

Growth from Conflict: The Evolution of Anna Marie Ochoa O'Leary

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Growth from Conflict

On July 1, 1983, the unionized workers at the Phelps Dodge copper mine in Morenci, Arizona, went on strike after failure to secure a labor contract with their employer. The strike officially lasted nearly three years, ending in the decertification of the local unions. Over the course of the strike, it became clear that ridding the mine of unions was the goal all along. Phelps Dodge, with the help of the media, local and state government, and even the National Guard did everything in its power to intimidate its striking employees, which left non-employee residents to “hold the line” in their place. Those non-employees were primarily the wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the predominantly male miners.

In the face of a collapsing way of life, the women of Morenci, Arizona, banded together to keep families and community together while the negotiations dragged on. Though not their original intention, their actions during the strike challenged the traditional gender norms of their families, town, unions, and cultures. One woman in particular, Anna Marie Ochoa O’Leary, was forever transformed by the conflict, leveraging her experiences to become a Professor of Cultural Anthropology, author, and international spokesperson. Her journey is inspiring to me for the bravery and awareness she demonstrated both throughout the strike and afterward. She has a sophisticated and evolving understanding of the layers of conflict related to the strike and the ability to analyze her own development despite the trauma of the experience.

In this essay, I will examine how conflict can serve as the catalyst for transformation through the lens of Anna’s story.

Background: Anna Marie Ochoa O’Leary

Born in 1954 in Clifton, Arizona, near the Phelps Dodge company town of Morenci, Anna Marie Ochoa grew up a small step removed from the copper business (Marin, 2012). Her

father was a shoemaker and her mother a homemaker, so her nuclear family was not directly dependent on Phelps Dodge for employment and housing (Marin, 2012). That changed in 1980 when she married Jorge O’Leary, the Phelps Dodge company physician, and moved from Clifton to Morenci into company housing (Marin, 2012) Still, Anna was not in tune with the details of life at Phelps Dodge, sharing that she only became aware of the strike on October 8, 1983, when her husband “was fired for his support of the striking workers” (O’Leary, 2018, p. 260). After his dismissal and their eviction from company housing, Jorge and Anna moved back to Clifton and were immediately embraced by the Morenci Miner’s Women’s Auxiliary (MMWA) (Kingsolver, 1996).

The MMWA helped Jorge set up a medical clinic to serve the striking miners and others who could not receive care from the Phelps Dodge Hospital (Kingsolver, 1996). Anna, in turn, joined the MMWA and began participating in MMWA events: food and clothing drives, community meals and meetings, and holding the picket line (Kingsolver, 1996; Arizona Memory Project, n.d.). As the strike wore on, the women of MMWA took it upon themselves to become more involved at the national and international level (Kingsolver, 1996). Anna attended the national convention of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), then in 1985, received a Ford Foundation grant to attend the UN Decades for Women conference in Nairobi. Upon her return, she was inspired to return to school, earning a master’s degree and Ph.D. in cultural anthropology and becoming a professor, author, and speaker (Kingsolver, 1996; O’Leary, 2018). Today, she is the Department Head of Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona (O’Leary, n.d.).

Conflict Dynamics

While there were complicated economic, political, and power dynamics at play in the

battle between Phelps Dodge and its union labor force, for Anna, the impact of the strike created a complex set of more personally felt conflicts.

In the beginning, the men and women of Clifton met to discuss and respond to the strike in largely gender-segregated groups (Kingsolver, 1996). As restrictions were placed on how many striking workers could be present at the picket lines, the non-employee women, including Anna, began “holding the line” (Kingsolver, 1996). Anna explains that, though her “husband didn’t want [her] going up to the picket lines” she did it anyway (Kingsolver, 1996, p. 145). Though this did not create tension in the O’Leary marriage, that was not the case for everyone. She notes it was particularly complicated in Latino households, where men are traditionally and culturally head of the family (Kingsolver, 1996).

Before the strike, it was typical for men to work at the mine and women to keep their homes (Kingsolver, 1996; O’Leary, 2018). Miners typically made a good living and had low-cost company housing, which made any goals women may have had outside the house “easily subsumed by the political economy of the community” (O’Leary, 2018, p. 258). Anna herself, though college-educated (BA at that point in time), was a homemaker, and commented that the women of the town did not spend much unstructured time together (O’Leary, 2018). Conversations were had at school and family events or in the grocery store, but were more typically shallow and brief (Kingsolver, 1996).

