

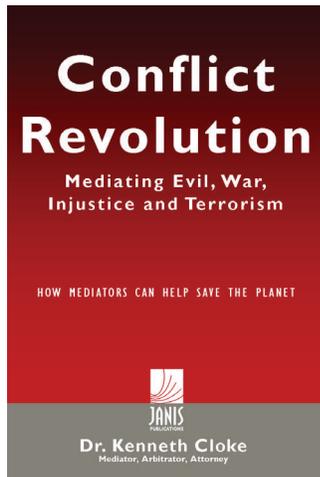
**BOOK REVIEW**

(Average reading time: 12 to 15 minutes)

**Conflict Revolution: Mediating Evil, War, Injustice and Terrorism – How Mediators Can Help Save the Planet**

by Victoria Pynchon, JD, LLM

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**Conflict Revolution**  
by  
**Dr. Kenneth Cloke**

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In [Conflict Revolution – Mediating Evil, War, Injustice and Terrorism](#), Ken Cloke proposes that we revolutionize the way we resolve armed conflict, global warming, terrorism, catastrophic species extinction and, yes, who should do the dinner dishes tonight. Household chores aside, few people have the audacity to even *suggest* that problems on this scale, of this complexity and with this persistence can be *solved*. Reduced, maybe. The sharpest edges rounded. The problems contained, diminished or off-shored. But *solved*?

These are the things we *do*. This is the way we *are*. These problems cannot be resolved because *we will never change*. If our habitual way of resolving conflict threatens our survival as a species . . . well . . . then we're pretty much doomed, aren't we?

But Cloke is deep in his practice and our skepticism does not deter him. “*Every change*,” he warns,

*entails a loss of certainty stimulated by the temporary transition from order to disorder, even if it is only in preparation for evolving to a higher, more successful level of order. Change therefore means, at least on a transitional and symbolic basis, surrendering the need for order and control, and accepting the inevitability of a period, however brief, in which there is disorder and loss of control.*

**Rising to the Occasion**

There is a moment in Al Gore's global warming slideshow where he addresses our tendency to move directly from denial to despair. “*There are a lot of people*,” he says,

*who go straight from den[ying the probable consequences of global warming] to despair without pausing on the intermediate step of actually doing something about the problem.*

Sitting in a darkened theater, overwhelmed by the disastrous events and perilous future outlined by Gore, I'd *just* been thinking that the problem was simply too big for us. But Gore persisted. "*Are we as Americans capable of . . . rising above ourselves and above history? The record,*" he stressed, "*indicates that we do.*"

*We formed a nation. We fought a revolution and brought something new to this Earth, a free nation guaranteeing individual liberty. America made a moral decision that slavery was wrong and that we could not be half free and half slave. We as Americans decided that of course women should have the right vote. We defeated totalitarianism and won a war in the Pacific and the Atlantic simultaneously. We desegregated our schools and cured some diseases like polio. We landed on the moon, the very example of what's possible when we are at our best.*

While Gore *closes* [\*An Inconvenient Truth\*](#) with a list of things we should *do*, Cloke *opens* his call to save the planet with who we can *be* -- personally, locally, globally, politically, socially and economically. How large a task is this? There's never been a bigger one. Then again, we've never before posed so thorough a threat to our own survival.

## **THE PROBLEM**

We are a fractious, competitive, self-seeking, emotion-driven species. We compete for property, power and prestige. We wrestle with one another for the affection of our family members, potential romantic partners, and the esteem of our communities. We are fearful of hunger, thirst, disease and exposure. Living in a world of scarce resources and limited opportunities, we see *your gain* as *our loss*.

On those occasions when we do cooperate with one another, we often do so with manipulation in mind. Working at cross-purposes, we become frustrated, angry, suspicious and more fearful than ever. Fisticuffs lead to rocks which we then learn to craft into arrow heads. We smelt metal for swords and make powder that explodes. We learn physics and create thermonuclear bombs.

That we have resolved our conflicts over scarce resources for millions of years without wiping ourselves from the face of the earth is the most surprising thing about us. Confronted with our documented taste for one another's blood, the only apparent explanation for our persistence as a species is our lack of the technology to finish the job off. Now that self-extinction is *possible*, we either move to the next level of conflict resolution *or we die*. But where do we begin?

