

## ***Taking The Third Side***

by Julia Menard

From her newsletter: HEN (May 27, 2010 issue) – you can subscribe to HEN for free at [www.juliamenard.com](http://www.juliamenard.com)

***“It takes two sides to fight and a third to stop it.” ... William Ury***

Anthropologist and conflict resolver William Ury has had the luxury of studying and traveling to peaceful cultures around the world to learn how they promote healthy relationships through conflict.

The key practice he discovered is the tendency for people to choose, not one side or the other in a conflict, but a “third side.” Ury dedicated a whole book to this phenomenon: The Third Side.

Ury sees this practice standing in stark contrast to our own. The norm in North American is to “take sides.” When faced with conflict, most of us declare allegiance to one of two sides: mine (the right side) or the other (the wrong side).

This sets us up to see the other as different, wrong and fundamentally not “one of us” – but “one of them” – the start of enemy imaging. Our culture is full of two sides in conflict: Employee vs Employer. Teacher vs Student. Husband vs wife. Union vs Management. Arab vs Israeli.

I saw this “natural” tendency to choose sides just today in a conflict I was called in on to help with. I met two clients not directly involved in the conflict, and both immediately wanted me to know about the validity of “their” side. It was a given that they saw their role as picking a side.

Unbeknownst to them, they were acting out of our culture’s dominant expectation perfectly. In fact, it’s hard to imagine there is any other role for a by-stander to play!

Through learning what works in other cultures, Ury offers us a third way. It’s not that some of us can’t see this third way, but it’s not a perspective that’s common or re-enforced in our culture.

To see what he saw, let’s also start by looking at what Ury discovered about peaceful cultures.

He devoted years to studying archaeological records and then visiting with tribes he saw as most closely resemble our ancestors. He presents the

case that for the first 99 percent of human history, the norm was not organized violence, but coexistence; only in the last 1 percent did violence become the way of resolving differences. He describes how the change from hunter-gatherer societies to farming led from horizontal to vertical power structures, to tension over fixed resources, and thence to organized violence.

"We have been maligning our ancestors," he says. It's not that they weren't capable of violence, but they worked hard at preventing and resolving conflict - and found ways to do so.

That's what Ury has devoted himself to: What do people in peace-promoting societies do - which our culture does not expect us to do?

He visited the Kalahari Bushmen, the Semai people of the Malaysian Rain Forest, and certain tribes in New Guinea and the one big difference he saw was how they looked at conflict.

For the Bushmen, for example, their system for managing conflict was the active, vigilant and constructive involvement of the surrounding members of the community. It was the people NOT directly involved in conflict who had the most powerful role to play. The relatives and friends of the warring Bushmen expected the disputants to work it out – and the community took an active role in ensuring the conversations happened.

Relatives and friends actually approach those in conflict and encourage them to have calming discussions with the "other side".

By-standers are peace-promoters - they act as the Third Side in any conflict.

The Bushmen also have a way for the community to have a conversation about the conflict - which further strengthens the Third Side. They call their community gathering a "kgotla." It is an open-aired, circular gathering place where people know they are coming to "talk and talk and talk."

Similarly, for the Semai people of the Malaysian Rain Forest, the norm when conflict is present is for people to zealously avoid taking sides: "It is not proper behaviour to take sides," one Semai man is quoted as saying.

What is proper is to urge one's relatives to resolve their dispute.

Also like the Bushmen, the Semai have long community conversations. They call their community gatherings “Bcaraa”.

Both these tendencies – for by-standers to advocate for both sides (to be the Third Side) and for a community to come together to talk in a “Circle” – is sadly not even heard of in our mainstream culture.

Mediators can act in that role (encouraging both parties to talk and setting up conversational spaces). In our culture, however, it’s usually just an “official” who acts as a mediator; mediator is a role everyone in a peaceful culture plays. In our culture, after a formal mediation process, disputants go home to their “side” – to a community who usually reinforces one side. This of course acts as a deterrent to peaceful relations.

Coming together to talk in community is not something most people welcome in our culture. It’s just expected in a peaceful culture. People must talk when things are not working. It is difficult to encourage conflicted parties in our culture to come together to talk for 2 hours in a mediation, let alone come together to talk indefinitely in a community circle!

It’s not like our culture doesn’t know better or doesn’t yearn for something different. Think of the tale of Romeo and Juliet – the tragic story of the consequences of taking sides.

Deep in our hearts we know it doesn’t help to take a side, but without enough modeling about the Third Side – it’s easy to slip. We can’t watch Romeo and Juliet every day!

We need reminders and reinforcement for how we most want to be: honouring the humanity of all sides and all parties. Being compassionate with all sides.

Barbara Coloroso, in her book *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander*, also looked at the important role by-standers (the Third Side) play in making conflicted situations better or worse.

She saw that if a by-stander takes a passive stance to conflict (by watching it or ignoring it), the effect was the same as if the by-stander was participating in the conflict!

Coloroso advocates an active part for by-standers. She saw with bullying and violence that there was a positive impact when a by-stander chose to become active as a witness, a resister, a defender, or a mediator.

Studying how we lose compassion with bullying led her to her later book on Genocide – where she saw how genocide begins with treating someone else as the “other”. She saw how extreme forms of hate are “rooted in contempt for another human being who's been deemed by the bully and his or her accomplices to be worthless, inferior, and undeserving of respect. Once I have contempt for you, I could do anything to you and not feel any shame or compassion. I've removed you from my circle of needing to treat you as a human being.”

Coloroso gives this advice for how to nurture a more compassionate world, starting with our children:

"What we want to do is root out anything in our children's lives that allows them to treat another human being with disdain. I don't tell children they have to like every kid in their class, or be their friend, but they must honour another child's humanity. When they name-call, relationally bully, or physically harm another person without caring, we have to say, wait a minute, stop that."

Peaceful tribal cultures are also wholly pertinent to contemporary life because, according to Ury, our global society is becoming more like earlier periods in human history:

“With the knowledge revolution we are experiencing, we are shifting from fixed resources, such as land - long fought over - back to an expandable resource. Pyramidal structures of authority are breaking down, and self-organizing, cooperative networks of horizontal relationships are emerging.”

We need to learn to become peace-promoting by-standers now more than ever.

Ury gives us some guidance on how to do this. We take a Third Side when we:

- Become an active participant in the prevention and constructive handling of conflict in our community by seeking to understand and hold as important both sides of any conflict;
- Actively encourage both parties (if possible) to cooperate - advocate for both side;
- Ask for dialogue as a wider community to build a vision which meets

the essential needs of both sides **and** the community as a whole.  
We are all affected by conflict; we are all inter-dependent.

Hopefully, the idea of a Third Side will come back to you the next time you are faced with a conflict you are not directly involved in. Be the Third Side. Try to see the conflict from both sides, to encourage both parties to cooperate, and to support a community dialogue until all can find what might be best for the whole community.

Your role is vital. The Third Side is us.

***"War is not inherent in human beings. We learn war and we learn peace. The culture of peace is something which is learned, just as violence is learned and war culture is learned." ... Elise Boulding***

Julia Menard works with Executives and Leaders wanting to create a more collaborative and respectful approach to conflict in the workplace. If you would like to learn more about what Julia offers, check out her articles and offerings at her website: [www.juliamenard.com](http://www.juliamenard.com).