

Resolving Personal and Organizational Conflict

Stories of Transformation and Forgiveness

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Ch. 1, The Hidden Meaning of Conflict Stories

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow.

--T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

An ancient piece of Jewish wisdom asks, "What is truer than the truth?" It answers, "The story." How is it possible for a story to be "truer than the truth"? Stories contain not only the truth of factual description, of events, people, and places, but also fragments of the storyteller's truth. They expose the Shadow that falls between emotion and response.

Stories open up parts of ourselves that we have hidden or shielded from view. They present masks to the outside world that provide us space to hide behind, yet in their conception and design they reveal who we really are. Stories are expressions of our deepest desires, and for this reason they encourage us to become more human, even to ourselves. They are, as Franz Kafka wrote, "an axe to break the frozen sea within."

Stories are impressive fabrications. They are, as someone described novels, "lies in search of a higher truth." They are designed, woven, and polished in the subconscious mind of the storyteller, the artist, the sculptor, the poet who created them. They are hardy yet delicate, true yet false, eternal yet internal, factual yet symbolic, unresolved yet resolvable. They seem impervious yet are easily malleable, to last forever and yet change in the telling.

Whenever events occur, stories take shape that surround and profoundly alter the way they are experienced. Hard facts mix with the soft human material of the artist, who is at the same time canvas and painting, marble and sculpture, music and instrument. Once the story is shaped and refined, once it has become coherent and whole, the artist experiences an inner need to tell it to others, perhaps as a way of confirming a timeless, universal human connection. Stories are a set of instructions for figuring out who people really are and how to respond to anger, pain, fear, and shame.

Stories are a method of learning and a means of play. They pass important cultural information from generation to generation. For this reason, they command our immediate attention and invoke deep listening. We have learned to anticipate the captivating, deeply satisfying experience of listening to fables, myths, and fairy tales, although none of them are about real life or even about us.

The Power of Stories

Why do we listen so closely to stories? What is it about them that delights, enchants, and transports us? What is the strange hidden power of stories? Why do they induce such deep states of listening?

Stories invite the listener to jointly experience an event with the storyteller. They elicit a sympathetic vibration, an empathic discovery of what it must have felt like to live the event being narrated. They encourage a deep level of communication and promote a sense of community by bringing people together, through imagination and empathy, to collectively define the meaning of the world in which they live. Listening changes people. The Native American novelist Leslie Marmon Silko describes the process this way:

At Laguna Pueblo . . . [stories express] an understanding of the original view of creation—that we are all part of a whole; we do not differentiate or fragment stories and experiences. . . . So in the telling . . . the storytelling always includes the audience, the listeners. In fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners.

In stories, we both lose and find ourselves. At some deep place within them, we both discover and create who we are. Even a fairy tale that concerns princesses, dragons, and knights in shining armor somehow seems to be about us or parts of ourselves that we are able to bring to life by listening deeply, as though the story was about us. We willingly suspend our disbelief in the story's truth or falsity and thereby access its deeper truths.

The same process takes place in mediation. We have realized, in the course of listening to tens of thousands of stories about conflict over the last twenty years, that every story about conflict is, at one level, a fairy tale. Each tale of conflict, in the way it is told, has the power to keep people locked in combat, and it has an equal power to free them from suffering. Each story can lead them closer to anger or forgiveness, toward impasse or resolution, into stasis or transformation.

Every party to a conflict, on hearing his or her opponent tell a story describing how awful he or she was, or how he or she caused the conflict, finds it difficult to suspend disbelief and examine the story for its deeper truths. Often he or she is unable to set aside, even for a moment, judgments about the factual truth or falsity of the story to search for its metaphorical truths. This party cannot feel empathy for his or her opponents or experience with them the emotions described in the story. He or she is unable to reach across the barrier of opposition to discover something in and about the story that bridges the distance from the other party or parties to the conflict.

Yet every authentic story reverberates powerfully inside us. Whenever a story touches us deeply, we identify acutely with the experience of the speaker, and the story becomes one that is also about us. Even if it is told in a way that casts us as the villain, we can recognize from the structure of the story that our "villainy" is only the flip side or mirror image of our opponent's pain. Mediators can encourage people to discover these hidden meanings for themselves.

When we work with schools, organizations, and communities attempting to resolve cross-cultural conflicts or address issues of bias and prejudice and celebrate their diversity, we often use stories to evoke empathy and compassionate listening. We ask people to find someone in the audience who is completely different from them. We ask women and men, blacks and whites, gays and straights to find each other. Then we ask

them to tell each other a story about a time when they felt discriminated against for any reason.

Some people's stories describe racial, gender-based, or cultural discrimination; other stories are about being too short or too tall or funny-looking, or about being called a name as a child. Ancient, profound, deeply painful stories are remembered and exchanged as the storytellers relive their shame and sadness amidst tears and rage. Although people are very different, as their stories unfold they discover that the experience of discrimination is remarkably similar despite their differences.

For example, one African American woman told of driving through an upper-class neighborhood and repeatedly being stopped and questioned by police. A Latino man told of being expelled from school as a child on his first day because he had only recently arrived in the United States and could not speak English. An elderly woman with a thick accent spoke of growing up Jewish in prewar Germany and of being discriminated against in the United States because of her accent. A Caucasian male engineer told us he could not think of a time when he had felt discriminated against. After a few minutes of listening to other people's stories, he shared a repressed memory of being teased unmercifully. Forty years later, he blushed as he recalled the pain their ridicule had caused him.

The experience of discrimination can be understood by everyone, even if, by comparison, it looks trivial. Through this exercise, people often experience a deep sense of relief, letting go of burdens they have been carrying for years. They are grateful for the opportunity to articulate memories they have not shared before, and they are deeply appreciative of their partners for listening carefully and compassionately to their stories. There is often surprise among storytelling partners that their experiences are remarkably similar despite differences in age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic, racial, or other backgrounds. As a result, people can identify powerfully across the apparent abyss of their differences. They can see that the purpose of discrimination is to shame and divide them and prevent them from discovering the similarities in their stories.

It then becomes possible for those who have discovered their own emotional pain to understand the deeper damage done to others by repeated, even harsher experiences of prejudice. After considering what they have gone through, they can empathize with what it may feel like to experience discrimination not as a single event but as a daily occurrence for thirty or forty years. Although people are listening to stories about other people's lives, no one ever appears bored, and attention never wavers.

