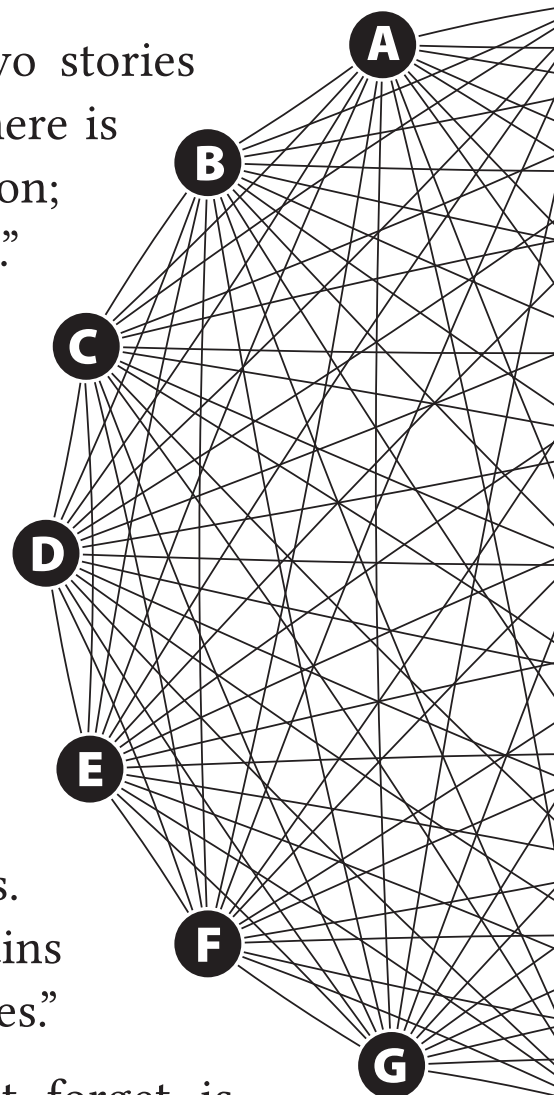# The third side and the third story

Whenever we perceive that we are locked in a conflict between one person's story and another person's story, the conflict we are perceiving is like a mirage on the surface of the ocean. The mirage is not the whole ocean.

In reality there are always more than two stories and more than two sides to any conflict. "There is not just one side or two sides to any interaction; there is a third side, the side of the whole." How can we escape the mirage of two conflicting stories and perceive how the whole vast ocean of reality, throughout space and time, has produced the present situation?

THE THIRD SIDE

Our perception of a conflict between two stories or two sides is only a mirage, a fantasy, but the mirage has real consequences. The mirage of two conflicting stories "ruins relationships, wastes money, and destroys lives."

What both sides in a two-sided conflict forget is that there is a vast world beyond their two sides, including "relatives, neighbors, allies, neutrals, friends, or onlookers." This surrounding community can become the third side, "which serves as a 'container' for any escalating conflict. In the absence of that container, serious conflict between two parties all too easily turns

into destructive strife. Within the container, however, conflict can gradually be transformed from confrontation into cooperation."

"The third side is people (from the community) using a certain kind of power (the power of peers) from a certain perspective (of common ground) supporting a certain process (of dialogue and nonviolence) and aiming for a certain product (a 'triple win')." A triple win is "a resolution that satisfies the legitimate needs of the parties and at the same time meets the needs of the wider community."

The third side is a community of wisdom that "arises from the vital relationships linking each member and every other member of the community." This community of wisdom cannot be replaced by authorities such as the police or the civil or criminal court system. When the mirage of two sides emerges from the heat of fear and anger, one side may use these authorities to try to win a conflict or to harm the other side; this is clearly not the third side in action. The third side can only emerge from the people in conflict and those around them, like a cool breeze dissipating the heat that creates the mirage of two conflicting sides.
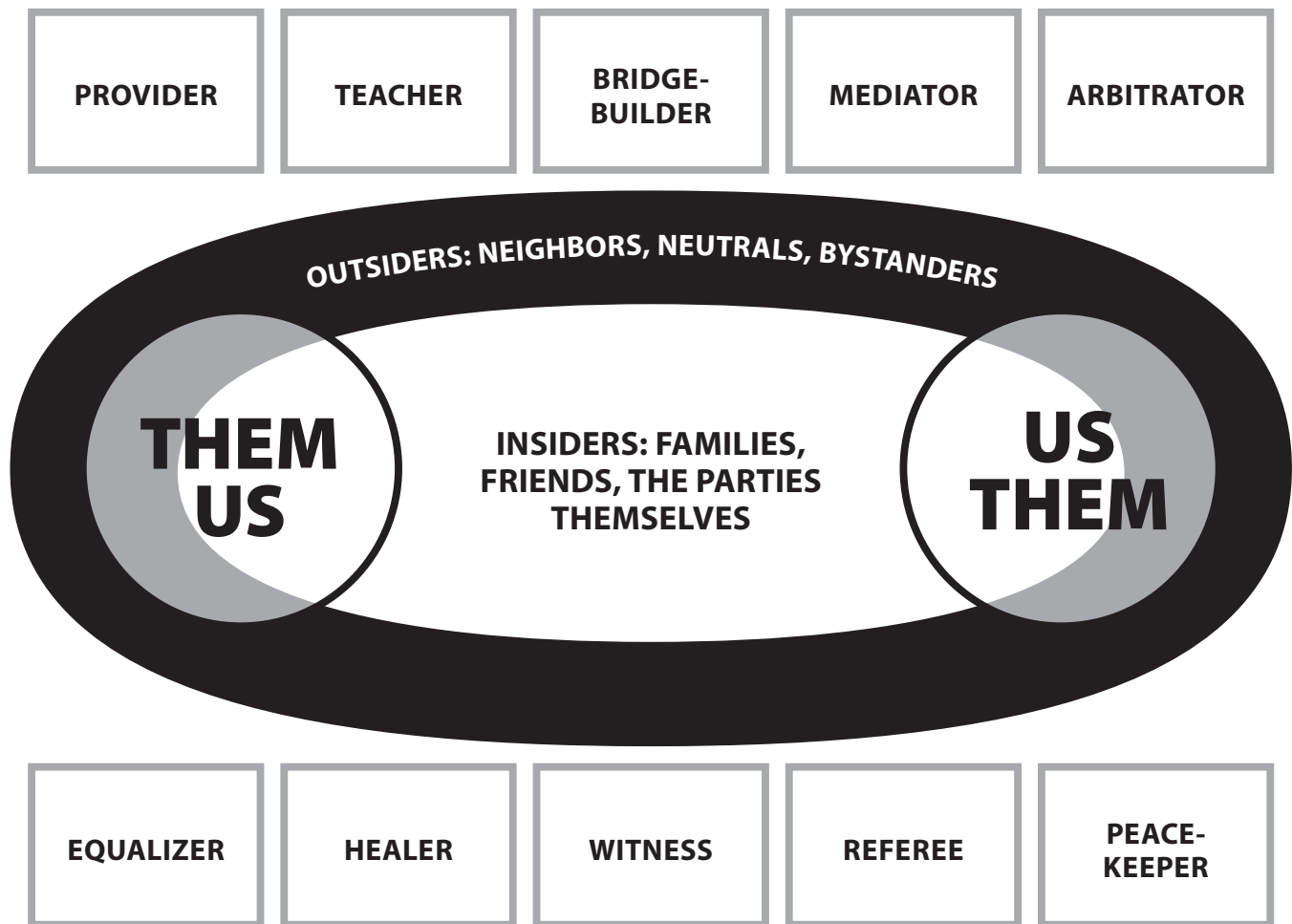
"A simple experiment will reveal, in its most elementary form, the influence of the third side. Introduce a neutral third person into any argument between two people. Even if the third person does not talk, the parties' tone will usually begin to moderate and their behavior will become more controlled. If the third person commands special respect, the effect will become even more pronounced. In every conflict, there usually exists not just one possible third party but a multitude. Individually, people may not prove very influential. But collectively, they are potentially more powerful than any two conflicting parties."

