

# The Heart of Restorative Dialogue

By Ted Lewis June 2020

At the 'heart' of restorative dialogue is the human heart-zone. We use the language of the heart metaphorically when we speak about emotional connections or disconnections, and there is a good reason for this: our physical hearts are truly affected by harms and conflicts. Stress raises our blood pressure and our hearts pound faster. Our breathing also tenses up. We literally heat up.

Human conflict is inevitable; it is part of our social world. It happens to the best of people and from the best of people. Friction happens when two things rub against each other in opposite directions. The same can happen between two people or two groups. This rubbing, on a deeper energetic level, affects human hearts and lungs. From this rubbing, an extra charge of negativity is loosed into the air as when storm clouds rub against each other. Reflexively we protect ourselves.

How we respond makes all the difference in the world! We can either lessen the friction or magnify it. The relational rubbing between us and another can generate more internal rubbing within our own thoughts and feelings. I call this primary and secondary rubbing. Secondary rubbing is the sort of thing that keeps us awake at night. We mull over every detail in the head-zone, feeling in the right and feeling slighted by others. But if we are completely honest, we know our hearts are overburdened, hurt, or ill-at-ease, and we want the rubbing to cease. We want inner peace of mind.

Now here's the *rub* to this whole topic. When we are affected by a conflict with another or by a harm caused by another, the heated friction we feel does not exist in isolation. It is often linked to a thread of past irritations or hurts that can sometimes regroup within ourselves, prompting in us a response that may seem, to others, quite out of proportion to the present situation. A mindless response can also be called a reaction.

Over time, everyone develops a default style of response, the two most basic ones being Fight or Flight (and if you are like a rabbit, you Freeze). All of these responses are protective: we don't want to be hurt. This applies either to someone victimized who does not want to be re-victimized, or to one who caused harm who does not want to receive any reprisal-based harm. In the conflict realm, people generally strengthen their defensive or offensive postures. Our shields and force-fields go up!

One way to think about the biblical concept of sin in this relational context is that our sinning stems from our inability to respond to conflict and harm in ways that bring redemption, but rather bring more difficulty and separation. This is precisely why certain problems intensify and escalate over time. In a group setting, everyone plays some sort

of role in contributing to climates of anxiety. Through word, thought, or deed, we default to sin-responses more than love-responses. The result is the construction of more walls and less bridges.

I can empathize with you if you have a negative reaction to the concept of 'sin' being woven into this discussion. You might think, "If someone who is abused by another is truly traumatized from that event, let alone, a string of previous events, how can you talk about that person's response having anything to do with sin?" The same could be said for people with righteous anger about larger systemic injustices. Sin lies with the oppressor but certainly not with the oppressed!

The biblical tradition, however, complexifies this issue because it combines what I call two solidarities. The Bible shows a profound solidarity with offending humanity as well as a profound solidarity with victimized humanity. It conveys an understanding of the human condition as being composed of both wounding and wounded natures. And it also holds people free and response-able to participate in their own journeys of formation and healing.

In this complexified view (which removes all finger-pointing), we begin to see the intersectionality of all offending behaviors with histories of pain and victimization. If you think about where an individual's sinning stems from, is it ever isolated from their patterned responses to conflict and harm that are stirred up by unhealed pain from the past? Is it possible that one thing that unites all humanity is that all of our offending and defending actions spring out of a deeper reservoir of unhealed pain for which other people also bear responsibility? Are we not all, at some level, a combination of victim survivor and habitual offender?

Once we recognize that under all human sin is human pain, we begin to recognize the cyclical nature of conflicts and harms. Those cycles are so difficult to step out of; people in the recovery world, however, know this very well. They understand how their own offending addictive behaviors are enmeshed with earlier experiences of victimization, either at the hands of others or themselves. By allowing their inner offender and inner victim to have open dialogue with each other, they can begin to take steps on the road of healing and restoration.