Storytelling has the potential to carry us, listeners and storytellers alike, to a new place in our relationships with one another and with ourselves. Simply exchanging personal details and trivia about our lives helps us become more compassionate, recognize ourselves in others, and deepen our relationships.

Conflict Stories and Reality

Moments of incredible intimacy, insight, and empathy often occur in storytelling, uniting people so opposite that they might otherwise dislike each other. We need to ask why it is so much more difficult to make the same connections when we hear our adversaries tell stories about their conflicts with us.

What are conflict stories, and what is the source of their power? From the point of view of the people involved in conflict, stories are an effort to mend the fabric of their perceived reality—to create a consistent, sequential version of upsetting, unexpected,

seemingly contradictory facts or events. We tell stories to integrate our experiences into a matrix, system, or pattern of thought that reinforces, justifies, and defends our identities. Whenever significant conflicts occur in our lives, we immediately create stories about what has happened, in an effort to make sense out of our conflicts. We tell stories to rationalize what we have said or done, to justify our roles, to express our injured feelings, to defend our positions, or to prove that we were right.

For example, we were recently in the company of a two-year-old girl who fell down, skinned her knee, and cried inconsolably for several minutes. A short while later, she relayed to her grandmother the story of what had happened: she had fallen down, hurt herself, cried, and was now all better. It was clear that for her the story was a kind of bandage or medication, a salve not for her scraped knee but for her injured self. As she told her story, the event simultaneously grew more distant and became more permanent. She later repeated the story several times-to her father, her aunt and uncle, and everyone else who came within range. By the fourth or fifth telling, a painful memory had been replaced by a story about pain, bravery, and recovery, in the same way that a photograph both stimulates and substitutes for detailed recollection.

The stories we tell ourselves and others create causal connections between seemingly disparate, unconnected events that might otherwise frighten us with their irrationality and threaten the safety with which we try to fill our lives. As we tell these stories, we link random events in a seemingly logical, purposeful sequence. Doing so allows us to feel protected, good about ourselves, and less anxious about the world. Stories allay our fears, quell our anxieties, soothe our pains, and alleviate our shame. They deny the inevitability of death, or they tell us we are lucky not to have been more badly injured.

We continuously search out, manufacture, and process reality through stories. We use stories to make the world's sudden, irregular events consistent with our continuous, regular inner lives-with our beliefs, feelings, actions, and attitudes. Stories are how we learn to avoid danger, avert failure, and prepare for unexpected contingencies by imagining how we might respond successfully to them.

When others are angry with us, for example, we can easily become frightened. We assuage our fears by manufacturing images and stories that give us permission to pull away, or to cause the others harm. We do this because we would feel guilty if we did not first cast our opponents as unworthy of our company. In this way, we create them in the image of our own fear. Thus, the stories we tell others and the ones we tell ourselves recreate the world as an externalized self-image.

At the same time, our authentic selves, our inner sense of truth, our core integrity, and our natural capacity for empathy are often sacrificed. Stories give meaning and identity to our lives, but they do so in a social context that produces and conveys social meaning. We tell them for a purpose, yet our purpose causes us to lose track of the actual experience from which we shaped the story, with its plot, its characterizations, and its descriptions of feelings.

When there is a tenuous relationship between who we really are and who our stories say we are-between what actually happened and the tales we weave to cover, protect, and deflect from some vulnerable space within-we become confused and disoriented. When we tell false stories, or stories about a false self, we lose connection with who we really are. Only by listening carefully to our own stories and making explicit the hidden assumptions that buttress our tales can we observe how we have brought together the elements that created our stories. Through self-observation and discovery, we can understand why we have created a story and how it melds our assumptions and

expectations with our experiences. From there we can discover alternative stories, including those told by our opponents, that are as accurate and inaccurate as our own.

When, as mediators, we try to decide which of two conflict stories is true and which is false, we forget that these stories, like novels and fairy tales, are fictions that are designed to reveal larger truths. In this sense, all stories are true, perhaps not factually but as expressions of how we feel at the time we describe it, about what has happened to us. They express true needs, emotions, interests and desires, however false the facts may be. By following the clues hidden in stories, we can discover the truths they symbolize.

Stories Within Stories

In every conflict story there are three separate stories that describe vastly different truths. There is an external story that is told for public consumption. Beneath it, there is a second, internal story that is constructed to protect the ego. Beneath that, there is a third, core story that explains why the storyteller found it necessary to invent the other two stories.

All three stories reveal common themes and similarities in language, yet the purpose and method of each story are different. In external stories, the focus is on demonizing the other person, characterizing what he or she did as wrong or harmful, so these stories are told in an angry or pained tone of voice. In internal stories, the focus is on excusing ourselves, justifying our actions and inactions, and our tone conveys guilt or shame. Core stories connect the other two stories. They focus on accepting responsibility for the conflict and being who we really are. The tone in these stories is centered, authentic, honest, and self-aware. The mediator's role is to diminish, reframe, or remove the demonizations and negative characterizations in external stories, to extract, bypass, or question the justifications and excuses in internal stories, and to encourage the parties to discover their core stories and reveal them to each other. It is the search for these core stories that forms the center of our work. They are the fulcrum tipping impasse and stasis toward resolution and transformation.

As people in conflict discover and tell their core stories to each other, bridges are erected, permitting empathy, understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation to cross between them. External stories, by contrast, build invisible boundaries that defend and protect the parties against those they have chosen to describe as enemies, keeping them locked in position. Internal stories isolate them even more, protecting them against their own vulnerability, guilt, and shame. Internal and external stories both work to keep core stories well hidden.

In Buddhism, there is a practice known as "Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue." These three consist of what we try to minimize, what we try to maximize, and what we do not care about minimizing or maximizing. They can also be thought of as negative, positive, and neutral. In conflict resolution terms, they translate into, "You're wrong," "I'm right," and "Who cares." These three positions correspond roughly to the external, internal, and core stories if we change the last statement to "I do care, but I don't want to admit it."

When core stories are finally revealed, it is almost as if a direct channel were opened between the parties, revealing their authentic selves. Their tone and the quality of energy flowing between them shifts dramatically, allowing new possibilities to emerge. They connect with each other at a deep level because they have dropped their conflict masks and protective stories and revealed who they really are.

Listening for the Core Story

All stories bypass our rational thought processes. They speak to us directly through fantasy, emotion, heart, and spirit. The subconscious mind does not distinguish between metaphor and reality, between what is true and what is intensely imagined, whether as wish or fear. It is to this nonrational, subconscious mind that stories communicate. When conflict stories are told, these deeper issues, feelings, needs, and wants are revealed, even when the storytellers want them hidden.

