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The Conquest of Hate : By Turning Conflict Inside Out, a New Breed of Mediators Finds a Way of Bringing Peace to the City

April 25, 1993 | Itabari Njeri | *Itabari Njeri, a contributing editor of this magazine, won the American Book Award in 1990 for "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone." Her last article for this magazine concerned the scarred psychological landscape of Los Angeles after the riots*

IN A CHILLING, AND WIDELY unreported, coda to the rage that filled Los Angeles streets last spring, a woman sits in a banquet room in the Biltmore Hotel violently tapping her fingers on a dining table, slamming down her silverware repeatedly and trembling as L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley speaks. He came, he says, to pay respects to his friend Charles E. Lloyd, being honored that night by the Criminal Justice section of the Los Angeles County Bar Assn. as Trial Lawyer of the Year.

Lloyd defended Korean-American grocer Soon Ja Du, convicted of voluntary manslaughter in the shooting of a 15-year-old black girl named Latasha Harlins. Her death, and Judge Joyce A. Karlin's decision to sentence Du to probation instead of prison, contributed, many believe, to the 1992 Los Angeles uprising.

The muttering woman at the table is Latasha's aunt, Denise. In the rear of the room, Joseph, Soon Ja Du's eldest son, sits with family friends. Judge Karlin is present, too. As Lloyd receives his award, telling the crowd he accepted it because "I know I deserve it"--throwing in that Karlin is the "greatest (judge) of them all"--Harlins rises.

"Charles Lloyd," her voice is surprisingly steady, "how can you have the unmitigated gall to--the audacity to celebrate the death of my niece?" Her voice suddenly spirals to a shriek and she turns to the filled banquet room. "All you people sitting, applauding over a child killer. All of you who have children. Latasha was defenseless. She didn't do *nothing* !"

"Sit down," yells the master of ceremonies from the stage, "or we will have to arrest you."

"You can have all the money in the world . . ." she shrieks. The crowd is stunned, embarrassed. The rage that had leveled large swaths of the city just weeks earlier had entered the Crystal Ballroom. "This whole system is going to come tumbling down. . . . *All your money is not going to cover what's going to happen, God be with me, as I stand here right now* wwwwww . . ." The police escort her outside, her voice a human siren of pain piercing the hotel corridors.

Weeks later, a Korean-American premed student named Kenny Son sits in a Los Angeles church with a group of African-American and Korean-American Catholics trying to find common ground.

He had watched his friend get shot in the leg by a black teen-ager while the friend had defended his store during the riots, says Son, 22. "If I was to tell you what the African-American has done within the Korean community, you'd be outraged. My neighbor's mother--excuse me, I might get emotional," he sighs deeply--"was pregnant. She was managing an apartment building. Two African men came saying they'd like to see an apartment. They raped her, then they set her on fire.

"I came here with my mother in 1981," he tells the mostly black group. "We lived in a single apartment with rats and roaches. With the grace of God we were able to move up, literally, move up the rungs of the ladder. A lot of African-Americans condescend because they were born here and we are immigrants. If anything," his controlled tone gives way to anger, "we are more American than you guys are because we earned it. We came here seeking American democracy. African-Americans say they were forced here because of slavery. If you don't like it, *leave* ! Go back to Africa."

It was bad before, but in Los Angeles since the first verdicts in the Rodney King case, the notions of healing and coalition-building have become dirty words to many.

At a time when our piece of the planet reflects the same sort of social fissures and ethnic hostilities sweeping across Europe, how is it possible to heal profound wounds within and between ethnic groups?

Color and ethnicity are not the only sources of our tensions, of course; they have just seemed the most intractable. The hostility between Korean-Americans and African-Americans in Los Angeles is the crisis of the moment, but it also reflects a general circling of the wagons, a staking out of tribal positions. In this atmosphere, among the least aggressive acts may be the one of an L.A. motorist sporting a bumper sticker that read: "*If I had known then what I know now, I would have picked my own cotton.*"

Even among those who have devoted their life's work to "healing" and "conflict resolution," the phrases have started to sound hollow, because the concepts have become "Oprah-ized" on television and elsewhere. Conflict-resolution experts have descended upon the city in recent months with dog-and-pony shows hawking workshops, seminars and assorted techniques designed, they claim, to empower oppressed communities by giving them the skills to tackle issues of political, social and economic inequality. Many beleaguered local conflict-mediation experts greet the mediation carpetbaggers with skepticism.

