

## Why Every Conflict Breaks Your Heart: Conflict as a Spiritual Crisis

By Kenneth Cloke

*The price of anything is the amount of life you pay for it.*

Henry David Thoreau

We all pay an incalculable price for conflict. We pay a *financial* price in wasted time, attorney fees and lost productivity; a *physical* price in stress-related illnesses and accidents; an *intellectual* price in adversarial assumptions, mistakes and failures; and an *emotional* price through anger, distrust, fear, grief and pain.

Yet we also pay an unseen *spiritual* price in stress, imbalance, blindness and loss of energy, life force, or *chi*, that is increased by worry over what already happened, and fear over what might yet happen; a *heart* price in destroyed relationships, silence over things that matter, and loss of family, joy and love; and a *systemic* price in dysfunction, false polarizations, lost opportunities and preventable, chronic conflicts. Every conflict thus represents a spiritual crisis, breaks our hearts, and at the same time, reveals a path to spiritual transformation and heartfelt transcendence.

If we ask *where* conflicts are located, people may point to their heads, to various parts of their body where they experience stress, or toward their opponents. Clearly, conflicts manifest themselves *physically* in bodily stress, triggering chemicals in our brains that prepare us for aggression or defense; *intellectually* in distinctions and judgments that bolster our positions and justify our aggressive or defensive reactions; and *emotionally* in anger, fear, jealousy, guilt, shame and grief that upset and isolate us from others.

If conflicts are located in these deeper places, is it not apparent that our efforts to resolve these conflicts *cannot* be complete until we develop skills and methodologies that allow us to stop, settle, resolve, transform, transcend and prevent them at each of these sources? And is it not equally apparent that we know *least* about how to work skillfully with spirit and heart?

When we recognize that conflicts can teach us unique and important lessons and contain secrets that can transform our lives, suddenly the price of conflict is transformed into an *immense* source of value, allowing us to free ourselves from conflict's icy grip, release our spirits, and open our hearts.

Therefore, we can describe the costs of conflict in two fundamentally opposite ways. We can portray conflict as a loss by describing its *price* and what it costs us; or we can portray it as a gain by describing its *value* and what it teaches us.

### **Why Spirit in Conflict Resolution?**

Think of it this way. Each of us has 100 percent of our life energy to invest in leading our lives. When we are fighting, nearly all of it is committed to conflict. If we were to assign some arbitrary numbers, we might say that stopping the fighting could reclaim perhaps 20 percent of our energy. Settling the issues reclaims perhaps 60 percent. Resolving the underlying reasons for our dispute reclaims perhaps another 10 percent, and forgiveness returns most of the rest. Reconciliation, which is an act of the heart, restores the remainder, and systemic change prevents its reoccurrence.

While physical techniques are useful in stopping a fight, they are less helpful in settling the underlying issues that created the fight. Similarly, intellectual techniques are useful in settling issues, but do not resolve the emotional issues that gave rise to them. And while emotional techniques resolve the underlying reasons for conflict, they do not encourage forgiveness.

To reach forgiveness, *spiritual* techniques are needed to explore what triggered the conflict within ourselves, release our own false expectations, and transform our suffering into learning. Reconciliation is the complete transcendence and disappearance of conflict, which requires an open heart. To begin, we require a better understanding of what spirit and heart are and how they lend themselves both to scientific analysis and artistic intuition.

### **What Is Spirit?**

We can define spirit as the energy of life flowing within, around and between us; as the backdrop against which our physical reactions, minds and emotions are projected; or as a combination of intense awareness, unfocused concentration and acceptance; or as undifferentiated direct experience.

Spirit does not require belief in any kind of supernatural deity. While spirit forms the basis for much religious experience, religious doctrine has little in common with spiritual experience. The moment we try to analyze, quantify, distinguish, measure or enumerate spiritual experiences, certain qualities disappear. For example, what happens to the *feeling* of love when we scientifically define its nature? Is it possible to create an accurate description of the feeling of romantic love from a list of objective characteristics?

We unconsciously experience spirit in countless ways: for example, notice how energy shifts when we interact with different people, when we become focused or distracted, when we grow angry or upset, or when without physical or verbal signaling someone decides to leave. We experience spirit as our attention shifts into the present; as we move closer and sense how the quality and depth of communications and relationships change as we approach the invisible boundary that defines another's 'space.'

