The Roots of Peace in Conflict

Elise Boulding

Kenneth Boulding and I traveled together a lot over the fifty-two years of our married life. We loved to discover new places, to experience new landscapes. But every time we arrived somewhere new, we would experience a sharp conflict. Kenneth would happily search his vast memory storehouse and retrieve the mental image of some other place that had similarities to this one. All his delight in the new had to do with finding patterns in the unfamiliar that matched patterns in the familiar. This would infuriate me. I wanted to savor the uniqueness of the new—find features that I had never experienced before. "Kenneth," I would cry, "you are missing all the specialness of this place!"

As you can imagine, we learned over the years to laugh over this recurring experience of our differentness, and our travel life was certainly the richer for having to thrash out the differences in our perceptions every time we went anywhere together. Our awareness of constantly clashing perceptions was part of the fun of our marriage. One example: Kenneth loved to work with plasticene. He would make castles and cathedrals with turrets and towers. Once when we were out at our cabin by the waterfall, he made a square tower and a round tower and placed them on a rock in front of the cabin. He asked me which I liked better, the round or the square. I chose the round, he of course chose the square. Then we tried it out on visiting friends. In each couple, one partner chose the round, the other the square tower. It became a game for us. Every visiting couple was "tested." Did they prefer the round or the square tower? Never did we find a couple who shared the same preference.

I tell these stories to make the point that conflict, the fact of difference in perceptions, wants, needs, interests, is an omnipresent fact of human life because we are all different from one another. No two of us experience the world in the same way. We see, hear, smell, taste, and feel differently. Furthermore, experiencing our differentness is an important part of our sense of identity. We need our autonomy, our own space. This means we are forever having to communicate with one another across the chasm of difference. Yet at the same time we need one another; we empathize, we identify with others, we need to feel closeness and belonging, to be wanted,

to know that others care about us. It is that mysterious duality that keeps us from destroying one another because of our differences, that keeps us from smothering one another in our bonding.

Yet conflict is not just about different perceptions and wants. Another important and pervasive source of conflict is the fact of finiteness of resources and opportunities, and of institutionally structured difference in access to resources and opportunities. Rage over differential access easily upsets the subtle balance between individuation and bonding in human relations, whether in relations between men and women or in race or ethnic relations.

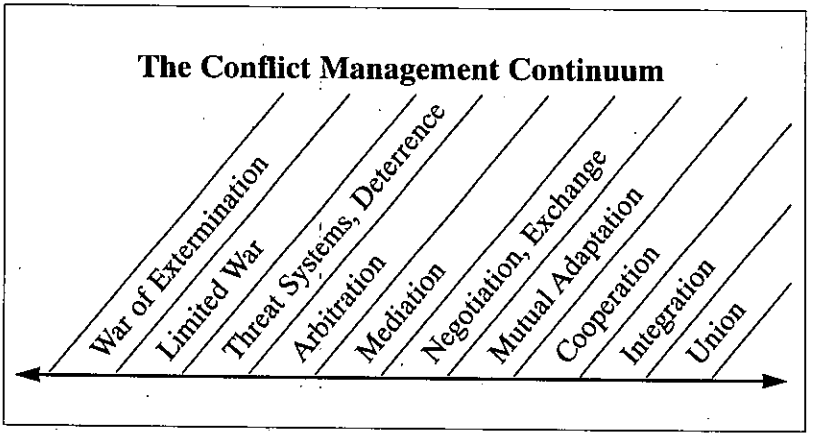
The differences, both interpersonal and structural, are the source of all our learning. The roots of peace lie in each conflict, because the conflict process itself can lay bare all the ingredients of the underlying problems that cause pain to the disputants. The conflict can teach us what we need to know in order to deal justly with those problems. However, people do not always enter conflicts in a learning mode. They may instead destroy each other by entering into a win-lose relationship. Behavioral and structural violence result. Today we are overwhelmingly aware of the amount of violence that goes on at every level of social interaction from family to planet, to say nothing of how internally conflicted most of us are. The observation is frequently heard that the human race may be destroying itself and its planetary home. The temptation to despair is real. When George Fox was tempted to despair, he heard a voice saying, "There is One, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition." What does that mean for us? That Jesus knew conflict intimately, therefore his spirit can enter into our condition of being in conflict, and bring illumination to it.

I take this spiritual illumination of conflict situations to be that which enables us to learn from it and act accordingly. The injunction to live in that life and power that takes away the occasion of war is sometimes treated as an injunction to avoid conflict, but this we cannot, must not do. To avoid conflict is to avoid learning. The papering over of differences, their premature resolution, leaves problems to fester unsolved. What we can do is live in a spirit that

can enter conflict unafraid, a spirit of listening and learning, a spirit open to the envisioning of a future with new solutions, a spirit anchored in prayer and contemplation yet finely honed to action in the world.

