

The
Third
Side

Why We Fight and
How We Can Stop

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Chapter 1

THE THIRD SIDE

Is this a private fight or can anyone get in?

— Old Irish Saying



A friend of mine, Herman Engel, was out for a walk with his wife in Lower Manhattan. As the couple was crossing the street at the corner, a speeding car screeched to a halt, missing them by inches. In fear and rage, Engel slammed his fist on the hood of the car.

Furious, the young man driving the car got out, shouting, "Why'd you hit my car?"

Engel shouted back, "You nearly killed my wife and me!"

A crowd gathered. Engel was white, the driver was black, and suddenly the scene took on racial overtones. As people began to take sides, it looked as if the situation might escalate into a full-scale brawl.

Then Engel noticed behind him an onlooker, an older black man. The man's hand, palm down, was slowly moving up and down, as if to say to the young driver, "Okay, now, cool it." The young man visibly struggled to control himself, then suddenly walked back to his car, got in, and drove off without another word.

“We’ll send for the person from the other group. If he doesn’t come, our group will go to his group and we will have a talk there.”

Seven years later, I visited the Semai people deep in the Malaysian rain forest. The Semai, who have the reputation of being perhaps the most peaceful culture on earth, also make ample use of the community in resolving their disputes. When conflict emerges, people zealously seek to avoid taking sides even when—indeed, especially when—it involves their close relatives or friends. “It is not proper behavior to take sides,” one Semai man explained. What is proper is to urge one’s relatives to resolve their disputes.

Like the Bushmen, the Semai have long community talks, called *bcaraa*. I was told of a *bcaraa* convened to discuss the behavior of a father who had hit his four-year-old son for uprooting plants in the field. It is just not done, people explained. They do not believe in striking children, or forcing them to do something, or even admonishing them. The lesson transmitted through the *bcaraa* is not only the disapproval of force, but the approval of alternative ways of dealing with the issue through talking and apology.

A *bcaraa* is organized not just for disputes among adults, but for conflicts among children as well. When a Semai child strikes another, the adults, instead of punishing the child, will call a children’s *bcaraa*. All the children sit down in a circle, discuss what happened, and talk about how to resolve the issue and repair the injured relationship. Everyone thus profits from the dispute by learning the lesson of how to handle frustrations and differences peacefully.

The Challenge in Modern Societies

Our highly populated, urbanized, and technologically complex societies could not be more different from simple societies like those of the Semai and the Bushmen. But, in at least one crucial respect, we face the same challenge. As modern families, workplaces, and political systems become less hierarchical and more horizontal, our great challenge is to learn, as simpler societies have, to handle our

differences cooperatively. Our task is not to copy their *kgotla* and *bcaraa*' but to devise our own ways to mobilize the community in helping to resolve conflict.

In our societies, conflict is conventionally thought of as two-sided: husband vs. wife, union vs. employer, Arabs vs. Israelis. The introduction of a third party comes almost as an exception, an aberration, someone meddling in someone else's business. We tend to forget what the simplest societies on earth have long known: namely, that every conflict is actually three-sided. No dispute takes place in a vacuum. There are always others around—relatives, neighbors, allies, neutrals, friends, or onlookers. Every conflict occurs within a community that constitutes the "third side" of any dispute.

The third side is the surrounding community, which serves as a container for any escalating conflict. In the absence of that container, serious conflict between two parties all too easily turns into destructive strife. Within the container, however, conflict can gradually be transformed from confrontation into cooperation.

A good analogy for the third side is the body's immune system. When a cell is attacked by a virus, it sends out a chemical alarm awakening the dendritic cells that lie dormant in every tissue of the body. The dendritic cells, in turn, mobilize the T-cells, which come to the rescue. If the T-cells correspond roughly to the police and peacekeepers of the world, the dendritic cells correspond to the surrounding community that must be aroused in order to stop destructive conflict. The third side thus serves as a kind of *social immune system* preventing the spread of the virus of violence.

