

# Introduction



## *Let's Dance*

MICHELLE LEBARON AND CARRIE MACLEOD

*In the myth of Persephone and Demeter, the arts are stolen from the earth while Persephone is in the underworld. The dark frozenness that ensues is thawed only by Persephone's return, bringing dance and stories back to life. Like the land, people in the winter of conflict can be renewed by the creative arts.*

Without physical bodies, there would be no conflict or resolution. There would be no human-created art or imaginative expression as a catalyst for resilience and reconciliation. This book aims to do two things: to foreground the body as essential in the genesis and the transformation of conflict and to make a case for the inclusion of an aesthetic, physical vocabulary in conflict theory and practice. To this end, a wide range of talented authors powerfully highlight dance and movement as key approaches through which the mysteries of conflict can be understood, engaged, shifted, and transformed in new ways.

The authors are a part of the Dancing at the Crossroads project, a four-year exploration of new directions in conflict theory and practice. Many people have asked how we came to examine these directions. The answer is simple: through partnership and dialogue with many inspiring people whose work shows the way to resilience in the face of wrongs that cannot be righted, to hope in the midst of unspeakable pain, and to mobility in frozen or rigid contexts. After decades as scholar-practitioners seeking to help others navigate challenging conflicts, we searched for what was missing from our canon and why conflicts had not more successfully shifted in local and global settings. We came to believe that, in worldview and intractable conflicts, cognitive methods drawing on so-called rational processes have limited applicability unless they are accompanied by tools that access the less less-obvious aspects of conflict as it lives in our bodies and affects our ability to relate with others. As we reflected further on our work in dialogue and mediation, we realized that a much wider range of conflicts could benefit from embodied praxis.

Much is not understood about even personal conflict behavior. People surprise themselves with the intensity of responses or when something they had not anticipated would deeply affect them carries a strong charge. Dance, the art in which the body is the canvas, offers ways to access and affect perception as well foster shifts and transformations in conflict. As documented in this book, developments in neuroscience reinforce the legitimacy of this research direction, as do conflict intervention field reports from around the globe.

# THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF RESOLUTION

Some of the initial questions that guided this inquiry include the following:

- How does conflict live in our bodies and how can we embody it safely? What does this show us about how we can experience conflict safely in ways that promote health?
- How do we embody our roles as catalysts for change in a healthy way? What can this teach about how we can support others in conflict?
- How do we embody strong emotions? How is flexibility a part of our practice and experience? How can body-based praxis open awareness, generating new nuances and suppleness in expressiveness and communication?
- How can bodies, central to relationality, teach us about ways to move through conflict?
- How do body-based methods implicate creativity and satisfy our thirst for beauty in the midst of destructive conflict?

## Why Is the Physical Realm So Important?

Conflict arises over ideas and ideologies, how we share and occupy territory, how we manage our needs in the face of competing values, and over identities—how who we are is acknowledged, respected, and accommodated physically and relationally. Even the ways we speak about handling conflict are in corporeal terms, such as

- I sidestepped that issue.
- I am not going there!
- I'm feeling off center.
- This is weighing me down.
- Can we create a little more room for discussion?
- Let's take a breather and come back to this later; you've given me nowhere to go on this issue.
- The solution is just beyond our grasp.
- I wish he'd just get out of the way and let me do it.

Turning points and shifts in conflict are also replete with physical references, such as

- I felt a load off my shoulders when he said that.
- Something inside me dissolved when the papers were signed.
- I could breathe more easily once we had talked about it.

Yet even as these descriptions of conflict are everywhere in colloquial and artistic expression, they have been largely missing from scholarly and practice literature about conflict analysis and transformation. Intellectual biases overwhelmingly prevail in our work, evincing a preoccupation with logic, reason-based problem solving, and reductionist analysis. While these approaches are important, they are not sufficient for addressing real human problems in all their complexity, cultural diversity, intractability, and unpredictability. Thus seasoned

scholars Bernie Mayer and John Paul Lederach (and others) have alternately called for awareness of human systems and emotional intelligence in *Beyond Neutrality*<sup>1</sup> and for the use of embodied arts in *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*.<sup>2</sup>

Human *being* needs to be on the map of conflict resolution as much as human *doing*. Conflict scholars have done a good job of coming up with processes, actions, and strategies but a less less-thorough job of shining light on states of being, diverse ways of perceiving, dynamics of identity, and the making of meanings—all related to embodied functioning. Along with colleagues in many parts of the academy, we have ignored the body, treating it as more of an also-ran than as the integral and essential sensing wonder that it is.

