

2013

When spider webs unite

They can tie up a lion

A treasure trove of ideas and exercises for spinning a web of enhanced relationships



Collaboration between
Centre for the Study of Violence & Reconciliation
and
Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights



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Inspiration for the entire learning series was drawn from a collaboration with Michelle Parlevliet who worked with Ghalib Galant and Undine Whande in the late 1990s/early 2000s in South African and continental human rights institutions and later in the context of international development practitioners encountering the nexus between Human Rights and Conflict Transformation as a key fault line to consider in their work. Michelle Parlevliet and Undine Whande facilitated one inaugural workshop on 'Facilitation Skills for Human Rights Practitioners' that contributed to the foundation of this project, process and products.

This publication brings together key insights from the Learning Series and a compilation of the exercises used during the various sessions. We would like to acknowledge that these exercises were based on a 20-year journey of learning of the facilitators, straddling many people and many sources. We strive to acknowledge all places and persons through whom we have encountered the various exercises and concepts. Many (re)sources in the conflict transformation field are (thankfully) open source and shared widely. Where we have not acknowledged original or failed to identify the correct origins, or have attributed something to later co-creators, this is entirely our making and we apologise, having done our best to acknowledge and valuing all ancestral lineages in this professional field.

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The Learning Series

Between 2011 and 2013 the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (ZA) and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (Zim) collaborated to conceive and implement a learning series, entitled “*Spinning the Web: Exploring the Nexus between Human Rights and Conflict Transformation*”. This was born out of the identified need for human rights activists and lawyers to develop or deepen their facilitation skills to meet the needs of a changing socio-political environment. There was also a benefit to exploring the intersection between the fields of conflict transformation/peacebuilding and human rights with a view to seeing how they could complement each other in the field. In doing so, it was hoped:

- 1) To contribute to broadening the skills base of practitioners to include facilitative and conversational approaches for legal practitioners
- 2) And to deepen the analytical and intervention capacity of practitioners within ZLHR and HR oriented partners to explore the value of a conflict transformation lens in addition to a human rights lens;
- 3) To make room for exploring the value of human rights based knowledge and practices for peace practitioners; and

- 4) To co-create and strengthen webs of relationships within and among partner organisations and communities as a way of fostering resilience, social cohesion and contextually wise and appropriate engagement for nonviolence and peace, based on a human rights ethos.

The objectives of the Learning Series were that participants would:

- 1) Have a heightened appreciation for the interplay and nexus between human rights and conflict transformation;
- 2) Acquire and deepen analytical and facilitation skills through a conflict transformation lens;
- 3) Understand and explore the application of the approach(es) and skills within their own context;
- 4) Explore nonviolence and nonviolent strategies for social transformation and cohesion
- 5) Explore and deepen skills and approaches to community participation and mobilisation

About the Treasure Trove

This Treasure Trove contains a selection of the important substantive concepts and theoretical underpinnings of the Learning Series. It also contains some of the more important exercises done over the course of the Learning Series.

The Treasure Trove is not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, it is offered as a collection of materials which we hope will be useful in your own work. The content pieces for instance may be used as information sheets or as the basis for inputs on those topics.

The exercises are offered with detailed instructions on how they may be run. They have been drawn from our own experience as facilitators working at the nexus of human rights and conflict transformation. There may also be other ways that are more appropriate in the contexts that you work. Feedback on what works and what could be changed would be greatly appreciated. In that way these exercises might remain living and evolving within different contexts and with different audiences in mind.

Spinning Webs of Relationships

In Proverbs 6:6 the reader is admonished to consider the industriousness of the ant as a life lesson for humans - “Go to the ant... consider her ways and be wise”.

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In this Learning Series, we turned to another wise creature, the spider, for inspiration on how social transformation take place.

Based on the work of theorist John Paul Lederach, we explored how creating Critical Yeast rather than Critical Mass might transform a situation. In other words, what might a few, on the surface unrelated, individuals inspired by a common objective and held together in a web or network of relationships to each other achieve?

