

## ***Beyond the Hall of Mirrors***

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### ***Reflections on War, Terror and Human Interaction***

***by Dennis Rivers, MA***  
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*June, 2005. For everyone working in the field of communication skills and conflict resolution, the past few years of war and terror attacks have been a time of special catastrophe. Like the buildings of Falluja, so many of our hopes and dreams for a better world lie in ruins. The recent bombings of the London subway remind me of how much we need, along with firefighters and paramedics, some deeper understanding of the struggles going on in our world today. We need some sort of intellectual compass to guide us through the storm of claims and counterclaims, alarms and calls to arms.*

*Many of the topics in this essay are beyond my personal comfort zone, but it is difficult for me to see how any communication trainer can now avoid them. War and terror, however justified they may seem to their participants, are the deepest possible challenges to all visions of cooperative communication, dialogue, compassionate listening and win-win negotiations. If our vision of the life of dialogue is not to wither away, I feel we must creatively and compassionately assert it against the challenges of violence and coercive force.*

*In the following essay I want to explore some of the limits of coercion, both in everyday life and on the stage of the world. For I believe what we are witnessing today could well be described as a giant contest of coercion, a contest which I imagine all participants will lose. I also want to explore some possible openings toward hope in this time of great suffering..*

Our everyday language suggests that every war has a winner and a loser. One of the purposes of this essay is to explore the dangerous unreliability of this common idea. The idea that every war or contest has a winner and loser obscures at least two other significant possibilities: first that the two sides might mutually destroy one another, a kind of tie of mutual doom, and second, that whoever allegedly wins may have to pay costs far beyond what the victory was worth. If these third and fourth options were included in our everyday

understanding and discussions of war, people might think more carefully before deciding to take up arms. They might try harder to negotiate. The same thing is true in everyday arguments. We imagine that each argument has a winner and a loser. What that thinking obscures is how often arguments destroy the relationship of the two participants. Our common pattern of using games such as chess or football as models for conflict in life can be deeply misleading.

Let me give one brief historical example to illustrate my point, an example safely in the past. The Allied nations in World War I, suffered casualties of 5 million soldiers dead and 13 million wounded. The Allied powers are alleged to have 'won' World War I, and we repeat this fanciful interpretation of historical events to this very day. I call this a fanciful interpretation because no one can explain to me what the Allied powers actually 'won' that was worth the loss of 5 million lives and the wounding of another 13 million. In my view, all talk about 'victory' in World War I is a way of avoiding the unnerving fact that World War I was a catastrophic blunder all around, a blunder of such epic proportions that it raises the question of how much anyone should ever trust government officials who advocate going to war. Because we rely on them to guard our lives and interests, we simply do not want to believe that reasonable-looking and -sounding government officials can make mistakes of that magnitude. But, unfortunately, World War I shows that they can. (I leave it to you to fill in more recent examples.)

As a student of conflict, I'm deeply interested in the way that conflicts spiral out of the control of the participants, whether we are talking about wars or kitchen arguments. Gandhi summarized the problem this way: "an eye for an eye" leaves everyone blind. One contemporary application of Gandhi's principle would be that "a bomb for a bomb" turns everyone into a bomb-maker.

I see the root of this problem in the fact that there is an enormous amount of imitation in human interaction. Without even realizing it we start to echo the other person's tone of voice, body posture, gestures and even logic. One of the scariest things my study of communication has taught me is how vulnerable we are to becoming exactly like our opponents in conflict.

One of the most disturbing examples of this out-of-control imitation unfolded in World War II. At the beginning of World War II, Hitler was bombing entire cities. This made him truly evil in the eyes of the

Allies and most of the world. By the end of the war, the Allied air forces were burning to the ground entire cities in Germany and Japan without regard to their civilian populations. What account shall we give of ourselves in regard to this practice of mass murder? That "they did it first?" Given the amount of death and suffering involved, and the months and years it took to plan it and carry it out, that sounds to me like a very pale excuse. It seems to me that mass murder is always evil, and does not cease to be evil simply because someone else "does it first."