I am afraid that "living in the spirit" has become a Quaker cliché. What kind of spiritual strength does it take to work in the midst of conscious intended cruelty, ugly greed? This is what the peacemaker must often face, whether in an episode of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, a gang fight in Denver or a boardroom fight in Philadelphia. Unless the reservoirs of the spirit are constantly replenished with love and compassion, our skills in creating the structures of peace can produce only so-so outcomes. And if the spiritual dimension of conflict resolution involves in some deep sense the empowerment of the other—our adversary—where does the strength to do that come from? How much the world needs love, and how lightly we assume that it will be on tap for us as needed. Let us look to our reservoirs!

Nevertheless, skill is all-essential. We have said that conflict is ubiquitous. Since it cannot be abolished, it must be managed. It can be helpful to think in terms of a conflict management continuum. One end represents the destruction of the other. The continuum shades from destruction to threat through processes of arbitration, mediation and negotiation to integrative processes that bond us to each other in joyful cooperative activity.



When we are working at the integrative end of the conflict management continuum we are engaged in peace building. This is a highly dynamic process involving constant listening, creative adaptation and social inventiveness in using the materials of the conflict for its resolution. It sounds very difficult and yet in modest small-scale ways we all do it every day of our lives. From the time we wake up in the morning to the time we go to bed, we are dealing with differences—some deeply felt, some that we take as a matter of course—in our interactions with our families, our neighbors, colleagues at work and school, in community spaces. We actually negotiate our way through life: who will do what chores at home; whose turn it is to do thankless tasks at the office; how to handle a controversial resolution brought before the city council. We all have conflict management skills, although some of us are better at it than others.

As Friends, we might think of ourselves as being in a lifelong training process for creative conflict management. Let us reflect for a few minutes on our own personal experiences with conflict at various stages in our lives. By becoming more reflective about our own learning, we can discern more deeply what is empowering and what is disempowering to participants in conflict situations.

How did we handle conflict when we were children? Paul Wehr in *Conflict Resolution* gives an assignment to students to write an essay on the role of conflict in their personal lives. It has been my experience that this assignment has had a profound effect on each student who undertakes it. How do we incorporate our childhood learnings into our adult life? Are we even aware of them? Holly Giffen, a Friend in the Boulder Meeting, did a study of how children between the ages of 3 and 7 communicated in the course of playing together.[1] What she was in fact observing was some very skillful negotiation as children arrived at decisions about what games to play, what the rules should be, who got to take which roles. The inventiveness of the children in creating rules of play that gave everyone a chance to do something important to the play process was amazing. The outcomes went far beyond adult expectations. The adult failure to notice and reinforce that creativity

certainly contributes to the forgetting by children of that wisdom and knowledge they once had, as they grow older.

Now let us take a few moments to reflect on our childhood memories of conflict. Start by recalling a conflict you managed really well.... Recall a conflict that left a hurt.... These long-ago conflicts still have something to teach us in the present, can help us in our continued growth.

Now let us move ahead to the memories of our teen years. This stage of life is a conflict-filled time. Conflicts with peers, intergenerational family conflicts, conflicts with society's expectations—the sheer intensity of these conflicts, greatly magnified in the life of inner-city gangs and in the lives of teen fighters in the wars of the Third World, offer stunning opportunities for social learning that can be applied throughout the rest of life—or produce arrested development in peace building skills. What memories can we call up from those years? Start with conflicts you managed really well.... Then, a conflict that is still unfinished business in your life....

We can't cover every significant stage here. Choose now whether you wish to remember young adulthood or middle-years conflicts. How have we handled, or how will we handle, the formation of new households, new networks of friends and colleagues at work and in local community affairs? How good are we at creative conflict management when facing those who hold drastically opposed views on how and whether to try to control situations, behaviors, resources in our neighborhoods and in the world? Again, start with a conflict you managed really well.... Then a conflict that is still unfinished business in your life....

Now we get to the senior years. What a humbling experience to be in one's seventies and realize that instead of a mellow sharing of relevant wisdom and insight from a lifetime of experience when conflict situations arise, one may instead be seized with a vast impatience! What happened to spiritual discipline? Alas, there is still much learning to do. My personal device for quelling un-Quakerly rage at destructive handling of confrontations is to repeat

over and over to myself "Impatience is a flower," while holding a picture in my mind of that lovely simple blossom *impatiens*. Slow down, harness the energy to a flower, and listen. In this reflection on older years I urge those who are still in the earlier part of your lifespan to think ahead in your imaginations. Try playing out in your mind what kind of creative peace building roles may lie ahead for you....

