



Into the Heart of Conflict

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“Keep your intelligence white-hot

and your grief glistening,

so your life will stay fresh.

Cry easily like a little child....

Say whatever your pained heart chooses.”

Jelaladin Rumi

TEN PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSITIONS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

To understand the evolution of conflict and resolution at a deeper level, it has been helpful for me to articulate a set of fundamental propositions regarding the *human* reality and context in which they occur. The following ten philosophical propositions regarding conflict resolution may help explain its constantly changing, highly intuitive, deeply subtle, transitory character, and ability to regularly result in resolution, transformation, and transcendence:

1. *No two human beings are the same.* Everyone is different, and while we share certain characteristics, at a given level of nuance or subtlety, nothing that happens 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 is continuously flowing, *we* are continuously 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 to plan and strategize how we are going to resolve conflicts, it also makes sense to improvise and refuse to allow rigid plans or strategies to stand in our 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, inconsistent attitudes, and dysfunctional systems, any one of which can increase the level of chaos and complexity. Therefore, linear, scientific, logically rigorous approaches to resolution need to be combined with holistic, artistic, creative, non-logical ones.
5. *Most conflicts take place beneath the surface, well below the superficial topics over which people are fighting, and often hidden from their conscious awareness.* These issues include emotions, interests, longings, memories, self-images, secret desires, the history and trajectory of their relationships, the systems in which they are operating, where, how, and why they got stuck, and the *meaning* of their conflict to each of them. Therefore, every conflict leads toward the center, not only of the issues in dispute, but the minds, emotions, and hearts of those who are stuck.
6. *Chronic conflicts are systemic, and all systems, be they personal, familial, relational, organizational, social, economic, or political, defend themselves against change, even*

when it is essential for their survival. Therefore, the greater the need for change and deeper the potential transformation, the greater the resistance, the more intense the conflict, and the more difficult it becomes to even imagine resolving or letting it go.

7. *Every conflict is holographic and systemic, so that each part contains and recapitulates the whole.* Therefore, every issue in conflict, no matter how trifling or insignificant, is capable of invisibly altering the whole by transforming any of its parts, allowing even minor interventions to trigger major resolutions.
8. *Every conflict reveals an internal crossroads with each path branching and leading off in radically different directions.* Every conflict contains at least three paths: one moving backwards toward impasse, enmity, and adversarial relationships; one moving forward toward resolution, respect, and collaborative relationships; and one moving deeper into the heart of the conflict toward evolution and learning, transformation and transcendence. Therefore, every conflict allows people to choose how they will define their attitudes toward past, future, and present.
9. *Every conflict offers opportunities to evolve to higher levels of skill and awareness in how people respond to their opponents and problems.* Therefore, every conflict is a rich source of learning, improvement, and wisdom, both for people and for systems. More importantly, every conflict subtly and implicitly points their attention toward these sources.
10. *At the center or heart of every conflict lies a pathway to resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation.* Therefore, conflicts have the capacity to ensnare and entrap or liberate and transform people, along with their ideas, feelings, intentions, attitudes, relationships, and the systems that created or fueled them. By opening our minds, emotions, and hearts in conflict, we *automatically* initiate an evolution to higher orders of conflict and resolution.

Several practical conclusions flow from these propositions. First, it is clear that each person's attitude, intention, intuition, self-awareness, environment, and capacity for empathetic and honest communication will significantly impact their experience of conflict and capacity for resolution. Second, because each person is different, each conflict is different, and both are different from moment to moment, no one can conceivably know objectively or in advance how to resolve a given conflict, as anything that is chaotic or rapidly changing cannot be successfully predicted or managed. Third, for this reason, it is impossible to instruct anyone in detail on the best way to resolve a particular conflict, other than to develop their skills, increase their self-confidence, and develop a broad range of techniques that may or may not succeed depending on unpredictable conditions. Fourth, to resolve the underlying reasons for a dispute or learn or evolve, it is 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 increase empathy, encourage dialogue, resolve issues collaboratively, and negotiate interest-based solutions, which can lead to a profound understanding of the systemic sources of the conflict and ways of working collaboratively to change them.

