The Point Within the Circle

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Mindful Mediation, Global Conflict, and the Inner Work of Peace

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World Mediation Organization / Daniel Erdmann

The Point Within the Circle: Mindful Mediation, Global Conflict, and the Inner Work of Peace.

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ABSTRACT

This book is the second volume of a trilogy on peace, and it is the most personal of the three. Where its companions address the method of mediation and the strategy of peace at the scale of nations, this volume addresses the one variable that neither a method nor a strategy can supply on its own: the inner condition of the human being who does the work.

Its central claim is easy to state and difficult to live. The world's conflicts are not resolved primarily by tools, technologies, or institutions. They are resolved, when they are resolved at all, by people who have developed the capacity to stand in the space between two adversaries with genuine stillness, genuine curiosity, and genuine care for the wellbeing of both, without being captured by either.

That capacity is the point within the circle. The point is the still centre from which every direction is equally reachable. The circle is the full perimeter of human conflict, personal, cultural, political. The practitioner who has learned to inhabit the point can see and navigate the whole of the circle. The practitioner who has not will be pulled to its edge by the first strong feeling in the room.

Drawing on two decades of directing the World Mediation Organization, on training delivered in more than forty countries, on a formation that began in Havana and deepened in contemplative practice, and on the author's own proximity

to political violence, the book argues that the inner formation of the practitioner is not a private refinement but a public good.

It offers not a programme to be completed but a threshold to be crossed, and a vocabulary for recognising and sustaining the quality of presence from which all genuine peace work proceeds.

PREFACE

The Ground Before the Work

This book was not written from a study looking out at a quiet garden. It was written from the ground of decades of engagement with conflict in its most intimate and its most geopolitical forms, in mediation rooms and diplomatic halls, in contemplative communities and university lecture theatres, on the streets of Berlin ten minutes before a truck drove into a Christmas market full of children, and in the inner silence that follows years of sustained practice. If there is authority in these pages, it is the authority of the ground, not of the desk.

The title names two things at once, and the whole argument lives in the fact that they are the same thing. The point within the circle is a figure of geometry: a single indivisible centre from which every radius is equal, surrounded by the closed line that contains all directions. It is also a state of consciousness: the still centre a person can occupy while the whole periphery of a conflict turns around them. The image is ancient. It appears in Pythagorean geometry as the monad, the unity from which number and form arise. It appears in contemplative traditions across many centuries and continents as the centre that holds while the circumference moves. And it appears in the ordinary practice of mediation every time a skilled practitioner stands

between two people in conflict without taking a side, present to both and possessed by neither.

I have come to believe that everything difficult about this work reduces, in the end, to the difficulty of occupying that point. Anyone can learn the choreography of a mediation. The stages can be memorised in a weekend. What cannot be memorised, what has to be grown, is the inner condition that lets a person stay at the centre when the room fills with fear, when two histories of unacknowledged pain collide in front of them, when the pressure to produce a result would pull almost anyone toward one edge or the other. That inner condition is the subject of this book.

A word about how this volume sits beside its companions, because the three belong together and are meant to be read together. I think of them as the practice, the practitioner, and the world. Mindful Mediation: The Shapeless Art is the book of the practice. It describes the method, the movement of a session, the disciplines a person trains. This book, The Point Within the Circle, is the book of the practitioner. It does not repeat the method. It asks who the person conducting the method has to become for the method to have any life in it at all. And The Unnegotiable Peace is the book of the world. It carries the inner argument outward to the scale of societies and nations and asks what a whole civilisation would have to learn. Each stands alone. Read in sequence, they move from the technique to the person to the planet, and the person is the hinge between the other two.

Because they belong together, I have taken care that they do not overlap. Where the reader needs the mechanics of the method, I point to The Shapeless Art rather than reprint it here. Where the reader needs the economics and the governance of peace at scale, I point to The Unnegotiable Peace. What remains in these pages is what belongs to no other volume: the formation of the human instrument, and the still point it is formed toward.

The chapters build a single cumulative argument, and they build it as a spiral rather than a staircase. Each returns to the same centre from a new direction, so that a reader who reaches the final chapter finds that its conclusion was already present, in seed, on the first page. This is not a technical manual. It does not offer easy answers, and it does not flatter anyone with the suggestion that the problems facing us are simpler than they are. It offers clarity of a particular kind, the clarity that comes not from simplification but from the willingness to look at things as they are and to work from that honesty rather than from the comfort of inherited assumptions. The readers who reach the last chapter will find themselves not at a conclusion but at a threshold, and the real work begins on the far side of it.

Daniel Erdmann

INTRODUCTION

Two Decades in the Room with Conflict

In the summer of 1999 a young German arrived in Havana to study music, and he had no idea that he had arrived, instead, at the beginning of a life spent between people in conflict. He was twenty two years old. He had no interest in mediation and no vocabulary for it. He had come for the sound that seemed to leak out of the walls of that city. He found the sound. He also found something he had not come for: an entire order of life unlike his own, another political system and the consequences it carried into every ordinary day, and a plurality of perspectives and cultural difference that would take him twenty years to learn to name.

What he encountered in Havana, without yet having any word for it, is the thing this book is about. Human beings in conflict are almost never in conflict about the thing they say they are in conflict about. The stated grievance, the argument, the position defended to the last, these are the surface. Beneath the surface there is always something older: a need for recognition, a history of pain that was never acknowledged, a sense that one's existence and one's contribution to the shared world have not been adequately seen. In Havana this was not a theory. It was the daily weather of the place, a social complexity that no academic preparation could have anticipated, and it

taught the young man to listen beneath the words before he knew that listening beneath the words was a profession.