The reflections we have just been sharing are a way of reminding ourselves that peace building is a lifelong task and that each part of our lifespan offers special opportunities for new learnings. We could do much more than we do in our local Meetings to enhance that learning, not only through special planning on the part of Ministry and Counsel, Religious Education and Peace and Service Committees, but also through a more reflective use of the opportunities for spiritual discipline that Meeting for Worship for Business offers monthly, as familiar conflicts about the use of space and resources rage.

We should pay particular attention to examples of creative learning from conflict wherever we find them, whether in local or Yearly Meetings, in Friends General Conference or Friends United Meeting, or in the conflict-rich experience of the American Friends Service Committee. There is one model I would like particularly to celebrate tonight, that first arose, I believe, in New York Yearly Meeting. We owe a great deal to the Friends of that Yearly Meeting, including particularly Lee Stern, who noticed the problem-solving creativity in children's own culture out of their own experiences with children, and who built upon it to initiate the Children's Creative Response to Conflict Program that is now being used to enhance children's conflict resolution and peacemaking skills in a growing number of schools on several continents. The Fellowship of Reconciliation administers that program, but many Friends continue to be involved.

Why have I begun with an emphasis on personal skills and discipline in turning conflict into creative learning and problem-solving activity? Our Quaker witness is usually focused outward, on peaceful resolution of social conflicts from local to international.

The reason for the emphasis on how well we do in our various interpersonal spheres is that as a society we cannot do any better in international diplomacy than we do in families and neighborhoods. If we are to recover a viable peace culture for our own country, this has to happen at the grassroots. At present, society's conflict management practices are heavily tipped toward the violence and destruction end of the conflict management continuum I mentioned earlier. The habits of negotiation and accommodation, and the integrative behavior at the peace building end of the continuum, have to become personal habits in family and community. Jo Clare Hartsig and Walter Wink point out that "Evolution prepared us to fight or to flee; it did not prepare us for creative nonviolence. Consequently we have to continually rehearse nonviolent alternatives in order to reprogram our minds."[2] It is up to us to begin modeling the new behaviors we would like to see mirrored back to society from TV and media programming, from classrooms and boardrooms, from playing fields, from the video games that so many youth inhabit as their virtual reality. Without the behavioral wisdom of a peace culture, each society and its leadership becomes trapped in repeating cycles of violence.

We should remember that every society has two cultures—a war culture and a peace culture. The war culture is the culture of power and dominance, aggression and violence, with the macho warrior hero as the behavioral model. This culture of violence shapes ruthless behavior in every kind of setting. In the family it is legitimized as patriarchal control; in the classroom as stern discipline; in churches it is legitimized as holy war, on the playing field as fighting to win. Yet even warrior societies have a peace culture—the Elysian Fields for the Greeks, the Plains of Ida for the Viking, where adversaries laid weapons aside, feasted and sang together, engaged in philosophical musings and gentle discourse.

The peace culture is the culture of nurturance and sharing and caring. The nurturing mother stands over against the forbidding father, the listening teacher over against the disciplinarian; gentle Jesus and the compassionate Buddha over against a wrathful Jehovah; Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa over

against the soldier hero. It is in part the women's culture of every age, the conserving of the skills of tilling the soil, of feeding, tending and healing children and men, creating places of refreshment and peace in the invisible underside of every society.

The peace culture might seem like a recessive characteristic of the social order, but our century has seen the women's culture come out of the underside and go public, reshaping institutions and teaching men to share the work of nurturance. Our century has also produced a new spirituality pervading deeply humanistic artistic expressions; it has produced a new vision of the possibilities inherent in human development beginning with a new understanding of child development, organizational development and group dynamics. Out of these currents, new models have emerged for nurturant human relations, and a new interdisciplinary field of study, peace studies. The gay and lesbian movements have produced enriched models of manhood and womanhood.[3]

It is our task as Friends to be on the alert for every sign of this less visible peace culture, and to support these manifestations in every way we can. Even more important is to nurture and strengthen our own Quaker peace culture. We worry about leadership for peace work in the Society of Friends. I wonder about this. It seems to me that too much emphasis on leadership works against the strengths of a peace culture, strengths which lie in the peace building capacities of children, women and men, as much as in eloquent pleading for just social and economic structures. It diminishes the strengths of the Society of Friends, for each individual Friend of any age is a potential carrier of the peace witness, every hour of every day, in every act. That is what it means to be called to live in the life and power that takes away the occasion of war. We can only make effective public witness as our families and Meetings become living examples of peace culture in its special Quaker forms. It is out of the practice of watchfulness, mindfulness, of silent listening and reaching a sense of the meeting in any community undertaking—something far deeper than ordinary consensus—that we can speak to the condition of the larger society of which we are a part.

