

## **Mediators Beyond Borders: Pathways to Peace and Reconciliation**

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*We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words or actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men ... and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

While listening to news about the latest disasters from wars to terrorist attacks around the world, I sometimes fantasize about what would happen if, instead of dropping bombs on civilian populations, mediators by the tens of thousands were parachuted into war zones to initiate conversations across battle lines; if, instead of shooting bullets, we organized public dialogues and shot questions at each side; if, instead of mourning the loss of children's lives by visiting equal or greater losses on the children of the enemy, we became surrogate mourners, turning every lost life into the name of a school, hospital, library, road, or olive grove, dedicated to those who died because we lacked the skills to get along.

I realize these are wishful fantasies, yet within their whimsy lies a startling truth that surfaces when we ask: what would we do after parachuting in once we hit the ground? We can then begin to see that it is *possible* for us to have an impact, even on the willingness of embittered, intransigent opponents to avoid war and terrorism by building people's capacity to promote alternative ways of expressing, negotiating, and resolving their differences. I began referring to this idea as "Mediators Beyond Borders."

### **What Can Be Done?**

It is clear that conflict resolvers, as a profession, have developed the requisite knowledge, skills, and experience to begin thinking and talking about how we might intervene in trouble spots, even in small ways. Within our ranks, we have amassed considerable experience working in diverse countries and cultures, building mediation centers in hostile communities, and training people throughout civil society in conflict resolution techniques.

While we have done so largely as individuals, our field has reached a level of maturity that allows us to now consider how we might make a difference collectively, as a profession. While parachuting mediators into war zones might not be realistic, convening groups of dedicated dispute resolution professionals to work a few weeks a year over several years with opposing sides in international disputes is quite possible.

It seemed likely to me that conflict resolution professionals might be willing to dedicate part of their time and income to such a purpose. Grants might be obtained from foundations and donations from individuals to support these efforts, and costs, in any case would not be excessive. In other words, all that seemed lacking was our resolve, understanding of the dimensions, potential pitfalls, and complexity of the problem, together with a practical, strategic way to begin.

### **What I Have Learned**

For over two and a half decades, I have worked as a mediator and trainer in political disputes, not only in the US, but in the former Soviet Union, helping resolve conflicts among Ukrainians, Georgians, and Russians, and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. I have worked in conflict resolution in Nicaragua, Pakistan, India, and Ireland, and participated in mediations and dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians, Mexican ranchers and indigenous forest dwellers, and racially divided communities in the US. I have trained people in conflict resolution techniques in Austria, Canada, Cuba, England, the Netherlands, and Puerto Rico, and conducted dialogues on dispute resolution in Brazil, China, India, Japan, Spain, Thailand, and Zimbabwe.

During that time, I have successfully resolved thousands of complex multi-party conflicts, including marital, divorce, family, relational, community, grievance and workplace disputes. I have mediated collective bargaining negotiations, organizational and school conflicts, sexual harassment and discrimination lawsuits, and difficult public policy disputes. I have resolved disputes between committed activists and within political advocacy organizations. I have conducted victim-offender and restorative justice mediations, trained tens of thousands of people in dispute resolution, and designed preventative conflict resolution systems for small non-profits and Fortune 100 corporations. And I am not unique in having done these things. Hundreds of my colleagues have had similar experiences.

As a result of these experiences, I have learned that deeply entrenched social, economic, and political conflicts *can* be prevented, resolved, transformed, and transcended. Doing so means working collaboratively to design culturally adaptable conflict resolution approaches and integrating them with prejudice reduction, group facilitation, public dialogue, collaborative negotiation, victim-offender mediation, arbitration, community building, and similar methodologies.

Simultaneously, it means forming local intervention teams, training indigenous conflict revolutionists, increasing local and global conflict resolution capacity, enlisting support, and training trainers who can provide commitment and continuity to these strategies.

The most effective international projects, in my experience, have been those that extend over decades, with people returning year after year to follow up, learn what worked and what didn't, and provide fresh information, more advanced techniques, and nuanced advice as circumstances evolve and change. It will undoubtedly take considerable effort and commitment to design and implement such projects. Yet, as conflict has no borders, neither does compassion, or commitment to making a difference. We can only choose whether we will be distant, helpless victims of what we mistakenly regard as other people's tragedies, or active participants in resolving disputes in our own human family, regardless of where, how, or among whom they are occurring.

### **Conflict as a Border or Boundary**

All conflicts take place *between* people; that is, at the borders or boundaries that separate individuals, cultures, organizations, and nations. Every conflict can therefore be regarded as *creating* or reinforcing a border or boundary that divides us, drawing a line of demarcation that separates us into opposing sides, antagonistic positions, alien cultures, foreign experiences, and hostile camps, isolating and alienating us from one another.