In May 2001 he established a connection to the contemplative history of Cuba, one that would shape the next two decades of his professional and inner life, in the company of people formed by a lineage of social and moral commitment that traced itself back to José Martí and the Cuban movement for independence. The lesson was immediate and it never left him. The work of peace is not the work of institutions alone. It is the work of individuals who carry within themselves a quality of inner orientation that no external credential can confer. A person can hold every certificate the field awards and be useless in a room where two human beings are frightened of each other. A person can hold none of them and change what is possible simply by being present.

This book is the distillation of what came after. It draws on the doctoral study Comprehensive Mediation and on the training method set out in Mindful Mediation: The Shapeless Art, on a series of articles published in the WMO Conflict Insight Journal, on chapters written for Springer volumes on the geopolitics of polarisation and on the relation between personal identity and peacebuilding, on a contribution to the PIN Points bulletin of the network for Processes of International Negotiation, and above all on more than twenty years of directing the World Mediation Organization and watching, at close range, what actually happens when a person tries to help two adversaries find their way back to each other.

The World Mediation Organization was founded in 2006 out of a single stubborn conviction: that mediation, rightly understood, is not a professional technique owned by licensed practitioners but a social skill that belongs to every human being, latent, awaiting cultivation, present in our species long before the profession that now claims it ever existed. The WMO was built to act on that conviction, to offer training widely, to publish first hand research, to convene practitioners across national and cultural boundaries without imposing a single model on their very different worlds. What that work taught, over the years and across more than forty countries, is what these pages try to convey.

I should say plainly what kind of book this is, so that the reader knows what they hold. It is not a memoir, though it draws on my life, and it is not a manual, though it was written by someone who has spent a career in the practical work. It is a book of reflections, the considered thought of a practitioner looking back across two decades and trying to say what the work has actually taught him about the human being who does it. I have tried to earn every general claim with a particular experience, and where I could not, I have left the claim out. If the book has a single method, it is this refusal to say more than my own life has shown me, and the reader is entitled to hold me to it on every page.

The chapters are arranged not as a march from simple to complex but as a deepening. Each takes up a different face of the same essential question, and each face is necessary before

the whole comes into focus. The reader who begins at the first chapter and reaches the last will find that the argument encountered at the end was already waiting at the beginning, and that the journey between was less a line than a spiral, each turn bringing the same centre into sharper relief. That centre has a name. It is the point within the circle, and it is, in the end, the only thing this book is about.

Part One



The Ground

Before there is a method, there is a person. Before there is a person, there is the ground the person stands on. This first part is about that ground: the discipline of not already knowing, the art that existed before it had a name, and the city that taught a young European to listen beneath the words.

Chapter One

Stripping the Language Clean

The Discipline of Not Already Knowing

It is the first task of every human to think properly.

José Martí

There is a single question that separates the practitioner who will grow from the practitioner who will not, and it is not a question about technique. It is a question a person asks themselves, silently, in the first minute of every encounter with a conflict they do not yet understand. The question is this: am I willing to not already know? Almost everything that follows in this book is an unfolding of that one willingness, because the inner formation of a mediator begins not with the acquisition of knowledge but with the disciplined suspension of it.

THE POVERTY OF INHERITED VOCABULARY

Every field of human endeavour rests on a vocabulary. The vocabulary of medicine names diseases and their treatments. The vocabulary of law names rights and their violations. The vocabulary of engineering names forces and their management. But the vocabulary of peace and conflict is different in one decisive respect. It is a vocabulary that nearly every human being uses, across every culture and every language, and almost

no two of them mean the same thing by its central terms. This is not an inconvenience to be tidied up before the real work begins. It is the root of a structural failure that runs through the whole field, from the drafting of international agreements to the training of a local mediator, and the practitioner who does not feel this failure in their own body will reproduce it without noticing.

Consider the word peace. Researchers have long distinguished negative peace, the mere absence of armed conflict, from positive peace, which names the presence of conditions under which human beings can develop and contribute to a shared world. Even this refined distinction assumes a shared understanding of what flourishing means and whose cultural framework defines it. In a world more interconnected than ever before and at the same time more culturally fragmented than ever before, that assumption is quietly untenable. What a researcher in Scandinavia means by peace may be genuinely incommensurable with what a community leader in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo means by it, not because either is wrong but because their two concepts were formed by experiences so different that they share only the name.

There is a temptation here to disappear into the philosophy of terminology, and I want to resist it, because the point is entirely practical. The absence of armed conflict can be a profoundly positive experience of peace, especially in a place that has known the alternative for years. A so called positive

peace can be a fragile arrangement that the smallest disturbance will overturn, especially in a community that has not yet built any resilience for conflict. What matters is not that we perfect our definitions but that we stop mistaking a shared word for a shared understanding. The practitioner who works toward peace without asking what the word means in this particular room, with these particular people, shaped by these particular histories, is projecting a framework onto a situation that may reject it, and then blaming the situation for the resistance rather than the framework.

To gain a little honesty, I sometimes replace the word peace, in my own mind, with the phrase constructive dialogue within an area of mutual respect and non escalated armed conflict. The reformulation is not wordplay. The distinction between naming a state and naming the conditions for a state is the distance between a slogan and an instruction.

CONFLICT IS NOT WHAT YOU WERE TAUGHT

The same clarifying pressure must fall on the word conflict, and here the problem is deeper than terminology. A person's understanding of conflict is formed by the whole of their lived experience, their education, their social and cultural background, and the worldview those forces have produced together. Two practitioners from different continents, trained in different traditions, using the same word, may be operating from entirely different and silently incompatible pictures of