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## Tango: the intimate dance of conflict transformation

### Tango: the intimate dance of conflict transformation

[Naomi Head](#) [1] 22 August 2013

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Trust, dialogue, passion, communication, vulnerability and empathy. Like tango, transforming conflict is an intimate affair.



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The tango. Two dancers stand apart at first, looking at each other. The connection begins before the leader invites the follower to enter into the embrace. There is delicious enjoyment in the moment when both dancers find comfort and stability as the music begins to beat a rhythm in their blood and in their feet. The dancers are drawn together into the intimate space they will share for the next three minutes, repeated for as long as they wish, and knowing that no two dances with the same partner will ever be the same.

The connection may expand, deepen, stumble or be blocked. But at its best, it produces a silent

oblivion to the external world and an internal communion between two people who move as one, circling the floor. Perfect communication without dialogue. Mutual trust between strangers. Empathy for oneself and for the other. These are the qualities that transform tango from a social dance into healing for the heart and soul.

As in tango, so in conflict and its transformation. Connections between the parties can be lost, rejected, or hard to establish. Trust can be broken. Cooperation may falter, empathy be blocked, and communication misunderstood or distorted. A relationship which is healing and creative can turn into a source of frustration, boring repetition, intolerance, judgement and negativity regarding oneself and the other. A conversation which begins so well can lose its way in response to a deliberate or unconscious shift in perceptions of the other.

Take, for example, [the story of Jo Berry and Pat Magee](#) [8]. Jo is the daughter of Sir Anthony Berry MP who was killed in the IRA Brighton bombing during the 1984 Conservative Party Conference. Pat is the former IRA activist who was convicted of the bombing. They met in 2000 after the Good Friday agreement when Jo went to meet Pat in Ireland, touching off a thirteen-year "dance" of their own during which they worked together for peace - sometimes moving jointly and then breaking apart, talking with each other and with communities in the thick of the conflict, and all the while exploring the possibilities for reconciliation.

Like the tango, their journey has been improvised, taking them on paths that neither had anticipated and opening doors that neither had imagined. Sharing their stories with others who are hostile or think differently has made them vulnerable, raising deeply personal, emotional and political questions about their commitments and their differences. Sharing a platform remains a repeated and conscious choice, involving nothing that is inevitable, predictable or easy. In [Jo's words](#) [8], "an inner shift is required to hear the story of the enemy. For me the question is always about whether I can let go of my need to blame, and open my heart enough to hear Pat's story and understand his motivations. The truth is that sometimes I can and sometimes I can't. It's a journey and it's a choice, which means it's not all sorted and put away in a box."

As with Pat and Jo's relationship, tango is an improvised dance that is built around the quality of the embrace and the willingness of each dancer to share themselves and their passion with the other. Both must give themselves up to the music without any desire for control, and without judgement, resentment or criticism. This is what feeds the circularity of trust, empathy, and dialogue which exists between the dancers. The follower must trust in the leader to know where and when to move. To permit another person - frequently a stranger - to move with you, body and soul, requires a willingness to make yourself vulnerable. This is not without risk or uncertainty.

All these characteristics are instantly recognisable to those engaged in processes of conflict transformation. Embedded hostility, dislike, or simple shyness in the face of an invitation all affect the quality of engagement between the different parties to a conflict. How do you approach your partner before you enter the embrace? Do you make your intentions clear, and take time to feel your way into the relationship so that both partners are comfortable with the contact? Are the preconditions present for trust to be built?

Conflict transformation requires bringing this awareness into the public sphere. Where people are unable to exercise empathy in relation to the other - when they dehumanise, distance, stereotype, and label their opponents - then conflict and violence are inevitable. Examples of this problem abound in contemporary politics. Long narratives of hostility, captured in the conflict over Iran's nuclear program between Iran and the United States, reflect an inability to walk in the shoes of the other. In place of empathy come preconditions, pressures, and harsh economic sanctions on Iran, all of which have failed to deliver an agreement.

Exploring why this is so leads us to consider the beliefs about ourselves and others which inform Iranian and Western worldviews. Understanding the emotional underpinnings of the historical narratives that have undermined negotiations with Iran is crucial in developing sustainable alternatives to the escalation of hostilities. In order to break the cycles of violence, the actors involved must recognise their role in perpetuating them. This transformative process is grounded, at least in part, in the experience of empathy and reflective dialogue which takes time, perseverance

and imagination, in order to look for alternative paths of thought and action.

The emotions that are encountered frequently in conflict such as pride, dignity, humiliation, anger, disrespect, joy, sadness and love, are no strangers on the dance floor. Each dancer has to learn to take responsibility for their feelings, and to manage them with respect to their partner and the dance. Such emotions also colour the recent protests in Egypt, Turkey and Brazil. They permeate international politics from elite levels to grassroots activism and calls for revolutionary change. Emotions are woven through the causes and experiences of violent conflict. Yet they remain sidelined by politicians, negotiators, governments, armed forces and international institutions. Interpersonal transformation practices such as mediation, meditation and mindfulness teach us to examine and manage our own emotions, stories, and judgements. Perhaps it is time to consider these responsibilities when states negotiate with one another.

As Jo Berry and Pat Magee's relationship demonstrates, creating and maintaining a connection with the other takes imagination and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable. It requires embracing complexity and the rejection of binary polarities, so that we can see ourselves embedded in a web of relationships that includes our "enemies." This is the stuff of transformation, and it applies to the deeply personal, intimate experience of the tango as much as to the revolutionary calls for political change and social justice that resonate in global politics.

The rich and detailed stories of people who are involved in conflict wander through emotional landscapes, historical events, personal and political vulnerabilities, and complex layers of relationships. Such narratives offer insights into the workings of social and political structures in societies. They help to navigate through alternative political possibilities while simultaneously acknowledging the complex dance of relationships which embraces friends and enemies alike. Like tango, conflict transformation remains an intimate affair.

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 About the author

[Naomi Head](#) [13] is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Glasgow. She works on conflict transformation, critical theory, dialogue and empathy, and is equally passionate about dancing Argentine tango. Recent publications include [Justifying Violence: Communicative ethics and the use of force in Kosovo](#) [14] and 'Transforming Conflict: Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue' [15].

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