



HOW CAN WE SOLVE OUR TOUGHEST PROBLEMS PEACEFULLY?

A SPEECH BY ADAM KAHANE

For the past 15 years, I have focused all of my attention on answering one question: How can we solve our toughest problems peacefully? It is not hard to try to solve our problems violently—to use our money or authority or guns to try to make things the way we want them to be. And it is not hard to be peaceful—but leave things just the way they are. How can we work together to co-create new social realities?

A few years ago, I had some dental surgery. The day afterward, I was getting onto an airplane and I banged my head against the overhead compartment, which sent a terrible shooting pain into my jaw. I went back to the dentist's office and complained to the nurse that when I hit my fist against my head, it *really* hurt. She looked at me calmly and gave me the most sensible advice I have ever been given: "If it hurts," she said, "then stop doing it."

Our usual way of trying to solve tough problems hurts, and we should stop doing it.

An Unusual Approach

For the past 15 years, I have been working on an *unusual* way to solve tough problems. I got started on this journey quite unexpectedly. In the early 1990s, I was working in the strategic planning department of Royal Dutch Shell, the global oil company, in

London. One day we received a phone call from a group of left-wing activists in South Africa who wanted to use the Shell strategic planning methodology to make plans for their country's transition away from apartheid, and they wondered whether someone from Shell could come and give them methodological advice. I found myself facilitating a team of South African leaders—black and white; from the left and the right; from the opposition and the establishment; from politics, business, and civil society—who were talking through what was happening and what they would do about it. What I witnessed in South Africa is that it is possible for a highly diverse group of leaders from across a social system, even ones who have literally been at war with one another, to engage in co-creating a better future.

Since then, I have, with my colleagues, been following this thread I picked up in South Africa. Our basic approach has been to work with teams of leaders from across a given social system, all of whom have the commitment and capacity to act to change that system, to build up a shared understanding of their current reality, of their own role in that current reality, and of what they can and will do to co-create a new reality. We have worked in this way with all kinds of teams, on all sorts of complex challenges, in all parts of the world: in Guatemala, to implement the peace accords; in India, to reduce child malnutrition; in the United States, to rejuvenate both urban and rural areas; in Canada, to shift to a low-carbon economy; across Europe and the Americas, to make food systems more sustainable;

and in South Africa, to respond to social impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Becoming "Bilingual"

I have bumped my head many times. But if you focus on one question for long enough, then eventually an answer will start to come to you. Here is the beginning of the answer that has come to me: If we want to be able to solve our toughest problems peacefully, then we have to become *bilingual*. We have to learn to speak two languages that are not translatable one into the other. We have to learn to speak the language of *power* and the language of *love*.



Now this answer requires a bit of explanation because the words power and love are defined by many different people in many different ways. I am using two particular definitions suggested by a German-American theologian named Paul Tillich that I have found resonate deeply with my own experience.

Tillich defines power as "the drive of everything living to realize itself, with increasing intensity and extensity." So power in this sense is the drive to get one's job done, to achieve one's purpose, to grow. I have spent most of my career in the world of business, which is dominated by this language of power: by the energetic, entrepreneurial drive of individuals and organizations to get their job done, to achieve their purpose, to grow. And when 15 years ago I got involved in that first project in South Africa, what so impressed me about South Africans was their entrepreneurial energy to do the job, to achieve the purpose, to grow into what their time was demanding of them.

TEAM TIP

Teams, like societies, can benefit by integrating power—the drive to get our job done—with love—the drive to make whole.

Tillich defines love as “the drive towards the unity of the separated.” So love in this sense is the drive to reconnect that which is whole, which is one, but that appears broken into fragments. I witnessed this drive toward unity, away from apartheid, in South Africa; after all, the word *apartheid* in Afrikaans means separateness. And I witnessed this same drive in all the work I have done in Latin America—in Colombia, Argentina, Paraguay, and Guatemala—working with teams of leaders who are trying to come together to heal the wounds caused by decades of polarization, repression, and war.

