Whatever the surface issues in dispute, the underlying cause of conflict usually lies in the deprivation of basic human needs like love and respect. Frustration leads people to bully others, to use violence, and to grab someone else’s things.

—William Ury
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN? That is a question in which poets, philosophers, scientists, religious scholars, writers and individuals from every discipline offer their perspectives in an effort to answer this age-old question. No one discipline can provide an adequate answer, yet we all bring layers of perspectives that help to build understanding around the complex beings that make up the human species. One aspect of the human experience is conflict — humans have a profound ability to engage in conflict. And while humans are not the only species that experience conflict, we are unique in our ability to engage in protracted conflict that wounds us psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and physically. From terrorism to capitalism and numerous “isms” in between, humans have created systems that wound us at an individual and collective level. We are far more adept at spreading widespread conflict than we are at cultivating widespread peace. Why are we so much better at harming others and ourselves? What must we do to become equally adept at loving others and ourselves? These are the questions in which this paper will seek to provide answers.

This paper will explore the human propensity for conflict: why we engage in conflict and how we might harness the benefits conflict brings to the human experience. This paper will make an argument that peace and understanding are critical aspects of advancing the human condition and provide insights into the changes that are necessary to achieve peace.
WHAT CAUSES HUMANS TO ENGAGE IN CONFLICT?

In his book, *The Third Side*, author William Ury makes the claim that, “Whatever the surface issues in dispute, the underlying cause of conflict usually lies in the deprivation of basic human needs like love and respect. Frustration leads people to bully others, to use violence, and to grab someone else’s things.” He goes on to claim that all people want to feel “safe, respected and free.” Our basic human needs are quite simple, and yet there is a human tendency to over complicate the process of getting needs met in a manner that is fair, equitable and just. When we peel back the layer of every conflict, what we will find is an unmet need. People tend to engage in violent conflict when they do not have the skills or resources necessary to get their needs met in a pro-social manner.

This begs the question? What is violence? In his 1969 article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” published in the *Journal of Peace Research*, Johan Galtung of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo provides a definition for violence that will be applied to the use of the word in this paper. “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential.” One does not have to be a member of a hate group, terrorist organization or commit a violent crime to engage in violence. We engage in violence every time our behavior, speech and even our thoughts position others in such a way that their ability to achieve their potential is jeopardized in any way. For example, Hillary Clinton’s “basket of deplorables” statement was a form of violence. By reducing half of the people voting for Trump as deplorable, she bucketed millions of people into a category that is undeserving of respect, and, one might go so far as to think that they are unworthy of being treated with dignity — they are deplorable after all.

“We engage in violence every time our behavior, speech and even our thoughts position others in such a way that their ability to achieve their potential is jeopardized in any way.”

This way of speaking in generalities is a shortcut form of communicating referred to as categorical thinking, and we all do it. Categorical thinking is shorthand cognition. We live in an extremely complex world. To process each piece of data our brain comes into contact with on a case-by-case scenario would require far too much cognition. Being the brilliant piece of biological machinery that it is, the brain facilitates cognition with predetermined structures called schemas that automatically minimize the effort of processing loads and loads of cognitive inputs. These schemas allow the brain to rapidly process new information within a context that is already known to the brain. The structural frames act as guides to what is important and influences how the data are filed away within the brain’s systems for informational recall.

For example, many children develop a schema for what a family looks like: a mom, a dad, and their children. This schema informs the child’s understanding of what a family looks like. The child will use that schema to understand the world around him as it relates to family systems or new information that seems to fit the criteria of a family system. When a child encounters a family that does not fit this schema — perhaps a family with two moms and a child, two dads and a child or perhaps a single parent and a child — the human tendency is identify the new information as wrong rather than to develop an awareness of the fact that the original thinking about family systems was misinformed. Schemas can be so firmly established that they become associated with values and personal ethics and morality.
Therefore, challenging the schema is to challenge a person’s identity and value system.

