

# EMBODY-ING CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

An integrative approach to applying physical awareness and basic improvisational skills to the disciplines of conflict resolution and collaborative change.

BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC, AND ULLA GLAESSER, LLM

Life - with all the conflict and change it brings - is a process of improvisation. If the one reliable constant in life is change, then life is a constant practice in reconciling conflict. Our challenge is to transform the experience of conflict into an opportunity for constructive change and growth. If freedom is operating from choice, then there is no foolproof formula to follow. The joke is that as soon as you think you've figured out all the answers, the questions change.

While we can acknowledge and appreciate this intellectually, how does it play out in our lives? What, for example, happens when I am faced with changes to which I feel profound and righteous resistance? What happens when I cannot control the outcome by force of will or reason? What happens when I am blindsided and have no power to respond effectively? What happens when the changes bring irreparable damage or feel totally unfair? What happens when I feel like a victim of the change and not at cause in choosing my own life course? What about the "simple" problem of decision-making in the context of complexity?

The courses that we offer, together and individually, for embodied practices in conflict resolution and collaboration are an expression of our personal journeys. We are both professionally qualified and experienced lawyers and mediators. We share a deep love of dance. We also share experience in bridging differences related to cultural, linguistic or professional barriers. We both appreciate how essential it is to honor a person's story - their narrative - in support of understanding, growth, and healing.

In offering **EMBODY-ING CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION**, we choose not to pose as experts in negotiation, mediation, somatic learning, or organizational development. Instead, we prefer to guide a journey for learning and connection to the participants' own inner experience and insight.

What follows is a co-mingling of reflections about our approach and who we are. Beata begins by describing why embodied learning is so important to her...which is parallel to Ulla's experience. Next we offer a brief overview of our approach. Finally, we each tell our own story of how we got here, to devoting our energy and attention to understand and create shifts in conflict and collaboration dynamics.

## WHY INTEGRATE AWARENESS AND INVOLVEMENT OF THE BODY?

No learning is really yours until it is in your body. This idea is powerfully articulated and substantiated in the handbook for implementing the "Five Disciplines" in learning organizations: *An Unused Intelligence: Physical Thinking for the 21st Century*, by Andy Bryner and Dawna Markova, Ph.D. They write:

*You need to have a hologram for a reference point, and this occurs only with a cellular experience. When people ask, 'How do we do these ideas?' they are asking for a kinesthetic component to their learning. Thus to assimilate concepts completely so we can utilize them as needed, we must be able to access the physical intelligence that corresponds to those ideas.*



**COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE**

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This message has mostly not yet reached or been integrated by those professionals, predominantly lawyers, who teach and practice conflict resolution.

For the most part, conflict resolution is taught and even experienced as a mind-based discipline. In learning to negotiate and resolve conflict from a rational and supposedly "win-win" perspective we learn to recognize our patterned responses of "fight, flight or freeze" and how to strategize for problem solving. For example, *Getting to Yes*, the book which has become the primer for all interest-based approaches to negotiation and mediation, is all about discerning and reconciling needs and interests for mutual gains. Articulating, discerning, strategizing, etc. are all cognitive functions. This cognitive approach to learning is also completely consistent with the cultural and practical contexts in which negotiation and mediation are applied. In law or business, for example, what role do feelings and intuition have in convincing your opponent of the rightness of your argument?

There is tremendous value in gaining cognitive fluency in the principles and mechanics of negotiating and resolving conflict for mutual gain. But cognitive fluency must become integrated into our being if we strive for excellence and integrity in our lives. In real life we bring our whole selves to conflict situations, not just our rational capacity. While we cannot help but bring our feelings, our bodies and our innate intuition and wisdom, for the most part we shut them out of the process in the belief that they just mess things up. I have become increasingly curious about ways to honor what I learn and know while also honoring the rest of my experience, especially in difficult situations. Indeed, I believe that this is a key to genuine effectiveness and authentic being.

I notice that what I have learned - the cognitive knowledge I have for negotiation, conflict resolution or collaboration - is not always my first or most natural response when I am in the thick of things. While I know well how to problem solve, for example, the rest of my being - and most notably my body - frequently rebels in situations of conflict. Rather than shutting down the rest of my being, I am more curious now about how I can stay open to what it may be telling me and how it can help. Rather than fight myself internally while presenting a face of rational competency to the outside, I want to feel confident in the congruence of what I feel, know, and do and in who I am.

