

From Reactivity To Responsiveness
Reflections for the Rocky Mountain Retreat Presentation

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My interest in reactivity stems from my experience and observations of my life. I have always been interested in how we think, act and behave in the world, why we make the choices we do. I am a mediator, attorney, yoga teacher and student of the world's wisdom traditions. Further, I observe, facilitate and participate in discussions, dialogues and arguments. From these numerous vantage points, it has always struck me as interesting how often people's perceptions of reality differ. We all have different points of view based on upbringing, culture and experience. Patterns of unchallenged thought can create distortions. Conflict and stress tend to amplify these distortions. In these times of stress, the words we use, the vision we see with and the behaviors we engage can have more to do with misperceptions and unchallenged assumptions than they have to do with reality.

The more I have challenged my own perceptions and ways I respond in stress or conflict, the more I realize is that these patterns of thought and behavior are often tied to experiences from the past which has never been questioned or healed. These patterns which affect the way we see and behave often exist at the core of our nervous system, and are based on a response to a perceived (remembered) trauma that is no longer happening. When our nervous system responds as if our very existence is being threatened, we will over-react: We will see, hear and assume the worst in the situation.

The ambition of clear seeing assumes an objective reality exists and that we can observe and clarify to help parties in a dispute find their way towards some common understanding. That objective reality exists and can be described has been an underlying assumption of our economic, communications, educational, scientific, and legal systems. In particular, the American legal system is based on the premise that when disputing parties set forth one-sided versions of a dispute, even in the most

polarized fashion before a “neutral” third party, some larger version of the truth will emerge.

From the vantage point of the conflict professional who can be actively engaged and yet not have a stake in the outcome of a dispute, it is easy to see the obstacles to clear seeing that entangle the participants: lack of distance, high stakes, raging emotions, and limited information. As mediators, we are trained to help the parties overcome these obstacles in many ways: modeling active listening and reframing of issues in non-toxic language, working with empathy and through emotions, validating and encouraging recognition and empowerment, and distinguishing between fact and conjecture. With these skills we can help the parties come up with clear and workable issues, focusing on common goals, interests, and values. However, even with the advantage of having a more neutral perspective, the conflict practitioner is still faced with impediments to clear seeing. The lens through which we are looking at any given time will determine what we see. At any given time, what we see, hear, feel, and experience is determined by many factors: our mental state, the focus of our attention, our past experiences, and current mood. Using the metaphor of driving a car, our vision can be limited by a smudged window. This can be likened to the preconceived notions, those unchallenged assumptions, prejudices and biases that we bring into the room. The sun shining in our eyes can blind us. This is analogous to holding one party or position in higher esteem than others. Further, we may be so narrowly focused on the goal of settling the dispute or moving the participants toward a destination where we think they need to go, that we can miss important markers, signposts, the scenery along the road.

Of all the impediments to clear seeing, none is more dangerous than blind spots —those unhealed and untended places in our psyche from which we react out of fear or defensiveness, often without even realizing we are doing so. Perhaps the most challenging blind spots are the ones that are buried in our unconscious: They appear as lightning quick reactions to protect us from the pain of our own histories.

Before going further, it is important to make a linguistic clarification, to distinguish between “reactivity” versus “responsiveness.” Although these terms may be used interchangeably, for purposes of this paper, “reactivity” refers to a conscious or

unconscious opposition to something that short-circuits the part of the brain that can stop and make choices. The term “response,” from which responsibility derives, focuses on the aspects of interventions (including non-interventions) involving choice, accountability, and the ability to make appropriate decisions based on connection to reality, good judgment, and sound thinking.

I offer an example to clarify the distinction. I was recently coaching would-be mediators at a training session for executives and professionals who wish to develop mediation skills to enhance their careers and communication skills. In a mock divorce case, when the issue of division of property came up, I noticed that the aspiring mediator I was coaching, who I will call Mary, was speaking of behalf of the wife with alarm and fear in her voice. Mary was devising strategies to protect the role-playing wife from having to give up any of her property.

