

### 3.

## *Defining Conflict Transformation*

I propose the following definition:

**Conflict transformation is to envision and respond  
to the *ebb and flow* of social conflict  
as *life-giving opportunities*  
for creating *constructive change processes*  
that *reduce violence*,  
*increase justice*  
in *direct interaction and social structures*,  
and respond to real-life problems  
in *human relationships*.**

The meaning and implications of this definition will be easier to understand if we analyze the italicized components. Imagine conflict transformation as a person on a journey, comprised of a head, heart, hands, and legs.

### Head

The head refers to the conceptual view of conflict—how we think about and therefore prepare to approach conflict. In the head we find the attitudes, perceptions, and orientations that we bring to creative conflict transformation. Our definition uses the terms *envision and respond*.

*Envision* is active, a verb. It requires an intentional perspective and attitude, a willingness to create and nurture a horizon that provides direction and purpose.

A transformational perspective is built upon two foundations:

- *a capacity to envision* conflict positively, as a natural phenomenon that creates potential for constructive growth, and
- *a willingness to respond* in ways that maximize this potential for positive

change.

A transformational approach recognizes that conflict is a normal and continuous dynamic within human relationships. Moreover, conflict brings with it the potential for constructive change. Positive change does not always happen, of course. As we all know too well, many times conflict results in long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction. But the key to transformation is a proactive bias toward seeing conflict as a potential catalyst for growth.

**A transformational approach recognizes that conflict is a normal and continuous dynamic within human relationships.**

*Respond* suggests that vision must result in action, engaging the opportunity. The tilt is toward involvement. *Respond* recognizes that the deepest understanding comes from the learning process of real-life experience.

Both foundations—*envision and respond*—imply a certain level of “head” work. They represent the ways we think and orient ourselves as we approach the conflicts in our lives, relationships, and communities.

*Ebb and flow*: We often see conflict primarily in terms of its rise and fall, its escalation and de-escalation, its peaks and valleys. In fact, we often focus on a singular peak or valley, a particular iteration or repetition of a conflict episode. A transformational perspective, rather than looking at a single peak or valley, views the entire mountain range.

Perhaps it is helpful here to change our metaphor to one that is less static. Rather than narrowly focusing on the single wave rising and crashing on the shore, conflict transformation starts with an understanding of the greater patterns, the ebb and flow of energies, times, and even whole seasons, in the great sea of relationships.

The sea as a metaphor suggests that there is a rhythm and pattern to the movements in our relational lives. At times the sea movements are predictable, calm, even soothing. Periodically, events, seasons, and climates combine to create great sea changes that affect everything around them.

A transformational approach seeks to understand the particular episode of conflict not in isolation, but as embedded in the greater pattern. Change is understood both at the level of immediate presenting issues and that of broader patterns and issues. The sea is constantly moving, fluid, and dynamic. Yet at the same time it has shape and form and can have monumental purpose.

## Heart

The heart is the center of life in the human body. Physically, it generates the pulse that sustains life. Figuratively, it is the center of our emotions, intuitions, and spiritual life. This is the place from which we go out and to which we return for guidance, sustenance, and direction. The heart provides a starting and a returning point. Two ideas form such a center for conflict transformation.

*Human relationships:* Biologists and physicists tell us that life itself is found less in the physical substance of things than in the less visible connections and relationships between them. Similarly, in conflict transformation relationships are central. Like the heart in the body, conflicts flow from and return to relationships.

Relationships have visible dimensions, but they also have dimensions that are less visible. To encourage the positive potential inherent in conflict, we must concentrate on the less visible dimensions of relationships, rather than concentrating exclusively on the content and substance of the fighting that is often much more visible. The issues over which people fight are important and require creative response. However, relationships represent a web of connections that form the larger context, the human eco-system from which particular issues arise and are given life.

To return for a moment to our sea image, if an individual wave represents the peak of issues visibly seen in the escalation of social conflict, relationships are the ebb and flow of the sea itself. Relationships—visible and invisible, immediate and long-term—are the heart of transformational processes.

*Life-giving opportunities:* The word *life-giving* applied to a conflict situation reminds us of several things. On one hand, the language suggests that life gives us conflict, that conflict is a natural part of human experience. On the other, it assumes that conflict creates life like the pulsating heart of the body

creates rhythmic blood flow which keeps us alive and moving.

***Conflict is an opportunity, a gift.***

Conflict flows from life. As I have emphasized above, rather than seeing conflict as a threat, we can understand it as providing opportunities to grow and to increase understanding of ourselves, of others, of our social structures. Conflicts in relationships at all levels are the way life helps us to stop, assess, and take notice. One way to truly know our humanness is to recognize the gift of conflict in our lives. Without it, life would be a monotonously flat topography of sameness and our relationships would be woefully superficial.