### **Restorative Dialogue in the Heart-Zone**

It is natural for us to protect ourselves from harm in the aftermath of a conflict or interpersonal harm. Mistrust in the other person or persons serves us well to avoid more entanglement and hurt. But given all of the friction and rubbing and loose electricity in the air, the real question is: Can we continue to live well in this state? Can we coexist

with others in our community when such tensions and separations are so real? And more to the point, can we sleep well at night?

Ultimately, the journey toward resolution or reconciliation begins with the desire to have inner peace of mind. If our thoughts are dominated by anger or resentment or fear or even self-blame, we know that this is not a sustainable situation. Our initial impetus, therefore, follows our own self-interest: we move toward resolving conversation because it will be good for us. And so we take a calculated risk that coming into a place of greater vulnerability will lead to greater strengthening.

Due to the high mistrust that comes with the prospect of meeting others for unpredictable dialogue, it makes sense that third-party facilitators play a key role to be “brokers of trust.” Trust often elicits financial metaphors, such as when we talk about “earning trust.” Given the “debit of trust” that both harmed and harming people have, the only possible way they will consider a process of joint dialogue is if they can draw on a “credit of trust.” Without a sufficient degree of re-gained trust, no one would take the risk to enter a restorative conversation.

By meeting with people in preparatory settings, facilitators help them to regain trust in the facilitator and in the process. That “credit of trust” is like a joint bank account which can be accessed in a joint process when a participant begins to regain trust in the other party. Facilitators model the best in communication dynamics -- deep listening, acknowledgment, open questions, validation, reframing, etc. -- as a way to evoke the best within a person who is preparing for a hard but healing conversation.

Once parties are ready to come together for joint dialogue, either to discuss a mutual conflict or harm, facilitators make it easy (‘facile’ in French) for both sides to share what they need to share, hear what they need to hear, and respond as they need to respond. In the best of conversations, facilitators get out of the way, allowing for both sides to have direct conversation with each other. But when tensions remain, facilitators take the time to help parties reach new levels of understanding and empathy for what the other has experienced.

Let’s back up a bit. If two people who are not on good speaking terms with each other have enough inner trust and strength, and feel like the risk of resolution is not too high, then they do not need a third-party helper to assist. They can choose directly to have a heart-to-heart conversation to ‘get everything out in the open’ and thereby ‘put things to rest.’ We all have had this kind of conversation with friends and family members. We are rightly nervous at first to enter the conversation, but by the end we are feeling much better, and we are very glad we took the risk. Chances are, one or both people made an apology, which allowed the built-up negative feelings to dissipate.

## **Shift Happens!**

In the same way that a two-person, heart-to-heart talk usually leads to a shift from tense feelings to relaxed feelings, the same can happen in dispute mediation or restorative dialogue. Once people have had the chance in a dignified way to say and hear all that they need to say and hear, and once they feel like they have been understood and heard well by the other, there is a human connection or bond that happens which transforms the previous mistrust into a new relational trust.

This shift happens in the heart-zone. Whereas the head-zone keeps track of all the details of why the other person was in the wrong and you are in the right, or why the other person is fully responsible and therefore they deserve a harsh outcome, the heart-zone tunes into the deeper humanity of the other person. This is why an apology is like a verbal gift that bridges over the details of what happened, and makes the relational connection more important than anything else. Once people feel connected to each other, it is almost impossible for earlier negative sentiments to have a place to stand.

This concept of a “verbal gift exchange” is very important in restorative dialogue. There is a reciprocal dynamic here that helps people move from a place of mistrust to new trust. One person will give the gift of honesty about taking ownership for a choice. The other feels good about hearing that and then offers an empathetic comment about the life experience of the other. These bridge-building statements build upon each other and eventually both parties feel a satisfaction with how much they have discussed. This is a beautiful expression of people moving from reactivity to responsivity.