Yet every boundary is also a *connection*, a potentially unifying element, a place where two sides can come together. As a result, we can therefore regard resolution as a consensual crossing of the borders and boundaries that separate us. Non-consensual border crossings are experienced as boundary violations, and may be vigorously resisted. Consensual border crossings, on the other hand, are experienced as acts of empathy and friendship, indicators of love and affection, and precursors to collaboration, problem solving, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Conflict, in this sense, is a chasm cutting us off from our own commonality. It is a fault line isolating us from our estranged family, a schism within wholeness. As a result, conflicts can be prevented, resolved, transformed, and transcended by identifying the boundaries that separate us, and consensually crossing them; by communicating across the internal and external borders we have erected to keep ourselves safe; and by using empathy and compassion to dismantle the sources of opposition to the Other within the Self, and within the systems we have created to defend ourselves from others.

There are two principal reasons for doing so: first, to create positive, enjoyable learning relationships; and second, to solve common problems. While the first is optional, the second is mandatory. The problems we are increasingly forced to confront have no borders, threaten our very survival, and cannot be solved *except*

collaboratively, i.e., by crossing social, economic, political, religious, ethnic, gender, and cultural borders, and by building relationships as a result that allow us to transcend and move *beyond* them. As discussed in Chapter 1, some of the problems that clearly require us to move beyond borders presently include:

- global warming
- species extinction
- air and water pollution
- resort to warfare
- drug-resistant diseases
- overuse of fertilizers
- religious intolerance
- torture
- genocide
- AIDS and bird flu
- narcotics smuggling
- exhaustion of the oceans
- decreasing bio-diversity
- deforestation
- nuclear proliferation
- global pandemics
- loss of arable land
- terrorism
- prejudice and intolerance
- “ethnic cleansing”
- sexual trafficking and abuse
- organized crime

What would it take to successfully mediate these conflicts? If time, money, laws, bureaucracy, expertise, and willingness to participate were not obstacles, what methods and programs might we employ to reduce the bloodshed and return to peace and unity once upheavals subside? What could the United Nations, national governments, or non-governmental organizations do to discourage evil, war, injustice, and terrorism before they begin? [For more on what the United Nations could do, see Chapter 19 of *Mediating Dangerously*.]

Political conflicts are simultaneously public and private, intellectual and emotional, procedural and structural, preventive and reactive, relational and systemic. Because these disputes are highly complex and multi-layered, successful resolution efforts will need to focus on supporting diverse local collaborative initiatives, and on developing a combination of techniques and approaches *democratically*, rather than simply importing or blindly imposing US-specific solutions.

Solving any of these problems will not be simple. In the face of such difficulties, it is easy to think: we are so few, so isolated, so imperfect, so poorly prepared, and the problems we face are so vast, universal, multifaceted, and ingrained, how could we possibly make a difference? The real question, however, is: how can we stand by and *not* try to make a difference, no matter how imperfect our efforts may be?

On a global level, it does not matter *whose* end of the ship is sinking. We inhabit a planetary island in a vast, expanding universe. As a result, regardless of who created these problems, we are all impacted by them, and have no sustainable option other than to learn to discuss, negotiate, and resolve our conflicts, and prevent them by acting together.

In truth, we already know – not just intellectually, but in our hearts, as human beings and conflict resolvers – that there are many tangible, practical ways we can make a difference, as imperfect as we are. Over the last few decades, we have developed a number of techniques for successfully communicating across much smaller, less defended *interpersonal* borders and cultural divides, and resolving disputes in families and communities without warfare or coercion. And it is *precisely* these skills that the world now needs in order to solve its problems.

### **An Elicitive Approach to Mediating Between Cultures**

In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary first to learn how to work humbly, ethically, and respectfully across cultural lines. Cultural differences inevitably exacerbate conflicts, as do prejudices based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, personality, and style. It is therefore critical in working beyond borders that we learn ways of communicating, working collaboratively, solving problems, and resolving conflicts within, between, and across cultures that are not our own.

I have found the most effective approach in developing conflict resolution capacity across diverse cultures is the *elicitive*, collaborative, democratic methodology best articulated and practiced by Mennonite mediator John Paul Lederach. This method focuses on supplementing rather than replacing indigenous resolution strategies, while simultaneously learning from other cultures and developing improvements in local methods and practices. Here are a few of the techniques I have used to bridge cross-cultural gaps, either between the mediator and the parties, or between the parties themselves:

- Take time to warmly welcome both sides. Serve food or drink and break bread together. Ask them to create a culturally appropriate heartfelt context and opening for the conversation they want to have.
- Ask each person to clarify who they think you are, or how they define your role, or what they expect of you and the mediation process.
- Ask each side to identify the ground rules that will make them feel respected, communicate effectively, and better able to resolve their problems.
- Elicit a prioritization of conflicts from each side. What are the words for different kinds of conflict? Which are most serious and which are least? What is commonly done in response to each? Compare similarities and differences between cultures, then do the same for conflict styles and resolution techniques.
- Ask people to rank their available options from war to surrender, and explore the reasons they might choose one over another.

