# Journeys into the Heart of Conflict

Kenneth Cloke

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## CHAPTER 1: THE ELEMENTS OF CONFLICT

*Sweet are the uses of adversity,*
*Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,*
*Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;*

William Shakespeare

Sweet, indeed, are the uses of adversity, yet this sweetness is often concealed in the ugly, venomous aspects of conflict. The "precious jewels" our conflicts contain are the deeper truths they are able to teach us. What prevents us from recognizing these deeper truths and learning from our conflicts? What drives us along ugly, venomous paths of aggression and self-destruction rather than dialogue and constructive engagement? What keeps us locked in impasse? And how can a deeper understanding of the origin of our conflicts help us locate these precious jewels and turn them to use?

*The Dual Nature of Conflict*

We all grow up in families, lived in neighborhoods, attended schools, and worked in organizations in which we experience conflict. By the time we become adults, we clock thousands of hours in conflict. Yet few of us, in our families, neighborhoods, schools, or organizations, receive comprehensive practical instruction in how to resolve them. So let us acknowledge two facts: first, that conflict is endemic and an essential part of everyone's life experience; and second, that none of us have been adequately trained in how to handle them.

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As a consequence, we often behave badly and mimic patterns we learned in our families of origin, or revert to "fight or flight" default settings centered in the amygdyla, or what is sometimes called the "reptile brain," which stimulates our automatic reflexes during conflict. It is not the activation of these reflexes alone that makes conflict so difficult to handle, but our lack of awareness that they have been triggered, and our inability to recall countless constructive, creative, and more evolved alternatives. We seem unaware that by adopting these alternative approaches and disarming our reptile brain's default responses, we can dramatically improve our relationships, self-confidence, and skills, increase our energy and effectiveness, liberate ourselves from the constraints of unresolved issues, and transcend the conditions that gave rise to them.

In any conflict, we may experience anger, fear, pain, jealousy, guilt, or shame, sometimes simultaneously. But we may also experience courage, love, empathy, compassion, or forgiveness, equally simultaneously. This duality, and the apparent paradox of concurrently experiencing creative and destructive emotions, humility and arrogance, divinity and stupidity, comedy and tragedy, allows us to recognize that every conflict invites us to evolve by learning to replace destructive with constructive responses. Both these tendencies exist inside us as inchoate, unformed, disjointed forces that, given the right catalyst, can either keep us imprisoned or set us free.

How we experience conflicts therefore depends less on the issues at stake than on the *attitude*, intention, spirit, and character we adopt in approaching them, which will profoundly influence the way we think and feel about the issues, our opponents, and conflicts in general. But these are not fixed quantities or permanent, in-born features that, once formed, cannot be altered. On the contrary, we can *significantly* alter our attitudes, intentions, spirits, and characters, for example, by changing the *way* we listen to our opponents, asking questions that probe beneath the surface of their assumptions, drawing them into creative collaborations, focusing their attention on the future rather than on the past, and encouraging them to speak unspeakable, deeply guarded truths – not only to us, but more importantly to themselves.

Consequently, conflict is both a creative and a destructive force. While this fact is widely recognized, what is not adequately understood is that we can use every conflict we experience in our lives as an opportunity to learn and practice new skills, evolve to higher levels of conflict, become better human beings, and lead more satisfying lives. To do so, we need to recognize why we get stuck in conflict, and how we get unstuck.

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*Ten Ways We Get Stuck in Conflict*

There are probably hundreds of reasons we become stuck and unable to end our conflicts. Here are my top ten, to which you can add your own:

First, *conflict defines us and gives our lives meaning.* Having an enemy is a quick, easy source of identity, because we are whatever they are not. By defining our opponents as evil, we implicitly label ourselves as good. Our opponents' apparently demonic behaviors allow us to appear — if not angelic by comparison — at least poor, innocent victims who are entitled to sympathy and support. Yet identifying ourselves as victims leaves us feeling powerless to resolve our disputes and encourages us to sink deeper into an abyss of anger, fear, and self-righteousness from which it becomes more and more difficult to escape. It makes our opponents seem worse and ourselves better than we actually were. It causes us to lose perspective, resist learning, and retain unrealistic expectations.

Second, *conflict gives us energy,* even if it is only the energy of anger, fear, pain, and guilt. It is even possible to become addicted to the adrenaline rush, the flash-point intensity and *intimacy* of combat. Yet the energy of anger, fear, pain, and guilt are ultimately debilitating, giving us a quick stimulus that dies just as quickly, in place of a healthier, longer lasting energy that flows from compassion, collaboration, and honest communication. This negative energy keeps us stuck and deepens our suffering, causing us to pay a steep physical, emotional, and spiritual price in anxiety, rage, stress, and deteriorated health.

Third, *conflict ennobles our misery* and makes it seem to have been suffered for a worthwhile cause. Without conflict, we may feel we suffered in vain and be forced to critique our choices and regret the wasted lives we've led. Yet the effort to assign higher meaning to our suffering encourages us to justify its' continuation and deceive ourselves into thinking our own abusive behaviors serve some higher purpose. It encourages us to hold on to our suffering rather than learning from it, letting it go, and moving on to more collaborative, less hostile relationships.

Fourth, *conflict safeguards our personal space* and encourages others to recognize our needs and respect our privacy. For many of us, conflict seems the only way to effectively declare our rights, secure the respect of others, restore our inner balance, and protect ourselves from boundary violations. Yet conflict also creates false boundaries, keeps out those we want to let in, substitutes declarations of rights for satisfaction of interests, secures respect based on fear rather than personal regard, and creates justifications for counter-attack and continued abuse. It erects walls that separate and isolate us from each other and

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prevent us from collaboratively negotiating the use of space, being authentic, or finding out who we or they really are.

Fifth, *conflict creates intimacy*, even if it is only the transient, *negative* intimacy of fear, rage, attachment, and loss. Every two-year old knows that it is better to be noticed for doing something wrong than not to be noticed at all. Yet negative intimacy is ultimately unsatisfactory because it blocks us from building positive intimacy in its stead. Many marriages are sustained by invalidating, insulting, conflict-laden communication styles that simultaneously bring people together and hold them apart, frustrate their efforts to get closer, and undermine the lasting intimacy they really want based on positive regard, mutual affection, and shared surrender.

Sixth, *conflict camouflages our weaknesses* and diverts attention from sensitive subjects we would rather avoid. It is a smokescreen, a way of passing the buck, blaming others, and distracting attention from our mistakes. Yet doing so cheats us out of opportunities to learn from our mistakes, makes us defensive, diminishes our integrity, and reduces our capacity for authentic, responsible relationships. It impedes us from addressing real issues, and diverts awareness from sensitive subjects, magnifying their importance and effect.

Seventh, *conflict powerfully communicates what we honestly feel,* allowing us to vent and unload our emotions onto others. Many people in conflict assuage their pain by externalizing it and passing it to others. While venting allows us to reduce our own emotional suffering, it increases stress in others, fails to communicate our respect or regard for them, and does not encourage them to take responsibility for their choices or address what got them upset in the first place. Venting communicates disrespect, encourages defensiveness and counterattack, escalates underlying conflicts, and does not accurately express what we are capable of when we are with someone who is genuinely listening.

Eighth, *conflict gets results*. It forces others to heed us, including faceless bureaucrats and "service representatives" who only seem to respond to our requests or do what we want when we yell at them. But yelling turns *us* into angry, insensitive, aggravated people and adds unnecessary stress to the lives of unhappy, alienated, powerless employees who are obliged to pointlessly accept our wrath. It labels us as "bullies," and gets us less in the long run than we could by politely requesting their assistance and eliciting their desire to be helpful. It discourages us from being genuine and open while listening, and produces outcomes that undermine what we really want.

Ninth, *conflict makes us feel righteous* by encouraging us to believe we are opposing evil behaviors and rewarding those that are good. Our opponents' pernicious actions justify us in giving them what they "rightly deserve." Yet righteousness is easily converted to self-righteousness, and good and evil are far more complex, subtle, and nuanced than we are prepared to admit. Engaging in conflict reduces our capacity for empathy and compassion, allowing us to cross the line from punishing evil to committing it ourselves. It makes us haughty,

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judgmental, and superior, and unable to be humble, accepting, and egalitarian in our relationships.

