



## CHAPTER 3

# SEEING CONFLICT AS SMOG

*The enemy is fear. We think it is hate; but, it is fear.*

—MAHATMA GANDHI

When you hear the word *conflict*, what do you think of? What's the first metaphor that comes to mind? Write it down.

Now think of a specific person you are in conflict with. What does conflict look like with him or her? Again, write it down.

Let's try again. This time think about a conflict in your organization. What does that one look like? Keep writing.

Now try your community or country. What metaphor comes to mind? Let's put that one down too.

I do this exercise with my senior peacebuilding students at the start of their final semester. These students have been studying both peace and conflict for several years. Nevertheless, I know what is coming. Inevitably, out of a class of twenty-five students from two dozen or so countries in the world, just about everyone writes down something negative—something like volcanos, tornados, or forest fires.

Conflict scares the hell out of many of us. Did the metaphors you wrote down look scary too?

One semester, a student from Hong Kong summed up the mood of the class.

“Conflict is like smog,” he said. “It is everywhere. It fills my lungs and makes them burn. And while I don’t like the smog and want it to go away, what can I do? Even if I sell my car and quit driving, others won’t. There’s no escaping it.”

No one likes smog. The smog metaphor paints conflict as inconvenient and restrictive, the result of some external force that we cannot escape. It is everywhere, and unless all of us start living differently, it’s not going away. That’s what makes smog so frustrating. While I could walk to work or cut emissions to reduce my contribution to the smog epidemic, it will matter little unless others do the same. So why even try since we know others won’t change?

We live in a world filled with destructive conflict, and so often we feel simultaneously overwhelmed and helpless to do anything about it. We do just about anything to get away from it. We run and hide, avoid, blame, attempt to legislate it, and even go to war when we run out of other options. Running, blaming, legislating, or forcing our way through conflict never seems to leave us with the lasting solutions we need. Our ability to bring about lasting transformation or cessation of conflict often feels frustratingly limited. It’s taxing.

When we come home from a long day at work or sit down after a monotonous day at home with the kids, our fatigue typically has less to do with any physical exertion and more to do with mental exhaustion. We spend way too much of our time figuratively putting out fires.

Smog seems like an understatement. No wonder we can't or won't see each other.

Seeing conflict as smog is a major impediment to mustering the sort of dangerous love we need to truly transform conflict. In the story in chapter 1, Miriam saw conflict this way. She was convinced that any interaction she had with Mahmoud was going to turn out bad.

When we have a smog view of conflict, we never think about being the first to turn because it feels like our turning couldn't possibly make a difference. In fact, the smog view of conflict invites us to stay entrenched in our destructive conflict.

## **THE INSANITY OF CONFLICT**

Having a negative perception of conflict adds to both the perpetuation and the escalation of it.

In 2013, a study based on research of seven thousand workers in London found that the more negative people's perceptions were about stress, the more likely they were to have a heart attack.<sup>1</sup> If people reported that their health was heavily affected by stress, they doubled the chances of having a heart attack in comparison to those that saw stress as a positive motivator.

"We found that the association we observed between an individual's perception of the impact of stress on their health and their risk of a heart attack was independent of biological factors, unhealthy behaviours and other psychological factors," Dr. Hermann Nabi, one of the authors, said. "One of the important messages from our findings is that people's perceptions about the impact of stress on their health are likely to be correct."<sup>2</sup>

Stress, as it turns out, doesn't necessarily kill us. But perceiving stress negatively does.

Perceptions of conflict work in a similar way. See conflict as constructive, see the people involved in the conflict as people with equally valid if not similar desires, fears, and wants, and you're likely to turn it into something positive.<sup>3</sup> Perceive conflict negatively, especially the people we are stuck in conflict with, and things start going downhill quickly. The more exhausted we become, the angrier or more frustrated we get, the more likely we are to escalate the conflict and unwittingly create even more of it.

In short, we create the very thing we say we want to go away. Negative conflict becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>4</sup>

## TELLING CONFLICT STORIES

When a spouse comes into my office looking for mediation help, a student is ready to choke his roommate, a manager is unhappy with the poor performance of her employees, or a member of the State Department is frustrated because every project she is working on to effect change doesn't take hold the way she wanted—each person's story sounds a little bit like this:

I don't know what to do anymore. [Insert the name of the person or group here] is driving me crazy. They don't respect me. They are constantly doing things to irritate or hurt me. I try to be calm. I try to be helpful. I try to correct them. I try to let them know how I feel about it and what they need to do to change, but they won't listen. They are so stubborn and stuck in their ways. No matter what I do, nothing changes. And I can't take it anymore. I'm exhausted. I've tried everything. Help me. Please help me change them.