- Ask people to state, pantomime, role-play, draw, or script how conflicts are resolved in their culture. To whom do they go to for assistance? What roles do third parties traditionally play? Which techniques do they use when, and why? How do they mediate, forgive, and reconcile? Where do they get stuck and why?
- Invite volunteers from opposing cultures to jointly design a culturally inclusive, enriched, multi-layered, comprehensive conflict resolution *system* to help them avoid future disputes.
- Ask each side to meet separately and list the words that describe the communication, negotiation, or conflict style of the *opposing* culture and, next to it, the words that describe their own. Exchange lists and ask each side to respond. Do the same with conflicting ideas, feelings such as anger, or attitudes toward the issues.
- Establish common points of reference by asking someone from each culture to indicate their values, or goals for their relationship with the other culture, or aspirations for the resolution process.
- Ask questions like: “What does that mean to you?” “What does the word ‘fairness’ indicate or imply to you?” “Can you give an example?”
- Acknowledge and model respect for differences, and ask questions if you are not sure what things mean.
- Ask each person to say one thing they are proud of with regard to their culture, ethnicity, or group, and why.
- If appropriate, ask if there is anything they dislike about their culture, ethnicity, or group, and why.
- Ask groups in conflict to say what they most appreciate about the opposing group or culture and why.
- Ask them to bring cultural artifacts, such as poems, music, or artifacts, and share stories that would help an outsider understand and appreciate their culture.
- Ask each side to identify a common stereotype regarding *their* culture, what it feels like, and why. Then ask them to describe what their culture is actually like, why the stereotype is inaccurate, and what they would most like others to know about them.
- Ask what rituals are used in each culture to end conflicts or reach forgiveness, such as shaking hands, then design combined or simultaneous rituals for closure and reconciliation.

In many countries that lack significant long-term experience with social, economic, or political democracy, many ancient indigenous tribal or civil societal conflict resolution traditions that originally emphasized collaboration, and democratic, interest-based interactions were gradually supplanted by or

subordinated to conformist, competitive, autocratic, power-based processes that relied on directives and hierarchical authority from above, rather than on democratic participation, curiosity, community, and insight from below.

While both of these have proven useful, prevention, resolution, transformation, and transcendence occur more often when ancient interest-based resolution processes can be revived and reintegrated using elicitive techniques. An example is the *panchayat* system in India and Pakistan, which originally resolved disputes communally, but in many places became dependent on local political leaders who had been hierarchically selected from outside. Another example is *palaver*, which consists largely of continuous community dialogue, and is still used in parts of Angola, Mozambique, and other countries in Southern Africa. Yet with the rise of large, urban centers, the old techniques have been bypassed, or become institutionalized and less effective in recent years. Yet when revived and combined with modern methodologies, these ancient practices can invigorate the process of dispute resolution and help us all learn from one other.

### **Race, Class, Ethnic, and Cross-Cultural Conflicts**

It has become increasingly clear, especially since the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina and a number of disputes alleging police brutality in ethnic urban communities, that resolving conflicts requires us to learn ways of crossing the invisible boundaries that separate genders, races, classes, ethnicities, and cultures.

Indeed, gender, race, class, ethnic, and cross-cultural conflicts are now common occurrences, not only in the US, but Europe and elsewhere around the world. In many large cities, poverty, underfunded schools, violence, delinquency, gang warfare, drive-by shootings, and drugs as big business are everyday events that have habituated us to the spectacle of people destroying themselves and their communities. Rapid changes in demographics, cultural rivalries, and economic inequalities inevitably accentuate these conflicts.

Of course, there have always been conflicts between people living in close proximity to one another whose cultures, religions, and languages are fundamentally different. There have been conflicts throughout history between men and women, white and black, rich and poor, gay and straight, privileged and dispossessed, hard working and laid back. There have also been conflicts between people who simply think and behave differently, as for example, between those who occupy positions of power and those who do not, those who want to protect natural resources and those who seek to profit by them, those who advocate change and those who struggle to hold onto traditions.

These conflicts take place within a context, environment, or system that has been shaped by a wide range of cultural, familial, organizational, social, economic, and political influences, all of which can dramatically impact the ways people behave when they are in conflict. We easily recognize, for example, that there are

cultures that actively promote avoidance and obedience while others promote engagement and dissent. There are family systems that support secrecy and authority, while others encourage openness and dialogue. There are organizations that reward individuality and distrust, while others build teamwork and trust. There are social systems that promote inequality and inequity, while others try to reduce them. There are economic systems that prize competition and individual efforts, while others support collaboration and social engagement. And there are political systems that are dictatorial and corrupt, while others are more democratic and transparent.