Tenth, *conflict prompts change,* which feels better than impasse and stagnation. Many changes take place only as a result of conflict — not because it is actually necessary to achieve a given result, but because other people's resistance makes it so. As John F. Kennedy famously declared, "Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent revolution inevitable." Yet conflict also increases resistance to change, which can often be more successfully overcome through inclusion, collaborative dialogue, and interest-based negotiations. Adversarial conflict produces, alongside change, a backlash dedicated to reducing its gains and polarizing those who might otherwise become its supporters. Worse, as a means, it frequently undermines the ends to which it is dedicated. While consequential changes require conflict, understanding these dynamics allows us to design approaches that can improve its effectiveness.

Thus, while there are excellent reasons for engaging in adversarial conflict, there are better ones for resolving it and collaborating with our opponents in open dialogue, informal problem solving, and interest-based negotiations. While adversarial conflict produces beneficial outcomes, it also results in alienation, defensiveness, counter-attack, and resistance. Worse, it creates a quality of energy or spirit that gives the *appearance* of strength while simultaneously sapping it. This weakness makes it more difficult to solve our problems, engage each other constructively, and learn what the conflict is there to teach us.

There is really only one great, constructive use of adversity, and that is to open our eyes and ears, minds and hearts, and force us to pay attention to what is happening within, around, and between us. Our conflicts are our teachers and liberators because they ask us to wake up and become aware of what we have not yet learned or transcended. They expose our internal myths, assumptions, antagonisms, misunderstandings, emotional triggers, false expectations, and weaknesses. They direct our attention at wounds we desperately need to heal, and problems we urgently need to solve. As Carl Jung presciently wrote, "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."

Conflict is the sound made by the cracks in a system, be it personal, relational, familial, organizational, social, environmental, economic, or political. It is a warning light pointing our attention at something in our environment or character that is not working for others or ourselves. It is an opportunity for rethinking and innovation. It is the birth-pang of a new paradigm waiting to emerge. It is a reminder of our interdependence, of the skills we need to improve, of what is most important, and what we need to do or let go of in order to escape their orbit and evolve to higher levels of conflict.

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The principal difficulty with conflict is that it defines us in the wrong ways; that is, *for* ourselves and *against* others, rather than for ourselves *and* others against our common problems. It deprives us of deep, profound, heart-felt relationships that only develop through dialogue, problem solving, and collaborative negotiation. It traps us in ancient, profitless, destructive stories that cannot transform or transcend what got us into conflict in the first place.

*Six Ingredients in a Recipe for Conflict*

To understand in greater detail how we get stuck, it is useful to investigate the elements or ingredients that are required to create a conflict. In my view, for a simple disagreement to turn into a conflict, six fundamental elements or ingredients are required.

First, there need to be two or more people, or two or more contradictory parts of the same person, in order to establish polarity. We have all heard the admonition "It takes two to tango." We forget that this implies the presence of a corollary: it takes *one* to stop the tango. One person cannot create a conflict by themselves. Trying to do so is like trying to reproduce the sound of clapping with one hand. This suggests that anyone in conflict can stop it at any time by changing the dance, and that introspection, strategic withdrawal, unilateral concessions, and forgiveness will be useful techniques in resolving conflict.

Logically, since it is possible for two or more people to interact without creating conflict, an additional ingredient is required. A second element, therefore, is that there must be a difference, disagreement, or dispute regarding an issue over which it is possible to take opposing positions. Yet every opposite is connected along a *line of polarity*, as up and down are connected along a line of height. This suggests that dialogue over issues, collaborative negotiation of differences, small agreements, brainstorming, and creative problem solving will be useful techniques in resolving conflict.

Since it is possible to have a disagreement between two or more people and still not create a conflict, something more is needed. A third critical ingredient in creating conflict is unresolved "negative" emotions, such as anger, fear, jealousy, guilt, and shame. These emotions "fix" the conflict, giving it shape and consistency. Yet emotional intelligence can be systematically developed and people can learn to listen actively, responsively, and empathetically while their opponents express negative emotions and not get emotionally upset. This implies that recognizing and taking responsibility for our emotions, listening, venting, acknowledging, internalizing, and letting them go will be useful techniques in resolving conflict.

Negative behaviors are simply the nearly automatic acting out of negative emotions, the body's instinctual response to perceived hostility. If negative behaviors reflect unmet emotional needs, we can act to defuse them by asking questions that clarify those needs and by acknowledging and satisfying them.

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This suggests that agreeing on ground rules that mutually renounce future resort to negative behaviors, openly discussing them when they occur, and asking people to identify the rewards or penalties that would discourage them from breaking those ground rules again will be useful techniques in resolving conflict.

The fourth ingredient in conflict is less tangible and more difficult to define. It is the presence within ourselves or others of an antagonistic attitude or intention; a hostile spirit, energy, life force, or *chi* that blocks the free flow of our energies, results in impasse, and makes it difficult to discover what lies beneath the conflict. Yet conflict provides us with countless opportunities for overcoming and transcending these hostile attitudes, energies and intentions. This suggests that developing our capacity for honest introspection, monitoring our intentions and attitudes, giving up false expectations, releasing and letting go of conflict, forgiving our opponents and ourselves, and moving on with our lives will be useful techniques in resolving conflict.

The fifth ingredient is similarly difficult to define. It is the existence of a closed hearted, antagonistic, withholding attitude toward our opponents, our selves, or our conflict. Yet conflict provides us with multiple opportunities for open, heart-to-heart communications. This suggests that opening our hearts to each other, conducting intimate, empathetic, honest communications, collaborating, learning, reaching reconciliation, and redeeming our respect, trust, and affection for each other will be useful techniques in resolving conflict.

A sixth, rarely identified element, consists of an adversarial system or environment, be it psychological, familial, organizational, social, economic, or political, that manifests its dysfunction through chronic conflicts that *appear* purely personal. These conflicts grow deeper and more profound as the system loses its ability to adapt to its changing environment. Systemic disputes may emerge in families, for example, as a result of incompatible roles and divergent or unmet expectations; in organizations as a result of an absence of leadership, or hierarchical, bureaucratic, and autocratic managerial practices; and in societies as a result of persistent inequalities and unfair treatment. This suggests that identifying, addressing, and reforming the dysfunctional systems, cultures, relationships, and processes that generate apparently isolated, interpersonal disputes will be useful techniques in resolving conflict. The following diagram summarizes and describes these elements, the likely results of each, what is needed, wanted, or missing to move toward resolution, and a few possible strategies for intervention.

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## Essential Elements of Conflict

| Indispensable Element | Likely Results of Element | What is Needed, Wanted or Missing | Possible Strategies for Intervention |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. *Two or More People* | Diverse Interests, Possible Distrust, Competitive Relationships | Openness, Communication, Positive Intent, Common Goals | Set Ground Rules, Encourage Story Telling, Build Empathy, Agree on Common Interests |
| 2. *Disagreement* | Unresolved Issues, Differences over Facts, Competing Issues, Personal Solutions | Engagement, Logical Analysis, Neutral Identification and Discussion of Common Interests | Support Dialogue, Collaborative Negotiation, Creative Problem-Solving |
| 3. *"Negative" Emotion* | Unexpressed or Hostile Emotions, Incomplete or Inadequate Compassion and Letting Go | Introspection, Venting, Empathy, Acknowledgment, Self-Esteem, Emotional Closure, Rituals, Completion | Encourage Venting, Acknowledge Emotions, Caucus, Process and Let Go, Create Rituals of Closure |
| 4. Hostile Spirit, Energy, Life Force, Intention, *or* Chi | Chronic Conflict, Illness, Injury, Confusion, Spiritual Suffering | Forgiveness, Expanded Awareness, Compassion, Authenticity, Acceptance Release | Encourage Honest, Empathetic Awareness, Meditation, Shift from Negative to Positive Energy |
| 5. Closed-Hearted Antagonistic, Withholding *Attitude,* | Dysfunctional Relationships, Depression, Broken Heart | Reconciliation, Positive Attitude, Heart to Heart Dialogue | Speak from the Heart, Learning, Insight |
| 6. Adversarial System *or Environment* | Inimical Social Conditions, Cultures or Systems; i.e., Inequity, Hierarchy, Bureaucracy and Autocracy | Systemic Change, Collaborative Relationship, Cultural Sensitivity, Increased Equity, Equality, and Democracy | Transform System, Alter or Adapt to Environment, Balance Power, Build Participation, Consensus, and Ownership |

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Having identified and distinguished these elements, it is important to recognize that conflict is holistic and cannot be subdivided without rendering it, at a deeper level, incomprehensible. While each distinction we invent or discover is a key that allows us to unlock impasse at its source, one ingredient at a time, each is also a piece in a larger puzzle that allows us to move a little further in understanding and unlocking the whole. As these elements are mixed and comingled in the course of conflict, they appear inseparable and it becomes difficult to recognize what needs to be done to reach resolution.