The spider-mind acquires a faculty of memory and, with it, a singular skill of analysis and synthesis, taking apart and putting together in different relations the meshes of its trap. Man had in the beginning no power of analysis or synthesis approaching that of the spider, or even of the honey-bee; but he had acute sensibility to the higher forces.

(Henry Brooks Adams)

On Space: Life in the Web – A Summaryⁱ

“How do we build a strategic structure of connections in an unpredictable environment, a structure that understands and adapts continuously to the contours of a dynamic social geography and can find the attachment points that will make the process stick?”

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John Paul Lederachⁱⁱ in his book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005) develops a framework for conflict resolution and peace building by transferring his observations of the behaviour of spiders. The chapter *On Space* deals with the importance of relationships for social change.

The key question he asks is “*What centre holds things together?*” In terms of the social world this could be the family, faith community, a chosen family or friendship group, in short: social relations.

“(…) peacebuilding understands that relationships create and emanate social energy and are places to which energy returns for a sense of purpose and direction.” (2005: 75)

Lederach states that crucial for building sustainable justice and peace are the quality and nature of peoples’ relationships. The goal is always to build a strong web like the spider does, to build strong relationships that survive external shocks.

So if one wants to observe social change, analyse it and learn how to bring it about, one has to look closer into the social fabric of a society, relationships between people and relational spaces, meaning the social environment. This requires careful observation, because most of the processes are invisible. It also requires patience and perseverance, because these processes are dynamic and the web keeps changing constantly.

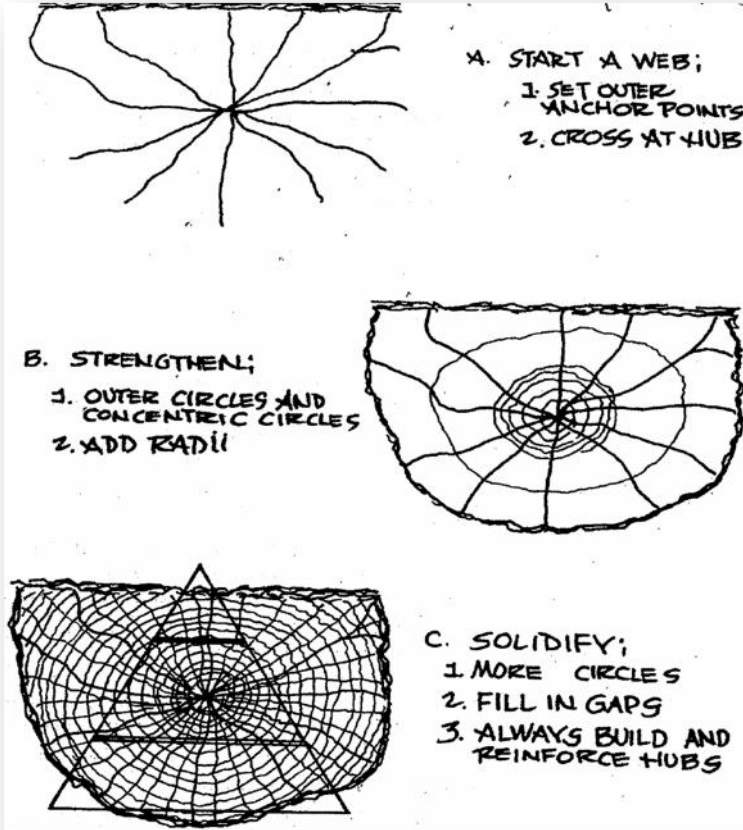
“Spiders must think strategically about space, how to cover it and how to create cross-linkages that stitch locations together into a net. And they must do this time and again, always at considerable risk and vulnerability to themselves.” (2005: 81)

Space is of crucial importance. It is essential to understand the environment one moves in. Only then can one make use of the potential a given space and its web offer. Peace builders can try to create cross-linkages between people or rather create spaces where those cross-linkages can develop. Lederach states that it is not about providing the solution to a conflict, but about creating a platform where these solutions might be created.