TEN REASONS WE GET STUCK IN CONFLICT

There are undoubtedly thousands of reasons we become stuck in impasse 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 define 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 spiral downward into an abyss of fear, pain, anger, 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 are. It causes us to lose perspective, resist learning, and hold onto unrealistic expectations.

Second, *conflict gives us energy*, even if it is only the energy of anger, fear, pain, jealousy, guilt, grief, and shame. We can become addicted to the adrenaline rush, the flash-point intensity, and *intimacy* of combat. Yet this energy is ultimately debilitating, providing a quick stimulus that dies just as quickly, in place of the healthier, longer-lasting energy that comes from compassion, collaboration, and honest, empathetic communication. This negative energy keeps us stuck and deepens our suffering, causing us to pay a steep physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual price in deteriorated health, peace of mind, anxiety, and unhappiness.

Third, *conflict ennobles our misery* and makes it appear that we have 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, or deceive ourselves into thinking our own abusive behaviors serve some higher purpose. It causes us to get angry at people who suggest alternatives, and encourages us to hold on to our suffering rather than learn from it, let it go, and move 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 of effectively declaring our rights, securing the respect of others, restoring our inner balance, and protecting ourselves from boundary violations. Yet conflict also creates false boundaries, keeps out those we want to let in and lets in those we don't, 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 prevent us from collaboratively negotiating the use of common space, being authentic, or finding out who we, or they, actually 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 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 prevents us from finding positive intimacy in its stead. Many relationships are sustained by invalidating, insulting, conflict-laden communications that simultaneously bring us together and keep us apart, frustrate our efforts to get closer and undermine the lasting intimacy we really want based on positive regard, mutual affection, trust, and shared vulnerability.

Sixth, *conflict camouflages our weaknesses* and diverts attention from sensitive subjects we would rather avoid discussing. 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 our willingness to address real issues, and diverts our awareness from sensitive subjects, falsely magnifying their importance and effect.

Seventh, *conflict powerfully communicates what we honestly feel*, allowing us to vent and unload our emotions onto others. Many of us assuage our 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 us to take responsibility for our choices or address what got us 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 and caring.

Eighth, *conflict gets results*. It forces others to heed us, especially faceless bureaucrats, clerks, 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, poorly paid employees who are compelled to pointlessly accept our wrath. It turns us into “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, 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 transformed into 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, and allows us to cross the line from

punishing evil to committing it ourselves. It makes us haughty, judgmental, and superior, and less able to be humble, accepting, and egalitarian in our relationships.

Tenth, *conflict prompts change*, which feels better than impasse and stagnation. Many changes only take place as a result of conflict – not because it is actually necessary to achieve a given result, but because people’s fear and resistance make it so. Yet conflict also prompts resistance to change, which can be more successfully overcome through inclusion, collaborative dialogue, and interest-based negotiations. Adversarial conflict stimulates a backlash dedicated to minimizing its gains and polarizing those who might otherwise become its supporters. Worse, as a means, it undermines the ends to which it is dedicated. While the deepest and most consequential changes actually *require* conflict, understanding this requirement allows us to design strategies to transform destructive criticisms into constructive suggestions for improvement and increase our skills and effectiveness as change agents.

Thus, while there are many excellent reasons for engaging in adversarial conflicts, there are even better ones for resolving them and collaborating with our opponents in informal problem solving, unrestricted dialogue, and interest-based negotiations. While adversarial conflicts produce beneficial outcomes, they also result in alienation, defensiveness, counter-attack, and resistance. Worse, they create a quality of energy and attitude that give an *appearance* of strength, while actually sapping it. This weakness makes it more difficult to solve common problems, engage each other constructively, and learn what our conflicts are trying 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 invite 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 hidden weaknesses. They direct our attention to 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 therefore simply the sound made by the cracks in a system, whether the system is personal, familial, relational, organizational, social, economic, or political. It is a warning light pointing at something in our environment or character that is not working for ourselves or others. It is therefore an opportunity for rethinking and innovation, and the birth pang of a new way of being or behaving that is waiting to be born. Equally, it is a reminder of our interdependence, of the skills we need to improve, of what is most important in life, of what we need to do or let go of in order to escape its’ orbit and evolve to higher levels of conflict.

