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We must make conflict resolution a universal life skill and core value!

I'd like to express our sympathy to our Vietnamese hosts and their communities for the recent damage and loss from the Typhoon Damrey in Nha Trang, Hue, Hoi An and Da Nang this past week. It was very severe, and we hope the reconstruction of your historical and beautiful cities will be swift and bring smiles to the residents faces again soon.

And to the non-Vietnamese participants: Welcome to Vietnam fellow mediators!

For those of you coming to Vietnam for the first time, you are in for a wonderful and exciting visit with engaging, confident and warm people who are always genuinely enthusiastic to meet foreigners and proudly introduce them to their homeland.

For those of you, like me, who have lived here or visited before, it's like a homecoming to a place that always has a special place in our hearts. 15 years ago, when I was offered work here by the U.N., my wife and I began reading everything we could get our hands on about Vietnam. We also met with an expat who had lived and worked here for some time. Stanley Karnow, the preeminent authority and author of "Vietnam", confidently told us: "Now you will become members of the Vietnam Club". "What do you mean?" we asked, confused. "Once any foreigner spends time living in Vietnam, they cannot help falling in love with this country and you become kin to all others who have lived there".

Well, we did fall in love with Vietnam and my 3 year contract got extended year by year to 7 years from 2002-2009. We have made many dear Vietnamese as well as expat friends here. And I hope that you too, in your short time will also discover some of the magic that make Vietnam such a special place to visit.

What a rich diversity of presenters and attendees we have here! Over 12 countries and scores of diverse fields- so many pioneers and distinguished and accomplished individuals.

The field of mediation has grown enormously over the past decades in the US, Europe, South America, Africa and now, Asia, is ready to take some big steps forward as well. We have seen mediation used to lower the incidents of school violence and bullying, bring together many different sides in contentious community and tribal disputes, resolve difficult international commercial conflicts, allow labor unions and enterprises to settle differences and avoid strikes and begin constructive dialogue between parties who have been enemies for generations...

New and improved methods of communication have also been adopted by mediators. Later today, you will be hearing from speakers talking about the exciting developments in online mediation truly globalizing the reach of mediation. This is all good news for those of us who believe in this movement. And make no mistake. Mediation is indeed a social movement as well as an art and a science.

In the US, I worked for several decades as a Federal Mediator for the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. It was a full-time government mediation job. Year after year, the employees of the agency rated the agency top for job satisfaction. And year after year, the agency ranked among the top US Government agencies with the oldest population! Mediators just didn't want to retire! And in the US, there is no mandatory retirement age.

All of you, of course, immediately can understand these statistics. Many of you are part time mediators. Many of you are recovering lawyers trying to shift more and more of your hours to mediation practice. Many of you are doing other jobs like HR management, training, coaching or and trying to bring mediation more and more into your work. Some of you are students trying to decide how mediation can fit into your career plan.

But, for some reason, mediation- the process, skills and values inherent in mediation and conflict resolution appeal to you. Why is that?

Why is it that mediation practice is so satisfying? Is it because it is basically peace-making? Healing? Connecting? Communicating? Positive? Uplifting? Client Empowering? Helping? All the above?

I've thought for a long time that there is a core belief for all mediators that brings people like us together into this field:

The belief that people are basically good and want to do the right thing. And that our role as mediators is to create the space/conditions for them to help them discover what that is.

So, when disputing parties assisted by mediators are finally able to understand each other's needs and interests, solutions begin to flow.

How fortunate we all are to be in a profession where we are helping to **connect** people on issues that matter to them! The process of mediation relies on the mediator assisting people to communicate, listen to each other, empathize with each other, and ultimately help each other. And it thus draws on people's better human instincts that often get buried under past indignities and wounds,

We are all armed with a very powerful tools or weapon...a weapon of mass connection.

One definition of a weapon includes anything used to gain a strategic, material or mental advantage over an adversary. In this case, the adversary is ignorance, fear and hate.

Yes, we want to arm the world with Weapons of mass connection and mass construction!

I don't believe we realize how powerful this tool is. But I've seen it at work over decades of my own experience and heard inspiring stories about the power of reconciliation and peace building from hundreds of my students over the past years.

