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Conflict transformation is our collective inheritance.
It begins with accepting our individual responsibilities,
consciously re-entering into right relationships, and
generating systemic and cultural transformations.
Surrender to inspiration and integrate healing.
Practice and continuously improve from the foundations.
Be humble and in service to justice.
Lift as we climb.

Where were you when the music stopped in the game of pandemic musical chairs, as the first wave swelled and the restrictions fell? Slowly rewind the tape to February, those flickering screens moving oddly in reverse, and let it play.

Can you see the person you were then playing across the screen? Can you recall what we had believed to be impossible at the time, and how quickly this became normal? The world changed, and we changed with it.

Many of us intuited that overt and structural forms of racism would be exacerbated by the pandemic. Tensions heightened in our interactions with others; a rising, scratchy cough in a public space could send us awash in cold, damp anxiety, or heighten our watchfulness for someone eyeing us, agitated.

How these tensions played out on a structural level emerged slowly. The world was held captivated by climbing graphs and rising numbers. When the data was disaggregated in the UK and elsewhere, we saw with grim, certain horror the outcomes for ethnic minority communities. And when Black Lives Matter grieved and protested the death of George Floyd, the whole world shook and trembled. We reached deep to make sense of how his murder had been possible and traced the shallow, breathing bones of structural racism.

We must cultivate power and solidarity within and across our communities to transform the racism embedded in our societies. How we show up, particularly in moments of conflict, can shatter or strengthen our solidarity.

Over this year, I have been reflecting on the need for awakening and strengthening conflict transformation skills in all communities, but especially diasporas. In our sustained pursuit of justice and liberation, we must be prepared for moments of confrontation. Before they arise, we and our communities must discuss our commitments to dealing with conflict in constructive, transformative ways. Because we are often working in dispersed and sometime atomised networks, we must strengthen our capacities to act on conflict collaboratively, creatively and together with others.

Conflict transformation is our collective inheritance. It may exist as a named academic field, as I first encountered it, but it came before then under different names. In essence, it is an aspiration for peace and justice, inviting us to not be content with short-term problem solving and resolution of issues. Sometimes it breathes through a song or story. Other times it lingers as a cultural vestige, a handshake or a deep bow. In still other moments it sprouts suddenly, spontaneously. The wisdoms of conflict transformation are a slumbering, steady pulse under the skin of our lives, but to listen for them and unfurl their lessons is a choice and a practice.

What have we inherited that we should cherish and bring with us? What have we inherited that is burdening us and that we should archive, thank and recycle, repurpose or let go of?

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Despite my years in peacebuilding, I still experience an intoxicating pull and blinding fear whenever I approach conflict. However, alongside these now resides a quieter reaction of watchful curiosity and listening, a suspended witnessing of these intensities. And in that suspension, there is a new possibility to break out of predictable cycles of suffering and violence. I believe that this is where we can choose to build relationships and trusting coalitions towards more equitable and just futures.

Imagine what it would be like to reach out to a community with the confidence that there would be someone who was willing to work to overcome differences and challenges with you, even when it got difficult? For the work of transforming racism and structural violence that lies before us, I envision generations of leaders who are also peacebuilders – wise, compelling, confident in self-knowledge and awareness, and deeply compassionate. These are essential core skills. Building on the work of generations before us, we must become the ethical community leaders who practice, cultivate and live out these values and principles.

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In many communities, but in South/East/Asian diasporas in Europe particularly, the avoidance of conflict and acceptance of oppressive power dynamics are often rooted in adaptation strategies. As a consequence of migrating to and navigating new dominant cultural landscapes, individuals and communities learned certain ways of approaching conflict to survive.

But the conflict strategies which once offered protection for our survival may also actively mask and perpetuate inequalities. Even as we need to learn from our cultural heritages and wisdoms, we must also challenge them. We can welcome creativity and imagination, to allow the emergence of new wisdom in our search for social justice.

Our identities and experiences may be more complex as a result of our or our families' migrations. Our differing experiences of assimilation, diffusion, or traversing cultures may defy simple explanation, often with only anecdotal information to work with. Articulating and validating our experiences is less resourced and difficult to find; the data of our communities is more thinly spread. In diaspora, we often lack the validating spaces to individually and collectively explore our identities.