In periods of social chaos, economic crisis, and profound political change, conflicts between these different orientations and tendencies inevitably increase. These conflicts are nearly always experienced as personal, emotional, isolating, and unique, yet it is clear, most often in retrospect, that these are *systemic* conflicts that are inspired and influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political factors.

### **Five Intervention Strategies**

In order to recover from the aftermath of severe conflicts such as war and genocide, people in divided communities need to develop a broad range of skills, including *Communication* skills in order to reduce bias and prejudice and engage in constructive dialogue; *negotiation* skills to solve problems and settle differences; *emotional* processing skills to work through rage and guilt and assuage grief and loss; *mediation* skills to resolve disputes collaboratively; *community building* skills to develop interest-based, collaborative leadership and become productive, functional communities again; *heart and spirit* enhancing skills to rebuild empathy and compassion and encourage forgiveness and reconciliation; and *conflict resolution systems design* skills to prevent and resolve future disputes before they become intractable.

In working with diverse cultures, communities, and nations to build local capacity to resolve conflicts, it is essential to develop skills in each of these areas. There are dozens of additional ways of assisting people to recover from their conflicts and to learn practical methods for preventing, resolving, transforming, and transcending them. Combining these together, we can identify five fundamental intervention strategies that have proven useful in my experience in building local capacity to achieve these goals.

#### **1. Responding to Grief and Loss**

The first strategy is to actively encourage the open expression of grief and rage that were triggered by the conflict, but to do so by first creating a *context*, process, and setting that are constructive and oriented to resolution and reconciliation, such as that invented by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Grief, along with denial and rage, are natural emotions in processing loss, whether it be the loss of a loved one, a way of life, or material goods, position, or influence. It is normal to blame others for one's loss and feed enmity and conflict with accusations and blaming. Yet healing comes when people face their losses, express profound grief, tell stories about what happened, describe their feelings, hear each other's subjective truths, open their hearts to forgiveness and reconciliation, and collaboratively seek to prevent future clashes.

Modern psychology has created a useful set of tools for responding to grief, loss, understanding the desire for revenge, and helping people overcome them. Every culture has its own rituals for handling painful emotions, and these rituals should be respected and included in the conflict resolution process. Yet there are times, places, and individuals for whom these rituals will be inapplicable or ineffective, and all rituals can be creatively improved and supplemented using insights drawn from experiences in conflict resolution.

Responding to loss can be seen as requiring efforts in four principal stages.

- 1) Design an environment within which it becomes possible to encourage and support expressions of grief and rage.
- 2) Examine prejudicial views being spread about "the enemy" and explore alternatives such as forgiveness, reconciliation, collaboration, and heartfelt communication.
- 3) Develop skills in directing future expressions of grief and rage in the direction of problem solving, negotiation, collaboration, and mediation.
- 4) Use these skills to create a sense of larger community, so that future conflicts are resolved in ways that do not require the use of violence.

By way of illustration, I have asked hostile racial, religious, and ethnic groups to meet in mixed or self-same teams to discuss and answer the following questions:

- What is one thing you lost as a result of this conflict, or one thing that happened that you are still grieving over?
- What is one thing someone said or did to you or others that you find it difficult to forgive, and never, ever want to experience again?
- What is one thing someone said or did that supported you or others when this happened, or that gave you strength or courage, or helped you recover?
- What is one thing the people who are here could do right now to help make sure that what happened to you will never happen again?

- What is one thing *you* would be willing to do to help make sure that occurs?
- What is one wish you have for your future relationship with each other, or for the relationship between your children and grandchildren?
- What is one thing you would be willing to do starting now to help those children have the relationship you would like them to have?

## 2. Dismantling Prejudice and Bias

A second strategy is to systematically dismantle the prejudices and stereotypes of the “enemy” through a combination of sensitivity to others, awareness of one’s own biases and prejudices, storytelling, honest dialogue over differences, problem solving, collaborative negotiation, conflict resolution, and jointly planning how to face common problems in the future.

Every community experiences cross-cultural, ethnic, racial, national, and religious conflicts, and in every community these conflicts interfere with peace and cooperation, unity and progress. These conflicts grow out of biases and prejudices regarding culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, politics, nationality, language skills, handicap, sexual orientation, and countless other differences that can be surfaced and successfully resolved in open-dialogue sessions that teach people how to become aware of their biases and prejudices and resolve cross-cultural conflicts.

Creative interventions, techniques, and exercises can assist people in becoming more aware of their biases and realizing that differences can be a source of strength and celebration. These exercises encourage pride in one’s culture or background without denigrating anyone else’s right to feel pride in theirs. They use storytelling to elicit empathy and person-to-person understanding, and group presentations to promote learning from each other.