But Mediation and conflict transformation is practiced in the real world and not everyone shares our belief in the transformational power of mediation.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed countless global examples where mediation has been ignored as an option to the detriment of the parties involved. These past years we have seen disturbing trends in global events that make even the most optimistic peacemaker question where the impact of forces for peace are being felt.

The Global Refugee Crisis:

Last year, my wife and I were on a one-week bicycle tour in Germany along the scenic Rhine River riding a rented tandem bicycle from Koblenz to Cologne. We didn't realize that Germany had recently opened its border to over a million Syrian refugees but found out how this impacted some residents.

As we stopped at a local Wirthaus for lunch, one of the other diners there smiled and greeted us and enquired in English where we were from and where we were headed on our bicycle. The sight of two Korean-American senior citizens riding a tandem bike along the Rhine bicycle path was often enough of a sight to elicit a comment or a smile. He said the German government was planning to bring several hundred Syrian refugees to his small town and had asked locals to make housing available and that the government would guarantee the rent. He was getting an apartment ready as requested. His only concern was his not being able to interview the potential renter who would be assigned to him from Syria. He and others in the same situation didn't like losing that control over his tenant, but was trying to be open minded about the assigned guests.

My first thought: Why hasn't the community facilitated a dialogue to explain the full situation of these refugees, the conditions they're fleeing, the options they have, how long they will be here? And when they begin to arrive, why not set up some mechanisms for ongoing social dialogue between the apartment owners and their new tenants?

Later, on another evening on the outskirts of Cologne, we checked into a hotel and walked to the small town's square to find a restaurant for dinner. Imagine our surprise when we saw hundreds of men, women and children dressed in Arab garb, women with burkas, men in loose fitting robes, sitting on park benches, drinking coffee in cafes, eating ice cream, children running around playing and shouting in Arabic. Very few local Germans were to be seen anywhere on the main square. We later found them on side streets in their favorite taverns and pubs. Some of them were not so happy about being chased out of their parks and cafes on the main street. When we asked our hotel clerk why, so many foreigners were in town, he replied that they were all there for extended stays because someone in their family was at the well-known hospital in town and that these were rich medical tourists. When I asked about the local townspeople's reaction to their large presence, he diplomatically shrugged his shoulders and said "it is what it is. We just have to get used to it".

My first thought: Why hasn't the mayor called a meeting to facilitate a dialogue between the edgy townspeople and the hospital officials and some of the Middle Eastern medical tourism operators to get a better understanding about each other's expectations?

These two examples wouldn't make headlines anywhere, but they reveal the possibilities for tensions that might build in a community due to a sudden need for some cross-cultural understanding between two very different cultures. Yet, Germany has a history of immigrant workers living in the country since the end of the WWII. A considerable number of Turkish residents have lived there for several generations now, and clashes between skinheads and immigrants have ebbed and flowed over the years and many cultural understanding programs, political organizations and other groups as well as departments have been set up to deal with social needs of the immigrant communities. Nevertheless, because of the increasing visibility of refugees, the right wing political party was able to garner some seats in the German Parliament during the last election appealing to growing anti-immigrant/refugee sentiment in the community. Germany and Sweden have taken a disproportionate share of the recent refugees since 2015 and are straining to accommodate them.

The UN reports that increasing armed conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have led to the highest level of refugees since World War II. 65 million forcibly displaced persons fleeing for their lives with just the clothes on their backs. A third of them are children under 18. 55% are from just 3 countries: Syria 5.5 million, Afghanistan 2.4 million and South Sudan 1.4 million.

And while the needs of refugees grow, so too has the backlash against these refugees in the countries they are fleeing to. Days before the UK voted to leave the EU in its close Brexit vote, Nigel Farage unveiled his inciteful poster showing refugees crossing the border from Croatia to Slovenia, with the slogan: “Breaking point: the EU has failed us all.”

A day after the fatal shooting attack on the gay Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, Donald Trump shamelessly used the tragedy to declare: “We must stop the tremendous flow of Syrian refugees into the United States — we don’t know who they are, they have no documentation and we don’t know what they’re planning.”

But such self-serving political tweets serve to polarize those citizens wanting to embrace realities of an increasingly global existence and those seeking security from the mayhem through isolationism and nationalism.

