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A MODERN VERSION
OF CHAUCER'S
CANTERBURY TALES

THE TALE OF MEL

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THE TALE OF MEL

There was once a drug lord named Mel who lived in splendor with his wife Pru and daughter Sophia. Like most drug lords, he was in constant and violent competition with his fellows, and ruled through a combination of loyalty and ruthlessness, as he was both feared and loved.

One day he was called to a meeting by the chief drug lord of the area, and while he was at the meeting, his rivals attacked his house in force, killed his bodyguards, raped and beat his wife, and cut off the hands and feet, the ears and nose, and the lips of his daughter, leaving her for dead.

When he saw what had been done to him, at first he could hardly believe what had happened, and then he was furious and wanted immediate revenge.

His wife Pru counseled him, saying: "My dear husband. You must recognize that you are simply going through the stages of grief. Dr. Kubler-Ross long ago described them as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. You are simply at the second stage."

"Second stage be damned!" he shouted. "Look what they've done to me! Am I just supposed to wait for the stages to pass?"

"You seem to be suffering from NPD," Pru replied.
"That's narcissistic personality disorder. After all, it's our daughter who is in the hospital near the point of death. And I'm the one who was raped and beaten."

"But they did it to me! Me! I was the one this was directed at! My loved ones were just the means to get at me!"

"True enough," Pru agreed. "Even so, I have more reason for anger than you. And still, I counsel patience. Anger increases your heart rate, your blood pressure, and your adrenaline. All this physical turmoil makes decision-making problematic."

"But according to Moon and Mackie, in experiments done at the University of Santa Barbara, anger makes for better decisions, not worse. The angry individual is better able to base his or her decision on cues that really matter."

"Still," Pru insisted, "most research indicates that angry people are more prone to risk-taking. I advise you to get some good advice from people you trust before you go rushing off into a course of action you may regret."

Reluctantly, Mel took Pru's advice and called together all of his lieutenants for an emergency meeting. In greeting his underlings, he made it clear that he was

furious at what had been done to him and wanted immediate revenge. But the first person who spoke, a wise old friend of many years and wars, said as follows:

"The common wisdom, my friend, is that 'revenge is a dish best eaten cold.' I counsel you for now to double your security and to be on constant alert, but not to counterattack rashly or in anger. The purpose of this attack was obviously to provoke you into a response. Don't allow it to succeed."

The majority of those assembled, however, booed loudly and shouted the old man down. Weakness invites abuse, they insisted, and any delay in answering the attack would invite another. When another old adviser suggested that war is easy to enter and difficult to exit, again they shouted him down.

Mel agreed with the vociferous majority and formed a committee to plan an attack and report back to him by the next morning. But after their guests had gone, Pru came to him, saying that she disagreed with his decision, and asking him to hear her out.

"Am I to reverse my decision now?" he asked. "Because my wife suggested it? How does that look?"

Pru answered him, saying: "First, it is better to look like a fool than to be one. And, second, there is no dishonor in listening to your wife. In fact, it is becoming more and more acceptable as society evolves.

A recent study by Meghan Murphy at Iowa State University involving 72 married couples found that 'women were communicating more powerful messages, and men were responding to those messages by agreeing or giving in.'"

"Well, I'll listen," Mel said impatiently. "What do you advise?"

"Most of all, to consider your options without anger and without haste. Ziegler, Rief, Wehrner, Mehl, and Lincoln found that people with delusions tend to jump to conclusions (JTC). So I suggest that you be wary of delusions in your decision-making process.

"Once you have looked coldly and rationally at your situation, keep your determination secret as you ask the advice of your counselors. You surely erred when you called all of your advisers into a single meeting. As has long been established, crowds act differently from individuals, more commonly anti-socially, as Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb discovered in a landmark study in 1952. Deindividuation results in a reduction in self-awareness, in which each individual becomes less able to consult his or her internalized standards, thus becoming more open to influence by environmental stimuli. Further, Freud analyzed the influence of a leader on a crowd in terms of suggestibility, and surely your desire for revenge was both obvious and suggestive.