“Peacebuilding can learn from spiders that web making is the art of creating platforms to generate creative responses more than creating the solution itself.” (2005: 85)

The art of know-who, a phrase coined by Lederach, describes those involved in conflict resolution as asking *who* before *how*. That means that it is not about finding the solution to a problem oneself, but to ask other people who might have an idea first.

At the end of the chapter, Lederach provides the 3 steps for building constructive social change.



Understand the Social Geography

Like the spider, peace builders too have to find strategic anchor points for a strong web. Lederach underlines that the challenge lies in connecting people who are not necessarily like-minded and like-situated in the context. One must stop thinking dualistic in groups that work against each other or try to convince each other. It is about creating spaces to bring all the different ideas and people together.

Always Think Intersections

“A relationship-centric approach must see spaces of intersection, both those that exist, and those that can be created.” (2005: 85)

One must watch for existing hubs where the cross-linking relational spaces connect the not-like-minded and not-like-situated or create them. Key to lasting peace are relational centers that hold, so it is all about creating and sustaining these connections.

Be Smart Flexible

“The permanence of change requires the permanence of creative adaption.” (2005: 85)

Like the spider adapts to its environment and creates the web over and over again the challenge in peacebuilding also lies in continuously adapting to new situations. A solution that was adequate yesterday might not be in the future. The same applies for different contexts. What works in one community, might not work in the next one.

The bigger picture

It is crucial not to forget the bigger picture, to keep observing what is happening in different spaces. If we keep focussing on one problem, group, person we might miss the possibility of innovation which leads to the change we want to bring about.

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Lederach' s conclusion in a nutshell is to *“think, feel and follow relationships.”* (2005: 86)



On Mass and Movement: The Theory of the Critical Yeast – A Summaryⁱⁱⁱ

“The web approach does not think in terms of us versus them, but rather about the nature of the change sought and how multiple sets of interdependent processes will link people and places to move the whole of the system toward those changes.” (2005:88)

As in the chapter on Space, Lederach uses his observations from the everyday life to describe a social phenomenon. In this chapter it is about the critical yeast as opposed to the idea of the critical mass. Lederach points out how it is of minor importance if there is many people (a critical mass) supporting a social movement or an idea for it to be successful, but that what weighs heavier are some strategically relevant people (critical yeast).

Lederach criticizes the recipe for change that has been used so far. According to that the first step for a social movement is to raise awareness, followed by promoting action to attract as many people as possible. The last step would be to develop some form of action, to actually build something. This third part seems to be the critical one in which most movements fail. As mentioned in the previous chapter, change requires linkages and coordination across not-like-

mindful and not-like-situated spaces. Multiple processes on different levels are happening at the same time. It is not a unilinear process, or a one-fits-it-all sequence that applies in every case, meaning there is no recipe for change.

“In settings of protracted conflict and violence, movement away from fear, division, and violence toward new modalities of interaction requires awareness, action, and broad processes of change.” (2005:89)

Lederach admits that numbers do matter, but what matters more is the invisible behind the numbers. A danger when focusing on the pure numbers might be that the quality of actions loses. The question one should ask is the following:

“Who, though not like-minded or like-situated in the context of conflict, would have the capacity, if they were mixed and held together, to make other things grow exponentially, beyond their numbers?” (2005:91)

The metaphor stems from observing someone baking bread. You will need a lot of flour for baking bread. But to get tasty bread other ingredients are needed. The crucial ingredient which makes the others rise and stick together is the yeast. Only yeast can make the rest grow. For the yeast to fulfill its role some preparation is needed. The yeast needs to come into the process slowly in a safe, warm and comfortable place. This can be translated into assumptions about social movements. It is critical to find what Lederach calls the *social yeast*.

Supposedly you need to identify strategically relevant people. Those people will have the potential to bring about change

but they are not able to do that by themselves. Like the yeast, they will need a comfortable and safe environment to be able to work together, especially if they are not-like-minded, as mentioned above.

