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Initiating the Dialogue

Like inchworms measuring the marigold, we humans are slowly leading ourselves through a millennium experience. People who like to articulate their perceptions of this progression reflect individual propensities toward optimism, indifference, or despair. These combine to unveil a collective sense of the times, and the conflicts we feel about the times. The dialogue initiated in this book is embedded in these times.

Whether we are concerned about the small and large wars among nations, the destruction of the ecosystem, the decline of civility, the escalation of violence in our communities, the impact of stress in our jobs, or the struggles we each experience in our families and our intimate relationships, we all face conflict. Most of us would like to resolve our conflicts a bit more creatively. Thus, in one way or another, we turn to conflict resolution for aid, and perhaps for hope.

No human device provides all we might hope for. Each is flawed in the same way we humans are flawed, reflecting our limitations and sometimes perpetuating them. Conflict resolution is no different. It is a valuable but limited human device. The discovery of limits inevitably emerges from the lived experiences of those who test such a device. Since this book invites you to a dialogue about a specific limit of conflict resolution, it seems appropriate to first describe my vantage point as the author.

Every book approaches its topic from a given vantage point. This may be stated or unstated. I have elected to state mine, to the best of my ability, with some degree of candor. This decision comes from years of reading books written by people who do not state or acknowledge their vantage point and sometimes even try to hide it.

Unacknowledged vantage points are often a source of conflict or confusion. Frequently authors are unable to differentiate their vantage point from those of others because they genuinely believe that their vantage point is the only available or valid one. They may also be a bit anxious about their vantage point. They may feel that others may challenge or disagree with it. If they really need it to be the only valid one, this can be pretty frightening for the author.

I have a distinct advantage. I know that this is only my vantage point. I do, however, think it is a meaningful one and have learned that it can be useful to others. I think this with enough conviction that I have taken the time to write a book about it. But I do not need it to prevail. I am hoping to start a conversation, not elicit agreement or win an argument. I am certain that others will have myriad ideas that will enhance what I have to say. I think some suggestions will clarify my thinking more, and I know that this is to my advantage. If I say the things I have to say as clearly as I can from my vantage point, others might better connect with my worldview, and that will also be to my advantage. As you read further in this book, you will discover that this is just one of the advantages that emerge from learning how to constructively be at an uneven table.

On Getting Situated

A vantage point is really a metaphorical device for clarifying a position; as Einstein revealed, what I see depends on where I'm at. In this sense, my position is clarifying. It has been my experience that actually the only place I can be is where I am, and being clear about where I am enables me to better understand where other people are. But I am somewhere, and that location makes a difference.

From a vantage point, I can survey the terrain called “reality.” As with any other unique human, some things will capture my attention more than others; I will elect to focus on some things more intently. I also may completely fail to focus on some realities. I further bring my personal set of characteristics to the terrain called “reality,” and these serve as lenses and filters, in much the same way as one “sees” through a camera lens.

As I describe my vantage point, both the choices of focus I have made and the lenses and filters I use are important. They are so intertwined that distinguishing one from the other is a bit artificial, but I will attempt to do so here for purposes of clarity. My focus leads to a set of premises that have shaped this book; my lenses and filters are the personal characteristics that have provided tonal hues to my observations and my descriptions of what I have seen.

Sharpening the Focus: The Premises of This Book

The most compelling premise of this book is that the resolution of human conflicts is a moral enterprise that is the responsibility of every human. To not pursue the creative and constructive resolution of human conflict is to knowingly and deliberately further divisiveness and the harms such divisiveness creates. Norman Cousins, in a legacy to the culture he so valued, wrote a book shortly before he died called *The Pathology of Power* (1987), an analysis of our nuclear arsenals and their dangers. His final words in that book capture this moral imperative: “Beyond the clamor of clashing ideologies and the preening and jostling of sovereign tribes, a safer and more responsible world is waiting to be created” (p. 208).

