

The Deepening Process of Peace

Arny Mindell is interviewed by Sarida Brown (Caduceus Magazine, London, Autumn 2002 <http://www.caduceus.info/home.shtml>)

What can we learn from conflict? And what is peace? Arny Mindell and his wife Amy are known for their approach, called 'process work', which they have taken to arenas of conflict around the world.

Sarida Brown: We are living in a time of great uncertainty. The heart of the world seems to be bleeding, and there is a sense of the human psyche being deeply shaken.

Arny Mindell: In a way it's bleeding - and in a way it's not bleeding any more than it usually does. Wars and conflicts have always been ruminating in the background: it's like having a virus inside that is waiting to create a cold. All the problems have always been there, it's just that people rarely bring them to the surface. So in a way I'm happy they are emerging - it may be a chance to work them out for a change.

Are the problems being worked out?

Not really, at least not in the mainstream. Everybody thinks that governments should be working the problems out, but that is naïve because the people in governments are just very ordinary people. Few of them have had any training in psychology or in working with people, or spiritual training that has an influence on group process. So it's got to be done by individuals and small and larger groups: that's where the big changes need to happen and government will follow afterwards.

So is group process one of the important keys to working with this 'virus'?

All of us have problems with other people all the time, and very few of us really work them out. Few of us know how to go inside deeply enough so that we can see both our viewpoint and the other person's. Since very few of us can do that, it makes every sense that our countries freeze in one viewpoint or another and go into conflict with one another, since that is what almost everybody does most of the time in their everyday lives.

This year people are seeing an explosion of violence in the world.

They see the virus 'breaking out'. I wouldn't say that the violence has suddenly exploded; it's always been there between Muslims and Hindus, between the USA and all the other groups on earth that have been upset, jealous and angry at the United States' behaviour, between Palestinians and Jews in Israel.

I've recently been speaking with women from Israel and Palestine. The inner conflict that I sense is very raw and unresolved, between their ideal for peace on the one hand, and their experience of fear, anger and insecurity.

They sound like absolutely reasonable normal people to me, that they would love peace and they hope for it. This may not apply to the people you have been speaking with, but most peace movements and peace activists are not really at peace: they are mainly against anger and violence - they are making war with war. The result is that inside them is a rebellion: they want peace, and they are still terrified and angry as all normal people are. I don't want to criticize them for this; I want to say to them that they are doing absolutely the best they can, and that they just haven't yet gone deeply enough into their fear, their anger and their insecurity.



So how do people do that?

It's easy in a way; it's a step in personal development.

One way is to say 'I would love peace and I am working for peace, but I can't help being afraid of my neighbour who wants to kill me, and I would also like to put up a defence against my neighbour'.

The next step would be to say to oneself, 'Aha! The neighbour might kill me, and I might have to kill my neighbour as I defend myself against her or him, so death is very close.' Everybody in a war zone knows death is very close, in the negative sense of actually getting shot, for example. But there is another way of dying, in a positive sense of letting go: letting go of their identity at least temporarily, stepping out of it, letting their body lie on the ground (or on the bed) and having an overview, and then there's an OKness about everything once that has happened. We've done it in large group processes; it's quite dramatic to see the results of that.

This sounds like an initiatory process, like the dying ritual in the Egyptian pyramids. But how would a woman in Gaza City, whose neighbourhood has just been bombed by an F16, be able to go through this initiatory kind of dying, when the negative kind of dying is so close?

Each person has her and his own process, and there is no one way which is right for everyone. We have worked with potential suicide bombers who were caught before they carried out a bombing. They had said to themselves, 'My life isn't everything; more important is the cause that I stand for, and so I'm ready to die.' The next step for that person who knows there is something more important than life itself is to be ready to give up their life in the sense of letting go now of their personal identity. Now they can go for the greatest cause, which is not the destruction of other people, but the betterment of their own people and the betterment of all people. That means letting your own identity go, so in a way people in a war zone are closer to this process than most of us realize. Only they are doing it physically instead of psychologically.

The concept of doing psychological and soul work in a war zone - we have great examples of that in Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh and others. But what about ordinary people caught in conflict, for example in Israel and Palestine: how do they move from that position of embracing death for their political and tribal cause, to embracing death in this positive sense, for humanity?

There are many more people than you'd realize who are capable of that. Friends of our group have just been working in Israel and told us an amazing conflict scene where Palestinians and Jews were working together and one person said to someone from the other side, 'I hate you. I could kill you. I'm going to kill you.' Then somebody from this second side had an amazing inspiration, lay down on the floor in front of the speaker and said, 'If taking my life will make yours and everybody else's better, then please do take it.' Bango! Everything stopped. Because that's just the thing that isn't being said. People sat down and started to talk. It's quite dramatic and effective to bring death in to conflict work; it's just not done very much.

These things can happen, but are still very rare. I think the world is on the verge of taking a next step and hasn't made it yet.



You mean that it needs to come closer to death in order to take that step?

We all need to reconsider what we don't know about conflict. Then we need to consider all the conventional and alternative methods, and then we have to sit down quite stoically and ask which methods work and which do not, and finally - and I've seen it and practised it with over 100,000 people worldwide - the one thing that works is to help people to get deeper inside themselves while they are in conflict, and to say to them 'Trust your feelings. If you hate somebody, don't put it down. Go deeper into it. Why don't you like the other person? We understand maybe it's transgenerational. Perhaps you hate the other person in part because of your own history. So, kill them in the sense of stopping their behaviour in yourself. Affirm what you think, affirm what you feel, and then have courage and go deeper into your feelings of anger or desperation, take them inside and recognize what part of you is behaving like the 'enemy', and stop that 'enemy'. That's how to make change.

