

The Roots of Conflict A Conversation with Michelle LeBaron



Lyn Hartley for Fieldnotes: *Perhaps you could begin by giving us a snapshot of your current work and interests.*

Michelle LeBaron: I am currently working in China, Japan, and Europe, as well as across Canada and the U.S. In the past two years, much of my work has involved giving addresses, workshops, and symposia at conferences and meetings, and on campuses related to my two recent books *Bridging Troubled Waters* and *Bridging Cultural Conflicts*. I have also worked with campus communities to foster a climate of dialogue after racist or xenophobic incidents.

Generally, my work is about bringing people together across differences and helping mend rips in torn relations. It's about creating space around people when they've gotten themselves into corners and helping them make choices while keeping heart at the center. It's about cultivating an awareness of cultural lenses and the worlds they reveal as well as the worlds they hide.

I am particularly interested in how people with diverse worldviews can collaborate, whether in commercial, community, or academic settings. I am passionate about designing processes that tap into our human potential for acting out of connection and common ground, rather than difference and conflict. I am excited about the potential of dialogue to transform relationships.

Through my intercultural work, I have learned that difficult conflicts tend to be rooted in differences of identity, perceptions, and meaning-making, and thus are not easily addressed through rational, linear means. This has led me to an increased interest in the creative arts as a way of shifting internal and relational states of anxiety, fear, and defensiveness. It has also led to recent work on ritual, story telling, and metaphor as important gateways into the symbolic domain where cultural and worldview differences are played out.

Fieldnotes: *Your module is about cultivating "cultural fluency." What exactly do you mean by that?*

This is the ability to internalize and respond to a range of different worldviews or perspectives. It is not enough to learn a laundry list of characteristics about any one group, since every group has tremendous diversity within it. It is therefore more important to understand a range of starting points and cultural currencies, and to be able to respond to these in relational contexts.

I define culture broadly to mean different collective ways that meaning is made and identity is enacted. Culture includes race and ethnicity, and also social class, language, religion, generation, sexual identity, able-bodiedness/disability, and other ways people identify. I have written about culture as an underground river because it is fluid, changing, and hugely influential, but often outside people's conscious awareness.

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Fieldnotes: *Can you give examples of how you create alternative routes for engaging conflict?*

In summer 2004, I worked with a group of Palestinian and Israeli youths who came to Vancouver to learn about conflict resolution and community. We asked them to find and share metaphors of their communities. Their images included a tree (deep-rooted, beautiful, shade-giving, alive, and worth protecting), a road (carries people places, needs maintenance, leads somewhere, and has intersections), and a circle (has no end, is continuous, cannot find an entry point to understand or enter it).

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Then, towards the end of their stay, I asked these young people to make human sculptures to symbolize their hopes for the future. One group tied themselves in knots and used this image to speak about the difficulties maintaining their relationships once they returned to the Middle East. In another group everyone stood looking in different directions, with some people on chairs (with more power) trying to lead them away from each other. Through these sculptures, the youths became more aware of barriers to their ongoing relationships and were able to plan ways to surmount these barriers.

Last summer I also taught the first week of the Caux Scholars Program in Switzerland, as I have for the past several years. This program brings together about two dozen young people from around the world to learn and work together about cross-cultural conflict transformation. The experience this past summer was particularly moving, as scholars from 13 countries, including Palestine, Sudan, Mexico, Nigeria, Nepal, the U.S., and Canada, shared their stories. They offered thoughtful and mature perspectives about conflicts in places such as Israel-Palestine, the Darfur region in Sudan, and the Niger River delta.

Though there were substantial political differences among them, the young people listened to each other with respect, and engaged in dialogue that world leaders would do well to emulate. Their commitment to developing leadership skills across differences made this possible, as well as their openness to learning about and using dialogic processes.

One morning during that first week, I asked this group to sit silently in circles and draw images to represent their experiences of conflict. I then asked them to pass their images to their neighbours, without any conversation or explanation. Each person in the circle received each other person's image in turn, and had three minutes to add to the image before passing it on around the circle.

But one young woman, who I'll call Ilsa, had not drawn anything on her paper. She was not accustomed to this kind of exercise, and her experiences with conflict had been intense and violent—not the kind of thing she was anxious to re-create. After the first few minutes, Ilsa's blank paper was passed first to one and then the others in her group. Each of the group members sat with Ilsa's page in turn, and added what came to them. When the papers had circled to each group member and were returned to their originators, Ilsa was very surprised. Those next to her had intuited her pain, representing it as tumultuous seas with tiny boats buffeted about on the waves. But as her paper had been passed around, her fellow scholars had added to the troubled seas. The composite image she received included a shining sun, a safe harbour, and a large ship hovering in the area to offer shelter to those on the smaller boats.

Ilsa and her group members had a very rich dialogue following this experience—a dialogue that took them into her stories of loss and tragedy while also covering the ways help had come and hope had survived. They realized together how powerful their coming together with an intention to be open had been. Even when Ilsa had drawn nothing, intuition and empathy had led to an unarticulated understanding.

