These two chromosomes evolve in response to one another, almost as if they were in a constant battle. This is known as antagonism. However the Y chromosome, the one that makes a male a male, is less dominant. The Y chromosome has basically "shed as many genes as possible and shut down the rest to 'run away and hide'" (Genome, 111) from the X chromosome. With the Y concentration on very few tasks it is easier for it to become better at those few than it is for the X to perfect all it has to carry out. Though this may be true the X seems to be keeping up. The law governing all of this is the law of survival. The X chromosome wants more of itself than the Y to continue on and vice versa. Ridley gives an example of this by saying "the ability to seduce a woman was good for the Y chromosome in the past; the ability to resist seduction by a man was good for X chromosomes in the past" (Genome, 115). While this might not seem all that positive, this is just one example of how genes change in response to one another. If our genes did not change we would still be

single-celled organisms. Here we can see that good hearted competition brings out the best in someone or something and cause it to become better.

Conflict then brings out change and change in the long run is a good thing. According to the story from the Crow, conflict between humans was just as necessary. War was brought about by differences in language, because two people who are the same can not fight one another. From war also came war songs, honors, and a higher place in society for the warriors. So while war in itself might not be looked at in a positive light today, normally, though certainly not always, the benefits of war are worth the negatives according to the Crow story.

In Genesis we see a totally different picture. Competition is a bad thing because it brings out struggle and feelings of jealousy. These things lead to death and exile of the murderer. However the exiled is not left to die at the hands of another. God Promises the exiled that the punishment of anyone who takes revenge upon him will experience "a sevenfold vengeance" (Genesis, 4.15) and so on and so forth. Once again a parallel can be drawn to the Crow tale. Humans are not as capable as animals in most physical aspects. Therefore the humans were starving from lack of food. Old Man Coyote gives them weapons that they use to hunt the animals. The animals receive nothing more because of their pre-existing physical superiority. Here we see an evolution of sorts in humans and animals. The humans adapt to the animals so they can survive, then only the best animals will survive, passing their traits down. Humans will then have to become more adept at hunting and the cycle will continue.

If we take the previous example we can see that it is exactly what genes have done, at least in their beginning. Genes that were more useful or made a person better at something than another were passed on because those people were more likely to reproduce. This whole idea of natural selection has faded with the introduction of different medicines and other factors that

help people with less than ideal genes survive longer. Not that this is a bad thing for people in general, but it is the best for the human species as a whole? It is important for everyone to have the same quality of life and shouldn't every human have the best possible chance? On the other side of the argument, since genes can randomly mutate what would keep them from doing so once the genetic mutation that causes Huntington's disease was bred out of humans?

The last thing left to touch upon is a subject from Genome. There was once a point in time where people believed that homosexuality was a genetic trait. Actually many people still believe this. I can't manage to buy into this. This would have to mean that in the case of identical twins, if one was gay the other would have to be as well. I know from experience this is not true. My best girl friend in high school was gay yet her twin sister was not. This also destroys the other commonly held belief that environment is the sole cause. But if these twins were raised together then their upbringing would be the same and the once again both would be either hereto or homo sexual. This is once of those cases like asthma. There is really no one cause of homosexuality in humans. I firmly believe it is not a choice but I also can not believe the idea that it is genetic. Maybe it's somewhere in the middle. Perhaps there could be a gene that makes a person more likely to be homosexual, but that can not be the only cause. The only reason I include this in my paper is because of the conflict it has brought about in today's culture. We have, once again for the most part, begun to look past sex and race as a determination of a person's abilities and worth. This is defiantly a conflict that is a struggle between two groups, those for and those against. In the end this should be a positive outcome because most changes in society happen through conflict first, as can be seen through the issue of race in the United States of the 1960's. Perhaps in my lifetime we will move forward past the debate on homosexuality, realizing every person is a person like any other, different.

Conflict is not something we can get away from. You can't run, you can't hide and you most certainly can't stop it. But what has to be realized is that conflict of the non-violent nature has to run its course. Our genes are in a constant chess match, seeing who has the right moves to be passed along to the next generation. There will always be a heated debate before something of mass importance is decided upon. Conflict just has to be accepted as part of our everyday lives. After all, without it we would still be those single celled organisms swimming through the ocean.