Years of experience as a musician give me an answer: practice. Practice so that the desired expression is not just something I know to do (particularly in hindsight or from a place of balanced rationality) but it becomes who I am. Mahatma Gandhi is known to have said something to the effect of "**BE the peace you wish to see in the world.**" That peace begins with me, with who I am. What begins as knowledge and an acquired skill becomes an embodied practice of being.

Improvisational dance is one way to access our ways of being. One of my dearest teachers, Angeles Arrien, cultural anthropologist and author of *The Fourfold Way* and *Signs of Life*, is fond of telling the following story that applies to the process of conflict resolution and healing:

*In many shamanic societies, if you came to a shaman or medicine person complaining of being disheartened, dispirited, or depressed, they would ask you one of four questions: When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? When did you stop finding comfort in the sweet territory of silence? Where we stop dancing, singing, being enchanted by stories, or finding comfort in silence is where we have experienced the loss of soul. Dancing, singing, storytelling, and silence are the four universal healing salves.*  
(Preface, *Maps to Ecstasy*)



## OUR APPROACH: 1, 2, 3

Our approach to **EMBODY-ING CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION** is like a dance. There are three basic steps:

- 1. SELF AWARENESS AND PRESENCE**
- 2. INTERACTION AND CO-CREATION**
- 3. INTERVENTION OR COLLABORATION**

As in a dance, these steps are repeated in sequence and are also contained within each step. The numbers indicate the sequence as well as the number of people to whom we devote our attention. And in steps two and three, there are continuous reminders to return to one, to self and Source. In exploring each of the steps, we introduce simple reflective or interactive exercises that bring energy and awareness to each person's physical experience. As a bridge to the cognitive understanding of conflict dynamics and approaches for resolution, we offer connections to conflict resolution theory and practice. Most importantly, we ask people to share their insights about what they experience in the exercises and how that can be translated to being more effective in instances of conflict and collaboration.

We begin by exploring familiar metaphors about conflict and introducing improvisation principles. The principles that inform improvisational movement also inform skillful conflict resolution: energy, attention, breath, balance, center, flow, etc. If conflict is an impasse, then resolution is movement that restores a flow in relationship. Masterful conflict resolution, collaboration, and leadership require a certain command of externally oriented relational skills, such as communication and negotiation. But the mastery comes with the capacity to reflect on inner dynamics, integrate what one perceives intuitively and through the senses and to hold paradox.

### SELF AWARENESS / PRESENCE - 1

All interpersonal processes begin with self. This is the place from which we acknowledge and cultivate our profound inner way of being. We explore ways of being centered and recognizing our boundaries. If I do not know my own boundaries, how can I articulate them accurately to you? If I am not aware of my expectations, how can I share and manage them effectively? We play with balance and notice that from a posture of balance and centered awareness we consistently have the greatest range of choice and capacity for responding to what we perceive. This is true in our physical presence. It is equally true when translated to awareness and communication of what events have taken place, the feelings and needs these events evoke, and our capacity to articulate clear and actionable requests. This is also true in terms of developing relationships of trust; the starting place is awareness and cultivation of our capacity for trust. In reconciliation or healing from betrayal, this is the place for acknowledgement of one's own responsibility in what occurred and, most importantly, choosing to forgive.

### INTERACTION AND CO-CREATION - 2

This is the place where we extend to join and interact with another person. It is the place from which we experience dynamics of reciprocal relationship. We are exploring what it means to negotiate non-verbally for self-care and mutual gain, where the goal of interaction is to "win the relationship" rather than to win the immediate "deal." We begin by playing with the nuance of approach and perceptions of intent. Here we notice that even blindfolded we perceive how close a person is and what has to happen for the distance to feel safe.

In the context of conflict, this is where we explore our individual and mutual responses to aggression, interruption, or a "grab." We notice our responses to the grab, the sensations it produces and impulses it provokes. We play with



alternative responses and notice what happens for the other person. We notice our conditioned tendencies and what is required to return to center, depending on the type and intensity of the grab.

