

Some Lessons from the Pandemic

By Kenneth Cloke

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

"Every day silence harvests its victims. Silence is a mortal illness."

Natalia Ginzburg

"Everything has changed, except the way we think."

Albert Einstein (on hearing of the bombing of Hiroshima)

There are many ways of understanding or defining conflict, each leading to a different set of techniques and approaches, and among them are these, reinforced by our experience of the pandemic:

- Conflict is the lack of appreciation of the imminence of death or sudden catastrophe.
- Conflict is the sound made by the cracks in a system.
- Conflict is a need to evolve, together with a refusal to change.

We have learned from the pandemic that we are all facing death, and are therefore one, connected by crisis and undivided by conflict. And we have also learned that we are facing it differently, and are therefore many, separated by race, gender, nationality, age, religion, wealth, occupation, social class, political beliefs, emotional vulnerability, and physical well being, and divided by conflict.

What we have not learned sufficiently or everywhere is how to turn our differences into deeper and more powerful expressions of empathy and compassion; how to strengthen I/Thou communications and relationships with our opponents; how to use the pandemic to repair the cracks in our systems; and how to evolve to higher *orders* of conflict that reveal and require higher orders of resolution.

We have learned that we can withdraw from the world and still be in it. We have learned to be socially and emotionally connected while physically distant. We have learned the importance of science, and the equal importance of art, music, and dance. We have learned that we can be courageous, even when we are frightened. We have learned the meaning of touch, contact, intimacy, and connection; of having time to reflect, exercise and meditate; of the centrality of celebration and loss. We have learned the depth, extent and intricacy of our interdependency. We have learned the value of slowness, and that when we stop even for a moment, our skies clear of pollution, global warming slows its pace,

whales and dolphins return to our shores, and we are able to take pleasure in the beauty of nature and each other.

We have learned that global problems cannot be solved using national or local methods; that death and loss touch all of us; that political conflicts can be deadly; and that it doesn't matter whose end of the boat is sinking. We have learned that it is easier to face death together, even if each of us dies alone, and that looking out for ourselves requires us to look out for each other.

What we have not yet learned is how to hold on to these lessons and not return to an addictive cycle that leads only to future crises and conflicts. We have not learned how to love one another enduringly, or that in all the conflicts we experience between "Us" and "Them," there simply *is* no them, there is only us. We have not, in short, learned the most fundamental lesson in all of conflict resolution: that *every one* of our conflicts contains opportunities for learning, discovery of self and other, and evolution to higher, better, and more satisfying relationships. And that the pandemic is pointing our attention precisely toward those outcomes.

Doing so will require us to bring conflict resolution *directly* into the political arena. It will require us to strengthen global collaboration through dialogue, negotiation and mediation; to invent interest-based forms of political discourse, economic activity, and social problem solving; and to find new ways of assuaging the pathological belief in medical conspiracy, suicidal resistance to common sense health measures, hostility to science and art, and fear and rage toward migrants and minorities that are also infecting us.

None of this will be easy or quick. But, as mediators, we have been silent, confused, reactive, and avoidant in applying our skills and knowledge of conflict resolution to the chronic social, economic and political conflicts that are impacting our response to Covid 19, and to other, equally pressing issues, for far too long, and are paying the price.

So let us honor the dead and dying, the heroes in hospital gowns and grocery aprons, the friends and families who have suffered – and let us commit that their sacrifices shall not have been in vain, by dedicating ourselves, our energies and intentions, our knowledge and skills, to keeping these lessons alive until we have transformed them into renewed hope for a better world, and return to our old, conflicted lives, but newer, collaborative ones enriched by learning – and not just back, but better.