Such skeptics are among the 28 human-relations professionals from Southern California attending a three-day training workshop sponsored by the Washington-based National Coalition Building Institute. They know that you pay your money and you take your chances

with many of these workshops, so the setting seems appropriate: Santa Anita Church, across the street from the racetrack of the same name.

But these coalition builders are the real thing. They work to reduce prejudice and resolve conflicts by wedding personal healing to strategies for structural change--and it works.

Law and Order journal--an unexpected source given the institute's emphasis on psychological healing--called the institute's approach one of the most effective prejudice-reduction models for police departments. The 9-year-old organization, whose 35 chapters cross the United States as well as Canada, England and Northern Ireland, is working for institutional change in, among other places, the DuPont Co., Motorola and the Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training.

Among the ideas that distinguish NCBI from many organizations promoting diversity and social healing is its emphatic belief that all forms of oppression are linked: racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism and homophobia, to cite a few common forms of human mistreatment. In a typical NCBI workshop, participants share personal stories to explore the psychological consequences of systematic mistreatment.

The purpose of the storytelling is not to "reduce all tough intergroup issues to the level of personal counseling," cautions Cherie Brown, founder and director of the institute. "Instead, one of the most effective ways to communicate a universal principal is to present the issue in human terms." Giving voice to the painful experience is also healing for the storyteller. And these stories, often told with profound grief, can move listeners to see the similarities between one group's oppression and their own. Brown, who for more than 20 years has been a trainer in prejudice-reduction work, notes that research has shown that empathy is a key factor in motivating people to fight prejudice.

Once motivated, however, people need specific skills to begin to change institutions. NCBI workshops, unlike many other programs promoting diversity, teach participants to tackle controversial issues that typically divide groups--abortion, the death penalty, affirmative action policies and gay and lesbian rights, for example. They learn how to find the values they share with antagonists, reframe controversial issues in a way that acknowledges the concerns of both parties and attempt to find solutions based on honorable compromises.

Impressed with the group's track record, Democratic Rep. Louise M. Slaughter of Rochester, N.Y., sponsored one-day workshops this month and in February for members of Congress.

"If politicians are going to be catalysts for change in their districts," says Slaughter, who has been in Congress since 1987, "they have to understand the problems, put a human face on them and then have the skills to find solutions to the problems." The coalition-building institute, she believes, can offer these skills with rare success.

SEVERAL FURLONGS FROM THE SANTA ANITA TRACK, THERE ARE HEARTS and minds still to be won.

Unyong Kim, a Korean-American woman and co-leader of the institute's visiting team, waves an index finger furiously. "What I can't stand about you Korean-Americans is the way you come into black neighborhoods without any sense of community. You take and take and all it is money and getting ahead for yourself.

"What I can't stand about you Korean-Americans is that you have no sense of history. That you are here on the heels of the civil rights movement that was started by African-Americans (but) you are racist."

Kim shivers and groans a few seconds after she speaks.

Moments pass, and those watching her seem frozen in a silent gasp. There is one other Korean-American in the room. Several others are of Asian heritage and the rest are Latinos, African-Americans and Anglos, along with some self-described gays and multiethnics.

Cherie Brown, who is Jewish, is the other member of the team leading this train-the-trainer workshop. She faces Kim, who is now playing the role of a Jew, and booms: "What I can't stand about you Jews is how scared you still get. How invisible you (still try to be).

"What I can't stand about you Jews is how you are always talking about liberating people and progressive things (but) you have lost your own progressive tradition."

The group unfreezes, claps and one voice calls out, "Heavy."

Brown cautions that neither she nor Kim believe these negative "recordings" about their own group. Rather, what they say represents a compilation of negative, false stereotypes that they have heard members of their own group say.

"Sometimes," Brown elaborates, "the most painful part of discrimination is the negative feelings you have about your own group." Further, these feelings are not true, she emphasizes. "Anything negative we feel about our group is a hurt that needs to get healed," she insists. If, for instance, an ethnic group is perceived as "inward," unwilling to build allies, "it is because they have been hurt so much collectively that they react to the mistreatment" in a manner that may make them appear insular.

It's true, she acknowledges, that groups have to deal with the dysfunction within their communities, but one should not blame these communities for reacting as they do--"that is blaming the victim. None of us choose to have these recordings. But we are responsible for getting rid of them."

Kim and Brown ask the participants to choose a group they belong to, one they have powerful feelings about and, with a partner, say what disturbs them about their own group. The point, Kim and Brown will maintain through the next three days, is that it is difficult to

successfully build bridges to other groups until each group confronts the internal misperceptions that divide it.