Schemas allow the brain to make quick, unconscious decisions that determine their understanding of new information based on rules that are established for other schemas. Schemas make for efficient cognition, but they are not foolproof. This rapid form of processing leaves significant room for error. Because not all information is processed fully or completely, the accuracy of perceptions can range from somewhat inaccurate to completely false. Information that fits our schema is more likely to receive attention by the brain (confirmation bias) and information that is inconsistent with the schema is likely to receive less attention and considered to be an exception to the schema rather than as data points that have noting to do with the schema. When Clinton made the “basket of deplorables” statement, she was using the schema associated with our collective understanding of racism, misogyny and bigotry. The human tendency is to search for information that supports this schema and give little to no attention to the information that does not support the schema.

In her article, “How Categorical Thinking Creates a Biased View of the World,” social science scholar Madeleine Côté explains, “In organizing the social information of our world, we inevitably categorize the group we belong to in opposition to the other groups.”

We develop in-group / out-group thinking that perpetuates an “us versus them” view of the world in which members of the perceived “in group” are attributed with desirable traits while people of the perceived “out group” are attributed with undesirable traits.

Social psychology research has found that humans tend to develop their social identity in four core ways:

1. Cognitive: The group exists and is characterized in specific ways
2. Affective: The emotional relationship a person has with his or her group
3. Evaluative: The judgment a person places on the group (i.e., the person is proud to be a part of the group or perhaps ashamed to be)
4. Perceived common fate: This is the understanding that the success of the group is interdependent (i.e., every individual within the group is responsible for the group’s survival)

The affective dimension — the emotional relationship a person has with his or her group — is the greatest predictor of in-group bias. A strong emotional attachment to one’s group increases the likelihood of developing a negative view of the other group. The more emotionally connected a person is to his or her political party, the more likely that person is to develop a negative view of the opposing political party. The more emotionally connected a person is to his or her religious group, the more likely that person is to develop a negative view of the other religious groups. Research also shows that prejudice is increased when a group feels the other group is threatening its ability to survive. This prejudice is increased even more when similarities between the groups are identified. In other words, if a group’s identity is threatened, that group does not want to feel any affinity with the other group.

It is clear to see how categorical thinking, and the in-group / out-group effect that springs from it, can begin to shape our ideas of the worthiness of the “other” as well as how we think resources should be allocated, or not. It is easy to understand how categorical thinking can lead to the bullying of others, the use violence, and to the belief that one has the right to grab someone else’s things. It is also clear how categorical thinking threatens our sense of safety and our ability to feel respected and free. Of course, categorical thinking is not the only thing that leads humans to conflict; however, if one peels the layers of a conflict back far enough, one will likely find that categorical thinking played a significant role in the origination of the conflict.
HARNESSING THE BENEFITS OF CONFLICT

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but rather a state of navigating conflict nonviolently while protecting the human security and human dignity of all people. When managed productively and nonviolently, conflict offers numerous benefits. Conflict offers individuals and groups the opportunity to increase their understanding of one another. When managed in a collaborative manner, conflict can help individuals deepen their trust in one another. Conflict can strengthen relationships and improve problem-solving. Conflict can even improve individual and group motivation. To achieve these benefits, it is imperative that humans become highly conscious to biases associated with categorical thinking and become intentional about embracing those aspects of one another that may be different such as cultural differences and gender differences.

Understanding Culture

Culture is comprised of values, norms and beliefs. Culture is shared; it is intangible; it is learned and dynamic; and it influences how the world is perceived. All cultures operate under a set of fundamental assumptions. In diverse environments such as organizations, communities, governments, etc., if these assumptions are not brought to the surface through dialogue and open exchanges of self-expression, they can become catalysts for conflict. Recognizing that “you don’t know what you don’t know” is paramount to unearthing the assumptions that exist within diverse populations and bringing them to conscious awareness so they can be acknowledged and an opportunity for learning can be made available. Recognizing that communication happens on many levels is paramount to understanding culture.