Every conflict can therefore be regarded as creating a kind of confusion or blindness regarding the unique, separate elements that created it. This blindness extends not only to antagonistic impressions of our opponents, but to the root causes of our disagreement, the engrained patterns of our emotions, the attitudes underlying our adversarial behaviors, the deeper spiritual and heartfelt lessons of our conflict, and the systemic sources of our displeasure. Separating these elements and attacking each separately can release us from impasse and allow us to discover the reasons we became stuck, either piecemeal or in a single stroke.

In truth, there are hundreds of ways of defining and analyzing conflict. Each new element and insight we identify leads directly to some fresh technique or method of resolution and improved understanding of conflict in general. Ultimately, each element draws our attention back to what *we* contributed to making it happen, and discourages us from blaming our opponents for what we have not been able to overcome within ourselves.

## The Circle of Conflict

Conflict is a relationship between polar opposites, a dialectical interplay between countervailing values and principles, a field of opposing forces united in opposition, a dance of antithetical, inimical, refractory forces. Because of its contradictory character, conflict can be defined simply as being stuck or at impasse, and thus as a state of equilibrium, counterbalance, or stasis between two equal and opposite forces, drawing them into apparently endless cyclical rotation around a hidden center.

So what keeps us stuck, going round and round the same issues with no escape? How do we become unstuck and transcend these equal and opposite forces? What releases us from the embrace of our conflicts? What produces transformation and transcendence? While opposing forces can result either in chaos or a stalemate that goes nowhere, they can also result in fresh realizations, strategies, syntheses, and collaborations that transform and transcend the limits of static order and chaotic opposition.

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If we analogize conflicts at impasse to circles or ellipses, we can see that, like planetary orbits, they consist of two equal and opposite forces: a centripetal force that unites and draws them together, and a centrifugal one that separates and drives them apart, as illustrated in the following diagram.
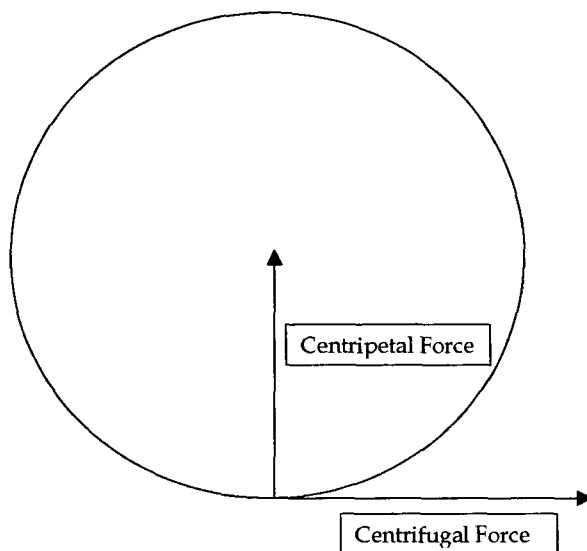


Once we perceive that our conflicts are a combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces, we can recognize that it is possible to end them not only by leaving or walking away, but by moving inward toward their center, and rather than trying to avoid, escape, or run away from our conflicts, we can journey into their hidden heart. As we advance toward their secret source, we release the energy that fuels and empowers them and discover a holistic approach to understanding their dynamics and internal forces.

If we combine the circularity of our conflicts and repetitiveness of our arguments with the polarity and one-sidedness of our views, we can discern a somewhat different dynamic pattern that reveals their polarized, contradictory, yin/yang nature, as revealed in the following diagram:

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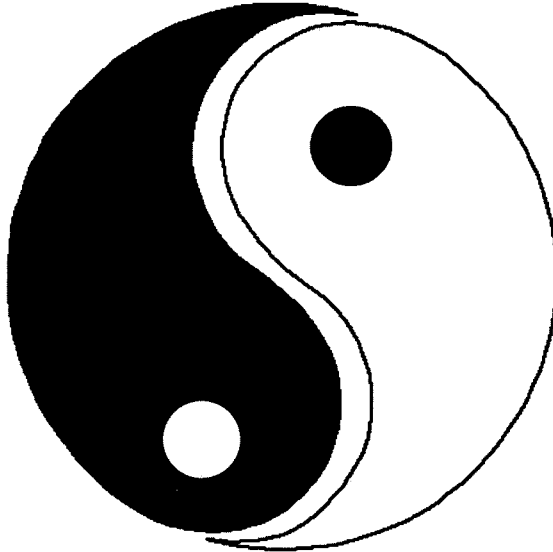
When we experience our conflicts not simply as circular, but as a precise balance between polarized positions, we can understand that they consist of unified antagonistic forces, similar to the positive and negative poles of electro-magnetic attraction. Thus, in spite of their opposition, all conflicting parties, positions, and principles are united along the line of their polarity. For example, white and black are united along a line of color, hot and cold along a line of temperature, and people in conflict along a line of caring about the same issues.

*From Circles to Spirals*

Conflicts are filled with a cacophony and noisome chaos that confuses us about their real meaning. Yet at the center of every conflict, as in the eye of a hurricane, there is a silence and peace, described by poet Rainer Maria Rilke as "the noise at the entryway to the voiceless silence of a true conflict." When we pay attention to this voiceless silence of our conflicts, to their heart and spirit, to what they *mean*, everything we do or say will lead us to the center of our dis-pute. We are able to locate this center, as all circles, not by moving outward against our opponents, but inward toward our own authentic selves.

Whatever we approach correctly, with the right spirit, leads us to its center, or rather, from *our* center we can touch *its* center, while from our periphery we

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will reach only its periphery. When we speak and listen compassionately from our hearts and spirits, we touch the compassionate hearts and spirits of others. When we connect to others in these ways, we begin to recognize the illusion of our separateness, and the reality of our interdependence. We are then able to see that the invisible line that divides and polarizes us is pointed *straight* at what we most need to learn.

By analogizing conflicts to circles, we can define transcendence as their transformation into spirals. A circle can only be transformed into a spiral by upsetting its equilibrium and the balance of opposing forces that is keeping it spinning. If every conflict consists of a centripetal force pointing outward toward our opponent, and an equal and opposite centrifugal force pointing inward toward its center within ourselves, the outward force represents a desire to avoid, retreat, or release ourselves from the orbit of impasse, while the inward force represents a desire to advance closer and understand what holds us in this circular pattern. Transforming this circle into a spiral means learning what got us stuck, changing direction, evolving our approaches and skills, and transcending the equilibrium of forces that are reinforcing the conflict by causing it to spiral into a more evolved orbit.

Between repulsion and attraction, renunciation and engagement, struggle and accommodation, lies a space in which these forces can be creatively combined to produce transcendence. By creatively combining them we produce a third force that blends and integrates them, causing them to spiral into new orbits, and connecting them at their heart. This transcendent "third force," described by William Ury in The Third Way, can be found, for example, in the Gandhian integration of non-violence with resistance, the merger of conflict with compassion, and the combination of head with heart that, in indigenous cultures, is called "thinking with the heart."