Conflict also creates life: through conflict we respond, innovate, and change. Conflict can be understood as the motor of change, that which keeps relationships and social structures honest, alive, and dynamically responsive to human needs, aspirations, and growth.

## Hands

We refer to our hands as that part of the body capable of building things, able to touch, feel and affect the shape that things take. Hands bring us close to practice. When we say “hands-on,” we mean that we are close to where the work takes place. Two terms of our definition stand out in this regard.

*Constructive:* Constructive can have two meanings. First, at its root it is a verb: to build, shape, and form.

Second, it is an adjective: to be a positive force. Transformation contains both these ideas. It seeks to understand, not negate or avoid, the reality that social conflict often develops violent and destructive patterns. Conflict transformation pursues the development of change processes which explicitly focus on creating positives from the difficult or negative. It encourages greater understanding of underlying relational and structural patterns while building creative solutions that improve relationships. Its bias is that this is possible, that conflict is opportunity.

*Change processes:* Central to this approach are *change processes*, the transformational component and the foundation of how conflict can move from being destructive toward being constructive. This movement can only

be done by cultivating the capacity to see, understand, and respond to the presenting issues in the context of relationships and ongoing change processes. What are the processes that the conflict itself has generated? How can these processes be altered, or other processes initiated, that will move the conflict in a constructive direction? A focus on process is key to conflict transformation.

Conflict transformation focuses on the dynamic aspects of social conflict. At the hub of the transformational approach is a convergence of the relational context, a view of conflict-as-opportunity, and the encouragement of creative change processes. This approach includes, but is not driven by, an episodic view of conflict. Conflict is viewed within the flow and the web of relationships. As we shall see, a transformational lens sees the generation of creative “platforms” as the mechanism to address specific issues, while also working to change social structures and patterns.

## Legs and Feet

Legs and feet represent the place where we touch the ground, where all our journeys hit the road. Like the hands, this is a point of action, where thought and heartbeat translate into response, direction, and momentum. Conflict transformation will be only utopian if it is unable to be responsive to real-life challenges, needs, and realities.

A transformational view engages two paradoxes as the place where action is pursued and raises these questions: How do we address conflict in ways that reduce violence and increase justice in human relationships? And how do we develop a capacity for constructive, direct, face-to-face interaction and, at the same time, address systemic and structural changes?

**Rather than seeing peace as a static “end-state,” conflict transformation views peace as a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationship.**

*Reduce violence and increase justice:* Conflict transformation views peace as centered and rooted in the quality of relationships. These relationships have

two dimensions: our face-to-face interactions and the ways we structure our social, political, economic, and cultural relationships. In this sense, peace is what the New Sciences<sup>1</sup> call a “process-structure”: a phenomenon that is simultaneously dynamic, adaptive, and changing, and yet has a form, purpose, and direction that gives it shape. Rather than seeing peace as a static “end-state,” conflict transformation views peace as a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationships. Peace work, therefore, is characterized by intentional efforts to address the natural ebb and flow of human conflict through nonviolent approaches, which address issues and increase understanding, equality, and respect in relationships.

To reduce violence requires that we address the presenting issues and content of an episode of conflict, and also its underlying patterns and causes. This requires us to address justice issues. While we do that, we must proceed in an equitable way toward substantive change. People must have access and voice in decisions that affect their lives. In addition, the patterns that create injustice must be addressed and changed at both relational and structural levels.

*Direct interaction and social structures:* As suggested above, we need to develop capacities to envision and engage in change processes at all levels of relationships: interpersonal, inter-group, and social-structural. One set of capacities points toward direct, face-to-face interaction. The other set underscores the need to see, pursue, and create change in our ways of organizing social structures, from families to complex bureaucracies, from the local to the global.

Conflict transformation suggests that a fundamental way to promote constructive change on all these levels is dialogue. Dialogue is essential to justice and peace on both an interpersonal and a structural level. It is not the only mechanism, but it is an essential one.

We typically think of dialogue as direct interaction between people or groups. Conflict transformation shares this view. Many of the skill-based mechanisms that are called upon to reduce violence are rooted in the communicative abilities to exchange ideas, find common definitions to issues, and seek ways forward toward solutions.

***Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of***

***social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.***

However, a transformational view believes that dialogue is necessary for both creating and addressing social and public spheres where human institutions, structures, and patterns of relationships are constructed. Processes and spaces must be created so that people can engage and shape the structures that order their community life, broadly defined. Dialogue is needed to provide access to, a voice in, and constructive interaction with, the ways we formalize our relationships and in the ways our organizations and structures are built, respond, and behave.

At its heart, conflict transformation focuses on creating adaptive responses to human conflict through change processes which increase justice and reduce violence.