In the coal country where I used to work as a mediator and arbitrator, there was a famous union song whose refrain went, "Which side are you on?" It was an eloquent call to join up rather than do nothing. The Bushmen and the Semai would wholeheartedly agree with the appeal not to stand aside passively in a dispute, but they would disagree that, in any conflict, there are only two sides to take. To the song's challenge, "Which side are you on?" they might reply in their own language, "The third side."

FROM THE NUCLEAR FAMILY
TO THE HUMAN FAMILY

Spending time in other societies often has the effect of giving one new eyes with which to view one's own culture. That is what happened to me after my visits to the Bushmen and the Semai. Everywhere I looked, from the dinner table to the boardroom, and from the town hall to the courtroom, I began to see traces of the third side in action. What I saw went far beyond the activities of professional mediators such as myself. This was the *community* itself—in the form of neighbors, relatives, and friends—acting as third parties to facilitate the prevention and resolution of conflict. While these examples are still exceptions in our modern societies, they suggest what the third side could accomplish if one day it became strong and these kinds of interventions became the norm.

In the Family

“One night, my mother and her boyfriend got into a silly argument about where they were going to go out,” recounts eighteen-year-old Marquise Johnson, who had been trained as a peer mediator at school in one of Cleveland's toughest neighborhoods. “I had to sit them down. That was the hardest thing because he just stared at me when I told him to sit down. But I said, ‘I'm going to help you solve this problem—could you sit down, please?’ Afterward, we were all sitting there laughing. I was proud. When I finish college, I want to be a social worker or psychologist.”

While American customs for dealing with domestic conflict differ greatly from those of the Semai, they are shifting away from passivity toward the active intervention of the surrounding community. Abused children and battered spouses are no longer treated, as they traditionally were, just as a “family matter.” Neighbors sound the alarm and social workers, police, and court officers step in. Shelters for battered women offer refuge and counseling.

At the same time, a “Yes” to dialogue is being voiced. Support groups, marital counseling, and family mediation are becoming much more common, and not just among the wealthier classes. Twelve-year-old Jane’s parents were so busy arguing that they forgot about how *she* felt. “After they had been to mediation,” she recalls, “they listened to each other more, and to me.”

“Without family mediation,” her father adds, “I feel we would still be battling it out and spreading the damage over a much wider field.”

Just as the Bushmen insist on resolving a dispute amicably before letting the parties go their separate ways, so more and more divorces begin with an intense effort to settle the economic and child custody issues in a collaborative fashion through mediation—in order to preserve a working relationship between the parties. This can happen even if the children are already grown; as one divorcing wife explained, “We’re going to have to be grandparents together.”

In the Workplace

In the workplace, torn by interdepartmental rivalries, corporate lawsuits, strikes, employee grievances, and unexpected violence, there are also signs of the third side at work. “When my sales representatives create conflicts, they’re often over customers and territories,” says Michael Rosenberg, president of a home food-delivery service. He asks the quarreling salespeople to exchange customers or to work as a team. “This way,” he explains, “they’re forced to help each other for the good of the company, rather than worrying about protecting their own turf.”

Thousands of businesses and government agencies have appointed “ombudspersons,” people whose full-time job is to help employees, sometimes on a confidential basis, resolve their disputes with management and one another. Once confined to settling union-management contractual disputes, mediation is increasingly being used to resolve employee and customer grievances. Many

businesses are also binding themselves in advance to use mediation and arbitration rather than court to resolve their disputes with customers, suppliers, and partners. Of the one thousand largest corporations in America, nearly ninety percent report having used mediation to settle a dispute in order to save money, achieve a more satisfactory agreement, and preserve a good relationship.

Inside many organizations, facilitators are working with cross-functional teams to overcome interdepartmental issues. Managers are learning to mediate among their teammates, their employees, and often their multiple bosses. The success of a company is coming to depend on the ability of its people to resolve the innumerable conflicts that crop up between manufacturing and marketing, sales and headquarters, employees and supervisors, and to seek a "triple win"—a solution good for each side and for the company as a whole.

