

**Compassionate Listening in the "Holy Lands", by John Shaffer
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I recently returned from a conflict resolution training of unusual depth and dimension. It is an experience I wish for all my family and friends, co-workers and neighbors. I say "it is" because the journey this training is a part of is not over; in fact, I'd say it has hardly begun.

The resolution method is called "compassionate listening," which is the focus of The Compassionate Listening Project, an extraordinary organization that demonstrates and teaches ways to understand conflict at its very core. I recommend a visit to its website, found at compassionatelistening.org. I also recommend contacting the organization and signing up for a training. I'll almost guarantee a life-changing experience if you do.

I have been on my own journey for a long time. It is a "religious" journey, if you will allow me the use of this word to mean a process by which we find meaning in our lives, and come to understand in some small way the part we have to play in the unfolding drama we see and experience day by day in the world around us.

This is a world not only marked with great abundance and potential, but one marked and marred by seemingly intractable human conflict and human-caused destruction as well. Focusing this article only on the human conflict, we cannot escape the reality that we experience bitter, destructive conflict everywhere we turn.

Human conflict comes in many forms that impact our emotions and our mental health. Non-physical violence stirs our spirit, distressing our well-being. It occurs in marriages and families, with raised voices and shouting reminders of the passions that undergird our minds and hearts. It happens during cross-examination in court or in deposition, in the way we answer interrogatories, and relate to each other when we need to change the date of a motion or require other forms of cooperation from our adversaries.

Such conflict does not happen all the time, of course, but it is prevalent enough that we speak of marital battles and legal warfare. We practice one-upmanship and we scramble to get ahead of others. "It's a dog eat dog world," we say, and we have the scars to prove it.

Human conflict is endemic in the "Holy Land" — in Israel, the Palestinian Territories of Gaza, and the West Bank; in Jerusalem, Hebron and other geopolitical and religious sites holy to the three main monotheistic religions. It's also happening in the metaphorical "Holy Land" of our own hearts and minds — the soul of our physical being. As a result, our spirits also suffer.

Together with 23 other worldly travelers, I entered these Holy Lands on a journey organized by The Compassionate Listening Project. I made the journey because I knew I had much to learn about conflict. The trip has only reinforced that awareness.

Together with my companions, I entered “Holy Places” — both geopolitical and religious, and inner, personal, “sacred ground” — as we strove to master or, better put, apply the lessons we were there to learn. We met together to train in the ways of compassionate listening and enter the worldly places where there were incredible stories to be heard. We practiced stilling our own minds and hearts to make us ready and capable to hear the stories of others. We became more skilled in asking the kinds of questions that allowed the storytellers to go even deeper, to trust us with the accounts of their lives, in their Holy Lands that — in both senses of the term — are so physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually war-torn.

We met with Israeli and Palestinian journalists, politicians, peacekeepers and peacemakers, NGO and government workers. We met with people who had been rocketed and bombed, with refugees who were second- and third-generation displaced persons kept in camps that have existed for more than 60 years. We met with teenagers and Holocaust survivors. We met with everyday people, and experts trained in peacekeeping and trauma response.

We wept, we danced, we grew silent and we sang. Then we went deeper and deeper into places the human heart and soul has to offer in ways many of us had never experienced before. And we knew, as we went, that there is a great need for this work, an imperative for this journey to the “Holy Land.”

It’s a journey that brings something critically important to Jerusalem, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and to the other troubled spots on the planet. It is also work for which the need is evident here, right in our midst, both within ourselves and with those whose lifetime journeys we share.

For us as lawyers, as potential healers of conflict, it is a journey we also share with each other, with the courts and the clients we serve, and in the greater communities in which we work. It is a journey of critical importance as we begin to shed and modify the ways of conflict escalation and that of the legal warrior, and as we learn to respond to the deeper sources of the conflict we are asked to serve and make better.

The adversarial system, in which cases are made and evidence is carefully gathered and presented in stories designed to convince others, and the legal system, where nonviolent

conflict resolution occurs (leaving the mental, emotional and spiritual parts quite often untouched), are still very much needed. These systems are, and have been over their many years of existence and evolution, a huge step forward from the historic and violent ways inherent in “might makes right.”

But vital as they are and as helpful as they will be in worldwide conflict resolution, these systems are only part of the answer. They are only part of a process that is emerging among us in greater quality and quantity, and that must continue to do so if we are going to deal with the challenges we face in this difficult time. We need to discover within ourselves, and find in others, the answers to what it really means to live together on this one planet we share.

This is a process of the heart, mind and soul that we have and that we share. The solution to violence is going to be found as we discover our individual and collective wholeness, the “holiness” of it all. This, to me, is the binding back — the “re-ligion” — to that greater mystery from which we come and from which all laws of relationship emerge.

As lawyers, trained in the legal system and offering service to those who care about how their conflicts can be resolved or avoided, we have a special opportunity — perhaps even an obligation — to advance the ways of nonviolent conflict resolution that we entered school and practice to learn. Until now, most of the resolution techniques we have learned have been geared toward ending the physical manifestation of the conflicts we encounter. But now we are being asked, I believe, to take another step forward, to explore issues of the heart and soul, and to learn how to “hear” with “new ears” and to “see” with “new eyes.”

This process may seem idealistic, but I can assure you it is not. It is required. Conflict is everywhere and we can, and should, be here to help find ways to resolve it. We are pledged by our “profession” morally and ethically to help others dealing with conflict and to learn how to better respond to it ourselves. If we are to cross into more-profound layers of resolution, we need to be students of more-profound responses and show the way to others.

New information is available to us. In addition to The Compassionate Listening Project, visit cuttingedgelaw.org and pick up a copy of the recent ABA book, *Lawyers as Peacemakers: Practicing Holistic, Problem-Solving Law*, by J. Kim Wright. I think we should study this information and make use of it.

My journey had its start, as did yours, many years ago. My trip to the “Holy Lands” has only reinforced my own inner need and desire to be a part of the changes that are now called for and are already under way in our work as lawyers. I would like this article and the resources that are

out there for the taking to be contributing parts of an opening and continuing dialogue. I'm looking forward to what we all might discover.