A third-side perspective can perceive that the appearance of a two-sided situation—pro and con, true and false—is a mirage. "From this third perspective, each competing point of view can be properly understood. Shared interests often come to loom larger than the differences."

People who are telling conflicting stories may be able to take a third-side perspective and mediate their own disputes when no third party is present, except in cases when they are constrained by police procedures and by a court system that forbids contact between the sides and exacerbates the conflict by transforming the mirage of two sides into legally enforced and rigid adversarialism. The adversarial court system, far from providing a third-side perspective, is often a factory for fabricating enemies from former friends, producing perpetual mistrust and estrangement instead of mutual understanding and reconciliation.

The task of dispelling the mirage of two conflicting stories cannot be relegated to the police, to the court system, or to political leaders. William Ury has pointed out that "political parties arose out of war parties"—so it is not surprising when political parties fall short of realizing the third side. In the absence of a strong community of wisdom that will serve as the third side, the court system or political leaders may make conflicting stories more polarized and destructive, reinforcing the mirage of two sides.

As an alternative to two-sided conflict, William Ury has proposed ten different third-side roles. Each role describes a different way that we can be the third side. The ten roles are: provider, teacher, bridge-builder, mediator, arbiter, equalizer, healer, witness, referee, and peacekeeper.

| PROVIDER | TEACHER | BRIDGE-BUILDER | MEDIATOR | ARBITRATOR |

OUTSIDERS: NEIGHBORS, NEUTRALS, BYSTANDERS

THEM US

INSIDERS: FAMILIES, FRIENDS, THE PARTIES THEMSELVES

US THEM

| EQUALIZER | HEALER | WITNESS | REFEREE | PEACE-KEEPER |

1. *The provider*: "Each person wants to feel well, safe, respected, and free." The provider's role is "to share, to protect, to respect, and to free" by enabling people to meet their needs.

2. *The teacher*: Tensions over conflicting stories can escalate when people lack appropriate attitudes, dialogue skills, and problem-solving skills. The teacher's role is to give people opportunities to learn the attitudes and skills that they need to benefit all others.

3. *The bridge-builder*: "The more bridges we build across the chasms of culture and distance, the harder it becomes to demonize others." The bridge-builder's role is to bring people together in a comfortable and neutral place so that they can come to understand each other and, when appropriate, to trust each other.

4. *The mediator*: "Parents can mediate among their children, and children among their parents. Supervisors can mediate among their employees and employees between their bosses. Colleagues can mediate among their peers, managers among their teammates, and friends among their friends. We may not think of it as mediation, but that is what we are doing whenever we listen attentively to people in dispute, when we ask them about what they really want, when we suggest possible approaches, and when we urge them to think hard about the costs of not reaching agreement. The mediator does not seek to determine who is right and who is wrong, but rather tries to get to the core of the dispute and resolve it. The core is each side's interests — in other words, their needs, concerns, desires, fears, and aspirations." The mediator's role is to help people identify and reconcile their interests that are hidden behind the mirage of two conflicting stories.

5. *The arbiter*: "When mediation doesn't work — or is not appropriate — the third side can usefully play the role of arbiter. Whereas a mediator can only suggest a solution, an arbiter can decide. The arbiter is a familiar role, embodied in the judge in the courtroom or the arbitrator in a work setting. More informally, the arbiter is the teacher deciding a dispute among two quarreling students, the parent ruling on a matter involving two children, or the manager determining an issue among two employees." The arbiter's role is to decide on a fair resolution to a conflict, encouraging a negotiated settlement "whenever possible and appropriate" while focusing on repairing relationships rather than on blaming one side or the other. The arbiter role should be chosen only when previous roles don't work.

6. *The equalizer*: "We are capable of empowering the weak and unrepresented so that they can negotiate a fair and mutually satisfactory resolution." The equalizer's role is to level the playing field between parties so that one side's advantages do not prevent an equitable agreement.