In the Community

In the early 1990s, teenage violence in Boston seemed out of control. There was a shooting every day and a half, a tripling of the rate over the course of ten years. A nine-year-old boy out trick-or-treating on Halloween was killed by gang crossfire, as was a teenager walking to an anti-drug meeting. Yet after more than twenty youngsters died from firearms in 1992, the rate fell to zero in 1996.

The key, according to Boston Police Commissioner Paul Evans, was "collaboration." The entire community was mobilized. The police worked closely with teachers and parents to search out kids who had missed school or whose grades had dropped. Local government agencies and businesses provided troubled youth with counseling, educational programs, and after-school jobs. Social workers visited their homes. Ministers and pastors mentored them and offered a substitute family for kids who almost never had two and sometimes not even one parent at home. Community counselors, often ex-gang

members, hung out with gang members and taught them to handle their conflicts with talk, not guns.

Boston is not alone in making good use of the third side. All across America, community disputes of all kinds—from barking dogs to landlord-tenant problems to conflicts over children's toys left on the sidewalk—are increasingly being mediated by trained community volunteers. "I would recommend the process [of mediated negotiation] to any dispute that looks insoluble," proclaims Judge Clarence Seeliger after mediation resolved an almost-quarter-century-old bitter dispute in Atlanta over the placement of a highway through local neighborhoods. "They [the third parties] probably kept us from pulling out guns and shooting each other across the table," says Hal Rives, leader of one of the disputing sides. "I don't think it [the agreement] would have happened without them."

As among the Semai, the young too are learning to mediate. "If we don't get mediation, I'd fight her," says Alisha, a sixth-grader at Martin Luther King School. She had asked a fellow pupil, Elizabeth, a simple question, she said, and Elizabeth had responded by calling her names and "getting in my face ugly." Instead of fighting, however, Alisha and Elizabeth stomped down to the Center for Conflict Resolution on the ground floor of the school to ask for help from a fellow student trained in mediation. "They resolved the problem by agreeing they would try to get along and not get smart with each other," explained Patrice Culpepper, the eleventh-grader who mediated the case. "There was follow-up afterward, and they were doing fine."

In more than five thousand schools across America, children are being trained as peer mediators. They do not wait for problems to come to them; they go into the playgrounds and corridors where the problems are. Typically working in pairs, a boy and a girl, the young mediators approach children who are arguing or fighting and ask them if they want to talk it out. Some simple ground rules are stated: Agree not to interrupt, talk about your feelings, agree to look for a

solution. The success rate is high. At Melrose Elementary School in Oakland, for instance, the mediation program was credited with substantially reducing violence and cutting suspensions fiftyfold.

This trend of consensual dispute resolution is not limited to the United States. It is occurring around the world, often building on the traditions of mediation indigenous to each society and culture. The Hawaiians have a tradition of *ho'oponopono*; the Palestinians call it *sulha*; and the peoples of the Caucasus use their elders as mediators. Spreading from one society to another, benefiting from local traditions, mediation is becoming a worldwide movement.

In a Warring World

It started as a conversation involving professors and peace activists. Norwegian sociologist Terje Rod Larsen and diplomat Mona Juul, a husband-and-wife team, set up a series of direct unofficial secret peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians in Norway. The first Israeli representatives were two scholarly peaceniks, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundik, with links to the Israeli leadership. Representing the Palestine Liberation Organization were economist Abu Alaa and two aides, Hassan Asfour and Maher el Kurd. The talks eventually ended up becoming official and produced the 1993 Oslo Accord, captured for the world in a televised handshake on the White House lawn between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli President Yitzhak Rabin. Although only one step along the tortuous path toward Middle East peace, it was the biggest breakthrough in decades of violent conflict.

The third side is increasingly stepping in to help resolve international disputes that once only warfare would have settled. The Vatican averted a war over the Beagle Channel islands between Argentina and Chile by mediating a mutually acceptable division of territory. Mediation by the international community has ended wars in Namibia, Mozambique, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.

