Responsibility, Community, and Conflict Resolution in an Age of Polarization

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To what or to whom are human beings ultimately responsible and what is the mechanism by which responsibility is mediated down to day to day life and decision making?

The answer for much of human existence was the gods and religious systems. Later, as civilizations rose, emperors and kings wrapped themselves in mantles of the gods and demanded obeisance.   In recent centuries, alarmed by the brutality and injustice of tyrants and religious warfare, societies have separated the realms of sacred and secular and turned to rule of law and democracy to guide the latter.

In America, classical liberalism (predecessor to both conservatism and liberalism as known today) took deep root and has shaped national discourse on responsibility for centuries. Conservatives emphasize economic freedom, liberals emphasize individual freedom[168]. But they share deep individualism and skepticism about giving too much power to government.

As a result, they also share a tendency to foster conflict avoidance, for both tend to license a simple parting of ways. When protection of individual freedom is sacrosanct, and imposition of government anathema, unless processes and structures for jointly exploring differences have been carefully constructed, the solution to differences easily becomes to withdraw and pursue separate futures.

Conflict avoidance has not always obtained; intense battles have been fought.   But neither conservatives nor liberals have a history of deep commitment to dialogue in the midst of differences or a track record of investment in the skills and processes of dialogue.

This narrow repertoire of response to conflict – pitched battle and avoidance – seemed to serve the needs of the nation well for several centuries. But events of recent years now raise concerns about the foundations of social cohesion in American that seemed unimaginable a few years ago. Americans of

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[168] See for example, Yuval Levin, The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left (Basic Books, 2014)

all political persuasions increasingly feel that something is seriously wrong and question whether the "center will hold".

Having spent a lifetime in professional practice of conflict resolution in a variety of settings, I ponder our present situation with alarm and disappointment. Like others, I worry about the "center" holding. And I am disappointed that, despite several decades now of activity and apparent progress, the field of conflict resolution seems to be little engaged with the crisis.

I know a large number of conflict resolution practitioners with magnificent skills that would be beneficial in polarized situations in America today. But so far as I am aware, like everyone else they are on the sidelines, uninvited and unable to gain entry to situations where they are desperately needed.

What does conflict resolution have to offer in this time?

Conflict Resolution for Utilitarian Reasons

In the thirty plus years in which conflict resolution has been prominent as a movement in the United States, the case for its contribution has largely been made on utilitarian grounds. Conflict resolution, we have said, is faster, cheaper, and produces better solutions than litigation.[169]

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[169] A common argument for conflict resolution is that existing options for resolving conflict are expensive and inefficient. An early and powerful proponent of Alternative Dispute Resolution, or ADR as it is often called, has been the American Bar Association. The ADR movement is commonly traced to a 1976 speech, sometimes described as the "big bang moment of ADR", when Harvard Law Professor Frank Sanders argued "that traditional litigation systems process only certain kinds of disputes effectively" and suggested that the remaining types of disputes might better be addressed through other mechanisms. (From https://law.uoregon.edu/images/uploads/entries/Michael_Moffitt-Before_the_Big_Bang-The_Making_of_an_ADR_Pioneer.pdf.) In the decades since, lawyers have played an active role in encouraging the use of arbitration, mediation, facilitation and other activities that deploy responses to conflicts that have repeatedly been shown to be faster, more effective, and often more satisfactory to disputants in their outcomes than litigation. Another common utilitarian case for conflict resolution is cost. A 2012 infographic reports that 15 million civil cases are filed annually in the US. Americans spend 2.2% of their GDP on tort cost, which is about 30% higher than second place Italy, and double that of third-place Germany. Per capita tort costs have increased by eight fold since 1950, even after adjusting for inflation. In the business world, wrote Dan Dana, a veteran conflict resolution trainer, in Measuring the Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict: "Unresolved conflict represents the largest reducible cost in many businesses, yet it remains largely unrecognized." (MTI Publications: 1999). Yet another utilitarian reason for conflict resolution is widespread ineptness in conflict resolution. This results in inefficiencies in organizations. A Grovo survey found that 98% of managers said that, in their company, managers need more training, and conflict resolution was one of the topics managers most frequently identified as a need. A survey by survey by Roffey Park found that 57% of managers said that "inaction" was their organization's main method of conflict resolution, and that avoidance and "pretending it isn't there" were common responses. Even pastors name lack of preparation for conflict management as the biggest gap in their training.