Specific conflicts can then be analyzed through simulations, and alternative solutions generated through joint analysis of group experiences. For example, I have used the following exercises, even in large community groups, to reduce prejudices and cross-cultural conflicts:

- *Introductions:* Ask people to turn to the person next to them and introduce themselves by describing their personal history and cultural background.
- *Reclaiming Pride:* Ask participants to state their names, the groups with which they identify, and why they are proud to belong to them, as in “I am a \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_,” listing different sources of identity.
- *What’s in a Name?* In mixed dyads, ask people to describe the origin and meaning of their names and how they came by them.

- *Storytelling*: Each person finds someone from a different group or culture and tells a story about what it felt like to grow up as a member of their group or culture.
- *Assessing Group Identity*: Participants discuss what they get by identifying with a group, and what they give in return.
- *Personalizing Discrimination*: In mixed dyads or small groups, participants describe a time when they felt disrespected or discriminated against for any reason, and compare their experiences.
- *Reframing Stereotypes*: In mixed or self-same dyads, people describe the stereotypes and prejudices others have about their group while their partners write down key descriptive words and phrases, which they later compare and reframe as positives.
- *Observing Discrimination*: In mixed dyads, participants describe a time when they witnessed discrimination against someone else. What did they do? How successful was it? What might they have done instead? What kept them from doing more? How could they overcome these obstacles?
- *Owning Prejudice*: Participants in teams write down all the prejudicial statements they can think of, analyze them, identify their common elements, and read these elements out to the group.
- *Overcoming Prejudice*: In dyads, participants describe a personal prejudice or stereotype they had or have, what they did or are doing to overcome it, then ask for and receive coaching, preferably from someone in that group, on what else they might do.
- *Which Minority are You?:* Participants list all the ways they are a minority, report on the total number of ways, and discuss them.
- *Explaining Prejudice*: Participants in self-same groups identify the prejudices and stereotypes other groups have of them, then explain the truth about their culture and answer questions others have about their group but were afraid to ask.
- *A Celebration of Differences*: Participants are asked to stand and be applauded for their differences, in age, family backgrounds, skills, languages, cultures, and personal life experiences.

[Based partly on work by the National Coalition Building Institute]

### **3. Developing Skills in Interest-Based Processes**

A third intervention strategy is to develop skills within local neighborhoods and communities in implementing these strategies, as well as in interest-based processes such as group facilitation, public dialogue, strategic planning, collaborative negotiation, and peer mediation. Teams of volunteers can then

conduct skill-building workshops, not only for conflict resolvers, but for mixed groups of neighbors, community activists, therapists, clergy, managers, union leaders, judges, attorneys, government officials, and leaders in civil society.

For example, in Los Angeles following the civil unrest in response to the beating of Rodney King, I helped train Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) workers to facilitate community dialogues between hostile racial and ethnic groups, and go door-to-door to de-escalate potentially explosive conflicts. Here are some of the exercises I used:

- *Communication and Miscommunication*: Self-same groups identify the communications, behaviors, and signals they or other groups do not understand about their culture, and suggest ways to clear up misunderstandings.
- *Mock Conflict*: Participants demonstrate a typical cross-cultural conflict in a fishbowl while observers describe their reactions and volunteers offer suggestions on how to mediate.
- *Offensive Remarks*: A volunteer starts to make an offensive comment or joke, and observers offer coaching on possible ways to respond.
- *Observing Cultural Bias*: As homework, participants collect examples of biases and prejudices in the media and share them.
- *Social Change*: Cross-cultural teams discuss what they could do to change prejudicial attitudes and behaviors among family, friends, and peers, brainstorm suggestions, and agree to implement them.
- *Institutional Change*: Participants discuss what their organizations and institutions could do to counteract prejudice, and what they might do together to encourage them to change.
- *Breaking Bread*: Ask each participant to invite someone from the other groups or cultures in their community to their home for a potluck dinner, and exchange food, music, poetry, artifacts, and stories from their cultures. Then, ask each of them to do the same next month, and pass it on.
- *What I Will Do*: Each person indicates one thing they learned and are willing to do differently in the future to reduce cross-cultural conflict.

#### **4. Encouraging Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

A fourth strategy is to encourage forgiveness and reconciliation by creating profound, spiritual, open-hearted communications and direct, heart-to-heart dialogue between former antagonists. I discuss these techniques in greater detail in *Mediating Dangerously* and *The Crossroads of Conflict*, but have often found it useful, for example, to ask adversaries to:

- tell their opponent directly what they most want or need to hear in order for the conflict to be over for them

- acknowledge the positive intentions or character of the other person or group
- apologize for what they did or did not do in the conflict that was counterproductive, or allowed the conflict to continue
- clarify through stories the price they have paid for the conflict, and why it is difficult for them to forgive
- list all the reasons for *not* forgiving them, then identify what it will *cost* them in their lives to hold on to each of those reasons
- say what they most want to say to each other, straight from the heart, as though this were the last conversation they were ever going to have
- articulate what they each believe are the most important lessons they learned from their conflict and what they are willing to do differently
- design a ritual of release, completion, or closure that expresses their desire for forgiveness and reconciliation, and agree to execute it

## 5. Redesigning Systems and Institutionalizing Conflict Resolution

A fifth strategy consists of redesigning systems and institutionalizing conflict resolution skills so that future disputes can be prevented or resolved without violence or coercion. This strategy consists of using conflict resolution systems design principles that have been discussed in earlier chapters to identify what the organization, institution, or system contributed to the conflict, and work together to change it.