For example, we mediated a claim of sexual harassment involving a man and a woman who had worked together for several years. At first they were unwilling to speak to each other about what had happened and sat frozen in silence. We asked the woman to tell her story and reveal her experience. We asked the man to listen with empathy and an open mind, without being distracted by thoughts about how he was going to respond when his turn came.

Instead of describing this man as evil, the woman spoke honestly about her fears and about the pain she had felt as she went to her car and found his unwanted love notes and requests for dates. She spoke graphically of her aborted efforts to tell him she did not want to see him. She described his silent staring and persistence in following her around the building where they worked. She painted a clear picture of his harassing behavior and her feelings of being hounded by him. She acknowledged her ineffectiveness in communicating her desire that he stop. Finally, with our assistance, she turned to him, told him she was miserable, and, in tears, asked him to please stop. At the end of her story, they both cried. The man, for the first time, understood the pain he had caused and was profoundly ashamed of his behavior. He apologized from his heart, saying he knew he could never make up for what he had done. He said he had fallen in love with her. He admitted not noticing her fear or registering her rejection. He thanked her for opening his eyes and promised he would respect her wishes. He said he would never speak to her again unless she spoke first. In response, she told him she understood his anguish and accepted his apology, although what he had done still was not okay. With authenticity and emotional honesty, each was able to hear what the other felt and, on that basis, resolve the conflict. They were both released from the burden of carrying their stories alone and from the hostile external stories they had created of evil, cruelty, harassment, and fear. They were also able to transcend the internal stories they had told themselves in order to exonerate their own behavior. The woman, for instance, had told herself that she was justified in not directly asking the man to stop, because he was so insensitive he would never listen. She admitted wanting to keep her feelings of fear and revulsion to herself because in her culture it would have been highly inappropriate for a woman to speak so directly to a man. The man, in turn, had told himself that he did not need to acknowledge the woman's subtle signals, because she was behaving politely toward him. He admitted being unable to hear the word no and placing his need for affection over her need for safety. As they each revealed their core stories and mistaken assumptions, they were able to see together the events and actions that these assumptions had precipitated, and they were able to acknowledge the anguish and pain they felt as a result. Through their tears, they told each other that they finally understood each other in a genuine way and could now begin to heal. The healing process accelerated as they created a new, third story—not of fear and pain but of learning, listening, and improved understanding. Then they agreed to tell this story to their colleagues at work.

The Dangers in Mediating Conflict Stories

The parties in mediation tell their stories not just to friends, colleagues, or mediators but also to the very people they have accused of evil, the people who have justified their rage

and have served as explanations for their fear. In organizational mediations, as one person tells his or her story, others are inspired to join in and tell their own stories of the same experience or events. As everyone recounts some version of what happened, a composite or collective story emerges, one that is truer and more accurate than any of the others. Objective truth, in this sense, is an amalgam of all the possible subjective truths that can be told; it cannot be found in one story before the others have been told. Here are some of the dangers in mediating conflict stories.

Unpredictability

Mediation is rarely a simple process in which the antagonists spin narratives for the mediator and their open-minded, actively listening opponents. It works archeologically, excavating deeper stories that may be entirely different from or even contradictory to the one that lies just beneath the surface. It is an adventure, a hunt for hidden treasure that even the storytellers may not know is there. This story does not have a safe, predetermined ending, so one danger is unpredictability: anything can happen.

Collusion

Every form of vulnerability is loaded with fear, reluctance, and mistrust, making vulnerability especially risky in the presence of conflict. Most people are reluctant to explore or share their core stories. They feel frightened, shy, or embarrassed, and committed to the tales they have constructed and to the beliefs anchored in their version of what happened. Moreover, their opponents find it difficult to hear their deeper, more vulnerable stories. They fear being manipulated into a powerful form of empathy, or being pressured to surrender an important interest, or being called on to reveal their own inner selves. For this reason, another danger is that the parties on both sides of a conflict may collude or conspire to defend their stories against other, less flattering versions and to keep communication superficial by staying with superficial stories.

Seduction

Storytelling is a fluid art. Stories change as feelings, interests, and needs shift. People tell stories as a way of encouraging their listeners to respond supportively and sympathetically. Storytelling is sometimes used to manipulate, win over, or hypnotize listeners into supporting the storyteller's feelings. Stories are designed, and other people's actions are coordinated, in such a way as to elicit the desired emotional responses. To quote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "every word strikes an emotional note," and this is particularly true of conflict stories. The danger for the mediator is of being seduced by a highly emotional internal story. A rich narrative has the power not only to attract the storyteller's antagonist but also to trigger memories, unresolved issues, feelings, and incomplete episodes in the life of the mediator. Thus, all the parties to the mediation process may succumb to the intensity or tragic beauty of a story told with deep, absorbing emotion.

Undue Influence

Every time we enter a conflict, the conflict enters us, and every story we hear is changed by the way we hear it. In this way, our own stories have an impact on the stories told by others, and this is true even when our "story" about mediation is that we should not get involved in trying to understand the stories of parties who are in conflict.

Instead of denying our influence, we can use it to enhance learning. Every story we hear

contributes to our personal and professional growth, so it is possible for mediators to use storytelling to reveal openings for our own learning, resolution, and transformation.

The Context of Narrative Communication

The context of a narrative communication is its framework: the big picture, the environment that surrounds it. The context assigns meaning, both for the speaker and for the listener, and every communication takes place within a context. Therefore, to understand the meaning of any communication, it is necessary to be aware of the visible and invisible contexts in which it takes place. What is actually understood by speaker and listener alike depends on the degree of awareness and attention that each can bring to bear on the invisible context. Thus, whenever anyone tells a story, the listener has a choice: to focus on the literal meaning of the story and ignore its hidden contextual elements, or to search out the contextual elements and hear a more complex but clearer story.

Because conflict stories often carry strong emotions, they require mediators to elucidate the context, which is rarely explicit. By addressing contextual elements, mediators support the storytellers in understanding and defusing the story, because when the context is uncovered, a new story emerges from underneath the words, leading the listener to the core story.

One way of elucidating the context is for the mediator to elicit background information that explains why a speaker is upset. The mediator can unhook the past from recent events or reframe accusations as statements of the speaker's own pain. In these ways, the mediator creates an environment in which the story can be heard, digested, and explored.