## **RIGHTS AND POWER VS. INTERESTS**

The discrete "medicines" Cloke prescribes as remedies for our local and global conflict "disease" are not new. As Cloke notes from the start:

*Mediation, informal problem-solving, group facilitation, collaborative negotiation, public dialogue, prejudice reduction, and other conflict resolution techniques have amply demonstrated, in countless conflicts over the last three decades, that there is*

*a better outcome than winning and losing, a more successful process than accusation and blaming, and a deeper relationship than exercising power over and against others.*

What is new about Cloke's conflict therapy is how thorough-going it is. It doesn't take 400+ pages to say that a rights/power conflict analysis doesn't hold a candle to the collaborative interest-based dispute resolution techniques developed over the past thirty years. What takes 400+ pages is laying out the social, political and economic *architecture* necessary for the transition from the flying buttresses of Notre Dame to the curvaceous steel exteriors of a Frank Gehry concert hall.

The work Cloke asks us to do is an inside job. We must, as Gandhi decreed, "*be the change [we] want to see in the world.*" But individual transformation alone is not enough. We also need to do our *connective* homework – seeing the links and fault lines between ourselves and the institutions we have created to "hold" and express ourselves as a community.

If you think I exaggerate the immensity of the task and the enormity of Cloke's prescription for change, let me begin by telling you how difficult it is for an attorney to set aside her rights, law and power tools in favor of a process as messy and unpredictable as a colonial New England town meeting. I begin to release my grip on these familiar instruments, however, when reminded by Cloke that the resolution of conflicts based upon rights requires the use of

*legislation, litigation, adversarial negotiation, bureaucratic coercion, rules and regulations, contractual agreements, and policies and procedures.*

I'm nearly ready to set my existing tools aside when Cloke asserts that "rights are limitations on the exercise of power, yet depend on power for their enforcement." I finally surrender only when Cloke reminds me that

*[r]ights-based processes . . . generate winners and losers, undermine relationships, and result in collateral damage, . . . Since rights rely on rules, change is discouraged, though not prevented, and conflicts are settled rather than prevented or resolved*

This is not easy work. As a full-time attorney-mediator, I *know* how elusive Cloke's "outcomes" can be --

*outcomes [in which] both sides win and no one loses, when former adversaries engage in meaningful dialogue and reach satisfying agreements, and when power is exercised with and for each other by jointly solving common problems.*

Can we actively promote mechanisms that create these results? Yes we can.

## CHANGING THE WAY WE CHANGE

Shakespeare famously said that the poet “gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name.” Because I do not wish to leave any reader in the land of “airy nothings,” what follows is an extremely truncated 50,000 foot travel guide to Cloke’s dense and necessary book.

### ***PART II: The Sources of Social Conflict***

The first course of Cloke’s revolutionary menu is contained in Part II – **The Sources of Social Conflict**. It is here that Cloke makes the political personal again by placing all individual conflicts into their social, political and economic context. As Cloke writes:

*Most efforts at resolution . . . downplay or ignore the profound influence that social and cultural environments have on conflicts, and rarely examine or seek to resolve the underlying social assumptions, myths, mores, expectations, and ways of thinking and behaving that link seemingly isolated individual conflicts with the methods by which people ascribe and interpret their meaning.*

If we do not recognize and provide for the *context* in which conflict arises, we have no hope of resolving our differences at either the individual or the societal level. How could we? We are it and it is us. Have we done this before? Yes we have and within at least one living generation’s personal history.

When I was in my early twenties, for instance, an entire generation of post-war women came together to learn about the social and political causes underlying their very personal and frustrating limitations. We called it “consciousness raising.” Did our education lead us to wallow in self-pity? Did we cast blame, cover ourselves in ashes and wait to be rescued? No. We went back to school. We changed our career aspirations from the three or four we believed to be available to us (waitress, wife, teacher, nurse) to the multitude we now inhabit as rightly our own – professor, lawyer, doctor, mechanic, machinist, welder, cabbie, firefighter.