This observation points to my second premise: we humans have conflicts over many things, and we do not always engage in conflict because of dominance power concerns. This focus is important, because it points to a systematic bias that seems to pervade analyses of conflict and conflict resolution. That bias, simply stated, is an overattention to a single concept: power as control of something

or someone, as dominance, as the ascendance of one's self-will. In this book, I have called this concept dominance power.

Although the propensity for pursuing opportunities to exercise dominance power is a significant human trait, if one focuses on it to the near exclusion of all others, one does not capture other dimensions of interest and importance to persons involved in conflict. Indeed, dominance power concerns tend to focus on a somewhat less evolved and more exploitative dimension of what it means to be a human. This bias tends to distort not only the analysis of conflicts but also the assumptions about the desired outcomes of participants.

Conflict resolution as a field of endeavor, laboring under this distortion, harbors a threat to its own real promise. It runs the risk of allowing room only for conflicts that fit its bias, and dismissing those who question this bias. The implicit risk is one of vacuousness, superficiality, and stasis. This benefits no one.

A somewhat more troublesome premise that flows from this is the assertion that persons who reveal these distortions and misconceptions are often dismissed and discounted because there is a vested interest in denying these issues and in sustaining current dominant power structures and assumptions. Those who wish to bring conflicts to a sound resolution, like all humans, wish to succeed, to be proven correct, just, righteous. To be confronted by one's biases can and often does evoke mere defensiveness, feigned agreement, or withdrawal, rather than an honest appraisal of the multiple realities present in a situation.

My final premise is that an unacknowledged overemphasis on dominance power leads to the persistent creation of unacknowledged uneven tables. Dominance power by its very nature assumes that some persons will dominate others. To the degree that such relationships are socially structured and sanctioned, they will be created, recreated, and reinforced during conflict resolution negotiations. Hence, conflict resolution efforts may actually serve to exacerbate conflict, supporting socially structured and sanctioned inequities

based on dominance power. I believe that revealing these distortions and misconceptions is meritorious, even if not initially welcome.

One way of revealing these is to describe how people accommodate such distortions and misconceptions in ways that are either constructive or harmful. The latter unveil the costs of ignoring the problem and demonstrate how conflict resolution efforts may actually increase conflict. The former provide some avenues of exploration that may reveal a potential path out of a potential morass. This book, which emerges from the premises I have just recorded, is an attempt to engage in a revealing dialogue of this nature.

Revisiting the Premises

In preparing the second edition of this book, I revisited and reflected upon these premises. Several years of teaching and training others have actually intensified my convictions about the premises. Indeed, it seems sometimes that they were actually understated. In a culture where “power” tends to mean “power to control others,” imagining other types of power seems elusive. Understanding the concept of dominance power is easy; catching oneself perpetuating it as a behavior pattern is more difficult.

I have therefore searched for mechanisms to help people imagine other kinds of power. I have further explored and refined my own definition, describing power as “life energy” in an effort to focus on the primary meaning of power: self-agency, the capacity to act, to have an influence.

What has startled me is the degree to which many people cling to a single concept of power, the one that focuses on “control over others.” What is perhaps more sobering is the frequent assumption that such dominance power is actually a type of entitlement, accompanied by intense emotion when threats to this control present themselves. The response is often attacking, full of rage, sometimes vengeful. This too has become part of my dialogue with others, and in the years since initial publication of this book I have learned that open discussion

about the loss of dominance power as entitlement can evoke far more destructive emotions than I might originally have indicated.

I say this primarily in the interest of honesty. Articulating the nature of uneven tables for persons who not only are unaware of their nature, but also are interested in never facing their impact has proven instructive. I think I better understand the persistence of sustaining uneven tables, not merely as habit but also as vested interest. It is one thing to negotiate at an uneven table; it is quite another to publicly reveal its nature to persons who believe themselves entitled to maintain inequity. My experiences have thus led to the addition of some heretofore unstated premises.

Uneven tables often exist because individuals have very personal vested interests in creating and sustaining them, and attach these interests to perceptions of personal entitlement. When this is the case, unveiling deliberate inequity can evoke persistent and sometimes volatile interpersonal violence. It probably needs to be said, even though it doesn't feel like good news. Perhaps it is not only a premise, but also a caveat.