Waking up to the transcendent meaning of our conflicts means escaping their circular orbits and using their energy to catapult ourselves and our opponents into higher levels of awareness and understanding. In conflict resolution, this consists of using the *centrifugal* force of attraction to create an energy of engagement, commitment, caring, and compassion that allows empathy and compassion to approach the hidden center of the conflict; and using the *centripetal* force of repulsion to create an energy of disengagement, distance, serenity, and equanimity that permits openness and honesty to break the equilibrium of the status quo. Used together, these opposing energies allow us to escape the gravitational attraction of our conflicts and spiral upward toward more evolved centers by synthesizing the creative energy of opposition.

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### The Mathematics of Conflict

The metaphor of the circle or ellipse offers an additional insight. Part of the mathematical description of every circle is the number *pi*, an infinitely indeterminate quantity that gives every circle its' unending character. So too, every conflict contains something infinite and unending in its' logic, a kind of symmetry that can be broken in two ways: by separating and denying its' unity, or by uniting and affirming its wholeness. When we go round and round the same arguments over and over again, it is because there is something fundamental, eternal, and infinite at the center of the circle of our conflict that is waiting to be recognized and openly addressed, and at the same time a resistance to getting there which is keeping us in orbit around it. The longer we remain on the periphery the more boring and idiotic our conflicts seem, and the closer we get to what lies at the center, the more exhilarating, profound, and rewarding they become.

Extending this mathematical analogy, it is possible to locate an infinite number of points on a line of any length, each marking a discrete location, yet not all these points can be precisely ascertained. Some can only be represented by "irrational" numbers, which are *themselves* infinite in length. To correctly identify even one such number would require infinite information, which is beyond the capacity of the most powerful computer imaginable. Thus, at a certain point, precision becomes impossible, and with it, predictability and one-to-one causality. In a similar way, conflicts defy precise definition, upset prediction and causality, resist division, and feel infinite in depth.

We may ask, for example, how far apart are people who are in conflict? There are at least three correct answers. First, they are an *infinite* distance apart, because they are completely unable to communicate and believe the issues dividing them cannot be resolved. Second, there is *no* distance at all between them, because they are inseparable and intimately connected along the polar line of their disagreement. Third, they are a *single step* apart, because either can reach out to the other at any time and annul their separation.

We can think of the elements of conflict as sources of distance between infinitely divided, yet connected parties, somewhat like the points on a line. It is possible for us to find an infinite number of reasons that prevent us from ever reaching the other side. Yet each of these elements of conflict can be flipped and transformed from a source of repulsion and opposition to a source of attraction and partnership. To illustrate how the elements of conflict can be used to reveal these deeper issues and result in transformation and transcendence, consider the following mediation case study.

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CHAPTER 2:  THE EVOLUTION OF CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

*Give me a fruitful error any time, full of seeds, bursting with its own corrections.*
*You can keep your sterile truth for yourself.*

Vilfredo Pareto

To understand why we get stuck in impasse and how this understanding might lead us to transcendence, we first need to recognize and appreciate the positive, creative, and transformational role conflict plays in our personal and social lives.  Without conflict, quite simply, there would be no change, no growth or improvement, no learning or development.  It is not merely that change, growth and learning require us to release ourselves from obsolete circumstances so we can evolve, but that any system, be it intellectual, emotional, familial, organizational, social, psychological, environmental, economic, or political, seeks to stabilize itself by means of integration and order, and can only evolve to a higher level of integration and order by means of disintegration and disorder.

Thus, "breakdown" inevitably proceeds "breakthrough," and chronic conflict is the first sign that a fundamental shift is taking place within a system.  A breakdown is merely an accumulation of conflicts, anomalies, and difficulties that cannot be completely resolved within the confines of an existing system.  Chronic conflict is therefore not only a sign that a system is breaking down, but an indication that its problems can and must be resolved in order for it to evolve to a higher level of order.  If systemic conflicts are easily resolved, we experience only episodic disagreements.  Impasse occurs only when there is a real possibility that the system itself can be liberated from whatever has kept it from growing.

For this reason, conflict has no existence apart from resolution, any more than sound can exist without silence, light without darkness, or good without evil.  It is impossible to understand one without the other.  The consequence of this recognition is not merely that a deeper understanding of conflict will lead us to deeper resolutions, but that a more skillful and creative approach to resolution will make it possible for us to experience higher levels of conflict, and as a result, increase our capacity for self-understanding, collaboration, intimacy, growth, and resolution.

*The Dance of Conflict and Resolution*

Conflict and resolution are thus a dance.  They are inextricably linked, both in their essence and evolutionary rhythms.  Together, they suggest a "punctuated equilibrium" model of development, as described in the writings of the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, in which long periods of equilibrium are

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interrupted by moments of rapid transformation. In fact, conflict often represents the emergence within a given system of an environmentally induced evolutionary imperative, which is commonly mistaken for miscommunication, disrespectful behavior, personality clash, and similar interpersonal dysfunctions.

In other words, if we want to change, grow, improve, learn, or develop, we need to seek out the substantive obstacles that prevent us from moving forward, as well as the processes, methods and techniques by which these obstacles can be successfully identified, discussed, analyzed, overcome, transformed, and transcended. The depth and quality of the questions we ask will directly influence the depth and quality of the answers we are able to find, and our subtlety and skill in resolution will directly impact what we are able to learn from our disputes. Together, they can lead us from impasse to resolution, transformation, and transcendence.

In my lexicon, resolution means recognizing the underlying reasons for a conflict and rejecting the old ways of thinking and behaving that led to it. Transformation means a change in the form, sequence, style, or shape of a conflict, either within the parties, or in their relationship or communication, or their perception of the issues over which they are fighting. Transcendence is beyond form, and implies that the conflict has evolved, been outgrown or dissolved, and replaced by a higher order of conflict. At all three levels, people can grow, change, learn how to disagree more effectively, and collaborate more successfully using higher order resolution techniques. And using those techniques, they can see their conflict in a new light and evolve to a higher level of conflict.

Thus, evolution occurs not merely in the substance of our conflicts, or what we fight about, but in their form, or how we fight about them, and in their purpose, or why we fight about them. Primitive conflict resolution techniques do not invite higher order results to emerge, just as higher order outcomes require more advanced resolution techniques to elicit and bring them forth. It is not possible to reach forgiveness using techniques designed to merely stop people from fighting, or reconciliation with techniques designed solely to settle their disputes.

Because resolution is a more highly ordered state than conflict, it requires greater energy to create. Thus, entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics predict that without any additional effort, it will be easier for resolution to break down and result in conflict, than for conflict to break down and result in resolution. Entropy can, however, lead to increasing order, as when open systems are able to dissipate chaotic energy to their environment, thereby giving rise to higher levels of complexity and order. Conflict resolution techniques can thus be considered a hedge against *social* entropy, and a method for translating the chaos of conflict into social evolution.

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In science, entropy is a measurement not only of the loss of energy due to random motion, but the loss of *information* as well. By analogy, conflicts result in a loss of socially important information regarding the human nature of our opponents, collaborative approaches to problem solving, what we really want to achieve, anomalies and defects in the system, our ability to accept responsibility for solutions, and our capacity to detect and prevent destructive conflicts before they occur. In this way, conflict resolution serves individuals, families, organizations, and societies by allowing them to preserve important information, adapt to changes in their environment, and reach higher levels of development. At the same time, conflict resolution protects them against social entropy by dissipating their energy into more complex learning processes and higher levels of unity and cohesiveness.

We now recognize that there are three fundamental methods by which disputes are resolved: power, rights, and interests. Power-based resolution processes such as war and coercion create a great deal of "collateral damage," result in winners and losers and a loss of socially important information, and as a result, inevitably invite future disputes in their wake. In addition, as Lord Acton wrote, "All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and when one group routinely wins power contests, those who lose must either surrender or escalate the level of conflict until their needs are met. Under these conditions, it becomes nearly impossible for systems to evolve without experiencing consequential, cataclysmic conflicts.

Rights-based processes such as litigation and adversarial negotiation are designed to place limits on the exercise of power, allowing a greater number and variety of disputes to be resolved and important information to be salvaged, thereby allowing systems to evolve more peacefully. But rights are ultimately based on power and perceived by those with power as curtailing their authority. They are therefore fragile and contingent on the continuing willingness of those with power to acknowledge and enforce their existence. In addition, rights-based processes also produce high levels of collateral damage, winners and losers, corruption, and muted versions of the same problems created by power. Additionally, rights-based approaches generate bureaucracy, which slows the process by which systems evolve.