Nor is it just governments that intervene. As in the Oslo talks, more and more nongovernmental organizations and private citizens are working in parallel with official diplomats to bring parties together and facilitate talks. The Community of Sant'Egidio, an assembly of Christian communities, is credited with facilitating an end to the war in Mozambique.

The third side sometimes goes further and intervenes forcefully to stop aggression and war. With the world public continually appalled by massacres and rapes of defenseless Muslims in Bosnia, international forces finally intervened, destroyed Serb arsenals, and helped Muslim and Croat armies redress the balance of power to the point where the Serbs were ready to talk. The ensuing peace settlement, forged by international mediators, is being enforced, as this is written, by armed peacekeepers from twenty-four nations.

Across Domains

The third side cuts across domains. What children learn at school, they begin to apply in the family. As fifteen-year-old Makita Moore, a peer mediator, recounts, "Before [my training], when my mother would come in and talk to me, I used to get real mad, but now I know how to listen. And when I don't get loud, she listens to me. So we get along better." What black and white South Africans learned in labor negotiations during the 1980s contributed substantially to the breakthrough political negotiations during the 1990s that ended apartheid. Violence is not the only contagious phenomenon. So is cooperation.

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE THIRD SIDE?

The third side is *people*—from the community—using a certain kind of *power*—the power of peers—from a certain *perspective*—of common ground—supporting a certain *process*—of dialogue and nonviolence—and aiming for a certain *product*—a “triple win.”

People from the Community

Unlike the ultimate arbiter in the form of a king or authoritarian state, the third side is not a transcendent individual or institution who dominates all, but rather the *emergent will of the community*. It is an impulse that arises from the vital relationships linking each member and every other member of the community.

It may be hard to grasp how such an amorphous entity could prevent serious strife. People naturally look to superior authority to police their conflicts, yet genuine coexistence cannot be imposed from above. Ultimately, it can emerge only from the parties and those around them. Just as a central planning authority cannot run a complex and dynamic economy efficiently by decree alone, as the failure of Soviet communism so clearly demonstrated, so a top-down response to complex and dynamic conflict would be vastly inadequate. Just as in the free market, the initiative needs to come from anywhere and everywhere, from private citizens and institutions as well as government. Just as the free market is the creation of a host of individuals and organizations freely interacting with each other, so too is the third side. People can contribute to the third side, but no one commands it. Like the market, it is *self-organizing*, with its own natural laws. As each person contributes his or her bit, a powerful phenomenon materializes.

Using the Power of Peers

In one of Aesop's fables, the North Wind and the Sun were arguing about who was more powerful. They finally agreed to a contest: Whoever could strip a wandering shepherd boy of his cloak would win the argument. The North Wind went first, blowing with all his might, but the harder he blew, the more tightly the boy held on to his cloak. It was the Sun's turn next; she warmed the boy with her rays. In no time at all, the boy had decided to cast off his cloak and bathe in the sun.

If the North Wind is the traditional approach of superior force, the Sun is the approach of the third side. It uses the power of persuasion. It influences the parties primarily through an appeal to their interests and to community norms. The third side possesses the power of peer pressure and the force of public opinion. It is people power.

A simple experiment will reveal, in its most elementary form, the influence of the third side. Introduce a neutral third person into any argument between two people. Even if the third person does not talk, the parties' tone will usually begin to moderate and their behavior will become more controlled. If the third person commands special respect, the effect will become even more pronounced.

In every conflict, there usually exists not just one possible third party but a multitude. Individually, people may not prove very influential. But collectively, they are potentially more powerful than any two conflicting parties. Organizing themselves into a coalition, they can balance the power between the parties and protect the weaker one. "Do you see these sticks in my hand?" Tsamko, a Ju/'hoan Bushman, once asked his group. "One stick alone breaks easily, but if you pick up lots of sticks like this, you can't break them."

In the end, power comes not from government, not even from superior force, but from people who choose whether or not to give their obedience to the government or their respect to superior force. If the will of the people can be mobilized, it can prevail.