Once all the storytelling and impact discussion and understanding (as described above) has taken place, and facilitators sense that a heart-shift has happened, the discussion can naturally glide into a future-focused realm. Only when the past and present have been fully discussed in ways that bring about a human heart connection between parties, can they jointly move forward to discuss solutions or reparations. You can't talk about the future if you are still stuck in the past! When people are more relaxed and trusting with each other, they can then create mutual, practical agreements for ensuring a better future.

## **From a Jumble of Thoughts to a New Simple Peace**

So far we have seen how conflicts and harms naturally put people in protective zones that can sometimes create additional tensions and rubs that make it challenging for anyone to remain in that protective place. We have also seen how the prospect of inner peace can drive a person forward to take risks, seek new trust, and participate in the work of resolution. Finally, we considered how bridge-building dialogue can lead to a

shift point where both sides have been satisfied *in the dialogue* before they even discuss practical settlements.

The resulting inner peace that was first desired is not the only peace obtained. There is also a relational peace that results from the unexpected connections made in the humanizing dialogue process. Relational peace is simply another term for reconciliation. It does not need to be an expected outcome, but when it happens, it is a true gift. What often happens, too, is that the initial self-interest to find personal peace of mind gets re-narrated as a common-interest for everyone to have peace of mind, and for the relationship to possibly have a new life.

One way to chart this restorative process is to map the transition from one's Protectiveness to one's Openness. When we feel threatened by a difficult situation, and the rubbing is sustained both relationally and internally, our thoughts and feelings are often jumbled up together in a cacophony of discordant sounds. This itself is a form of discomfort which can drive us toward the need for peace of mind. Our minds are restless, full of ghost-like thoughts that flit in and out, all waiting for resolution.

Even when we have been prepared for joint dialogue with another party, our minds, at the beginning part of the meeting, can be somewhat disoriented with many thoughts moving in and out of our consciousness. Close proximity to the other party is enough to set all those mental particles into an energetic frenzy. We are still affected by past rubs that are troublesome precisely because the rubbing is still going on in the present! And yet, here we sit to work things out.

A good facilitator recognizes how this jumble is commonplace at the front-end of a process. Being a calm, non-anxious presence is vital to help offset the impact of this jumble. Slowly, the facilitator encourages a distilling process that lifts out the most essential things to be said and heard. The 'legion' of thoughts no longer have sway over the brain; through focused discussion, thoughts are simplified and articulated in clear, empowering ways.

In trainings, I often encourage facilitators to press the Pause and Mute buttons on their internal remotes. By creating spaces of stillness and silence, people can more easily hear within themselves the most needful things to say, and they can also more easily hear from the other person the most needful things to understand. Note how listening is the antidote to the former cacophony of internal noise. But to get to listening, there needs to be a slowing down, a quieting of the jumbled thoughts.

At some point in the joint dialogue there is what I call a moment of *incubative silence* in which the New is birthed. This is when one person has an 'ah ha' moment, discovering one key idea that drives home a new realization; or they might have an 'ah' moment,

feeling thankful for something they have heard. In either case, something new has been heard from the other that opens up a new vista of understanding, thus helping the receiver to shift forward in the process.

The head is certainly active throughout all of the dialogue, but it is in the heart-zone that people feel something special happening. This is the zone where relationships find their bonds. The heart and the brain, of course, are directly connected, and the mystery of a positive dialogue is that once that heart-to-heart connection has been made, the restless and noisy jumbles in our thinking comes to an end. The secondary rubbings caused internally by own clash of thoughts and feelings no longer have a foundation that sustains them.

The blessing of the whole process is that our bodies feel better when the hard things of the past are put to rest. We breathe more easily, our hearts are more relaxed, and we no longer feel the same tensions in our muscles. We are no longer on guard, no longer protective, and the more often we experience this liberation, the more we are apt to take risks in the future to resolve things with others sooner than later.

**(Author note: while the context of this article focuses on small scale processes, and gives examples between two people, the same principles apply to larger group and communal processes. Those larger processes can be more multi-layered, presenting greater opportunities (communal wisdom and support) but also greater challenges (varied levels of protectiveness vs. openness)).**