I agree with these utilitarian arguments and have made them myself. But increasingly I think that advocating conflict resolution on utilitarian grounds may handicap possibilities for achieving the larger benefits of our work. When conflicts turn out to be deep-rooted and trenchant, perseverance flags if those involved expect quick results.

Of greater consequence, a utilitarian emphasis overlooks perhaps the most important reason why conflict resolution should play a central role in society: the learning and use of conflict resolution skills facilitates the development of human beings and society capable of taking responsibility for making decisions and resolving problems in the midst of controversy.

Until quite recently, a limited repertoire of responses to conflict and an *ad hoc* approach towards teaching the skills and values of conflict resolution were adequate equipment to navigate the challenges of communities and society. Today the forces of disintegration are so strong, the technology-enabled pull of individualism so powerful, the occasions for integrative experiences and unifying narratives so few, that old responses are out-dated.

In unique ways, conflict is capable of catalyzing high level responses in human beings that mobilize our best resources. But not when preparation is haphazard. To achieve high-level responses we must approach things differently than in the past.

Conflict Resolution as a Foundation of Existence

Let us start from the given that human beings are tribal creatures, hardwired to seek out and live in proximity to others. At some deep level we know, as our ancestors knew, that we need partnerships with others. Survival itself requires it. Dependency on community is perhaps most undeniable when we are young and again when we are old. But even in the more autonomous middle years, maintaining communal connections is a central concern for most people.

This deeply imprinted awareness of reliance on community gives conflict and its resolution a special place in the human psyche, for we know instinctively what they portend. Unresolved conflict threatens danger to and loss of community, and thus death, for in our ancient past, safety required numbers. Successful resolution portends continuation and renewal of community and thus survival.

Activities and processes of conflict resolution, then, have more impact in the human psyche then we might estimate from the significance of the issues alone that humans quarrel about. Weighty though the issues of a given dispute may be, the symbolic impact of conflict and human response to it may be even weightier in the psyche.

Successful experiences of conflict resolution assure us that we are not helpless to defend against loss of community and connection to others. Aside from the practical implications of agreements, to experience or witness a process of conflict resolution is to participate symbolically in an act of

existential renewal and hope. By the same token, to experience efforts at conflict resolution that fail threatens the foundations that sustain us.

If this analysis is true, we are wired to pay attention to conflict resolution and to invest in achieving it. We feel anxious when we are not connected as allies to others. Conflict and how to resolve it, then, is not a matter of mere utilitarianism. We are programmed to consider it a foundation of existence. So why not then act on this deep knowledge?

Brooks on Loss of Covenantal Attachments

In a recent, thought-provoking essay, columnist David Brooks wrestles with the requirements of building a humane society.   He draws on psychological attachment theory and a 2014 essay by Yuval Levin[170] to make his case.

At the foundations of American life, Brooks writes, there once was "a society with strong covenantal attachments — to family, community, creed and faith. Then on top of them we built democracy and capitalism that celebrated liberty and individual rights."

Deep covenantal attachments, says Brooks, provide human beings with the foundation required to use freedom well.   Without them, we grow selfish: "Freedom without connection becomes alienation."

When large numbers of people come to take freedom without connection for granted, the result is chaos and breakdown. "[T]hat's what we see at the bottom of society — frayed communities, broken families, opiate addiction," Brooks writes. "Freedom without a unifying national narrative becomes distrust, polarization and permanent political war."

Brooks attributes grave outcomes to loss of covenantal attachments. When people are deprived of good covenantal attachments, "they will grab bad ones. First, they will identify themselves according to race." People become so deficient in meaningful attachment that they are unable to cope with those who differ from them: "The only people who can really know me are in my race. Life is a zero-sum contest between my race and your race, so get out."

From racism, things go to tribalism. Political demagogues encourage simple in-group and out-group dichotomies and build political movements out of them. This is the appeal of Trump. "As history clearly demonstrates, people will prefer fascism to isolation, authoritarianism to moral anarchy.