This neglect of the body as a site and resource in conflict is changing through two important influences. First, artists are increasingly involved in peace-building processes around the world,<sup>3</sup> and arts-based methodologies are being developed and applied in multiple contexts.<sup>4</sup> Second, recent neuroscientific findings revealing the astonishing effects of neuroplasticity, mirror neurons, and other phenomena have aroused new interest in approaches to conflict that tap these capacities. Arts-based tools are very promising in this regard because they engage our whole beings in powerful ways. Led by artists and scientists, conflict scholars and practitioners are focusing more and more on physical resources for everything from professional development to conflict intervention and peace building.

In the aftermath of violent or intractable conflicts, physical and emotional safety must be secured and the imagination reignited. For this, the body is key. Physical safety can be arranged through peace agreements and careful boundary observance and enforcement. But the need to reknit communities and restore a sense of individual and collective coherence can be met only with tools expansive enough to hold contradiction and complexity. Dance and other physically based arts-inspired forms summon the necessary imagination for finding ways forward. This has been known and practiced around the world in cultures since time immemorial as rituals of dance, song, and feasting mark transitions through conflict.

Physical bodies are sites of trauma, anchors of pain, and divisions between one group and another. They are also vessels of possibility, vehicles of change, and places of healing. When we bring a difficult conflict into our awareness, our tissues feel heavy with its emotional weight and our minds can fall into well-traveled pathways of negativity. Yet bodies are also the places where we experience the relief of letting go, the relaxation of resolution, and the glimmer of possible futures into which we may walk. Experienced mediators and facilitators report that their bodies gift them with cues about how processes are working, when shifts or breaks are needed, and when something is out of alignment in a process.

Intercultural aspects of conflict also point unfailingly to the body as a common denominator. When language and translation barely stretch across divides, when people share a common language and look beyond words for cues, and when people realize the limitations of words in communicating symbolic aspects of conflict, including identity and meaning—the body is put into use. Nonverbal communication is well known to be powerful in ways that spoken or written language is not. Indeed, Mark Patrick Hederman has written that before he learned to read or write, he was more in touch with imaginative possibilities arising from

## THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF RESOLUTION

nature through physical exploration and adventuring.<sup>5</sup> Because people in conflict need to find ways to access imagination and intuition and to move beyond the frames that keep them stuck and confined, physical attunement and engagement are essential.

The work of *Dancing at the Crossroads* was born from these realizations. We sought ways that body awareness could help people in conflict and help those who assist them access and make generative choices about largely unconscious identity influences, essential narratives, cultural norms, and worldviews that shape perceptions and escalate conflict. We invited a group of experienced scholar-practitioners to a beautiful, purpose-built location at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, to explore movement and dialogue as they inform conflict dynamics and interventions. The results are chronicled in this book by those who attended the weeklong session. At the session and afterward, we explored a number of questions, first about movement and then dialogue, including:

- What insights and understandings of conflict complexities can be generated from body-based modes of inquiry?
- How can a body-based vocabulary and sensibility inform intervention and transformation of actual conflicts?
- What practical and theoretical links exist among dance, movement, and conflict transformation, and what research questions arise from these links?
- How might interdisciplinary research on dance and kinesthetic learning inform effective strategies for pedagogy and practice in intercultural conflict transformation?

In short, we wondered what dance and dancers could teach mediators and dialogue facilitators that they did not know through other avenues of learning. We also wondered what alchemy could arise in communing with one another and a master dancer: would old questions reform themselves or would new insights be revealed?

### **What Did We Learn?**

First, we realized that those traditionally outside the field of conflict intervention have a lot to share with those who work within it. Artists, community and international development workers, and others who respond to calls to forgotten or conflict-ravaged places know well the terrain of the body. They know it as the site of deprivation, contest, and battleground; they have also witnessed it as a place of healing. These people have given their time and energy to help, often at great personal cost. Their work has taken them to postgenocide Cambodia and war-ravaged Sierra Leone; it has also taken them to boardrooms where corporate and labor leaders, community members, and activists work with the help of conflict practitioners to handle difficult situations closer to home. We asked how work with a physical focus could be helpful in communities whose members seek outside accompaniment. This book contains the answers, inklings, and emerging possibilities that arose.

