The Energy of Conflict and Conflict Resolution: More Than a Metaphor

by Ted Lewis  October 2013

In many respects, understanding how the energy of conflict and conflict resolution works is similar to understanding how the force of gravity works. Scientists even today humbly admit that they really don’t know how to explain gravity, even though they can fully study its effects. How can something as invisible as gravity have such a profound influence on all matter? Or in the realm of electromagnetics...How can a distant, invisible force make a tiny needle in a compass jiggle? And so we may also ask, how can something as invisible as the energy of forgiveness be so significant in the lives of people who journey forward out of deep conflict and trauma? In what sense is that energy ‘real’?

One way to approach this topic is to consider how the emotional energies surrounding conflict and resolution processes have numerous parallels in the study of physical energies that operate in our world and in human technologies. By considering the common language used by scientists of nature’s processes and facilitators of peacemaking processes, I hope to show that the energy dynamics of interpersonal and community conflicts are far more than a metaphor. It may turn out, in fact, that the very reason energy language is so appropriate for facilitators is because the emotional forces at work, be they positive or negative, are real forces, like light and gravity, which move in and around our bodies -- indeed, in and around our hearts -- and extend outwardly toward other people.

Ever since Einstein formulated his equation about the relation between energy and matter, the study of energy has grown by leaps and bounds. Two new frontiers of study include research on how black holes work at the center of galaxies (including our own Milky Way), and on how our hearts and brains pass bioelectric communications to each other, resulting in the modulation or emission of strong emotions. Common to both of these areas is the concept of energy fields. Consider how black holes are voracious eaters of all incoming sources of mass and energy, and yet more recent research has found that black holes also spill out energy beyond the boundary of their gravitational pull. Now consider how an individual’s intense emotions can suck in the emotional energies of other people, while also spilling outward with damaging consequences. Little wonder that a self-help book came out, blending the terminology of different disciplines: Black Holes and Energy Pirates: How to Recognize
What we are increasingly seeing in multiple areas of study is the cross-fertilization of the language of energy.

As a mediator and facilitator of both restorative justice and dispute resolution cases, I have comfortably used the language of energy in my descriptions of conflict and resolution processes. But this has been a very loose, informal usage that has not moved much beyond phrases like, “The energy between the parties was really tense,” or “By the end of the meeting you could feel how the energy in the room was relaxing.” Over the years, I have spoken of the “energy shift” when a mediation goes from tense ‘uphill’ dialogue work to relaxed ‘downhill’ dialogue work. What I hope to accomplish in this essay is to push us further to consider how the presence of energy in relational conflicts is far more than a metaphor; it is a very real interplay of unseen forces that can be studied, mapped and even harnessed in the service of providing better resolution services to people in conflict. As this is an exploratory exercise, I will leave it to others to add both better research and better theory to what for me is simply a first-time expedition into new territory.

Of special interest to me is how a source of energy can be converted into other forms of energy. Just rubbing our hands together on a cold winter’s day involves the transfer of kinetic (moving) energy into heat energy. This friction, a concept easily transferrable to the realm of relational conflict, becomes a source of energy intensification. Such an intensification happens very fast when we strike a match on a striker pad. In fact, the word ‘conflict’ stems from the Latin word meaning “to strike together.” Recall times when you may have rubbed your shoes on a shag carpet, building up a charge of electricity that could arc out from your finger and shock another person. This provides a simple analogy for how conflicts, due to the way clashing interests rub ‘against’ each other, create a new storage of negative energies that seek an avenue of release.

Once energy is released it can go into a couple of directions. It can be converted into useful energy or it can become wasted or unused energy. A more complex system of energy flow and energy conversions starts with our sun. The sun, a constant generator of nuclear energy, throws off excess radiant energy toward our planet. Our climates and ecosystems are sensitively tied to the amounts of sun-energy received, and all plants photosynthesize this energy to grow. In turn, animals digest plant life, and through a conversion process that stores up energy in calorie units, this potential energy is released through muscle-driven movement and work. At the most fundamental level, be it for food or warmth, energy keeps us alive.

But more significantly, as stated in the Wikipedia article, “Energy is necessary for things to change.” This reminds me of a maxim that I often use in my trainings called the Five ‘Cs’: “Conflict Creates a Chance for Constructive Change.” (Crime could also be substituted for Conflict.) I know for myself that the main thing that keeps me committed to the field of

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2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Energy
conflict resolution is the transformative opportunity that I see from time to time in the lives of clients who went through a dialogue process. Without the prospect of personal and relational change, there is not much motivation to help people who are stuck in conflict.

Consider now another grade-school level example of energy conversion (or energy transformation): the hydroelectric plant. Storable water above a dam turns into gravitational energy when it falls, which converts into the mechanical energy of spinning turbines, which converts into electrical energy that is moderated through transformers. Note the concepts of...