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

SOME ALTERNATIVE DEFINITIONS OF CONFLICT

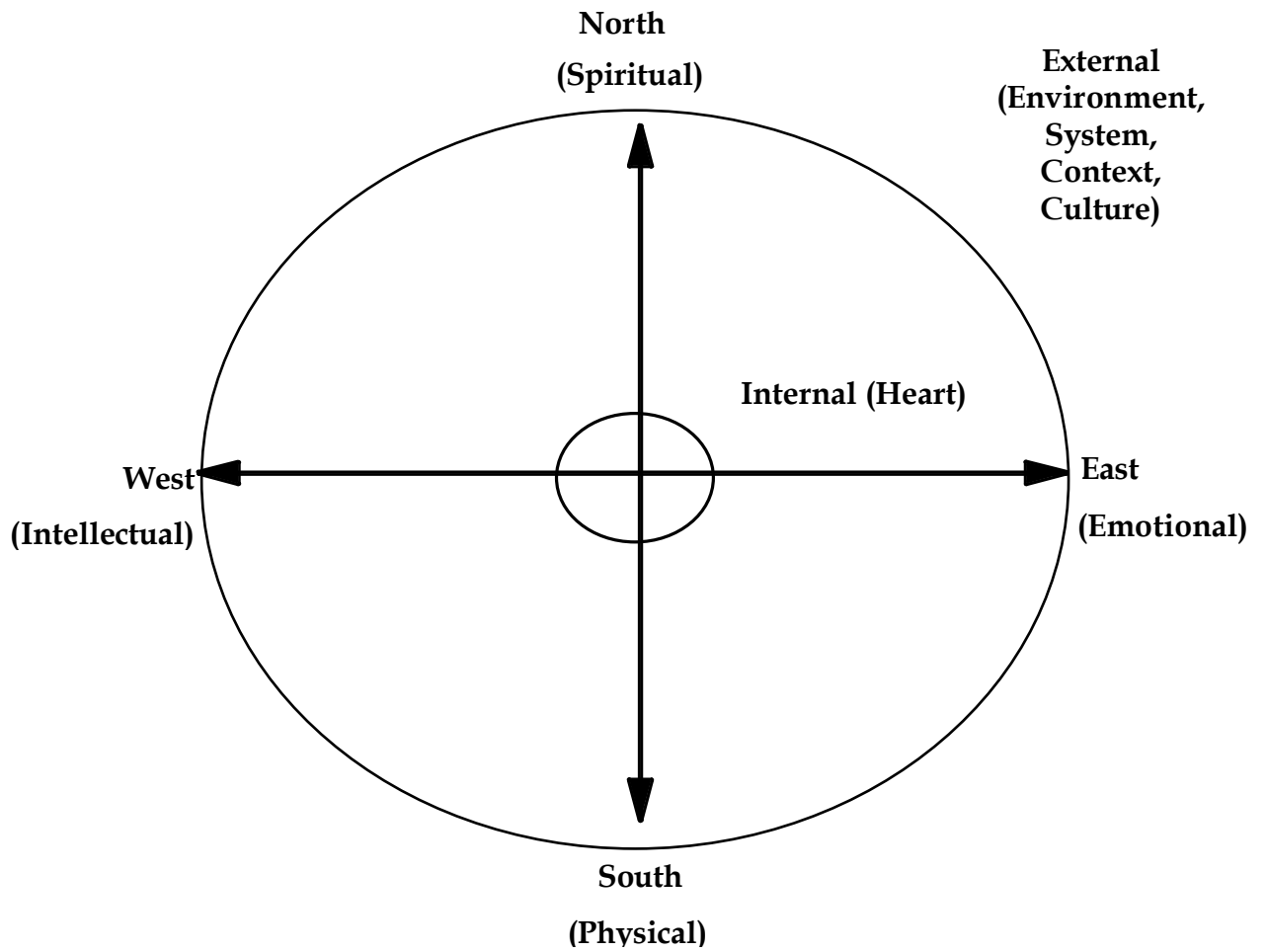
1. Conflict represents a lack of awareness of the immanence of death or sudden catastrophe.
2. Conflict arises wherever there is a failure of collaboration or community.
3. Conflict reflects an ignorance of our essential inter-connectedness, of the beauty of the human spirit.
4. Conflict is a lack of acceptance of ourselves that we have projected onto others, a way of blaming someone else for what we perceive as failures in our own lives, of diverting attention from our mistakes.
5. Conflict represents a boundary violation, a failure to value or recognize our own integrity, and therefore the personal space of others.
6. Conflict reflects a need to support or maintain a false image of who we are.
7. Conflict is a way of obtaining the acknowledgment, sympathy or support we need by casting ourselves as the victim of some evil doer.
8. Conflict is a lack of skill or experience at being able to handle a particular kind of behavior.
9. Conflict is the continued pursuit of our own false expectations, the desire to hold on to our unrealistic fantasies.
10. Conflict is a lack of appreciation of subtlety in what someone else is saying .
11. Conflict is a result of what is not communicated, of secrets, confusions and cover-ups.
12. Conflict represents a lack of effectiveness or clarity in communicating what we feel, think or want.
13. Conflict is a way of opposing someone who represents the parent with whom we have not yet resolved our relationship.
14. Conflict is the sound made by the cracks in a system, the manifestation of contradictory forces coexisting in a single space.
15. Conflict is the voice of the new paradigm, a call for change in a system that has outlived its usefulness.