Only interest-based processes such as mediation and collaborative negotiation encourage individuals, systems, and societies to learn from their conflicts, preserve their information, and turn it into a catalyst for transformation and transcendence. Interests are diverse yet mutually compatible, and because interest-based processes require consensus, they cannot result in unacceptable collateral damage, win/lose outcomes, or entrenched corruption. In this way, the evolution of more advanced approaches to resolution allows deeper levels of conflict to emerge, more advanced resolution outcomes to occur, and systems to advance to more complex, collaborative, inclusive forms of order.

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Another way of understanding this relationship is to view conflict as the principal source of *opposition,* and resolution as the principal source of *unity.* Together, they create a continually evolving, living, double-helixed relationship in which separation and combination, expansion and contraction, dissension and harmony, interact continually with each other in a self-organized, iterative process through which combinations are created that could not have been imagined beforehand. This does not mean, however, that evolution is inevitable, or that conflicts occurring at one level will easily yield outcomes at a lower, higher, or equivalent level.

As there are moments when resolution becomes more important than conflict, so there are moments when conflict becomes more important than resolution. These shifts in importance reflect what we most urgently need at a given moment based on our perceptions and the evolutionary problems of the system in which we are operating. Thus, divorcing couples sometimes fight in order to free themselves from a relationship they partly do not want or are afraid to end. But those who would have resolution without conflict, or conflict without resolution, miss the opportunity to achieve higher levels of each, and are unable to appreciate the beauty of the dance that brings them both into existence.

*What is Mediation?*

There are multiple methods for achieving resolution that can be distinguished based on a variety of factors. One of these is the number of people involved in the effort. There are, for example:

- *Single Party Processes,* such as reflection, observation, meditation, and introspection, in which individuals search alone for insight into their role in the conflict, its' meaning for them, and what they are going to do about it
- *Two Party Processes*, such as coaching, mentoring, informal conversation, negotiation, and private dialogue, in which two people discuss what is not working and agree on possible solutions
- *Three Party Processes,* such as facilitated negotiation, mediation, and arbitration, in which third parties assist those at impasse to clarify their issues, agree on solutions, or decide outcomes
- *Multi-Party Processes*, such as facilitated meetings, organizational retreats, policy planning processes, and public dialogue, in which external facilitators assist groups and communities in discussing their problems, agreeing on solutions, or improving their relationships

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It is possible to distinguish conflict resolution techniques based on whether they are assisted or unassisted, binding or non-binding, or based on power, rights or interests. In addition to the methods cited above, there are summary jury trials, private judges, administrative adjudication, fact-finding, settlement conferences, internal organizational appeals boards, peer mediation, advisory arbitration, "med/arb," conciliation, and others.

Some conflicts are resolved simply by pleasant social interactions, informal problem solving processes, brainstorming sessions, agreement on shared values, visions for the future, teamwork, collaboration, or leaders who unite people around common goals. Other conflicts are resolved through elections, lobbying, organizing, unilateral direct action, lawsuits, or deferral to hierarchical decision making. There are dozens of ways of resolving conflicts, but among these, mediation is the most magical, effective and satisfying.

In its' simplest form, mediation is a facilitated conversation designed to solve a problem. The best way to design such a conversation is to make it voluntary, private, confidential, collaborative, and informal; to have it led by a third party who is outside the problem; to make decisions by consensus, balance power, and treat everyone as an equal; to encourage active, empathetic, and responsive listening; to permit separate private conversations in caucus; to encourage collaborative, as opposed to adversarial forms of bargaining, and direct the conversation toward the real reasons for the dispute.

Conversations designed along these lines will predictably reinforce respectful behavior and support openness, honesty, authenticity, and integrity. They will invite people to participate in non-superficial dialogue over issues that matter to them, reduce blaming and fault-finding, encourage emotional as well as rational intelligence, and support creativity and informal problem solving. The goal of these conversations is to make it possible for anyone stuck in conflict to choose to settle, resolve, transform, and transcend their dispute. Mediation reaches these higher levels of resolution by inviting people to:

1. Move from angry interactions over boundary violations and fear of differences to respect for boundaries and dialogue over differences

2. Convert their communications from sullen silences or acrimonious complaining to candid conversations and collaborative negotiations

3. Shift from competition based on positions and exclusion to collaboration based on interests and inclusion

4. Transform closed hearts and minds by making them open and receptive

5. Change people's actual experience of each other from hostility or aggression to friendliness, cooperation, and respect

6. Discover why they are stuck, choose to free themselves from those reasons, and let them go

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To achieve these results, mediators occupy a space that is not merely *between* the parties, but also simultaneously above, below, before, behind, and around them. They search not simply for compromises and half-way measures, but ways of resolving the underlying reasons for disputes, transforming people's communications and relationships, and allowing them to transcend the issues that triggered their quarrel. To achieve these ends, mediators are led to discover within themselves the concealed, indestructible unity that connects people along the lines of their opposition.

Every conflict generates and amplifies the opposition between self and other, subject and object, knower and known. Mediators pull these poles together by increasing each person's ability to recognize the inseparability of self and other, and clarifying the invisible connections between apparent opposites. They do so by turning each person inward to a place where these opposites are united; and increasing their ability to cross the physical, intellectual, emotional, and heart-based, energetic or spiritual lines that define the field of their conflict.

In these ways, mediation comes to be defined not merely by what we *do*, but who we *are* when we are in conflict. There are many ways of being in conflict that are profoundly mediative, and we become mediative whenever, in the midst of conflict, we are able to:

- Show up and be present
- Listen empathetically for what is hidden beneath words
- Tell the truth without blaming or judgment
- Engage in authentic, heart-felt communication
- Be open-minded, open-hearted, and unattached to outcomes
- Act collaboratively in relationships
- Display unconditional integrity and respect
- Draw on intuition
- Work for completion and closure
- Be ready for anything at every moment

The highest goal in conflict resolution is therefore not simply to become more skillful in resolving disputes, but to become a more mediative person – externally in all our conversations and relationships, and internally in every part of our being. To do so, we need to surrender our power to compel, coerce, or manipulate results, and by that surrender, to access a far greater power, the power of powerlessness. The reasons for this surrender emerge naturally from an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of conflict and resolution.

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*Ten Philosophical Propositions on Conflict and Resolution*

To understand this dance and clarify the evolution of conflict and resolution at a more complex level, we begin by articulating a set of fundamental philosophical propositions regarding the human context in which conflict and resolution occur. The following propositions help explain the constantly changing, highly intuitive, subtle character of conflict resolution and its potential as a means of transformation and transcendence:

1. *No two human beings are the same.* Everyone is different, and while we share certain patterns, at a given level of nuance or subtlety, nothing that occurs between two people is more than grossly predictable. Therefore, no conflict resolution technique, however evolved or skillfully executed, will succeed with everyone.

2. *No single human being is the same from one moment to the next.* Not only is it impossible to step into the same river twice because it continues flowing, we also are continually flowing, and different from one moment to the next. Therefore, no matter how stuck anyone is, they can become unstuck at any moment.

3. *The interactions and relationships between human beings are complex, multi-determined, subtle, and unpredictable,* if only because they involve two or more different, constantly changing individuals. Therefore, while it makes sense for conflict resolvers to plan and strategize, it also makes sense to improvise, and let neither plans nor strategies stand in the way.

4. *Conflicts are even more complex, multi-determined, subtle, and unpredictable* because they involve intense emotions, negative behaviors, miscommunications, contrasting cultural norms, jumbled intentions, false expectations, and dysfunctional systems, any of which can easily increase the level of opposition. Therefore, linear, scientific, logically rigorous approaches to conflict and resolution need to be softened and combined with creative, holistic, artistic, non-logical approaches.

5. *Most conflicts take place below the surface*, beneath the superficial topics over which people fight, and hidden from their conscious awareness. These issues include their emotions, interests, longings, memories, self-images, and secret expectations; the history and trajectory of their relationships; the systems in which they are operating; where, how, and why they got stuck in the first place; and the *meaning* of the conflict to each of them. Therefore, every conflict leads toward the center – not only of the issues in dispute, but the hearts and minds of those who are stuck.

