What Exists Is Possible: Stories from Conflict Resolution Professionals

JULIAN PORTILLA

This article describes findings from sixty interviews with leading conflict resolution scholars and practitioners about their experiences studying and intervening in intractable conflicts. Both diversity and commonalities were found; some of the most prevalent and important themes are reviewed here.

In her interview on www.beyondintractability.org, veteran peace builder Elise Boulding reminds us of a phrase her husband, Kenneth Boulding, eminent economist and conflict theorist, coined: "What exists is possible" (Boulding, 2003). Although apparently obvious, this very powerful statement gives reason for hope if we can identify moments in apparently intractable conflicts when people have managed to overcome their differences. If these moments ever occur, we can learn from them and eventually transform difficult and apparently intractable conflicts more effectively. This article offers a small glance into an oral interview project whose aim was to find the best practices in addressing intractable conflict the world over.

From 2003 to 2005, the Beyond Intractability Project interviewed over sixty conflict resolution professionals with theory or practice expertise in intractable conflicts. The questions asked were open ended, intending to elicit inspiring stories, unique insights, and what John Paul Lederach (2005) later called "the moral imagination"—the spark that enabled people to break through the violence and despair so typical of intractable conflict situations. All of the interviews were conducted in person, with the

NOTE: *For full affiliations of interviewees quoted throughout this article, see http://www. beyondintractability.org/resources/audio.jsp?nid=5065.*

exception of one that was done by telephone. The full transcripts and recordings of the interviews are available on the Beyond Intractability Web site (http://beyondintractability.org/resources/audio.jsp).

The interviews exhibit two interesting elements. One is the vast diversity of expertise and experience. Hundreds of topics and ideas came up, and hundreds of inspiring stories were told. The moral imagination is clearly very much alive in these interviews and interviewees. At the same time, a number of themes came up repeatedly—themes, perhaps, that should guide practitioners as they set out to transform intractable conflicts. Most prominent are the virtues of listening, humility, patience, and hope. Two other themes were not virtues but conundrums: the concept of neutrality and how to move from talk to action.

Listening

The importance of listening was described in two ways. The first was the effect that listening can have on the disputants. It was often described as therapeutic, reassuring, or even, in some cases, transformative. For example, Silke Hansen (2003), a community relations service mediator who works in minority racial communities, said, "I think that one of the biggest frustrations in victim communities is that they really feel like *nobody* is listening. Nobody is even *trying* to understand what their concerns are, what their issues are. . . . I spend a lot of time listening, not just to the immediate issue, but to the history as well. And to understand that even though some of those things may have happened ten, twenty, fifty years ago, it's still part of the current conflict. If you don't hear that, if you don't listen to that because you think it's not relevant today, then you are going to lose credibility and that becomes really important."

Another interesting dimension of listening is the question of who is listening. Often the parties are not. Laura Chasin (2003), founder of the Public Conversations Project, recalls watching a public television broadcast on abortion: "After a great deal of name-calling and finger-pointing, the host slumped into his chair and muttered a just barely audible, 'there's nothing going on here but a lot of noise.'" Soon afterward, Chasin and her colleagues began to devise a way to adapt the listening technology they used in family therapy to create respectful dialogues on abortion. The key was creating a formal structure that enabled people who had never before communicated respectfully to listen to each other. Perhaps the most famous involved key leaders on both sides who met for seven straight years

and went public about their meetings. They reported that although none of them had changed their minds about abortion, they had changed their minds very much about each other and about appropriate and effective ways of relating to each other and to people "on the other side."

Listening is also important to the third party, since it is essential to enable them to understand what is going on and how best to assist. Listening is thus a condition for creating and maintaining effective interventions.

Peter Woodrow (2003), a mediator at CDR Associates, tells the story of how he and colleague Chris Moore set about helping to design a mediation system for East Timor, a country whose legal system was in shambles. The cultural context of East Timor was not conducive to the outsider-impartial, confidential model of mediation they normally used. So what did they do? Woodrow's response was simple: "You listen. More than having the right answers, the work was largely based on asking the right questions and naturally, listening to the answers provided by locals."

Humility

Humility is another theme that came up frequently. Respondents stressed the importance of knowing one's own limitations. "One thing I feel very strongly about," observed Elise Boulding (2003), "especially since I see it being violated so often, is for people who are taking on the role of peacemaker to be an apprentice to the situation they go into. They really have to understand where the people are coming from, what is going on, what are the priorities, in order to apply what they know. But you see many trained negotiators set themselves up as experts, saying, 'Here is what you need to do.'" If problems were really that simple, they would not be intractable.