To be constant, the movement needs the capacity to be resilient like yeast is. Furthermore, multitasking is required. Many processes are going on at the same time, interdependent from each other.

What is required from outside of the baking bowl, i.e. outside the movement is support for ongoing processes. It is important to keep in mind though, that the ability to sustain the process lies within the existing resources and connections. Solutions cannot be imposed from outside but must develop from within the web.

“In the simplest terms, to be strategic requires that we create something behind what exists from what is available but has exponential potential. In reference to social change, it means we must develop a capacity to recognize and build the locus of potential for change.” (2005: 101)

In the second part of the chapter, Lederach tries to define the work of peace builders. He redefines the term mediation, moving away from the idea of a single person being the mediator, towards a network that helps institutions promote mediatory behavior. Different people and activities are required to find solutions to complex conflicts. One task for a peace-builder in that sense is

“(…) finding spaces of natural and necessary cross-community interaction (…)” (2005:96)

That can mean to examine where there are spaces people necessarily interact in their daily life even though in the conflict they belong to different groups and start from these spaces.

To draw back on the web approach, Lederach invites everyone to think broadly and not focus on political negotiations exclusively.

“I am not suggesting that political negotiation is not necessary. A web approach, however, does argue that political negotiation is not the primary, nor the exclusive measure of the mediatory capacity of a conflict-ridden society to promote the broader change processes that must take place. Sustained change, this approach posits, lies with the capacity to mobilize the web.” (2005:97)

One should shift the focus from getting an outcome quickly towards maintaining the quality of platforms over time.

“The place where the critical mass and the critical yeast meet in

Four Practices of the peacebuilder

- 1) Evolving Relationships - holding rapport
- 2) Practicing Paradoxical Curiosity - suspending judgement
- 3) Providing Space for the Creative Act - a space so imagination can give birth to the unexpected
- 4) Being willing to take Risks - explore beyond what I know and come continuously from a place of not knowing

reference to social change is not in the number of people involved but rather in creating the quality of the platform that makes exponential growth strong and possible, and then in finding ways to sustain that platform.” (2005:93)



The Task of Unknowing

Much of working in the way proposed by John Paul Lederach requires an 'unlearning' of traditional ways of working. It involves seeing in new ways, and making connections in new ways:

Letting go

- In Buddhism, knowledge is regarded as an obstacle to understanding, like a block of ice that obstructs water from flowing. It is said that if we take one thing to be the truth and cling to it, even if truth itself comes in person to knock at our door, we won't open it. For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them.

• *Thich Nhat Hanh, Being Peace*

Systemic Analysis

- **Observe Observe Observe:** suspend knowing, suspend judgement, avoid interpretation, stay with facts
- observe outer process and inner responses of the practitioner (journaling) in order to see possibilities for engaging and impact (awareness of resonance points in the system and self)
- locate a core set of patterns and dynamics that generate the complexity (finding simplicity/essence on the other side)

Systemic Analysis & Presencing Futures

- 1) **Observe Observe Observe: what is?**
- 2) **Observe further:** what is between things? what is invisible? what is moving? what is birthing? what is dying in the situation? what patterns are emerging? how are they dynamically evolving? what are my surprises?
- 3) **Finding Essence:** silence, retreat and allow inner knowing to emerge - using right brain artistic means: draw, paint, sculpt the situation - working with emerging images to get to the core (essence) of what can only I/we offer only here only right now?
- 4) **Strengthening collective intelligence and energy:** creativity and co-creating the future - prototyping ideas and strengthening the new

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Social systems are living systems

- What makes any social-living system work is not how cleverly it is conceived and mapped but how wisely and mutually it is understood and valued, enabling those who have and take leadership to see and work with what is there and what is possible, and with each other. (D Reeler, CDRA)

Working with emergence:

- If emergence and complexity are to be authentically worked with, then we need facilitative leadership, open and equalising communication systems and sufficient investment in collaborative learning and thinking processes (conversations, actually).
- A sufficient level of trust and trustworthiness needs to be cultivated. Then networks will emerge and self-organise in healthy and more open ways (they do already but get obstructed by instrumentalists). (D. Reeler, CDRA)

Egg-celent: An Egg-sploration in Collaboration^{iv}

The purpose of this exercise is to build a sense of community among participants by getting them to work together around a single objective. The exercise also explores the concepts of “protection” and “security”.