Fear of this potential interpersonal violence can motivate disadvantaged persons at the uneven table to prefer conflict avoidance, to consent to compromise and adaptation, even when it is contrary to their own best interests and the interests of others. They can also align themselves with those claiming entitlement, join forces with them in one fashion or another, and then seek to sustain the status quo. This complicates the work of persons at an uneven table who have seated themselves in the interest of creative conflict resolution. This too is both premise and caveat.

Perceived entitlement counts, especially when it is threatened.

Acknowledging the Lenses

In 1994, I noted that in addition to these premises, my vantage point as the author of this book is also shaped by who I am, by my specific traits and characteristics. Several of these are germane when

one considers negotiating at uneven tables, when one acknowledges the overattention in this country to dominance power, and when one attempts to make distinctions between constructive and harmful models of conflict resolution. My vantage point is that of a person who has been on “both sides” of the imbalanced distribution of dominance power, one who has made the errors of both sides, and one who has had the opportunity to experience and value the strengths and opportunities of both sides.

I am a person with European-American, Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman roots raised in a culture dominated by these exact perspectives and values. They are familiar to me, and I grew up assuming not only that they were the right ones, but that they were virtually the only ones, all others being distortions or errors. More specifically, my roots are German American, Roman Catholic, and Midwestern United States. Even writing this makes me feel sort of stereotypically wholesome, like homemade bread and the Fourth of July.

I am also a woman, raised in a culture dominated by values of forced gender structuring, where being a woman was largely that which was not being a man. I was taught that a man was a superior entity in what the culture valued most: agency and control. My life experiences and education have been largely dominated by masculine perspectives—which are rarely called that. I am now fifty-eight years old. During my lifetime, I have experienced cataclysmic changes about what it means to be a woman in the United States, and therefore inevitably in what it means to be a man. These changes seem to me to have been, until recently, more actively initiated by women than by men.

I am a professional academic, enjoying all the status and privileges awarded the scholar in U.S. society. I have significant opportunities to know, learn, and discover and view these as beneficial and personally enriching. I take great pleasure in both the teaching and the creating elements of academe and believe I am involved in worthwhile work.

I am a professional nurse, embracing membership in one of the most gender-structured, systematically exploited, and oppressed occupational groups in the United States. I believe nurses engage in one of the most profound services given to humans. I take enormous pride in knowing I am a member of this cadre of powerful, caring persons who truly make a difference in the quality and meaning of human existence. I also believe few occupational groups have experienced so much institutionalized and socially sanctioned injustice.

The years between the first and second editions of this book have seen cataclysmic change in health care in the United States. As I am writing, the most serious nursing shortage in my career is unfolding. Current studies demonstrate that the “downsizing” of hospitals during the 1990s has shortened patient length of stay, keeping only the very sick as patients, while concurrently introducing massive layoffs of the registered nurses who care for these very sick patients. This process, variously described as the reengineering or redesign of health care, purported to improve the health care delivery system. The resultant layoffs, a cost-saving “quick fix” often neglectful of the impact on the well-being of patients, created even more untenable working conditions for the nurses who remained. Many nurses, both those who were retained and those who were not, simply left nursing.

Recently, the impact this “reduction in force” had in terms of errors, accidents, and harm to patients has been documented. Hospitals simply have too few professional nurses, with staffing often well below safety levels. Increasingly, patients cannot be admitted to hospitals because there are no nurses to care for them. The result is poorer, less safe, and often more insensitive patient care. Fewer people wish to be nurses, looking at the career patterns that seem inevitable: “mandatory” overtime, excessive workloads, undervaluation of contribution, chronic discounting of expertise, inadequate pay for responsibilities assumed, limited job satisfiers. Nurses who were “downsized out” are certainly not interested in returning to this chaos. The table has become more uneven than it was in 1994.

I note this because it has increased my sense of urgency about what I have to say here. It is an urgency that will increasingly be experienced by every person who is hospitalized in the United States. This “update” seems noteworthy.