16. Conflict reflects an inability to say good-bye, a refusal to let go of something that is dead or dying.
17. Conflict is a way of being negatively intimate when positive intimacy has become impossible.
18. Conflict is the antagonistic voice of half of a paradox, enigma, duality, polarity or contradiction.
19. Conflict is a superficial interpretation of difference, diversity and opposition, one that ignores their essential role in creating balance and symbiosis.
20. Conflict is an opportunity and a *request* for authenticity, emotional honesty, acknowledgment, intimacy, empathy, communication, understanding, growth, or learning; in other words, for a better relationship.

COMPONENTS OF CONFLICT

Indispensable Component	Likely Results of Component	What is Needed, Wanted or Missing	Possible Strategies for Intervention
1. <i>Two or More People (or internal parts of the same person)</i>	Diverse Interests, Isolation, Distrust, Competitive Relationships	Communication, Openness, Positive Intent, Common Goals	Ground Rules, Listening, Story Telling, Empathy, Common Interests
2. <i>Disagreement over Content, Process, Relationship, or Outcomes</i>	Unresolved Issues, Differences over Facts, Competing Issues, Personal Solutions	Engagement, Logical Analysis, Neutral Identification and Discussion of Common Interests	Brainstorming, Collaborative Negotiation, Creative Problem-Solving, Dialogue
3. <i>"Negative" Emotion, i.e., Anger, Fear, Jealousy, Shame, Guilt, or Grief</i>	Unexpressed or Hostile Emotions, Incomplete or Inadequate Compassion and Letting Go	Emotional Closure, Introspection, Venting, Empathy, Acknowledgment, Self-Esteem, Rituals, Completion	Venting, Acknowledgement, Caucusing, Emotional Processing, Rituals of Closure
4 <i>Antagonistic Spirit, Intention, or Energy; Intolerant or Unforgiving Aim, Attachment, Embittered Life Force, Soul, or Chi</i>	Chronic Conflict, Illness, Injury, Blindness to Self and Others, Confusion, Spiritual Imbalance, Feeling Stuck, Incessant Suffering	Forgiveness, Mindfulness, Expanded Awareness, Compassion, Authenticity, Acceptance, Release, Letting Go	Honesty, Empathy, Introspection, Centering, Meditation, Ritual, Shift from Negative to Positive Energy
5. <i>Closed-Hearted Attitude, Hostile, Self-Centered, or Withholding Outlook</i>	Dysfunctional Relationships, Depression, Self-Centeredness, Broken Heart	Reconciliation, Compassion, Positive Attitude, Heart-to-Heart Dialogue	Open Hearted Communication, Confession, Learning, Acceptance of Self and Other
6. <i>Adversarial, Bureaucratic, or Highly Competitive System, Context, Culture, or Environment</i>	Inimical Social Conditions, and/or Structure or System; i.e., Inequity, Hierarchical, Bureaucratic and Autocratic Relations	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