In addition to wars causing forcing the refugee crisis, horrific random acts of terrorism against civilians in major cities throughout the world, (Berlin, London, Las Vegas, NYC, Nice, Barcelona) are also one of the key factors leading to increasing fears of “outsiders” and a desire to retreat to a safer, smaller less multicultural world. But the same longing in insecure voters in England, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Denmark also are showing themselves with resulting far right nationalistic anti-immigration politicians gaining seats in government elections.

A Global Battle of Ideas

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s founder speaking at a Harvard graduation characterized the political polarization reflected in elections in the U.S., England, Germany, France, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands and many other countries as a battle of ideas, not a battle of religions or nations.

Within every country, within every religion, within every ethnic group, within every community and tribe there are those who yearn for more freedom, flow of ideas, connectiveness to others around the world, flow of trade and travel and exchange of education and knowledge.

And within the same country, religion, ethnic group, community and tribe there are people who find more security and comfort with a government that is more authoritarian, isolationist, nationalistic more homogeneous, slower to embrace change from the traditional ways.

As mediators, we know better than to force our perspectives on others, but we do know how to help these two sets of people to communicate. In fact, that is our special expertise and social responsibility.

Mediation gives us a special filter through which to interpret these different disturbing global events.

When I observe the threats and name calling thrown between the president of the United States and the president of North Korea, I find myself shouting at the TV: No, no, no, you stupid idiots! Stop, acting like schoolyard bullies! Just ask each other what it is that’s important. Discover each other’s interests! Find mutual interest! Use Active Listening! Use open-ended questions! Try a little Track two diplomacy, find a mediator.

It’s so simple! Just get a mediator!

But this is serious. Even though a bill has been introduced to force the president to get the approval of congress before dropping a nuclear weapon on North Korea, Trump currently has the power to send a nuclear bomb to North Korea without consulting Congress if, in his mind, he feels it’s in the national

interest to do so. If, in his mind, Trump considers North Korea even **building** an intercontinental missile a sufficient threat to US security, he could theoretically drop a bomb on Pyongyang.

Kim Jong Un and North Korea have been in a siege mentality ever since President Bush targeted North Korea as one of the 3 countries in the “Axis of Evil” along with Iraq and Iran. After that pronouncement, US military role in Iraq and their hand in attempting to destabilizing Iran convinces North Korea that without nuclear capability, they too would suffer the same fate.

People like us look at these actions and can’t understand why our leaders just can’t do the logical, rational thing.

Mediation and skilled conflict resolution is so self-evident the path to take to resolve tensions in our communities, and globally. Why is it being ignored? What’s needed?

Mediation is boxed in, it’s viewed simply as a tool to pull out when all else fails. The problem with the state of mediation is that it is still considered a specialization to be used only in certain situations.

What can we do to raise mediation’s visibility, so it will be seen a **universal life skill** and **core value**?

If I were president, I would mandate compulsory courses in communication and conflict negotiations for all elementary, middle and high schools in my country. I would demand that all children pass courses in cross cultural communication and respect for other cultures before they could graduate and go to college.

Do you think that would have an impact on who the next generation elected to presidency? Or how they might vote on gun control or military spending vs education? Or global warming issues? Or mass transit? Or women’s empowerment? Or weighing priorities about whether to allocate tax dollars to job development, decent work, education, ending homelessness vs cutting taxes for the rich and buying more military hardware and sending soldiers to more countries?

If I were Warren Buffet or Bill Gates, I would spend billions of dollars to ensure that every school in the world had the resources to set up a student peer mediation program to train kids how to mediate conflict among their school mates properly. And make sure the clubs had enough money to spring for a pizza party once a month to keep them happy!

I would buy news media outlets to tell all the stories to inspire and build community rather than spread fear and anger.

Because the world is much more than Donald’s tweets or another mass shooting or suicide bombing or hopeless people running over innocent people.

But I’m not Bill Gates, Donald Trump or Warren Buffet. So, we need other strategies to give the next generation a decent chance.

We must make mediation a universal life skill and core value!

When I speak of mediation in this context, I am referring to all the many conflict resolution skills we practice: like all the many mediation forms, active listening, multi-party group facilitation, interest-based negotiations, deep listening, victim-offender reconciliation, open space facilitation, appreciative inquiry techniques...the list goes on and on. The common denominator, however, is that it all leads to constructive communication and peaceful problem solving and community building.