"You should know," Kim says, "that when NCBI did this exercise in South Africa, there was a mixed group of blacks and whites. One was an Afrikaner who was a member of the security police, and he was shaking. He was so terrified that if he revealed what he couldn't stand about his own group, he would feed the hostility and hatred" toward them.

What actually happened, she says, was the opposite. "Blacks stood and said: 'If you have the guts to stand up and share what you can't stand about your own group, then we have a place to talk.'" So, says Kim, with the customary upbeat attitude and passion that characterizes the NCBI style, "take a risk" and do the exercise.

Next, Kim points out that a self-hating ally is a pretty worthless commodity. "So, this is where you get to glow. All those groups you slammed before, you now get to say what you love about them."

Kim turns to Brown to demonstrate what she means: "What I love about Korean-American people is the incredible courage it takes to uproot from an ancestral culture and to go to a completely new country for the sake of dreams and goals for the future generation," she tells her, continuing with a long, enthusiastic list that celebrates, among other things, Korean-Americans' sense of humor, their strength and their love of food.

Then, the group is asked to come up with phrases that immediately spring to mind about a group other than their own. In this group, the hostile misperceptions men and women hold of each other are as deep and negative as any ethnic stereotypes. Men: *brutal*, echo many of the women. Women: *bitches*, echo many of the men.

The discussion of these images triggers one man to express a long-held grievance: As a Latino man who faced discrimination all his life, he resents white women calling him sexist and racist. "I saw no white women," says Adam Cordero* (this name and others marked with an asterisk have been changed at the individuals' request) in the "poor black and Chicano neighborhoods" he grew up in. "I did see white women in those schools, who basically were hand in hand with white men promoting a racist agenda. Now, suddenly, as a minority male professional, not only do I have my own issues, promoting the development of blacks and Latinos, but I have to take you into consideration."

Brown interrupts gently. "You bring up an important piece," she says. "It's difficult to empathize with another person's or group's oppression when we, ourselves, have suffered profound injustices."

"Burns the hell out of me," Cordero snaps back, "that given my experience I would be called racist and sexist. I wish," he threatens, that the women who say this "could change genders for 20 minutes, 'cause I would just take care of business then and there." In this room full of people who work as human-relations experts, there is momentary, nervous silence.

Later, Brown and Kim explain that to be effective in reducing prejudice, people have to heal their own wounds as much as possible. Otherwise, they become clients. It's as if you go to a counselor and say: "I had this terrible experience"---and the counselor cuts in: "Hey, you think you had it bad? Well listen to me."

Brown, 43, who founded NCBI in Boston in 1984 and moved its headquarters to Washington in 1991, first focused her work on relations between blacks and Jews and Arabs and Jews and now handles all forms of intergroup conflict.

She has worked with ex-Nazis and their children, along with Holocaust survivors and their children in the setting of a German concentration camp, and she believes that everyone has been hurt in some way, and everyone's fears and concerns matter. She was terrified, she admits, when she went to Germany in 1983. As a Jew who had heard the horrors of Nazi persecution, she says, just hearing German made her shiver.

But when she heard the stories of these ex-Nazis and their children, she saw the same pattern of hurt in their lives that she had seen elsewhere. These people, who had grown up in a rigid, often abusive culture, had been "(mistreated) every day of their lives" she says. You have to be oppressed to oppress, she insists.

That's why the NCBI model acknowledges all forms of mistreatment, Brown says, and resists the notion that there is a hierarchy of oppression--a competition for "most bloodied and bowed." Given the United States' history of slavery and its legacy, the group believes that racism against African-Americans must always be a primary focus of any American efforts to reduce prejudice, but it stresses that oppression functions horizontally: The victim of racism one day may be a gay-bashing homophobe the next.

If their myriad hurts are not both acknowledged and healed, people who end up in leadership positions end up "smashing" elements of their own people and other groups, Brown says. We see this in liberation movements around the world, she asserts. In other words, pay-back. Or, as the activist-rapper Sister Souljah was recently quoted as saying: "Two wrongs don't make a right, but it sure evens up the score."

This nihilist's version of karma drives home the consequences of failing to do the painful work of healing, and it prompts members of the group to step forward with stories as part of a "speak out," one of the most important elements of the workshop, a time to share a personal experience of discrimination.