After the mock mediation, I asked Mary about her choice of interventions. She remembered that when her parents divorced, her mother felt impoverished and powerless. As a result, Mary experienced not being taken care of and fearing for her mother’s health and safety throughout her childhood. When the issue came up in the mock mediation, Mary felt frightened as she had in her childhood, and literally feared for the wife’s safety. She intervened on the wife’s behalf, not based on present need or responsiveness to the situation. In reality, the wife was doing an excellent job speaking up for herself. Mary’s reaction was based on an unconscious repetition: Fear arising from her history that made it hard for her to clearly see the situation in front of her. Both husband and wife in the exercise noted that Mary’s reaction had unraveled them. The wife felt as though her voice had been taken from her and that the mediator doubted her ability to protect herself. The husband felt undermined and isolated.

Seasoned mediators are not immune from this type of intervention based more on personal history than on the current situation. Most of us come to our work in conflict resolution with a set of unconscious reactions to move us away from areas of discomfort based on the values we were raised with and our histories. It is hard to be present when we are projecting our own biases, fears, and resentments on to the story our clients are telling us. When we react without understanding our filters and blind-spots, these become obstacles to neutrality and impediments to clear seeing.

One way of understanding clear seeing is to comprehend on an experiential level what is happening inside of us when we are being reactive. We are all touched by the emotional pain and bullying or victim behaviors of the parties who sit before us. When we get into the uncharted territory of our own or others' pain, we often react out of our own need to get out of discomfort, rather than choosing to respond based on what is appropriate for the parties.

For example, say a client in divorce mediation is sitting before me in a great deal of pain at the prospect of losing his wife, his home and his marriage. And posit further that because of my own unresolved pain, I find this demonstration to be intolerable—because I cannot bear my own unresolved losses, I cannot endure it in another. I will intercede to put an end to what is unfolding—call a caucus, make a proposal, offer soothing comfort, whatever it is, I will need to do something. Or, I may need to disassociate or space out in some other way, which is to say that my pain has become so intolerable, that I need to abandon myself. Again, this reaction to save myself may happen at lightening speed before I even know why I am interceding.

Perhaps at that particular moment, the most powerful intervention is to allow silence to connect each person more deeply to the moment. Allowing the man to be where he is in pain and to his soon to be ex-wife to sit with it as well could be just what is called for. Sometimes from these painful places the participants can feel the love they once had for one another, the tremendous dashing of hopes and dreams, and the fact that there is still a degree of caring between them. This can bring them to the next level in their process.

Letting them stay where they are for an appropriate time is one choice I can make if I have available to me the full range of options. The more limited I am in what I can tolerate by way of “negative” emotions, the less I will be able to access what is most appropriate for the people who I am here to serve. If I can sit with my own sorrow that this man's display is triggering in me, I will be brought more deeply into a sense of connection with myself, the parties, and the appropriate action. It is the hard work of connecting to our painful places that would make this choice available.

The people who sit with us around the mediation table are often in a great deal of strife. Their marriage is dissolving; their health, finances and sense of security, identity

and well-being may be threatened. They are sitting across the table from some person, entity or group whom they experience as the enemy. The reasons for this will differ: It may be longtime ethnic, religious or political feuding, family disharmony or business deals gone bad, senseless acts of crime or the accidents of life.

In this role of neutral we see feuding spouses come together and redistribute their limited assets and to care for their children; we ask “offenders” to sit with their “victims” and create a plan for healing and re-compensation. Representatives of warring factions sitting around peace tables are called upon to traverse decades and sometimes generations of violence, loss of home, community, and the lives of family members, to join forces with the “enemy” on the other side and work towards a solution. If we are facilitating such largess in the field of human capacity, we ourselves must broaden our view of good/bad, right/wrong, black/white. This, in part, entails a willingness to hold the space of paradox.

