Transforming Conflict from the Inside Out:

Stories and Reflections from Transformative Practitioners

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The Transformative View of Conflict: Developing a Non-Judgmental Posture

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The ways we communicate with others, the way we deal with conflict are closely linked to who we are, to our *"way of being"* as a person, as a colleague, as a parent, as a spouse, as a neighbor. Paradoxically, it seems easier to get along with people we know less and more difficult to deal with persons we are emotionally involved with. It is difficult to remain "detached" and calm when we are personally involved in a situation. While facing the opposition, disagreement, aggressiveness, lack of respect of another person, various thoughts and emotions come into play and affect our ability to deal with the situation in a constructive way. Think only of the words which come to your mind when someone keeps interrupting you in a meeting, when your boss criticizes you in front of colleagues or when your teenager promises to do something but fails to do it. Frustration, anger, disappointment entail reactions we are not always proud of.

I deeply enjoy my position as a neutral mediator. It is so much easier to see and understand what's happening when I am not directly involved in a situation. The sense of calmness and wisdom that I aspire to and sometimes reach in my practice regrettably tends to disappear when, for example, my teenagers do not even bother to respond when I talk to them: after many trials, I sometimes see myself raging and screaming for them to react.

Most parents experience this phase where, in the process of constructing their identity, our beloved teenagers see every subject as an opportunity to debate, putting *each and every sentence that we pronounce* into question. Of course, our reactions have the potential to make it worse, trying

to defend our view too strongly or giving an emotive reply that makes us lose all credibility in front of them.

It is sometimes difficult to accept seeing ourselves become mad and out of control, replying sharply then regretting our words, or on the contrary, become vulnerable, numb and without words. We sometimes experience contradictory feelings, we don't recognize ourselves, and our lack of understanding (of the other, of the situation, of what's happening within us) puts us in a state of confusion. Nevertheless, this state of mind (and being) is the raw material we have to deal with in the face of a conflict.

There is a very fine line between respecting the other and respecting ourselves. We constantly have to deal with, on the one hand, this view that we should be kind and open to others and on the other, the saying that we first have to think of ourselves in order to be able to deal with, and give to, others. We navigate between these two poles in a perpetual movement which inhabits us as surely as waves inhabit the sea.

It would be great if we could find the perfect balance, reaching a space and state in which we would react appropriately at all times, treating ourselves *and* others with perfect equanimity. But this is just not possible. We can *try*, we can *lean towards*, we can *evolve* and minimize the number of times and situations where we "lose ourselves", having difficulty coping with others, but we cannot reach this ideal space because our human condition just doesn't allow for it. Perfection doesn't exist, neither in the world nor within and between human beings. From there, it becomes easier to state and recognize that: an imperfect person, interacting with another imperfect person, can only produce an imperfect interaction. So…, our best alternative is to accept that state of facts and try to find ways to deal with the situations that we encounter the best way that we can.

A certain "mourning" might be necessary in order to do that: we first have to renounce to the idea that "*it should have been otherwise*"; that we (or the other) shouldn't have reacted the way we/he/she did, that we shouldn't be thinking what we've been thinking and acting the way we were acting. The situation is what it is. It occurred for reasons that we sometimes understand and sometimes not. In any event, this situation is what we have to deal with.

Accepting human complexity

One of the major strengths of the transformative approach lies in the recognition and acceptance of human complexity as a starting point to any attempt to deal with a conflictual situation.

Most specialists in psychology and communication agree that the very first step towards better interactions is to observe and become conscious of what's happening 1) in the interaction with the other *and* 2) within ourselves.

The next question is: how do we deal with what we then see? Learning to step back, to mentally distance ourselves in order to be able to look at our reactions with a different perspective *while caught in the middle of* a critical situation, is not an easy task.

Being able to accept the discomfort of ambiguity, chaos, instability is an important key.

The choice

If I enter into a dark room at night, I generally see nothing at first. Even more so if I fear darkness. I may try to *escape* the situation by shutting my eyes or by turning around and going away. I may *refuse* and fight the situation, intensively trying to find the light switch, hitting my toes and hurting myself on the way. I may also try to stay calm, with my eyes wide open and allow myself to observe and be impregnated by the environment. By doing so, I may gradually detect zones of subtle luminosity, shadows and shapes, learn how to move *in* the room and eventually find the light, if this is my will.

Similarly, the way I decide to position myself in the midst of a situation will make the difference. I do not have control over what others think and decide to do, but I do have a few choices as regards my own mind and attitude.