From a Perspective of Common Ground

A senior executive attending one of my negotiation classes recounted a story of how, one day on a four-lane highway, he failed to notice a driver behind him trying to pass. The frustrated driver finally passed on the right, blared his horn, and made an insulting gesture. The executive became enraged, sped up, and began to overtake the other car on the right. As he was passing it, he rolled open his window to shout a response; the other driver did the same. As the executive looked at the other driver, suddenly the words popped out, "I'm sorry!" The other driver was speechless, then he too replied, "I'm sorry!" Each ended up motioning the other to go ahead: "You first!" "No, you first!"

"What happened to your anger?" I asked the executive.

"I don't know," he replied, "I guess I just suddenly saw how ridiculous the conflict was."

That is a third-side perspective—and it is available, as the story illustrates, even to the disputing parties themselves. While most issues in contention are presented as having just two sides—pro and con—there usually exists a third. From this third perspective, each competing point of view can be properly understood. Shared interests often come to loom larger than the differences. People remember that they all, in the end, belong to the same extended community.

Third parties can help disputants achieve this sense of perspective. "Within minutes the mediator had me and the person I fought with laughing together," reports one New York high school student. "I knew that if I could talk and act calmly instead of getting upset, I might never have to fight again!"

Supporting a Process of Dialogue and Nonviolence

In the midst of a firefight in the rice paddies between American soldiers and the Viet Cong early in the Vietnam War, six monks walked toward the line of fire. "They didn't look right, they didn't

look left. They walked straight through," remembers David Busch, one of the American soldiers. "It was really strange, because nobody shot at 'em. And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight was out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody, because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting."

Like the monks walking across the rice paddy or the older man on the Manhattan street corner, the third side, silently or loudly, says "No" to violence. Conversely, the third side says, "Yes" to dialogue. As among the Bushmen and the Semai, thirdsiders urge disputants to sit down and talk out their differences respectfully. Thirdsiders, in other words, focus on the process. To them, *how* people handle their differences is just as important as *what* outcome they reach.

Aiming for a Product of a "Triple Win"

The dispute had lasted nine years and gone all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court without resolution. The Georgia Department of Transportation wanted to put an elevated parkway through a historic Atlanta neighborhood. The local neighborhood residents opposed it. The wider community wanted the dispute solved and a solution implemented before the Olympics came to town. Two mediators went to work and, in nine meetings, helped the parties hammer out a solution: a four-lane surface street with a substantial expansion of parkland. Everyone—the parties and the wider community—pronounced themselves satisfied.

As in this case, thirdsiders strive for a resolution that satisfies the legitimate needs of the parties *and* at the same time meets the needs of the wider community. The goal of the third side is, in other words, a "triple win."

WHO IS THE THIRD SIDE?

For decades, South Africa was the leading example of racial injustice on the planet. On my first visit, in early 1989, I found almost everyone I interviewed expecting the repression, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare to continue far into the future. My own experiences only seemed to confirm this. A few days before I was to meet anthropologist David Webster, a determined opponent of the apartheid system, he was assassinated on his doorstep in front of his wife by a government-backed death squad. A few weeks after I spent a long evening conversing with Anton Lubowski, a political opponent of South African government in Namibia, he too fell to the bullets of a death squad. The conflict appeared irreconcilable.

Six years later, on a return visit to South Africa, I felt as if I had entered a different country. Nelson Mandela, who had still been in prison on my last visit, had become president. The former president, F. W. de Klerk, was now serving as second deputy to Mandela. Blacks and whites, previously isolated from each other across a seemingly unbridgeable chasm, were reaching out to find ways to work together for a peaceful and prosperous South Africa. Bullets had given way to bridges.

