

The Heart of Conflict : A Spirituality of Transformation  
By Elinor D.U. Powell  
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Elinor Powell sets out briefly the spiritual background of her analysis of conflict transformation techniques. “Our spirituality is that essence of who we are as aware, sentient and intuitive human beings... Spirituality is that fundamental property of our nature that affirms life and inspires, animates and pervades our thoughts, feelings and actions. It’s what inspires devotion to causes, from caring for the sick to saving the earth...

“It is most surely put to the test and thus more clearly manifested when we are faced with challenge and conflict... Our spirituality is forged and shaped as we face life’s challenges and discover in the process, what is most meaningful. We gain wisdom in the process... Spiritual power is embodied in creative, healing leadership, provided without judgment, but entailing risk, for it is often seen as dangerous by those who seek to maintain the status quo.”

Elinor Powell was born into the Protestant minority of the Republic of Ireland — a minority which played an important cultural and economic role in the Republic but who were always suspected of having lingering loyalties to England. Thus after medical studies, she left for Canada and a career in internal medicine. Later, she became active in peace work, especially against nuclear weapons. However, she also recognized that peace must be developed at the local level and took up practice as a mediator — often of family-related conflicts— and became a trainer in conflict management. For all conflicts be they between large groups of states— as was the Cold War — or between two individuals is a sign of lost harmony. “Conflict is a signal of problems afoot, a challenge that tells us that evaluation, reflection, and action are needed, either in small scale or large. Such challenges put into focus the basis of our beliefs, values, understanding of reality, and our spiritual identity.”

In this book, she presents the approaches of others such as John Burton who has been a leading writer on conflict resolution. (See John W. Burton and Frank Dukes, *Conflict: Practices in Management, Settlement and Resolution* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990). She also draws upon her own experiences and her admiration of peace workers who combined a spiritual outlook with active social justice and peace efforts, in particular Mahatma Gandhi whom she quotes on the need for action. “You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no results.”

I think that the best way to look at her approach is to use the image of the charkas — the psycho-spiritual centers along the spine — the heart for compassion, the throat for communication, the ‘third eye’ for vision.

The heart represents the need within ourselves and thus within all for identity, for security, belonging, and a sense of self-worth. The heart is also the seat of emotions, again within ourselves and within others. As we understand our own emotional life, we come to understand something of the emotional life of others. As Powell notes, “E motions are so much the driving force of the conflict. But they exist to protect the self, the identity of the person who feels threatened. They are there to point out what matters. Resistance and emotions are potent signs of an unmet need. It is best not to deny or ignore these indicators, but to read their message and use them to discern their underlying meaning: the spiritual core of the souls embroiled in conflict.”

The heart is also the seat of patience — the ability of accepting without judgement in order to understand. As R. Scott Appleby of the Peace Studies program at Notre Dame writes “ More than a cessation of violence, reconciliation involves a fundamental restoration of the human spirit. As a spiritual rather than a technical process, it cannot be foreshortened; it keeps its own timetables.”

The throat chakra is both the symbol and the energy center of communications. Much conflict resolution rests on the ability to keep channels of communication open. One of the first acts in a conflict is to cut off communications both symbolically and literally. A key role of the peace maker is to try to keep open or to re-establish channels of communication.

Communication is also necessary to develop awareness and to build that ‘critical mass’ of people working on an issue in order to bring it ‘to the front burner’. It is important to be able to use different forms of communication from radio talk shows to newspapers and journals, films and television.

However, communications can also be a calm presence. As Elinor Powell writes “People with spiritual power impart a sense of inner peace. Their power is evidence of a tremendous investment they have made in working through their own negative experiences, their shadow side. It has been said that the stronger the light an individual displays, the deeper the shadow which serves to profile that luminescence. People with spiritual power have this quality of self-knowledge.” The American spiritual teacher Ram Dass adds “When you meet a being who is centered you always know it. You always feel a kind of calm emanation. It always touches you in that place where you feel calm. But you can’t hustle it. You can’t make believe you’re calm when you’re not. It never works.”

The ‘third eye’ is a symbol both of inner vision into the self and a deeper outer vision, seeing the causes of events and the ways in which events and people are inter-related. “A reappraisal of human interconnections and stewardship of global resources is urgently needed. Such a review will widen our mental horizons to encompass our understanding of the nature of reality, our nature as human beings, our relationships with each other and with the world from which we derive sustenance.”

Elinor Powell’s book is a reflection of her life and readings. While it is not a ‘how to’ book for dealing with conflicts, there are many practical insights for peacemakers. As she writes “ The wise person gains rich life experience through spontaneous and intuitive emotional involvement with the world, and brings clarity and form to this experience while maintaining an intellectual distance. It is a quality that is gained from experience and reflecting on a life lived in the fire of events both traumatic and pleasurable.”

Rene Wadlow



Drawing : Cecile Wadlow