There are four primary types of communication that affect culture and that, when understood and practiced effectively, can reduce conflict and enhance peace-building initiatives.

1. High versus low context
2. Verbal communication
3. Non-verbal communications
4. Listening

High Versus Low Context

Certain cultures assume that knowledge of a situation and the appropriate way to behave in a situation are acquired through built-in expectations of what is customary and ordinary within that culture. There is little use for formalized agreements or lengthy discussions to decide what is appropriate in a given situation — the parties are assumed to have acquired this knowledge from experience. This is considered to be a “high context” culture. A “low context” culture is a culture in which information and rules are abundant and clearly stated. There is a general focus on rules and people assume the literal meanings of words are the intended meanings of words. In a high context culture, rules are implicit, which means communicating with individuals from high context cultures can present challenges for those who identify with a low context culture. Active listening is a crucial skill in communicating with people from high-context cultures, as the listener must look beyond what is stated. Below is a comparison of high versus low context cultures.

High Context: Implicit/Indirect

- Knowledge is acquired through a built-in expectation of what is customary within a culture.
- Non-verbal messages and gestures are important
- Saving face and tact are important.
• Rules are implicit.
• There is little use for formalized agreements, the parties “know” from experience.

Low Context: Explicit/Direct

• Information and rules are abundant and clearly stated. There is a focus on rules and the literal meanings of words.
• Statements are taken at face value, and there is little about the process that is assumed.
• Expectations are discussed.
• Direct questions are not meant to offend.
• Indirect cues may be ineffectual.

Individuals who identify with high context cultures tend to be diplomatic, face-saving and non-confrontational people who experience a shared history and culture. Individuals within high context cultures often communicate in a high context manner and easily understand one another when doing so. Individuals from high context cultures are very relationally focused. And while many assumptions may be made during the course of communication, the listener is responsible for intuiting the meaning. In contrast, individuals from low context cultures expect and rely on very clear communication and clear accountability. Individuals from low context cultures demonstrate power and assertiveness in order to get things done. This can be perceived as rude and dominating to individuals from high context cultures. In general, the United States is a more direct, low context country, while Japan is one of the least direct cultures. Examples of high context cultures are Japan, China, Indonesia, India, Southeast Asian countries and Native American Indian. Examples of midrange context cultures are Middle Eastern countries, African countries and Latin American countries. Examples of low context countries include Northern and Eastern European countries, the United States and Canada.

Within the context of high and low cultures, there is also the element of high and low individualism. Individualism is a social theory that favors freedom of action or individuals over collective control. Individualistic cultures assume allegiance to self rather than to the group. Individualistic cultures tend to be:

• Independent
• Self-directed
• Assume responsibility for self
• Competitive
• Self-focused (i.e., responsible for self, self-motivated, high achievers, etc.)
• Motivated by recognition

In contrast, collective cultures are group oriented, and allegiance is given to the group rather than to self. Collective cultures value community and an individual’s own sense of self is in relationship to who he or she is within the community and that person’s relationships with other people. Therefore, within a collective culture, individual decision-making is influenced by how one person’s decisions may affect the community, including one’s own family. Collective cultures can be either lineal collective or collateral collective. Lineal collective cultures experience themselves in relationship to their lineage (i.e., Jewish, Irish, African-American, etc.); collateral collective cultures experience themselves as a formation of a group for a particular purpose (i.e., educational class, training program, degree program). Nuclear families are often collateral formations. Organizational structures such as businesses or churches are often collateral formations. The following demonstrates the difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures.

Individualistic
• People are independent and autonomous.
• Identity is individual.
• In conflict, response is individual.
• Achievement involves individual goal-setting and action.
• Everyone is capable of making is or her own choices.
• People are autonomous.
• People are accountable to themselves.

Collectivistic
• People are part of a circle of relationships.
• Identity is as a member of a group.
• In conflict, response is chosen jointly.
• Maintaining group harmony is important.
• Choices are made in consultation.
• People are part of a hierarchy.
• People are accountable to the group.

