

"Bridge-Building Between People Of Differing Religious Ideologies."

An Unedited Interview With Amy and Arny Mindell, www.aamindell.net,

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Dear Linda, thanks for asking us about our conflict work around ideologies. Some of the background behind our answers can be found in Arny's books;

The Year I,

The Leader as Martial Artist,

Sitting in the Fire,

The Deep Democracy of Open Forums

Linda; I should say that, in general, my questions will stem from the following assumptions about your work, based on reading your website and listening to the previously mentioned interview with Arnold (please correct any inaccuracy):-- that you work with groups of people who come to you to address differences/conflicts with other groups (and this is what you refer to as WorldWork, yes?)

A+A Not quite. We work on many levels with many different issues and types of people, groups, and organizations. Some want greater diversity consciousness, others need to improve a depressed or oppressive atmosphere, some are businesses and very large organizations hoping to survive or get richer, some want to reorganize and learn to develop their visions, others want direct work on conflict, some are in war zones, etc etc. Process work depends upon the people, cultures, and particular styles.

Linda that your work deals in part with getting people to recognize and be present to the fears that cause them to separate into ideologically-based groups of perceived safety.

A+A Well...yes, in part. However the larger part of our work is based upon awareness of what is happening, and following that inwardly, in relationships, dialogues, and large group forums. Frequently fears arise, but more often aggression is the first recognizable signal. We don't criticize people's belief systems, but try to appreciate them when possible, and ask *ourselves* to sense the essence of those systems. The essence is nondualistic, and embraces the unitive nature of the person and group (--not necessarily the details of an ideology!). When we are able to touch this level, just about everyone feels spoken to. But this is as much innerwork on our part, as it is outer work.

Linda Here then are my questions...

1)What kinds of attitudes and levels of openness do people come to your World Work groups with? In my experience, getting someone to move from an attitude of "I want to prove that I am right" to "I am willing to question my assumptions and learn about/learn from this other person" seems to require the person's own intrinsic motivation. There has to be some motive on the individual's part to show up at a meeting or to broach the conversation, perhaps simply an element of the person that allows them to be slightly more curious than they are dogmatic. Would you say that the people you work with come to the group sessions already possessing the motivation to have a breakthrough conversation?

A+A Only Rarely! Most people feel hurt, but will still come if they suspect or hope

that others might understand them better or support them in what they feel. Usually people hope that the "other side" changes, wakes up, or submits. We don't usually question peoples' motivation, but rather seek to show it as belonging to everyone, as a role or "ghost role" shared by all. If anything, we question our own motivation. If we want to "change others", we are usually less successful than when we try to understand and appreciate everyone.

By the way, when people are ready to come to the "table" to meet, half the problems are already solved. At this point, any well intentioned facilitator will do well, regardless of the method. However, for us, the greatest challenge is connecting and embracing those people who do NOT want to come to the table to discuss anything, are not ready to do so, and could easily wait several life times before sitting down with the "other." These people represent a very large portion of our world. We have studied how to open up to these folks. One thing we know for sure is they are most likely to appear, when they feel their deepest natures are acceptable, not simply endured, but wanted and needed in the open forums. That is our goal. To make everyone realize, we need him or her, regardless of what they feel. We don't always succeed, but it is a deep direction for us.

Linda In your group sessions, how much do you dig into the differences in moral stances or ideologies that may have brought them there in the first place?

A+A Great question. We don't really "dig", but point out from verbal and body signals, the deeper, usually unrecognized feelings, opinions, etc that have not yet been said. In other words we listen to the different views of the facts, unintended communication signals, and try to sense that special deep "oneness" feeling as it may arise in the moment. We follow all this as best possible, representing it in creative ways as the situations allows. For example, in New Orleans, we might use Mardi-Gras masks to demonstrate hidden spirits. In European business communities, we might simply verbalize the unintended signals ourselves. In psychological or spiritual communities, we might do some form of role play. With kids, everything is play! ☺

Linda As one person I interviewed said, about bridging the gap between fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists, "in order to continue to befriend one another, there is a certain amount of avoidance of inflammatory topics, such as abortion and homosexuality, though the more we develop relationships of respect and trust, we can go toward discussing our differing ideas." It would seem that some bridge-building can occur while avoiding the more delicate issues, but, I wonder if you are able in your groups to broach the divisive ideas/moral stances.