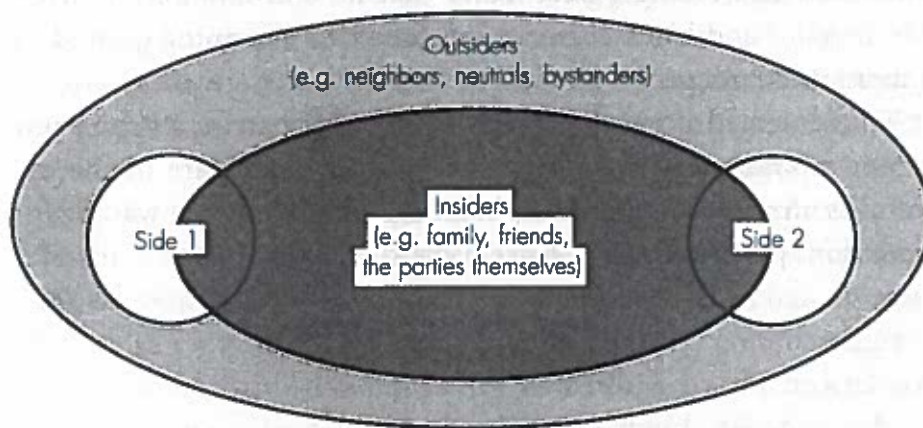
While the transformation of the conflict in South Africa seemed almost miraculous at the time, it actually resulted from the coordinated practical actions of the third side—in three forms:

Outsiders

“You must believe,” declared South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “that this spectacular victory [over apartheid] would have been totally, totally impossible had it not been that we were supported so remarkably by the international community.” The outside world strongly opposed the institutionalized racism of the apartheid regime. Governments imposed economic sanctions. Sports federations ostracized South African teams. The United Nations provided

political and economic support to Mandela's African National Congress. Intergovernmental organizations dispatched groups of eminent statesmen to mediate. Churches mobilized the public conscience and university students carried out protests. Under intense pressure, universities and corporations in the United States made decisions to stop investing in South Africa. From ordinary citizens to governments, outsider third parties came together to support a democratic community.

WHO IS THE THIRD SIDE?



The third side is made up of both outsiders and insiders.

Insiders

Even more critical were insider third parties. While Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk were solidly rooted in their own groups, fighting hard to protect their interests, they also played the curious role of third parties seeking a nonviolent resolution. Indeed, a pair of insiders, one from each side, can often make the most effective third party; while separately neither would be perceived as neutral, together they may be seen as balanced. As an outsider neutral, I find myself impressed by the considerable virtues of insider third parties. In con-

trast to outsiders, insider third parties possess intimate knowledge of the conflict and its players. They also are more likely to work on a conflict all the way through implementation of a settlement.

Working with Mandela and de Klerk were thousands of other insiders determined to reach across the chasm of color. Church and business leaders came together with the white government, the African National Congress, and other political groups to devise the National Peace Accord, an unprecedented countrywide network of dispute-resolution committees at the local, regional, and national levels. The committees, made up of people from the different communities who had never talked or worked with each other before, succeeded in defusing a great many violent confrontations between white police and black citizens, and provided a training ground in grassroots democracy.

Thus emerged a critical mass of insider third parties, a strong new center capable of withstanding the polarizing pressure of the extremists on each side. Outsiders helped, but, in the end, it was the insider third parties who did the real work.

An Inner Third Side?

Imprisoned for twenty-seven years, treated harshly by whites, Nelson Mandela somehow found it within himself to forgive his white captors, the oppressors of his race. I was impressed, when I heard him speak about his white adversaries, that his voice and demeanor betrayed no rancor. And while this inner change of heart was the solitary soul-searching act of an individual, it did not stop there. For, in the hope of reconstructing a South Africa in which both blacks and whites could live together in peace and prosperity, Mandela succeeded in persuading first his colleagues, and then his people, to tread the same difficult path of forgiveness and reconciliation. An individual act of spirit thereby became an emotional shift among millions, a political force with far-reaching effects.

On the other side of the divide, F. W. de Klerk, previously an arch

defender of the apartheid system, came to realize it had been a terrible mistake, resulting in unfair discrimination and the domination of the majority by the minority. In acknowledging the error publicly, he helped his own people, rigidly attached to the old ways, accept the painful necessity of surrendering much of their power and privilege to the black majority.