In the context of building collaboration, we explore what qualities of interaction promote connection and flow. We bring conscious attention to how we listen and awareness to qualities of moving together. We notice that collaboration, like balance, is a process of continuous realignment in response to disturbances or micro-conflicts. This is where we explore the concept of mutual support and protection. What happens, for example, when one person withholds their full weight or truth in an effort to protect the other person?

### INTERVENTION OR COLLABORATION - 3

This is the place of harmonizing with what is or intervening to effect a change. Here we explore dynamics of joining, separating and leaving. Two people are engaged in an existing dynamic, and a third person intervenes. How can the intervening person facilitate separation without producing a collapse or dependence, represented by taking on the weight of one or the other person? What qualities of approach, interaction and leaving feel respectful of each person's process? How can the third person join to create a new dynamic that everyone feels good about, no matter what the agendas were from the outset?

Throughout, we reflect about what keeps us from returning to center, breathing and extending from choice in stressful, conflicted situations. We consider ways to apply and integrate the learning in actual conflict situations.

## HOW WE GOT HERE...

### ULLA'S JOURNEY

The most important parts to the story of how I came to our "emBODY-INg" work and how the "emBODY-INg" approach came to me is told in three chapters:

1. THE SPLIT
2. THE APPROACH
3. ONGOING INTEGRATION

### CHAPTER 1: THE SPLIT

Once upon a time, I decided to go to law school.

I wanted to study law to acquire the necessary tools to save the world.

My main concern was the endangerment of the natural environment. I did not want to end up as somebody who is well aware of the urgent need for changes but always hopes that somebody else - someone perhaps more knowledgeable, more powerful, or somehow more something than me - would take care of the situation. Studying law seemed like the most efficient way to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and possibly power, to eventually be able to affect change.

The main strategy I learned in subsequent years for working toward political changes was:



- Think hard and define the right goal.
- Think hard and figure out the right way to get there.
- Try hard in convincing as many people as possible that you have the right goal and the right way to get there.
- Walk briskly, confidently, and as straight as possible on your way toward your goal.

Over the years, I realized that this way of trying to change things all too often does not lead to the desired changes. Or at least it takes much longer than expected and, almost always, everybody ends up being really exhausted.

Luckily, studying law and doing political work was not my only occupation.

Shortly after I started law school, I discovered the dance form known as contact improvisation. I had earlier experience with ballroom dancing, ballet and modern dance, but contact improvisation was definitely something different, very new and exciting to me. It catalyzed a revolution in the way I deal with myself and the world.

The movement principles of contact improvisation are inspired by martial arts and free movement improvisation, based on the awareness of and work with physical contact between the dancers, mutual impulse and weight exchange. The most important rule in contact improvisation is that you don't have to do anything. And an essential invitation is for each dancer to be fully authentic.

In contact with other dancers, I soon discovered that the more I cling to a preconceived plan for my movement, the harder it is for us to dance together. This is especially true when my plan collides with the other person's movement concept. The more open I am for movement to unfold in the present moment, the more I am able to genuinely meet and communicate with the other dancers. From that attention to impulse in the moment, the next moment's movement is the result of the other person's movement impulse encountering my own.

Slowly, I learned to release preconceived concepts and trust this principle of ever-developing presence.

As much as I started to love it, though, this principle did not seem at all applicable in the legal and political world. So for a long time, the world of law and politics and the world of dance and improvisation seemed inexorably separate. It was always hard - sometimes even physically painful - to switch between the atmosphere and requirements of the legal field and those of the dance studio or stage. Many times I cried in anger or frustration about the fact that parts of myself seemed unable to be alive at the same time. And that this principle I had experienced to be so profoundly valid did not apply and live in another part of my life.

## CHAPTER 2: THE APPROACH ("DIE ANNÄHERUNG")

After my graduation from law school, I wanted to continue working with conflict transformation and change processes, but I was definitely looking for alternative ways. I experienced a sense of hope and relief when I encountered mediation and some related facilitation techniques. I was thrilled to realize that the work of a mediator/facilitator is actually a form of structured improvisation. The mediator is asked to be present for the parties' needs without preconceived solutions, to work with the "impulses" of the parties and to allow a process and resolution to evolve without knowing in advance exactly where it would go or what it would be like.