Before you laugh, think hard. I'm sure our friends or our parents or a boss at work can probably remember a conversation about us that sounded very similar.

The more obsessed we become with externalizing the problem (putting it somewhere outside ourselves) and personalizing the conflict (they don't *have* a problem, they *are* the problem), the more we feel helpless to do anything about it. With blame comes a loss of control. Others determine our reality because we are not accountable.

Think about Miriam again. From Miriam's point of view, she and her organization didn't have a problem. Mahmoud was the problem. And because he was the problem and owned the only solution to their problem, they felt helpless. Miriam had run out of ideas and was blind to the ways she was inviting him to be a bigger problem.

Giving up that accountability, so we don't have to face the truth about ourselves, is alluring. But the second we begin blaming, we have handed over our whole reality to someone else. We no longer call the shots because we have created a reality where every struggle belongs to someone else—to that person's choices.

Very few people like to feel that matters are out of their direct control. The more we perceive others (or the universe) as hostile toward our goals—robbing us of our ability to think and act as we choose—the unhappier we become. The unhappier we are, the more we need to blame others for our unhappiness. The more we blame, the more we invite others to behave in the very ways we don't want them to.<sup>5</sup>

The more out of control we feel, the more desperate our actions become (either through retreat or confrontation). The more desperate our actions, the more likely we are to dig an even bigger hole for the conflict.

Essentially, as we become stuck in our conflict stories, the interactions with those we are in conflict with wane. We separate and then tell the story of that separation in a way that justifies our separation. When we do so, our conflict

narratives—the accounts we give others whenever we are in conflict—become both weak and self-absorbed.<sup>6</sup>

They are weak, because they sound helpless:

“Help me!”

“I can’t take it anymore!”

“They just won’t change!”

“She won’t listen to me!”

“Why is he hurting me?”

They are self-absorbed because the two dominant words laced in every conflict narrative are me and I:

“Help me!”

“I can’t take it anymore!”

“They just won’t change (for me)!”

“She won’t listen to me!”

“Why is he hurting me?”

These narratives show very little recognition that those we are in conflict with, might have some issues of their own and would, if they could, likely tell me the exact same thing if they were the ones sitting in my office.

Can you imagine what Mahmoud would have said about Miriam and her organization? Perhaps something like this: “What did I do to them? All of a sudden they are protesting my gym? Who am I to them? Who are they to me? Why are they hurting me? They won’t listen to me! Help me!”

No wonder conflict is scary for many of us. Our vision of what’s really going on is so obfuscated that everything—every word, every facial gesture, every action—is a step into the unknown, a step that could be life or death to us. It’s not physical life or death most of the time, but life or death to something we often cherish over our own lives, a life or death we are often not even aware of.

When we’re stuck in a destructive conflict, we may not be able to eat, sleep, or feel comfortable at home or work. We

often obsess about the conflict to the point that everything we try to do to fix it only seems to make things worse. We're endlessly occupied with who is right and who is wrong. We often feel as if the hurt will never stop and no one seems to care.

We often find ourselves asking, "How do I go on like this for months or years? I can barely make it through the day!"

The stories we tell in the midst of destructive conflict portray conflict as out of our control: it's not our fault; they started it; our misbehavior, if any, was a result of provocation from them; or the problem lies in how we or they were raised. Sometimes we'll argue that conflict is in our (or their) blood or DNA.

Perceive conflict the smog way, and feelings of hopelessness are sure to follow. We start to feel

- Hopeless in a marriage
- Hopeless with a wayward child
- Hopeless with a disrespectful neighbor
- Hopeless because of an adversarial political party
- Hopeless because the union or management will never really change
- Hopeless because we cannot pick a spot in this world where poverty, violence, and even war aren't raging to some degree

Of course we fear conflict. We believe, too often, that it's fueled by unpredictable people looking out for their own self-interest. No one can control that.

If you have this view of conflict and I use the phrase "dangerous love," the response is something like this: "Dangerous love? It's not going to work for these problems. All it will do is get me killed!"

When it comes to conflict, so many of our stories are blind to the reality of the situation, and that blindness takes

a serious toll on us and others. It takes a problem and turns it into something potentially destructive.

If others aren't going to change and if I can't change and if conflict is never going to end, our methods of dealing or coping with conflict are going to take on the DNA of those pessimistic beliefs. Fortunately, that's not the only way we can see conflict.