When faced with cultural components, there are choices that help in the management or mitigation of conflict to assist in peace-building efforts. One can select from one of the following options:

• **Adopt** the cultural core value and assume it as one’s own while leaving one’s own core value behind. This is an accommodating approach.
• **Adapt** by learning to adjust one’s behavior to be in accordance with cultural norms when appropriate and changing one’s own behavior to fit the environment. This is a cooperative approach.
• **Maintain** by holding on to one’s own cultural norms no matter what the cultural norm is within the organization or community. This is a competitive approach.
• **Combine** cultural norms and create one’s own culture based on the multiple cultures that are presented within the organization or community. This is a collaborative approach.

When determining the approach that best meets the needs of the situation, one must be conscious of the human tendency toward “normative behavior,” which is perceiving the world through one’s own filter and assuming that one’s own norm is the norm. Maintaining a sense of curiosity is critical to reaping the benefits of cultural differences and mitigating the risks associated with categorical thinking.

**Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**

Verbal communication refers to one’s tone, dialect, language, nuances such as slang, the pace with which one speaks, and how a person utilizes (or does not utilize) interruptions. All of these verbal communication characteristics are developed at a young age and are highly influenced by culture. In his book, When Culture Collide: Leading Across Cultures, author Richard D. Lewis writes:

American speech is quick, mobile and opportunistic, reflecting the speed and agility of the young country. The wisecrack is basic to their discourse. American humor excels in quips, barbed retorts and repartee, typical of the dog-eat-dog society of early America.

Lewis goes on to explain that exaggeration and hyperbole are core elements of American expressions, which contrasts with the “understated nature of the British.” The United States is a melting pot of cultures and developing self-awareness about one’s own verbal communication and the effect it has on others is paramount to establishing and maintaining relationships that are consistent with one’s intent and that reduce conflict while fostering peace.

Of course, communication is a simultaneous exchange of verbal and nonverbal communication in a
“Kinesics and proxemics can influence as much as 93% of the communication.”

two-way process involving the listening habits of all those involved in the communication. When people are in conflict and there is a need to determine veracity, truth and meaning, the words used actually hold the least importance in determining meaning. In conflict:

- Words have about 7 percent of meaning
- Tone and inflection have about 38 percent of meaning
- Facial expressions have about 55 percent of meaning

There are several aspects of nonverbal communication worth noting:

- Kinesics — an umbrella term to describe body language, gestures, eye contact, physical space, facial expression, clothes, posture and how one uses silence
- Proxemics — a term used to describe the use of physical space to convey messages
- Chronemics — a term used to describe how people use time (i.e., monochronic and polychronic)

The above demonstrates that kinesics and proxemics can influence as much as 93 percent of the communication, which is why having awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences is paramount to communicating effectively and in a way that fosters understanding. Embracing diverse cultures requires an intentional focus on understanding and implementing cross-cultural communication skills to ensure that how one uses verbal and nonverbal communication enhances understanding of the message rather than detracts from it. In the western societies, the following kinesics are generally understood in the following ways:

- An open limb positions indicates there is receptivity toward what is being communicated
- Crossed or folded limbs indicate defensiveness toward what is being expressed
- Forward-leaning body posture indicates attentiveness to the speaker
- A backward stance indicates an indifference to what the speaker is communicating
- An open and palm up hand gesture tends to indicate honesty
- A closed fist or pointed fingers suggests aggression or a threatening attitude
- Direct eye contact tends to indicate sincerity, openness and honesty
- An averted gaze with an avoidance of eye contact tends to indicate deceit, guilt or embarrassment

A general understanding of proxemic norms within the United States can also be helpful in ensuring one’s message is communicated and experienced in a manner consistent with the intent.

