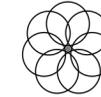


and/or warped by the onslaught of Western ways and chaotic warfare, something that was later suggested by traditional African healers I would meet in India.

Common Humanity ~ Awakening Compassion



Love and compassion are not luxuries, they are necessities.

Without them, humankind cannot survive.

— His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama

Susan Collin Marks, the senior vice president at Search for Common Ground and a long-time peacebuilder from South Africa, once reminded me that most conflicts in the world were handled peacefully or at least nonviolently, a fact easily forgotten when traveling to war-torn countries or watching the evening news.

Another core principle Susan taught was that conflict was neither negative nor positive. If approached constructively, conflict could be an engine of growth and transformation. If approached destructively, conflict could cause tremendous suffering.

I reflected on these principles for years, trying to see how they fit with my meditation practice and exposure to other spiritual traditions. I also wondered how spiritual teachings related to the level of violence that took place in Sierra Leone and in other countries, such as Rwanda.

Separation: A Root Cause of Conflict

On one level, yes, conflict was a natural result of differences — differences of opinions, political parties, religions, etc. From a yoga perspective, it went much deeper: conflict was integral to the very fabric of the universe. A senior member of the Kriya Yoga community in Virginia, Gene, helped me understand this idea. An engineer and scientist by training, Gene enjoyed talking about yoga in terms of consciousness and energy, and often quoted yoga texts about the *gunas*, or qualities that make up the physical universe.

The three gunas are: *sattva*, *tamas*, and *rajas*. Sattva is the positive attribute that influences toward good — truth, purity, and spirituality. Tamas is the negative attribute that influences toward darkness or evil — untruth, inertia, and ignorance. Rajas is the neutral attribute, the activating quality working on sattva to suppress tamas or on tamas to suppress sattva, creating a constant activity and motion.

The concept of the three gunas was consistent with themes and stories told throughout the ages by different cultures about how good and evil were constantly in battle. Gene brought it to the scientific level, highlighting the composition of subatomic particles of energy and consciousness, that the positive and negative are required in order to have movement. He also talked about how the universe was expanding and contracting at the same time; how God had created everything (expansion) yet was drawing it back (contraction). He described this dynamic in terms of laws of gravity and love, the power drawing everything back, to Source, or God, and that ultimately love would prevail. Thus, love was the strongest force in the universe.

People were born with more sattva or tamas qualities depending on where they were in the cycles of death and rebirth, in their own evolution. In yoga, the idea was to use sattva, the positive, to pull out tamas, the negative, and then pull out rajas, the motion. Final liberation comes when throwing out sattva, too — God, or Cosmic Consciousness, was beyond the duality of positive and negative and was changeless, at least as told by the yogis and other saints who had fully merged with Cosmic Consciousness.

Bringing it all down to individuals, a person was born into this realm of duality and then subjected to the positive and negative, and the dynamic between the two. A resulting source of conflict for people was the ego — a soul's identification with the thoughts, emotions, body — and its emotional reactions to the inevitable changes of the phenomenal universe. In this sense, conflict was a natural result of the soul's deluded sense of separation from God, and conflict was an integral part of the spiritual journey.

Tara Brach, the psychologist and Buddhist meditation instructor in the Washington, DC area, explained this sense of separation by saying we identify with our thoughts and emotions, and then believe they are real. This belief starts a process whereby we separate from others and everything around us. With separation comes fear, which in turn gives rise to the “wanting self” (i.e., I want to be happy and avoid suffering). Everyone on the planet has this basic operating software package running — we are all trying to rearrange a constantly changing world to avoid suffering and get what we want.

Conflict is inevitable, as a result. It also is a natural part of the human experience, as we bump into other people trying to avoid suffering and create happiness. A child wants a toy to be happy and will fight with another child to get it, adolescents struggle over identity and romantic relationships, and adults continue the drama with even more involved conflicts. The mere process of surviving — food, water, and shelter — can create conflicts of its own, especially where there is rampant poverty and/or natural disasters. Also, in a warped way, the people who sold AK-47s and RPGs to the rebels in Sierra Leone were doing so to make money so they could be happy.

Meanwhile, humans are governed by spiritual laws, including free will; cause and effect, or karma; and a more subtle law, evolution. Often, free will is usurped by emotions, societal expectations, cultural norms, or subconscious patterns, whether from this life or another one. Still, we slowly learn by trial and error, and by reaping the fruits of our actions, how to choose behaviors that benefit us and those we love. In this way, we evolve.