Given that the key contextual element in most conflict stories is the antagonistic relationship between speaker and listener, the mediator can also ask questions that reveal problems in the relationship, the history of the relationship, and expectations for the relationship. This process will reveal what each of the parties is responsible for in their dysfunctional relationship. Moreover, the mediator can ask questions that clarify the background of each person, the environment in which troubling incidents have taken place, and any organizational structures and systems that have added meaning to the communication.

In addition, the mediator can focus on the communication process—on how the message is being delivered, on the speaker's tone of voice, energy level, and body language, and on the medium of communication that was used. The mediator can also check on what the listener has heard—on what was understood, on what was internalized, and on what was missed. The mediator can ask questions of the speaker as well, to explore his or her intentions, discover the speaker's hoped-for impact on the listener, assess the actual emotional impact on the listener, and compare it to the impact the speaker desired. This process encourages resolution by revealing the parts of the story that were acceptable or agreeable to the listener and by focusing the listener's attention on elements that he or she missed. The speaker can also be led to recognize, for example, that a communication was ineffective because it did not take account of the listener's context, or because it was actually incongruent with the context and therefore sent a mixed message.

By openly identifying the contextual patterns in conflict stories, mediators enable parties to pay attention to the hidden elements that define the meaning of their communications. This process encourages them to act strategically and thereby increase the effectiveness of their communications. Because they learn to avoid using inconsistent and incongruent

communications that distort their messages, they decrease the level of their conflict.

Key Components and Functions of Conflict Stories

Every conflict story reveals key components and functions—justifications, defenses, and expectations—that harden and intensify every time the story is told. As mediators, we rarely stop to analyze or reveal the components that keep these stories locked in place, nor are we conscious of the functions that these components play in maintaining stability and security in the storyteller's life. Without this kind of analysis, there is a danger that we will let people fall into the trap of telling their stories to a sympathetic listener who does not empathically challenge their views but merely reinforces their positions, thereby blocking resolution of their conflicts.

Understanding a story's key components and functions allows the mediator to support the parties in releasing their external and internal stories and allowing their core stories to emerge. As you read the following two sections, consider the effects that these ideas could have on the conflicts you are mediating.

Components

Not every conflict story contains every one of the following components, but most contain one or more, which can be identified through questions and used to create an opening to the core of the conflict:

- The storyteller is a victim, more acted on than acting. Who is the victim in the story? Who is the actor? Who is acted on? Why is the story told in this way? In telling it this way, what does the storyteller expect to gain from the listener?
- The opponent is the creator, initiator, and cause of the conflict. What would happen to the story if the opponent were not the cause of the conflict? What reaction would the listener have if the storyteller began by taking responsibility for everything that has happened?
- Whatever the storyteller has done is presented as rational and just. In the story, does the speaker include a description of the mistakes she has made? Does she describe her own irrational actions or fears? If not, why not? What does she think would happen if she did?
- Whatever the opponent has done is presented as irrational and unjust. In the story, does the opponent do anything right?
- Is there a way of rationally explaining what the opponent has done? If not, why not? Why is it difficult for the storyteller to admit that his opponent may have done something right?
- The symbolic and metaphorical content of the story points to the real meaning that it has for the storyteller. In the story, what symbols and metaphors are used? What real meanings do they reveal?
- Both parties' stories about the conflict are metaphorically true. How do the metaphors used by the storyteller express a deeper truth about the conflict? What is the metaphorical truth of the opponent's story?
- The story links perceived facts in such a way as to favor the storyteller, while facts inconsistent with the story are denied, dismissed, or disconnected. What facts have been left out of the story? Why? What would happen to the story if they were inserted?
- The conflict story, in its imagery and language, reveals a set of emotional assumptions that have more to do with the underlying conflict than with the event itself. What images are implicit in the story? What are the storyteller's emotional assumptions? What words does she use to describe her opponent? Is

it possible to find different words that have the same meanings but are positive or neutral? Why were these words not chosen?

- Stories about the opponent are actually about the storyteller—about what he admires in others but lacks in himself, or what he dislikes and rejects in others but is simultaneously drawn to in himself.
- What can the storyteller learn about himself from what he dislikes or admires in others? What does the story say about what he has done, and what does it reveal about what he has not done?

Functions

Understanding the role the story plays, both in the life of the storyteller and in the conflict, may reveal openings that allow the mediator to break its hold. The key functions of the conflict story operate on many levels, both for the storyteller and for the listener:

- The conflict stories people tell create their lives; in a story's telling, the conflict is created. What aspects of the story have shaped or created the speaker's life? How? How has the telling of the story helped create or deepen the conflict?
- Stories are rituals designed to comfort the storyteller with their familiarity. Does the storyteller appear to be comforted by the story? How? Why is this important?
- The more a story is repeated, the more it is believed to be true. How often has the conflict story been repeated? Has it changed as it has been repeated? How? Why?
- Conflict stories maintain the self-image and self-esteem of the storytellers. How has the self-image of the storyteller been enhanced or bolstered by the story? What would happen to the storyteller's self-esteem if the opponent's story were accepted?
- Stories indirectly help fulfill wishes, dreams, and expectations, or they explain why wishes, dreams, and expectations have not been fulfilled. Are there any wishes, dreams, or expectations expressed in the story? What are they? How would the story change if these wishes, dreams, and expectations became realities? Is the story primarily about the opponent or about the storyteller's wishes, dreams, and expectations?
- Most stories that people tell about themselves are compensatory, and the satisfaction that storytellers take in these stories reveals their underlying needs and interests. Does the story reveal an underlying need or interest on the part of the storyteller? What parts of the story provide the greatest emotional satisfaction? Why? What are each party's underlying needs or interests? How are underlying needs and interests revealed in each party's story?
- Most stories told about others are relational. Thus the storyteller creates others as a way of creating herself through her relationships with them. How does the storyteller's narrative create the other person? What impact does her description of the other person have on her self-definition? On her relationship with the other person?
- Stories create listening and produce powerful bonds with listeners, even when the listeners are opponents. How could the storyteller use his story to create a bond with his opponent in the conflict? Could he tell the same story without the device of a victim or a demon? Without one who is good and another who is evil? Without a predefined notion of right and wrong?
- Conflict stories can all be retold to end with the words "and they lived happily ever after" and describe a full resolution of the conflict. How could the parties tell their stories so as to have them end in this way? What would they have to give up in order to do so? What would a happy ending do to their relationship?