With the help of technology, recent experiments in neuro-sciences have shown that our brain does not actually make a difference between imagination and concrete reality. One group of persons were asked to play the piano while people in another group were asked to *imagine* that they were playing the piano. A scan of the participants' brains (showing their level of pleasure and relaxation) revealed that the activity of the brains was exactly the same in the two groups. This tends to confirm the ability that we have to

influence our mind, our state of being, solely by our thoughts. I can feel sad and cry if I connect myself with the idea of illness, poverty or war, even more so if any of these affect a person I know. I can "re-live" *in my mind* an argument or fight that I had with someone, which will make me feel outraged and physically tensed in my body. This potential we have to orient our thoughts and influence our minds is a gift of a tremendous value. It provides us a tool to access a form of power within ourselves in various situations.

This fills me with optimism and hope. It confirms to me that it makes sense to try learning how to develop a state of mind which will concur with the idea of better understanding, harmony and peace (both within oneself and with others). Every time I am facing the opposition of another person, every time I am experiencing discomfort in a situation or feel submerged by my emotions, I have the opportunity to make a decision: I can choose to nourish the negative thoughts and emotions or I can choose to connect with the experience I am going through and try to find a posture that will help me reach more awareness.

This is not about "knowing better". It is about working my way towards more understanding and compassion. It is about realizing and recognizing that the "I know better" posture of the other person may have as valuable a meaning for that person as *my* "I know better" position has for me.

Most of us were raised learning that if something is not good, it has to be bad. Translated into a conflict, this premise means: my position is better than that of *the other*, I acted "in the right way" while "the other" didn't, the other person is responsible and is the one who should apologize… What if there were a middle ground to this? What if ambivalence, ambiguity, uncertainty were seen as signs of strength (offering time and opportunities for growth) rather than signs of weakness?

When I contact my disarray, my suffering and confusion, I actually encounter the disarray, suffering and confusion of all human beings; this experience being somehow universal (common to all of us).

By staying as open and as close as possible to my own experience in conflict (what I deeply think, feel and want), I paradoxically work my way towards a greater opening to the other. I find ground and develop an

anchorage to which I can return every time I so choose. Building more confidence in myself, I may feel more secure in the presence of "the other", less urgent to make my point or impose my views, and more capable to consider his or her point of view.

Sitting in the middle of chaos

In Mandarin (the Chinese language), the word "crisis" is written with two characters which respectively mean: *danger* and *opportunity*.

In science, researchers developed the theory of chaos, finding "order in apparent disorder". Chaos is an opportunity to renew, develop and reshape things in a different (and potentially improved) way.

By accepting to sit in the middle of chaos, I accept to look at all the components of the situation I am going through. It is about being humble and curious, trusting the unknown, and learning more. By letting the situation "talk to me", I will be confronted with my own choices as to the mental position and attitude I decide to favor.

Life is in perpetual movement. So are the situations and relationships we experience. At the moment I interact with someone else, there is necessarily a lien, a connection; it necessarily implies that we are linked to one another. The interaction becomes sort of an organic system, with a life of its own (not being me or the other person, but the combination and result of our respective reactions and moves within it). If there is a shift on the part of one person, the other part(s) of this dynamic system (the other person(s)) will necessarily be affected and react in one way or the other. If, for example, I decide to shift my attitude from wanting to convince to wanting to understand, the other person will sense my opening and react differently than if I decide to dismantle his or her point of view, with the goal to have him or her change his/her mind. We may well discover that many different options can emerge from the process.

Practicing transformative mediation in the workplace allowed me to see how powerful it can be to provide space for chaos and ambiguity, for the expression of anger, sadness, disappointment, misunderstanding, frustration. I cannot *impose* feelings or thoughts on anyone, nor can I judge or criticize the

fact that a person felt or thought anything. By putting forward a non-directive posture, the transformative model recognizes the need for time, reflection, consideration, respect and understanding; it recognizes the value and importance of authenticity.

In Conclusion

One of the fundamental principles of the transformative model is that human beings bear within themselves the will and capacity to take charge and to connect with others. Just as this is a challenge for most mediators who have learned the "traditional" settlement-based or facilitative models of mediation, adopting a non-judgmental posture is certainly a challenge for most of us, as individuals, in our daily lives, in our encounters and relationships with others. It is the evolution of a lifetime to develop our capacity to communicate and interact in a way that will generate peace rather than war, kindness, ease and joy rather than mistrust, discomfort and hurt.

By recognizing the necessity and value of looking at, and dealing with, ambiguity and uncertainty, the transformative view of conflict recognizes the subjective legitimacy of each individual's feelings, reactions and position. This is certainly a major key for coherent personal positioning and meaningful decision making.