Mindfulness-Based approaches to stress reduction and depression are now widely endorsed by respected members of the global medical and scientific communities, and bringing mindfulness to other areas of human experience is receiving similar accolades. The potential of mindfulness’ power to rewire the brain (and mind) of its practitioner toward increasingly awakened, productive and humane thoughts, choices and actions is an example of self-directed neuroplasticity available to everyone who embraces it with verve and commitment. Bringing the grounded discipline of mindfulness into how human conflict is addressed, healed and transcended is being implemented by professionals in a multitude of areas of human interaction with positive results - including human resource management, amongst prison populations, and within the offices of therapists and alternative dispute resolution professionals.

Human conflict is messy to put it mildly, yet it is almost always framed as something negative instead of an opportunity for positive growth and change. Mindfulness acknowledges the power of the possible over dismal self-resignation to the status quo. Mindfulness is about choosing receptivity over teeth-clenched resistance; therefore, bringing its fluid perspective and influence to the table can literally transform the situation of any human conflict at hand - no matter how challenging it can be - and offers a co-creative way to move with conflict between individuals, turning the scenario into a prospectively empowering, enlivening experience for all parties.

My incorporation of mindfulness as the nexus of my practice of conflict mediation and communication education is based upon years of working with people contending with stressful human relationships. I’ve witnessed if they don’t proactively and deliberately work on creating new pathways in their brain to upgrade their internal operating system out of the older one reflexively and unconsciously clung to (with its predictably disparaging and drama-attracting results), their world will be one of constant potential human landmines they will be either avoiding or recovering from. Simple logic will forecast their future; if a person continually views the world through a framework of divisiveness and discord, it is no surprise conflict will follow him or her through life.

One of the foundations of a Mindfulness-Based approach to dispute resolution is authentically facilitating the expression of multiple sides of an issue without judgment or partiality toward any party’s position, regardless of whatever opinions a peacemaking professional may hold in terms of the gravity of the conflict at hand. That’s not necessarily an easy task. A mindful mediator is not there to influence the outcome in any way; but instead is given the task of creating a environment conducive to open communication and ensuring that everyone’s needs, concerns, fears and demands are heard in order for them to reach a mutually agreed upon result whenever possible. This does not imply a Mindfulness-Based approach is emotionless - in fact, having a wooden attitude toward the arc of feelings expressed by human beings in opposition would be highly ineffective in reframing conflict as an opportunity for growth and change.

A Mindfulness-Based approach to conflict resolution also encourages people in opposition to stand in the other party’s shoes, even if just for a moment, even if they deem that other person despicable and unlovable in any way, even if they feel so violated and appalled by that person they can barely stand to be...
in the same room. In fact, it is a mindful facilitator’s pledge as a fellow human being to at least try to accomplish that. Without even attempting to plant seeds of empathy and compassion - even if they don’t sprout and flourish in any person’s heart right away - means all parties involved aren’t being served to the fullest and highest of the Mindfulness-Based dispute resolution profession’s skilled training and ability, regardless of the disputant’s degree of satisfaction with how the problem was resolved. This does not put the facilitator in a position of taking sides when offering suggestions intended to foster greater understanding of where the other person or party is coming from, it simply offers another lens to look through than the one that can be myopic, tunnel-vision impaired, or even blind when it comes to the view inside their own head and the realities outside of it.

The exercise of asking clients to place themselves in one another’s shoes in order to find empathy and compassion, and hopefully, choose options to resolve their conflict that are humane and civil is not a single-step outwardly-focused process. In fact, its efficacy is only partial if they are choosing to approach conflict as an opportunity with a long-term positive effect upon all involved. The second part of the process is to discover that for themselves by standing fully square in their own shoes, and find the courage and self-compassion to honestly examine where and how they contributed to the conflict at hand - and if possible, to all conflicts they’ve found themselves engaged in.