Native American Medicine or Spirit Wheel



CONFLICT RESOLUTION TECHNIQUES BY LOCATION

Here are the main resolution techniques for each of six primary conflict locations:

1. *Physical Techniques:* Paying attention to body language, physical movement, and sensory awareness, allows us to speak *directly* to the body and resolve conflicts at their physical source. For example, we can encourage people to fighting and de-escalate their conflict by:

- Moving out from behind our desks into an open circle of chairs
- Modulating our voices
- Arranging our bodies to subtly mirror the parties' postures
- Lowering our height to appear less threatening
- Making eye contact with our "non-dominant" eye
- Nodding to encourage trust
- Using hand gestures to communicate calm
- Moving closer to communicate sensitive information
- Using body language to counteract aggressive or defensive postures
- Using touch to "anchor" negative feelings in one physical location and positive feelings in another
- Indirectly embracing the space around the parties with our arms
- Lightly touching someone to soothe their wounded feelings
- Leaning forward to interrupt fruitless exchanges, or backwards to open a space for direct communication
- Holding up our hands to stop a combative communication or block an aggressive party from becoming violent
- Closely observing body movements to monitor shifting states of mind, emotion, and attitude
- Expanding body awareness by asking questions about how someone is physically sensing themselves, others, or the conflict

2. *Mental Techniques:* We have learned a great deal about how to resolve conflicts mentally, logically, sequentially, and intellectually. For example, we can help conflicted parties move toward settlement by:

- Clarifying and explaining the parameters of the resolution process
- Establishing clear ground rules
- Listening to facts and explanations
- Identifying the issues requiring settlement
- Setting an agenda listing issues for discussion
- Contracting and agreeing to work toward solutions
- Caucusing to explore hidden agendas
- Brainstorming options
- Clarifying interests
- Accumulating points of consensus

- Using law, research, and expert opinion to resolve differences
- Evaluating arguments and proposed outcomes
- Facilitating negotiations
- Urging settlement for objective and subjective reasons
- Making recommendations and evaluations to promote settlement
- Drafting agreements
- Reviewing and solidifying commitments

3. *Emotional Techniques:* Resolving the underlying emotional reasons for conflict requires a subtle, sensitive, facilitative, empathetic approach. For example, we can help moderate negative emotions and resolve the underlying emotional reasons for conflict by:

- Listening to and naming the emotions parties express
- Acknowledging and accepting emotional declarations
- Normalizing and validating emotional concerns
- Mirroring emotional affect
- Releasing hidden emotions by asking probing questions
- Reframing to raise or lower emotional intensity
- Searching for emotional triggering mechanisms
- Connecting emotions to vulnerability and internal issues
- Revealing the benefits gained from intense emotion
- Empowering people to tell others how they feel and set limits
- Eliciting and surfacing repressed emotions
- Reducing emotional resistance and ego defenses
- Redirecting emotion from people to problems
- Separating intentions from effects
- Shifting focus from emotions to behaviors
- Agreeing to change behaviors in the future
- Connecting emotions with underlying interests
- Modeling appropriate emotional responses
- Acknowledging and apologizing for negative, disrespectful, or counter-productive communications

