



Mediation Musings: *Jaws*

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The movie theater was dark and cool on a warm day. I was a little tentative meeting my new romantic interest's sister for the first time. The movie was already a big deal, but it hadn't been on my radar. The movie opened. Surprise! I discovered places I recognized from Martha's Vineyard! Once I realized its location, I found myself having a hard time following the plot, my inner location scout scouring the scenes for, *I know that place!*

The scruffy and plainspoken characters struck a familiar Island tone, and I was lulled into thinking I was in friendly territory. So, when the first shark attack came, I was nowhere close to ready. Sitting next to the sister, I jumped and grabbed her wrist so hard she had marks. After that she always looked at me with suspicion. I thought of the movie encounter as the cause, though there was probably something much more values-based, or personality-based, or it was just cultural—I was 17 and she 26, and we *did* march to very different drummers.

The *Jaws* historical context

Distracting oneself required some concerted effort in 1975. There was so little in the life experience that was predictable in the United States. The continuing Vietnam war and the [fall of Saigon](#), the erosion of the presidency ([vice president corruption/resigned](#), [Watergate](#) and the [presidential resignation](#)), the post-[assassination decade](#), the destabilized economy ([oil embargo](#), [stock market crash](#), [unemployment](#) and [recession crises](#)), [ongoing movements for justice](#) for [African Americans](#), women, LGBTQ; an engaging movie was welcomed by many.

Filed on Martha's Vineyard, the movie employed and was adopted by many Islanders. There was something about the story—silly and outdated leaders holding strong to simplistic, unexamined solutions. It tracked with the historical period and made sense to those living on the Vineyard. Enter complexity and scientific analysis à la Richard Dreyfuss—the educated and earnest guy from Woods Hole (*I know that place!*), the new sheriff from off-Island, the grizzled shark hunter—Quint (*he looks familiar!*). The town meeting. It may have been called Amity, but we all recognized our Island.

The *Jaws* plot

I am getting ahead of myself. For those of you who don't know the plot of [Jaws](#) or who have forgotten it, *Jaws* premiered in 1975 and is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. It was the first [summer blockbuster movie](#), with over \$100,000 in ticket sales. Here's the [basic synopsis](#):

- Boy meets girl on beach; girl goes swimming and dies in a bloody mess.
- The town of Amity (Edgartown) is prepping for July 4, big money coming in, the police chief wants to close the beach due to the death, the mayor and business leaders veto this with profit motive as the reason.

- Thousands of visitors begin arriving to Amity and a small local boy is attacked and killed, finally causing the beaches to be closed and his mother to offer a reward for anyone who kills the shark.
- A shark expert arrives, proving that a shark that was caught is not the shark that killed the people, and does this by illegally slicing it open, in cahoots with the sheriff, to find no human remains.
- The shark expert and sheriff then discover a shipwreck and the corpse of a fisherman.
- Despite these tragedies, tourists flock to the still-open beaches, another two boat attacks and deaths occur, and the mayor finally takes the threat seriously and hires a shark hunter.
- Shark hunter, police chief and shark scientist go to sea in search of the shark.
- The remaining story is shark hunting men, men hunting shark. The shark hunter is eventually killed by the shark, the two remaining occupants of the boat paddle back to shore, the shark having been killed by a creatively managed gunshot that causes an explosion of an oxygen tank in the mouth of the shark.

Analyzing with a conflict lens

As your high school literature teacher will tell you, all story involves conflict. As a professional in the conflict resolution field, I'm often surprised at how little traction this idea has gained. You too can analyze conflict in movies, books and, well, life. Here's the easy recipe: take an event, look for power, values, identity, belief or needs disputes; voilà, you are analyzing using a conflict resolution lens. When I asserted a few months ago that *Jaws* would be the perfect context as an instruction manual for conflict resolution, I hadn't yet delved too far. Now that I've been rolling this around for a while, I think my instincts were right. You be the judge.

I'm only scratching the surface here, but the themes of conflict that I'm taking a stab at are: youth culture, class conflict, misogyny and us-and-them. There are so many more. You could look at this film from the POV of Hollywood and film-production power bases. You could wade into the oft-reviewed human vs. nature friction. Wampanoag perspective as the original we-were-here-first dispute. The absence of Black people in the movie. One could study the production for conflicts derived from substance use disorder. The story could be rewritten from the perspective of the shark. Historical diminishment of the fishing industry could be your background scenery. Climate change as a conflict backdrop. All this is to say, analyzing anything from a conflict resolution stance offers many platforms from which to dive into the conflict water.

Youth culture

The scene starts with a significant gathering of hippyish twenty-somethings gathered on the beach. Guitars, pot smoking, sex and open-minded young people all together without adult supervision was, still in 1975, a conflict in and of itself. Yes, the pre-WWII generation, their parents, had begun to grow sideburns a little bit longer and wear some (already outdated as per young people) brighter colors, and slightly more enlightened male/female roles were evolving.