Chester Crocker (2003), of Georgetown University, illustrated the same idea with an example of from the civil war in Mozambique: "To me, the example of San Egidio's tradecraft is interesting, because they knew what they could and couldn't do. They helped to stitch together a fabric of communication that would never have been possible by a government. What they could not do was establish a military agreement that would lead to a U.N. peacekeeping force coming in between the government and rebels. There is an element of humility there that was important."

Another aspect of humility is the admonition made famous by Mary Anderson (2003) of the Collaborative for Development Action: "Do no harm." This was echoed by Crocker (2003): "Above all else, don't make things worse, and think carefully about whether you are up to it, because

this is serious business. It's not something where you mess around in, and you shouldn't even consider getting engaged unless you have staying power, enough autonomy, and a clear enough mandate to be able to do something for a sustained period of time."

Humility also involves recognizing that other approaches are sometimes better than our own: "We've got a hammer, so everything looks like a nail, but we have to realize that we are just one tool in the toolbox," observed William Ury, faculty in the Program on Negotiation at Harvard University (2004).

Patience

A third theme that came up often was patience. This has two dimensions. One is a tolerance of déjà-vu, that is, having the willingness to listen to things one has heard time and again. The other is patience in the sense of not rushing things, knowing that progress takes time. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, intercultural conflict scholar (2003), reflected both meanings: "You need patience because it is very intense work, and if you do a lot of this type of dialogue group work, you tend to see similar things happening. You should have the energy and capacity to listen to people's pain, people's misperceptions, and even people's ignorance. You sit there and you are capable of seeing racist things that have a good intention sometimes. . . . Patience in the sense of facing those biases that you have, and having the energy to face them; patience in terms of dealing with prejudice, with things that will bother you."

Referring to her work in Northern Ireland, Mary Fitzduff (2003) says the most important lesson she learned is "patience, patience, patience. People will do everything to avoid taking on something that is uncomfortable or even dangerous. Getting people to move is just *extraordinarily* difficult, because it often is a huge risk to their own identity, their sense of who they are. It can take an extraordinary amount of patience. . . . Intractable conflict ends not with a bang, but with whimper after whimper after whimper."

Mary Anderson (2003), however, takes a different view. "International peace workers," she observed, "say that peace takes a long time. Then you hear a local person who will be much less patient with that process. They will be far more likely to say, 'You know, we cannot afford the time that people say it takes.' . . . I think we ought to wake up every morning on the assumption that we could get it done by tonight if we just work the right way." At the same time, however, Anderson points out that short-term

funding is not effective for peace building, so while she insists on the importance of optimism and pressing forward as fast as possible, she recognizes that peace building takes time.

Hope

Related to the notion of impatience is the constant theme of hope and optimism. All of the people I interviewed shared this in common. They all spoke of deep and terrible conflicts—some violent conflicts and some less violent. Many spoke of the best-known conflicts on the planet, some of the longest-running conflicts, and some that threaten the stability of the entire globe. Yet they almost universally shared a sense of hope about the possibility for positively transforming these conflicts.

There are many statements to this effect in the interviews, but perhaps the one that stands out is Ury's (2004): "In the twenty-five years I've worked in this field, just looking for the toughest, most intractable conflicts, I've seen nothing that convinces me that conflict cannot be transformed."

Hope is essential for peace builders, and it is ever more precious to parties in intractable conflicts. As Mark Amstutz (2004) from Wheaton University said, "The great challenge for people in conflict resolution work is to . . . cultivate the art, the moral art if you wish, or the moral imagination, required to somehow see beyond just the rational processes of defining issues and to really provide hope. It's the hope—and the discourse—that maybe together can serve as the motor that enables groups and peoples to begin working together [effectively]."

Neutrality

Two other themes that came up frequently were not virtues but conundrums: neutrality and action.

While neutrality is seen as undesirable by some and impossible by others, there are those who stand by neutrality and those in between. Sarah Cobb (2003), director of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Research at George Mason University, says that rather than seeking impartiality, she seeks to be multipartial, being with each party as he or she might find it necessary during a process: "People who are suffering and having bad conflicts with others need advocates. They need all the help they can get. My job, as I see it, as a facilitator and a mediator, is to be there for them." Also in the

aggressively partial school of thought is veteran diplomat Chester Crocker (2003): "If you don't have an interest, you won't mediate anyway. I'm looking for interested mediators, especially amongst governments, because I want them to really care enough to see it through and to get a result."

Others champion transparency. Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2003) notes that the values that we bring to a situation may diverge from the local values, making us decidedly nonneutral. We need to recognize that. "We all bring our own values and assumptions into this work . . . that might contradict the local culture or norms. Many of us are not aware that we bring those assumptions." Interveners need to spell out those assumptions clearly to themselves and the parties at the beginning of their work, says Abu-Nimer says.