The Language of Metaphor

The language of metaphor, allusion, and symbolism is exactly opposite to the language of fact, attribution, and logic. Factual and logical accounts are linear, temporal, unchanging, causal, local, and specific. Metaphorical and symbolic descriptions are circular, timeless, always changing, without cause, universal, and general. Metaphors are images we use to try to make sense of the world by comparing it with something we understand. Mediators can discover the hidden contexts of conflict stories from the metaphors that the parties use in telling them.

Logic is automatic and predictable, whereas metaphor is accidental and chaotic. In metaphor, events are linked symbolically, not because one action leads causally to another but because it is associated with another action through meaning. The meaning of any metaphor is implicit rather than explicit, based on feeling rather than reason and on something other than what is literally being said.

Meaning often is evident through tone of voice, feeling, intensity, or sensation rather than through data, reasoning, or precise definitions of words. Metaphor, in this sense, is the language of art and of the unconscious. It is the stuff of dreams used by mediators to reach the inner self and bypass the logical, rational barriers that keep others at a distance.

For example, consider the stories told by a divorcing couple who disagree about who will get the family home. To each spouse, the house is described as more than just a residence. Its meaning to each party is often revealed through the use of metaphors that identify deeper conflicts lying below the surface. For one of the spouses the house symbolizes security in old age, whereas for the other it represents an investment or opportunity to turn a profit. It may represent a lost childhood, a broken promise, a hope for reconciliation, or a weapon of revenge. It may be a hedge against fate, a way of saying no, or the equalizer in a perceived power imbalance. It may represent a memory of martyrdom, a way of holding on to being right, or memories of being together. It can hold many meanings other than its ordinary meaning as a place to live.

Metaphorical elements occur in workplace conflicts as well. For instance, in one mediation we conducted, an employee kept repeating statements about his supervisor: "She's always telling me what to do," "I feel powerless when I'm around her," "She is so punishing," and "She's too controlling." When we repeated to the employee the words he had used in describing his relationship with his supervisor, he realized for the first time that he felt like a child when confronted by her. "Oh my God," he said, "it's my mother!" With this insight, he discovered why she was a problem in his life. As a result of this insight, he was able to see that the problem was mostly his. We were then able to assist him in reaching an agreement with his supervisor on what they could do to create a better relationship. We asked him to find a word that represented a new metaphor for his supervisor, and he chose "coach." He stopped interpreting her attempts to work with him as efforts to control his life. When he was able to uncover and acknowledge the hidden meaning of his relationship with his supervisor, and when he created a new metaphor that allowed him to think differently about the meaning of her behavior, the subconscious reasons for his resistance disappeared, and the rest of their agreements came easily. He shifted from metaphors of control to metaphors of learning.

Mediators can use metaphors to reveal misunderstandings that fuel conflict and to clarify emotional experiences on both sides. Questions-such as "What did that feel like?" or "What was that like for you?"-can elicit metaphorical responses that speak directly to a listener's subconscious mind and result in increased empathy for the speaker.

Separating Fact from Interpretation

Every conflict story is organized around an event, which is presented by the speaker as made up of objective facts. The listener, it is assumed, will be forced by his or her acceptance of these facts to adopt the storyteller's interpretation of the event-including the speaker's attributions of meaning, which are based on those facts. Most external stories are built on facts that have been tailored to support a particular interpretation or point of view.

During the storytelling process, one way the mediator can interact creatively with parties in conflict is to encourage them to recognize the vast difference between facts and their interpretation. Every fact is simply that: a fact. Rarely, however, do facts get people into conflict, mostly because it is a waste of time to contest the uncontestable or rail against reality. What upsets the parties is the interpretation of fact.

Consider the words "You are lazy." That one person is working harder than another may be a fact. One way to interpret this fact is to say that the person described is lazy, but there are other possible interpretations. The speaker may have been tired, for example, and have asked the other party for help, politely, without getting any response. Or the speaker may expect work to be shared with the other party and may feel exploited. Or the speaker may be upset about the time it has taken the other person to get started on a task. Or the speaker may be using these words as a way to open a more authentic line of communication about his or her relationship with the listener, or simply may be feeling irritable because of lack of sleep, or may be in a foul mood or be joking. We could go on in an interminable process of interpretation that can be triggered for any set of facts in a conflict story. It is important for each party to understand that his or her meaning is not the only possible one, nor is it necessarily the correct one. An interpretation may reflect a listener's fear more than a speaker's aggression, a listener's irritability rather than a speaker's sleepless night.

At a deeper level, both the attribution of meaning and the selection of a single interpretation out of many possibilities are choices made by the listener. Again, an interpretation often reveals more about the listener's intentions and emotions than it does about the speaker's. Every interpretation tells the mediator something about the mental framework, expectations, and context of the one who is doing the interpreting. This information can be used in powerful ways to deepen the conversation. For example, employees who respond defensively to criticism by accusing their managers of harassment may be afraid of losing their jobs and unable to hear criticism until they have received positive feedback. Once they have received it, they become able to engage in deeper conversations with their managers about the responsibility they share for clarifying expectations, improving communication, and building better working relationships. It, then, becomes possible to probe deeply into the fear, defensiveness, harshness, and retaliation that have proved unsuccessful in past communications.

Filters, Lenses, Mistaken Assumptions, and Unrealistic Expectations

The stories that parties tell about a conflict are partly efforts to reshape actions or events that they have experienced-to recreate them in the storyteller's image. In order to understand exactly how this is being done, mediators need to recognize the context, elicit the metaphors, and identify the interpretations that add meaning to the conflict. It is equally important for mediators to recognize the filters and lenses that parties use to subtract meaning from the events that shape their conflict stories. Even before it has been told, the conflict story has been patterned and fitted to a design: unwanted facts have been cut away, and those that remain are refinished and molded to achieve the effect that

the story is intended to produce.

For example, a conflict we mediated between two sisters-in-law revealed the role that subjective lenses and filters can play in shaping a conflict story. Helen, whose marriage to Elaine's brother was disintegrating, told a story in which Elaine was described as trying to help her brother meet other women so he could betray Helen. The story was based on Helen's fears and on her interpretation of the fact that Elaine had invited her brother to travel to a business meeting that would be chaired by Cecelia, a strong, beautiful woman.

Elaine's story was equally colored by her own unrealistic expectations of her brother, her dislike of the way Helen picked fights with him, and her desire to encourage her brother to meet people who would support what she saw as his capacity for success. Helen had started with a set of preconceived ideas, colored by her poor self-esteem, about Elaine's history of lukewarm support for her marriage. To these negative feelings she added her fear that her husband did not love her and a recent history of emotionally unresolved marital arguments. These filters distorted the real purpose of Elaine's invitation to her brother and led Helen to invent a story of betrayal. The two women told conflicting stories about the same event because each of them had filtered it differently and was seeing it through a different set of lenses.