7. *The healer*: The mirage of two-sided conflict is often generated from the heat of emotions such as "anger, fear, humiliation, hatred, insecurity and grief." These emotions are like wounds in a relationship, and dissipating the mirage of two sides requires healing these wounds. "Healing ideally takes place not just at the conclusion of the process of dispute resolution, but at the very start. For talks to succeed, the right emotional climate must be set." The healer's role is to suture the psychological breach caused by suspicion, hostility, and other divisive attitudes as soon as possible.

8. *The witness*: "Destructive conflict does not just break out but escalates through different stages, from tension to conflict to overt violence." The role of the witness is to watch carefully to detect early warning signs that conflict may be escalating; to take action to cool the heat of emotions and to de-escalate conflict; and to record what is happening. The mirage of two-sided conflict easily appears when only two parties are present, sometimes leading to a "he said, she said" scenario. Witnesses, especially when they are using recording devices, can provide visible or audible evidence to disprove elements of two conflicting stories or prove that an element in one story is more accurate than a conflicting (exaggerated or fabricated) element in another story. The presence of witnesses also tends to increase the sense of safety for both parties and to moderate their behavior.

9. *The referee*: "If and when people do fight, it is important to reduce the harm." The referee's role is to set limits on conflict by setting ground rules, or codes of conduct, for fair fighting. "Each of us can serve as a potential referee in the conflicts around us."

10. *The peacekeeper*: "When two children fight, adults can step in the middle and, if necessary, physically pull the two apart. When two men brawl in a public place, their peers can drag them off each other. When rival gangs in Los Angeles started to eye one another, a group of mothers would regularly interpose themselves." The peacekeeper's role is to interrupt aggression and to protect all parties from each other.

Usually these ten roles are blended together and played by the same people. For example, the peacekeeper is likely to need the skills of the healer, thereby helping each party to identify the psychological pain that is driving their escalation of conflict. Police captain Cheri Maples recounted one of her first interventions where she learned how to use the power of the third side instead of the enemy-making machinery of the adversarial criminal court system: Instead of arresting a man for behaving unskillfully, she just sat down with him and talked with him from the heart. Within five minutes he was crying and talking and beginning to heal, and Captain Maples began to realize that many of the situations she encountered were a mirage of two-sided conflict generated by misplaced fear or anger because people were confused and feeling intense emotional pain. When she realized the need for the third side, she no longer approached everyone who behaved unskillfully as if they were a dangerous enemy to be arrested and charged with heinous crimes.

Once Captain Maples learned to practice using third-side roles such as provider, teacher, healer, and peacekeeper, she created a community of wisdom.

William Ury has proposed a dozen "next steps" that we can follow to create the third side, a community of wisdom, around us:

1. *Change the story*: Let go of the mirage of two conflicting stories, and let go of the belief that the mirage of two sides is unavoidable.

2. *Learn some skills*: Each of us can learn to improve our attitudes, dialogue skills, and problem-solving skills.

3. *Start close to home*: Transforming conflict by creating the third side must be a daily practice in all our actions at home and at work.

4. *Mediate your own disputes*: We can try to mediate our own disputes first, but it is also important to create a network of wise friends and associates who are familiar with each other and who can serve as the third side in any dispute between any two persons in the network. "If our efforts falter, we can actively seek the help of others, mobilizing the third side around us."

5. *Do what you do best*: "As you look around and wonder how you can contribute to the wider community, you don't need to start from scratch. Instead, begin with what you already do and add an extra third-side dimension." Parents can teach children to mediate their own disputes. Journalists can draw attention to emerging conflicts. Police officers can help mediate domestic disputes informally, without making arrests or filing charges whenever possible. Artists can help people witness events through artistic media and help heal psychological pain by expressing and transforming emotions in art.

6. *Volunteer your services*: "You can volunteer as a peer juror, as a neighborhood peace officer, or as a mentor or sports coach for needy teens. You can teach others in the community about joint problem-solving and conflict resolution."

7. *Fill a missing role*: Look for the third-side roles that are missing in your social network, and then play—or find someone else to play—those roles.

8. *Create a winning alliance*: "Don't fall into the trap of thinking you have to do it all yourself." Keep building a community of wisdom by talking about the third side with people around you who could form an alliance with each other for the benefit of all.

9. *Urge your organization to take the third side*: The organizations where you work can provide many third-side roles.

10. *Support the third side in the wider community*: "Even where you are unable to assume a direct role in the wider conflicts surrounding us, you can still lend your voice to the third side."

11. *Help build third-side institutions*: Examples include teaching universal benevolence, tolerance, and conflict resolution as part of the school curriculum; promoting community mediation services; and creating groups of peacekeepers who can act promptly.

12. *Help create a social movement*: "In coalition with other great social movements like those for human rights, women's rights, and democracy, a thirdsider movement could help raise awareness and mobilize a powerful third side." We need a social movement that documents the destructive effects of two-sided adversarialism and advocates for the constructive power of the third side.

THE THIRD STORY

To resolve a conflict between one person's story and another person's story, especially important is the role of the mediator. As described above, the mediator is a third party who helps people identify and reconcile their interests. "Mediators have no power to impose a solution; they are there to help the two sides communicate more effectively, and to explore possible ways of moving forward. One of the most helpful tools a mediator has is the ability to identify this invisible third story. This means describing the problem between the parties in a way that rings true for both sides simultaneously."

The third story is the mediator's story. The third story describes the gap (or difference) between one person's story and the other person's story and points toward a solution. "When tensions arise in a marriage, the third story might be the one offered by a marriage counselor. In a dispute between friends, the third story may be the perspective of a mutual friend who sees each side as having valid concerns that need to be addressed."