I am reminded at this point of the commandment Jesus gave to his disciples, that they be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. After thinking about that teaching for a long time, it now seems clear to me that the two parts are related: in order to be as harmless as a dove, you really must be as wise as a serpent. And that serpent wisdom includes all the weird kinks and loops in human communication that can cause people in conflict to come to resemble one another.

My work on these kinds of problems has led me to one overarching principle: All behavior is instruction and encouragement. Whatever we do, we teach other people how to do. Whatever other people do to us, they teach and encourage us to do back to them. They show us just how it is done, in great detail! The consequences of this principle can be either beautiful and horrible. It allows for the most uplifting parenting and leadership, and the worst sort of degeneration. While we would like to imagine that we can control the violence we unleash, that fact is that in armed conflict, things can and often do go horribly wrong. For example, Osama bin Laden and his gang bombed the World Trade Center with airplanes full of jet fuel. The United States and its allies proceeded to drop 14,000 tons of bombs on Afghanistan. Bombs of every shape and description, some bombs so large that a giant cargo plane can carry only one, and this monster bomb has to be rolled out of the cargo bay on some sort of wheeled pallet. Sober voices in Washington now press for the manufacture of an entire new generation of nuclear weapons, that will allow us to obliterate the hidden bunkers of our enemies. We clearly believe that bombs and bombing will keep us a safe or otherwise help us reach our objectives in the world. What worries me is that this is exactly what Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers in Iraq believe. Everyone in the current world conflicts seems to be deepening their commitment to bombing as the way to get rid of your opponents, or at least coerce your opponents into submission. Meanwhile, just as

landmines from the Vietnam war era continue to kill and maim people today in Southeast Asia, unexploded cluster bomb munitions now litter the Afghan countryside and will continue to kill unsuspecting civilians for many years, even decades. Many of those who will be killed will have been born after 9/11, and so could not possibly be held responsible for the 9/11 attacks by the wildest stretch of anybody's imagination. Leaving aside, for the moment, all other aspects of the war in Afghanistan, it seems clear to me that on the issue of cluster bomb munitions alone, the United States, in responding to one massacre of innocents, has created another.

All behavior is instruction, even when we wish it were not. In everyday conversation, every sarcastic put-down is an invitation for the victim to come up with a topper. Neither wars nor arguments can be resolved at the tit-for-tat level at which we experience them, because at the tit-for-tat level we labor under the illusion that we know just what to do: give the other person an even bigger serving of whatever they just give us. We don't realize at the time that we have become entrained in, and perhaps even hypnotized by, the other person's behavior. We can become so obsessed with what they did that we cannot focus our minds on what we really need or the mistakes we may have made. Thinkers like William Ury<sup>1</sup> and Robert Kegan<sup>2</sup> would argue here that we absolutely need to go up at least one level, "go to the balcony," in Ury's terms, and develop an overview of the conflict we are in. That is radically different from just planning your next move. For example, the government of Israel, explaining its actions as a response to various terrorist attacks, has openly embraced the practice of assassination, which, like terror attacks, further blurs the boundary between murder and war. I do not have any easy answers for how the Israelis and Palestinians are supposed to extricate themselves from their spiral of violence, but I have deep doubts that the Israelis (or anyone else) will be safer now that Israel has given assassination a new aura of legitimacy.

Even in the face of all these horrific examples, the idea that all behavior is instruction does open up positive possibilities, just as real as the negative ones,

<sup>1</sup> William Ury, *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way From Confrontation to Cooperation* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

but more difficult to realize. It is possible to initiate new behaviors of a de-escalating sort, with the intention of drawing your opponents into a spiral of de-escalation. One of the most famous examples of this comes from the life of Gandhi. In 1947, when communal violence threatened to engulf Calcutta, Gandhi publicly confessed the transgressions of his side in the conflict (the Hindus), and began a penitential fast. This inspired many on the other side of the conflict (the Muslims) to repent of their violent acts, and the riots ended. If the riots had continued, tens of thousands of additional lives might have been lost. Initiating this kind de-escalation involves enormous faith and courage because it means going against your natural impulse to strike back. As unrealistic as this approach may seem, I think we have to press on in this direction anyway, because the stakes today are so high and the alternatives are so grim. If it has been done once, we know it can be done.

