



# Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research and Training

## **Peacemaking and Spirituality: *Touching the Soul Within the Energy of Conflict and Trauma***

By Mark Umbreit

The journey of peacemaking and spirituality is about honoring the enormous healing power of story; listening deeply to the woundedness within others and ourselves; acknowledging such woundedness, without judgment, assessment, advice or problem solving; and nurturing the innate strength, wisdom and yearning for peace that is within each of us. The journey is about being ever mindful of the power of unintentional negative consequences if we cannot tame our egos and their endless thirst for recognition and control; learning to tame our minds and their endless thoughts and chatter so that we can be fully present with each other through the turbulence of inter- and intra-personal conflict.

Creating a safe, if not sacred, place for people in painful conflict to tell their story, without interruptions, has been found throughout the ages to be at the core of healing. Personal stories of conflict or trauma touch others as no articulate argument could ever. Arguments and positions keep us in the head. The telling of stories touch our hearts. When I work with victims of severe criminal or political violence seeking mediation and dialogue, much of my “intervention” involves deep compassionate listening and acknowledgement of the stories of trauma for all involved, without judgment or prescription. Daniel Taylor in his book *The Healing Power of Stories* speaks of how stories help us learn to live more responsibly, to understand others in their life context, and to avoid many of the conflicts in life that so quickly hook us.

The journey of peacemaking and spirituality is about being present with conflict in our wholeness, in our body, mind, and spirit. It is about “being with” rather than “doing for” the conflict, allowing our own and other’s woundedness to teach us profound lessons of life in community. Learning to be fully present in our life and work, with no illusions of control, is not easy in Western culture. Yet there exist a number of practices that cultivate such presence. By far the most relevant spiritual practice that we can integrate into our peacemaking and conflict resolution work is mindfulness. John Kabat-Zinn speaks of mindfulness as openhearted moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness. Kabat Zinn’s book *Wherever You Go, There Your Are* provides a practical guide for how to integrate mindfulness practice into one’s personal and professional life. His new book *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* provides an even richer guide to how mindfulness practice relates to personal and social healing in the global community.

Other practices that can cultivate integrating spirituality into our life work include yoga, Tai Chi, and Chi Gong, all of which can be accessed quite easily through local course offerings, books, videos, and audiotapes. Each represents a meditative practice in movement. Each works with our wholeness: body, mind, and spirit. Each cultivates the power of breath, a creator given gift we all have, to promote healing and a compassionate presence with those we are with. After living in China and being taught Chi Gong by Taoist

masters my approach to conflict has profoundly changed. No longer do I focus exclusively on the cognitive and verbal expression of conflict. Instead, I work with the energy of conflict, my own and others. The powerful non-verbal language of our bodies and spirit are far more potent in both understanding conflict and allowing the path toward healing to be engaged.

The simple act of centering can also be easily integrated into our practice. While centering is part of all the practices already mentioned, it can be used by itself in a quick and practical way by taking a few moments to close the eyes, focus on deeper breathing, imaging a beautiful place in nature or a person who immediately brings you joy, and allowing interruptive thoughts within the mind to simply float away by refocusing on the breath.

Spirituality is a frequently used but often misunderstood concept in Western culture. It tends to be equated with religion, which is confusing to some and disengaging to others. All religions provide an understanding of life, it's meaning, and it's relationship to a higher power. Religions have specific beliefs that must be embraced and tend to be highly judgmental and exclusive. While religion has served as a bridge to a deeper experience of spirituality for many, including myself, for others formal religion presents an obstacle to spirituality. For these people, many who have been wounded by formal religions, a different, often non-conventional, spiritual path is chosen. Spirituality, on the other hand, is profoundly non-judgmental and non-separatist, honoring the sacred gift of life and creation. Spirituality is about the search for ultimate meaning and wholeness in life, despite the pain, suffering, conflict and brokenness present throughout the world.

Indigenous cultures have a profound understanding of spirituality and its relationship to peacemaking and healing. For example, the symbol of the Medicine Wheel that is deeply embedded in Native American culture refers to "medicine" as spiritual energy. The Medicine Wheel and its sacred teachings provide powerful guidance to individuals along the path towards mental, physical, emotional and spiritual healing. The sweat lodge and the ritual of smudging through the burning of sage, sweet grass or cedar are additional examples of spiritual practices within Native American culture that foster healing and the calling in of good spirits to live in a good way on the path of peacemaking. Another example is seen in the wisdom of "Pa a ka wa ha," a core principle of Native Hawaiian healing that requires the healer to close the mouth, be still, and stop talking so much.

The journey of peacemaking and spirituality is best understood through bearing witness to the healing power of story in people's lives, in many diverse settings. Peacemaking has little to do with problem solving and settlement achievement. Peacemaking goes beyond the presenting issues in conflict, in search of greater empowerment, meaning, recognition, and healing. Forgiveness and reconciliation are often part of the journey, yet are not to be pushed upon people; they often occur in very authentic spontaneous ways, both explicit in some cases and very subtle in others.

The following case example involves Sarah, a young mother whose father was brutally murdered more than twenty-two years ago, and Jeff, the man in prison for having killed her dad. Extensive in-person preparation of the parties over many months occurred before my co-mediator and I brought them together in a face-to-face dialogue in a prison. The "presenting issue" or perhaps "trigger" was a letter from the department of corrections notifying the victim's family of the offender's scheduled appearance before a parole board, since he was now eligible for parole having served so much of his lengthy sentence. Sarah and her family became consumed with intense feelings of vulnerability, anger, and uncertainty. They decided to speak at this hearing and the offender was not approved for release. The following story tells of the courage, strength, and compassion that led to healing for both Sarah and Jeff. This case exemplifies at the deepest level the journey of peacemaking and spirituality. There was no mediator reframing of the participant's stories in the language of peacemaking and spirituality. Rather, after extensive pre-dialogue preparation through deep listening and gentle guidance, the primary role of the co-mediators was that of bearing witness to the strength, capacity, and compassion of these wounded individuals as they helped each other heal. In more than five hours of the

mediated dialogue the two mediators spoke less than twelve minutes combined, yet we both were totally emotionally present, and available to hold the sacred space that emerged.