I kept asking: *how did the horrible violence happen in Sierra Leone, or the genocide in Rwanda* (a country I visited too)? Sure, there could be individual and collective karmic reasons that go back lifetimes, or collective unconscious forces at play, but those realms were beyond my immediate comprehension. All that kept coming up was that, when conflicts are handled destructively, fear becomes the driving force.

In Sierra Leone, it was hard to see the patterns of conflict as there were no clear ethnic, religious, or political divisions. Rather, there was a complete breakdown of civil society after decades of corruption, all while the country was caught in a web of international politics and economics, with opportunistic power struggles by malefactors like Charles Taylor and Foday Sankoh.

It was when I started to travel to Burundi and other countries that I started to see a pattern to many destructive conflicts. It seemed people become polarized, and that extreme positions drove the agendas. The people with the loudest voices often used fear as a tactic to unify their group against “the others.” As fear increased, people narrowed their multiple identities (such as father, mother, musician, artist, sports fan, farmer, teacher) down to just one — whether an ethnic group (“I’m a Hutu and you’re a Tutsi”), a religious sect (“I’m a Muslim and you’re a Jew”), or a political party (“I’m a Republican and you’re a Democrat”). Instead of seeing what they had in common, or what connected them, they saw only how they were different and what separated them. (In this sense, it was not so much religion that drove conflict as the human tendency toward dualistic and polarizing patterns of thinking.)

In Rwanda, this dynamic played out to an extreme level. In the early 1990s, radio programs amplified the fear and mistrust by fueling ethnic tension. As fear increased, people became more polarized, thinking in terms of “us and them.” Tutsis and Hutu moderates were identified as the problem. To get rid of the problem, the radical Hutus believed it was necessary to get rid of the Tutsis and even the moderate Hutus. As in all destructive conflicts, the aggressors created an atmosphere where it was possible to strike out and kill — first stereotype and then dehumanize “the others.” Thus, Tutsis were called dogs, since it was easier to kick a dog than a human. Then, they were called cockroaches, as it was easy to kill a cockroach.

I once heard a Jesuit priest quoted as saying, “I knew evil existed when I saw a wave of killing come over the hill.” Just imagining the collective fear that mobilized the killing reminded me of Dean Radin’s research on entangled minds, where thoughts from one person were picked up by others, and how they leveraged the collective unconscious. In Rwanda’s case, people’s thoughts and consciousness formed a mass frenzy of fear, allowing the collective group consciousness to become a channel for universal *tamas* (negative consciousness) to manifest on the physical plane.

By exploring this dynamic, I was reminded of what Mickey had told me when I was searching for a spiritual path: “You have it set up in dualism already.” There was a human tendency to think dualistically — us/them, good/bad, either/or, etc. John Marks, the president of Search for Common Ground, liked to say, “When it is either/or, it is usually both.” Dualistic thinking was a part of human consciousness; it stemmed from feeling separate from God/Universe/Spirit. When experiencing intense fear, human consciousness contracts around the small self, the ego, and goes into a survival mode. Dualism was part of the operating software package of humanity and fear and love, and contraction and expansion were some of its chief functionalities.

In yoga, fear dissolves and duality disappears when a person expands his or her consciousness, taps into the soul’s essence, and merges with Spirit, at least so I heard from yogis, though I had had only glimpses of such states of consciousness. Search for Common Ground was doing a similar process of helping people expand their identity to see their common humanity with “the other.” The idea was to expand the middle — the number of people who did see their commonality — and reduce the power and influence of the extreme positions. While leveraging common humanity was a core part of the work in Sierra Leone, the clearest example of moving beyond polarization and dualistic thinking was in Burundi.

The Voice of Hope

The Search for Common Ground program in Burundi started in 1995, a year after the genocide in Rwanda, and later became the inspiration for the programs in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The first time I went to Burundi, in 2003, I was nervous because the Rwanda genocide was such a hallmark of horror. But I was amazed to walk into the Search office and see a large team of people busily producing radio programs, all committed to working together. One of them was Adrien, a tall, soft-spoken man with deep, compassionate eyes. He was a Hutu; in his youth, Adrien took time off from school only to have his entire class massacred by Tutsis. In the office next to Adrien was Agnes, a powerful, robust Tutsi woman who had lost seventy-nine members of her family to the ethnic violence. Indeed, everyone on the staff had a story of personal loss, yet each was willing to take a stand, together, for a new way of resolving conflict.