We must stop thinking of mediation as simply a set of soft skills to use in only certain situations at the workplace or for commercial disputes!

We have to stop thinking of mediation as simply another profession to earn us money like being a businessman, lawyer or cpa. Being a mediator and knowing the skills we have shoulders us with a higher responsibility to share what we know to improve society.

We need to stop waiting for someone else to come up with a great idea. It all starts with us.

Here are just two examples that push forward the social agenda to make mediation evolve into a universal life skill and core value:

Example #1: Promote universal school peer mediation in all schools around the world

Daniel and Karl Gusner are our godchildren in Los Angeles. We are close to both and have known them since they were babies. Both were trained as peer mediators starting in elementary school. They called them Conflict Managers. Today they are both young men in their 30's and both noticeably good listeners. They are both very thoughtful, respectful and ask genuine questions that can get me talking about myself and my thoughts for hours before I catch myself and begin to return the favor! It's rare to find two brothers who both have such character.

I'm convinced that mediation training gave them those skills early and that it just became part of their natural character and value system.

Peer mediation has been widely practiced for over 25 years in U.S. schools now. Wherever the program has been implemented there has been a sharp decline in fighting, gang violence and bullying, and although I haven't seen any studies on the subject, I'm certain the students who were trained and practiced mediation in the schoolyards graduated with valuable life skills and values that gave them a big boost in emotional intelligence and problem solving that is helping them in their adult lives.

Volunteer to teach mediation at a school or community center to youth.

All of us can make time to volunteer us to teach young people the right values and methods for resolving conflict. WE can volunteer to mentor young peer mediators at local schools or youth organizations. We can chip in some money for refreshments for youth mediator clubs. And we can teach young people to mentor each other to spread the practice and values of mediation.

Example #2: Put yourself in a new situation to learn new skills and be inspired by others. Rotary Peace Center.

Every 6 months for the past 10 years, I've been invited to teach peace skills to a class of 25 mid-career conflict resolution practitioners from on average 17 countries at the Rotary Peace Center in Bangkok. My week is one of 11 where other experts from around the world are invited to lecture about conflict theory, women's role in peace making, sustainable peace strategies, post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, etc.

Rotary Peace Fellows are refugee social workers from Africa, Timor Leste. Some are police officers from Philadelphia or Thailand or Australia, a retired general from the Sri Lankan Army who is now a peace builder with former Tamil Tiger rebels. Fellows from UN organizations, Vietnamese NGOs, a Muslim cleric and Christian minister from Nigeria, a Palestinian mediator, and Israeli youth organizer, and Afghanistan school official or a Nepalese mediator.

Every 6 months I eagerly look forward to meeting a new crop of fellows and learning about their work all over the world. Their stories and work inspire me, and they are so hungry for the skills we work with every day that connect people, lower tensions, build community, and help us understand cross cultural communication.

Don't fool yourself. Mediation is not neutral. The process itself is full of implicit principles and valuable life lessons. Without even realizing it, we mediators are promoting the following principles:

- That everyone's views should be heard and respected
- That listening respectfully to someone else makes them more likely to listen to you.
- That civilized discourse leads to peaceful problem solving.
- That understanding other perspectives expands your ability and range for finding richer solutions.
- That a win-win solution is often possible through sharing of ideas.

We possess powerful tools that can change the world.

I hope these examples stimulate you to think about how to use your priceless tools and minds to commit yourselves to finding ways to making the world a better place.

And you know what? You couldn't be in a better place than here in Danang at the APMF meeting where the most creative, talented and diverse mediators and practitioners from more than 12 countries in the Pacific Rim have all gathered. Your presenters have all spent hours sweating and working on their presentations to come up with and focus their best ideas to offer all of us. And they could not have found more eager participants waiting to be stimulated and inspired to learn about innovative approaches and techniques for amplifying their work.

So, enjoy the fellowship of our special community and learn from the many speakers and workshops the next three days, and take the opportunity to imagine how much more we, as a mediator community, can do to make our impact felt in our communities, our countries and our world.

And challenge yourselves to find ways to advance our strategic mediator goal to make conflict resolution a universal life skill and core value for future generations!