We will examine conflict and violence in two different kinds of social spaces: (1) the daily action space of individuals, of which I have already spoken, and (2) the global space of our historical present, spanning the century we are leaving and the one we are entering.

Let us remind ourselves briefly of some of the daily action spaces in our own communities: where children bring guns to school; teenagers play Mortal Combat on home computers, where the fun is impaling your adversary on sharp spikes; where right-to-lifers attack doctors and patients at family planning clinics, and towns become embroiled in furious Not In My Backyard battles when the needs of minorities threaten private suburban sanctuaries. What are the roots of peace in these situations of threat and violence? Those roots can only be discovered by looking *through* the violence and threatening behavior to the actual life situation of the participants, a situation of pain, aloneness and rejection. Just today my local paper reports a meeting of Denver high school students with Colorado Governor Romer to talk about new gun laws for juveniles: "You all want us to be angels. You want us not to have guns, not to be in gangs. But society ain't offered nothing for us"—bitter words from sixteen-year-old Brandy Smith.[4] These young people have no one to love and praise them, ever. Walls everywhere, and no doorways. We don't have to make a journey to find these teenagers. They are *here* with us. Let us all reflect for a moment on our own daily movements on a typical day. When and how do we touch the tumultuous conflicts that frame the lives of those who suffer continual violence? I am not so much suggesting that we should be sternly uprooting ourselves to be where the heat of a conflict is, as that we should be alert to the possibilities in our existing activities for making linkages that indeed address conflicts that we may not directly experience ourselves. It was to make that linkage in my own life that I chose to work with our local Parenting Center after retirement, to help recreate the conditions for parents of small children that will take away the occasion of child abuse.

Our teachers are conflict, pain, and paradox. By facing the contradictions between our values and aspirations for the world we

live in and the anguish of reality, and listening with a centered spirit to those contradictions, letting them play out inside us, we will learn what to do.

The present moment, however, is not enough to teach us. We need to face those contradictions in that expanded moment that I have called the 200-year present. We stand tonight at midpoint between November 1, 1893, the day when today's centenarians were born, when the first World Parliament of Religions was held, and November 1, 2093, when the babies born today will reach their 100th birthday, and the Third World Parliament of Religions, God willing, will be held. What paradoxes we have faced in the first half of that present! On the one hand, a century of peace building beginning with the first Hague Peace Conference that committed states to the peaceful settlement of disputes by diplomacy instead of war, on to the establishment of the World Court, the League of Nations and finally the United Nations, each providing new mechanisms and instruments for making peace. A century of enrichment of the concept of peace with the explosion of people's associations called INGOs (international nongovernmental organizations) from 200 at the beginning of the century to 18,000 today—transnational networks of human caring in every field of concern from science to human rights, peace, justice, a sustainable environment, to sports. On the other hand a century of exploitation, violence and war as the states of Europe (the Hague Peace Conference notwithstanding) redrew the map of the Third World for their own convenience. Concurrent strategic development of weaponry and military force led to the capabilities for nuclear destruction that still surround us and hold even the UN hostage.

How could we simultaneously travel such contradictory paths? The world community is undergoing a pathological adolescence with technological power far exceeding its social and spiritual maturity. Yet the seeds of peace have nevertheless and improbably taken root in the turbulence of East-West and North-South conflicts. Our task is once again to look *through* the turbulence and learn from it, this time in order to discern possible developments in the second half of our two-hundred-year present.

What seeds have taken root? The 10,000 societies, those ethnic, racial and other identity groups scattered across the planet from the earliest times of homo and mulier sapiens, more recently terrorized and battered by colonialism and the formation of "modern" states, have come to new life. They survive because they have problem-solving skills at the local level, that enable them to deal with the structural violence of exclusion from the mainstream opportunities of the state they live in. Today we witness violent distortion of ethnicity in a number of settings: Somalia and other parts of Africa, former Yugoslavia, former republics of the old Soviet Union, large areas of the Middle East and Asia, and large areas of the Americas including Indian territories of the United States and Canada. Ethnic cleansing, the terrible fruit of successive ages of imperialism, should not blind us to the local storehouses of wisdom, including traditional conflict resolution skills and knowledge of how to use environmental resources, both rural and urban, that are passed on from generation to generation within these groups. What we are witnessing today is the growing pains of a new order in which states, unable to meet the needs of their complex and highly differentiated populations, will recede in importance as new forms of governance allowing for ethnic and cultural autonomy emerge. The recent development of a number of regional and intercontinental indigenous people's associations will increasingly empower these groups to work nonviolently for more just and humane political and economic arrangements.