We experience spirit at the moment of death of someone we love, allowing us to sense the difference between living beings and lifeless flesh. In silent meditation we get in touch with spirit as we notice breath and body sensations, observe physical, mental or emotional expressions, and watch as they interact and flow.

We experience spirit in mediation when we stop to discuss what just happened; listen without aim or intention; observe what is occurring moment by moment, especially during intense emotions; expand empathy and compassion toward an opponent or ourselves; speak honestly from the heart; act with integrity and skill; accept conflict as our teacher; or work collaboratively to end animosity.

### **Spirit and Conflict Resolution**

There are three main reasons to experience spirit in mediation. First, in doing so, we become more aware of the quality of our own and others' energies. We become more sensitive to how these energies are altered as people move from conflict to resolution, from lies to truth, from anger to compassion, from defensiveness to open-heartedness, or in reverse.

Second, by becoming more aware of spirit, we allow it into the process and learn to direct it. We discover how to make it stronger, clearer, and brighter and avoid what makes it weaker, blurrier, and darker. We can calibrate our interventions and more accurately predict their effects. We can notice how angry judgments form and dissipate, and invite open-hearted communications.

Third, as we become more skillful, we recognize that conflict teaches people who they are and who they can become. Conflict is simply a place where people are stuck and unable to be relaxed or authentic, and by learning to become unstuck, they can discover how to transcend not only *that* conflict, but similar conflicts. By recognizing spirit we allow people to liberate themselves from the confused ways of thinking and inauthentic ways of being that got them stuck in the first place. For these reasons, every conflict contains a spiritual path leading to higher levels of resolution.

## **What Is Heart?**

If spirit is the rhythm and free flow of energy, heart is its interaction and touch. We can imagine heart as an energetic or spiritual connection with others that is loving, kind, open, honest and compassionate; as a synergy created by the union of disparate human beings; as a seat of wisdom, insight, fellowship, and recognition; as a living, evolving, intimate relationship with others; as a willingness to be open, vulnerable and genuine in the presence of those we perceive as opponents.

We can imagine heart as challenges, lessons to be learned, and sources of growth; as those parts of ourselves we discover by interacting with others; as the source of a sense of well-being that flows from creative, intimate, honest and compassionate experiences with others. We can imagine it as listening compassionately, not just to the words others speak, but those they do *not* speak and most want to say. We can imagine it as truths that are so poignant and profound they are understood immediately.

Heart is, in Thomas Merton's phrase, our "hidden wholeness," our capacity for instinctively recognizing what is true in ourselves and others; our wisdom, insight and inner peace. It is also a way of letting go, and no longer holding in, back, or onto. It is whatever we most deeply want or feel within and between us.

## **Heart in Conflict Resolution**

If we follow conflict into the labyrinth of the subconscious, we will ultimately identify the center of what people need to learn, know, do, and become. If people are stuck at a certain place in their lives, would it not make sense for their subconscious minds to find a conflict that could get them unstuck, or clarify what got them stuck in the first place?

Conflict connects people intimately with their enemies, and also with parts of themselves they have silenced, suppressed or denied. It draws them along deep, subterranean channels and ushers them into anger, fear, pain, shame and grief. Discovering where these channels are located, and how to switch to channels that are heart-felt and convey love and acceptance, requires heart knowledge in the mediator. This knowledge allows us to open the gates of subtle learning, expand awareness to the unity that underlies opposition, reset priorities, reveal the opponent within each person, and transform and transcend conflict.

We know that heartfelt, loving communications are *immensely* effective in resolving conflict. Yet people in conflict are reluctant to open their hearts to

each other, not merely because they are frightened and prefer not to become vulnerable in the presence of those they do not trust, but because they may be confused about what they really want, or do not feel strong enough to face the sadness and pain they have accumulated over the years. Nonetheless, when they look deeply and clearly into their own hearts, they become more centered and less fearful of engaging in heartfelt communications.