The solution, Brooks holds, is to renew covenantal relationships. "If we are going to have a decent society we're going to have to save liberalism from itself. We're going to have to restore and re-enchant the covenantal relationships that are the foundation for the whole deal. The crucial battleground is cultural and pre-political."

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[170] "Taking the Long Way: Disciplines of the Soul are the Basis of a Liberal Society", First Things, October, 2014.

Covenantal Relationships Require Skilled Conflict Resolution

I agree that loss of covenantal relationships lies at the core of what is happening in America today. But Brooks' suggestion that the cause is too much liberalism - resulting in isolation - is shallow. Ineptness at community building lies at the core of both liberalism and the conservative communities whose demise Brooks mourns.

"Re-enchantment" of covenantal relationships, Brooks' answer to the problem, is similarly facile, suggesting a magical solution. A way out of this impasse will have to include addressing injustices and developing new ways of responding to conflict.

Brooks points to the weakness of liberalism of giving priority to individual freedom at the expense of covenantal relationships. However, he ignores the dark side of many conservative institutions and practices: Deep connection and community exist in such communities only for those who fit in or blend in. Those whose social status, history, preferences, appearance, identify, or priorities differ from a certain ideal type are second-class citizens. As such they are expected to put up and shut up.

Some amount of abnegation of self, equally distributed across the human community, is arguably good, perhaps compelling individuals beyond the narcissism that seems to come naturally for human beings.

But intolerable oppression is rife in conservative settings. Those unable or unwilling to accept the norms of their group are often lonely, scorned, isolated, ridiculed, exiled, or worse. Hence there is good reason for the rise of liberalism: A significant portion of people in most covenantal groups have experienced at one point or another the pain of not fitting in. For some, this is chronic.

Conservative institutions, though effective in fostering covenantal relationships, often have terrible processes for managing diversity and conflict. Those in power impose their will on others. Those not in power withdraw to survive, or over-rule their own views, wishes, needs, and preferences to go along with the majority.

Peace is often valued such setting, for the chaos of conflict is threatening and disruptive. But the peace sought is not achieved through vigorous mutual engagement, but rather through acquiescence and submission.

The latter may reduce conflict on the short-term. But the long-term cost is severe, not only to individuals but to the entire community. When dissenters are chronically squelched or driven out, groups lose their ability to self-correct. Weaknesses and failures of leaders go unchecked. The ability of the entire community to adapt to change is diminished.

Brooks has it wrong, then, in asserting that covenantal relationships once formed a pristine core to which liberalism later added an outer layer of freedom now gone to excess. The core itself was deeply deficient and survived only at enormous cost to minorities of many kinds. The institutions that fostered covenantal relationships often relied on destructive social processes for their power. Let there be no return to those days.

How then to make restoration of covenantal relationships a central part of our response to the polarizations of our times, without returning to the

oppressive structures and processes of the past?   The answer lies, I believe, in re-thinking old assumptions about conflict and revising our responses to it.