- Intimate distance is used for very confidential communications
- Personal distance is used for talking with family and close friends

Adapted from Figure 7-3: Personal Space Categories for Those in the United States
• Social distance is used to handle most business transactions
• Public distance is used when calling across the room or speaking to a group

**Chromenics**

A person’s relationship with time can have a significant impact on cross-cultural communications. There are essentially two different processing styles when it comes to time: monochronic and polychronic.

Individuals with a monochronic processing style tend to think very linearly, sequentially and in a chronologically organized manner. Monochronic people are most at ease when they know what to expect. They thrive in meetings with agendas and with meeting leaders who adhere to an agenda. They preferred planned activity to spontaneous activity. They are likely to read the table of contents of a book so that they are able to plan for what they will be learning and level set on how the information that will be presented. For monochronic processors, time is very quantifiable. A monochronic processor will use phrases such as: “This is costing a lot of time;” “This is a waste of time;” “Who has time for this?” etc. Time is a valuable commodity to be used judiciously. Monochronic processors often take a moralistic approach to time. Being tardy may be perceived as a flaw in one’s character or experienced as rude. It could easily cost someone an opportunity such as a sale, a new job or the opportunity to acquire a new project. People who are punctual may be attributed characteristics that shed a positive light on the person such as trustworthy, reliable, etc.

In contrast, polychronic people perceive time as relational. A person with a polychronic style simultaneously processes issues in a nonlinear approach while also juggling different topics or conversations without difficulty. Time is equally important to polychronic processors, as it is monochronic processors in that they want the time to be equitable in terms of quality, but they are not hooked on the clock. Polychronic processors are “whole picture thinkers” and are able to see how everything relates together. People with a polychronic processing style may often be late to meetings or may arrive late to the office, etc., because the activity or person with whom they are engaged with in that moment takes priority over an agenda or schedule. Meeting agendas may or may not be followed, and if the meeting starts late or runs late, the polychronic person is not likely to be affected by it. A polychronic person may read several books at a time; he or she may jump around in a book reading the chapters in the order of interest rather than in the order of presentation. The following demonstrates how monochronic and polychronic processing styles differ.

**Monochronic**
- Processes one thing at a time and in sequential order
- Wants to finish one project before beginning another
- Take time commitments such as deadlines and appointments seriously
- Tends to be low context (i.e., there is a need information)
- Adhere religiously to plans
- Accustomed to short-termed relationships

**Low Context: Explicit/Direct**
- Information and rules are abundant and clearly stated. There is a focus on rules and the literal meanings of words.
- Statements are taken at face value, and there is little about the process that is assumed.
- Expectations are discussed.
- Direct questions are not meant to offend.
- Indirect cues may be ineffectual.

Most people do not strictly or exclusively process time one way or another. Most people are on a scale
that leans to some degree in the direction of monochronic or polychronic. Understanding chromenics is critical to culturally diverse environments because of the way in which it affects almost all aspects of communicating and relating.

**Gender**

Gender-based communication differences can be the catalyst to not only miscommunication but also conflict, including bullying behavior, lack of professional upward mobility as well as disparity in workload allocation within workplace environments. Misunderstandings often occur due to the delivery of the message rather than the content of the message. Therefore, understanding how differences in communication by feminine and masculine genders affect outcomes is essential to productively and nonviolently managing conflict as well as mitigating against conflict.

Use of language is one of the most consistent ways in which people of masculine and feminine genders communicate differently. Dr. Deborah Tannen, author of *Talking From 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*, explains that women or people with a female gender often use conversation as a vehicle for establishing relationships. Conversation, therefore, is a tool for building rapport with one another. “Rapport talk” is intended to build relationships, strengthen connections and foster a positive relationship with one another. It is not intended as a vehicle for reporting data or important work-related information. In contrast, men and individuals with a masculine gender rely much less on “rapport talk” and instead focus on “report talk” — a form of communication that’s sole purpose is to share information. Therefore, when women in engage in rapport talk and men hear it as report talk, they respond with attempts to remedy the problem. This often causes great frustration for women who were not seeking a solution but rather an opportunity for connection.