The surprising magnitude and speed of transformation in South Africa cannot be explained by a change of mind alone; a change in heart and spirit was required. Because it is not as tangible as an outsider or an insider, the "inner third side" is harder to describe. However nebulous, its power cannot be denied because, in the final analysis, deep-seated conflict is resolved largely through the emotional, psychological, and spiritual work of the parties. The third side manifests itself as a kind of conscience within the single individual engaged in conflict. It is the voice that urges us to heal old grievances; it is the capacity to listen to the other side and show empathy; it is the impulse to respect the basic human needs of all.

The inner third side instinctively values life and abhors violence. In World War II, the U.S. Army was astonished to learn that at least three out of every four riflemen, trained to kill and commanded to do so, could not bring themselves to pull the trigger when they could actually see the person they were about to shoot. Amazingly, this held true even when the individual rifleman himself was in danger of being shot. The riflemen refrained from shooting as long as they thought they were not being observed by their commanding officer.

Psychiatrists found that the chief cause of combat fatigue was not fear of being killed, but fear of killing. Colonel S. L. A. Marshall, who interviewed the infantrymen, concluded:

It is therefore reasonable to believe that the average and normally healthy individual—the man who can endure the mental and physical stresses of combat—still has such an inner and usually unrealized resistance towards killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn away from that responsibility. Though it is impossible that he may ever analyze his own feelings so

searchingly as to know what is stopping his own hand, his hand is nonetheless stopped. At the vital point he became a conscientious objector, unknowing.

The inner resistance to violence is a well-kept secret, for interestingly, when interviewed, each rifleman believed that he was the *only* one disobeying the orders to shoot. While this resistance to violence can obviously be weakened, it can also be strengthened. Therein lies the potential of awakening the inner third side.

All Together

Outsiders empower insiders, insiders mobilize outsiders, and both are inspired by an inner third side. Working together, they can transform even an intractable conflict such as South Africa.

THE THIRD SIDE IS US

In the spring of 1987, I visited the headquarters of the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) based in Omaha, Nebraska. On the tour, my academic colleagues and I received a thorough briefing on every aspect of American preparedness for a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Our military guide led us into the underground headquarters and showed us how one could communicate with every missile silo and bomber base in America. At the end of our visit, he took us on board the giant aircraft that the U.S. president would use during a nuclear attack. The plan, our guide explained, provided for the president to lift off in the plane to escape the attack and continue to direct the war. The plane was jam-packed with communications gear and trailed a huge antenna so that the president could communicate even with a submarine commander submerged in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Everything was planned down to the last de-

tail—and a trained crew of eighty stood ready to take to the skies at any time of the day or night.

When our guide paused for questions, I raised my hand. “Not to be presumptuous,” I asked, “but if I were in the president’s shoes in the middle of a nuclear crisis, the first person I’d want to talk to would be the Soviet premier so that we could figure out how to stop the war. Do you have a communications link on this plane to the Hot Line and a Russian translator on board?”

The Department of Defense official looked me straight in the eye and answered, “Communicating with the Russians is not our job. It’s the job of the State Department.”

The same attitude of “not our job” is pervasive when it comes to dealing with the destructive conflicts around us. Our first instinct when a dispute erupts is often to stand aside on the grounds that it is none of our business. Or we take sides. Either way, we contribute to the escalation of the conflict. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, the only thing necessary for the triumph of force is for good people to do nothing.

But the job of stopping fights is too important to be relegated to others. It cannot be assigned to extraordinary leaders such as Mandela or to the authorities. As simple societies like the Semai have long recognized, it is everyone’s responsibility to prevent harmful conflict. “You have to help resolve a dispute,” one Semai explained. “If you don’t intervene and something happens between the two disputants, you are accountable.” “Friends for life don’t let friends fight” is the slogan of a successful media campaign against violence in Boston. That could be the motto of the third side.