A+A. Right. Much conflict is simply due to the fact that we really do not know the other. However, we don't encourage avoiding issues too long. Gently using awareness of feelings and ideas that are avoided can quickly clarify the process. Only rarely do people really need a lot of time to get to know one another. More frequently, a well facilitated conflict brought out quickly and almost painlessly, that is bringing up difficult issues in a way that people feel safe, can be immensely relieving. If you have a thorn in your finger, best take it out ASAP.

Linda Or is your work more about focusing on replacing fears with trust, helping people come to realize that their ideas are not as important as the sense of connectedness that they are missing out on when they emphasize ideological differences?

A+A We don't try to replace anyone's feelings with other feelings including trust. Trying to do that too quickly, usually does not last. Instead we focus on encouraging everyone to be aware of their feelings as they arise. (See Sitting in the Fire for examples). Following process is a flow awareness method requiring technical, social, and spiritual innerwork. This work connects us not only to the people who are

present, to the fact and feelings they are speaking about, but also to the idea that change is the amazing root of our interconnectedness.

Linda Besides acknowledging fears, what are some other methods you employ when working with groups or individuals to move them from holding a stereotype of what a _____ (fill in the blank-- gay person, christian, etc.) is, to opening minds and hearts to the real person in front of them ?

A+A We don't really try to get beyond stereotypes. Rather, we ask exactly what they mean, and how those stereotypes are actually true for the individual using them. How are those stereotypes unrepresented "ghost" roles, that are in the air belonging in some way to each and every human being? In some way, everyone is Lesbian, Gay, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Fundamentalist etc. (Or at least most of us! ☺)

Linda Excerpting from an FAQ on your web page ("How do people deal best with the stress of processing issues in groups?") you wrote,

"... it is important to appreciate that some people may not want to talk about stressful situations at all, while others do. Make two kinds of work for both groups when possible. Note, in religious communities, a particular belief system can be used to maintain awareness 'in the fire.'"

This is very intriguing. Can you please elucidate further about making two kinds of work, and about what it means to maintain awareness 'in the fire' ?

A+A. We meant when we spoke of "two kinds of work" that if a group is shy to speak out loud, folks can simply write their ideas on paper (without their names on it). Then the facilitator can choose one note at random, and simply discuss it with the group in a general manner. That is often a way of dealing with topics, without much stress. In others groups more overt forms of discussion, forums and role play can occur.

Using spiritual or religious belief systems to maintain "awareness in the fire" is a core element of our work. The essence of all god concepts and spiritual systems is not just dogma, but something closer to a unitive consciousness. This special form of awareness is often not in people's awareness. Even people speaking about their particular belief systems are rarely in touch with their essence or nondualistic spirit. In a way, they may not have gone deeply enough into the essence, or almost ineffable experience behind their beliefs. When they do, some feel they can be more open both to their own feelings, and at the same time listen to others. But we never insist upon this. We suggest it, or point to its possibility when the term "god" or Buddha Mind, Christ, Allah, Yahweh etc arise.

For example, years ago while working on an Aboriginal land rights issue, an Aboriginal person became silent in a large open forum in Australia. After pausing for a moment, he said, "The earth welcomes all of you!" That allowed all to work together!

Linda If gay people and fundamentalists can recognize their mutual fears of one another, and then get to the point where they can agree to safeguard each other's safety in the context of your group gathering, that seems like a significant gain toward openness to others. Can you speak to whether or how the effect of such a dynamic of trust that your group work helps to create TRANSFERS for participants out into the world AFTER THE GROUP WORK IS FINISHED?

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx You are referring here apparently to one of our large group, open forum city processes. After the forum on the evening you are speaking of, there was decidedly less violence. A city TV station re-played that forum right after that, and for years following that evening. In fact, people still see that show and speak of it today. That show created a buzz, one that contributes to the slow, gradual awareness change of public consciousness.

Linda I truly appreciate your time, and will do my best to put your ideas to service in a way that will be a light in the world! Many thanks!

Linda Ceriello

A+A Thanks Linda, and very much good luck to you in your work; bless you for caring for the world, love a+a