4. *Spiritual Techniques:* Spirit is easier to translate into techniques if we substitute the words intention, energy, life force, or *chi*. For example, we can assist people in moving beyond resolution to forgiveness and increased mindfulness or awareness by:

- Centering, relaxing, and balancing internally
- Releasing past recollections, emotions, and judgments
- Releasing future expectations, goals, plans, and desires
- Expanding present awareness
- Clarifying and concentrating energy, spirit, intention, or *chi*
- Setting the physical stage for intimate conversation

- Opening with an appeal to the parties highest intentions
- Sitting in silence and slowing the pace of conversation
- Watching the energy flowing within, around, and between the parties
- Using compassion to understand for the parties' deepest intentions, motivations, and desires
- Asking questions that clarify people's deepest intentions
- Using silence, pacing, body language, tone of voice, and emotional vulnerability to communicate sincerity and positive intentions
- Asking questions that encourage responsibility for intentions, attitudes, and choices
- Encouraging forgiveness, acceptance, and letting go
- Identifying all the reasons for *not* forgiving, what is wrong with those reasons, and the price for not forgiving
- Designing rituals of release, completion, and closure

5. *Heart Techniques:* The greatest deficit in current models of mediation is our lack of skill in responding to conflict in its heart location, yet we can assist parties in engaging in heartfelt conversations and reaching reconciliation by:

- Welcoming people with an open heart
- Opening with a question, invocation, or invitation directly to the heart
- Asking people to tell each other why they want to resolve the conflict, or what kind of relationship they would like to have
- Eliciting the heart-meaning of conflict stories
- Opening our hearts and using them to search for questions that invite the parties to speak and listen from theirs
- Asking direct, honest questions that encourage integrity and trust
- Being vulnerable and encouraging vulnerability in others
- Honestly communicating our heartfelt insights, preferably in the form of questions
- Encouraging people to ask each other heart-felt questions and answer them openly and honestly
- Focusing attention and awareness on what is taking place at the center, core, or heart of the dispute
- Bringing humor and play into the conversation
- Encouraging participation in activities likely to result in positive, collaborative, open-hearted experiences
- Asking each person what they learned for themselves from the conflict
- Identifying what each person is willing to do differently as a result
- Encouraging complete reconciliation
- Jointly designing new consensual relationships
- Ending with heart-felt acknowledgements and appreciations

6. *Systems Design Techniques*: Attempting to resolve the systemic, contextual, cultural, and environmental sources of conflict in ways that can prevent future conflicts allows us to work preventatively and systemically in response to chronic sources of conflict, for example, by:

- Conducting a “conflict audit” to identify the chronic sources of conflict within an organization or system
- Analyzing and targeting the chronic source of conflict, including their connection to systems, structures, culture, communications, strategies, change, values, morale, motivation, styles, and staffing
- Viewing conflicts not as isolated events, but as part of a stream of disputes originating in systemic dysfunction
- Identifying the core cultural ideas, traditional approaches, and informal mechanisms already in place for resolving conflict
- Supplementing these with enriched alternatives that emphasize prevention, skill building, and early intervention
- Approaching conflict resolution in multiple, diverse ways that allow many people to work on the conflict from different perspectives with different methodologies
- Emphasizing integrated conflict resolution systems over individual or discrete procedures
- Focusing on interest-, rather than rights- or power-based solutions
- Expanding the number and kind of resolution alternatives available internally and externally
- Arranging these procedures from low to high cost
- Encourage early informal problem solving
- Including a full range of options from process changes to binding arbitration
- Providing low-cost rights and power back-ups
- Creating “loopbacks” to informal problem solving and negotiation
- Encouraging consultation before, feedback and facilitation during, and evaluation afterwards
- Using dialogue, coaching, and mentoring to alter entrenched behavior patterns
- Instituting practices that support inclusion, empowerment, equity, dialogue, collaboration, and consensus, and other organizational techniques for reducing conflict
- Develop training programs in conflict resolution and ways of implementing and sustaining preventative systems
- Simplifying policies and procedures and adopting measures to encourage widespread use of resolution procedures