Longing for Connection

I recently had an experience where I witnessed a crystal-clear expression of the phenomena of power and love. I was in a workshop of a project that brings together leaders from all parts of the deeply and dangerously divided Jewish-Israeli society—left and right; religious and secular; politicians, businesspeople, rabbis, and activists—to try to develop answers to the vital question: What kind of society can we envisage, to which we and our descendants would be proud to belong, and in which we could live in friendship with our non-Jewish neighbors?

On the one hand, Jewish-Israeli society exemplifies the phenomenon of power: the drive of a people, rising out of the near-extinction of the Holocaust, to realize themselves intensively and extensively—and the conflicts that that drive inevitably produces. And this same phenomenon was present within the workshop itself, with each of the participants seized by the drive to realize themselves, to be true to themselves, to argue their point of view passionately—and the tough arguments that that drive inevitably produces.

But there was a second phenomenon also present in that workshop. One morning we had a long, heartfelt dialogue about inclusion and exclusion within Israeli society. It seemed to me that every part of that society feels excluded: the religious, the secular, the settlers, the Arabs, the Russians, the Ethiopians. I could hear the pain in people’s voices, but I couldn’t make

out why this conversation was so important to the group. Then suddenly I saw what *wasn’t* there. It’s like the joke about Sherlock Holmes and Watson on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Holmes wakes Watson up and asks him: “Watson, what do you see?” Watson is used to these tests of his skills of observation, and he

Power and love each have two faces: a generative face and a degenerative, shadow face.

starts to answer, “I see the twinkling stars, I see the rising moon, I see the passing clouds,” but Holmes interrupts him and says, “No Watson, you idiot! Someone stole our tent!” The pain in the room was the pain of the longing for what wasn’t there: for a sense of inclusion, of connection, of oneness. This is the phenomenon of love: the drive toward the unity of the separated. The pain in the room was the longing of Jewish-Israelis to be united with one another, and also with their non-Jewish neighbors.

Generative and Degenerative

Up to this point I have been talking about power and love in neutral and straightforward terms. But of course our situation is not neutral or straightforward at all, and this is because power and love each have two faces: a *generative* face and a *degenerative*, shadow face. Italian feminist Paula Melchiori has pointed out to me that we can see these two sets of two faces clearly if we look at traditional gender roles. The father, exemplifying masculine power, goes out to work in the world, to do his job. The generative face of his power is that he can create something valuable in the world; he can create history. The degenerative face of his power is that he can become so focused on his work that he forgets about his connection to other people, and can become a robot or even a tyrant. By contrast, the mother, exemplifying feminine love, stays at home to raise the children, renouncing her

capacity to create history. The generative face of her love is that she literally gives life to her child. The degenerative face of her love is that she can become so focused on the child that she stunts its capacity to grow and to realize itself.

So the reason we need to be bilingual is that power and love are complementary. Love is what makes power generative instead of degenerative. And power is what makes love generative instead of degenerative.

Paul Tillich’s most famous student was the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. In a speech King gave six months before he was assassinated, he spoke directly about this fundamental complementarity. “Power without love,” he said, “is reckless and abusive. And love without power is sentimental and anemic. This collision of immoral power with powerless morality constitutes the major crisis of our time.”

My own experience bears out King’s analysis. Power without love *is* reckless and abusive. If I act to realize myself without recognizing that you and I are one, then the result I will produce will at best be insensitive, and at worst oppressive or even genocidal. And love without power *is* sentimental and anemic. If I recognize our oneness, but don’t change my actions to accord with this recognition, then the result I will produce will at best be useless, and at worst a disingenuous reinforcement of the status quo.

It is not easy to work with power and love together. They are not opposed to one another but nor are they the same; they are permanently in tension. Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson said: “Probably the most troublesome pair of opposites [that we can try] to reconcile is love and power. Our modern world is torn to shreds by this dichotomy and one finds many more failures than successes in the attempt to reconcile them.”

Two Brains

A French-Canadian friend of mine once told me that his experience of being bilingual—which literally means having two tongues—was actually of being *bicephal*—of having two brains.