To hold paradox means we come to understand that the huge eruptions of life may contain our wake up call; that after great pain something new and shiny emerges. With these experiences comes an expanded bandwidth with which to hold a larger version of reality, one that includes the complexities and idiosyncrasies of human existence in the 21st century. Expansive reality becomes paradoxical. We can begin to imagine ourselves as a part of the stream of life, which includes creation and destruction and all of the disparate emotions that can accompany each. We can sit with parties in deep pain and hold with honor and reverence their movement from brokenness to reconciliation; from seeing the person or entity across the table as the enemy towards a view of them as another human being who faces challenges and feels pain. When we can only see conflict as the enemy, we will not fully understand. Until we are able to get beyond a view that requires us to make something else the “other” that must be extinguished, we will not begin to understand the roots and deeper purpose the conflict has served. From this deeper understanding, a different kind of peace can emerge.

To understand the force of negative creativity, we can begin with analogies from nature. The volcanic explosion sends deep mineral-rich lava from the earth’s core forth with great force to replenish the soils on the surface. So too are there riches from our core that come forth in with personal disruptions. Managing these powerful forces requires skill and practice. By patiently sitting with these more destructive tendencies within ourselves, we can begin to expand our view of the world and of who we are in it, to grapple with the rightful place of negative aspects of the creative force of life. (Shulman, J. J. A. Lecture, “Year One Integrated Kabbalistic Healing.” Summerville, NJ: May 2007. See also, Shulman, J. J. A.

Kabbalistic Healing: A Path to an Awakened Soul. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2004.

Going With the Flow

The stillness in stillness is not the real stillness. Only when there is stillness in movement can the spiritual rhythm appear which pervades heaven and earth. (Ts'ai-ken t'an, quoted in Capra, 2000).

In addition to seeing reality clearly, we have an equally important task of being a co-creative force within the mediation process. This goal focuses more on presence and process, holding space, and being open to the unfolding possibilities of each moment. Through this more subjective lens, we note that the gleanings of subatomic reality inform that the viewer will always affect that which is being viewed. Expanding this insight to our mediation practice, we acknowledge that “neutral third parties” are an active force that both is affecting and is affected by the process and the parties.

Whereas clear seeing involves being keenly awake to what is happening inside and around us, “going with the flow” requires a kind of relaxation of the fixed focus of analyzing mind and an easing into the moment. We soften our judging functions and open the body’s senses to allow information to come in from a variety of sources: sensations, emotions, flashes of insight, and other forms of guidance. When we are too strongly focused on linear time/space and the five senses, it is harder to be receptive to these other sources of information.

When reviewing my “magic moments” in mediation and in life, they happen when I am at once aware of all the sensations, body/mind responses, and emotions that are arising, and simultaneously letting go or allowing each moment to unfold. This unified state is very similar to what happens when we are fully engaged in an artistic or creative process. When these moments occur in mediation, the parties make quantum leaps in their views of themselves, each other and the conflict itself. The setting is removed from a purely linear vantage point and enters into one that is more multi-dimensional. From this more holographic visage, the participants can see the other in themselves and themselves in the other, and the conflict as an aspect of how they relate to themselves and their world. Some make giant strides towards settlement; others open to a quieter shift that settles everyone into a softer place, lessening the tension in the room. Whether the dispute settles, the parties leave the process with a deeper sense of their own humanity, and hence, regardless of the case outcome, a type of healing occurs.

This kind of participation in mediation requires a subtle dance between doing and allowing, managing and surrendering, being in the process so fully that the appropriate intervention does not require lifting oneself out of it but springs forth organically from the group presence and brings us more deeply into it and into ourselves. All this is helped by experience, a deep trust in our receptors and in ourselves as humane and fine-tuned instruments, adept at knowing when to dive in deeper, when to ask the truly difficult questions, when to hold the silence, and when to feel and give a voice to what one or more of the parties is experiencing.