When the mirage of two sides arises from the heat of fear and anger, typically we don't think like mediators. We don't begin conversations with the other person from the perspective of the third story; we begin "inside" our own story and emotions, ignoring the other person's story and emotions. "By leaving their story out, we implicitly set up a trade-off between their version of events and our version, between our feelings and theirs." Because our own story is biased toward our own perspective and usually communicates a judgment about the other person, it provokes the other to defend themselves, which escalates the conflict.

The mirage of two conflicting stories creates a "battle of messages." The third story creates a "learning conversation." If we are to think like a mediator, our conversations must begin from the third story. We don't even have to know the content of the other person's story to include it; all we have to do is to acknowledge that their story exists and to express interest in learning more about their view. "Stepping out of your story doesn't mean giving up your point of view. Your purpose in opening the conversation is to invite the other person into a joint exploration. In the course of that exploration you'll spend time in each side's perspective, and then come back to adjust your own views based on what you've learned and what you've shared."

In any conversation about two conflicting stories, it is best to begin with the third story, then explore their story, then explore your story, and then return to the third story. Douglas Stone and colleagues have proposed a checklist with five steps for skillfully conducting "difficult conversations" by using the third story to escape the mirage of two conflicting stories and to enter into a learning conversation.

STEP 1: PREPARE BY THINKING ABOUT THREE ASPECTS OF THE CONFLICT, CALLED THE "THREE CONVERSATIONS"

The "first conversation" involves clarifying *what happened*: What are the causes and conditions that have shaped the two stories? What evidence is available that would disprove elements of your story (or the other person's story)? Has your story (and the other person's story) been shaped by memories of past experiences, implicit rules or expectations derived from those memories, and/or information communicated by others? What impact has the situation had on you (and on the other person)? What various intentions and

competing commitments might you have had (and might the other person have had)? What have you each contributed to the situation and how have past events contributed? "As we argue vociferously for our view, we often fail to question one crucial assumption upon which our whole stance in the conversation is built: I am right, you are wrong. This simple assumption causes endless grief." Roger Fisher summarized this pattern of self-justification as he reflected on his time as a litigator: "I sometimes failed to persuade the court that I was right, but I never failed to persuade myself!"

The "second conversation" involves understanding *emotions*: What emotions have you been feeling (and what has the other person been feeling) and how are those emotions shaping your stories? Find the emotions underneath attributions, judgments, and accusations: "We translate our feelings into: judgments ('If you were a good friend you would have been there for me'), attributions ('Why were you trying to hurt me?'), characterizations ('You're just so inconsiderate'), problem-solving ('The answer is for you to call me more often')." Unfortunately, others may find it difficult to translate our judgments and accusations into inferences about emotions because when we make judgments the other person's attention becomes focused "on the fact that we are judging, attributing, and blaming" instead of on our feelings. (And how much more so when the judgments and accusations are false, as they often will be, due to the limitations of our perspective!)

The "third conversation" involves exploring your *identity*—your sense of self, sense of others, and sense of the world: What is at stake for you (and for the other person) in this situation about your sense of yourself, your sense of the other person, and your sense of the world? "The process by which we construct our stories

about the world often happens so fast, and so automatically, that we are not even aware of all that influences our views." What do you need to accept about yourself or others or the world that you have not fully accepted? For example, you may need to accept: that you and others are imperfect and will make mistakes; that your intentions and the other person's intentions are complex, some or all of those intentions may be unknown to either of you, and the other person's intentions are especially unknown to you; that you have contributed to the situation and so has the other person and so have many other causes and conditions; that you do not control the other person's emotions or reactions and the other person does not control yours; that your memories may not be accurate and will need to be corroborated by other witnesses and by physical evidence; and so on.

"Typically, instead of exploring what information the other person might have that we don't, we assume we know all we need to know to understand and explain things. Instead of working to manage our feelings constructively, we either try to hide them or let loose in ways that we later regret. Instead of exploring the identity issues that may be deeply at stake for us (or them), we proceed with the conversation as if it says nothing about us—and never come to grips with what is at the heart of our anxiety."

STEP 2: CHECK YOUR PURPOSES AND CHOOSE WHETHER TO RAISE THE ISSUE

Checking your purposes involves reflecting on your motives for talking about the issue with the other party. "What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation? Shift your stance to support learning, sharing, and problem solving." Thich Nhat Hanh has reminded us that the sole goal of compassionate communication

is to help all others suffer less—not to prove ourselves right nor to feel good about ourselves: "I am listening to this person with only one purpose: to give this person a chance to suffer less." To realize this goal we must perceive and come to understand first our own suffering and then the suffering of others.

Choosing whether to raise the issue involves asking: "Is this the best way to address the issue and achieve your purposes? Is the issue really embedded in your identity conversation? Can you affect the problem by changing your contributions? If you don't raise it, what can you do to help yourself let go?" There may be no need to talk about the issue with the other party if the conflict is really inside yourself rather than between you and the other party, or if you can change the situation on your own, or if your purpose is an unrealistic desire to unilaterally (from your own side) change the other party, or if you want to obtain short-term relief from your own emotions at long-term cost to the relationship with the other.

Step 3: Begin from the third story

First, describe the situation as a gap or difference between your stories. "Include both viewpoints as a legitimate part of the discussion." Second, share your purposes. (Your ultimate purpose should be to learn and to help all others suffer less.) Third, invite the other person to join you as an equal partner in sorting out the situation together. Take care not to frame the other party as the problem or to frame their behavior in an uncharitable way; the "blame frame" and the "intention invention" only generate more stress and suffering. "Talk about how to talk about it." If you and the other party have a history of difficulty talking about this issue, treat "the way things usually go when we try to have this conversation" as the problem, and describe the third story about that problem.

Beginning from the third story and ending with the third story is the most important step of all.

Step 4: Explore the other's story and your story

First, listen to understand the other person's perspective on what happened. "Ask questions. Acknowledge the feelings behind the arguments and accusations. Paraphrase to see if you've got it. Try to unravel how the two of you got to this place." Second, share your own view, your feelings, your intentions, and your understanding of how your memories of past experiences contributed to your reactions. Reframe (reinterpret) each person's statements so that they are as helpful as possible: Reframe assertions of truth *to* descriptions of perceptions; reframe judgments and accusations *to* feelings; reframe blaming *to* mapping the contribution system of causes and conditions.