Kathy Winnick,* a woman with a speaking voice that seems always on the verge of song, stands close to Brown. "I married a minister," she says shakily. "I lived with a .45 held to my head twice, and I thought in 10 seconds I would be dead." It was after one particularly brutal beating that she finally sought help. She went to her church's district leader, who "asked me if I had been submissive to my husband, had I

been sexual enough with my husband, and that it must have been my fault that he had done this.

"And I thought, this is the good ol' boys. If a cop had found him, maybe he'd have been slapped on the wrist. What they did do was tell him to pray for a year and fast." In the meantime, he continued beating her.

The husband couldn't endure his year of penance, and he left the ministry. He and the church leaders blamed her for his demise. Brown asks her to say now what she would have liked to say to those men but was afraid to.

"It's not me," she screams. "I did what I was supposed to do. It's not me. He's sick. Do something to him, do something for him. You save me! Don't just pray. It doesn't work. I'm not the problem; work with the problem, not me," she sobs. "Oh, God, I'm a good person. It's not my fault."

Listening to this woman, recalling the shrieks of Denise Harlins and the barely contained rage of Kenneth Son, one is reminded that the origin of the word *anger* is grief.

CALLS FOR NONVIOLENCE WILL GO unheeded as long as people who have been mistreated have no safe place to voice their rage and have their concerns acted upon promptly and justly. "To have the opportunity to take all the pent-up rage and direct it verbally at another person helps many individuals release their unhealed grief," Brown says. "There is then less need to act out the violence." The point of all this, however, is not to just "keep a lid on things." The step after healing is to change institutions, with people working in their own best interest--in conjunction with others.

NCBI workshops practice resolving conflicts by selecting an issue over which members genuinely disagree; the Santa Anita group chooses marriages between homosexuals. Being able to distill the essence of a controversy is a key to clarifying where conflicts lie, Brown says, so she tells the group it has to frame the issue in terms of a question that can be answered with a yes or no response. Their question: "Should marriages between homosexuals be recognized?"

After one person speaks in favor of gay marriage and one speaks against it, Brown explains that the group's goal is to build a coalition, not act as advocates for either side. In advocacy, she explains, one works to advance a position, to push for change by defeating another. In coalition building, one finds elements of agreement in diverse positions in order to accomplish together what each party cannot accomplish alone.

Randy Eastman,* an African-American man raised in the South and opposed to homosexual marriage, stands before the group with a Southern California Jewish woman named Jennifer Freed, who favors granting homosexual couples the same legal status as married heterosexuals. After each speaks, the other is asked to restate as precisely as possible the position just presented, to make sure each understands what the other thinks.

Both talk about family backgrounds and life experiences. Eastman explains that he came from a culture where only heterosexuals married. He knows, he says, that he carries a prejudice against homosexuality, and he is struggling to change, "but my training makes it hard." Family ties are important to him, he adds, as is being in a committed, loving relationship.

Freed also stresses the importance of family in her life, and tells about a lesbian couple she knew. When one of the women was in a car accident, her partner was forbidden by the victim's family to visit. "This woman's life was traumatized by the loss of her life mate," Freed says, and seeing this has been one of her reasons for believing that homosexual marriages should be recognized.

Freed and Eastman agree that they can find common ground because they both believe in family and the sanctity of a committed relationship, and they use that commonality to reframe their conflict. Eventually, they recast the issue with this question: "How can we maintain a commitment to family values while supporting the increasingly diverse nature of family life in the United States?"

Shifting the context of the discussion allows it to move forward and allows those who disagree to work together. With such skills, rooted in the sensitivity that comes from healing, NCBI believes people can move on to work for real social change.

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER, ASSESSING THE WORKSHOP, A LAWYER AND mediator named Judy Rubenstein says: "If I were working to resolve the large issues that an entire city confronts, I would incorporate a program like Cherie's from elementary school through the workplace. It's totally crucial. I don't think we can have a collaborative society, with the amount of tensions that exist, without this healing work."

Freed says she was "transformed" by the experience. "Being in a lesbian relationship and . . . standing with someone who clearly had bigotry about that but was trying to work through it was very healing. Because usually it's anonymous and irrational hatred directed toward me."

But Cordero, reflecting the skepticism that abounds among many in Los Angeles, was dismissive. He says he feels "ripped off" and describes the workshop as "a sort of pseudo-psychological approach to individual problems." In his view, using psychology to help reduce ethnic and racial tensions won't work, because the solution to such conflicts lies in "connecting the dots between economic and social issues--the larger macro issues."