Relaxed Awareness

*When you express gentleness and precision in your environment, then real brilliance and power can descend in the situation. If you try to manufacture that presence out of your ego, it will never happen. You cannot own the power and the magic of this world. It is always available, but it does not belong to anyone (Truongpa, C. *The Sacred Path of the Shambala Warrior*. Boston, Ma.: Shambhala, Dragon Editons, 1988 p.107).*

How can we reconcile the need to be awake and non-reactive and at the same time be free to flow in an enlarged sea of presence? It turns out that the same tools and practices required to hone the skills of clear seeing are exactly what is called for to cultivate our creativity and intuition. Relaxed awareness is a state in which we can be awake to and at peace with whatever is arising in the moment.

The very difficult work of therapy, self-study, healing, or any other spiritual path is to know and heal wounded and disowned parts of ourselves so that we may come into wholeness. Shedding light on our hidden places, holding ourselves in the full spectrum of human experience and being in the paradox and mystery of life are all ways of shifting our limited view of who we think we are. Once we become more aware of and come to accept those parts of ourselves we previously discarded, we have a greater capacity to feel safe around a wider range of emotions and experiences.

The path of wakefulness is ultimately a path of becoming softer and less armored, open and tender towards life, that is to say a path of the heart. It takes tremendous courage to allow oneself to be hurt and saddened by the brambles and arrows on life's path.

Shifting to a heart focus requires a willingness to be touched and moved by the joys and the overpowering disappointments and sorrows of our lives, the lives of our clients, and the world at large. Staying open to the wisdom of the heart is among the most potent tool in a seemingly intractable mediation. Amazing shifts can happen when combatants are urged to move from the forceful "rightness" of their

posture into a discussion of the pain the current situation is causing them. For example, I had an employment mediation where the manager of a large accounting department was livid at the lack of support she was receiving from the head of the office. The supervisor was frustrated and exasperated because all the help he offered was flatly rejected. In a caucus I learned that the manager had lost her teenage child in a car accident. I sat with her for some time in this painful place, the loss of a child, and encouraged her to share with the supervisor. By allowing the manager to drop down deeper into her anger and disappointment, she was able to reveal in a joint session that during the time of the funeral, the supervisor had called a mandatory meeting and no employees attended the mass. No matter what happened after that, the manager felt undermined, unsupported and misused. Allowing the manager to drop down and discuss her pain not only around losing her child but at the lack of support and understanding during the time of the death, allowed the supervisor to understand the depth of her pain, to reach out to offer solace. At this point, working out the details of how the parties could work together more efficiently at the office fell neatly into place. There was a relaxation of the need to convince me of the rightness of each one's position towards an exploration of the softer inner world. Tears flowed and those tears did not take us out of the process, but more deeply in. "The softest of stuff in the world penetrates quickly the hardest. Insubstantial, it enters where no room is" (Lao Tsu. *Tao Te Ching*. Gai-Fu Feng and Jane English, eds. New York: Vintage Books, 1972, Chapter 43).

The journey towards awareness begins with an intention to know one's self more intimately. What do we do with awareness as it makes known to us parts of ourselves we were formally unaware of? If we are in the habit of defining ourselves in a limited way, the awareness of unlikable aspects may make us contract more, as we judge ourselves harshly. Eventually, if our intention is clear, we do learn to keep opening. Even the need to protect ourselves is something we can honor. When we can have the full spectrum, open and cautious, keenly aware and softly flowing, content focused and process oriented, something larger than the sum of the parts arises that both contains and enlarges the full spectrum. Reality, it turns out, is big enough to include the limited and unlimited, separate and unified, aggressive and peaceful aspects of our being.

Therefore, my awareness of the pain arising inside of me while a client sits before me in deep grief does not need to be shoved down, denied, or kicked out of the room. It can inform me of the profound nature of the losses involved. Through it I can connect deeply to the full range of healing potential that exists in that moment.