It is especially important to reframe blame, because blaming obstructs learning and problem solving, and "when blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty"—especially in the adversarial court system. "Even in situations that require a clear assignment of blame, there is a cost. Once the specter of punishment—legal or otherwise—is raised, learning the truth of what happened becomes more difficult. People are understandably less forthcoming, less open, less willing to apologize." Blaming makes conversations more difficult, while mapping the contribution system of causes and conditions makes difficult conversations easier and more likely to result in learning and change.

Above all, we should never present one party's story as The Truth. "Some aspects of difficult conversations will continue to be rough even when you communicate with great skill: sharing

feelings of vulnerability, delivering bad news, learning something painful about how others see you. But presenting your story as The Truth—which creates resentment, defensiveness, and leads to arguments—is a wholly avoidable disaster." The purpose of the third story is to avoid the disaster of presenting one story as The Truth. (This does not mean that the truth of particular facts cannot be determined, nor that all forms of argumentation are equally valid and virtuous.)

Step 5: Engage in further problem solving

Propose *tests* of conflicting assumptions as if they are scientific hypotheses. "Divergent views are often rooted in one or more conflicting assumptions or hypotheses. If these can be identified, then you can discuss what would constitute a fair test of which assumption is empirically valid, or to what extent it is valid." Propose *options* "that meet each side's most important concerns and interests." Establish mutual *standards* for what should happen, based on evolving ethical principles; "keep in mind the standard of mutual caretaking; relationships that always go one way rarely last." Create *channels of communication* that will keep everyone connected as you go forward. Conditions that prevent communication (such as when a court order prohibits parties from contacting each other) can easily destroy the third side and the third story.

THE TOOLS OF THE MEDIATOR

The mediator, who is a third party that helps people identify and reconcile their interests, may be the ideal form of the third side and the best possible creator of the third story. Mark Gerzon has described eight tools that anyone can use to become a mediator for the people around them. The eight tools are: integral vision,

systems thinking, presence, inquiry, conscious conversation, dialogue, bridging, and innovation.

Tool 1. *Integral vision* is the commitment to perceive all the causes and conditions of a conflict, or as many of them as possible, and to hold in mind the welfare of all beings, in all their complexity. "Each of us cannot expect automatically to have the panoramic perspective of an orbiting astronaut or the universal compassion of a saint. What is realistic, however, is to commit ourselves to seeing the whole." Developing integral vision requires diligent practice of noticing our particular blind spots or whatever stops our vision from extending throughout space and time. "Wherever we live, there are walls—if not of oppression, then of privilege; if not of ignorance, then of sensationalized and incomplete information." We should aim to see the whole situation as if from a balcony where we can "take in" a vision of the whole field. "Be aware of words and phrases that are warning signs that dualistic either-or thinking is impairing your vision."

Tool 2. *Systems thinking* is the task of building a conceptual model of all of the elements related to the conflict, or as many of them as possible, and understanding how the elements interact and evolve as a system. In almost every conflict, a principal problem is that one or all of the parties are not thinking systemically enough. They are constructing conceptual elements with crude boundaries that ignore important subtleties of the situation or that make the situation seem too complex to handle skillfully. This easily happens when conflicting sides have competing interests and a corresponding bias to construct conceptual boundaries in self-justifying ways. One of the mediator's most important tasks is to help people reconfigure their conceptual models of the situation so

that they encompass more of the full complexity of the situation, including the complexity (and unavoidable bias) of everyone's role in creating and escalating the conflict. Mediators practice asking questions that reveal more systemic relationships, such as: "And then what?" "What happened next?" "What do you mean by that?" "And when you did that, what were the consequences?" "How do you know?" "Can you verify that?"

Tool 3. *Presence* is the act of using all our mental and physiological resources to witness ourselves in the conflict and to respond as appropriately or optimally as possible. "Are we contracted in fear? Are our perceptions of the situation compromised by stress? Are our emotions becoming unmanageable?" If the answer to these questions is yes, we are probably not fully present and not able to respond optimally to the situation. "Once stress or fear reaches a certain level in our bodies, our hearts and minds begin to close. Even though we think we are present, we are not. We may find ourselves thinking back to a similar challenging or traumatic incident in the past, thinking ahead to anticipate what might happen in the future if the conflict worsens, or, quite often, some combination of the two. So our first response to conflict, particularly if we are still reacting to previous trauma, is to be unpresent." To act effectively as a mediator, first we have to change our mental and physiological state of being. Every day we need to practice cultivating a state of quiet alertness and attentiveness in which we are naturally curious, neither hypersensitive nor oblivious. "We are likely to be present when we are: open to perceiving what is happening right now; responsive to the needs of this moment; flexible enough to shift gears; able to notice if our current behavior or strategy is not working; creative enough to invent a new approach in the moment; honest enough to admit if we don't have a new approach yet.

Conversely, we are likely to be unpresent when we are: so arrogant that we are unable to learn anything that contradicts our 'reality'; so self-centered that we are not serving others." The mirage of two-sided conflict often arises when antagonists are not as fully present they need to be. Anyone who organizes important meetings should think carefully about how to structure those meetings so as to maximize presence.

Tool 4. *Inquiry* is a continuous practice of asking questions with the purpose of finding more information that is essential to understanding a conflict and how to transform it. "The general rule is this: inquiry precedes advocacy." Before we advocate for our story, and before we advocate for the third story, we need to inquire. "Mediators have to be willing to not know"—they have to access what Zen teachers have called "don't-know mind." Mediators enter the conflict not with a plan but with questions that promote mutual learning and that change the way people are thinking (not with faux questions that are opinions in masquerade designed to shoot holes in one side's argumentation). "Such questions catalyze movement; create options; dig deeper; avoid yes-or-no answers; empower both questioner and respondent; and explore the unaskable. Their purpose is to illumine the path through conflict, not to build walls by 'proving' oneself right or the other wrong." Inquiry should not be confused with interrogation, which is a tool of adversarialism, not of mediation. "If, as a lawyer or police officer or dean of students, you need to interrogate someone, then do so. But do not pretend that you are inquiring, and do not expect to uncover the deepest layers of human motivation."