I had always understood his statement as metaphorical, until I came across a remarkable book by a neuroanatomist named Jill Bolte Taylor. Ten years ago, Taylor had a stroke where she completely lost the functioning of the left hemisphere of her brain. For three weeks she had the experience of functioning with only her right hemisphere.

Here is what she reports: “The two hemispheres . . . process information differently; each hemisphere thinks about different things, they care about different things, and dare I say, they have very different personalities. [The left hemisphere is] that little voice that says to me, ‘I am. I am.’ And as soon as my left hemisphere says to me ‘I am,’ I become separate.” So in my language, the left hemisphere is the brain of self-realization, of power.

Taylor goes on to report: “[The right hemisphere says:] ‘We are energy beings connected to one another . . . as one human family . . . We are perfect. We are whole. And we are beautiful.’” So in my language, the right hemisphere is the brain of wholeness, of love.

We need to learn to be bicephal, to be bilingual. We need to learn to speak both the language of power and the language of love. Power and love are not the same, but nor are they

opposed to one another. Like our masculine and feminine natures, like our left and right hemispheres, they exist in different domains; they complement and complete each other. If we can become more bilingual, then we will become more able to solve our toughest problems peacefully. ■

Adam Kahane (kahane@reospartners.com) is the author of *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*. As a partner in Generon Reos LLC (www.reospartners.com), he is a designer and facilitator of processes through which business, government, and civil society leaders can come together to solve their toughest problems. During the early 1990s, Adam was head of social, political, economic, and technological scenarios for Royal Dutch/Shell in London.

NEXT STEPS

In his book *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (Berrett-Koehler, 2007), Adam offers 10 suggestions for beginning to solve tough problems in partnership with others:

1. **Pay Attention to Your State of Being and to How You Are Talking and Listening.** Notice your own assumptions, reactions, anxieties, and projections.
2. **Speak Up.** Notice and say what you are thinking, feeling, and wanting.
3. **Remember That You Don’t Know the Truth About Anything.** When you are absolutely certain about the way things are, add “in my opinion.”
4. **Engage with and Listen to Others Who Have a Stake in the System.** Stretch beyond your comfort zone.
5. **Reflect on Your Own Role in the System.** Examine how what you are doing or are not doing is contributing to things being the way they are.
6. **Listen with Empathy.** Look at the system through the eyes of the other.
7. **Listen to What Is Being Said Not Just by Yourself and Others but Through All of You.** Listen with your heart.
8. **Stop Talking.** Camp out beside the question and let the answers come to you.
9. **Relax and Be Fully Present.** Open yourself up to being touched and transformed.
10. **Try Out These Suggestions and Notice What Happens.** Sense what happens with others, with yourself, and with the world.

POWER WITH LOVE IN GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Five principles may represent part of the code, the DNA, of an integral approach to solving tough problems peacefully. These five principles correspond to the five movements in Otto Scharmer’s Theory U: Initiating, Sensing, Presencing, Creating, and Evolving (see Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, Society for Organizational Learning, 2007).

Five years ago, Hal Hamilton and I launched a global initiative that we called the Sustainable Food Laboratory (see sustainablefoodlab.org). The problem situation that we set out to work on is the following: our present food system produces lots of food; the food is inexpensive for rich people but expensive for poor people; much of it is not healthy for the people who eat it; it doesn’t provide a decent livelihood for most farmers or farm workers; it’s not good for the soil or the water or the atmosphere . . . but other than that the system works fine! If the food system—as the systems

thinking aphorism says—is “perfectly designed to produce the results that it is now producing,” the Food Lab asked, how can we change this system to produce more economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable results?

- **Convene a Microcosm of the System’s Leadership.** We started off our initiative by looking for leaders of different parts of this system who understood and cared about this situation as a whole. We ended up recruiting leaders from food processors, retailers, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, governments, and citizen and worker movements. Eventually we had a team of 45 committed, influential people from Europe, the United States, and Latin America who together made up a miniature version of the global social system that we were all committed to changing. So the first principle is: “Convene a Microcosm of the System’s Leadership.”