Coming from a large family and having seen the impact of war on A.K.’s family and the Contehs, it was both mind- and heart-boggling to imagine working side by side with people from an ethnic group that committed atrocities against loved ones. Adrien, Agnes, and others across Africa became my teachers on the practical ways to embody compassion and love, and how to promote those values across multicultural societies.

Agnes, Adrien, and the other staff members were helping Burundians face their harsh realities together. The idea was to shift the focus from what separates people from their perceived enemies to what they have in common — their common humanity. In one sense, similar to yoga, this good work was moving souls back toward union.

Again, the *common ground approach* was based on an implicit trust in the human spirit. When there is recognition of common humanity, innate spiritual qualities of tolerance, compassion, forgiveness, and love can be awakened. With these positive human qualities present, it is easier for people to shift their mindset. A new consciousness arises, one where they can start to discern that the “others” are not the problem, but rather that they may share similar problems, such as poverty, corruption, or political manipulation. From there, it is possible to face problems together instead of attacking each other. In essence, the approach was similar to a meditation practice: help a person move beyond fear, expand their identity or consciousness, and experience a sense of oneness or connection with other people and nature. This process opens people to their innate spiritual potential and allows

them to tap into collective creativity and possibly higher states of consciousness to identify win-win solutions.

In a sense, Adrien, Agnes, and the others were introducing positive, or sattvic, thinking into a tense, negative, tamas, environment. Many motivational speakers and spiritual teachers talk about the power of positive thinking and positive affirmations. Some spiritual teachers say if you want to reduce the power of negative influences, do not battle the negative; rather, increase the positive. Paramahansa Yogananda often said, “Change your thoughts if you wish to change your circumstances.”⁷ This sounded idealistic when a society was facing potential genocide, but that was exactly what our staff in Burundi were doing — helping an entire society to begin thinking it was possible to peacefully coexist.

It was profoundly inspiring to see these universal principles around consciousness in action to inspire societal shifts.

One of the Search radio programs produced in Burundi was a radio soap opera called *Our Neighbors, Ourselves*. It told the story of a Hutu family living next to a Tutsi family. Like all good soap operas, it was filled with laughter, tragedies, drama, and love affairs. Through more than one thousand episodes, the program helped rehumanize Hutus and Tutsis to each other by highlighting what they had in common. Nearly 90 percent of the population listened to the show. Adrien told me it had become so popular that during a break in programming, a general in the army came to our office and demanded a copy of the next episode! He said his men were anxiously waiting to hear what happened next.

Our Neighbors, Ourselves was creating a story where Hutus and Tutsis were living peacefully side by side, much different from the story that came out of Rwanda in 1994. The core message of *Our Neighbors, Ourselves* was pretty close to: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Without using any religious references or overtones, Adrien, Agnes, and other staff were modeling behaviors taught by the great spiritual traditions and they helped reweave the social tapestry of their society with compassion and love.

Heroes: What You Appreciate Appreciates

Another radio program in Burundi was called *Pillars of Humanity*, or *Heroes*, which featured the stories of people who had risked their own lives to save the lives of others. One of the radio producers told me people were initially hesitant to tell their own story out of fear of retribution from their own families and communities. But over time, the radio program began to catch on and develop a following.

In this sense, *Heroes* was an example of wherever you place your focus, that was where your energy and consciousness went; or, what you appreciate appreciates. On a deeper level, *Heroes* was tapping into the collective unconscious and awakening the idea of a hero as someone showing compassion. In this sense, it was changing the story behind the predominant story. This program was taking the same concepts of healing and transformation that could be applied by individuals and doing it on a societal level.

On the tenth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, our team sponsored an historic three-day Heroes Summit, where people from across Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, and even Nigeria gathered to tell their stories of helping one another in times of crises and to discuss their visions for peace and reconciliation. The summit was broadcast live on national radio and was carried by a number of media sources.

There also were Playback Theater performances, where actors recounted the stories of individuals. One story told was about a Hutu woman who had hidden her Tutsi neighbor in a field, protecting her from the Hutu militia. Once the militia passed, her brother tried to escort the woman to safety but they were caught by a Tutsi mob that killed her brother because he was a Hutu. The woman was labeled a traitor by her own family. When she watched the actors tell her story, she sobbed, believing she had done the right thing.