Tool 5. *Conscious conversation* is awareness of the full range of choices about communication styles (forms of discourse or ways

of talking), and the ability to choose how to speak and listen. The range of choices, ordered from more to less adversarial, include: verbal brawling, debate, presentation (with or without question-and-answer), discussion, negotiation, council, dialogue, reflective silence and/or prayer. The mediator may use any of these ways of taking except verbal brawling. The less adversarial choices are preferable whenever appropriate, because the less adversarial choices are more likely to permit escape from the mirage of two-sided conflict. Mediators encourage people to avoid abstractions and to set ground rules that everyone owns before they need them. Ground rules "should not be formulated immediately after someone has egregiously violated them; doing so appears to be punishment." As Larry Susskind pointed out: "The worst time to figure out the rules for handling a disagreement is in the middle of the fight." Mediators help set consensual ground rules before a conversation begins so as to make possible conscious conversation.

Tool 6. *Dialogue* is a way of talking based on inquiry that helps participants work together to bridge differences and to innovate. Dialogue can be contrasted with debate: Debate is adversarial and focused on winning. Debaters assume that their side has the right answer, and they attempt to defend their answer and prove the other side wrong. By creating a winner and a loser, debate discourages further inquiry. Dialogue is collaborative and focused on inquiry. People in dialogue assume that each person has assumptions and evidence that need to be tested, and they try to listen to discover common purposes and interests; they admit that they can learn from other people's thinking. In the words of Sayed Aqa: "Dialogue is not about the physical act of talking at all. It is about minds unfolding." Compared with the easy adversarialism of verbal brawling or the simple task of giving orders to subordinates,
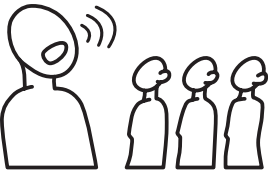
1. Verbal brawling

- War of words — language as weapon
- Verbal attacks against the other "side"
- Violations of decency and truth are common
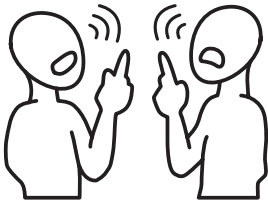
2. Debate

- Highly polarized pro-and-con "sides" on issue
- Seeks monopoly on truth — right vs. wrong
- Focused on winning, not compromise/consensus
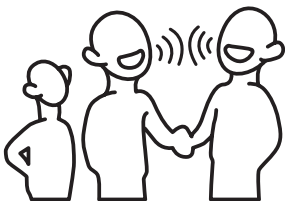- No verbal threats or actual physical violence

3. Presentation

- One person (or "panel") dominates discourse
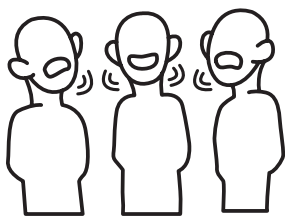- Audience may question speakers ("Q&A")

4. Discussion

- Not inclusive: some dominate, some never speak
- Goal is information sharing, not decision making

5. Negotiation

- Resolving disputes by seeking common ground
- Organized with two (or more) "sides" at the table
- Assumes a willingness to compromise
- Goal is a durable settlement for all stakeholders

6. Council

- Structured process that includes all voices
- Establishes value of diverse points of view
- No opportunity for immediate reaction or rebuttal
- Fosters attentive listening and mutual respect

7. Dialogue

- Inquiry, not advocacy, leading to new options
- Involves suspending judgment
- Develops a wider, shared knowledge base
- Identifies deeper issues requiring resolution

8. Reflective silence and/or prayer or meditation

- Invocation of quiet to shift tone and awareness
- May involve use of words as "blessing"
- Can be coupled with request for reflection

dialogue is time- and energy-intensive. So dialogue should be saved for times when it will: "result in real improvements in people's lives; empower people so that their energy will be sustained; ultimately heal divisions rather than widen them; be relevant to most people, and deeply felt; generate financial and human resources for the next dialogue." When trust between parties is low, dialogue will have to be preceded by: "treating those involved with respect and dignity; creating a 'container', or an environment, that is safe; adopting and enforcing ground rules or codes of conduct; listening deeply and caring genuinely about their situation; and avoiding blame, put-downs, and quick-fixes."

Tool 7. *Bridging* is the process of building partnerships or alliances that cross the divisions in an organization or in a population by taking action together (not only talking, although talking is also a kind of action). Bridging actions can include: "launching a joint inquiry that finds a previously uncharted path through the conflict; collaborating on specific projects that respect remaining differences while building on common ground; creating a partnership that brings the conflicted stakeholders into preliminary alignment; crafting an enduring agreement or contract that breaks the conflict cycle and/or reduces friction in order to foster a more productive, constructive relationship; renewing an institution so that its rules and procedures can adapt to deal with new challenges; changing the game so that a worsening conflict can be turned into an opportunity." We learn bridging by doing it.

Tool 8. *Innovation* is "creative, social, or entrepreneurial breakthrough that creates new options for moving through conflicts. Such breakthroughs, if they occur, cannot be guaranteed in advance. If they can, then they are not truly a breakthrough but

rather someone's preconceived plan." Mediators do not only think systemically; they also think about how to redesign systems, and they are always on the lookout for any breakthrough that makes innovative redesign possible.