Taking advantage of my opportunity to go to Berkeley, California, for a year of post-graduate studies, I used this time mainly to learn everything I could about the theory and practice of mediation. Simultaneously, I threw myself wholeheartedly into the rich contact improvisation scene of the Bay Area.



As it happened, my professor in mediation skills had a lot of background in body-awareness practices herself. She let bits and pieces of this background flow into her teaching. One day, when one of my classmates asked quite desperately how he could possibly manage the complexity of simultaneous tasks in the role of the mediator, she advised him that, if things got too overwhelming, there were always gravity and breath to return to as an anchor. Tears welled in my eyes immediately upon hearing this sentence. I knew this sentence so well from the dance studio, and I had waited years to hear it in any law school classroom. From this day forward I resolved to work on combining principles of dance, improvisation and body awareness with the realm of conflict resolution.

I found reinforcement in this commitment while visiting communities of Navajo Indians in the American Southwest. I learned that the Navajo people believe that every conflict, as well as every illness, has an intellectual, an emotional, a physical, and a spiritual dimension. Therefore, it cannot be healed if any one of those dimensions is excluded.

Inspired by my experiences with the Navajo, I shared my impressions with my mediation colleague and friend, Beata Lewis. Beata knew very well herself the painful experience of living a split between body and mind, between the legal or professional world and the dance world. Having grown up in New Mexico and close to Native American communities and their practices, she also understood some of what I had just experienced with the Navajo. With her, the idea of the emBODY-ING workshops was conceived and began to become collaborative practice.

### CHAPTER 3: ONGOING INTEGRATION

Meanwhile, Beata and I have co-led our emBODY-ING CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION workshop several times in quite different formats and contexts. Participants from varied professional and personal backgrounds shared their experiences and thereby influenced and enriched the ongoing development of our approach.

Looking back on the development of our work, I feel deeply grateful. At long last, areas of my life that I had previously perceived as totally separate are growing together. Instead of a painful split, the different aspects of my life and of my being are informing and enriching each other.

It is not only my personal desire but also my political interest to bridge that split, to reawaken the innate connection of body and mind. I am convinced that this is a highly political action. It is a seed with the potential of immense and urgently needed changes, that of restoring much neglected awareness for the body, for physical needs, impulses and truths to what we experience in our professional, intellectual, and political worlds.

### BEATA'S JOURNEY

Professionally and personally I am constantly augmenting and refining my understanding of how I respond to conflict and change. If I am to shine a lantern to illuminate a risky and uncertain path for others, I must have traveled such a path myself. For insight and guidance I draw on any life experience and from any discipline. In this process, I am learning more and more to trust my own experience and inner voice. In my professional role as coach, consultant, facilitator or mediator, my job is primarily in helping people to step out of habitual roles and conventional scripts and improvise; I help them embrace new options and make choices aligned with their values and needs. The choices are ideally informed as much by inner wisdom as by a person's understanding of the outer circumstances.

To set the context, I should mention that I have danced since earliest childhood. I danced, choreographed and performed before I knew what I was doing. While dancing ballet as a girl, my secret dream was to be an actress and



professional dancer. I did not take that path for many reasons, not the least of which was my belief about my body: mine was not the body of a professional dancer. I could not do it and succeed. I would have to make my mark with my mind. Especially while I was trying to zero in on a course of study and life work, the music, poetry, color and movement that ignited my passion and were genuine lifelines to my soul went underground.

One of the deeper, more personal reasons I became a lawyer was to protect myself from being a victim in this world. I wanted to understand the rules by which our society governs economic, political and social interaction and then choose how I would play. I was also motivated by a profound philosophical and pragmatic interest in justice, peppered with some definite opinions about who the system serves and a persistent desire to effect changes. As in the lyric by Joni Mitchell... "Is Justice just ice? Governed by greed and lust? Just the strong doing what they can and the weak suffering what they must?" I wanted to be one of the strong and help others be stronger, too.