Clearly, heartfelt, loving communications are *immensely* effective in resolving conflict. Yet speaking openly about heart, or proposing to use it as a source of technique in mediation is sometimes met with derision or resistance. This reaction is based partly on the assumption that mediation will descend into fuzzy thinking, new age sentiment, intellectual chaos and romantic delusion. Yet it is possible to both think critically and access heart knowledge at the same time. And at a deeper level, it is possible to think *with* the heart, and allow technique to be complemented by wisdom.

### **Communicating with the Heart**

Heart-based, spiritual communications clash with traditional ideas of toughness, rationality, invulnerability, safety and professional detachment, and suggest the possibility of unacceptable pain to those who have protected their hearts too long. They require mediators to open *their* hearts and become more vulnerable, compassionate, truthful, and kind. Yet for several reasons learning to communicate with the heart can make us far more skillful at resolving even commonplace conflicts.

First, heart is a metaphor for love, implying not only affection, but acceptance of others, letting us see what is good even in those who behave badly. It is not only *what* we see, but *how* and *why* we see that matters, as they reveal *who* we are.

Second, heart encourages empathy, allowing us to recognize others within ourselves. Listening empathetically means *wanting* to understand who the other person is, discovering within ourselves the reasons we might do or say something they have done or said, and turning these insights into questions to find out whether we are right.

Third, heart requires honesty. Honesty begins with truthfulness about ourselves, creating a platform on which it becomes easier to be honest with others. Only if we are truthful with ourselves will anyone care what we think or accept our insights.

Fourth, heart invites intimacy. Intimacy requires vulnerability and a willingness to explore the places where we can be most deeply hurt. Some degree of willingness to be unguarded, vulnerable and suffer for others is indispensable to intimate, heart-based relationships.

Fifth, heart demands integrity and authenticity. When we do something that lacks authenticity or integrity, we become false, divided, and unbalanced. An ancient piece of wisdom attributed to Jesus in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas counsels: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” Transcending conflict means bringing forth what is heartfelt within us.

Sixth, heart encourages compassion. When we engage in heart-to-heart communication, we create a single heart that unites speaking and listening. Listening with the heart means listening without biases or expectations, and *experiencing* who the other person is. Being open-hearted is not only deeply satisfying, it is far more successful in opening communications, getting at the heart of the matter, and resolving disputes.

Seventh, heart means dedicating ourselves as wholly and completely as we can, and being present in all our actions and interactions. I sometimes ask clients, “How much of *you* is present right now?” They generally answer, “Not much.” Yet the more they open their hearts, the more they become present, enjoy life, and love and accept those around them, including their perceived opponents.

### **The Dangers of Open-Heartedness**

Virginia Woolf wrote that, “The beauty of the world has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.” Similarly, while creating openings to spirit and heart can be rewarding, it can also be painful, and even dangerous. Partly, this is because no one gives *complete* permission to resolve their conflicts; because permission to stop a fight does not translate into permission to resolve the underlying reasons that gave rise to it; because forgiveness and reconciliation are transforming, and every transformation is a breakthrough that could not have been imagined or consented to when permission was given.

The dangers in heart-felt communications include the possibility that we will discover we were wrong and have been deceiving ourselves about what we have done; or will have to change our own lives and suffer consequences we are not prepared to accept; or will have to tell the truth to someone whose

life could change as a result; or will be forced to forgive our enemies or ourselves; or will never find out who the other person really is, or wake up to who we really are; or will never resolve the underlying issues and be condemned to repeat them; or will cease growing because our conflict is over and no one is asking us to improve.

Each of these defines a moment when playing it safe is more dangerous than risking openheartedness. By taking risks, we wake up, face our fears, pay attention to details, lose our egos, become more humble, operate out of the center of who we are, connect more authentically with others, and think more creatively.

### **You *Are* the Technique**

In heart-based mediations, you *are* the technique. You can only help others by first learning to open your heart space, becoming *unconditionally* openhearted, and engaging people in conversations that reveal a commonality of caring lying directly beneath the surface of their hostile communications.

You can focus attention on satisfying each person's deepest concerns, and ask dangerous, vulnerable questions that identify the leverage points where transformation and transcendence lie 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, more heartfelt and profound conversations.

