

The Heart of the Matter in Conflict Resolution

The Spring 2010 issue of *AC Resolution*, a publication of ACR, focuses on Spirituality and the practice of conflict resolution with heart. The latter a basic principle, that resonates especially for all of us in the helping professions, whether it be nursing, social work, therapy, or conflict resolution. In each of several articles, the argument for a heart-brain connection in mediation is made, versus the separation and independent functioning of each of these vital organs. T.Z. Reeves notes that we have been socialized and educated to consider the brain as the neurological storehouse for intellect and mind, remote from the heart, which is usually associated more with feeling.

The knowledge from brain research, “including DNA discoveries, computer modeling” and other methods allows researchers to visualize “the sources of thought, emotion, and behavior” located in the brain (Shreeve 2005). The integration of this knowledge with major psychological theories and cultural biology has altered the way practitioners may view mediating conflict. Current thinking by some conflict practitioners is of integrating mind, emotion and spirituality within the brain to develop an “educated heart”, thus providing the potential for a multi dimensional framework for decision making, approaching disputes from reason, emotion and spirituality.

In 1994, Deepak Chopra, in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, wrote and spoke, (books on tape) of the “intuitive/holistic aspects of the heart,” refuting the widely held thought of it being “sentimental”; instead, as noted in the Law of Karma, which includes “...including the heart for guidance in choice making decisions...” “I will witness the choices I make and will bring them into my conscious awareness...” “...the consequences of the choices...” “. I will ask my heart for guidance and be guided by its message...” Chopra elaborates a bit more as he narrates the Spiritual Laws on tape, clearly extolling the value of considering the heart’s message conjoining that of the mind. I have included the concept in my life’s practices, both professional and personal without regret.

Reading the articles in *AC Resolution* has caused me to reflect further on Chopra’s missives, several of which were, at the time, out of mainstream thinking. In my healthcare practice of conflict intervention, the heart’s intuition and rationality were particularly evident. In dealing with physicians in conflict, the focus was so often a sense of loss for them, for example, dealing with the fading concept of “Captain of the Ship” (an idea that there was very little, if any, shared risk/responsibility for the care of the patient, the total responsibility resting with the physician). Listening to and observing those disputants invariably revealed to me their disappointment, pain and anger at relinquishing some form of hubris which they held.

I am grateful for and appreciative of the trainings and ongoing learnings that help me to intervene successfully, (or not intervene) in conflict situations.

Some of the authors’ suggested heart opening questions include:

1. Before we begin, can you tell me a little about yourselves?
2. What do you hope will happen as a result of this conversation? Why is that important to you?
3. What role have you played in this conflict, either through action or inaction?
4. Is there anything you have in common? Are there any values that you share?
5. What is the crossroads that you are at right now in this conflict? (Kenneth Cloke, JD LLM, PhD)

Suggestions from other mediators for self care practices:

1. Feel in your body your temptation-even your urgency-to act and speak quickly and extremely.
2. Pause. Take a deep breath. Give your body a chance to settle down. Pay attention to how your body feels in the region of your heart.
3. Help others name what they are feeling. Encourage them with respect, understanding and compassion. (Ariel Lublin).

In summary, there is increasing evidence that integrating spiritual practice with professional life produces benefits by providing a fulcrum for balance on a personal and professional level, enhancing self care and productivity in both spheres.