In law I gained invaluable experience in the war zone. I saw how the game is played from the inside and what it takes to win. Just as important, I learned and observed that the vast majority of cases submitted to litigation are resolved on (or well before) the courtroom steps. I realized that an inordinately large component leading to business litigation of all kinds is executive infighting. How much litigation could be avoided if people were more self aware and skilled in negotiating for mutually beneficial outcomes with others? Does it make more sense to bring in a "hired gun" to annihilate the demonized opponent or to call for trusted, wise counsel to plan for resilient relationships and help resolve interpersonal misalignment when things go sour? From a business perspective, why should it make more sense for a judge or jury, who most likely know and care little about the real substance of a case, to decide its resolution on the basis of an incomplete version of the stories and limited legal remedies? What would help the actual stakeholders make better decisions and follow through on them? While I appreciate the value of legal monetary and punitive remedies, I recognize the limitations of a system that was never designed to accommodate genuine human needs for reconciling conflict and structuring sustainable collaboration. What processes and constructive remedies could people choose when confronted by serious conflict and a need for healing and regenerative change?

I left the law to begin a professional transition that became an intense "trust walk." It began with the intention of bridging from legal practice to mediation practice. My own conceptual framework for effective mutual gains negotiation and conflict reconciliation comes largely - but by no means exclusively - from my training and experience as a lawyer and mediator. The learning continues to deepen as I confront new challenges. Even with years of accumulated skill and knowledge, I am acutely aware of conflict situations where I have felt unable to cope and in the heat of the moment even unable to identify and articulate my needs, much less negotiate in a way so that those needs would be satisfied. Even with all the skills and knowledge, I cannot always help myself fully in ways that I want. Moreover, I notice my own resistance to being dependent on someone else who maybe could do it for me. How can I meet my own needs in conflict and feel good about myself in the process? Further, knowing how important this is to me, I then ask myself how I can offer professional help that empowers another person in need, rather than creating a dependence or colluding with an abdication of responsibility for one's own life choices.

Mediation practice turned out not to be my destination, and I moved on to organizational consulting and coaching work. Each step along the way has been an improvisation and a process of opening to the unknown. The introductory phase of the adventure began with formal training as a mediator in 1995. I had returned to the United States after three years' experience as a lawyer in Munich, Germany, working in the area of international commercial transactions. In 1996 I was one of 30 mediators chosen - 10 each from the United States, Germany and France - to participate in a project inquiring about cross-cultural aspects of conflict mediation. As an indirect consequence of my participation in that project, Ulla and I met in California in 1997 when she began her LLM program in the UC-Boalt School of Law in Berkeley. In 1997, around that same time that I began teaching courses for professional mediators in cross-cultural awareness and listening skills, I also began to dance the Argentine tango.





While I was drawn to Argentine tango for the exquisite beauty and complexity of the dance, I was soon to learn that this dance form is highly improvisational and extremely challenging to master. Moreover, dancing the tango is a profound lesson in leadership, follower-ship, conflict and surrender. To an outsider, the dance can easily look like an incredibly macho process by which a woman submits herself to following wherever (and dependent upon however well or poorly) the man leads. The improvisational nature of the tango combined with the role assignments of leader/follower present no small challenge for "followers" who have spent most of their lives honing their capacity to determine their own direction and initiate rather than be initiated upon. This is reflected in a poem I wrote in a fit of pique after dance:

Suspended Dance (by Beata C. Lewis)

*Impatient for your cues  
I am an uncertain interpreter  
watching your silence;  
Certain only that  
in relation to you  
this is not my moment  
to lead.  
I wish  
I might find ease  
in following, waiting.  
Mostly aware of wanting  
reassurance in  
hearing from you an invitation  
to communicate as I would  
if my step could be first.  
In my absence  
are you curious about me?  
When I am close enough again  
to hold  
will you find me?  
From here, how do I know?*

What I eventually learned is that the art of tango dancing is in the mutual surrender and communication for each improvised sequence of steps. The dance became satisfying for me as I could let go of the incessant inner chatter about how to do each step the right way and allow the movement to evolve from within. Both partners must be balanced and centered on their own axes, listening graciously for what they will do together next. The dance becomes beautiful and creative when both partners lead and follow - creating and allowing structured space for each other all the time. Tango dancing was a gateway for me to a larger and ongoing lesson: be open to lead by following. Being aware of and following oneself first.