Hedging is another way in which women tend to downplay or soften opposing positions or ideas. Rather than directly stating, “That’s not a good idea. I would like for us to try it this way,” a woman might reply stating, “Perhaps we should try it another way?” While this sounds like a question, it may actually be a directive. Women tend to hedge when communicating with a person in a lower power position in order to achieve a particular goal while also maintaining the relationship. While men do use hedging as a communication tactic, they tend to do so with people of higher power. It is important to be able to discern the difference between hedging — i.e., trying to achieve a goal with sensitivity to a relationship — and actual uncertainty. Hedging can become problematic when it is perceived as uncertainty or lack of understanding of the problem and the potential solutions.

In her book, Tannen explains the concept of ritual fight, referred to as “ritual opposition.” Tannen explains that men are more likely than women to engage in “agonism” — “a warlike, oppositional format” intended to accomplish a “range of interactional goals that have nothing literally to do with fighting.” This process, also referred to as “ritual opposition,” involves Mustering all the arguments possible to defend a particular position while simultaneously undercutting and attacking the opposing person or viewpoint. In an article titled, “Negotiating Like a Woman: How Gender Impacts Communication Between the Sexes Ritual” authors Nina Meierding and Jan Frankel Shau explain, “While women tend to hedge more than men, men tend to use ritual opposition more than women (except in the world of trial lawyers, where both sexes may excel in this style of argumentation).” The authors explain that ritual opposition is not designed to lob personal attacks or denigrate the opposing person or viewpoint; it is simply aimed at winning an argument. The exclusive focus on winning does so at the cost of rapport building, creating and fostering positive relationships and allowing...
the opposing party the opportunity to save face. The aggressive nature of ritual opposition lends itself to being experienced as a personal attack or insult.

Gender differences affect more than how men and women speak; they impact the way in which they listen too. When women listen, they have a tendency to nod their heads in what looks like agreement. While nodding they may also add small insertions such as “right,” “I understand,” “OK,” etc. The nodding and inclusion of verbal insertions while listening is not intended to be communicated as agreement, but rather an indication that the she is listening. It is an attempt to validate, encourage and inspire continued communication so that the she is able to acquire the information being communicated. This overlapping style of speech is often understood by men as an interruption, and perhaps even as an indication that the woman agrees with him. It is obvious to see how this can create conflict.

In her book, Tannen writes, “Conversation is a ritual. We say things that seem the thing to say, without thinking of the literal meaning of our words any more than we expect the question, ‘How are you?’ to call forth a detailed account of aches and pains.” In this manner, women are habitual apologizers in a way that men simply are not. Women say, “I am sorry” for almost everything. If a woman is walking in the door at the same time as another person, chances are she will say, “I am sorry” even though she did nothing wrong and there was no mishap that should beckon an apology from anyone. Women tend to express concern and empathy through apologies. In contrast, men tend to only apologize when they have failed at a responsibility or they are at fault in an actual error. This incongruity in how apologies are utilized is confusing for both men and women. Men can become conditioned to believing the woman is actually at fault while women become calloused to the fact that men rarely, if ever, “take responsibility.” The implication of how this can contribute to biased categorical thinking is obvious. Meierding and Shau explain the disconnect this way: “Men may assume a woman is accepting fault and taking responsibility when she apologizes, but she may simply be trying to restore a relationship or build rapport.” Ultimately, when a woman apologizes unnecessarily she positions herself in a role of less authority — one that is ultimately diminutive in nature. Apologies can cause a person to experience vulnerability. When women apply rapport apologies in order to mend relationships or extend empathy and understanding, they are waiting for reciprocity. When the reciprocity does not happen, there is a shift in power that can cause damage in the short and long term. From the concept of peace building, this self-diminishing habit jeopardizes a woman’s dignity.

Apologies are important and should be taken seriously when they are, in fact, necessary. Understanding the difference among the types of apologies is important so that they can be applied appropriately and with integrity.