*Sarah contacted me shortly after the parole hearing and expressed her strong inner sense of needing to meet the very man who killed her father so many years ago. Other than her husband, the rest of her family had no interest in following this path. From the very beginning it was clear that she was yearning to find peace within herself and her immediate family. Many months of separate preparation followed with both Sarah and Jeff. During our in-person separate meetings, I was able to understand the life context and needs of Sarah and her husband Rick, as well as Jeff, the offender. In addition to much deep compassionate listening to their stories, I explained how the process works and the fact that there are both benefits and risks in such a dialogue, particularly if people enter the process with unrealistic expectations. I also pointed out that even though many who have chosen a similar path of restorative dialogue have reported the encounter to be very therapeutic, the actual dialogue is not a form of psychotherapy. Jeff felt tremendous remorse for what he had done and was willing, though scared, to meet with Sarah. For all, this must be an entirely voluntary process. It became increasingly clear in Sarah's own words that she was on an intense spiritual journey to reclaim her soul, her sense of meaning, balance, and wholeness in life*

*The mediated dialogue was held in a maximum-security prison. Sarah's husband was present, as well as a support person that Jeff chose. Mediated dialogue refers to a humanistic approach that is very non-directive, honoring the healing power of silence and one's presence. My co-mediator and I practiced mindfulness through centering and breath work both during the preparation and in the dialogue so that our ego's and voices stay out of the way, to allow Sarah and Jeff's strength and wisdom to emerge and flow as it needed to. After very brief opening comments by the mediators, we entered an extended period of silence as Sarah sobbed and tried to find her voice to tell her story. As mediators, we did not intervene to move the process along. Instead, we remained silent. We knew she had the strength and our mindfulness practice allowed us to stay out of the way. Sarah and Jeff told us later that the energy of our presence, the non-verbal language of our spirit, was vital to the process being safe and respectful of their needs and abilities. After nearly four minutes, Sarah found her voice and her story of trauma, loss, and yearning for healing flowed out with strength and clarity. Jeff then offered his story of what happened, how it has affected his life, and the enormous shame he felt.*

*They continued to share deeper layers of their stories, interspersed with lingering questions both had. After five hours and shortly before the session ended, following another moment of extended silence, perhaps a minute, Sarah looked directly at Jeff and told him she forgave him for killing her father. She made it clear that this forgiveness was about freeing herself from the pain she has carried with her for more than twenty years. She hoped this forgiveness might help him as well, but Sarah said she could not set her spirit free without forgiving him. Sarah had never indicated in our many months of preparation that forgiveness was an issue she was struggling with, nor did we raise the issue. When she and her husband came to the prison for the dialogue with Jeff, she had no plan whatsoever to offer forgiveness. Yet in the powerful moment of confronting her greatest fear Sarah speaks of how she felt within her soul that "this is the moment to free myself." In post-dialogue interviews with Sarah and Jeff they both indicated the enormous affect this encounter had on their lives. Sarah spoke of how meeting Jeff was like going through a fire that burned away her pain and allowed the seeds of healing to take root in her life. She spoke of how before meeting Jeff she carried the pain of her father's death like an ever-present large backpack. After meeting Jeff, the pain is more like a small fanny-pack, still present but very manageable and in no way claiming her life energy and spirit, as before. Jeff reported a sense of release and cleansing, as if his spirit was set free as well.*

It would be easy for many to marginalize this moving story, perceived as a rare occurrence. The reality is that I know of hundreds of similar cases throughout North America and a small but growing number in other

parts of the world, including Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, and South Africa, many of which I have been personally involved in as a practitioner or researcher.

The journey of peacemaking and spirituality is grounded in practitioners first learning to walk the path themselves, within their personal and professional lives. Finding the still point of power within us is essential, often times through meditation, prayer, meditative movement, or other forms of spiritual practice. This power has nothing to do with control over others. Instead, this power allows us to tame the energy of our mind and ego so that we can be fully present in the most healing capacity with the people we are working with. Power flows from the recognition that it is not about our wisdom or technical expertise, but rather the need to honor the enormous capacity of highly conflicted, and often traumatized, people to find their strength and help each other heal through deep compassionate listening, from speaking and listening from the heart. It is power that recognizes that it is in the energy of our communication, particularly through the non-verbal language of our spirit, that we can offer a sacred place for bearing witness to the healing power of story. The language of our spirit communicates: our authenticity; the congruence between our thoughts, feelings, actions and the higher values we adhere to; our intention; and openness and non-judgmental nature, or lack of. Little children and pets are masters at reading the language of our spirit.

The path of peacemaking and spirituality requires a human connection with the people in conflict whom we are working with, grounded in empathy, support and impartiality. And, it requires the ability to make no assumptions about the needs of others, so that we as facilitators do not impose our judgments or spiritual needs and practices upon others. Peacemaking with others and within ourselves is about embracing the spiritual wisdom that bridges can in fact be built, no matter how intense the conflict or trauma might be. It's a journey that is ultimately grounded far more in a spirit of humility and compassion than technical expertise and credentials. May we all find the strength to walk this path.

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