Liberals and Conservatives from the Perspective of Conflict Styles

Liberalism and conservatism share a common tendency: aversion to conflict and an instinct to end it by disengaging from conversation. Liberalism values diversity and makes room for it, but it does so in ways that are often conflict avoidant. Its underlying individualism facilitates too-ready a parting ways and avoidance of difficult discussions, thus undermining covenantal relationships.
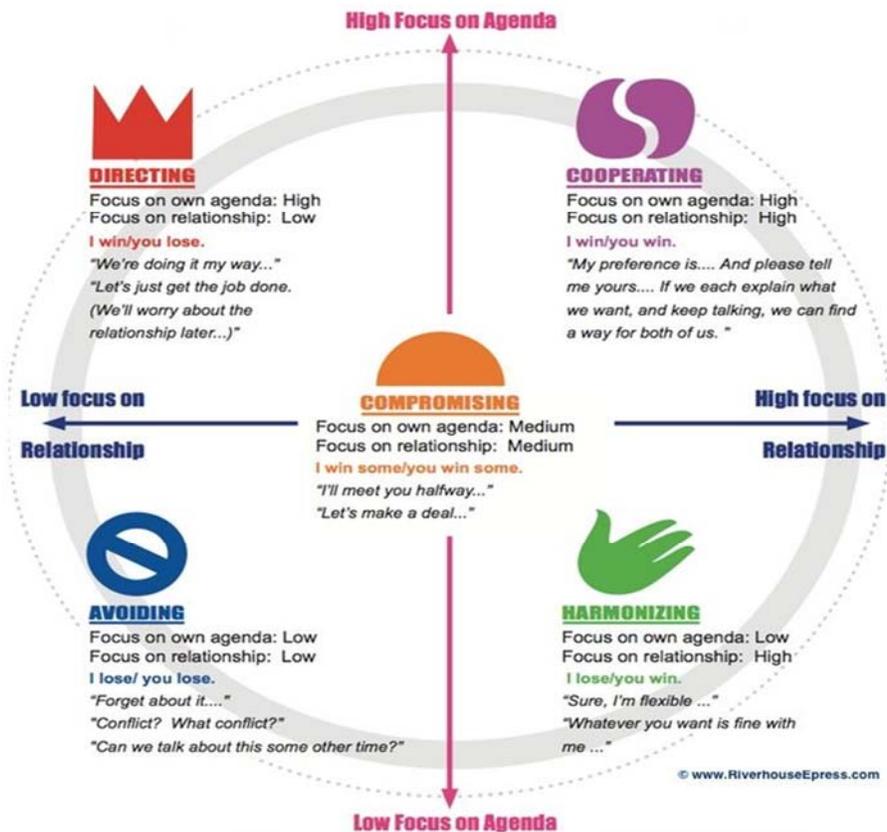
Conservatism, for its part, values the peace of quiescence and actively pursues it by squashing dissent. Certain things should not be talked about and dare not be challenged. Those who do so anyway are often silenced or removed.

We can gain further insight on these responses from conflict style analysis. An early and enduring model for evaluating the dynamics of conflict is the Blake Mouton Managerial Grid, an analytic tool for assessing styles of leadership, proposed in 1964 by Robert Mouton and Jane Blake, and used as organizing principle in a variety of conflict analysis tools.   The latter include the *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* and my *Style Matters* conflict style inventory, which adds elements that recognize the impact of stress and culture.

The Mouton Blake model assesses situations according to two key factors, commitment to goals (or agenda) and commitment to relationship (or to pleasing others). By intersecting these factors in a grid, the Mouton Blake framework (hereafter referred to as the Five Style Model) posits five distinct responses. When considering conflict, these are referred to as conflict styles:

- Forcing or Directing - High commitment to goals and low commitment to relationships

- Accommodating or Harmonizing - Low commitment to goals and high commitment to relationships

- Avoiding - Low commitment to goals and low commitment to relationships

- Collaborating or Cooperating - High commitment to goals and high commitment to relationships

- Compromising - Medium commitment to goals and medium commitment to relationships

Five Styles of Responding to Conflict

High Focus on Agenda

DIRECTING
Focus on own agenda: High
Focus on relationship: Low
I win/you lose.
"We're doing it my way..."
"Let's just get the job done.
(We'll worry about the
relationship later...)"

COOPERATING
Focus on own agenda: High
Focus on relationship: High
I win/you win.
"My preference is.... And please tell
me yours.... If we each explain what
we want, and keep talking, we can find
a way for both of us. "

Low focus on Relationship

COMPROMISING
Focus on own agenda: Medium
Focus on relationship: Medium
I win some/you win some.
"I'll meet you halfway..."
"Let's make a deal..."

High focus on Relationship

AVOIDING
Focus on own agenda: Low
Focus on relationship: Low
I lose/ you lose.
"Forget about it...."
"Conflict? What conflict?"
"Can we talk about this some other time?"

HARMONIZING
Focus on own agenda: Low
Focus on relationship: High
I lose/you win.
"Sure, I'm flexible ..."
"Whatever you want is fine with
me ..."

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Low Focus on Agenda

A key concept in the Mouton Blake framework is appropriate response. Each conflict style has intrinsic strengths and weaknesses, and effective conflict response requires discernment in each situation in light of its unique requirements[171]. But in fact few people make informed choices, relying instead on habit and often favoring one or two styles over others.