Just as a thought experiment, let's think about some of the possibilities. We could build hospitals and universities around the world instead of military bases. We could make sure that every child on planet Earth had enough food to eat, and could go to school. Every year the United States spends \$500 billion on preparations for war, a significant chunk of which is spent on bombs and the machines to deliver them. That works out to about \$80 for each man woman and child on planet Earth. How seriously has anyone thought about alternative uses for that money? One has to ask, are all those expenditures on machines of death actually keeping us safe from harm? I am afraid that to some degree our bombs and the planes to deliver them have become like objects of worship. (Think of the movie, *Top Gun*.) We dare not question them even when they're not performing the functions for which we bought them, they're not keeping us safe. If you bought a toaster and it didn't make toast, you would take it back to the store. Unfortunately it's not so easy to take a B-1 bomber back to the store, but we could stop buying them. And buy something else that serves our interests better.

This is not simply a matter of doing works of goodness and kindness, as wonderful as that would be. It is centrally a matter of inviting a different behavior from others. When the United States, with 5% of the world's population, spends as much money on preparations for war as all the other countries on planet Earth put together (half a trillion a year), we are sending a powerful lesson out to the world that bombs are the answer, bombs will keep you safe, bombs will help you get your way. If we spend \$500 billion on preparations

for war and, say, \$40 or \$50 million on hospitals and universities around the world, then we are teaching the world that coercion is 10,000 times more important than cooperation. Gandhi once said, "My life is my sermon." In truth, everyone's actions, whether a person or a nation, is their sermon. It seems to me that, in placing our faith in military hardware and the philosophy that "it is better to be feared than to be loved," we are inviting the entire world to emulate us, and to embrace coercion as the only principle by which to guide their actions. I don't think that is a good lesson for us to teach either the nations, or all the confused young people, of the world.

Another radical practice of de-escalation would be to listen to the grievances of our opponents. At this stage it seems that no one in the world's current conflicts is interested in listening to the grievances of "the other side." Each side is busy describing the other side as totally evil, and doing things the other side finds totally evil. Listening to the grievances of "the other" seems inconceivable under these circumstances, and is a move that belongs to an entirely different game than the game we are playing. That is why I feel it would be such a valuable move, because it might startle the players out of their appointed roles. We have settled in to the roles established by a thousand war movies, and therefore will be hard-pressed to think of some creative resolution of our difficulties. Peru and Ecuador recently resolved hundreds of years of armed border conflict by declaring a disputed patch of borderland to be a bi-national park. I am convinced that if you read all the manuals of all the armies on planet Earth, you would probably not find a single reference to bi-national parks. That was a genuinely new idea. And we need more genuinely new ideas. Listening to the grievances of the other would be an unprecedented step.

Given what I've said about behavior as instruction, compassionate listening would also set the stage for the other side to listen to our grievances. As one explores the practice of compassionate listening more deeply, one comes to realize that people conduct their conflicts within a given set of social skills, often within an impoverished set of skills. If the skill set changed, I feel certain that the conduct of the conflict would change. That is what the global movement for conflict resolution is trying to achieve in our time, it is trying to change the set of emotional and conceptual skills that international opponents bring to their

conflicts. Robert McNamara, some forty years after leading the United States to defeat in Vietnam, admitted with regret that the war in Vietnam dragged on a lot longer than it needed to because no one on our side tried hard enough to understand what the Vietnamese were thinking. How would we apply that lesson today and save ourselves who knows how many years of grief?