• A **rapport apology** is a non-accountability apology intended as a relationship builder; however, they can create miscommunications.

• A **full apology** is a recognition of a harm or wrong done; it demonstrates regret while acknowledging how the actions may have felt to the harmed party; it is a promise not to repeat it and a request to repair the harm.

• A **cohesion apology** is an expression of regret with the goal of mending a relationship or situation but falls short of a full apology in that it is not an admonishment of guilt, and therefore, attempts to repair the harm may be minimal or non-existent.

• A **dispersion apology** is a tactic used to get...

“Gender differences affect more than how men and women speak; they impact the way in which they listen too.”
out of a negative situation and to be rid of the
guilt of the situation. It an attempt to disperse
one’s self of a situation and is not an act of
integrity and will not foster collaboration.

- A **partial apology** is an expression of
remorse or regret without an attempt to repair
the harm.

Apologies can be perceived as a loss of face, and
therefore they are often met with resistance professionally
and / or politically. However, where there has been harm
done, good faith attempts at repairing are necessary for
cultivating peace.

**Bridging Differences**

In order to harness the benefits inherent in diversity
and to manage the conflict that may spring forth from
differences, barriers to embracing differences should be
acknowledged. The following are just a few barriers to
be cognizant of:

- Assuming superiority
- Assuming differences
- Stereotyping, prejudice and racism
- Different communication patterns
- Stories of victimization and demonization
- Lack of ownership (i.e., that is “someone else’s
  problem”)

Strategies for embracing differences include:

- Developing cultural awareness
- Being mindful of stereotypes
- Listening to understand
- Being attuned and open to cultural differences
- Focusing on one’s own culture to understand
  another’s
- Enjoying differences
- Separating culture from exploitation

In order to mitigate against the violent conflict that
can occur as a result of categorical thinking and harness
the benefits that are likely to occur when humans
engage with one another, it is important to have a deep
understanding of cultural and gender differences. Only
by understanding one another are we able to cultivate
human security and dignity for each other.

**ADVANCING THE HUMAN CONDITION**
**THROUGH PEACE AND UNDERSTANDING**

To transcend conflict and oppositional thinking
and divisiveness in the external world, one must first
transcend the conflict that exists within one’s internal
Preventative Solutions for Chronic Social, Economic and
Political Conflicts*, mediator and peace builder Kenneth
Cloke advises on many small, practical and deeply
personal ways every person can participate in systemic
change, by being the very change they wish to see in
the world:

- Be open, honest and willing to communicate
  fearlessly so as to surface rules coworkers
  operate under but have not declared, unspoken
  or secret expectations, and covert behaviors
- Listen closely and empathetically, especially to
  individuals who hold differing opinions
- Act with unconditional integrity and respect,
  giving generously of one’s self without expecting
  anything in return
- Increase sensitivity toward the emotional,
cultural, systems and processes of others
- Be inclusive with people and groups who have
  not previously been included
- Invite open, honest and empathetic feedback
  while giving more generously of one’s self
- Be willing and open to apologizing, forgiving
  and surrendering in order to build trust and
  strengthen relationships
“Mindfulness practices improve social relationships, increase the body’s immune system, allow for more positive and effective responses to stress and optimize emotional regulation.”

Research shows that mindfulness-based practices help to improve social relationships, increase the body’s immune system, allow for more positive and effective responses to stress and optimize emotional regulation. Mindfulness training is a particularly effective method for achieving inner peace because it involves the practice of “re-perceiving.” Mindfulness practices train the individual to become an observer to his or her life story by developing awareness of personal narratives, much like a mirror reflects an image without being immersed in it. The ability to observe one’s narratives brings about a profound shift in the relationship one has with his or her thoughts, emotions and feelings, resulting in greater clarity, perspective and objectivity. The profound shift that is experienced is, in part, due to the fact that the brain structure in individuals who meditate quite literally changes. The area of the insula — which involves interoceptive and visceral awareness and may also play a role in the process of awareness — shows marked difference in individuals who meditate as compared to those who do not.