The third side implies a new responsibility. It means that, as among the Semai, each person, organization, and nation is accountable for the conflicts that take place around them. We may not think of ourselves as third parties; indeed, we generally don’t. Yet each of us has the opportunity to help stop destructive fights around us. We constitute the family, the friends, the colleagues, the neighbors, the onlookers, the witnesses. Even when no third party is present, each of us can choose to mediate our own disputes by taking the third side.

Taking the third side is not an easy responsibility. It consumes time and energy. Those who step into the middle can find themselves criticized by one party or both for “interfering” or “meddling.” In potentially violent situations, thirdsiders may even run the risk of physical harm.

As fighting, however, jeopardizes the happiness of our families, the productivity of our workplace, and the safety of our communities, it is increasingly in our own self-interest to act as thirdsiders. We are all stakeholders in the conflicts around us.

In short, the third side is not some mysterious or special other. The third side is us—each of us acting individually and all of us working together. When it comes to stopping fights, the missing key is in our hands.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE THIRD SIDE

In one sense, the third side is nothing new. It is in action all around us. It is just not self-aware yet. There has been no specific name for it. There is not much recognition of its potential. Nor is there much acceptance of common responsibility for the conflicts around us.

Although I have not always thought about it in these terms, all my professional life as a mediator and writer, I have been a student of the third side. Yet I feel I have only begun to grasp its extraordinary possibilities.

A story from World War II captures the third side’s potential for me. In the heart of Nazi-dominated Europe, when millions of Jews were being torn from their communities and dispatched to the death camps, one community of three thousand farmers took it upon themselves to offer sanctuary to Jewish refugees until they could be spirited to safety. For four years, the villagers of Le Chambon risked their lives defending innocent people against the Nazis and their hirelings. The number of refugees protected was not small. Twenty-five hundred Jews, mostly children, were estimated to have been rescued.

Le Chambon’s efforts did not escape the notice of the authorities.

The village was not far from Vichy, whose officials made a number of determined efforts to get the villagers to surrender their guests. They sent policemen and buses, but the people of Le Chambon refused to cooperate with the police and hid the refugees. When the Nazis took direct control of the region, the Gestapo conducted a raid and caught a few children, whom they deported, along with their local host, to the death camps. The Gestapo also sentenced Dr. Roger Le Forestier, a local leader, to death as an example to the villagers. But even with their lives and their families' lives under direct threat, the villagers refused to turn in their guests.

Indeed, the villagers' courage helped change the minds and move the hearts of several of their opponents. The Vichy government's efforts to carry out the Nazi directives eventually turned perfunctory. Later, the German military commander of the region, Major Schmebling, moved by Dr. Le Forestier's testimony at his trial, attempted to explain to the Gestapo chief, Colonel Metzger, why it was useless to fight the villagers: "I told Metzger that this kind of resistance had nothing to do with violence, nothing to do with anything we could destroy with violence." Metzger was not persuaded and insisted Schmebling use massive force. But Schmebling kept delaying the plans, and eventually France was liberated and the lives of the Jewish refugees were saved.

Why should the villagers have cared about a group of strangers? When asked this question decades later, Roger Darcissac, a local pastor, explained, "It all happened very simply. We didn't ask ourselves why. Because it's the human thing to do . . . something like that. That's all I can tell you." An elderly peasant echoed his explanation: "Because we were human, that's all." In her analysis of the pedestrian and bureaucratic ways in which the Nazis proceeded to exterminate millions, Hannah Arendt coined the phrase "the banality of evil." The villagers of Le Chambon exemplified "the banality of decency."

Most remarkable of all was that, to them, their behavior seemed unremarkable. There was not much to say. They did not think of themselves as heroic. They weren't being modest; it was almost as if it had never occurred to them to act differently. When people

commit murder and mayhem, it is tempting to look for explanations in human nature. And it is true that such acts of violence fall well within the range of human behavior. But so do such altruistic actions to prevent violence as the decisions of the villagers to protect their guests from certain death. The example of Le Chambon suggests that we humans may be capable of making the villagers' protective behavior as habitual as we have made violence and war. That is the potential of the third side.