Bridging the Self-Other Divide

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Executive Summary

This thesis enters the space between self and other, us and them, exploring how a natural divide between two or more people becomes conflict-ridden, and how the resulting chasm between self and other is bridged—even to the degree that self and other may come to see themselves as one. The overarching question this thesis seeks to answer is simple: "When the divide between self and other has become conflicted, how is it healed?" Given the complexity of both the divide and the potential of unity between self and other, however, the question is restated as follows: "How is a relational bridge between self and other both understood and meaningfully established, especially in the context of distrust, exclusion, and alienation?"

To understand this question, we begin in chapter 1 with the philosophical contributions of Martin Buber, whose work on the I-Thou relation helps to build a foundational understanding of the self-other divide upon which the remaining thesis rests. Buber becomes our conversation partner throughout this thesis, asking questions, probing and challenging the perspectives proposed in the chapters that follow. In chapter 2, we explore how conflict theory explains the divide between self and other, and in particular, how differences shift from disagreement into conflict and entrenchment. Chapter 3 studies how conflict transformation theory bridges the divide between self and other. By leaning on two models, one for managing polarities and another for understanding the triangulation involved in conflict transformation, this chapter proposes a pathway that leads to a healthy self-other relation. Chapter 4 also considers the bridge over the self-other divide, this time, however, from the perspective of contemplative spirituality. Looking especially at the imagery of selfhood, and supported by explorations of unitive consciousness and the imagery of the Trinity, this chapter also proposes a pathway that generates a healthy self-other relation. In chapter 5, we bring our two primary disciplines of study—conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality—into dialogue with one another. While both disciplines have insights to offer the self-other relation, this dialogue also reveals the blind spots borne by each discipline—blind spots that are often exposed and answered by the contribution of the other discipline.

As our two disciplines of study engage, challenge, and enhance one another, three primary conclusions emerge: (1) While the images of selfhood in conflict theory and contemplative spirituality naturally differ from one another, their points of intersection and their differences have the potential to profoundly deepen the work of conflict transformation, and to strengthen the wisdom of contemplative

spirituality. For conflict practitioners, the contemplative image of selfhood changes the questions practitioners ask and opens the possibility for deeper healing to occur. For contemplatives, the practical applications associated with the image of selfhood proposed by conflict theorists puts "legs" under the contemplative vision for the self-other relation, providing concrete tools for those who seek to build bridges between self and other.

(2) Both contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation theory speak about both-and thinking. By developing a model to describe this form of thinking, conflict transformation theory is able to communicate the risks associated with either-or thinking alongside what both-and thinking looks like practically. Contemplative spirituality goes beyond where conflict transformation theory is able to go with regard to both-and thinking. Referring to this form of thinking as unitive consciousness or nondualism, contemplatives offer greater texture and tenor to this form of thought, casting a vision for unitive consciousness as the goal to which contemplatives aspire. When brought into dialogue with one another, the two models of both-and thinking push one another. Conflict transformation theory pushes contemplatives to be clearer with regard to both-and thinking (and offers them an avenue to do so); contemplative spirituality pushes conflict practitioners to reach beyond a simple utilitarian approach to both-and thinking, and toward a more stable and enduring both-and consciousness.

(3) In the dialogue between conflict transformation theory and Christian contemplative spirituality we see an interplay between the image of the Trinity with concepts such as "emotional triangles," and a "Law of Three." Borne out of hard won on-the-ground experiences of working with polarized people, many conflict transformation theorists use the concept of emotional triangles to understand conflict and inform their work. Conversely, when describing reality, some contemplatives use a similar Law of Three concept to undergird their explanations regarding the nature of change. When these two concepts—emotional triangles and Law of Three—are brought together with the concept of the Trinity, an image of reality emerges that informs, deepens, and strengthens both the image of selfhood and both-and consciousness.

In view of the dialogue between conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality, this thesis concludes with the proposition that the bridge between self and other is stronger, more robust, and more durable when wisdom from each of our two disciplines of study is woven together. Together, our two disciplines enrich each other, creating new and important wisdom for consideration.