Another important reason mindfulness practices enhance feelings of inner peace is because they involve the teaching of acceptance. An important component of meditation and other mindfulness practices is the acceptance of physical sensations, emotions and feelings, and thoughts and judgments, as they are experienced. No meaning is placed on them; they move through the meditator without consideration. Studies show that acceptance is an important element to experiencing inner peace.

There are numerous forms of mindfulness practices, including numerous varieties of sitting and walking meditations, yoga, journaling and prayer, all of which serve as powerful tools for creating and sustaining neural pathways for peace and collaboration.

**Cultivate Empathy**

While empathy is something some people experience and express in higher degrees than others, it is something all people can cultivate and practice in daily life. The following are just a few techniques to help cultivate empathy.

- **Active listening**: Active listening is a technique in which the listener relays back to the speaker what he or she heard the speaker say by way of restating or paraphrasing what was heard in his or her own words. This serves a dual purpose of confirming the listener correctly heard and understood what the speaker said and also provides the opportunity to verify that it was interpreted accurately. This practice allows the speaker to feel heard and understood and the listener the ability to gain important insight into the emotions and feelings of the speaker, humanizing both parties in the process.

- **Being fully present**: To be fully present means that all focus is on what is happening in the here and now. The individual’s intention is focused on noticing what is happening and not trying to control what it is happening. It is being present to the words being spoken, the emotions being experienced and the feelings being expressed without analyzing, judging or placing attachment to them.

- **Taking personal interest**: To take personal interest in another person or in a situation is the epitome of empathetic empathy. Taking a
personal interest involves the willingness to be personally invested in the solution and assuming responsibility or joint responsibility in doing so.

**Embrace Conflict Resolution Techniques**

Conflict provides rich and potentially rewarding opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of one’s self and others. Understanding how to navigate conflict in such a way that is nonviolent and productive is critical to creating sustainable peace. The following are just a few conflict resolution techniques that hold great promise in creating more peaceful relationships and communities.

- **Mediation**: Mediation is a form of conflict resolution that invites an impartial third party into a conflict to facilitate a mutual agreement between or amongst all parties. Mediation is designed to empower the parties who participated in the creation of a conflict to also be the authors of it resolution. Interest-based mediation is designed to address the foundational causes of conflict, optimizing collaboration and agreement amongst all involved.

- **Restorative justice**: Restorative justice models seek to repair the harm that has been done to an individual or individuals as a result of another person or persons’ behavior(s). Restorative justice models bring those who have been harmed by another’s actions into a restorative process designed to reclaim as much normalcy as possible for the person who has been harmed, and allows the person who created the harm to take ownership and responsibility in the repair.

- **Dialogue circles**: Dialogue circles are a safe space created for participants to talk about what is important to them via a facilitated dialogue by a professionally trained facilitator. Dialogue circles are an opportunity to develop respect and trust while sharing in a journey that affects all people impacted by a particular conflict.

**CONCLUSION**

To understand the human condition, we must understand our propensity for conflict, especially violent conflict so that we can become more proficient in the language of peace and less reliant on the language of violence. The human experience is a long game. We have proven our capacity for great cruelty and our capacity for great compassion and kindness. Peace and understanding are critical aspects of advancing the human condition. To thrive, we must do so together.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An international speaker, peace-building trainer and mediator with expertise in restorative justice and transformative mediation models, Robyn Short works with individuals, corporations and nonprofit organizations in discovering the root causes of their conflicts, so they may transform their relationships and create new and productive paths forward individually and as teams. She also works with community leaders and political and governmental leaders to develop grassroots efforts for building sustainable peace in areas of historic conflict. In this capacity, she has been featured in news outlets internationally.

Robyn currently serves on Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson’s advisory board for the Women of the World for World Peace conference. She is the author of three books and the founder and publisher of GoodMedia Press, an independent publishing house that’s mission is to actively and passionately promote peace and social justice through the written word.

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