There is exhilaration and relief in moving from going through the motions of applying knowledge and skills to listening for what wants to happen and allowing it to occur in the moment. I know this most consistently from a lifetime of downhill skiing. Skiing is technically not a dance, but it certainly is an exercise in improvisation. You have to accommodate what you do and where you go to the changing conditions of the terrain. As a former instructor, I feel confident of my expertise on skis in most terrain. There is a stance which I have come to call the "hero-me;" this is a stance where I am balanced on the center of my feet, upper body facing downhill and where I am breathing at each turn. There are days, though, when the "hero-me" is not to be found. I lean too far back or forward, my upper





body turns with the tips of the skis and I stop breathing. I feel myself muscling my way down the mountain, and it's exhausting. Only when I tune into myself - acknowledge the fear or other distractions - and recall the "hero-me," do I return to a relationship of harmony within myself and with my external environment and then ski with ease again. Skillful and fun skiing is less about what I know and more about releasing into what my body knows infinitely better.

In dance I am currently most drawn to contact improvisation and the practice developed by Gabrielle Roth known as the "Five Rhythms" and described in her book: "Maps to Ecstasy." These are dance experiences for me where a "right way" and prescribed structure of steps or interaction are not of primary importance. The question is how present I am to myself. Where is my balance, what sensations do I notice, how do I feel like moving and with whom? In dancing the five rhythms I return to my own definition, fluidity, integration, creativity and contentment. Body-based inquiry becomes an exquisite exploration of relationship: the relationship I have with myself - including the perpetual self talk by my inner critic or inner angel - and with other people and my life experiences. At issue in the dance are how to be fully present to myself while giving attention to others and the mystery of the interaction. This is the central question for all improvisation, no matter how it is applied: leading by following oneself while being in attentive relationship with others.

Improvisation can be understood as practice in intimate partnership. It is a continuous exercise in staying open to the unknown and trusting in something that keeps me moving in a direction that I hope is "forward." Staying open when it may seem far more sensible to contract, protect, or retreat. And being in the unknown when it seems far more sensible to return to the familiar. Cultivating the capacity to be open is cultivating the capacity to be intimate with all things, cultivating the heart of freedom. From here we can meet whatever arises in our lives with clarity and kindness for ourselves and for others. We cultivate our capacity to offer healing, compassionate listening to self and others and to reclaim our wholeness. We relinquish the prayer for the power to control our situation; instead the prayer becomes: "May I be empty enough to hear the deepest truth and guidance and may I trust enough to follow it." Mastery in conflict resolution, leadership and collaboration begins with the self. Cultivating self-awareness and the capacity to be open to self and another, to join for creation toward a compelling collective purpose.

So, I return to the questions posed earlier: How can I meet my own needs in conflict and feel good about myself in the process? What inner resources are available that support me in being the person I want to be, especially when confronted with intense conflict or disruptive change? They are the resources I know, in part, from embodied improvisational practices, such as dance and skiing. They have to do with explicitly physical manifestations of my presence: breath, balance, grounding, transforming resistance to flow. Embodying what we know and who we are is perhaps, more than anything, a process of allowing unconditional and joyful surrender.

Unconditional (by Jennifer Paine Welwood)

*Willing to experience aloneness,  
I discover connection everywhere;  
Turning to face my fear,  
I meet the warrior who lives within;  
Opening to my loss,  
I gain the embrace of the universe;  
Surrendering into emptiness,  
I find fullness without end.*

*Each condition I flee from pursues me,  
Each condition I welcome transforms me  
And becomes itself transformed*



*Into its radiant jewel-like essence.  
I bow to the one who has made it so,  
Who has crafted this Master Game;  
To play it is purest delight -  
To honor its form, true devotion.*

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**ABOUT BEATA LEWIS:**

Beata, founder of *Bridging Lives*, guides business leaders and their teams developing mastery in practices that cultivate trust-based collaboration. As a coach and consultant she works with organizations meeting the challenges of growth and change, especially in regenerating collaboration where it breaks down, due to lapses in communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, collaborative process, and agreement structuring. She is one of a select group of coaches and consultants certified to work with the Reina Trust and Betrayal Model™ and to administer its instruments to benchmark, measure, and monitor levels of trust within organizational systems.