However, as the women of the MMWA delved deeper into union politics, they began making the connection to their own lives (Kingsolver, 1996). Their understanding of their gender roles and opportunities shifted, and “women’s changing role in the strike had begun to unravel some of the deepest threads in the fabric of Latino family life” as they “started seeing a connection between the company abusing authority over strikers and men abusing authority over

women (Kingsolver, 2018, p. 144). In addition, the many visitors to Clifton supporting the strike (from Ed Asner to big city feminists) impacted how the women of Clifton and Morceni understood their own lives (Kingsolver, 1996). Those visitors inspired some, like Anna, to step out onto a broader stage to try to influence the outcome of the strike by writing letters to national and international union leaders and traveling to speak at union conventions around the country (Kingsolver, 1996).

Anna seems to have navigated this tension within her own marriage without experiencing that unraveling she noted in her community. She doesn't clearly explain how she managed this, unfortunately. However, in interviews with Barbara Kingsolver for her book, Anna shows amazing self- and cultural awareness. The quotes above are from no later than 1985, when the strike was still active (Kingsolver, 1996). I find it remarkable that she was so attuned to the deeper implications of the conflict dynamics while in the midst of it. She was able to articulate the personal, relational, and many structural dimensions of the conflict (Lederach, 2003) while herself undergoing a profound personal transformation as a result of the activities she engaged in during the strike (Kingsolver, 1996; O'Leary, 2018).

Conflict Transformation

Lederach (2003) explains that "conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase just in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships" (p. 14). I do not know if Anna actively envisioned transformation, but her actions embody this definition. After Jorge was fired, her immediate response was to accept the invitation to join the auxiliary and help organize social support activities to ensure striking families had food, clothing, and school supplies for their children (Kingsolver, 1996). Though she walked the picket line, she was not involved in any

violent activity (Kingsolver, 1996). She seems to have always been looking to contribute to “direct positive peace” (Galtung, 1996) by focusing on the well-being of her family, friends, and community.

As the strike wore on, Anna expanded her activities to try to influence union leadership at the national level (Kingsolver, 1996). But then she went to Nairobi and discovered how to affect change at the system level by learning about how to access grant funds and leverage the media (Kingsolver, 1996). She also gained perspective on her own life and problems, as well as building confidence in herself and her abilities (Kingsolver, 1996). She credits her experiences during the strike for inspiring her to attend graduate school and become a professor (Marin, 2012; O’Leary, 2018). Her scholarly work focuses on “the economic and social status of Mexican women across the international Arizona-Mexico border” (Marin, 2012).

I aspire to have that type of poise in the face of conflict. I may be idealizing Anna O’Leary’s reactions. Perhaps she was not as aware as she seems from what I have read about her. However, whether or not my understanding is a perfect reflection of her reality is not as important as the *potential* I see in my understanding of her. The potential to remain steadfast in a terrible situation full of hate and despair, not simply maintaining equilibrium but finding new opportunities for service and growth. I would not suggest a change to Anna’s reaction to the conflict she experienced. In my view, my understanding of her actions and attitude are aspirational, though in the next section, I do discuss a less ideal way she could have responded.

The Moral Imagination

If the moral imagination is “the capacity to recognize turning points and possibilities” to transcend destructive patterns (Maiese, n.d.), then Anna Marie Ochoa O’Leary is a moral imagineer. She could have succumbed to bitterness or anger in the face of the strike; it would

have been understandable. Her husband lost his job; she lost her home; her town and her family were divided between strikers and scabs; and the power structures—from police to unions to the Federal government—seemed determine to not only break the strike but break the spirit of the strikers. However, she did not succumb to negativity, instead focusing first on caring for those in front of her, then leveraging what she had learned and experienced into a career devoted to helping others through teaching, research, and scholarship. I am not sure I could have responded in the way Anna did, especially at that age. She was just barely 30 years old when the strike began with young children at home and an unemployed husband. I experienced my husband being out of work when I was 30, and I panicked. I eventually turned that experience into an advantage—working at the University of Washington and finishing my bachelor’s degree—but I did not recognize it as an opportunity at the time. I might now be able to have the type of poise she had, but I am not completely certain.

What I have now that I did not at 30 is perspective, as well as more education and a library of reference books to help me in turbulent times. This course came at an interesting moment, as my organization is experiencing upheaval and my work life is changing. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Lederach, 2003) was a particularly well-timed read that reminded me that life is in how you frame and experience it. I can choose to react negatively to the changes around me; I can choose to remain neutral; or, like Anna, I can embrace the change and seek growth and opportunity for service even during times of conflict.

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