6. *Chronic conflicts are systemic,* and all systems, be they personal, familial, organizational, social, environmental, economic, or political, defend themselves against change, even when it is essential for their survival. Therefore, the greater the need for change, the deeper the possible transformation, the stronger

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the resistance, and the more difficult to imagine the conflict could end, or to let it go.

7. *Every conflict is holographic*, so that each part both contains and recapitulates the whole. Therefore, every issue, no matter how trifling or insignificant, allows us to alter the whole by transforming the way we handle or interact with any of its parts.

8. *Every conflict reveals an internal crossroads*, and is polarized because each path leads in a radically different direction. Therefore, every conflict invites us to pursue a path leading backward toward impasse, enmity, and adversarial relationships, or forward toward growth, learning, and transcendence.

9. *Every conflict offers opportunities to evolve* to higher levels of skill and awareness in how we react and respond to our opponents and issues. Therefore, every conflict is a rich source of growth, learning, and wisdom, not only for individuals, but organizations and systems.

10. *At the center of every conflict lies its heart,* and a spiritual path leading toward transformation and transcendence. Therefore, every conflict has a capacity to ensnare and entrap, or liberate and transform us, along with the relationships and systems that created it. By opening our hearts in conflict we *automatically* begin a process of transcendence, and evolution to a higher level of conflict.

Several practical conclusions flow from these propositions. First, it is clear that the conflict resolver's intention, intuition, self-awareness, and capacity for empathetic and honest communication will significantly impact the process of resolution. Second, if every person is different, every conflict is different, and both are different from moment to moment, no one could possibly *know* objectively or in advance how to resolve a conflict, because anything that is changing or developmental or chaotic cannot be successfully known, predicted, or managed. For this reason, no one can instruct anyone else in the best way to resolve a conflict, other than by encouraging them to develop their own skills, building their confidence, and providing them with a diverse tool kit containing methods and techniques that may or may not succeed depending on inherently unpredictable conditions.

To resolve the underlying reasons for a dispute or achieve transformation or transcendence, it will be necessary to probe beneath the superficial issues people are arguing about and bring the *meaning* of their conflict into conscious awareness. It will then become possible to elicit empathy, promote honest dialogue, and collaboratively search for and negotiate interest-based solutions. This may lead to a deeper understanding how the system contributed to the conflict, and how both sides can work collaboratively to bring about systemic changes.

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Yet it is equally apparent from these principles that the more desperately a change is needed or desired, the greater the risk that it could threaten the balance of power within a given system or the internal balance of forces within a single person, making their future and continued existence uncertain. This uncertainty will provoke fears that any change will become chaotic, and require higher levels of skill to successfully overcome these hidden, unspoken reasons for resistance. These higher level skills include the ability to understand the systems that aggravate our conflicts and the fears and resistance we all experience with changes we do not understand.

Evolving to higher levels of resolution also requires us to learn how to navigate not only the physical and intellectual, but emotional, and spiritual, or heart-based dimensions of our conflicts. Thus, intuition, heart-knowledge, and a capacity for empathetic and honest communication on our part can significantly alter the dance of conflict, the reasons for impasse, the depth of resolution, and the capacity for constructive choice at the evolutionary crossroads that is present in every conflict. In these ways, we are invited to regard ourselves not simply as conflict resolvers, but as promoters of personal and social evolution, agents of systemic change, facilitators of liberation from impasse, facilitators of open-hearted communication, and supporters of transformation and transcendence.

*Levels of Resolution*

These complex evolutionary relationships between conflict and resolution require us to contemplate resolution more closely, and more carefully examine what it is and how it works. To begin, it is possible to resolve any conflict at five distinct levels.

1. We can *stop the fighting* and de-escalate the confrontation. This is useful and important and nearly everyone understands the basic skills and techniques required to be successful, which include separating people, speaking to them calmly, and listening to their stories.

2. We can *settle the issues* over which we disagree and end the dispute. This requires us to discuss the issues and negotiate a compromise, and most of us understand the basic techniques needed to do so, which include setting ground rules, listening to positions, identifying the issues, caucusing with each side, and negotiating compromises.

3. We can *resolve the underlying reasons* that gave rise to the dispute and continue to generate new disputes until they are resolved. Resolution transforms the conflict by moving toward its center and unlocking it. Few of us have been adequately trained in these techniques, though we intuit and learn them as we go, albeit at different rates and levels depending on our conflicts and characters.

4. We can *forgive* the other person and ourselves. Forgiveness consists of releasing ourselves from the burden of our own false expectations, or as Annie Dillard wrote, "giving up all hopes of having a better past." Forgiveness is the

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beginning of transcendence, and very few of us are skilled in the process of forgiving others or ourselves.

5. We can *reconcile* with our opponent and renew our relationship. In reconciliation, we come full circle and completely transcend the conflict. At the highest level of reconciliation, our conflict becomes a source of learning, the basis for a new synthesis, and an invitation to a higher order of relationship. We know least about how to achieve this last level of resolution, as it involves not only letting go, but evolving.

Each of these levels is like the Richter scale for earthquakes, requiring exponentially greater skills and flexibility than the one beneath it, along with greater commitment and permission to proceed on the part of those involved. Each takes longer to achieve, goes deeper into the heart of the problem, and permits a different set of issues to emerge. Each leaves less of the conflict remaining after it is "over."

For example, if we simply stop fighting but fail to settle the issues, most of the conflict will remain. If we settle the issues but do not resolve the underlying reasons that gave rise to them, the conflict will largely disappear, but anything beneath the surface will reappear to trigger future problems. If we resolve these underlying reasons but do not reach forgiveness, most of the conflict will dissolve, but some part of our energy and attention will remain trapped by whatever we have been unable to forgive. If we reach forgiveness but do not achieve reconciliation, the conflict will nearly vanish, yet some fragments will remain to remind us, sometimes in our sleep, that it is not fully over. Only with complete reconciliation and transcendence does the conflict finally cease to exist. This may seem unimportant compared with bloodshed, but when unresolved conflicts accumulate over time, they result in divorce, depression, stress, illness, chronic anger, and an inability to learn, grow, evolve, or find release.

Every conflict can therefore be seen as a challenge to develop better skills and behaviors, adapt to each other's needs and requirements, learn from negative experiences, and advance to higher levels of conflict and resolution. As in Darwinian evolution, the dynamic interplay between diversity and unity, competition and collaboration, conflict and resolution, conveys a powerful advantage to anyone skilled in more evolved techniques. Each stage or level of resolution allows us to advance to more complex and nuanced concerns, and develop higher level skills and relationships.

Scientists are now using computer simulations to model evolutionary processes to generate solutions to strategic problems through artificial Darwinian experimentation. In the 1950's, mathematician John von Neumann developed a theory of cellular automata that described how computer programs could reproduce themselves and create non-repeating patterns by applying simple rules or

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algorithms. These algorithms allow information to "evolve" in a computer simulated Darwinian environment of birth and death, change and conservation, simulating a natural selection process. Solutions are "breed" by a combination of random mutation, reproduction, competition, and cooperation. Outcomes depend on the properties of each cell, rival cells, and the entire "eco-system," including a constantly changing environment that is influenced by each of its parts. The most successful cells are then allowed to reproduce and pass their "genetic" advantages on to future generations, while diversity and innovation are encouraged through "cross-breeding" and mutation.

A similar evolutionary process can be described in conflict resolution. As people evolve from fighting to settlement, resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation, their conflicts advance to higher levels, requiring more subtle resolution techniques and permitting more creative outcomes. When, for example, we shift from "algorithms" of debate to those of dialogue, we simultaneously redefine the issues and substitute interest-based processes for those that reinforce power or rights. This allows us to supplant competition with collaboration and generate solutions that could not have been imagined beforehand.