Over the course of three days, many such stories were told, stories of people bringing incredible courage and compassion at great risk to themselves. Their bravery was acknowledged during the summit. A colleague who was the director of the studio was quoted in a report, “There is an inspiring face of Burundi that has been hidden from the world. The Summit has been a celebration of humanity.”

Facing Problems Together

A key part of the common ground approach was not to advocate for any sides or positions; rather, it was all about process. In this sense, common ground was sacred space, as it created the opportunity for humanity — stuck in cycles of polarization and duality — to experience itself in new ways and to shift dynamics from spiraling downward into cycles of violence to spiraling upward into new levels of cooperation.

The purpose of *Our Neighbors, Ourselves, Heroes*, and the other radio programs, together with the music festivals and other activities, was to help people reconnect with their common humanity and to awaken qualities such as compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, and even love for once-perceived enemies. There was endless

creativity that had been engaged to find culturally appropriate ways to help people rediscover their commonalities.

Once this base of common humanity was established, and innate spiritual, or soul, qualities awakened, then it was possible for people to stand side by side to address shared problems. It is amazing the amount of ingenuity and creativity the human spirit can muster when channeled and focused harmoniously together on problems instead of battling one another. Shared problems, together with the natural laws of free will and cause-and-effect, ultimately force us to come together and evolve as individuals, communities, nations, and a species.

One of the clearest examples of facing problems together came from the youth in Burundi. Like Sierra Leone, Burundi had a problem of young people being manipulated for political violence. When I met some of the Burundi youth, they had already moved beyond their differences and were working on a range of activities, including organizing the music festivals.

How they got together, though, was an amazing story.

A film company had been engaging youth from two ethnic rival groups in Burundi in an attempt to bridge their differences. These Hutu and Tutsi youth groups had been responsible for horrendous violence and even murders. Both sides were given video cameras to document their lives and share their films with the other side. The two groups slowly learned about the plight of the other.

Our staff got involved in facilitating the exchanges, and over time, the youth in the two groups slowly started to see the similarities of their experiences: the loss of loved ones, the pain and the suffering, the poverty, and also the manipulation by political figures to incite fear.

When the leaders of the two groups were finally brought together in person, everything almost fell apart after they discovered that one leader's brother had been killed by the other leader. It took incredible skill to navigate the tensions and to help both to remember their shared experiences of pain and loss.

The dialogues continued, and the two youth groups were brought together to play soccer and to have sleepovers in a camp environment. On the first night, many participants almost did not sleep, out of fear of being killed by the other. Over time, the groups gained trust in each other.

They separated out the problem from "the other." They both were experiencing poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and, more importantly, manipulation by political figures to incite violence. Together they created ideas on how to address

shared problems. They all loved comic books, so they co-wrote a book about the realities they faced, expressed through fictional characters.

Through the help of our staff, the comic book was brought to the attention of the Minister of Education, who then worked with the youth to edit, publish, and distribute the book to schools across the country.

This was the first of several joint activities by the youth groups.

In looking at the experience of the Burundian youth and other examples I witnessed across Africa, it was clear that the process of helping people discover common ground began with creating a safe space for people to experience themselves in a new way. It required complete belief in the positive potential of humanity and dogged persistence and ingenuity. Once that space of common ground was created and trust gained, then it was possible to discern the shared problems. When facing those problems together, a collective consciousness would arise — again, thinking about Dean Radin's work on entangled minds and yoga's precept that all thoughts are universal — creating a container for creativity and innovation to arise.

It seemed so simple. Instead of battling each other, face the problems together and free up the energy and resources to tap into higher states of consciousness, far beyond the range of solutions that would come from a state of fear. Or, to paraphrase Einstein:, *you cannot solve problems with the same mindset that created them.*

The complexity of problems facing Burundi, Sierra Leone, and many other countries was daunting, especially given the influences of the global economy. An ongoing challenge for these countries will be to reweave the social tapestries and integrate the best of traditional African cultures with the positive aspects of globalization. A driving force of evolution will be how people deal with conflict, whether they/we narrow our human potential because of fear or expand our possibilities by leveraging our capacity for love and compassion.