FIVE DANGEROUS IDEAS

The third side and the third story are important and beneficial ideas. They can help us escape the mirage of two-sided conflict, and they can help all of us suffer less. In contrast, there are five "dangerous ideas" that can strengthen the mirage of two-sided conflict and cause us to suffer. Roy and Judy Eidelson have named these five dangerous ideas *superiority*, *injustice*, *vulnerability*, *distrust*, and *helplessness*. These ideas could also be called dysfunctional biases or deeply held beliefs that are self-perpetuating. They can be held by individual persons or by groups of persons who share similar beliefs.

1. The dangerous idea of *superiority* occurs when individuals or groups are convinced that they are better than others in important ways. "Such an individual sees many societal rules as personally irrelevant because his or her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences are deemed to merit privileged status." When shared within a group of people, this idea "encompasses shared convictions of moral superiority, chosenness, entitlement, and special destiny" and a "corresponding view of the out-group as contemptible, immoral, and inferior." This idea is dangerous because it easily leads people to advocate biased stories about their own presumed superiority and to justify their own mistreatment of others, including defamation, insults, and other verbal abuse.

2. The dangerous idea of *injustice* occurs when individuals or groups are convinced that they have been mistreated by specific others or by the world in general, even when the events in question are accidents or honest mistakes. "Although actual experiences of victimization are commonplace for all too many, this mindset can lead the individual to identify as unfair that which is merely unfortunate" and to retaliate inappropriately or excessively. "In clinical practice, it is not unusual for people to seek counseling at least in part because of distress associated with grievances they hold toward those whom they see as having disappointed, betrayed, or mistreated them. For some, the ill treatment becomes a debilitating and immobilizing preoccupation." Within groups of people, this idea, when it contains "subjective distortions that include self-whitewashing and other-maligning myths," can lead to violent collective insurgencies that reduce the possibility of negotiating effectively for the group's legitimate needs and interests. "Indeed, it is not uncommon for both sides to a conflict to hold contradictory, mirror-image views of their past relationship, each highlighting its grievances against the other." This idea is dangerous first because it causes those who believe it to suffer unnecessarily, and second because it can inspire a cycle of escalating vengeance and retaliation.

3. The dangerous idea of *vulnerability* occurs when individuals or groups are convinced that they are perpetually subject to dangers over which they have insufficient control. "Although anxiety in the face of actual danger can be quite adaptive, individuals governed by an exaggerated sense of their own vulnerability often tend to overestimate the risks they are facing. In clinical practice, people whose lives are dominated by their fears frequently bring about the very outcomes they seek to avoid. Such individuals become

hypervigilant, investing time and effort in bracing themselves for failure, rejection, injury, or loss—to the detriment of their overall quality of life. Individuals who demonstrate persistent fears and worries about their prospects often engage in 'catastrophic thinking' based on their idiosyncratic assessment of how dangerous the world is and how weak and unprotected they are." In many places the sense that life is dangerous is well founded, but an excessive sense of vulnerability can be debilitating. "A standard part of this cognitive pattern is an exaggerated expectation that, regardless of prevailing conditions, sooner or later circumstances will deteriorate precipitously. When people catastrophize, they draw extremely negative and unsubstantiated inferences about the future based on little or no information. Often, the situation under consideration is actually quite ambiguous. Nevertheless, the catastrophizer selectively focuses on the possible disastrous outcomes and may even behave as if his or her dire fate has already been sealed." When groups of people hold this idea, they may become more hostile to the perceived source of threat, producing spiraling aggression including preemptive attacks or an escalating arms race that seems to confirm the group's imagined worst case scenarios. This idea is dangerous because of the unnecessary anxiety and escalation of conflict that it inspires.

4. The dangerous idea of *distrust* occurs when individuals or groups believe that others are hostile or have otherwise malign intent. All harm is perceived as intentional or as the result of extreme negligence. "At the extreme, the distrust core belief is transformed from a predisposition toward suspicion into outright paranoia with delusions of persecution." When this idea is shared within a group of people, they believe that the out-group is untrustworthy and harbors ill-will toward the in-group. This idea

is so common that "*dishonest* and *untrustworthy* are considered to be central elements in the universal stereotype of out-groups." At its most extreme, group distrust becomes a kind of collective paranoia. "Among the consequences of collective paranoia is the sinister attribution error in which individuals display a bias toward interpreting others' behavior as hostile and malevolent even when competing explanations are available." This idea is dangerous because it makes people refuse to interact with the distrusted other, which reinforces their distrust and precludes communication and mutual learning. Furthermore, one party's lack of trust is easily misinterpreted by the other party as something else that may not be true, such as a lack of respect, lack of caring or empathy, or lack of interest in negotiation.

5. The dangerous idea of *helplessness* occurs when individuals or groups are convinced that they will not be able to produce desired outcomes even with careful planning and execution. They may perceive their lack of efficacy as an inner lack of ability or as an outer lack of an appropriately supportive environment. When this idea is shared within a group of people, the group pessimistically perceives itself as helpless, and the group becomes more susceptible to subjugation by others. This idea is dangerous because it diminishes people's motivation to change. "When people believe that nothing they do will make a difference, they usually do nothing." The lack of action can contribute to a number of negative consequences, including a weakened ability to negotiate well with others or to participate fully in collaborative inquiry.

THREE UNHELPFUL STORIES

The five dangerous ideas described above share some common elements with three unhelpful stories described by Kerry Patterson

and colleagues. These three unhelpful stories are: *victim stories* ("It's not my fault"), *villain stories* ("It's all your fault"), and *helpless stories* ("There's nothing else I can do").

Helpless stories are essentially the same as the dangerous idea of helplessness described above. *Victim stories* and *villain stories* are the two sides of blame, accompanied by all the negative side effects of blaming described above in the discussion of the third story. Victim stories and villain stories overlap with the dangerous ideas of injustice and distrust described above: when we tell these stories, we are convinced that we have been intentionally mistreated and we believe that others are hostile or have other malign intent.