As my comments indicate, the conflicts in these “givens” of my life are substantial, but the conflicts themselves have taught me a great deal, often through trial and error, with more mistakes than I can at this point chronicle. I have learned to value these conflicts, however, because they have called forth in me a commitment to courage, self-honesty, and learning that I might not have acquired without the conflicts. They have sometimes fatigued me but have not permitted me to indulge in prolonged periods of sloth. They have stretched and thus enriched me—even the ones that enraged or frustrated me the most. And they have given me opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment that I might not have known had I lived a more naturally harmonious set of givens.

Thus, my vantage point in writing this book is that of a person awarded some privileges due to my membership in dominant cultures and groups, and not awarded some privileges due to my lack of membership in dominant cultures and groups. What living fifty-eight years has taught me is that both memberships have been invaluable, and both, ultimately, in many respects, are advantageous. What teaching others about this dual membership has taught me is that awareness comes slowly, often painfully, sometimes angrily. For many it has seemed like a flowering, a quantum leap of sorts, a thing of great beauty and joy. For some, it is a terror-filled discovery. For a few, it is a cause for rage.

It has become apparent to me that this dual membership has distinct advantages and makes me both intellectually and operationally bimodal, bilingual, and bifocal. Over time, I have learned that it has eventually led more often to being multimodal, multilingual, and multifocal. Once one is divested of the illusion of a belief in “the only right way,” the doors open to a myriad of ways, each with some truth and some distortion, all enabling clarity. Thus,

while there are substantive discomforts in dual memberships, there are also remarkable gains in terms of insight, education, opportunity, and personal growth.

Over time, this has developed in me a greater facility in seeing many sides of an issue. Indeed, eventually it has led me to be unable to do otherwise in the interest of personal integrity. It also makes it much harder for me to believe that I have the right answer, or that anyone else does. Finding meaning, discovering that which is of worth, becomes a searching process where everyone's help is welcome. Staying in dialogues becomes a priority.

This vantage point is obviously only one version of dual membership. It is, like most others, if explored creatively, useful. It can further dialogues across historically untraversed chasms between individuals and groups. Years of practical experience, both successes and failures, can refine these skills. I have thus learned not only what works but what doesn't work. This book is an attempt to share what these diverse experiences have taught me, to make them useful to others confronting the anomalous situation of being equal and unequal at the same time. It is my personal belief that this includes everyone.

Further Refining My Lenses

When I first wrote about uneven tables, I was struggling to describe experiences that were as real to me as my hands, yet often denied as real by others. I have since had hundreds of dialogues that assure me many share these experiences. This validation has been very positive for me, and I acknowledge this with gratitude.

I have also learned that my acknowledgment of the subtle impact of uneven tables on conflict resolution efforts seems congruent with some larger set of global shifts toward heightened communal consciousness, and it encourages me to have so many companions on the journey. These like-minded persons are a balm to me, as I try to live out my understanding of the challenge of intellectual integrity. I am grateful for their presence in my life.

Conversely, I am increasingly sobered by the violence, rage, and sense of impotence that seems to take possession of persons habituated to the advantages of uneven tables when that advantage diminishes. As these shifts continue, those with a deep sense of entitlement seem increasingly troubled. It warrants mentioning.

Observing persons who have a sense of entitlement has led me to explore some further dimensions of this topic that shed light on the impact on the entitled facing the loss of entitlement. These topics include the high cost of oppression for the oppressor, the depth of what I call the “victim-think” of the oppressed, the intensity of attachment to the secondary gains of conflict avoidance, and the impact of the shadow side of human personalities when that shadow is denied and projected onto others.

Perhaps for me the most interesting of these new explorations focuses on those persons at uneven tables who, to deal with their disadvantage, have embraced the values and behaviors of the advantaged in a derivative and imitative fashion. The “false entitlement” assumptions attached to such imitation of oppressors can make these persons even more violently opposed to change than the original oppressors were.

These added lenses have led me to begin to write a second book that builds on but goes beyond this one. It seemed important here to acknowledge that these additional lenses frame the pictures I now study and call my life, and the changes I have made in the second edition of this book.