*Dimensions of Resolution*

To better understand these levels of resolution, it is useful to visualize them using a geometric metaphor. In mathematics, a physical dimension can be defined as a degree of freedom. Thus, if there are zero physical dimensions there is no freedom of movement, which can be analogized to impasse in conflict resolution. One degree of freedom consists of a line, which can be analogized to stopping the fighting, or to one party identifying what they want, because only a single piece of information is required to identify a solution.
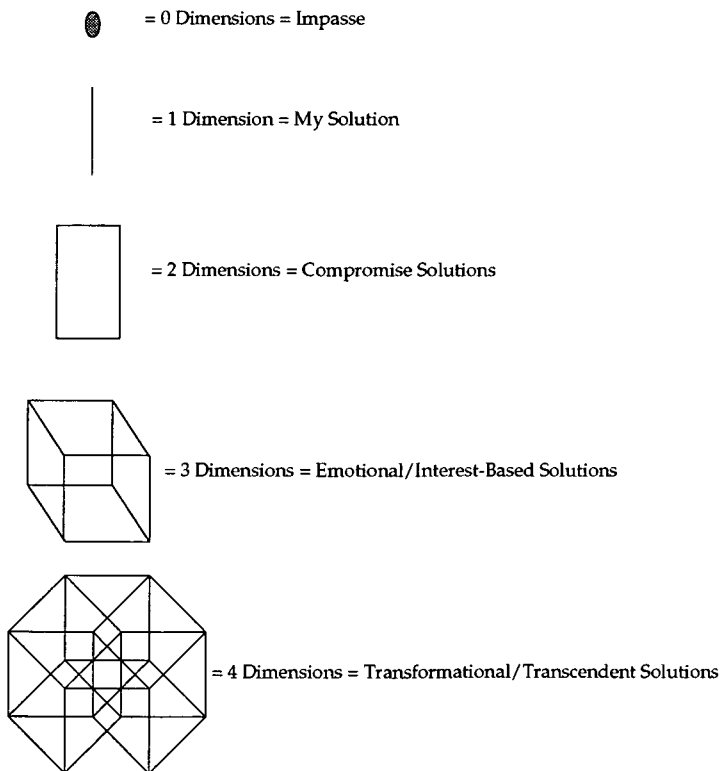
A second degree of freedom consists of a plane with both length and breadth, which can be analogized in conflict resolution to merely settling the dispute, or to both parties identifying what they want. Every outcome will then be represented by a compromise, consisting of any combination of two parameters. A third degree of freedom consists of a cube which adds depth as an additional degree of freedom, and can be analogized to a resolution of the underlying issues in the conflict,. Depth emerges when people move beyond their positions to communicate their underlying emotions and interests, and the reasons supporting their positions. Emotionally satisfying, interest-based solutions move people beyond compromise and make creative solutions possible.

It is possible to imagine a fourth physical dimension as a hypercube, which in conflict resolution can be analogized to forgiveness and reconciliation. This dimension is defined by the attitudes, intentions, spirits, hearts, and energies of the parties. It is the opening of internal heart spaces that are holographically connected, or in physicist David Bohm's phrase, "enfolded" in a hidden "implicate order." This fourth dimension permits transformation and transcendence to

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transpire in ways that would seem magical to anyone operating in a three dimensional space, just as three dimensional solutions must appear magical to anyone who cannot perceive depth, as illustrated on the following page..

We can, however, imagine time as a fifth dimension, signifying the impermanence of conflict and its movement or evolution either toward increased disorder and antagonism, or increased order and collaboration. Time permits past and future, delay and swiftness, backward resistance and forward momentum, silence and passion to alter conflict, and allows its infinite circular rotation to shift and become a spiral. While additional dimensions are possible, even an infinite number as in some mathematical theories, these are more difficult to imagine or illustrate.

## Dimension of Conflict Resolution

= 0 Dimensions = Impasse

= 1 Dimension = My Solution

= 2 Dimensions = Compromise Solutions

= 3 Dimensions = Emotional/Interest-Based Solutions

= 4 Dimensions = Transformational/Transcendent Solutions

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Using this dimensional metaphor, we can recognize that each new approach to resolution permits an expanded degree of freedom, and results in potentially deeper resolutions. It also offers a rational explanation for the magic that so often occurs in conflict resolution. Understanding this magic helps explain the role heart, attitude, intention, spirit, *chi*, and energy play in conflict resolution; the extraordinary capacity of mediation to achieve transformational results; and the ability of people to transcend their conflicts in ways that defy rational explanation. It also helps us see that magic is a byproduct not only of personal skill, but clarity of *intention*, and can therefore happen "accidentally" at any time, not only with experts but novices, not only between individuals but families, communities, organizations, and societies.

In similar fashion, we can extend this dimensional analogy to describe forms of communication and varieties of organizational structure. Thus, zero dimensions can be analogized to coerced silence in communication, and to dictatorship or slavery in organizational structure. One dimension can then be analogized to monologue, and to hierarchical forms of organization in which power is arranged vertically. Two dimensions can be be analogized to debate in communication, and to cross-functional teams that are empowered to work horizontally across organizational structures. In three dimensions, debate is turned into dialogue, and organizations acquire depth by developing leadership skills and identifying shared values. Four dimensions in communication occurs when we understand meaning without words, and in organizations that are strategically integrated and function synergistically.

Using these dimensional analogies, we can draw connections between seemingly disjointed approaches to conflict, styles of communication, and varieties of organization. Thus, we can identify and release ourselves from forms of communication and organizational structures that reinforce lower-dimensional approaches to conflict and begin to design integrated, evolutionary approaches to all three that encourage higher levels of awareness — not only regarding conflict, but the ways people communicate and collaborate with each other.

As an illustration, I have mediated dozens of workplace disputes in which a manager's hierarchical, bureaucratic, or autocratic style led to intractable disputes with employees who adopted irresponsible, cynical, resistant attitudes in response. Each party's approach justified, reinforced, and invited the other side's into existence. Together they formed a lack of movement and impasse. In response, upper management would often imposed a one-dimensional solution by hierarchically ordering the employee to obey the managers' orders. This resulted only in driving their resistance underground. Human resource managers would then try to broker a settlement based on compromise that allowed both sides to save face through temporary solutions while leaving their original attitudes in place and setting the stage for the next conflict.

Using a three dimensional mediation process, I would endeavor to surface and acknowledge pent-up emotions and identify both sides interests, leading to

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their negotiation of consensus-based solutions that encouraged employees to cooperate with managers in achieving targeted results; and managers to respect and empower employees as responsible adults. This three dimensional approach often allowed both sides to resolve the underlying reasons for their dispute and continue working together after it was over.

While more difficult to achieve, I have also taken the resolution process one step farther and achieved four dimensional outcomes that transformed managers and employees into collaborative partners, team members, and active participants in a unified effort to achieve common goals. By changing their attitudes and communicating from their hearts, they were able to act synergistically, fundamentally alter their relationship, and transcend the attitudes and conditions that led to their conflict in the first place. On these magical, multi-dimensional occasions, everyone was happy to surrender their failed strategies, agree on solutions they could not have imagined beforehand, and evolve to higher levels of interaction and relationship. Consider, for example, how transformation and transcendence transpired in the following mediation.

*Blinded by Conflict — A Case Study*

Sara had been blind from birth. She had also been a victim of childhood sexual abuse, and while she had gone on to become a champion downhill skier, karate expert, and horseback rider, she had not been successful in establishing a satisfying sexual relationship.

She met Bill in 1978. They did not marry or live together, but dated for about six months. She said she had not wanted a sexual relationship with him. Nonetheless, according to Sara, Bill had raped her. Bill denied doing so, but did not provide an alternate version of their sexual encounter, after which Sara became pregnant.

Sara said nothing to Bill about the pregnancy and had the baby, Scott, alone. While undergoing counseling regarding the after-effects of her rape, Sara decided, when Scott was 2 years old, to confront Bill with his child. At first Bill denied paternity though his son looked a lot like him. He asked Sara how she knew Scott was his. It took him a while to realize that Scott was his son, and he had lots of misgivings about Sara not telling him.

He began to see Scott for a couple of hours on Saturdays, then steadily increased the time they spent together. He began to pay child support and agreed in mediation that the amount he was paying was not sufficient. Sara felt she had supported Bill's relationship with Scott and acknowledged in mediation that he had "stuck in there."