Still others finesse the neutrality question with a disclaimer about personal views on the content but impartiality regarding the process. Laura Chasin (2003) puts it this way: "We don't claim to be neutral. We claim to be able to facilitate a fair and balanced kind of conversation."

So how can we reconcile the multipartial intervener with the equidistant, nonpartisan one? In his interview, John Paul Lederach (2004), peace activist and scholar, elegantly articulated the pros and cons of both insider-partial and outsider-impartial roles. Combining the roles, where one person (or team of people) can be partial and accompany the parties while the other (person or team) seeks equidistance and vies for the fairness of the process, seems a graceful way to sidestep the pitfalls of both being too close to any given party and generating suspicions by assuming the apparently humanly impossible posture of perfect neutrality.

Action

Another conundrum is how to move from patient, even hopeful, listening to action. It is no simple matter when we consider that some of our methods of getting people to listen involve promising confidentiality and no commitments—"just talk."

Perhaps the most iconic example of this is Harvard scholar-practitioner Herb Kelman's recounting (2004) of the problem-solving workshops that led, in part, to the Oslo Accords: "There was a contradiction in the sense that in order for an agreement to emerge, the process had to be secret. If it had been public, it would have been shot down long before it got to the point of agreement. But because it was secret, there wasn't the opportunity to build the constituencies for it, and that was an inherent problem to which there was no solution."

According to Mary Anderson (2003), one of the specific reasons that dialogue efforts aimed at personal change are not adding up to peace is that they do not have an agenda aimed at transcending personal change. They lack some kind of joint action toward peace at the institutional, political, or social level. The importance of transcending levels, of coordinating work with others working in different sphere, is also seen as important but difficult to do. Interviewees talked of the importance of coordinating between track I (official diplomacy) and track II (unofficial diplomacy often undertaken by private citizens) (Crocker, 2003; MacDonald, 2003; Zartman, 2003), coordinating between NGOs (Anderson, 2003; Hart, 2004), putting the pieces of the peace jigsaw puzzle into place (Fitzduff, 2003), and building a "peace infrastructure" (Katunga, 2003). But few thought we did this effectively. "I think we still lack this ability to effectively link the micro with the macro, or the individual level with the small groups and the communities with the policy making level. . . .These linkages are essential for any introduction of change" (Abu-Nimer, 2004). Frank Blechman (2003) notes, "I have been involved in the peace movement and have sat in lots of debates where people would say, 'Do you think world peace is a matter of internal change in people or is it a matter of national policy or is it the world's structures?' The answer is 'Yes!' I mean, we need all of those. It's not one or the other; they all have to happen in parallel," a tall order for the average peace worker.

Conclusion

The themes highlighted here are perhaps not novel. This very fact is quite telling. Conflict resolution professionals with as many as fifty years of experience had much to share, and yet they tended to highlight the importance of what I have come to call the basics. No matter how sophisticated our technology and approaches may become, let us not forget the basics of our field. They are important for all the reasons mentioned in this article, but there is something else. It is uncommon to find listening, humility, patience, and hope all at the same time in any situation, let alone in intractable conflicts. To quote Blechman, "The biggest obstacle is cynicism, lack of hope, lack of belief that anything is possible." Our field is dedicated to positive change, and perhaps the first step in making that change begins by adding these essential missing ingredients. If what exists is possible, then there is reason for hope everywhere.

References

Abu-Nimer, M. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/mohammed_abu_ nimer/.

Amstutz, M. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2004. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/mark_amstutz/.

Anderson, M. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/mary_anderson/.

Blechman, F. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/frank_blechman/.

Boulding, E. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/elise_boulding/. Accessed.

Chasin, L. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/laura_chasin/.

Cobb, S. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/sarah_cobb/.

Crocker, C. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/chester_crocker/.

Fitzduff, M. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/mari_fitzduff/.

Hansen, S. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/silke_hansen/.

Hart, B. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/barry_hart/.

Katunga, J. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/john_katunga/.

Kelman, H. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/herbert_kelman/.

Lederach, J. P. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2004. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/john_paul_lederach/.

Lederach, J. P. *The Moral Imagination.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

MacDonald, J. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/john_macdonald/.

Ury, W. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2004. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/william_ury/.

Woodrow, P. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/peter_woodrow/.

Zartman, W. "Interview with Julian Portilla." 2003. Retrieved July 1, 2006, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/william_zartman/.

Julian Portilla is a mediator and facilitator at the Centro de Colaboración Cívica (CCC) in Mexico City. The CCC is a member of the Partners for Democratic Change network.