

## A Tale of Two Conflicts

It's early morning in New York City. We're in a hotel in midtown Manhattan, and my partner Kate and I are exhausted. We've come from Zurich to teach a seminar on conflict resolution.

We arrived in town two nights ago, thinking we had a hotel reservation, only to discover that our room had been given away to someone else. The best the staff could come up with was a "secondary" room in the back of a large luxury hotel...which meant both of us sleeping in a single bed that reeked of unwashed bodies, alcohol, and cigarettes.

And here we are, comfortable at last in a good room in another hotel...when, at 2 A.M., just as we are getting ready for bed, the toilet overflows. Not just a little water spilling gently over the rim, but a virtual tsunami rises from the bowl, floods the tiny bathroom, jumps the threshold, and saturates the bedroom rug. This is the last straw. The manager eventually finds us another room. By now it is well past 3 A.M., and we have to start work in a few hours.

Checking out the following morning, I can barely contain my rage. I demand that they reduce the price of the room. The desk clerk mumbles a half apology – "I'm sorry you feel that way, Sir," which only feeds my anger. I demand to see a manager...the manager is unavailable. My face is turning purple. Kate later said she was afraid I was going to have a heart attack or become violent. I reach across the desk and grab the credit card slip the clerk has just run and tear it up, then storm out of the lobby.

### Winning – Sort Of

I got what I wanted, but it was a hollow victory that left me in a terrible mood for the rest of the morning. I felt that I had polluted the environment with my rage, leaving many people, including myself, worse off than when I started, all for the sake of a few dollars and my injured pride. Add to that the irony that we'd come to New York to teach conflict resolution!

There had to be a better way of handling the situation, a way that would leave the world better off than when the problem started. But I was damned if I knew how to do it.

This episode became the object of an ongoing meditation in the following months and years. I felt sincerely that I had been abused by the hotels with which we dealt. They clearly had more business than they could handle, so my satisfaction was not important to the people who dealt with me. On the other hand, I had to admit to myself that I loved the opportunity to "let it rip," to get furious and see others cringe before my threatening rage. It was only afterwards, when the momentary surge of exhilaration was replaced by a sense of loss, that I regretted what I had done. It was almost like a drug high that left a real "downer" in its wake.

It became clear to me why I got so high on conflict. I grew up as somewhat of an outcast, interested in science and reading at a time when geek was definitely not chic. Afflicted by vision problems that left me without much depth perception and therefore inept at sports, I preferred to do science projects or catch insects instead of playing

stickball with the other guys. I came to see myself as a weak recluse – prime bully bait – whose main response to impending conflict was to run and hide.

My unclaimed power lay coiled within me like a snake that was ready to strike at the smallest insult.

## **Ten Years Later**

Kate and I are standing at the Swissair counter at the old Athens Airport. We have just cut short a holiday on the Greek island of Santorini to rush back to Zurich for a long-awaited conference with my patent attorney. And things aren't working out too well.

Our flight from the island was cancelled because of a storm. We were forced to return to Athens by overnight ferry, causing us to miss our early flight to Zurich. So here we are trying to convince the Swissair agent to accept our Olympic Airlines ticket. And we aren't making much progress.

During the intervening ten years I had learned much about conflict resolution by attending classes given by psychologist Arnold Mindell on the theory and practice of “deep democracy” and Worldwork—two new, related offshoots of his interest in applying psychological insight to working with groups and conflict. His teaching promised an alternative to the kind of “resolution” I had reached in my conflict with the hotel personnel ten years earlier – winning a victory that left everyone worse off than before. And here I was, in the midst of another conflict I needed to win.

## **Taking Sides**

Winning by overpowering my opponent, I had learned, might quickly get me to my immediate goal, but was not sustainable. It set the stage for escalation, vengeance, and even violence. Winning was not bad, but the victory would be sweeter if my “opponents” liked, or at least respected, me after the dust settled. And one of the best ways to get my opponents on my side was to show them that I could be on theirs.

Back at the Swissair counter, I listened to the agent's explanation of why he couldn't honor my Olympic ticket. I told him I felt for him. Although it seemed he had all the power, I understood that he was the victim of an uncaring and impersonal corporate power structure. I understood he was a good person in an uncomfortable role. Then I explained my position to him. I absolutely needed to get to Zurich for a business meeting. I had endured seasickness and the stink of diesel fuel all night, knowing I would probably miss a very important meeting.

According to my theoretical understanding, he should, at this point, have responded in kind by taking my position, just as I had taken his. But no such thing happened. He merely repeated what he had said before, that he couldn't accept my ticket.

That's when I nearly threw all my learning to the winds. I felt my blood pressure rising along with my tone of voice. My face started getting red. I was about to pop my cork. And then I realized I had missed something. He said he couldn't help us. That must mean that, despite the fact that he seemed to have all the power, he really did feel powerless. He didn't see himself in the same light I saw him.

And then I did something very strange. I leaned across the counter, and said to him in a confidential tone of voice, “Your balls are bigger than you think they are!” He looked shocked. Then he stood up straight. Was he going to hit me? Had I insulted him? He

stepped out from behind the counter, put on his jacket, and said, “Follow me!” He led us to the Olympic counter, had a brief discussion with an agent there, and handed us new tickets. He smiled, shook our hands, and said, “Have a wonderful day.”

I won, but so did he. He came away from that conflict with an expanded view of himself, as well as his own power. It was truly a “win-win” situation.

Experiences like that gradually changed my attitude toward conflict. I was becoming less afraid of it, seeing it more as a playground for experiencing my own power in a way that also helped others experience theirs. I was taking the first stumbling baby steps toward making conflict an ally – even a friend – in getting closer to my own path through life. I did not know it at the time, but these two experiences showed me a direction that would later be of inestimable value in all sorts of situations, from the personal to the collective, to fields as unexpectedly wide ranging as business management and psychiatry.

Conflict could be something from which we flee. It could be something to which we get addicted as a way of satisfying our thirst for power. Or we could befriend conflict as an ally on the path of personal and social development. It is to this third alternative that this book is devoted.