For example, I have created mixed “conflict audit teams” to identify the systemic sources of conflict in specific organizations and institutions by asking the following questions drawn from *Resolving Conflicts at Work*:

- How much time and money have been spent on lawyers, litigation, and human resources personnel regarding conflict?
- How much time does the average manager, human resource personnel, union representative, and employee spend each week preventing, managing and resolving conflicts? At what salary rate and total cost?
- What has been lost due to stress-related illnesses and conflict-related turnovers?
- How much time has been spent on rumors, gossip, lost productivity, and reduced collaboration due to conflict?
- What impact has conflict had on morale and motivation?
- How many conflicts have recurred because they were never fully resolved?

- What personal and organizational opportunities have been lost due to conflict?
- Where might the organization be by now if it had not experienced these conflicts?
- What are the organization's unspoken expectations and values regarding conflict?
- What are the main messages sent by the organizational culture regarding conflict?
- Are negative conflict behaviors being rewarded? If so, how?
- How do leaders and managers typically respond to conflicts? How might they respond better?
- Have people been trained in conflict resolution techniques? Why not?
- What do different people do when they experience conflicts? Where do they go for help?
- Is there an internal conflict resolution procedure? Who is allowed to use it? How often is it used? Do people know about it?
- How satisfied are people with existing conflict resolution processes?
- How skilled are they in using those processes?
- What obstacles hinder prevention, resolution, transformation, and transcendence of conflicts?
- How can people be motivated to resolve their disputes more quickly and completely?
- What skills do people need to resolve conflicts more successfully?
- What systemic changes would reduce or help to resolve future conflicts?

Conflict audit teams in communities and countries could easily adapt these questions, then join with dispute resolvers, organizations, agencies, and others to design programs that would provide a broad array of resolution alternatives and strategically integrate the initiatives that are aimed at prevention across social, economic, political, and cultural lines.

### **Block-by-Block, House-by-House**

In the aftermath of wars, urban riots, and natural disasters, cleaning up the ashes and debris is the least formidable challenge. Something far more difficult must be done to heal the fury, mistrust, rage, and sense of loss that prevents healing from these outbursts, thereby triggering renewed outbreaks. As Israeli novelist David Grossman eloquently recorded:

I feel the heavy toll that I, and the people I know and see around me, pay for this ongoing state of war. The shrinking of the "surface area" of the

soul that comes in contact with the bloody and menacing world out there. The limiting of one's ability and willingness to identify, even a little, with the pain of others; the suspension of moral judgment. The despair most of us experience of possibly understanding our own true thoughts in a state of affairs that is so terrifying and deceptive and complex, both morally and practically... Because of the perpetual – and all-too-real – fear of being hurt, or of death, or of unbearable loss, or even of “mere” humiliation, each and every one of us, the conflict's citizens, its prisoners, trim down our own vivacity, our internal mental and cognitive diaspora, ever enveloping ourselves with protective layers, which end up suffocating us.

In response to such overwhelming challenges, what can we possibly do? While large-scale, long-term solutions to war and catastrophe can only be put in motion through political action, it is possible for each of us in our communities to begin the healing process. Most often, this means working locally and preventatively to resolve on-going conflicts, and simultaneously build the capacity and the skills needed to interact differently.

This means teaching people ways of communicating effectively across cultural divides, solving common problems creatively, negotiating collaboratively, resolving disputes without violence, and encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation, even after the worst atrocities. Without these skills, the suffering will simply continue, bringing new suffering in its wake.

It is possible, for example, for local communities to establish an expanding network of simple, replicable, peer-based community mediation projects in crisis areas, in which multicultural mediators volunteer, or are *elected* by their neighbors in the blocks where they live, given training and hands-on experience, and develop the capacity to expand outward into new communities on a block-by-block, house-by-house, community-by-community basis.

A simple “block-by-block” project might begin by selecting a small number of blocks representing diverse neighborhoods, then bringing hostile or divergent groups together, asking them to identify the sources of conflict between them, and analyzing the techniques most needed to resolve them. It would then be possible to train cross-cultural co-mediation/community facilitation teams to help prevent, resolve, transform, and transcend local conflicts; reach consensus on shared cultural values; facilitate open dialogues and problem-solving sessions on community problems, and design conflict resolution systems for preventing future conflicts between diverse cultures.