Filters

A filter is like a sieve. It eliminates from the storyteller's account any information he considers potentially dangerous. It is difficult to identify a filter, however, because its presence in the story is not conspicuous; indeed, it can be detected only through the perceived absence of what it has removed. Identifying a filter is like noticing the missing pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, which become obvious only when all the other pieces have been inserted and connected. Therefore, the mediator needs to recognize what is required for a story to make sense, identify what makes a story unconvincing, unclear, or incomplete, and sense what has not been said. Once it is clear that both parties to a conflict have neglected to include certain pieces of information in their versions of the conflict, it becomes possible to consider why those particular pieces were left out.

It is also possible, although difficult in practice, for the mediator to extrapolate backwards from behavioral symptoms and pathologies that appear in a conflict to facts or issues that have been left out of a conflict story. As the mediator notices emotional dysfunctions or biases, she can assume that they operate as a filter, to block parts of the story from being told or heard. Freud commented, in a similar vein, that wherever there is a symptom, there is an amnesia.

Lenses

In addition to filtering out unwanted particulars, the parties to a conflict view the facts through a variety of lenses, which subtly reshape whatever information remains after filtering, so that this information matches what the parties already know or want to be true. The information is refracted as it passes through a number of different focusing devices, including subjective perceptions, cultural assumptions, emotions, preexisting ideas, self-concepts, and personal or organizational paradigms, each of which both distorts and clarifies meaning. This process is illustrated by Figure 1.1. Words and actions, as they move through and are shaped by these lenses, become increasingly distorted and divergent from the original events or actions, to such an extent that the storyteller's descriptions of an event are often virtually unrecognizable, not only to his or her opponent but also to others who have witnessed the event in question. At the same

time, however, the hidden, inner meaning of the story becomes clearer as the events described more truly reflect the storyteller's needs.

Mistaken Assumptions and Unrealistic Expectations

As filters and lenses are identified and missing pieces are restored, a larger, more integrated story begins to emerge. Before this larger story can be understood, mediators need to carefully examine how filters and lenses are created by mistaken assumptions and unrealistic expectations.

Many conflict stories, for example, contain an assumption that people can and should be perfect. This assumption gives rise to an unrealistic expectation that one should behave with absolute correctness in all situations. To meet this expectation, people edit their conflict stories to omit everything that presents them in less than a perfect light.

Beneath this assumption is another, deeper assumption: that people are not good enough as they are and so require the approval of other people in order to feel right or okay. People expect to be able to earn the approval of others through actions, and they tell their stories in order to achieve this result. Whatever may incur disapproval is edited out or rationalized before the next telling.

There is also an assumption that if one has not been perfect, and if one's actions do not warrant the approval of others, then the cause of this failure is beyond one's control. This assumption leads to an expectation of helplessness, an irrational belief that one's whole life is determined by forces beyond one's control. As a result, people shape their stories to portray these forces (and their opponents) as larger than they really are, and they expect something terrible to happen if they do anything to address their conflicts.

As people become aware of these assumptions and expectations, they discover issues that have nothing to do with their opponents. They gain insights that open them to the possibility of resolving their disputes. As they go deeper and pull back the layers of their assumptions, they find yet another assumption, present in all conflict stories: that things should be the way they expect them to be. The expectation that things ought to be different than they are encourages people to adopt the position that it is the facts, rather than their interpretation, that is wrong. As a result, people make up stories to match the way they think things ought to be instead of describing the way things actually are.

Many people operate on the assumption that the more they want something, the less they deserve it or can get it or are entitled to ask for it. This assumption creates two expectations: that disguising one's emotional truth as a literal truth, or distorting it into the shape of a false absolute, increases the likelihood of getting what one wants, and that one suffers less when one's hidden desire is denied than if one had asked for it directly. Consequently, people fill their stories with words like always and never, which are always factually inaccurate and never literally correct. For example, consider what happens when someone makes an emotional request by saying to someone else, "You never do x" or "You always do y." The other person usually responds by saying, "I often do x" or "I don't always do y." But the first person's statement actually represents a request, as in: "I would like you to do more of x" or "I would like you to do less of y."

Beneath each of these assumptions and expectations lies still another assumption: that we must not become vulnerable or reveal to an opponent who we really are. This assumption is tied to expectations that becoming vulnerable will not help us get what we want, that we are not good enough, or that others will use our personal information in destructive

ways.

Finally, there is what we call "the mother of all expectations"-that others will meet our needs and desires without being asked-that if we have to ask, it means that others do not love us enough. Most people, given the choice, would rather live with conflict than surrender the beauty of this expectation. As mediators peel back the layers of assumptions and expectations that the parties in conflict hold about themselves and each other, opportunities for strategic intervention automatically arise. Once we draw these hidden assumptions and expectations into the open and support or acknowledge the party who has revealed them, we can expand the opportunity for genuine self-reflection, and moments may appear in which it is possible for the parties to elicit positive feedback and empathy from their opponents.

For example, we mediated a dispute in which an employee referred several times to the "fact" that her manager thought she was incompetent. We asked why she made this assumption, and she said it was because he always criticized her work. We then asked her what she thought of her own work, and she said she knew she made mistakes but wanted to succeed and was trying hard. We asked what she thought her mistakes were, and she became extremely detailed and critical about her own performance. We asked if she assumed she was incompetent and was about to be fired, and she nodded and began to cry. Sensing a sympathetic response on the part of her manager based on her willingness to acknowledge her mistakes, we asked him to respond but did not cue him or point him in an empathetic direction. He said he thought she was actually quite competent but had such a poor self-image that he could not give her any feedback without getting a defensive response. We asked him to give some examples of things she had done competently, and as he listed several, she perked up and began listening in earnest. The manager's empathy and positive feedback allowed her to drop her twin assumptions-that she was a failure, and that he was out to get her-and together they were able to negotiate an improved relationship.

Trading Power for Sympathy

The narrative structure of conflict stories is the framework on which storytellers hang their assumptions and expectations, arrange their metaphors, and set up their filters and lenses. The factual and interpretive content that makes up these conflict stories is expressed through and modified by their structure. As the mediator understands the narrative structure of a conflict story, its restructuring becomes possible, as do different outcomes. As mediators, we can learn a great deal by extrapolating from our own experiences. As we do so, we will stop thinking of ourselves as superior to people who are stuck in conflict and need our assistance, and we will improve our capacity for empathy.