1) potential energy that is stored up;
2) kinetic energy that is released through activity;
3) useable energy that is controllable for desired outcomes.

A fourth category of wasted energy (usually in the form of heat) could also be added to this list, but for the purposes of this article, I’ll put that one on the back-burner. When considering the dynamic elements of a mediation or facilitation process, not much is lost in using a hydroelectric plant as a metaphor. Conflicts and harms build up within a deep reservoir of blocked energies for both parties. The initiation of a resolution process commonly stirs up a flurry of intensified emotions and doubts, and participants often put up points of resistance. After a good dialogue (a circular exchange of listening and speaking between polarities), a transformative outcome leads to useful energies, including new solutions to help people move forward in life. In effect, the negative energies coming into the process have been converted into the positive energies coming out of the process.

We have now considered several examples from the physical sciences involving energy fields and energy transformations, noting the resonance of ‘energy language’ in the field of conflict studies. But is this only a metaphoric usage for those of us in the peacemaking fields? I believe the reason why this language is becoming increasingly central to descriptions of how conflict and resolution processes work is because there is far more going on than meets the eye. Someday, social-scientific research will reveal a clearer picture of what is going on, just as today’s researchers in physics cannot explain the dynamics of gravity but will likely advance their theories in decades to come. Meanwhile, just as the forces of gravity are researchable according to their effects, so the forces of emotional and relational energies are to be reckoned with so that facilitators can best operate in the realm of conflict resolution. This perspective, however, needs to be balanced with the fact that several ancient health traditions, including Qigong in China and Aikido in Japan, have been operating for centuries with a complex understanding of how to cultivate life-force (chi) energies revolving in and around the human body. This wisdom alone could advance the practice of mediation to new heights.

In a 2003 article, “The Energy of Conflict: An Emerging Paradigm”, co-authors Deborah Isenhour and Marilyn Shannon explored how moods throughout a mediation can have a heavy or light feel to them. They called this unseen phenomenon “the energy of conflict.”

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3 Deborah Isenhour and Marilyn Shannon, “The Energy of Conflict: An Emerging Paradigm,” (www.mediate.com/articles: October 2003). The material in this article was expanded in the book by the same
That was ten years ago, and at that time, medical research was making inroads into bioelectromagnetics. For instance, are there negative health effects for people living next to high voltage lines? Other medical studies explored how a healer’s bioenergies could actually flow outward for healing purposes, giving rise to a variety of alternative therapies that are active today. With applications in the realm of mediated dialogue, the authors suggested that both negative energies from what parties bring and positive energies from what mediators bring (and elicit from parties) can have a profound effect on processes and outcomes. One contribution from this framework was ‘The Energy Audit,’ designed to map out stuck energies and imbalances within or between disputants.

I have often heard mediators talk about emotional energies in terms of being blocked or released. And any mediator or facilitator who has done multiple cases has experienced on occasion that magic pivot-point during a meeting when the mood shifts from tension and mistrust to relief and greater trust. Sometimes you can even identify a statement that activated this transfer of emotional energy: it may have been a sincere apology by one party, or perhaps an empathetic acknowledgement of what the other party has experienced. As I have witnessed these shift-points over the years, I can say that I have felt, literally, the profoundness of these moments in my heart. There is a stirring, and then there is a relaxing. It is as if the human heart was a source of energy activity, the hub of where negative or positive energies were both stored and released. Little wonder, then, that moments of expressed apology or forgiveness between people, those heightened moments of energy transference, are spoken of as coming “from the heart.”

One of the interesting aspects in these deeply powerful moments of sharing and listening is the way they involve vulnerability but also courage. To verbally express apology or forgiveness involves a vulnerability on several levels. First, there is the vulnerability of looking into yourself and recognizing that within you is some degree of incompleteness. For those who have been on the giving end of hurting others, it is the incompleteness that comes with shame and self-disappointment. For those who have been on the receiving end of being hurt, there is the incompleteness of being wounded and needing validation. A second level of vulnerability comes from not knowing how another person will respond. Will they accept my words? Due to this vulnerability, it takes great courage to verbally say something that can truly help transform the negative energy of the heart into a positive energy that is good for both giver and receiver. An apt analogy involving energy conversion is composting in the garden. Decaying food scraps and organic matter eventually change, through heat, into usable and pleasant-smelling soil. I call this process “death unto life.”