After the Caux program, several of the participants wrote to me to say that their work in the first week set an essential tone of exploration and openness that fostered their deepening relationships over the course of the summer.

Fieldnotes: *How did you get into this field?*

I had engaged in the general practice of law for a few years while having my children. I wanted something more meaningful in my life than I had found in practice, and I went to a therapist for one session. He helped me, through guided imagery, to see the future I wanted to step into—a future in which I was helping bring people together rather than keeping them apart (which it often felt I did through legal practice). It was a future where imagination and intuition were part of the picture, where possibilities danced, and where interdisciplinary work was appreciated.

The field of mediation was emerging about the same time (the mid-1980s). I took as many courses in mediation and dispute resolution as I could and soon found myself teaching them for Continuing Legal Education and others. I decided I wanted to deepen my skills and capacities for this work, so I went back to school to study counseling psychology, completing an MA at Simon Fraser University. I remember that when I went for my admissions interview at SFU, the first question they asked me was whether I knew what salary counselors make. It was a surprising question to me. While of course I knew that counselors make less than lawyers, it really never occurred to me to continue practicing traditional law for the sake of the money.

Now I teach in a law school, after a dozen years teaching at an interdisciplinary institute in the U.S., where we graduated PhDs and MSs in conflict resolution. In an interesting twist, it is the same law school I graduated from. I see that the practice of law, and legal education, are changing to incorporate a range of approaches to solving human and social problems. I feel very appreciative to have the opportunity to be a part of this change.

Fieldnotes: *What alignment do you see between your work and the Shambhala Institute's view of "authentic leadership"?*

Cultural fluency means paying exquisite attention to the circles of connection of our relationships. This relates to the idea of *wakeful awareness*, which I see is one of the Institute's five central principles or values. When we work across cultures, we cannot assume that what makes sense to us will be shared by others. To work effectively, we are called to pay attention to words, to what is not said, to the messages our bodies and others' bodies convey, and to our precious intuition, which attunes us to incongruencies that may indicate something is out of alignment within us or between us.

I also resonate with the principle of *clear seeing*. I spend a great deal of energy making the case that intercultural work is complex and cannot be reduced to a list of "what to do or not do when working with people from x group." There is simply more diversity within many cultural groups than between them. Clear seeing is not about having encyclopedic knowledge of various cultural groups, but about being aware of various starting points and being able to put ourselves into different frames of reference.

My teaching and intervention work involves acknowledging *inherent capacity*. I have seen the wisdom of groups and individuals manifest when the circle of possibility is held open. We have many resources and capacities to shift stuck and conflictual dynamics. When something happens that speaks to us at those inner places where we constantly craft our identities and make meaning of our experiences—in other words, when something touches us in a way that matters—things can shift very quickly.

I love to help develop intentional *learning communities* where mindfulness is part of our shared daily practice. I use a very simple way of bringing everyone into the conversation: together we dialogue about what we want to have as a focus, how we will pursue that focus, and the results we desire. This three-part approach helps us incorporate not only our desired outcomes, but to collectively consider how we achieve them and to clarify exactly what we want to focus on, given our passions and inclinations.

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And I relate to *transformative action* because I have seen conflict transformation change the very fabric of people's lives for the better. And that is hugely satisfying and interesting—it creates hope for intractable and intransigent situations. Hope is so important in the world in which we live.

Fieldnotes: *How would you describe your own leadership style?*

My style has evolved over the years. At one point, I was very facilitative and elicitive – I brought groups into the process of designing how we would work together as well as our outcomes and products. This is still essential to me, and I incorporate different ways of seeing leadership and communication into groups and processes. I do this through incorporating ritual and metaphor into our convening and early days of working together, so that we have multiple modes of communicating what is essential to us. At the same time, I have realized that leadership also means offering my experience of what works.

I want to be sure everyone in a group is included, and also offer possibilities when stress or fatigue get in the way of creativity. To me, collaborative leadership means ensuring that everyone's voice is part of the choir, while helping everyone focus on magnifying the potential of the score, or changing the score if it does not strike a chord with the group.

Fieldnotes: *How did your work connect you to the Shambhala Institute?*

All of this connects me to the Shambhala Institute, with its emphasis on holistic approaches to social change and its focus on dialogue. I am thrilled at the prospect of working with creative artists and leaders from diverse sectors and places while addressing important questions, such as:

How does who we are affect the way we see and move through conflict?

Which states of mind and being are most conducive to conflict resolution?

How can creative tools assist us in assessing and moving through differences in ways that honor different ways of being in and seeing the world?

I was thrilled to find out that there so many different artistic disciplines linked to the modules. To me, possibilities abound. I'm thrilled to have this opportunity because it is an opening to integrate multiple strands of my work, while exploring the edge of creative leadership. There is a huge light around this for me!

To read more about Michelle's module, see http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/2005/cm_lebaron.shtml