These unhelpful stories will not help us escape from the mirage of two-sided conflict, but they may help us justify our self-interested or retaliatory behavior. "If we can make others out as wrong and ourselves out as right, we're off the hook. Better yet, once we've demonized others, we can even insult and abuse them if we want."

Ironically, when we tell victim stories about ourselves or villain stories about others, often those others are telling villain stories about us and victim stories about themselves. "We have all done something that made others angry at us, and we have all been spurred to anger by what others have done to us. We all have, intentionally or unintentionally, hurt another person who will forever regard us as the villain, the betrayer, the scoundrel. And we have all felt the sting of being on the receiving end of an act of injustice, nursing a wound that never seems to fully heal. The remarkable thing about self-justification is that it allows us to shift from one role to the other and back again in the blink of an eye, without applying what we have learned from one role to the other. Feeling like a victim of injustice in one situation does not

make us less likely to commit an injustice against someone else, nor does it make us more sympathetic to victims." The reason why unhelpful stories are unhelpful is because nobody learns from these stories how to behave more skillfully. The effect of these stories is to perpetuate the mirage of two sides.

The key theme of victim stories and villain stories is often "You hurt me." This theme may be true, but the mirage of two-sided conflict arises because we are not thinking systemically enough about suffering, and we ignore other important themes that may be present in the situation such as: "I hurt myself." "I hurt you." "You hurt yourself." "I was hurt in the past, and memories of my past are hurting me." "You were hurt in the past, and memories of your past are hurting you." "You can't experience the hurt that I feel as I feel it." "I can't experience the hurt that you feel as you feel it." When we remember that the goal of compassionate communication is to help all others suffer less, and when we begin to explore all the suffering in ourselves and others, we realize how inadequate victim stories and villain stories are. Then we can step out of our "same old stories" and start to tell the third story. The third story will give us a more integral vision of reality and will show us how "victims" are actors, "villains" are humans, the "helpless" are able, and all are inseparable parts of the whole.

Kerry Patterson and colleagues recounted the following villain story: "You're in the middle of a casual discussion with your spouse and he or she brings up an 'ugly incident' that took place at yesterday's neighborhood block party. Apparently not only did you flirt with someone at the party, but according to your spouse, 'You were practically making out.' You don't remember flirting. You simply remember being polite and friendly. Your spouse walks

off in a huff." In this scene, the mirage of two conflicting stories has emerged. Patterson and colleagues present this scene as an example of strong emotions, and certainly it is, but there are many other elements in this scene. In terms of the "three conversations" discussed above, this scene is not only about *emotions*, it is also about *identity*, and perhaps most importantly about *what happened*. The two spouses disagree on the basic facts of what happened: a polite and friendly conversation, even if it looks like flirting (or feels like flirting to the other spouse), is not at all the same as "making out"; the latter involves amorous physical contact. Either the spouse who perceived the "making out" was delusional or lying, or the spouse who denied it was delusional or lying. Sorting out *what happened* may require the third-side role of witnesses, and working through the *emotions* and *identity* conversations may require the third-side role of a mediator. Without the help of the third side, it is easy to imagine how this conflict could escalate into an adversarial court case, with the aggrieved spouse vindictively demanding that the other be held accountable for fictitious heinous crimes. This is how a minor incident becomes shrouded in the mirage of two-sided conflict and eventually, in the words of William Ury, "ruins relationships, wastes money, and destroys lives."

Kimberly Thomas has described how many cases in the criminal court system originate in such unhelpful stories. As an example, she recounted the following real-life situation: "A man gets into an argument with his girlfriend. The argument might be purely verbal, or perhaps it is physical, but is not, in any sense commonly understood by the criminal system, a significant aggression on the part of the girlfriend. Nevertheless, the man calls the police and reports a domestic assault. The reasons for this call might include retaliation, teaching the girlfriend 'a lesson', or getting the

girlfriend out of the house for a short time." In this situation it is not difficult to see how dangerous ideas and unhelpful stories can work together to perpetuate a mirage of two-sided conflict with damaging consequences. These dangerous ideas and unhelpful stories prevent us from learning and prevent us from helping all others suffer less.

THE MEDIATION PROCESS

Another name for the third side and the third story is the mediation process. All of the tools discussed above help us carry out the mediation process: the ten third-side roles of provider, teacher, bridge-builder, mediator, arbiter, equalizer, healer, witness, referee, and peacekeeper; the twelve "next steps"; the five steps of a learning conversation; the eight tools of the mediator; and the eight forms of discourse or ways of taking.

Christopher Moore has pointed out that "mediation is commonly initiated when disputing parties on their own are not able to start productive talks or have begun discussions and reached an impasse." We need to recognize when conflicting stories are so different—or when one or more parties are so insistent that their story is The Truth—that the parties will not be able to create a third story on their own, and the assistance of a mutually acceptable neutral third party will be necessary for a successful mediation process. "Specifically, mediation and mediators help disputing parties to (a) open or improve communications between or among them, (b) establish or build more respectful and productive working relationships, (c) better identify, understand, and consider each other's needs, interests, and concerns, (d) propose and implement more effective problem-solving or negotiation procedures, and (e) recognize or build mutually acceptable agreements."

Many other conceptual tools, not described in detail here, are available to mediators. For example, Bernard Mayer has described seven dualities or dilemmas that often can be found in conflicts: competition and cooperation, optimism and realism, avoidance and engagement, principle and compromise, emotions and logic, neutrality and advocacy, community and autonomy. We can learn to approach these two-sided tensions from the third side and work with them as partial aspects of the whole reality that lies beneath the superficial mirage of two sides.

We will never be able to fully comprehend the immensity and subtlety of the vast ocean of reality. But the third side and the third story are useful ideas that will help us to make, in collaboration with all others, the best evolving model of reality that we are capable of making and to escape the blinding mirage of two conflicting stories.

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This meditation on the third side and the third story was rendered by Nathan Strait (nathanstrait.com) on the 10th of June of 2016. In each of the preceding sections, the key ideas and all quotations in each section come from the sources listed below.

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