From the perspective of the Mouton Blake Model, over-reliance on the Directing/Forcing style as a response to conflict is common in conservative communities. Conflicts are quickly polarized and turn into power struggles, resulting in broken relationships and marginalization of nonconformists.

The Directing/Forcing conflict style, as the diagram above makes clear, gives low priority to relationships and deep damage to them often results in conflict. Recognizing this, individuals often choose silence and withdrawal in the face of conflict, for they know that if they challenge others they are likely to be targeted with a Directing/Forcing response.

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[171] See my short online "Intro to Conflict Styles" for more on this.

This means that not only Directing/Forcing but also Avoiding is over-used as a conflict style. In practice, this manifests in a pattern common in many conservative communities: long periods of cottony silence punctuated by occasional outbreaks of intense conflict.

From the perspective of the Mouton Blake model, liberalism too is over-reliant on Avoidance, thanks to its underlying individualism. Given liberal high commitment to individual freedom, conflict quickly leads to a parting of ways. Both conservative and liberal communities then are seen to rely heavily on conflict avoidance.

Neither conservative communities, rich in covenantal relationships, nor liberal communities, rich in individual freedoms, bring a balanced repertoire of responses to conflict. For different reasons, both neglect the practice and teaching of skills required to engage difficult issues without damaging relationships.

Conflict Response and Covenantal Relationships

Technology greatly expands options for individuals and make it ever easier to live in isolation from others. This means that sustaining covenantal relationships is likely to grow ever more difficult, and if Brooks' analysis is correct, that dynamics of tribalism are likely to grow more problematic in the future.

A number of attributes of conflict make it a potent resource in resisting this, but a particular response to it is required:

1) *Re-think attitudes towards conflict so as to harness its energy.*

One of my first learnings as a young professional working in organizational conflict was the discovery that dynamics in a room shifted when, as a resource person, I adopted a positive, inquisitive attitude towards the presence of conflict. Faces softened and voices shifted from angry and demanding to intense and engaged, often within minutes.

Conflict is easier to deal with when invited rather than discouraged. When people consider conflict to be wrong or irresponsible, they make it a habit to hide their true feelings. Dishonesty soon becomes normal. Frustration and anxiety rise and inevitably candor overcomes caution. When it does, battles immediately follow. People assume that others are now casting aside integrity and that warfare is the only realistic response.

When instead disagreement is *invited* and the airing of diverse views is considered a contribution to the health of community, a different dynamic results. Anxiety is still present, of course, but not in its bitter, aggressive, judgmental forms. Reason and principle remain accessible, even in the heat of differences.

Treating conflict as a normal part of relationships transforms it from a destructive force to an energizing one. Nothing focuses attention, stirs energy,

and attracts engagement like conflict[172].   Harnessing this energy with robust constructive processes of dialogue and decisionmaking must become a central goal of any community that cares about covenantal relationships.

The problem with modernity, after all, is not that it is intrinsically destructive, but that it disrupts and diverts attention from the things required to build deep relationships and stable communities. Every smart phone bearer carries a world of interesting engagements, waiting to be summoned from pocket or purse. To build covenantal relationships requires social processes capable of break through these self-constructed cocoons that increasingly isolate people.

Conflict is one of the few aspects of human life capable of doing this. The atomizing and isolating trends of our times make it ever more important that we recognize conflict as a moment of opportunity.   We must direct the energy that it brings towards responses that bring true dialogue, and in the process, help create individuals and communities capable of covenantal relationships.

2) *Recognize isolation and alienation, not ideology, as the drivers of the conflicts that threaten the fabric of American society today.*

The deep polarizations that increasingly threaten the very foundations of society are rooted in more than competing ideologies. Modernity, on a daily basis, erodes the ties of community itself.   The individual reigns supreme, empowered by technology to construct life and relationships in the mold of personal preferences. Information that differs, and people who differ, are easily blocked out.

The phenomenon of "fake news" is a reflection of this reality. Technology now assists individuals to coalesce into influential movements that convincingly propagate their own self-sustaining vision of reality, isolated from serious intellectual or social challenge by those whose experience differs.

We can't address this dystopian reality by sending specialists to the frontlines somewhere. We have to address the core problem of alienation underlying it, the pervasive isolation from meaningful engagement with diversity of any kind that makes individuals easy marks for extremists.