Second, we observed that scholar-practitioners in a range of practice contexts—from family to commercial to environmental/public policy to international—have the body in

common. All of us are blessed with unique, finely tuned physical instruments that guide, nudge, filter, and shape our attempts at resolution. All of us have physical habits—ways of paying attention—that influence points of view, perceptions of self and others, and reflexive responses to conflict dynamics. These are shaped by personal and cultural experiences; they are part of the reason different people can see the same scene and experience it differently. Physical habits of attention, when understood by counterparts in conflict, can help normalize differences, taking the focus away from enmities and putting it on the unchecked perceptions and assumptions that can divide people and escalate conflict. In the workshops, we found physical commonalities and shared experiences that gave us a way to exchange ideas and discover resonances far below the skin—deeper than if we had convened a series of “from the neck up” panel discussions.

Third, we saw that learning via the body yielded new vocabularies, awareness of nuances, and unnoticed intersections within and between us. Conflict at its most difficult is a series of knots, a complex interweaving of bodies needing locations that can support their weight in healthy and respectful ways. As Fisher, Ury, and Patton encouraged generating integrative interpersonal possibilities years ago in *Getting to Yes*,<sup>6</sup> now body-based work turns our attention to worlds within and how developing new neural pathways and physical habits can be useful in shifting conflicts. Engaging paradox and enacting transformative possibilities are both assisted by body-based work. Psychotherapists have long known this; when a therapist’s clients are unable to make a desired change in their lives, the therapist may encourage them to “act as if” they can do it. When we act in new ways, feelings can shift and possibilities emerge, facilitating the formation of new habits.

Here is a simple way to explore this. Choose someone about whom you may have had negative thoughts or judgments. Start treating the person with curiosity and kindness. Approach this individual with an open body posture, inviting his or her perspectives and ideas. Share your own. This is not to suggest acting in insincere or disingenuous ways; rather, let the thoughts or judgments that were present hang suspended for a time. After a short while, check in again with your feelings. To the extent you have been successful in following the tributaries of curiosity to the stream of another’s life, you will almost certainly have experienced—and expressed—empathy. It is much harder to maintain a negative emotional stance toward another once empathy is present. At the least, your perception of the person may have become more complex and more attuned to his or her humanity—and your own.

This has obvious implications for conflict. Emotions are impulses to act, but they may be braided with feelings of anger, revenge, or frustration. Engaging in actions that express curiosity and openness can create a range of possible responses to these impulses. No one feels secure all the time. We sometimes act from small, frightened, or threatened places. As we cultivate awareness from the inside out, the body becomes a reliable way to access feelings of security. Paradoxically, feelings of safety arise from our willingness to be vulnerable and to act from what we *do not* know about another. This is hugely important in conflict and goes directly against legal training that advises avoiding asking a question to which the answer is not already known.

## THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF RESOLUTION

Finally, we learned that dance and movement are very promising tools for intercultural conflict transformation. Veronique Schoeffel, one of the Saas-Fee participants and a leader in international development work from Switzerland, observes that “intercultural communication is about learning to dance to new music, or learning a new dance. Each of the dancers takes his or her dance for granted, knows it so well, and does it automatically. When we dance that well-known dance, the steps flow from the music, no conscious thinking act is needed, just the wonderful feeling in the body, the heart, and the soul. This experience of ease and of perfection gets disturbed if the partner dances a different dance.”

Partners always do different dances, often without awareness of the extent of value and worldview diversity that separates them from others. As Schoeffel reminds us, intercultural conflict transformation requires that we try “to understand each other across cultures, taking into account the visible and invisible parts of the cultures, as well as the context, the situation, and the personality of all actors.”

The Dancing at the Crossroads gathering gave us a safe space to experience the power of enacting positive change in physical and other ways. So many rich ideas emerged connecting practice theory and research that we committed to produce this book to share, broaden, and expand the conversation. Together, the authors show us how we can literally find new stances in conflicts as parties or third parties. Their work is critical yet inspiring; provocative and prospective. It covers multiple worlds, as is evident from the overview below.