Crisscrossing the 10,000 societies and the 180 states are the 18,000 transnational peoples' associations mentioned earlier, each with its own knowledge stock and problem-solving skills. These networks provide the interface between the societies, states and the United Nations system. They have all the advantages of mobility and of multiple interconnected communication channels that states, encumbered with armor and secrecy, lack. At this midpoint of our 200-year present, it is the INGOs that are increasing in outreach and capabilities while traditional state machinery has ever-decreasing relevance to the problems that need to be solved. This is because

INGOs are answering the dilemmas of scale: they are both local and global, linking individuals and households across the planet.

Let us stop for a moment to reflect on our personal local to global linkage systems. What organizations do we belong to locally that have transnational linkages? Our local Meetings are of course part of the INGO known as the Friends World Committee. What human rights, peace and justice, environmental, service, cultural and professional groups do we belong to? Most of these will be part of an international linkage system with overseas projects and periodic international congresses. What are the memberships of other members of our household, including children? (Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts will be found in more countries than almost any other INGO.) How about the memberships of our extended families—brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and grandchildren? To the extent that we are in active contact with our kin, we have access to each transnational network that any of them belong to and we can make use of these to enter local communities and households in other countries. Count your networks. They are paths into the future. Let us take a moment to travel one of those paths in imagination, making real the household to household quality of what might otherwise seem an abstract set of connections. Choose your organization and imagine yourself on another continent....

One set of networks that has particular relevance for a more peaceful future is focused on nonviolence. Such networks—one of the best known is the International Peace Brigade—not only provide training in conflict resolution, mediation, negotiation and peace building, but create early warning systems and are producing a growing body of practitioners. Gandhi's nonviolent army, the Shanti Sena, was an early model. These practitioners (including I am sure some of you in this room), working as individuals and in teams, are learning to work in the midst of conflict situations to reduce violence, protect lives and enable adversaries to arrive at cooperative rather than imposed solutions. New sets of teams are arising every day, and a new initiative of Friends Peace Teams is actively being planned this very week in Philadelphia. In the next

half of our 200-year present we will see more and more of the coalition-building among INGOs that is already happening right now, coalitions that will become an important presence at the UN and enable large-scale deployment of peace divisions to trouble-spots in lieu of the armed forces that are so helpless to enforce peace today.

Seeing a peaceful future through the current veil of violence is not easy. It helps to know there are roots of peace firmly in place. It helps to know that the conflicts themselves can be our teachers. This gives us the courage to move forward with hope rather than despair. But it is not enough to have confidence in the roots. We must also have confidence in the power of the inner light, the inward teacher, to help us generate images of the future, images of what the roots can grow into. We need images of the peoples of the planet living gently but adventurously on the earth, walking the ways of peace in a future still filled with challenges. It is as essential to spend time dreaming the possible shapes of that future as it is to learn the skills of peace building to maintain it. For our final reflection tonight, then, let us step partway into the next half of our 200-year present. I suggest some time in the 2020s. This is a time when what we have hoped for is beginning to come about. The peace culture of the 2020s is flourishing, and the world's armies are completing their demobilization. Go out your doors and into the 2020s. Let your hopes and your fantasy be your guide. What do you see?

* * *

You can continue this imaging in quiet moments from now on. This kind of imaging is really a prayerful meditation on what is in store for God's children once we are living in the life and power that takes away the occasion of war, laying aside every weight, running with perseverance the race, for the joy that is set before us.[5]

ENDNOTES

[1] Giffen, Holly. "Coordination of Meaning in Shared Make-Believe" in *Symbolic Play: The Development of Social Understanding*, ed. Inge Bretherton. Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1982.

[2] Hartsig, Clare, and Wink, Walter. "Nonviolence in the Arena," *Fellowship* 59: 9-10 (September-October), 1993.

[3] Note particularly the work of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns.

[4] "Governor Romer Faces Teens Angry with Gun Laws." *Boulder Daily Camera.* October 6, 1993, p. 7A.

[5] Hebrews 12:2 reads: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

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Elise Boulding gave this address on November 1, 1993, at the Quaker study and retreat center of Pendle Hill in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, USA, as part of their "The Peace Testimony in Changing Times" lecture series.

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THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA

Printed on recycled paper

4-95/3000/GS