He is wrong. Increasingly, social researchers find that the third "dot"--psychological issues of oppression--is as vital as Cordero's first two. Young Yun Kim, a professor of communications at the University of Oklahoma, says that all conflicts have several main components: institutional issues, which can broadly be divided into problems of economic and social equality, and psychological issues such as

stereotypical thinking, insecurity and frustration. The psychological issues seem particularly intense among groups with long histories of oppression: blacks, Jews, Koreans.

Many conflict-resolution efforts tend to emphasize either the institutional issues--though few propose radically reforms--or psychological healing. But what seems to work best is a synthesis.

Karen Umemoto, a doctoral candidate in urban studies and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recently finished analyzing the ethnic media's coverage of the death of Latasha Harlins and trial of Soon Ja Du. In her unpublished paper, Umemoto argues that in the past, the most popular models for resolving disputes have separated the problems of society and the economy from the psychological effects of those problems and focused on discussions between contending parties. They've assumed that discussion will lead to a "win-win" situation. But the fact that perceptions of a situation can be so different--witness Denise Harlins and Kenny Son--often makes it impossible to use these techniques. It's the "healing" work that gives groups common ground.

NCBI takes its work beyond the supposed "touchy-feely" stage by teaching people to build coalitions and, concretely, by establishing local chapters that evolve from workshops like the one in Santa Anita and do the long-term work that can result in social change.

In Phoenix, participants in Brown's workshops formed an NCBI team that became an official committee of the city's Human Relations Commission, the Criminal Justice Committee. By training groups both inside and outside the police department in techniques for reducing prejudice and building coalitions, the committee has significantly improved relations between police and the community, says Robert Aronin, chair of the committee. People who've been through NCBI workshops, says Aronin, leave them "ready, prepared and motivated to intervene when prejudicial statements are made"--no matter whom the statement is directed toward. If someone says "the police are pigs," the response from NCBI trainees is likely to be a question, says Aronin. "What brought you to that conclusion? Or what makes you think like that?"

NCBI's hope, says Unyong Kim, is that it is seeding communities with leaders. A three-day workshop is only a beginning, she says, but "often people speak about it in attitude-changing and life-changing terms. And if they're charged up enough, we hope they will become committed to leading this kind of work."

That's been the case in Southern California, where Horace Williams, chapter coordinator, leads a group of eight regular members who "meet periodically to keep our skills up and plan workshops" to train groups and promote diversity, which he defines as "accepting all human beings precisely as that, supporting their efforts toward liberation and making a commitment to never mistreat them nor allow mistreatment of human beings to go on in your presence."

His own NCBI training, he says, has been invaluable in the work he's done with a Pasadena community group called "We Care," which he helped form as an outgrowth of forums on racism held after the uprising in Los Angeles last spring. The group decided to pull together plans in case violence broke out again when the verdicts were announced in the King and Reginald Denny cases. It set up teams of people who would go into schools, ride with police and stop to talk to young people in troubled communities, helping defuse anger among people gathered in the streets.

To bring together the disparate volunteers he was leading, Williams, a pharmacologist and professor of bioethics at USC, used NCBI's exercises. "People are coming in with their own feelings about what happened last time. What you want to do first of all is work on getting rid of feelings of guilt people have been made to have," he says. "If an Anglo woman comes in and expresses how 'if whites had been better to blacks this wouldn't have happened,' you want to stop the blaming and make her aware that this is the system we are all in. Blaming just riles people up."

An eight-member NCBI group is small but it is a core, Williams says, and ideas are sometimes more powerful than numbers. "Two thousand years ago there was a man with 12 disciples," he says with a laugh, "and we're still reading about him today."

Assessing the long-range impact of NCBI's work, Gerry Koch Gonzalez, a member of the NCBI Boston chapter, says: "When one talks about real structural change, one is talking about revolution. I don't know anybody doing that." But NCBI is "setting the stage" for the type of change that can bring genuine social justice, Gonzales contends.

If this response is not the quick fix some would like, or too quick for others-- *If I had known then what I know now, I would have picked my own cotton*-- consider the alternatives: The paranoid camp that Los Angeles has become in preparation for the next apocalypse, the neat, nihilistic symmetry of "two wrongs don't make a right but they sure do even up the score" and the graphic representation of this in the vicious beating of white Reginald Denny by five black men

"We know we've done hundreds of workshops, and we also know that we're embryonic in terms of what needs to happen in terms of eliminating oppression," Kim says. "But social change may be holding up a model of behavior people aren't used to yet. People leave these workshops with a vision of people being each other's allies. That is social change. They understand the hurt of each other and stick up for each other. That, too, is social change."