Young, seemingly carefree, sexually less restricted young people gathering on the beach was sure to be seen by a significant proportion of their parents and grandparents as dangerous. This previous generation preferred to get its changing culture news through the careful filter of the Ed Sullivan TV variety show. The [rupture was](#) dubbed the Generation Gap, “a radical disconnect in social, political, and economic values, which ultimately led to their major rivalry....[T]he conflict that arose between these two generations remains notable in modern American history.” From <https://promotionofjustice.eadrummondhistory.lmu.build/the-eruption-of-youth-culture-in-america/>

The young people from the late '60s to early '70s had previously toyed with the notion of “Never trust anyone over thirty.” Now, though, the over-thirty-year-olds were beginning to gain positions of influence and power and were pretty sure that they could do it all much, much better. Enter the sheriff, who brought his young family into a relatively sclerotic and hierarchical society (Amity/Martha's Vineyard) that was not used to outsiders messing with existing power relationships.

Social class conflict

Below will sound like a course in political economy, for good reason. The progenitor of conflict resolution theory is the school of Marxism, which defined capitalistic classes and put the concept of group conflict into everyday use. You don't have to subscribe to Marxist thought to use the infrastructure of conflict resolution—it's just a side note to explain the theoretical roots that have evolved dramatically in the intervening century and a half.

Now back to analyzing *Jaws* as a conflict in need of resolution. We're going to delve into the concepts of competing social class interests here.

One: business. The [profit motive](#) for those in business, government and power is a conflict causer. Those who would benefit from potential profit hold the position that it is in their interest to do anything/everything to increase profits. Profit motive tends to be focused on a shorter time base—business looks to increase income as soon as possible—the future is not a given.

Two: society. Those with a longer view, such as academics, scientists, historians, religious leaders and visionaries, may view the unfolding current events with a different interest lens. They may analyze occurrences from the POV of the effect on the population as a whole, or the natural environment, the cultural morays or ruptures in historical patterns. Long-term thinking is the privilege of those whose present circumstances are relatively settled and who can afford to look at the big picture. Bill Ury of *Getting to Yes* fame calls this the “[third side](#).”

Three: workers. For those with present-day instabilities, such as paycheck-to-paycheck workers, the poor, the elderly and the disadvantaged, with little societal power, the profit motive often takes precedence, often at their expense. Yes, the benefits to their municipality may eventually trickle down. Most likely, in the present term though, their interests will be subsumed in favor of quicker financial gain for local businesses or larger corporate concerns.

If this triumvirate of interests looks familiar, it certainly can be found in the *Jaws* characters. The Woods Hole guy, the scientist, representing Group Two. Shark hunter, Group Three. And

the sheriff is enacting his internal conflict of whether to represent business interests, societal interests or those of the workers. Maybe he can find a way to serve all three.

As we witness the death of shark hunter, who's in an interesting intersection of going from sole proprietor as a fisherman to one who allows himself to be hired by the town, and becomes obsessed and unhinged through his dogged and eventually deadly pursuit, we see that it follows a pattern of workers who often [bear the brunt](#) of profit-motive schemes. This theme, familiar to those in the Vietnam era, surely struck a chord as the anti-war and anti-draft sentiment had.

We then see the sheriff and scientist swimming home on their own, knowing that business owners were home, safe and dry. We don't know whether the duo will receive the accolades they deserve. We also don't know whose interests they will align with in the future, knowing a turning point of this kind might well have the effect of shifting original alliances.

Misogyny

For those of you for whom the gender lens does not naturally occur, I'll let you know that you can apply gender conflict and [misogyny](#) perspective as an analytical theme for any plot. This movie, and the book that spawned it, is a typical buddy story—the men are in charge, the major characters are men, as were, by the way, the producers, directors and writers. The resulting movie points to the difficulties that an all-male set of creators might have if they did make attempts to create a fully realized female character. The character of the mother of the dead child provided a good possibility, but pretty much nowhere else in the movie do we see the story from the POV of a multifaceted woman character.

Another *Jaws* aspect is the pattern learned in Gender Studies 101—the female character who is sexually active or assertive will die. This happens in the first few minutes of the movie, as we see the young woman leading the man into the dunes in a flirtatious and luring way. She goes swimming—skinny-dipping—and she is quickly dispatched by the shark.

The mother of the dead boy, Mrs. Kintner, is played brilliantly by a local Vineyarder, Lee Fierro. She depicts an *upstanding woman* in society, with her demeanor, dress and diction all placing her within respectability bounds. Her restraint in the face of stupidity and lack of urgency is laudable. Her female voice, her condemnation of incompetence, her lack of deference for male power, is a familiar moment for many who have personally faced these challenges. She does her best to be heard. She is dismissed. A "[nevertheless, she persisted](#)" moment if there ever was one.