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Two years previously, at a workshop for single parents and their children attended by Sara, Scott drew a picture revealing sexual content and suggesting possible sexual molestation. An allegation of possible sexual abuse was filed against Sara's mother, who had been Scott's primary caretaker, which everyone felt was unfounded. Scott was taken from his home and from his father and mother, and eventually sent to Sara's sisters, who refused to allow Bill to see him.

Sara and her mother hired an attorney, and while Bill felt he had been supportive of them, he discovered in court that his paternity was not established and he was not recognized as Scott's father. All the latent hostility Sara and Bill felt toward one another came out in court, and the child abuse case turned into a bitter custody battle. Bill hired an attorney on his own and was finally able to secure a joint custody order with visitation every other week.

Scott began spending one week with his mother and the next with his father. Sara began a relationship with another man, Ted. They discussed marriage, but Sara had been troubled throughout the relationship, and in the course of several years together they had not had sex with one another.

In August, Sara and Ted decided to move to a small town in central California about 4 hours from Los Angeles where she and Bill had lived and worked, and where Scott, now age 7-1/2, had gone to school. She gave brief notice to Bill of her decision to move and none to the court. Bill applied for and received a temporary restraining order preventing her from removing Scott from Los Angeles and applied for sole custody, alleging that Sara was in violation of the court's prior order regarding joint custody and visitation.

Sara appeared in court to oppose the order and lost. School was due to start in one week, both sides were at complete loggerheads, and a trial was set for October, long after school started. They had each spent tens of thousands of dollars on legal fees and were no closer to a solution. In desperation, Sara's attorney recommended mediation.

At first Bill was reluctant to come to mediation and refused to pay for it. Sara said she was unable to pay. In order to get them started, I agreed to begin the mediation, and told them that if they felt I had not been helpful at the end of two hours they would not be required to pay. I have done this on several occasions when the party's conflicts prevented them from agreeing on who would pay for the mediation, and have never not been paid at the end of the session.

I asked Sara to start because she seemed the most agitated and untrusting, but she deferred to Bill. As Bill spoke, however, she continually interrupted him. Bill threatened to leave if she continued, which was difficult because she was unable, due to her blindness, to take handwritten notes for later reference. I shifted back to Sara, but she was less informative alone than in response to Bill's narrative. I asked her how she felt about the one-week-on/one-week-off schedule, and she said it was not working for her, or, she thought, for Scott, because the transitions were difficult. She expressed concern over changes in

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Scott's behavior after returning from Bill's, where there were constant videos and non-stop talk about ninjas, He-Man, Superman, and other escapes into fantasy. She felt these activities were excessive and interfered with Scott's emotional development.

I asked her what she wanted to happen. She said she wanted Scott to be with her for nine months during the school year and was willing to give up all holidays and vacations to support Bill's relationship with him. She said she wanted them to be close and did not want to interfere with their relationship. I asked her to speak directly to Bill and tell him what she wanted and why. She turned to him and repeated what she had said, but more directly and emotionally in a heart-felt way.

I then asked Bill to tell Sara directly what he wanted and how he felt. He said he loved his son and wanted to see him all the time, but recognized that Scott needed his mother also and was willing to do whatever was necessary to help him. He felt Sara should have given him more notice and consulted with him, rather than just announcing her move. He told Sara he loved her also, but recognized that they were unable to get along. He regularly invited her to talk but she always hung up the phone or walked out on him.

He agreed that the every-other-week schedule was not perfect. He had moved a few months earlier to an apartment only a block from Sara's so Scott could walk between their houses. He appreciated Sara's acknowledgment of his relationship with Scott and felt joint custody was a compromise he had agreed to because it would help Scott.

I thanked them for the honesty of their statements and their willingness to acknowledge their son's need to spend as much time with each of them as possible. I pointed out that they had a much harder time reaching agreements when they discussed what happened in the past than when they focused on their son and on his future. I summarized their requests and asked whether they would be willing to agree on a solution based on what would be best for their son.

They both agreed that many parents lived apart and exchanged children during school holidays; that many psychologists counseled against switching children too frequently, or from school to school; that children generally prefer not to switch schools before graduation; that courts often prefer mothers as the primary custodial parent for younger children and fathers for older children and boys; and that as Scott grew older he would probably want to have a direct say in where he would live during his school year.

We discussed a number of possible solutions, and they agreed in general that Scott would need to spend his school year with one parent and his holidays with the other. We also discussed travel arrangements, improving their communications, and increasing child support. But at the end, Sara and Bill still each

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wanted to have Scott live with them during the school year. I asked whether they would consider dividing the elementary school grades into two sets, where Scott would spend 3rd and 4th grades with one parent and 5th and 6th with the other.

Bill said he was willing to work things out and be more generous than he had planned to be before coming to the mediation. He offered to let Scott live with Sara for two years, then with him for two years, and spend school holidays and every other weekend during that time with the other non-custodial parent. Sara quickly agreed.

I wrote down their principal points of agreement, which included drop-off times and places, an agreement to be flexible, to make these exchanges a priority, to take Scott's wishes into consideration in selecting his junior high and high school, to meet again to discuss their communication problems and child support issues, and to return to mediation if there were any future problems. Bill suggested that they see Scott together after the mediation to tell him together what they had decided. Sara agreed. They agreed to tell Scott that they had resolved their differences and were going to support each other more in the future. They agreed that they would do more things together with Scott and not let their past disagreements get in the way of their future cooperation. They agreed to let bygones be bygones, recognize that they both loved Scott more than anyone, and discuss any issues regarding his future and well-being with each other before jumping to conclusions.

I congratulated them on their success in reaching these agreements, on their willingness to compromise and acknowledge each other's love for Scott. I then created a heart opening, and told them how lucky I thought he was to have two parents who loved him so much. They both began to cry, and talked about how much they loved him and wanted the best for him. I said I hoped they would continue to acknowledge and respect each other, and recognize how difficult the past few years had been for both of them. I suggested some ground rules for their future communications and set another date for mediation. Bill offered to pay for the mediation, and as they left, he reached over and hugged Sara, who hugged him back. They both stood and cried for a while, then left arm in arm.

The mediation succeeded because it encouraged them to recognize that they had one interest in common: they both loved their son. As a result, they were willing to sacrifice their anger at one another for his welfare and commit to finding an imperfect solution outside the legal system and making it work. This result was encouraged by their experience with the costs, delays, uncertainties, and emotional damage they had suffered in the courts.

The mediation permitted them to vent their anger at each other, yet recognize that their anger would not assist them in making decisions regarding their son. At various points, I made them aware of their specific communication problems and asked them to focus on the future rather than the past. I stopped their arguments periodically with process interventions, pointed out specific

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communication problems as they occurred, and occasionally said, "Let's take a look at what just happened in your conversation with each other." I worked with them to create a common agenda, refocused their attention on their problems rather than on each other, and provided them with information regarding criteria other parents had used to solve this type of problem.

The mediation did not let them become sidetracked in collateral questions of whether Bill actually raped Sara, whether their son had been molested, etc., since none of these issues, in their minds or mine, should have determined where Scott would go to school. Sara's blindness was acknowledged and addressed openly, but not allowed to dominate or distort their negotiations.

The agreement was not put off until later, but written, read aloud and signed. In closure, I encouraged them to recognize their mutual love for their son and suggested that they might actually become friends over a period of time. They began to reach forgiveness and reconciliation at the moment they agreed to tell their son together what they decided, and minimize his feeling that one of them had been treated unfairly, or that he had greater power than he did. In this way, they took a small, significant, collaborative step toward joint parenting, and toward connecting with the heart.

In short, the mediation transformed their relationship by successfully establishing a collaborative parenting relationship in place of the competitive one that had developed over time — not just as a plan, but as an experience. It allowed them to break through their animosity to re-establish a family system, even at a distance. It encouraged them to speak directly to each other from their hearts, and expanded the dimensions of their resolution, communication, and relationship. This allowed them to evolve, and transcend the limits of their earlier relationship.

In a follow-up mediation several months later, I was told by both Bill and Sara that their agreement had held and their communication had never been better. Scott was doing well, the transitions had become less difficult, and their new relationship had reduced his level of anxiety, hostility and acting-out. They both felt they were starting to become friends again.

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