In many US neighborhoods, for example, cross-cultural teams of mediators representing African-American, Hispanic, Asian Pacific-American and White communities, might be trained in processing people's feelings of grief and loss regarding recent tragedies, or solving problems and negotiating with other

communities, or facilitating community meetings, or reducing prejudice against people from different cultures who are seen as “enemies,” or using state-of-the-art mediation techniques to resolve community and cross-cultural conflicts, or reaching forgiveness and reconciliation.

### **A Twelve-Step Program**

These strategies and techniques, in combination and adopted as a whole, suggest a generic 12-step plan that might be used to increase the capacity of communities and countries to help prevent, resolve, transform, and transcend their conflicts. These 12 steps can be modified to match local conditions and used to break the cycle and addiction to local violence that ultimately impacts all of us:

1. Identify potential partners and allies and convene a cross-cultural team of experienced trainers to conduct research and deepen understanding of what is required.
2. Meet with leaders of hostile groups, cultures, or factions to secure agreement on a common plan, build trust, and encourage ongoing support.
3. Interview leaders of opposing groups, cultures, and factions, listen empathetically to their issues, and clarify cultural mores, values, interests, goals, and concerns.
4. Elicit from each group, culture, or faction the methods currently being used to resolve disputes, and identify ways of validating, supplementing, and expanding these core strategies, while introducing new strategies to adapt and try out to see which are successful.
5. Select or elect a team of volunteers from each group who would like to be trained as mediators, facilitators, and trainers.
6. Form cross-cultural teams of volunteer mediators and facilitators to work in communities, schools, workplaces, government offices, and other locations where conflicts occur.
7. Train volunteer facilitators in techniques for processing grief and loss, reducing prejudice, facilitating public dialogue, organizing Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, and similar efforts to build collaborative relationships and improve trust.
8. Train teams to facilitate public dialogues, arbitrate disputes, encourage forgiveness and reconciliation, and conduct conflict audits.
9. Form cross-cultural teams to train trainers in these techniques throughout civil society, and support for them to train others.
10. Conduct periodic feedback, evaluations, audits, and course corrections to improve the capacity of volunteers and identify where future support may be required.
11. Develop case studies revealing successes and failures and build ongoing popular, financial, and institutional support for resolution programs.

12. Design conflict resolution systems for civil society, economic organizations, political parties, and government agencies that provide increased opportunities for early intervention, open dialogue, problem solving, collaborative negotiation mediation, and between adversaries.

Implementing these steps and modifying them to fit each situation will allow us to substantially reduce the destructiveness of conflict and create a platform on which deeper social and political changes might take place. By comparison with the long-term costs of conflict, the most ambitious program imaginable would be inexpensive and well worth undertaking.

### **Postscript: A New Organization**

Since writing about this idea, Mediators Beyond Borders: Pathways to Peace and Reconciliation (MBB) has become a reality, and is now a fully functioning organization working to bring a rich array of conflict resolution techniques to people internationally. Its goal is to recruit volunteers within the dispute resolution community to support projects and programs that build conflict resolution capacity globally.

The work of MBB is principally accomplished through project teams in which people commit to work in a particular country, community, or region over a period of several years. Each project team consists of a small, diverse group of people who travel to a designated area several times a year to learn about conflicts from local sources and assist in designing and delivering conflict resolution trainings and services without charge. Members also work in committees and content groups to deepen our understanding of the field and the methods and techniques that prove most useful.

MBB is not alone or unique in attempting to assist people in other countries and cultures to resolve disputes without warfare, and works in partnership with other individuals, groups and organizations. What is unique about MBB is its focus on building local capacity in a variety of skills, including mediating family, community, environmental, and public policy disputes; reducing bias and prejudice; developing restorative justice and victim-offender programs; implementing multidoor courthouses; applying conflict resolution systems design principles; and encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation.

MBB also seeks to improve skills in group facilitation, informal problem-solving, team building, consensus decision-making, linking leadership, strategic planning, community building, and organizational development, both internationally and in the US. It uses computer technology, including the Internet, blog sites, websites, and audio and video uploads to transfer conflict resolution information, build networks and ongoing relationships, and allow people in any country to become directly involved in providing assistance where it is needed.

MBB chapters and individual members provide ongoing communication, research, training materials, and Internet support to local mediators, conflict revolutionists, disputing parties, and project teams. They assist in developing, refining, and disseminating best practices in dispute resolution, including training designs, materials, role-plays, and turnkey programs.

MBB is committed to a comprehensive, holistic approach that seeks to integrate innovative conflict resolution methods with traditional and local techniques, and develop a strategic methodology for addressing the sources of conflict within organizations, communities and societies. It is committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to local capacity building, together with a systems design orientation that focuses on prevention, transparency and sustainability.