Alienation at this level can't be remedied by setting up dialogue across the major gaps that divide society. We have to start more modestly, with a goal of simply reducing the alienation and isolation that characterizes daily life. On both sides of the ideological spectrums, evidence abounds that people have a hard time getting along, not only with their predictable opponents, but with their own fellow partisans. Our strategies must move at a level that targets the needs *within* groups as much as between them.

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[172] It's hardly chance that readership for some newspapers increased drastically in the heat of the 2016 elections, for the New York Times by 47% and for the Washington Post reportedly by 75%.

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3) *Give greater attention to community building as a goal of intrinsic value, as a pre-requisite to a peaceful social order; and to conflict resolution as a facilitator of community building.*

Although conflict between groups receives a great deal of attention, conflict *within* groups is widely ignored.   Behind the scene in every well-known public conflict - whether Israel/Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Ireland, or current polarization between Democrats and Republicans in the US - exists serious intra-party conflict.   These less visible conflicts often turn out to be the biggest obstacle to resolution of the public inter-party conflicts themselves.

When groups that nurture covenantal relationship weaken or when they are riven by internal tension, a common strategy for unification is to stoke conflict with external groups.   Heightened perceptions of a common enemy predictably serve to unify group members.

In an era in which covenantal relationships are under great threat, then, it is urgent to find ways to build community without resorting to the shortcuts of tribalism, which creates community at the expense of denigration of others. A key strategy in this must be to strengthen the ability of groups to deal with internal issues. As networks and groups are better able to work out their own differences with each other, they will have less need to rely on the predictable but destructive strategies of demonizing opponents outside.

This applies across the spectrum of groups. Strange as it may sound, helping radicals learn constructive ways of working out differences with other radicals would reduce their danger to others.

There would be many ways to work at this in various settings. But the common denominator would be to improve the quality of how communities conduct meetings, set priorities, make decisions, and resolve conflicts.
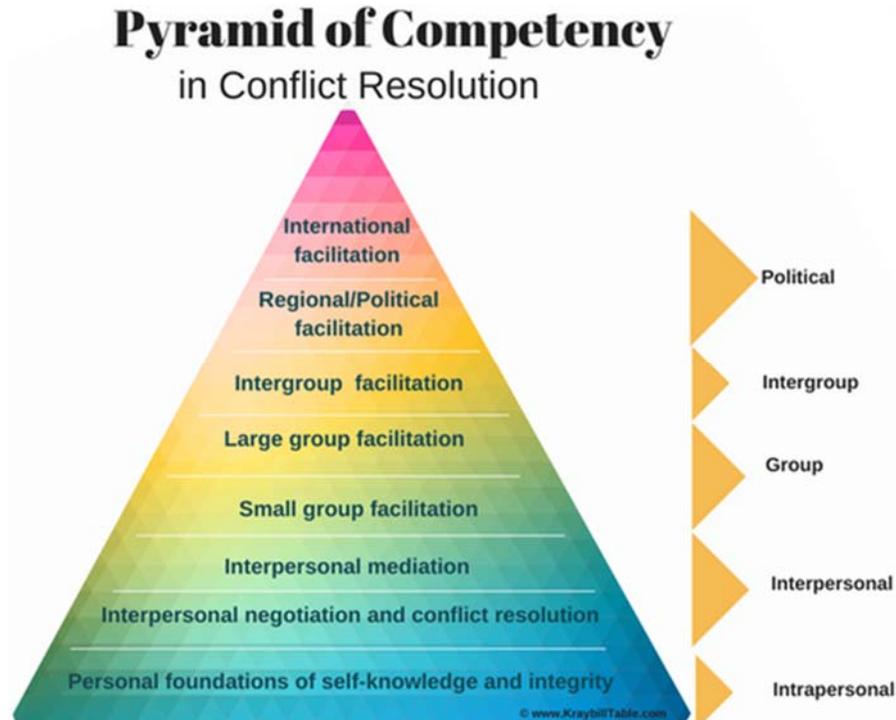
A community is shaped, after all, by many small moments and micro-responses to the diversities that people carry into every gathering, small or large.   Are divergent views welcome, are divergent people welcome?   Do participants interact respectfully with those who challenge them? Are decision making processes transparent and participatory? Is there clarity and easy access to information about things pertaining to structures, power, and use of resources?   Conflict resolution has enormous contributions to make on these issues.