It lies with us to create opportunities to reset our relationships with risk, choice and agency. Our movements will be more resilient if we face and welcome conflict as a creative and generative opportunity. In building awareness of our similarities and differences, we nurture our understanding and empathy. Coming together in these ways, we can better organize for the structural changes required to address our communities' issues and needs.

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A conflict transformation approach guides us towards seeing these tensions, conflicts and contradictions as both dangerous and valuable opportunities. A cautious approach grounded in respectful curiosity can help us surface and articulate new truths waiting to emerge.

My warm invitation to you is to explore your role in transforming conflict and building peace. The below exercises and links are an array of potential entry points through which you can discover resources that you already possess, and those that others have developed in their own journeys. Surface and articulate the new truths waiting to emerge.

Always adapt these invitations to work for you and your needs. For sustainable and effective learning, I suggest that you aim for a light challenge or stretch.

INDIVIDUAL EXERCISES

Social Messages

What messages have you heard about how someone like you (e.g. of your perceived gender, faith, culture, ethnicity, age, profession, class, nationality, ability) should behave? Write them down, say them aloud, or simply notice them. Choose one. Why might others urge or desire you to behave this way? Is it in service of you and of justice? Do a small ritual to welcome it in, or greet it and send it on.

Qualities of Peacebuilders

A peacebuilder is someone who tries to bring about peace and justice. Close your eyes and visualize someone from your life who you believe is a peacebuilder. Does a specific memory of them come to mind? What skills or qualities did they demonstrate? Choose one quality or skill you'd like to focus on embodying more and write it down. Place it somewhere where you can see it, as a physical reminder of your intention to grow this skill or quality.

Revolutions and Social Movements

In a letter from his jail cell in Birmingham, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue... my citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking... but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth."

Using whichever research methods you prefer (interviewing someone with lived experience, listening to podcasts or videos on YouTube, reading books or articles) spend about a half hour learning about a social movement. There are as many things to be learned from small, local and untold revolutions as from large, iconic and well-covered ones.

Try applying lenses of conflict transformation and peacebuilding - what were the underlying causes? Where were there power imbalances? What strategies did people use? Were they effective? What were the outcomes? (Think creatively about this last one, even if the community was not successful in achieving their stated aims, what other legacies did their efforts leave?)

Reclaiming and Expressing Identity as Resistance

To varying degrees, we must engage with cultural narratives about our identity. Sometimes we are labeled and defined by others, but sometimes we can label and define ourselves. Choose one aspect of your identity, preferences or desires that you have struggled to express or pursue. Spend an hour exploring, savouring and expressing that aspect of yourself in whatever way you wish.

KEY SEARCH TERMS:

Mediation; conflict resolution; conflict transformation; restorative justice; peacebuilding

DIGITAL RESOURCES:

Podcasts

- [“How Favoritism Leads To Injustice: When Kindness Towards Some Means Callousness Towards Others”](#) *Hidden Brain*, 8 June 2020. [Audio, 54 min]
- [“Notice the Rage; Notice the Silence”](#) *On Being with Krista Tippett*, guest Resmaa Manekem, 4 June 2020. [Audio, 51 min]
- [“Metta Meditation with Kazu Haga”](#) *Irresistible Podcast*, 31 Mar 2020. [Audio, 20 min]

Websites and toolkits

- [National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#): network bringing people together across divides to discuss, decide, and take action together effectively on tough issues.
- [Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit](#)
- [Centre for Intercultural Dialogue](#):
- [Beyond Intractability](#)
- [“Conflict Transformation”](#) by John Paul Lederach
- [What is Essential](#)
- [Intergroup Resources](#)
- [Mediate.com](#) (USA)
- [The Black Curriculum](#) (UK)
- [Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation](#) (Germany) offers a continuously updated online publication platform for academics and practitioners to review the state of the field, discuss new ideas and exchange experiences in the field of conflict transformation.
- [Race Forward](#) (USA)
- [Antiracist Resources and Reads: Lists for All Ages](#) by the Evanston Public Library (USA)
- [Training for Change](#)

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