One of the great paradoxes of political life and human behavior, is that we imagine that we can bend other people to our will by force of arms. At the same time we hold that no one will ever bend us to their will by force of arms. This implies some sort of belief that we are strong-willed while "they" are weak-willed. And of course, "they" think the same of us, thinking that they will be able to coerce us, but will never allow themselves to be coerced. This is a lethal fantasy, on all sides, in which grownup folks engage in childlike wishful thinking. It doesn't occur to people that the folks on the other side may be just like themselves. We are all strong-willed, we all resist coercion in whatever way we can. Unless someone becomes more conscious, every proud swagger from one side will elicit an even prouder swagger from the other side. Unless someone becomes more conscious, every taunt and humiliation from one side, will elicit an even bloodier taunt and humiliation from the other. "Bring 'em on, we're plenty tough," sneered President Bush to the insurgents. The Iraqi insurgents taunted back with videos of executions. We responded by torturing captured insurgents, setting off global shock waves. And so it goes, up to the most recent bombings. While this contest of coercion goes on, people are dying with no end in sight. Truly, if ever there were a situation that called for "thinking outside the box," we are in it now.

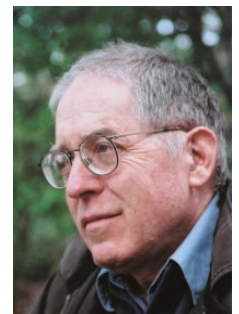
One possible answer, perhaps the greatest possible answer, to this downward spiral, would be a new turning toward the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The fact that the Golden Rule has been around for several thousand years, and appears in all the great religions, does not mean that we have fully understood it or mastered the art of living by it. One fruitful way, in my view, of starting over with the Golden Rule would be to explore it more deeply as an effort to steer spirals of human interaction toward life-sustaining outcomes and away from mutual destruction. If we don't want people to try to coerce us, we can begin by lowering our reliance on coercion in all our relationships, both personal and international. If we want people to listen to our concerns, we can begin by listening to their concerns. If we don't want people to

point guns or missiles at us, we can stop pointing our guns and missiles at them. Imagining that we can point our guns and missiles at countries around the world, and that they will not be motivated to point guns and missiles back at us, is, whatever else you may think of it, extremely unrealistic. If all behavior is instruction, we can take the initiative and model more of the positive behavior we want to evoke. This won't be easy, but our current slide toward perpetual war and national bankruptcy through military spending is not going to be easy, either. As a Borscht-circuit comedian in the 1950's might have put it: "A trillion dollars here, a trillion dollars there, pretty soon you're talking big money!"

Gandhi must have been thinking about the Golden Rule when he said "be the change you want to see." Which brings us back to NewConversations.net and the hopes embodied in the work of all the communication teachers featured on the web site and all the many people who visit the site each month. In searching for ways to bring more cooperation and reconciliation into our personal and work lives, we are each trying to do in a small way what we want the world to do in a large way. I thank each of you for keeping alive a single candle flame of hope and new possibilities. Each such flame can light many other candles.

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Dennis Rivers is a writer, teacher and peace activist who lives in Santa Barbara, California, teaches communication skills at the Santa Barbara Community Counseling Center, and edits several large peace and ecology web sites, including [newconversations.net](http://newconversations.net), [nonukes.org](http://nonukes.org), [turntowardlife.org](http://turntowardlife.org) and [earthlight.org](http://earthlight.org). Dennis received his MA in interpersonal communication and human development from the Vermont College Graduate Program, after studying sociology and religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, and theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His books include *The Geometry of Dialogue*, *The Seven Challenges Workbook*, *Prayer Evolving*, and, most recently, *Turning Toward Life*, an exploration of reverence for life as a spiritual path. All of Dennis's books and essays are available free of charge on the web at [www.karunabooks.net](http://www.karunabooks.net), thanks to generous support from the Estates of Hector and Winnifred Tate.




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