For this exercise you will need 1 uncooked egg per group as well as assorted materials for the groups to work with. Each group should get a similar set of materials (including: straws, paper clips, paper or card, masking tape etc.)

Process

Divide the participants into groups of equal size. Hand out a set of materials to each group.

Tell the groups that they have to construct a vessel, using the materials provided, that will ensure that a raw egg dropped into it does not break. ***(If you give the groups an egg, they often attempt to insulate it with the materials; without the egg, the focus is on building a receptacle)***

If you are in an environment that is conducive to it, allow groups to augment their standard materials with bits of the natural environment – without destroying the surroundings of course.

Give the groups about 10 minutes to plan and about 15 minutes to build their construction.

Observe the dynamics in the various groups: who takes the lead? Whose suggestions are followed or ignored? What roles do people assume in the group? Etc.

Call time.

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Debrief

Test the resilience of the structures by dropping an egg into the structure from a consistent height. Have the whole group go from structure to structure as they are being tested.

Once you have tested the structure, have the group explain their reasons for making the design choices they made.

Reconvene in plenary and explore how the various groups organised themselves to deliver on the task.

Also draw the lessons from the design elements that were used in making the structures.

Reflect on the relative success of the structures to do the task required. What does that reveal about notions of resilience, protection and security?



The River of My Life^v

In this exercise, participants reflect on, depict and share their Life's journey. Participants discover similarities and commonality in a common humanity through their life experiences.

For this exercise you will need paper (half a sheet of flipchart paper or similar per person), some pens, crayons and/or pastels for drawing. Prepare your own drawing on a flipchart to present to the group.

Process:

Hand out sheets of paper and multi-coloured pens to the participants.

Explain that the first part of the exercise is an individual one, and that they will get to share their drawings in small groups later.

Using your own prepared drawing as a reference, ask the participants to draw their Life as a river, showing the significant interactions and events looking back that they feel have shaped who they are at present. Remind participants that they are free to choose what to put on their drawing and that they will be sharing their drawing and their story in small groups.



(About 10mins)

Now group the participants in groups of 4. Each person has about 5 minutes to share with the rest of the group their story and to walk the group through their River. In sharing they should not only indicate what the significant event or interaction was, but also why they feel it was significant and helped shape who they are today.

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(20-25mins)

When everyone in the groups has shared, reconvene in the plenary group.

Debrief

(15mins)

Invite participants to share what the experience was like for them.

Caution them to respect the confidentiality of the small group; they may share their own story if they like, but not that of another member of the small group (unless they have their permission)

- ✚ What did it feel like to share your story with others?
- ✚ What did it feel like to listen to the other stories?
- ✚ What insights came to you out of the story?
- ✚ What is the value of an exercise such as this?

We are bound together by a common
humanity

An Elemental Analysis: Fire, Water, Air, Earth (FAWE)^{vi}

In looking at the situation, it may be useful also to look at “non-technical” aspects of the situation for a different perspective and to examine the underlying relationships between seemingly unrelated actors and events. Utilising the 4 elements, this approach looks for connections between seemingly unconnected matters.

Divide the participants into 4 groups. Each group takes one of the elements and answers the questions below in relation to their context. Have the groups write down their responses on post-it sticky notes.





Fire

- What is sparking
- What has burnt to ash?
- What embers are still hot but not aflame?



Air

- What is clear?
- What is hazy or fuzzy?



Water

- What is flowing freely?
- What is blocked?
- Where has the flow gone underground?



Earth

- What is solid?
- What is brittle?