This is “all” Part II asks – that we assess whether our current conflicts are due, in part, to political, social, economic or religious institutions that, united in purpose, we possess the power to change.

There is no true distinction, however, between this critical external work and the important internal work necessary to *change the way we change*.

As Cloke observes:

*Social evolution and personal transcendence are . . . linked. Each may take place in isolation, internally, and personally; or collectively, externally, and socially. We are therefore led to consider how conflict resolution principles might be used to proactively design social conditions that encourage the prevention, resolution, transformation, and transcendence of individual and social conflicts.*

Sounds good. But we still need help. Is it on the way?

### ***PART III: Analyzing Obstacles***

To the adage “know your enemy,” Cloke adds the exhortation that we also know ourselves and our friends; our comforts and our addictions; our fears and our resistance to change. If name be needed for our enemies, let them be called Prejudice, Nationalism, Xenophobia, Discrimination, Domination, Orthodoxy, even Capitalism, Competition and Money. But do not expect Cloke to take “sides” in the cultural and political wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Cloke is not talking about *change*. He is talking about *transformation and transcendence*.

*For transformation and transcendence to occur systemically, we not only need to eliminate the social, economic, and political sources of chronic conflict, but to shift the paradigm of change itself, creating a “revolution in the revolution,” and changing the way we change . . .*

After an exhaustive analysis of successful revolutions followed by failed economic and cultural orders; the triumph of a market economy that rests upon the back of an oppressed and impoverished “third” world; the problem of evil, the persistence of injustice and the horrors of terrorism, Cloke brings it all back home to each one of us:

*Whether our conflicts are intensely personal and between private individuals, or intensely political and between nations and cultures, three critical areas require ongoing improvement and transformation. These are:*

- *our personal capacity for mindfulness, integrity, learning, and heartfelt communications*
- *our interpersonal capacity for egalitarian relationships, collaborative negotiation, and democratic dialogue, and*
- *our systemic capacity for designing preventative, strategic approaches to resolving social, economic, political, and ecological disputes and encouraging positive attitudes toward diversity, community, and change*

*Developing in these areas will significantly improve our ability to resolve international disputes before they become needlessly destructive . . .*

*Yet it will also require us to recognize that interest-based conflict resolution techniques carry a price in our willingness to listen to people and ideas we do not like or agree with, and to share power and control over outcomes with people who are very different from ourselves. Ultimately, transcending conflict means giving up unequal, inequitable, and autocratic power- and rights-based practices and institutions and seeking instead to satisfy interests and the reasons people adopt power and rights approaches in the first place. This means surrendering our ability to use force to take from others what does not belong to us, or coerce them into giving what they are otherwise unwilling to give.*

The *real* enemy, the true obstacle to success here, is our resistance to the solution itself. Once we cross *that* barrier, what exactly is it we're supposed to do?

#### ***PART IV: Redesigning Systems***

In the penultimate section of **Conflict Revolution**, Cloke asks that we first acknowledge our individual responsibility for keeping unjust or inefficient conflict resolution mechanisms in place. He then outlines ways in which our existing systems can be redesigned. In many cases, these redesigned systems already exist. We can enter any one of them tomorrow morning to help make the *alternative* the norm.

What systems does Cloke contend will help us rescue ourselves from destruction?

1. Restorative justice based upon victim-offender mediation and including Truth and Reconciliation Commissions for crimes against humanity;
2. Peer mediation programs for conflict in our public schools;
3. Designing workplace conflict resolution systems;
4. Creating alternatives to capitalist *and* socialist markets; and,
5. Designing interest-based political institutions, an algorithm for a more mediative form of politics, and an ideal conflict resolution state.