- Increasing motivation, skills, support, and resources to make these interventions work
- Continually evaluating why these succeed or fail, and improving the design

CLUES PEOPLE DROP TO REQUEST A HEART-BASED RESPONSE

Clues that signal a person's desire for heart-based conversations or deeper order of resolution may initially take the form of a trivial statement that *begs* to be contradicted. Here are four examples of such statements followed by my translation and some initial questions that can deepen the conversation:

- Declaration:* "He doesn't think I'm a very good person."
Translation: "I don't think I am a very good person, am vulnerable to what he thinks of me, and am exaggerating what he thinks because I need some reassurance that he doesn't hate me."
Opening Questions: [to the other person] "Is that right? Do you think she is not a very good person?" [to her] "Why does it matter to you what he thinks?"
- Declaration:* "She did it for no reason."
Translation: "I really don't know why she did it but am afraid to ask because she could have done it because of something I did that I don't want to admit, or for some reason that will force me to stop playing the victim."
Opening Questions: "Would you like to know why she did it? Why don't you ask her?"
- Declaration:* "He's lying."
Translation: "What he said does not match my experience, I feel defensive about what he said, and I need him to listen to my experience before I can listen to his."
Opening Questions: "What truth do you see that is not reflected in his statement?" "What do you think is the underlying truth he is trying to communicate to you?"
- Declaration:* "I don't trust her."
Translation: "I am feeling insecure about what is going to happen, distrustful about her intentions regarding me, and need to hear that she is really committed to making this relationship work."
Opening Questions: "What are you afraid she will do?" [to the other person] "Is that what you intend to do? Why not? Do you want this relationship to work? Why?"

HOW TO CREATE OPEN-HEARTED CONVERSATIONS

1. Meditate or center yourself by spending a quiet moment before beginning the mediation and sense your own heart opening
2. Welcome people warmly and hold eye contact a moment longer than usual
3. Begin with questions, invocations or invitations directly to the heart such as those listed below
4. Engage in committed, open-hearted listening, as though your life depended on what you hear
5. Listen for “soft spots,” “power words,” intense emotions, exaggerations, accusations and denials as clues to the parties’ perspectives and “state of heart”
6. Use empathy to search for the center of the conflict within yourself
7. Clarify the hidden heart-meaning of metaphors in conflict stories
8. Ask questions to learn whether your insights are accurate
9. Honestly and empathetically communicate your deepest insights
10. Observe closely to detect mood, cadence, rhythm, body language and what is not being said
11. Search for profound alternatives to the platitudes that fill most conflict conversations
12. Ignore the scripts that keep conversations safe, and move into profound, poignant territory
13. Take risks, surface what is hidden, speak the unspeakable, and touch what is most sensitive
14. Interrupt circular conversations with questions that spiral inward toward the center of the conflict
15. Ask questions to reveal what is deeply desired, even if it is initially dismissed
16. Ask people to respond directly to each other and speak or listen from their hearts
17. Create openings to forgiveness and reconciliation
18. Collaboratively analyze and critique the systems and cultures that produced or reinforced the conflict
19. Design rituals of release, completion, and closure
20. End with heart-felt acknowledgements and appreciations