Us/them

In Conflict Resolution 101, we learn to look for indications of the *us-and-them* binary. The basics are, *us* = *good* and *them* = *bad*. Those of us who live on or have encountered Island culture are experts in this syndrome. Off-Island/on-Island; native Islanders/*washashores*; born here/interlopers; year-rounders/*summer dinks*. There are more than enough examples, and we get plenty of practice detecting and trying to avoid our own and others' *us-and-them* biases.

As with all biases, there can still be something true underneath the bias, driving the oversimplified binary. In *Jaws* the Islanders *do* understand best what their daily and year-round lives are all about—others do not. The business owners *do* most fully appreciate the business interests—others may not. The scientists *do* have the education and knowledge to understand the scientific precepts—others may have misunderstood or dismissed the scientific process. The newly arrived police chief *does* have professional training in safety and crowd control—others do not, though they may know the culture and have their own valuable crowd experience. Each of these knowledge bases can inform the others.

What does happen, though, is also typical. Folks shut down, hold to their positions, refuse to consider new and novel information or perspectives. A disruption in the social fabric is detected. Individuals and groups go to their corners to nurse their core interests and fears. The *us and them* arrives as an easy route to travel and the *I'm right and they are wrong* monster is born and grows, fed by peoples' fears and discomfort with instability. As *us and them* expands, the ability to listen and consider new and unfamiliar ideas contracts. The movie's emergency town meeting depicts this dilemma.

Conflict resolvers learn to wade into this kind of a setup with careful moves. They work to make sure that participants hear and understand each other's perspective, slowing down decision-making until all options are fully presented and understood by those who have knee-jerk opposition; amplifying quiet voices; keeping folks on topic; thinking about process decisions creatively. Careful multi-partiality is important on the part of any neutral facilitator. They have to work diligently to not be overly plodding or block progress when potential consensus begins to form, while being aware that human brains take time and safety to take in new ideas and appreciate others' perspectives. It's tricky business to detangle us-and-them thinking and to move folks toward collaborative decision-making. But it is possible. I have done it, and it has been some of the most rewarding work for me as a conflict resolver.

Movies tend to focus on the individual hero instead of the collective process. It's definitely more screen-worthy to follow the Quint drama chasing the shark with intensive zeal than a rowdy and messy group of characters talking and arguing together to form a plan that everyone can live with. Aside here: this is why we don't see mediation and group facilitation much in movies—it's sort of boring and frustrating to watch. Despite it purportedly being outdated, movies are still pretty stuck on the "[great man](#)" theory of history. Swashbuckling heroes abound, while scenes of dozens arguing and trying to plan together are unseen in films, or are only provided as an example of what not to do.

***Jaws* as a study in conflict resolution**

At the end of the movie, the immediate threat, *Jaws*, is dead. What is yet to be determined is what other conflicts were created or diminished through this process. Will the town leaders be thrown out due to their incompetence? Will the sheriff stay or go? What will happen with the scientist in Woods Hole—will he stay on the other side of the Sound, or has he grown fond of the Vineyard—I mean Amity? How will threats to the public be assessed in the future? Will the island of Amity suffer in terms of tourist trade? What about Quint's family, how will they cope? And Mrs. Kintner?

The thing about fifty years is that we do know how some of these conflicts played out. **Youth culture** looks quite different now, with five distinct generations all occupying society as life span expands. The Generation Gap as it was in 1975 is not a current term, though “OK Boomer” has a similar ring. The military draft is no more. Sexual mores have shifted and changed dramatically. **Social class conflict** is still ongoing, as the income and wealth gap has dramatically diverged over the intervening years. **Misogyny** continues in new and old forms and differs from society to society—the remarkable expansion of women’s rights from the ‘70s to 2010s is seeing even more remarkable political erosion. **Us and them** is still with us, though the important achievements toward equitability, inclusivity and expansion of diverse perspectives have been embedded into the zeitgeist over time.

What would happen if *Jaws* occurred today? Well, immediate cell phone footage would have been broadcast, and opinions on social media would abound. Quint might have been saved by drones or satellite surveys. The town meeting might have had more participation through hybrid use of teleconference and could have been translated into Brazilian Portuguese. The leaders may have been women or nonbinary people.

Today anything such as what is depicted in the *Jaws* movie related to wildlife would be in the hands of tribal naturalists from the [Wampanoag Fish and Wildlife service](#). Hopefully off-Island expertise would be welcomed in the form of [NOAA](#) or [WHOI](#) scientists, as they do tend to be respected by Islanders. Turns out that, although some did remain afraid to go into the water after *Jaws*, many others became excited by and champions of sharks, whose status has improved, likely as a result of the movie.

I think, though, the basic human nature reaction when crisis hits would look pretty similar. And it is true that *Jaws* looks pretty tame compared to some of the current conflict challenges we face today. Fifty years on, *Jaws* continues to entertain. It is also a great canvas upon which to superimpose conflict resolution lessons. We can learn from our mistakes and our successes. Eventually. I remain optimistic.