To try this for yourself, stop and think of a story of your own and the way you usually tell it, a story about yourself and a conflict in which you were involved. Then ask yourself who in your story was the one who "did it" and who was the one "it" was "done to." If your conflict story is like most others, you were the innocent victim to whom "it" was done, and the other person was the evil or insensitive one who did "it" to you. If your story is typical, you probably constructed it in the form of a drama, casting yourself as powerless and depicting the other person as powerful. Whether or not you were actually powerless, consider what you gained by telling your story as if you were.

After years of listening to people tell stories about their conflicts, we have come to believe that this is one of the universal subtexts or metamessages: the storyteller is the recipient of unfair and unjust actions, more sinned against than sinning. In every conflict

story we have heard, people position themselves as victims for one reason: to trade power for sympathy. Through their stories, they surrender their power in order to win a sympathetic response from their listener. They learn that the sympathy they receive increases in proportion to the other person's evil, which is measured partly by their own helplessness. Yet sympathy for them ebbs as their own responsibility for the conflict becomes more apparent, or as the story includes the other person's pain.

Thus people in conflict use stories to justify and defend themselves and to gain sympathy from others. As a result, they become locked in emotions that keep their conflicts going. They experience conflict as traumatic, shameful, anxiety producing, painful, and confusing, yet they are unable to tell stories that could heal their wounds. Instead, they nurture their negative emotions and remain locked in conflict. By positioning themselves as victims to whom the conflict is being "done," they reassure themselves that they are not as bad as they assume their opponents think they are. They tell themselves that all the nasty things the other party has said and done result from the other party's inherent callousness and cruelty, and the few nasty things that they themselves have said and done were only fair, given the cruel character and evil intentions of the other party. The more frequently they tell this story, the less they remember what actually happened. The less open they are to dialogue, the less able they are to empathize or communicate with the person on the other side. The less willing they are to take responsibility for what they themselves have contributed to the conflict, the less likely they are to find a way of successfully resolving it, and the more lost they are to the possibility of discovering something in their conflict that could release them from the impasse and from which they might learn something about themselves and others.

The Princess, the Prince, and the Dragon

To understand the fundamental prototype of conflict stories more fully, we need to return to the fairy tales we learned when we were young in order to examine their narrative structure and the archetypes that reveal the hidden organization of conflict stories. Most often, these classic fairy tales have three main characters:

- The princess (as Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, an innocent child, a victim, a cute animal, or a damsel in distress)
- The dragon (as ogre, evildoer, perpetrator, demon, vicious animal, wicked stepmother, or degenerate witch)
- The prince (as hero, rescuer, knight in shining armor, fairy godmother, warrior, noble animal, leader, and all-around good guy)

Notice how these relationships interact, and that a triangle is formed by these roles. Notice also that this triangle perfectly describes the victim, the perpetrator, and the rescuer in every conflict story. This triangle forms an extremely stable, self-perpetuating, self-fulfilling, logically unending, mutually satisfying story for all concerned, even the dragon. (This is shown in Figure 1.2.)

A fairy tale works only if all the roles are stereotyped—not so much in the familiar sense of gender, race, and class stereotyping (which are indeed present in these stories) but in the sense that stereotyping is a fundamental pattern in all conflict stories. In a fairy tale, the dragon personifies evil, the princess personifies beauty and helplessness in the presence of evil, and the prince personifies nobility and responsibility for solving problems. The only way a princess can meet her prince, or a prince his princess, is through the intervention of a powerful, evil, dangerous dragon. Not only must the dragon be powerful, the princess must be powerless by comparison. The only way the princess can attract the attention of the prince is by being helpless in the face of a peril that is

beyond her capacity to handle by herself.

In all stereotyping, the essential pattern is the same: a single characteristic is selected, isolated, and exaggerated out of all proportion while other characteristics that reveal a complex nature are suppressed, as are individual variations. The whole is then collapsed and flattened into a one-dimensional representation of a complex person. A fraction of the person's nature becomes his or her sum total, and that is the purpose and goal of stereotyping: to make the Other both simple to understand and easy to fear and hate. Conflict stories have the same dual purpose: to make the other person simple and easy to understand while making them into the evildoer, the one who has "caused" the conflict and is, therefore, undeserving of sympathy or understanding.

It is extremely rare to hear people tell conflict stories in which they cast themselves as evil dragons. Most people play the role of prince only in stories that are no longer in progress. When people describe the events that have led to an active conflict, however, they immediately revert to the role of princess, in order to gain sympathy and justification for their own wrongdoing. For this reason, every conflict story is told by a princess. To gain sympathy from the listener, the storyteller has to become someone who is powerless and blameless in the face of evil, and who needs the listener's help in order to be rescued. This means that the very person who is a dragon in the first story turns into a princess in the second story, while the first princess turns into a dragon. Thus, princess and dragon are the flip sides of each other.

The dragon is simply an externalization of the power of the princess, a power she has to give up in order to find her prince. The dragon is also an externalization of all that is ignoble about the prince, an ignobility he must shed in order to attract the princess. In this way, the dragon is an elaborate masquerade, a conspiracy, a commonly told story agreed on by the prince and the princess. The more evil the dragon, the purer the princess and the nobler the prince. The impurity and evil of the dragon allow the prince and the princess to create themselves as pure and good and to make their relationship appear more romantic by raising the odds against it.

Who is really the dragon and who the princess is therefore a matter of perspective. It depends on who is telling the story and on each person's choice of roles. Each role summons forth its own form of audience approval: the princess is rewarded by the listener with sympathy and affection, the dragon with hostility and respectful fear, and the prince with fame and glory. As long as all three agree that they are different rather than one and the same, the princess will never be free of her inner dragon, which has been externalized to gain sympathy and throw the prince off the track. In fact, nearly all our dragons are internal. The ones that seem external are mostly imaginary, living only in stories told by princesses and princes. But the corollary is also true: the roles of princess and prince are also internal. In truth, all three roles are inside each of us.

Freedom From Roles

Each of these characters performs a function and takes primary responsibility for it within the conflict. The princess is the one who is principally responsible for expressing feelings and being emotionally vulnerable. The prince is the one who is primarily responsible for coming up with solutions and overcoming evil. The dragon is the one who is fundamentally responsible for directing attention to problems that might otherwise remain unnoticed by two noble people who only want to live happily ever after.