QUESTIONS TO INITIATE OPEN-HEARTED CONVERSATIONS

1. Before we begin, can you tell me a little about yourselves?
2. What do you hope will happen as a result of this conversation? Why is that important to you?
3. Why are you here? Why do you care? What did it take for you to be willing to come here today?
4. What kind of relationship would you *like* to have with each other? Why?
5. What is one thing you like or respect about each other? Can you give an example? Another? How does it feel to hear each other say these things? What would happen if you said them more often?
6. Is there anything you have in common? Any values you share?
7. What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so strongly about this issue?
8. What role have you played in this conflict, either through action or inaction?
9. If you had 20/20 hindsight, what would you do differently?
10. Is there anything you would like to apologize for?
11. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would each of you rank that apology? What could you do to make it a 10? Are you willing to try right now?
12. What is one thing you would like him to acknowledge you for? What is one thing you are willing to acknowledge him for?
13. What do you think she was trying to say in that apology/ acknowledgment? [To her] Is that accurate? [If not] Would you like to know what is accurate for her? Why don't you ask her?
14. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of what you just said in reaching her? How could you make it more effective? Would you like some feedback? Why don't you ask her?
15. Is this conversation working? Would you like it to work? *Why* would you like it to work? What is one thing she can do that would make it to work for you? [To her] Are you willing to do that? Would you be willing to start the conversation over and do those things now?
16. What is the crossroads you are at right now in your conflict?
17. Will you ever convince him you are right? [If not] When will you stop trying?
18. What would you most like to hear her say to you right now?
19. What would you have wanted him to have said instead?

20. What does that mean to you? What other meanings might it have? What do you think it meant to her? Would you like to find out? Why don't you ask her?
21. Can you imagine what happened to him also happening to you? What would it feel like? Would you like to know what it felt like to him? Why don't you ask?
22. Would you be willing to take a moment of silence right now to think about that?
23. Has anything like this happened to you before? Who? When?
24. What are you *not* talking about that you still need to discuss?
25. What issues are you holding on to that the other person still doesn't know about?
26. What price have you paid for this conflict? What has it cost you? How much longer are you going to continue paying that price?
27. What would it take for you to give this conflict up, let go of what happened, and move on with your life?
28. Do you really want this in your life? What would it take to let it go?
29. What would change in your life if you reached an agreement?
30. If this were the last conversation you were going to have with each other, what would you want to say?

Remember, in heart-based mediations, you *are* the technique. You can only help others by first learning to open your own heart to identify the leverage points where transformation and transcendence are hidden. These points are located in every conflict, in "soft spots," equivocal statements, "power words," intense emotions, pointless exaggerations, wounded accusations, energetic denials, and overly defensive attitudes. If heard correctly, these are not statements, but *requests* and invitations to deeper, heartfelt, profound conversation.

SOME DANGEROUS QUESTIONS

There are some questions that are deep, profoundly personal, and dangerous, yet can produce extraordinary insights by drawing people's awareness inward to the secret source of the conflict within themselves. They should primarily be used in caucusing, coaching, or for homework. For example:

- What have you done to create the very thing you are most troubled by?
- What have you been clinging to or holding onto that it is now time for you to release?
- What are you responsible for in your conflict that you have not yet acknowledged to the other person?
- What do you most want to hear the other person say to you that you still haven't mentioned?
- What do you long for in your relationship with the other person?
- What is the refusal, or "no" that you have not yet communicated?
- What is the permission, or "yes" you gave in the past that you now want to retract?
- What is the resentment you are still holding on to that the other person doesn't know about?
- What is the promise you gave that you are now betraying?
- What is it they or you did that you are still unwilling to forgive?
- What price are you willing to pay for your refusal to forgive? How long are you prepared to continue paying that price?
- What promise are you willing to make to the other person with no acknowledgement or expectation of return?
- What gift could you give the other person that you continue to withhold? Why?

- What are you prepared to do *unconditionally*, without any expectation of recognition or reciprocity by the other person?

[Based on work by Peter Block]

HOW TO BE IN CONFLICT

Mediation is expressed not merely by what we *do*, but by who we *are* when we are in conflict. There are many ways of being in conflict that are profoundly mediative, and we embody genuine mediative principles 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 our deepest intuition
- Work for completion and closure
- Be ready for anything at every moment
- Be able to let go, while giving up on no one

Our true goal is therefore not only to become more skillful in mediation, but to become more *mediative* in all our conversations, relationships, and mediations.