When we speak of people having a “heart-to-heart” conversation, in effect we are saying that their conversation is going to have enough depth for blocked energies (weighing down the heart) to be released (resulting in light-heartedness). In more common terms it means that people will be as honest as they can to lay things out on the table and find a way to move on. This process, whether aided by a mediator or not, invariable involves some degree of “death

unto life.” A good dialogue will have a series of miniature deaths so that new life can rise up. As speaking from the heart demands a level of humility, there is a very real expenditure that takes place. A part of a person’s control has been expended, given up. But this, in energy terms, is what helps to activate an energy conversion, changing the stored negative energy into a useful positive energy. As in a chemical catalyst, the old is burned and the new is born. A candle provides a good image where wax and flame and oxygen combust to create new forms of useful energy: warmth and light. We all know that the release of negative energies can be a powerful thing, resulting in either helpful or harmful outcomes (a controlled fire for cooking or a forest fire that gets out-of-hand). The job of a good facilitator is to facilitate (French ‘facile’, “to make easy”) the transformation of negative energies into positive life-giving forces. Given the volatile nature of emotional energies, it is clear that a third-party guide is essential for holding a controlled, constructive space for resolution.

Energy Shifts From the Heart

These shifts in energy that transform negative emotional energy into positive emotional energy have been illustrated well by Dr. Mark Umbreit in his recent book, *Dancing with the Energy of Conflict and Trauma*. By choosing the word ‘dancing’, Umbreit is telling us that there are no hard-and-fast formulas for how we handle the energy dynamics in a conflict. It really amounts to a deep listening with one’s heart and inner being, as well as listening to the deeper levels of others. An apt image is the Tai Chi master in martial arts who loosely and playfully moves with the movements of an opponent rather than against those movements. This seems to fit well with the idea of energy transference. Mediators and facilitators learn to take the loaded statements that get released in conversation and through reframing and redirection, assist in a conversion of those energies into something useful for ongoing resolution.

Umbreit’s book offers twenty stories of how negative energy shifted into positive outcomes that rebuilt broken relationships. In one case involving family members, he writes, “Highly toxic and hurtful energy had been transformed into authentic communication….The energy of the entire event had shifted in a very palpable way.” Again, the impulse to be present to a hurtful situation was not a result of a left-brain “how-can-I-fix-this” mentality. Umbreit emphasizes how the intuitive, non-logical side of our brains provides the best resource we have for fostering energy shifts in hard relational situations. Altogether, this is an excellent book for showing the relationship between negative storehouses of energy that create conflict and positive sources of energy that resolve and even transform conflict. The book concludes with practical wisdom for how anyone can deepen the arts of meditation and mindfulness to bring healing for themselves and others.

Umbreit’s emphasis on “listening to the heart” corresponds well with recent neurocardiological research that reveals how the human heart and brain send quick messages

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4 Mark Umbreit, *Dancing With the Energy of Conflict and Trauma* (CreateSpace IPP: 2013).
back and forth to each other. Functioning not as a mere pump, the heart is found to house brain-like features that regulate emotions, and thus is constantly colluding with brain activity. The same authors of “The Energy of Conflict” wrote a sequel article six months later to advance their explorations of emotional energies. They cited an Institute of HeartMath study suggesting that when people atune better to their hearts, the “synchronization between our hearts and brains increases,” and this maximizes both intuitive and intellectual capacities. Conversely, stress studies are showing that decision and problem-solving functions are hampered when heart patterns are not steady and relaxed. Mediators have always understood that if emotional energy between parties is not relaxed, it is nearly impossible to lead people into a constructive zone of creating mutual agreements. Even when we ourselves are involved in a difficult family or workplace conflict, our capacities will rise or fall depending on our ability to manage our emotions.

But there is more. As the heart generates the largest electromagnetic field compared to any other organ in the body, so-called ‘heart energy’ not only affects the brain, but can affect another person’s emotional energy up to several feet away. In the same way the heart can activate a shift from the lower brain (the fight or flight response zone) to the higher brain (the cognitive zone where moral virtues and empathetic connections are mobilized), it appears that one person’s heart energy can also spread beyond the body to activate positive or negative shifts within another person. Isenhour and Shannon apply this within the setting of relational conflicts.

When we are able to listen to and respond from our heart energy, we can begin to communicate in ways necessary for the transformation of relationships. Igniting the heart energy allows new understanding to become available. Opening up to our heart energy helps to soften and balance our emotional states bringing clarity and releasing discord. There must be a partnership between the heart and the head for harmony to exist. The energy that is being used to hold onto a conflict can now be free to fuel healing.

