

# Peace On Earth: Conflict Resolutions That Work To Bridge Divides

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Healing happens when we handle conflict in a healthy and transformative way.

## **Call to Action**

Roughly 30 years ago, notable voices began urging Americans to embrace a sustainable worldview of unity in diversity, recognizing our core oneness as a solution to an increasingly out-of-balance society. Success in this endeavor depends primarily on the “habits of the heart” of our citizens, developed in local milieus of families,

neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, voluntary associations, workplaces and public places where strangers gather.

## **Activating Answers**

While mainstream media often largely focuses on the negative aspects of conflict—discord, divisiveness, intolerance, violence, incivility, injustice, chaos and complex problems—a counter-movement is convening constructive conversations. Participants are initiating dialogue and deliberations intended to resolve conflicts and create cohesiveness, collaboration, cooperation and compromise among local factions that disagree on how to deal with everything from health care and social justice to environmental protection and climate science. Educational training materials and books are giving outdated models of conflict resolution a facelift.

In *The Revolution Where You Live: Stories from a 12,000 Mile Journey Through a New America*, Sarah Van Gelder devotes a chapter to a Greensboro, North Carolina, battle over a story about a deadly, racially charged incident from the city's recent past. She quotes James Lamar Gibson, a 20-something African-American activist and core organizer for the Counter Stories Project: "We've been stuck in an old conversation for a couple of decades. We want to have an army of people with restorative conversation skills, so we can get past the divisiveness and imagine together a different sort of Greensboro," he says. The project began with facilitator training, and then developed story circles in which residents were able to have the difficult discussions that don't ordinarily take place among the police, city council, churches and social agencies.

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A community is a group that can fight gracefully... Chaos is not just a state; it is an essential process of community development.

~Dr. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*

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Today's conflict resolution experts are discovering that conflict is an essential and powerful call for applying spiritual principles and exercising spiritual practices.

## **Provocative Questions**

“What if we considered conflict as a secret ally or a guidepost, showing us what really matters to us and how much we care? What if our intense emotions are sources of invincible energy, with the power to build the world we want, together? What does having conflict in a healthy and transformative way look like?” queries Ma’ikwe Ludwig, executive director of Commonomics USA, an organization which educates and advocates for a world where a commons-based economy creates economic and ecological security for all.

“Conflict has the power to bring to the surface what’s really at stake and to unite people toward a common goal,” advises Ludwig. Her thought-provoking questions can help shift perceptions toward the idea that we need to use conflict; maybe even welcome it.

Ludwig, author of *Together Resilient: Building Community in the Age of Climate Disruption*, recently helped present new perspectives on conflict resolution during a webinar for Transition US members interested in creating inclusive and diverse communities through collaboration. The nonprofit inspires, encourages, supports and provides networking and training for grassroots initiatives seeking to build community resilience in the face of such challenges as oil spills, climate change and economic crises.

Courtney Breese, managing director for the nonprofit National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) and her colleagues, together with thousands of innovative thinkers, are helping by introducing people to simple dialogue and deliberation structures, processes and resources that invite meaningful and productive conversations leading to constructive civic engagement. Breese remarks, “We’re open to working with anyone interested in learning processes that can help bridge divides. We also like sharing stories about what is working.”

## **Toolbox**

The group’s downloadable free tools help newcomers: A [beginner’s guide for exploring dialogue](#); a [how-to-guide for Conversation Café \(CC\) hosts](#); and the [American Library Association Libraries Transforming Communities: Models for Change Project](#). “To date, we’ve had at least 800 librarians participate in free NCDD webinars,” Breese notes.

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Conflict that has been suppressed goes underground, then  
boils up in tense situations.

~Ma’ikwe Ludwig

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CC is a simple tool useful in exploring difficult topics and provides a safe space to process different perspectives. “Initial agreement on basic rules includes suspending judgment while listening and seeking to understand others, refraining from persuading or converting and talking only from personal experience,” explains Breese.



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One new network member, J. Scott Wagner, author of *The Liberal's Guide to Conservatives*, speaks about the importance of using neutral language in dialogue. “I learned from him how words can be emotional triggers and signal one-sided perspectives, leaving some group members feeling angry or excluded because they feel the speaker won't be open to hearing their

perspective,” says Breese.

After three tours of the U.S. and hundreds of interviews with conservative individuals, Wagner, founder of the nonprofit Reach the Right, was inspired to use his knowledge of five arenas—neurology/cognitive psychology, personality, bias, social conformity and morality—to help progressives understand conservatives that are not only their political leaders, but also their relatives, partners, friends and managers.

He offers a simple explanation for anyone drenched in inaccurate biases. “We inherit unconscious genetic personality characteristics that lead us to develop our ideology, with which we construct our world and align with others that are in agreement. Differences in our personality characteristics are the culprits that create conflict.”

## **Community Needs Erase Enmity**

Drawing on 25 years of experience of enabling sworn enemies to create peace in places such as South Africa, Northern Ireland and Colombia, Adam Kahane, author of *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust*, shares insights into the “enemyfying syndrome” that instigates conflict.

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Intense emotions can become sources of invincible energy with the collective power to build the world we want.

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This habit of thinking and acting as if people we are dealing with are our enemies and the cause of our problems is all around us and dominates the media. "The enemies are always the others, 'those people'. Enemyfying, which feels exciting and satisfying—even righteous and heroic—usually obscures, rather than clarifies, the reality of the challenges we face. It amplifies conflicts, narrows the space for problem solving and creativity, and distracts us with unrealizable dreams of decisive victory from the real work we need to do," observes Kahane.

Kahane sees the challenge of conflict becoming more acute. "People today are generally more free, individualistic and diverse, with stronger voices and less deference. Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are growing." Yet, contrary to the common view, it is possible for people that hold contradictory positions to find ways to collaborate.

That's what he and 40 others representing military officers, guerrillas and paramilitaries; activists and politicians; businesspeople and trade unionists; landowners and farmers; and academics, journalists and young people, accomplished in the Destino Colombia project. They organized to contribute to ending their country's 52-year civil war.

### **Motivated to Act**

Jonathan Bender, founder of The Performance of Your Life, a public speaking and personal development business, has been on a lifelong quest of fostering personal growth and societal transformation. His therapeutic classes and workshops demonstrate how to connect, honor and deeply resonate with others, even if they have different worldviews, and how to listen and hear in the same way we want to be heard.

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Acknowledging the adrenalin rush that's a common response to fear of conflict, Bender says, "When we learn to be mindful and speak from our entire body, rather than just

from our head, we notice that the voice resonates and originates from a much bigger place. This teaches us to cultivate greater awareness of our emotions and how we express them.

"Begin by acknowledging an emotion, and then reduce its intensity through slow, deep breaths, paying attention to the correlating physical sensation. Shifting our focus back to the heart allows us to recognize parts of ourselves in the stories of others and come to understand that our personal history is the filter through which we 'enemyfy,'" says Bender, who speaks and presents publicly, educating audiences and clients about the universally challenging performances of everyday life.

According to Robert Atkinson, Ph.D., author of *The Story of Our Time: From Duality to Interconnectedness to Oneness*, today's rugged individualism amid conflicts comprises a crisis of consciousness. "No longer can we settle only on seeing things in opposition to one another; we need to shift our consciousness to be able to see the parts coming together in a new whole. Accepting the oneness of humanity as a biological fact, a social necessity and a spiritual reality will lead us further along our journey toward lasting world peace."

His observation fits with what Joanna Macy, author and scholar of Buddhism and deep ecology, believes is the call of our time: "As planetary citizens, we are being called to wake up together."