What makes the dragon fierce, in this perspective, is the fact that the princess and the

prince are living in denial. If the prince is the sole one responsible for discovering solutions, and if the princess is the only one responsible for expressing feelings, then the only option left for the dragon is to push the conflict into the open, where it can be resolved. The dragon is the one who makes change, learning, resolution, and transformation possible.

On this basis, we can draw a new, upside-down triangle to superimpose on the one shown in Figure 1.2. In this second triangle (see Figure 1.3), three lines separate the parties into their primary conflict-related responsibilities. This division allows us to substitute a positive, complex, internalized set of functions for the negative, stereotyped, externalized roles, shown in Figure 1.2.

Notice in passing that all the roles we traditionally consider positive conceal deep-seated weaknesses. The prince, in order to defend against and conquer the dragon, needs weaponry, armor, and a capacity for overcoming opposition. He cannot be vulnerable or express feelings. The princess needs purity and weakness, and she cannot express her strength or exercise responsibility for outcomes. These weaknesses will not serve either of them as they try to achieve familial bliss and live happily ever after. In fact, the sole binding element in their relationship is the dragon, who must continue breathing fire and creating mischief in order for their future happiness to be secure. All three need each other to play their respective roles so that they can find and hold on to their own, and this dynamic locks them in a perpetual cycle from which it is difficult to escape. They are unable to find their authentic selves, which lie beyond the roles they have assumed or have been forced to play. Each one becomes codependent and an enabler. Everyone is trapped.

To become free of her role, the princess must reclaim her power and become responsible for discovering solutions to her own problems. The prince, to become free, must express his feelings and accept that he is not perfect. And both must see the dragon as an expression of their own fear of transformation. The dragon must become open and vulnerable and also join in the search for solutions. All conflict stories, then, are incomplete because they do not acknowledge the pain and nobility of the dragon, the vulnerability and ignobility of the prince, or the responsibility and power of the princess.

Marina Warner writes in her brilliant study of fairy tales *From the Beast to the Blond* (p. 307):

Beauty stands in need of the beast rather than vice versa. . . . Her need of him may be reprehensible, a moral flaw, or part of her carnal and materialistic nature; or, it can represent her understanding of love, her redemption. He . . . holds up a mirror to the forces of nature within her, which she is invited to accept and allows to grow.

To translate this idea into the idiom of conflict stories, the beast (dragon, opponent) is no longer seen as monstrous but as a reflection and a means of taming and transforming the monster within, the monster we all become when we are in conflict.

People in conflict need to recognize within themselves and to take responsibility for all three roles. They may slip back into these roles from time to time, but as they acknowledge their inner dragons, become aware that their inner princesses manipulate stories to gain sympathy, and recognize their inner princes' desire to rescue those who need to rescue themselves, they return to authenticity.

The three roles we have been describing, which appear in the guise of different people, are actually parts of ourselves that have been divided from our core selves, which are

beyond roles. Across all cultures, the true story, as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is of conquering the dragon within, falling in love with the princess within, and becoming the hero within. This heroic journey is a metaphor for the journey we all take in discovering who we are. Each of us has the potential to play all three roles. We are all part princess, part prince, and part dragon. Real resolution comes when we reclaim all these roles and stories. Transformation comes when we transcend them.

Reflections for Conflict Resolvers

One consequence of the division of conflict stories into these archetypal roles is that mediators can destabilize the story in three ways. First, we can refuse the role of prince, hero, or rescuer and ask the princess and the dragon to participate in a process that returns responsibility for solutions to them. Second, we can ask the princess how she thinks the dragon feels, what part of the conflict she is responsible for, or what options she can think of that could resolve the dispute. Third, we can ask the dragon to reveal itself as a princess or the princess to show her inner dragon. By encouraging each side to become vulnerable, we can move on to brainstorming options for resolving the dispute that allow all the parties to live happily ever after.

To move beyond the story, however, mediators also need to change. Many mediators enjoy playing the role of prince and hero-rescuing others, solving their problems, and helping them escape their conflicts-but in ways that can increase people's dependence on outside assistance and that do not make them independent or set them free. As long as there is conflict, princesses will appear who need to be rescued from evil dragons, making the role of prince or rescuer seductive for mediators. When we become the only ones in charge of saving people, we do them a disservice. The proper job of a prince is to convince the princess of her own strength, assist her in finding her own internal prince, and aid her in accepting the role of savior to herself.

By helping, we may assume that other people do not have the resources, skills, or inner personal strength to resolve their conflicts or to pull themselves out of quicksand. Help often implies that the one being helped is powerless or lacks something the helper has, making the one being helped needy and dependent. When this is the case, helpers easily become hinderers, reinforcing the parties' stories of victimization and demonization. We prefer the word assist because it includes the parties as active, responsible, engaged problem solvers, who can increase their skills and commitment to finding solutions aided by ideas and support from others.

As mediators, we can encourage the parties in a conflict to create a new story, one in which the prince is no longer a "helper" but instead becomes a teacher, coach, mentor, facilitator, empowering leader, and cheerleader, supporting both sides in learning about the conflict. When we make this shift, the princess is automatically encouraged to discover inner strength and power, and the dragon to discover feelings and inner beauty. Both are then able to own and correct their complementary dysfunctional behaviors.

As we increase our understanding of the hidden meanings of conflict stories, we can use this knowledge to alter the narrative structure of the stories we hear, in such a way as to encourage people to reach resolution of their conflicts. As we appreciate the context in which a story takes place, we can invent alternative contexts from which a different story can emerge. As we identify the metaphors of conflict, we can invert their meaning; for example, a metaphor of feeling trapped by a conflict can be neutralized if the mediator asks the parties whether they are willing to agree on solutions that free them from future

problems.

We can separate facts from interpretations, and we can elicit alternative interpretations that do not rely for their meaning on other people's hostile intentions. We can observe the filters and lenses that people use to censor their stories or protect themselves against the stories of others, and we can create filters and lenses that increase their willingness to be deeply honest and empathic with each other.

We can distinguish the components and functions of stories, and we can use them to encourage the parties to accept responsibility for those parts of their stories that lead them into impasse. Finally, we can recognize in each story the archetypal roles of dragon, princess, and prince, and we can use our understanding of these roles to aid the parties in identifying and sharing responsibility for the conflict.

By using these analytical processes, instead of simply listening to stories as if they were straightforward factual accounts, we gain a much better understanding of what is being said and how it is being received. With this knowledge, we are better equipped to offer insights and ask revealing questions so that the parties can find their way to resolution and transformation. From simple understanding of stories, we can move beyond them, to transcendence.

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