What would you do in relation to what is going on in Israel and Palestine?

What would I do also in relation to the Muslims and right wing Hindus in Gujerat where we have just been also? I think the first step is to look at the problem from many levels. Television can be very helpful: a television programme devoted to affirming people's feelings in conflict, large group processes where people are shown how to interact and actually allowed to have their feelings, and interact on television with some helpful person who knows about conflict: that would be very helpful, because when people see large groups resolving things, that's very ameliorating for a public situation.

I would also recommend that each one of us notice exactly the kind of flickering feelings or big feelings that we have about our neighbours or about somebody we don't like, and that we affirm

those feelings and don't put them away: 'I can't stand that person. I hate that person' or, 'I'm terrified they are going to kill me, they are bad people'. The next step is to go down deeper and ask oneself, first, 'How is that person a danger?' and then 'Am I in any way whatsoever like that person?'

Then ask, 'How does my family support my hating the other side? Why do my people support this?' People should affirm that, and say 'My family doesn't like the other groups and has good reason. Let me talk to members of my family, not just the living but also the dead. Let me talk to those who have died in battle or in the struggle.' Then you should talk to your dead grandmother, your dead great grandfather. Of course that's an inner experience, not an outer dialogue, but this can be done in front of others as well. I would suggest pondering, taking ten minutes a day, and talking to someone who has died as if they were still alive, in your imagination of the dead person as if there is somehow still a spirit that can speak. There is lots of wisdom in those people. The dead rarely have the kind of vengeance or hatred they had while they were alive.



Those who have died, the parents of the parents, maybe those who have died in violence, are often those who in our imagination are justifying the fear and antagonism that we hold.

That's right and that is because our first memory of people who have died is that they are still the way they were when they are alive. However this memory changes when people actually feel the spirits of the dead and re-meet them, so to speak. The first memory is a story we know about or have been told, and it's often about transgenerational hatred. That's the transgenerational in us: it's not just we who hate the other, it is that we have all sorts of spirits behind us saying 'Kill em, get em'. That's why you can't just negotiate a conflict, because there are deep transgenerational feelings in the background which go back centuries, which have to be talked about and brought into the present. It doesn't usually happen in the way we think: as I said most of these dead spirits suddenly come forward and say amazingly detached things. One example was a woman who had lost many of her family in a concentration camp. When she addressed them in her imagination, some of the dead said, 'Yes, we were foolish, we stayed too long, and we were too locked into our everyday lives. Now it's time for you to be more broad minded than we were.' The dead don't have as much hatred in them as we might think.

The problem is that people are tied up with everyday reality. We've forbidden ourselves from contacting deeper levels, even though they are there, even though we know in the darkness of the night we do talk to our dead grandma and grandpa. That's why war goes on: we just never get to deeper levels.

You are saying that peace cannot be made at the outer level?

Peace cannot be made just by folks talking about a list of practical arrangements. These are very important and have to be a first step, but if there's war against the world of dreaming, then there will be constant inner conflict and nothing will ever be resolved. We need to be multi-dimensional in the way we approach problems on this planet. Quantum physics discovered years ago that you can't just do things with Newtonian force; you need to get more subtle.

War means marginalizing and putting down something or somebody. To really make peace we have to become conscious of how we put everything down and learn to begin to affirm things and learn to go to deeper levels.



So what does peace mean?

It means something different to everybody. To me, it means being the ground that we walk on; not only being the people on top of the earth cut off from the earth. On top of the earth, so to speak, is everyday reality, you and me, but the ground that we walk on supports both of us. Peace means having contact with that deeper thing in us which sees and feels, 'Yes, my side is important, yet there's something true about the other person's side too.' That's peace. Peace is not antithetical to conflict; it understands things from a third viewpoint and sees how everybody is trying to do their best.

So peace is a deepening process of learning how to get deep enough in yourself, through conflict even, to see both sides as being somehow correct. When you have finally done that, then there's no war. Instead there is fluid dialogue.

Where is this happening?

It is happening inside every human being I've ever met when they go to bed at night. They go to sleep and dream and go into their deepest sleep without dreams, just darkness and quiet, and then they wake up into the everyday reality and they are back again at it. So it happens all the time, it's just marginalized.

So coming back to Israel and Palestine: what is our role, those of us who are outside that arena?

For those of us who are not directly in a war zone, our role is not to criticize those who are and think they should do better - that would make us part of the war scene. War is a non-local phenomenon, which means that there could not be war in one place on earth if there were not war everywhere inside us. It's like any virus: if it is proliferating in one part of the world it is because no-one has solved that virus problem anywhere. So those of us outside the war zone need to work on conflict. We need to know that we are projecting our own unworked-out conflicts onto the Palestinians and Israelis, and we need to send them good feelings instead. We need to remember how we've been hurt and kicked and how we start hurting and kicking back too, appreciating that and not projecting it onto them. That would be a big start, and many things will follow from that automatically.

We are all involved in every war, even if its only a little war far away, and we are all involved in the peace process.

We have to solve the problems of the Palestinians and Israelis in our own home. In the Middle East it is a conflict that is part religious and cultural. We have to think, how have we not taken

our deepest beliefs seriously? What do we really believe? And do we put that belief into action? That's how we can contribute to peace.



Arny Mindell, with his wife Amy, teaches process work (Process Oriented Psychology) and facilitates resolution of community and conflict problems for many groups and cities worldwide. He has an MS from MIT, was a Jungian training analyst, and has a PhD in psychology. He is the author of Dreambody, The Shaman's Body, Quantum Mind, and Sitting in the Fire. Arny and Amy Mindell practise in Portland Oregon.