This is a bilingual principle because in the language of power, this principle tells us to recruit leaders who have real capacity to change the system. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to recruit leaders who are committed to the health of the system as a whole.

- **Immerse in the Complexity of the System.** One consequence of having a team that constitutes a microcosm of the system they are trying to change is that, if they can talk with one another openly and honestly, then they can all see the whole system, from multiple perspectives, in its complexity and contradictions. Furthermore, the dynamics of the whole system—including the power dynamics—get replicated within the team’s meeting room, where they are available for everyone to see and to work on. The Food Lab team did this, and also got out of the meeting room and into a series of “learning journeys” around Brazil, where the whole system—rural and urban, primitive and modern, sustainable and unsustainable—was visible on the ground. In this way, they built up a shared picture of the food system and how it worked and why it was producing the results that it was producing. So the second principle is: “Immerse in the Complexity of the System.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to focus on understanding how things really work and what it really takes to change them in practice. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to focus on building connections and relationships across the system as a whole.

- **Retreat to the Source of Insight and Commitment.** As a committed, influential, microcosmic team immerses itself more and more deeply in the reality of the system it is trying to understand and change, they begin to notice their own role in things being the way that they are. There was a slogan in the 1960s that said that “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” But, as Bill Torbert once pointed out to me, actually that slogan misses the most important point about effecting change, which is that “If you’re not part of the problem, you *can’t* be part of the solution.” If we cannot see how what we are doing or not doing is contributing to things being the way that they are, to the system producing the results it is now producing, then it follows that we have no basis at all for changing these results—except from outside the system, violently. But if the leaders of a system can step back, can retreat, from the complexity of the system they are part of, and reflect on what is going on and their role in it, then they will be able to glimpse what they have to do. The Food Lab team, after they had been working together for six months, went on a retreat that included 72 hours alone, in silence, in the desert of Arizona. So the third principle is: “Retreat to the Source of Insight and Commitment.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to connect with our own deepest purpose and will. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to connect, not with what we need of the system, but with what the system needs of us.

- **Try Out Systemic Innovations.** When a team connects to this source of insight and commitment, within and between and around themselves, they can move mountains. Within only a few hours of coming back from the desert, the Food Lab team agreed on a set of six ambitious initiatives for creating more sustainable mainstream food supply chains, which they have continued to work on together during the past four years. These initiatives include connecting retailers in Europe and the United States to small fishermen and farmers in Africa and Latin America; connecting hospitals, schools and other public institutions to local producers of healthy food; and connecting buyers of food and bio-fuel commodities with sustainably managed growers. It’s not that the Food Lab team’s work, having connected to their source of insight and commitment, has since then always been easy or successful. It is just that they have had the courage and strength to get out into the world and just do it: to try and fail and learn and try again, over and over. So the fourth principle is: “Try Out Systemic Innovations.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to learn, not by theorizing or planning or recommending what other people ought to do, but rather by acting, by doing, by using our hands. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to undertake this action in partnership with other stakeholders from across the system.

- **Grow Ecosystems of New Practices.** The Food Lab team, after these years of trial and error, is gradually and organically building up an entirely new body of relationships and alliances and standards for mainstream sustainable food supply chains that is spreading within their own institutions and also across their suppliers and customers and competitors and allies. A web of ambitious, cutting-edge, cross-institutional initiatives is spreading across Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The Food Lab has become an influential space for learning and for institutionalizing these learnings into living examples of best practice. So the fifth and final principle is: “Grow Ecosystems of New Practices.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to keep our eyes on the prize of creating new and better realities, not in theory but in practice. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to keep our eye on the prize of creating these new realities, not violently but peacefully.

The Food Lab is making progress on its objective of creating living examples of mainstream sustainable food supply chains and so is itself becoming an important living example of this way of solving tough problems peacefully. Through trial and error we are gradually learning how together to create new social realities. That said, the approach to solving tough problems that I have outlined here is only about 15 years old and is still very much in its difficult teenage years. We have a long way to go before we can employ or replicate this approach to effecting change in complex social systems reliably. It is not easy to solve tough problems peacefully. It is not easy to employ power with love.