On a wall, on a prepared matrix, place the post-it notes in the appropriate place:

Fire	Air	Water	Earth
What is sparking?	What is clear?	What is flowing freely?	What is solid?
What has burnt to ash?	What is hazy or fuzzy?	What is blocked?	What is brittle
<i>What embers are still hot but are not aflame</i>		<i>Where has the flow gone underground?</i>	

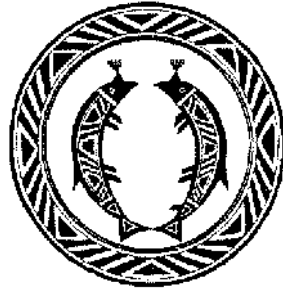
Debrief

In plenary look at what trends emerge from the completed matrix.

- Is there a correlation between what is sparking and what is clear?
- Is what is solid also blocking the energy?
- Has the flow of energy gone dormant for something that is also brittle?

Looking at what emerges can indicate where energy needs to be placed to unblock a situation or where something needs encouragement to fan the flames that are already sparking. Likewise, the analysis can identify what is already working well in the situation (as opposed to looking only at what is problematic). These solid or clear or flowing aspects would require nurturing, but not necessarily additional resources which could be better used elsewhere.

Surfacing and deepening your question – a mirroring exercise for problem-solving^{vii}



Often when we face a difficult issue or problem we look immediately for answers. Yet just as often a satisfactory answer is not easily available because the problem is not well defined. The right answer can only come from the right question. One approach, with the help of colleagues or peers, as encapsulated in the exercise below, is to rephrase the problem or issue as a question and then to work with the experience which gave rise to the problem. Through this peer-reflection process we can improve the question, to clarify the problem or issue. The answer may become more apparent but if not, it might be worthwhile, now that there is a better question, to ask “what will I do next towards finding the answer?”

This process is quintessentially developmental, seeking a better question and taking this question forward another step, without a rush to an answer, but still with forward movement. It can be used in many settings, from an informal problem-solving situation or in a more formal workshop.

With a colleague or group of colleagues or peers:

- a) Spend a few minutes, individually, thinking about a problem or issue that needs to be resolved. Rephrase this as a question.
- b) Now recall, as vividly as possible, an experience that gave rise to the problem or issue or question... make some notes.
- c) With your colleague or group, begin with one person as the teller and the other(s) as the listener(s). State the question and describe any feelings that accompany it. Then describe, as a vivid story, the experience that gave rise to the question... the sequence, what was said, the people, the place, the mood, how you felt after. Those listening can gently prompt for more detail. Then restate the question.
- d) After a pause to collect their thoughts, the listeners should, one by one, reflect back what they thought was happening, what struck them as important or interesting. They could give an image or word picture that characterises the situation. They should finish by gently commenting on the question.
- e) After a short pause to think, the teller should restate or reformulate the question, hopefully an improved question, and then say what the next steps he or she will take towards resolving it.

In a workshop situation each participant could get a turn as a teller. This can be a very powerful exercise for surfacing the

questions that participants come with to a course or organisational process.

Endnotes

ⁱ Summary written by Fritzi Groll

ⁱⁱ John Paul Lederach is Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University Of Notre Dame. He has written extensively on Conflict Resolution and mediation. He has been involved in various peace processes internationally, e.g. in Somalia, Northern Ireland, Colombia, Nepal.

ⁱⁱⁱ Summary written by Fritzi Groll

^{iv} An exercise drawn from the **Alternatives to Violence Project** (AVP), an international network of individuals and organisations facilitating understanding of violence and promoting nonviolence. See www.avpinternational.org

^v An exercise drawn from the **Alternatives to Violence Project** (AVP), an international network of individuals and organisations facilitating understanding of violence and promoting nonviolence. See www.avpinternational.org

^{vi} Exercise developed by Ghalib Galant and Undine Whande

^{vii} Exercise taken from **the Barefoot Guide**, a collaborative guide for development practitioners. See www.barefootguide.org