### **30 Things You Can Do**

If you would like to support this work or create your own local projects to encourage conflict resolution in other communities, countries, and cultures, there are countless actions you can take, some small and quick, others large and long lasting, each of which can be immensely helpful. To illustrate, here are 30 ways you might decide to contribute:

1. Join MBB or similar organizations and help publicize their work. To contact MBB, visit the website at [www.mediatorsbeyondborders.org](http://www.mediatorsbeyondborders.org), or email [mediatorsbeyondborders@gmail.com](mailto:mediatorsbeyondborders@gmail.com).
2. Send a donation to MBB or similar organizations and assist them in locating potential funders and making media contacts in your area.
3. If you have expertise in a particular region, country, language, or conflict and would like to help or become a member of a project team and work in that country for a period of several years, contact MBB and specify your interest.
4. If you have training materials in communication, dialogue, problem-solving, negotiation, mediation, prejudice reduction, conflict resolution, and similar topics that might be useful to people in conflict areas, especially if they are in other languages, send them to the MBB Library.
5. If you have useful information regarding a country or region where conflicts are occurring, contact MBB and share or coordinate your information with others through our newly created "conflictmedia".
6. Select a country or region where conflicts are occurring, form a small group of like-minded people, or create a local chapter of MBB to study, think about, and discuss what is happening there.
7. Go online to see what has already been written about the conflict and synthesize it in a briefing paper that others can supplement online or read before traveling there.
8. Prepare a summary of the history of a conflict; or description of the dominant political forces and constituencies, economic factors, or

- environmental concerns that impact it; or list the main sources of impasse and similar information that might be useful in briefing groups or project teams working there.
9. Adopt one or more pen pals in an area you select and wherever possible add correspondents from the opposing side.
  10. Once you make contact, ask questions to expand your knowledge and understanding of what is taking place there, then pass it on.
  11. Find out what is needed or desired by way of assistance and let MBB or similar organizations know.
  12. Identify important cultural “dos and don’ts” and publicize them.
  13. Prepare a list of useful quotations from indigenous authors, including poetry, stories, folklore, novels, religious tracts, and political ideas and send them to the MBB Library.
  14. Develop a list of stereotypes used by each group against their opponents and send it to MBB.
  15. Start a local area blog, or send information and ideas to MBB’s blog site at [www.mwoborders.blogspot.com](http://www.mwoborders.blogspot.com).
  16. Collect important news articles from media in and around the area, translate them, and forward them to others.
  17. Create a list with useful descriptions and contact information identifying mediators, facilitators, trainers, and allied professionals in the country or region who might be willing to assist.
  18. List other potentially useful contacts, such as leaders in government and hostile organizations, for use by groups or project teams in the area.
  19. Identify institutions and organizations already contributing to peace, including descriptions and contact information.
  20. Organize a public dialogue in your community to discuss global conflicts, pass resolutions supporting conflict resolution, and publicize facts and stories that raise people’s awareness.
  21. Send pen pals information about MBB and other organizations, and assist them in forming chapters or supporting conflict resolution activities in their area.
  22. Send useful books, training materials, and articles to conflict resolvers in other areas.
  23. Assist in preparing or revising training materials targeted to areas you select.
  24. Contact media to increase awareness of conflict resolution, write letters to the editor, or op-ed pieces advocating meditative approaches to conflict.
  25. Contact political representatives to encourage support for conflict resolution.
  26. Write to the United Nations, especially country representatives, and encourage use of conflict resolution.

27. Contact schools, religious gatherings, etc., and ask to speak about conflict resolution and conflicted areas.
28. Invite friends from ethnically diverse communities to dinner, ask them to bring cultural food, artifacts, and materials to share, discuss conflicts in the area, and agree on ways you can help.
29. Travel to an area to gather information first-hand, but do not intervene in conflicts without adequate training, preparation, support, and assistance.
30. Make copies of this list and pass it on. If these ideas don't succeed, invent others. Don't give up. Remember that a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

What is most important in reducing the level of global conflict is for each of us to recognize that if we cannot learn to resolve our conflicts without war, injustice, coercion, and catastrophic loss, we will be unable to survive, either as a species or as a planet.

More profoundly, by responding to global conflicts in these preventative, heartfelt, systemic ways, we may actually prepare the groundwork for the next great leap in human history – the leap into international cooperation and coexistence without war. Through these efforts, we may someday achieve the transformation promised in a pamphlet issued by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Instead of revenge, there will be reconciliation.

Instead of forgetfulness, there will be knowledge and acknowledgement.

Instead of rejection, there will be acceptance by a compassionate state.

Instead of violations of human rights, there will be restoration of the moral order and respect for the rule of law.

Let's make it happen. Right now. Starting with us.