### Overview

The perspectives and themes explored in this book illuminate how modes of engagement in conflict are filtered through complex systems of somatically braided cognition. As the authors transit the boundaries of diverse cultures and disciplines, they acknowledge and examine the body as a key resource for conflict transformation. They consider the role of movement in conflict dynamics, expose the limitations of omitting the body from understandings of conflict, explore ethical dimensions of embodied approaches, and propose key strategies for conflict intervention. The authors explore the genesis, generation, and escalation of conflict through physical geographies, asking who we are and how our physical selves participate as blocks and resources in shifting what is stuck. These interdisciplinary accounts capture the centrality of corporeal sensibilities in addressing challenging relational dynamics. The contributors have woven theory and practice from multiple disciplines, yielding a range of strategies to handle conflict as it gets “under our skin.” Theoretical frameworks, case studies, and hands-on interventions are offered for those working and living in complex conflict terrains.

This work invigorates connections between somatic knowledge and conflict transformation. Taken together, the chapters address this question: How does the nexus of movement and conflict inform and deepen understandings and generate new questions and insights about conflict geography and the choreography of resolution? Juxtaposing autobiographical and practice experiences with diverse cultural, historical, and social realities highlights both challenges and breakthroughs in this burgeoning area.

The chapters also reveal the importance of symbolic and nonliteral language in expressing and addressing the true toll of trauma on an individual or a community. Metaphor and ritual situate and reposition possibilities for exchange beyond fixed grids of bounded relations. Because webs of conflict always exist within multiple meaning and identity structures, they cannot be easily reduced to a formulaic analysis. Rather, many subaltern identities determine the routes conflict takes, and reconciliation may be contingent on how plural identities are accounted for and acknowledged. Perceptual, imaginative, and symbolic frameworks are needed for conveying intricacies of meaning and identity in conflict, and these necessarily rely on the body.

Several of the chapters refer specifically to the Dancing at the Crossroads studio sessions with the Canadian dancer Margie Gillis. These sessions sparked conversations about the body as a reflexive instrument in conflict and negotiation. Without even realizing it, we approach problems by repositioning ourselves or unconsciously shifting our stance in relation to a particular dynamic. We may clench our hands, tighten our jaws, or feel uneasiness in our stomachs as people “overstep our boundaries.” Since our bodies are vehicles for enactment and change and receptacles of lived experience, our somatic sensibilities attune us to feeling “off center” or “off-kilter.” One of the realizations arising from Saas-Fee was the pervasive influence of movement metaphors related to conflict.

Readers are accompanied down this less-trodden path with provocative insights that arose from the authors’ experiences at Saas-Fee of inhabiting the “space in between” and exploring shared spaces that were *not* contested. The authors examine how physical vocabularies offer currencies of meaning when verbal communication breaks down, generating real and imagined gaps.

In the first section of the book, *Why Dance?*, the authors examine neuroscientific and other theoretical underpinnings for this work. Beausoleil distills recent work on the brain with a bearing on conflict and movement. Ney and Humber explore the powerful roles of metaphors in shaping our perceptions, expectations, and behaviors in conflict, concluding that dance has heuristic, aesthetic, empirical, and moral value as a metaphor for conflict. Gillis shares contextual information and examples from her work and how it came to be related to conflict.

In the second section, *How Dance?*, the authors make links between field experiences and choreography. MacLeod describes work with former child combatants in Sierra Leone, and Honeyman and Parish analyze movement in theater-based work, connecting it to the broader theme. Acland reflects on the Saas-Fee workshop and the changes it brought to his thinking about dialogue and mediation.

The third section, *Teaching Dance*, features contributions by Alexander and LeBaron and Irvine about how movement and other experiential methodologies can be integrated into curriculum design and teaching and learning. Mason, Nan, and Van De Loe examine how this work relates to helping conflict workers deepen intuition. Gillis then provides a series of somatic approaches that can be applied in a range of conflict dynamics. Following this, the section titled *Dance and Resilience: Select International Examples* includes chapters by

## THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF RESOLUTION

Maloney and Corry on work from Ireland and by Shapiro-Phim, Burt and Dilts, and Herbert on Cambodian applications. Organizational contexts are considered in *Organizations: Finding Coherence*, where McCrea and Lang offer examples of how movement-based work informs their thinking about practice. Finally, a conclusion by Carrie MacLeod presents concluding thoughts, ethical questions, and avenues for future inquiry.

Throughout the book, we emphasize the accessibility and practicality of embodied interventions. Conflict will always be understood through traces of bodily inscriptions, and dance offers a nuanced approach for the translation of these markings. We hope that the book is a trail of bread crumbs that will lead conflict scholars and practitioners to build on it by examining physical and aesthetic dimensions of conflict with curiosity while acknowledging and respecting the potency of the body as a partner in change.