Impossible you say? Take a look at Cloke's suggested principled steps for achieving these goals:

- *Shift[ing] from hierarchy, bureaucracy, and autocracy to heterarchy, participation, and democracy*
- *Reduc[ing] inequalities in status, inequities in wealth, and autocracies in power*
- *Foreswear[ing] the use of military options except in the decreasing likelihood of self-defense when under attack*
- *Invit[ing] direct public participation in all significant decision-making*
- *Substitute[ing] dialogue for debate*
- *Reach[ing] consensus whenever possible and vote only as a last resort*
- *Shift[ing] from exercising power and defending rights to satisfying interests*
- *Commit[ing] to open, honest, authentic communication and elimination of government secrecy*
- *Conduct[ing] foreign and domestic policy based on collaboration and partnership rather than antagonism and hyper-competition*

- *Celebrat[ing] diversity in race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and individual personality on all levels*
- *Flatten[ing] hierarchical agencies by reducing the ranks of middle management and leveling pay differentials*
- *Treat[ing] employees as equals and reorganize internally into self-managing teams*
- *Bridg[ing] organizational silos and institutional specializations*
- *Implement[ing] continuous feedback and 360-degree performance improvement processes*
- *Reward[ing] disagreement and dissent, and invite organizational learning*
- *Encourage[ing] self-assessment, organizational learning, evolution, and transformational change.*

Who, you ask, will do this work? Anyone. But Cloke has in mind a particular group of professionals who are already tilling these fields. In the last section of his treatise he delivers on his promise to tell us ***How Mediators Can Help Save the Planet.***

#### ***PART V: Implementing Solutions: [Mediators Beyond Borders](#)***

Cloke has described himself as having an optimistic heart and a pessimistic mind. In forming [Mediators Beyond Borders](#), Cloke has put both heart and mind together to raise the questions and implement the solutions outlined in **Conflict Revolution**. As Cloke explains:

*The most effective international projects, in my experience, have been those that extend over decades, with people returning year after year to follow up, learn what worked and what didn't, and provide fresh information, more advanced techniques, and nuanced advice as circumstances evolve and change. It will undoubtedly take considerable effort and commitment to design and implement such projects. Yet, as conflict has no borders, neither does compassion, or commitment to making a difference. We can only choose whether we will be distant, helpless victims of what we mistakenly regard as other people's tragedies, or active participants in resolving disputes in our own human family, regardless of where, how, or among whom they are occurring.*

This call to action – made expressly to mediators -- has already been answered. The Founding Congress of Mediators Beyond Borders met this February at a retreat in Colorado to plan projects, discuss strategy, and to learn from one another how to transform conflict into committed activism worldwide.

This, however, is not the solution. This is the *beginning* of a solution. As our former national poet laureate Billy Collins reminded us in his poem *Aristotle*, in the beginning, “[a]lmost anything can happen . . . “

*The first-person narrator introduces himself,  
tells us about his lineage.  
The mezzo-soprano stands in the wings.  
Here the climbers are studying a map  
or pulling on their long woolen socks.  
This is early on, years before the Ark, dawn.  
The profile of an animal is being smeared  
on the wall of a cave,  
and you have not yet learned to crawl.  
This is the opening, the gambit,  
a pawn moving forward an inch.  
This is your first night with her, your first night without her.  
This is the first part  
where the wheels begin to turn,  
where the elevator begins its ascent,  
before the doors lurch apart.*

## HOW TO READ THE BOOK

There is only one doorway to Mr. Cloke’s book. A single point of entry. And that place is where the thicket is the deepest for each of us; where we locate the path for the journey to save our own lives.

Here’s my suggestion. Read the Introduction and then put the book down for a week or two. Don’t think about it. It will be thinking about you. When you pick the book up again, from your bedside table or off the living room floor, take a look at the table of contents or the index and see what subject draws you in. Where is the need greatest or the confusion most profound in your own life? It is to this subject that I would go.

After you read about your own most personal and pressing issue, put the book down again. Based upon what you learn there, try one new thing. Why? Because you have already gone beyond the point where your usual problem-solving methods have failed you. That’s why you picked up this book in the first place.

The good news is that you do not have to *believe* in a thesis or sign on to a program. You needn’t take an oath, recite a pledge or accept anyone else’s ideology. Cloke’s book doesn’t come at a discount with a set of Ginzu steak knives thrown in. It will work whether you believe it will or not.

I leave you with **Conflict Revolution** and your own dreams, remembering what Ralph Waldo Emerson said more than one hundred years ago: ***What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.***