Awareness Practices

Consider...the world that you carry inside you, and call this thinking what you wish.....What is happening in your innermost self is worthy of your entire love. (Rilke, R.M. Letters to a Young Poet, New York: Vintage Books, 1986, p. 56.(modified)).

Being awake and relaxed requires certain attributes and qualities that can be learned, practiced and perhaps even mastered. There are many practices that allow us deepen our connection to our center and allow for self-study, reflection and relaxation to relax and connect simultaneously with ourselves and with the world around us. One example of working with our fixed perceptions will be given in this workshop in the form of the questions we ask about conflicts we are engaged in. The more we are willing to go through these steps and ask questions that allow us to examine our attitudes, behaviors, needs and beliefs, the more we will be able to ask ourselves questions in the spur of the moment about why we are about to react in a particular fashion.

For some, this self-reflective spaciousness may come from time spent alone or in nature, meditation practices that allow the deeper aspects of mind to rise to the surface, like mindfulness meditation, or practices that allow us to cultivate acceptance and compassion towards ourselves and others, such as tong lin or loving-kindness meditation. Various movement forms of dance, martial arts, tai chi, aikido, yoga, and chi gong can help us become more aware of what is stored in the body, and to learn how to release it without judgment

We can also do exercises to make us more aware of our bounded places in the body and in the psyche—the shadow. To get a sense of what shadow elements you are harboring, make a list of qualities that you believe best describe you, then list their opposites and check out your relationship with those. Try to sit embodying the opposite quality. For example, if you think of yourself as open, warm and intelligent, try to sit with yourself being cold, closed, or ignorant. What happens in your body when you hold these disparate aspects? What happens in your mind? What are your mental, emotional and physical reactions to these unfamiliar places inside of you? Is there a way to increase your comfort or tolerance to these? Often shadow elements appear in our dreams in the form of horrifying characters, one that is murdered or punished by the others, or that frightens us in the dream and later upon waking. Giving these characters a voice by dialoguing with them in a journal is one way to allow light to be shed on information they hold for us.

Another way to examine and work with your unseen and uncomfortable places is to think of the people who annoy you the most, the ones you have the least amount of tolerance for—chances are that you are looking at an aspect of your shadow. Be willing to sit with these qualities that you find abhorrent, revolting or

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simply unpleasant as they arise throughout your day. We do not have to give up our preference for pleasure over pain, for peace over war, for joy over sadness. What we are working with is reactivity: those places within us that contract and limit our choice in the moment. We can learn to apply to these wounded places a salve of kindness: Not a kindness that sloppily and carelessly allows us to act out of these qualities or emotions, but rather a kindness that allows us to befriend ourselves, to sit with our pain. Non-judgmental tenderness applied to these tough spots softens our resistance to the once disowned aspects of ourselves, which weakens their overall power. What slowly emerges is a gentle tolerance of our own and others' humanity, with all its foibles, limitations, and glories. "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility. Humility is endless" (Elliot, T. S. *The Four Quartets. East Cocker II*, p. 27 New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971.

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In 2007, Lili presented workshops on bringing Spiritual Awareness and Intention into dispute resolution at The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) and Association of Conflict Resolution (ACR) annual conferences and at the Second Annual Rocky Mountain Retreat and she taught yoga at the ACR annual conference and at the 2007 Summer Learning Forum of the Harvard Negotiation Insight Initiative.

A thirty year practitioner of yoga, and Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT), Lili currently teaches yoga and meditation and presents workshops throughout metro Denver. She teaches classes at Samadhi Center for Yoga (Westward Best of Denver Award Winner; Channel 7 A-1 List Award Winner 2007) and Cherry Creek Athletic Club, where Lili received the Yoga Teacher Circle of Excellence Award in 2007. Lili is in her third year of study in Integrated Kabbalistic Healing, a non-dual healing methodology with founder Jason Shulman.