### **How to Open a Heart Space**

Heart openings can take the form of statements that are exaggerated or begging to be contradicted. For example:

- Declaration:* "He doesn't think I'm a very good person."  
*Heart-Meaning:* "I don't think I am a very good person, am vulnerable to what he thinks of me, and am exaggerating right now because I need some reassurance that he doesn't hate me."  
*Opening Questions:* [to him] "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:* "He is lying."

- Heart-Meaning:* “What he said does not match my experience, I feel defensive about what he said, and I need him to listen to my truth before I can listen to his.”
- Opening Questions:* “What truth do you see that is not reflected in his statement?” “What truth you want him to acknowledge or understand?”

### **Some Techniques for Opening Heart-based Conversations**

Spirit and heart become more practical when they are transformed into technique. Here are some techniques that work for me:

- Meditate or center yourself by spending a quiet moment before beginning a mediation, so that you can sense your own heart opening
- Welcome people warmly and hold eye contact a moment longer than usual
- Begin with questions, invocations or invitations directly to the heart, such as those listed below
- Engage in committed, open-hearted listening, as though *your* life depended on what you hear
- Listen for “soft spots,” “power words,” intense emotions, exaggerations, accusations and denials as clues to the clients’ perspectives or state of heart
- Use empathy to search for the center of the conflict within yourself
- Clarify the hidden heart-meaning of metaphors in conflict stories
- Ask questions to learn whether your insights are accurate, and honestly communicate your discoveries
- Observe closely to detect mood, cadence, rhythm, body language and what is not being said
- Search for profound alternatives to the platitudes that fill most conflict conversations
- Ignore the scripts that keep conversations safe, and move into profound, poignant territory



- Take risks, surface what is hidden, speak the unspeakable, and touch what is most sensitive
- Interrupt circular conversations with questions that spiral inward toward the center of the conflict
- Ask questions to reveal what is deeply desired, even if it is initially dismissed
- Ask people to respond directly to each other and speak or listen from their hearts
- Create openings to forgiveness and reconciliation
- Collaboratively analyze and critique the systems and cultures that produced or reinforced the conflict
- Design rituals of release, completion, and closure
- End with heart-felt acknowledgements and appreciations

### **Some Questions to Expand Heart Spaces in Mediation**

Here are a few questions I use to locate, open, and expand heart spaces in mediation:

- Before we begin, can you tell me a little about yourselves?
- What do you hope will happen as a result of this conversation? Why is that important to you?
- Why are you here? Why do you care? What did it take for you to be willing to come here today?
- What kind of relationship would you *like* to have with each other? Why?
- 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?
- Is there anything you have in common? Any values you share?
- What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so strongly about this issue?
- What role have you played in this conflict, either through action or inaction?
- If you had 20/20 hindsight, what would you do differently?

- Is there anything you would like to apologize for?
- 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?
- What is one thing you would like him to acknowledge you for? What is one thing you are willing to acknowledge him for?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- What is the crossroads you are at right now in your conflict?
- Will you ever convince him you are right? [If not] When will you stop trying?
- What would you most like to hear her say to you right now?
- What would you have wanted him to have said instead?
- 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?
- 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?
- Would you be willing to take a moment of silence right now to think about that?
- Has anything like this happened to you before? Who? When?
- What are you *not* talking about that you still need to discuss?
- What issues are you holding on to that the other person still doesn't know about?

- What price have you paid for this conflict? What has it cost you? How much longer are you going to continue paying that price?
- What would it take for you to give this conflict up, let go of what happened, and move on with your life?
- Do you really want this in your life? What would it take to let it go?
- What would change in your life if you reached an agreement?
- If this were the last conversation you were going to have with each other, what would you want to say?

Conflict can cause suffering so deep that it prevents people from opening their hearts and creates wounds that have to heal before they can be transcended. Yet what is extraordinary is that mediation simultaneously has the *natural* capacity to touch our hearts, heal our spirits, and reveal the hidden spiritual, heartfelt connections between us. Our true work is only just beginning ...

**Bio:**

Kenneth Cloke, J.D., Ph.D., L.L.M. is Director of the Center for Dispute Resolution in Santa Monica, California and works as a mediator, arbitrator, consultant and trainer. He has published many journal articles and several books, including *Resolving Conflicts at Work*; *Resolving Personal and Organizational Conflicts*; and *Mediating Dangerously: The Frontiers of Conflict Resolution*.