"You should therefore speak to your advisers singly, without signaling your own opinions, if you want good advice."

"That is good advice," Mel said. "And I thank you for it. I would be obliged, though, if now you would give me your advice on what to do in the present situation."

"First," Pru said, "I advise you to consider what you might gain or lose in a precipitate attack on your enemies. For it was clearly their intention in attacking you to provoke you into attacking them. Therefore, at least they must think it would be to their advantage to draw you into war with them.

"Now they may be wrong about that, but think carefully. For if you once begin a war, it is much more difficult to come to a peaceful agreement than it would be before hostilities begin.

"Second, I urge you to consider using an Interest-Based Relational Approach (IBRA) to resolve this conflict to everyone's mutual satisfaction. What you need to do is find some mutually respected person to oversee the process of conflict resolution and have all agree on the steps to be taken. The first step is to get everyone to buy into the process and agree on the rules. The second is to gather information about the situation under dispute. The third is to agree on the problem that needs resolution. The fourth is to brainstorm

possible resolutions. The fifth is to negotiate a solution that is mutually satisfactory, optimally a win-win solution."

"Pru," Mel answered. "Our daughter is in the hospital fighting for her life. Even if she survives, she'll be crippled and disfigured. You've been raped. What kind of win-win solution could there be for that?"

"That's just your narrative. You have to understand that parties to a conflict have conflicting narratives. You have your narrative, they have their narrative, and normally both narratives foreground grievances. Chaitin has shown how getting each side to listen to the other's narrative has been an important first step in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I'm sure the people who have attacked us have a narrative justifying the attack, just as we have a narrative justifying a counterattack."

"I'm not interested in listening to them. I'm interested in taking a chainsaw and cutting them up one by one, piece by piece, while they scream in fear and pain."

"Yes, of course," Pru said. "Anger is a normal human emotion. You have to let yourself feel it. But then you have to learn how to handle it. The Educators for Social Responsibility have a five-step process that should help you deal with your anger. The first is to identify your feelings, getting beyond just happy and sad to some really expressive figurative language. The

second is to identify what triggers your anger and to attempt to avoid such situations. The third is to be aware of the physical cues of anger – rapid pulse or breathing, raising your voice. The fourth is to use relaxation techniques, such as slow and regular breathing. And the fifth is to take responsibility for your behavior by addressing the behaviors that make other people angry at you."

"What have I done to make others angry at me?" Mel asked.

"You have to answer that," Pru said. "It does you no good if I do."

So Mel thought about it for a moment. And then he called the chief drug lord and asked him to mediate at a meeting between him and those who had attacked his wife and daughter.

In the end, using a combination of the IBRA approach and Winslade and Monk's narrative mediation, the warring parties resolved their conflict in a mutually satisfactory way. The attacking party paid the attacked party monetary compensation for their injuries, a course of action that was far less costly than a violent conflict would have been. The attacked party agreed to some adjustments in territory and distribution that had originally aggrieved the attacking party and led to the confrontation. And peace reigned in the neighborhood, which was beneficial to all parties,

including the chief drug lord, who was worried about how violence might affect public attitudes towards the drug trade generally.

"You were so right about conflict resolution!" Mel said to Pru after the requisite handshakes had been exchanged. "Look what might have happened if I had retaliated! How many people would have been killed! How severely our business interests would have been damaged! I'm so glad I listened to you and then listened to them and understood their point of view!"

"Unfortunately," Pru replied, "research on the dynamic links between theory and practice in the field of conflict resolution is still at a primitive stage. There are few studies that isolate variables in practice and trace them reliably to specific outcomes in any replicative or reliably quantifiable way. I plan to publish an article soon on the success of our experiment in the field. Perhaps that will help bring the value of a resolution approach to conflicts to the attention of a wider audience."

"Yes," Mel agreed. "Perhaps it will."