I could expand on how all this works itself out in dialogue processes, but for now, I invite you to review the language of the quote itself. “Igniting the heart energy...” and “...free to fuel healing” are two notable phrases. Heat energy terminology almost always conveys the conversion of one energy form to another. And it is not only a matter of a new outcome -- the end-product of a resolution process. The energy transformation creates a new condition during the dialogue encounter that significantly allows for a better outcome. The “softening,” the “balancing,” the bringing of clarity and harmony which includes cognitive understanding, all of these elements happen during the shift-stage itself to ensure maximal transformation. This softening image is well illustrated by the image of a solid object slowly dissolving in a liquid state. In fact, our very words ‘solution’ and ‘resolution’ are tied up with this process, stemming from a Latin word that means “loosening, unfastening, dispersing.” Facilitators, at

6 http://www.heartmath.org/research/science-of-the-heart/head-heart-interactions.html
best, are aiding this profound and often subtle transition from hardened states to softened states to ensure positive outcomes. How well this all blends with the centuries-old language of the hardened heart (resistant to change) and the softened heart (open to change)!

John Paul Lederach, at the outset of his *Little Book on Conflict Transformation*, describes the “creative tension” between the terms ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘conflict transformation’. After a trip to Central America in the 1980’s, he recognized that ‘conflict resolution’ did not go deep enough to address underlying social structures and relationship patterns. Employing the language of energy, he wrote, “Conflict transformation begins with a central goal: to build constructive change out of the energy created by conflict….The key here is to move conflict away from destructive processes and toward constructive ones.” The transformative shift I have referenced above is very evident in this framing. But what Lederach helpfully adds to our discussion is the depth of underlying conflict-sources that need to be addressed.

By way of summary, what follows is an outline that shows the cyclical flow of energy within a conflict resolution context. Visualize these three areas in a circle where the end of the third area can feed into the first area.

1. Stored Energy (Potential)
   a. Can be blocked (uncommunicated)
   b. Can be released (communicated)

2. Released Energy (Kinetic)
   a. Can be uncontrolled (destructive)
   b. Can be controlled (transformative)

3. Transformed Energy (Useful)
   a. Can be used (for healing, empowerment)
   b. Can be stored up (for future uses)

The resolution of a difficult hate-crime that I facilitated can be used to review this Energy Flow diagram. A neo-Nazi youth was involved in an act of vandalism against a synagogue. Years later, opportunity arose for both offender and victim parties, voluntarily, to journey through a series of resolution meetings over 20 months. Significantly, the youth was proactively moving out of his hate-based subculture. The stored energy from both parties was very deep, given the emotional intensity of hate-group dynamics and the residual emotional

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weight of Jewish persecution history, notably the Holocaust. Carefully-timed processes of communication had to be orchestrated in order for appropriate amounts of this stored energy to be released, first in preparation meetings and then in joint dialogue meetings. And not all of the stored energy was by any means negative or blocked. Both parties deeply wanted goodness to come out of a restorative process.

Throughout the many months of meetings, I was mindful of how my own stored and released energies were vital to instill extra doses of calmness and trust into the equation of bridge-building. There was a rubbing-off effect that involved an exchange of distrustful energies for trustful energies. The activation-energy of an apology and the loosening of forgiveness language were part of the first joint dialogue, and these helped to convert some of the earlier blocked energies into useful energies for future reconciliation work. At times I noted how the release of lesser-controlled energies created very challenging disturbances, a type of temporary chaos. For example, a federal investigator met with the whole group once and this unleashed an explosive set of emotional energies that threatened to terminate the process, even after months of successful reconciliation work. Hard as it was, I took this unharvested energy as a potential source that could be converted into a new platform for continuing the process. A re-strengthening of the group happened, allowing a newly transformed energy to be used by all involved. In successive stages, the older forms of energy were being changed into new, life-giving forms and both parties eventually expressed relief about the relative closure and healing that came about.

I have intentionally packed this brief narrative with energy language so that you can see the connections between a resolution process and any other energy conversion process. At the same time, because I had first-hand engagement with these ‘energy flows,’ I can say that they were very real even though I could not demonstrate or replicate them in a laboratory. Someday there may be Star Trek-type monitors that can track the presence, type and intensity of emotional energies that operate during conflict resolution situations. Please know, however, that when I say these energies are “more than metaphor,” I do not mean that they cease being metaphoric. Language and narrative are the best vehicles we have to describe our human experiences, especially when things invisible to our eyes are at play. We would do ourselves a great disfavor to drop the richness of language. And maybe we cannot drop the language of energy because it is so inextricably tied to the human heart in all respects (physiologically, psychologically, spiritually). If this is the case, as I have been advocating throughout this essay, then the language of heart energy can only become more common.

My sense is that energy-analogies in this field, along with heart language, fit so well precisely because such unseen forces are operative beyond our comprehension. Fortunately, there is no conflict between the scientific exploration of these dynamics with our rational thinking and the experiential exploration of unseen energies with our intuitive senses. Even when the common person says, “I have low energy today,” or “I’m feeling heavy-hearted,” we can know they are hinting at a greater dynamic than they could ever imagine. Our goal as mediators and peacemakers is to tap into this greater dynamic, literally with both head and heart, in order to strengthen our language and thus strengthen our practice.