4) *Treat conflict resolution as a full spectrum of responses.*

The case made for conflict resolution has often focused on a limited understanding of its potential, often presented only in reference to mediation of micro-level, interpersonal conflicts. This limited focus ensures that when conflict has systemic roots, as the polarization now threatening us has, conflict resolution is considered irrelevant.

Conflict resolution competencies should be presented embedded in a larger context of functions. Only then is the full potential contribution of the field visible. Below is one example that highlights how each level is essential for effective response at higher levels. For example, mediation skills assume

certain predecessor skills and in turn are an essential pre-requisite for effective responses to intergroup and group conflicts.

Pyramid of Competency
in Conflict Resolution

International facilitation — Political

Regional/Political facilitation

Intergroup facilitation — Intergroup

Large group facilitation — Group

Small group facilitation

Interpersonal mediation — Interpersonal

Interpersonal negotiation and conflict resolution

Personal foundations of self-knowledge and integrity — Intrapersonal

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5) *Integrate conflict resolution training broadly into education.*

A consequence of the prominence of lawyers in promoting mediation in its early years and the rapid growth of community mediation centers with a focus on mediation of interpersonal conflicts and divorces is that conflict resolution has come to be understood largely as an alternative to courts.

Conflict resolution is indeed such an alternative and it should continue to be. But it is also potentially much more. To achieve this larger community building potential will require more than occasional workshops for a peace-oriented fringe of society. Conflict resolution components need to be attached to every level of education and every profession.
Conflict comes with the life for learners of every level, whether school children, university students, or professionals in training. The need to function effectively in groups, to define key issues, set priorities, explore options, and make decisions with others is intrinsic to human functioning.

Relevant issues and pressing needs, for which appropriate skills can be taught and practiced, reside at every level of education.

If it seems utopian to hope that such an agenda could be inserted into an already crammed educational environment, it should be pointed out that professional schools and agencies of many kinds have already initiated the offering of such skills training. Typically such offerings come in response to utilitarian concerns - the awareness of practitioners in the professions involved of the high costs of badly managed conflict to their profession.

Many of those who live and work in the world of professions and projects understand the practical costs of badly managed conflict as well or better than the philosophers of peace. Some have learned or teach related skills under rubrics such as problem solving, personnel management, leadership skills, human resource management, etc.

Now we are in a time when a large number of people harbor serious concerns about the sustainability of our entire system. Yet many of these same people, through their professional experiences, have learned skills with great potential to build common purpose among diverse people in the presence of high stress.

From their own lived experience, the latter know that as a society we already possess, in scattered pockets and veins, the knowledge and skill required to shore up our faltering system. They surely know as well that the structures are lacking to teach and use these skills on the scale needed.

My suggestion then is for a new initiative from the field of conflict resolution. What might result if we made a systematic outreach to the educational institutions around us?

I return in conclusion to the question with which the essay began: To whom are we responsible as we face the many issues of pressing importance that confront humanity, and what is the mechanism by which we connect this responsibility to day-to-day life at the lowest level?

Humanity long answered the question by pointing too high in the cosmos, first to the gods, then to their stand-ins, the kings, and then to the state. However, recognizing the injustice and brutality unleashed by those answers, classical liberalism in the US, the parent of both liberalism and conservatism as we know them today, turned in the opposite direction.

But in turning to the individual as the ultimate focus of discourse on responsibility, we have aimed too low. The implications of this are becoming rapidly more apparent as technology expands the ability of individuals to create isolated and self-sufficient universes independent of deep relationships.

Responsibility in the end must lie in the hands of those involved in and those affected by the issues in contention. This rules out neither query after divine guidance nor baseline principles of individual rights. But the processes, forums, and norms shaping discourse and decisionmaking should look to those involved and those affected by the issues in disputes as key interlocutors.

To achieve this would require the enskilling of humanity at all levels in competencies of dialogue, problem-solving, and conflict resolution that today are possessed by only a minority. We already know what those competencies

are, what each is capable of, and how to teach them.   The key missing piece is the will and the resources to teach them on the scale required.