All human relationships have at least two people present, and each person will have their vulnerabilities, their harmful habits and tendencies, their selfishness and even their ignorance. It’s easy for us to name and describe the darkness we experience coming from another human being; in fact, many of us are so good at it we can articulate it with absolute perfection and clarity. Some of us are skilled enough due to mindful, committed and ever-refined practice in observing that darkness with neutrality to separate behaviors from the person, and to make the leap straight into compassion, empathy, and when possible, even authentic (as opposed to lip service) forgiveness. But to do the same with ourselves is much more difficult - to own up to our hypocrisies and lack of transparency, as well as our dark thoughts and behaviors can be daunting. Yet without reflection upon our own shadow tendencies, we can never gain full insight and knowledge as to why and how any conflict with another human being erupted in the first place.

Unfortunately, not everyone enters any type of dispute resolution process with the understanding they can possibility learn and grow from the situation. Many want a settlement, want it quickly (and for usually less money than it costs to hire attorneys), and will likely walk away from the process unchanged and unequipped for the next conflict that comes their way. If they haven’t taken one iota of responsibility for their actions, the impact their behavior has upon others and themselves (even if they are technically not the one “at fault”), or remain rigid regarding the imperfect nature and realities of being human, the cycle of disempowerment and self-involved, often regrettable or even harmful reactions will once again consume them when the next challenge arises. They will choose to live life as a perpetual victim, cynic, jerk, coward, predator upon the weak, or any number of paralyzing cocoons chosen as either justifications or resignations in their interactions with others.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful.” Letting go of violent, abusive, vindictive thoughts and behaviors when we find ourselves in conflict with another is often problematic when what we observe emanating from them is something we deem “foul” as Emerson said. Yet harboring any of these destructive energies within is also quite foul, and are bona fide obstacles to allowing ourselves to take the high road in a conflict situation. The truth is, all of whomever or whatever we perceive as our opponents and obstacles to peaceful co-existence are not just the ones on the outside. We can be our own worst enemies. Bringing light in the form of self-acknowledgment and self-compassion to those obstacles to humane inner connection and unbroken inner transparency that are foundations to living with mindful, unclouded interaction with everyone, whether we are in conflict or at peace, is an essential aspect of bringing our best self to the negotiation table when we find ourselves in rough waters with another person.

That does not mean we have to be all “warm and fuzzy” toward, and sing “kumbaya” with the people we are in a dispute with. Authentic humanity is sometimes fiercely passionate and can appear contradictorily “judgmental” when it brings foul
darkness into the light, yet it its intention comes from the place of genuine compassion and empathy. I have said repeatedly for years that one of the most compassionate, empathetic, kind and caring things we can do for a fellow human being is to not enable their darkness (either directly or by ignoring it) under some deluded notion that we are practicing “unconditional love.” The art is in the mindful style and class we bring to our communications that keeps us from sliding into the murky waters of condescension, resentment, superiority and further separation from our fellow human beings.

It is with that same spirit of mindful style and classiness we can shine light at the conflicts and barriers to peace within and how we mediate them. No one responds well to being hit over the head with their weaknesses and mistakes, and beating ourselves up over the same is an exercise in unproductive ridiculousness as well. Yet if we bring along with us the powerful tools of compassion, empathy and kindness, confrontations without and within that bring up and out darkness in the other as well as ourselves can often be met with less defensive posturing, and instead take us down pathways of productive responses, choices and actions rather than spinning in the downward spiral of negative, petty, disempowering reactions. We can access that place of neutrality that allows us to make the distinction between harmful, hurtful and short-sighted behaviors that foster division between people, and the human being him or herself, who, by definition is imperfect.

Again, not everyone wants to reframe conflict as an opportunity. They just want the situation to go away and hopefully not have to deal with that person again. But regardless, since we take ourselves wherever we go, odds are we will attract a similar conflict situation in future. Doesn’t it make sense to choose to try something different? Every day, more people are communicating their desire for a relational worldview. People are seeking unity over division, interconnection over separation, and inclusion over exclusion. Because of this shared desire for authentic humane interaction between all human beings, regardless of geography, appearance, beliefs and economic status, cries of “enough!” regarding the old paradigm status quo are being expressed by those who know that collectively we are capable of more, and better ways to relate with one another in times of peace and conflict.

The truth is it takes concerted, fearless, mindful effort to get there - without and within. Are you willing to bring transparency to your desire for unified humanity, and an authentic demonstration of interconnection with all human beings - not simply toward the ones you deem worthy, but to the “foul” both without and within? If the answer is yes, welcome to graduate school.

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