BRIDGING THE SELF-OTHER DIVIDE

Conflict Transformation and Contemplative Spirituality in Dialogue

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in Dialogue

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_Epiphany, 2019._
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.
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Introduction

The relational bridge between two or more people is naturally complex, generating multiple experiences and emotional states—often simultaneously. The span of this relational bridge easily grows and shrinks over time, depending on the nature of the encounter between self and other, the nature of selfhood that each—self and other—bring to this encounter, and the nature of the larger environment within which the relational bridge is built. At one extreme, self and other are so removed from one another they exist as aliens to one another. At the other extreme, self and other are so united they experience themselves as one being.

It appears self-evident that self and other are two and not one. This divide is neither good nor bad, it is simply a fact grounded in lived experience. What begins as a natural division, however, may readily grow over time becoming a chasm marked by conflict, pain, and distress. Eventually, a growing divide can lead to both categorical exclusion and dehumanization. Even a cursory look at the daily news reveals how alive and painful this divide is. We see this chasm in discourses between those with differing political viewpoints, in conflicts between nations and the minority groups that inhabit them, between corporations and those who work in their factories, and between geopolitical players maneuvering for influence. Closer to home, we see this same chasm between colleagues, family members, neighbours, and friends.

Despite the realities of division, multiple voices argue that the distance between self and other is an illusion: Self and other are not two but one, at least in part. While self and other are naturally unique and separate beings, an existential unity undergirds the relationship between self and other, binding the two to one another. As self and other experience this unity, the distance between them shrinks, to the degree that eventually self and other come to a place where no bridge is necessary—the two are already one. In reality, oneness is most often experienced in fleeting and passing moments. Nonetheless, the awareness that oneness exists drives self and other to seek its flowering again and again. In this view, the natural division between self and other, at least in its less extreme forms, is seen positively: Self and other each require unique selfhood in order to genuinely allow an experience of oneness to materialize. As a result, a “both-and” construction of the bridge between self and other emerges: To experience genuine oneness, self and other must be both divided and one with one another.
This thesis enters the space between self and other, 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. In a sense, 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 stated 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 pursue an answer to this question, this thesis considers four sub-themes, each representing its own chapter. In chapter 1, we invite philosopher Martin Buber into the conversation, in order to understand how he explores the self-other divide. While we will encounter the voices of scholars and practitioners of conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality in due course, we open with Martin Buber, as he will accompany us as a conversation partner throughout the chapters that follow. This thesis is not intended as a thorough exploration of Buber’s thought. Instead, by bringing Buber into the conversation, we create a type of accountability for ourselves. In a sense, Buber is our interlocutor. At various moments, his voice affirms, challenges, and poses questions of the project we are undertaking. Buber’s thought acts as a touchstone to which we will regularly return as we pursue our key questions.

Chapter 2 explores how the divide between self and other is explained in conflict theory, noting in particular the shift from healthy disagreement to conflict and entrenchment, the causes of conflict that lie behind these shifts, and how interactions between self and other contribute to deepening the self and other divide. Alongside this exploration, we note how understandings of selfhood change in the context of conflict and how this change further drives conflict experiences.

In chapter 3, we consider how theories of conflict transformation seek to heal the rift between self and other. By plotting the self-other divide on a polarization schematic and then using this graphic as a guide, we propose a pathway that draws self and other from their extremes and into the transformation of their conflict. As we shall see, this model rests on a shift from either-or to both-and thinking. This model also proposes that the bridge between self and other is ultimately three-pointed: While self and other inhabit the two endpoints of the bridge, a third space opens up beyond them—a space that becomes the pivot point through which transformation can occur.

Chapter 4 takes us into somewhat different territory, as we shift from conflict transformation to explore how contemplative spirituality seeks to heal the rift between self and other. Like conflict
transformation, contemplative spirituality is motivated by both-and thinking allowing for a natural point
of conversation between the disciplines, even though the formulation of this construction naturally
diffsers between the two. Alongside both-and thinking, this chapter explores the nature of selfhood and
the concepts of Trinity and a “Law of Three” —all of which impact the self-other relation and the
transformation of conflict. Contemplative spirituality casts a vision for unity between self and other that
honours unique identities while simultaneously allowing for an experience of oneness between self and
other to emerge.

Finally, in chapter 5, the proposals made by conflict transformation and contemplative
spirituality are brought into dialogue with one another, each engaging, challenging, and enhancing the
other. In this manner, both disciplines are held accountable to our overarching question regarding how a
bridge between self and other is built. We draw several conclusions from this comparison, proposing a
pathway of transformation that neither discipline can achieve on its own.

As might be expected, the two fields of conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality do
not typically correspond with one another. The former is somewhat more technical in nature, the latter
more spiritual or philosophical in nature. Nonetheless, both serve a similar purpose—at least insofar as
the theme of this thesis is concerned, as both are motivated to build bridges between self and other.
While no readily available literature brings our two disciplines of study into dialogue with one another,
the yearning for interaction between the two is already present in both disciplines. For example,
mediator Lois Gold encourages a grander vision among conflict transformation practitioners when she
laments: “We have honed our skills as conflict technicians, not conflict healers.”¹ In contrast, but also by
way of lament, contemplative Tom Eberle states: “We know how to teach the philosophy and practices
of contemplation but we do not know how to teach the practical application of contemplation,
especially as it relates to the hard work of interpersonal relationships.”²

This thesis proposes that dialogue between conflict transformation and contemplative
spirituality is not only necessary, it is critical and perhaps even urgent. While both conflict
transformation and contemplative spirituality seek to heal the rift between self and other, each
discipline carries potential blind spots and each has something to offer the other. Contemplative
spirituality offers a philosophical understanding of identity and self-other interactions that open the
possibility of deep unity between self and other. If this form of spirituality is unmoored from the
practical application of this vision, however, it risks losing the unity of which it speaks in favour of a
much smaller vision of unity within the self, or alternatively, exclusive unity between the self and a
divine entity. In other words, removed from theories of practical application, such as those provided by
conflict transformation, contemplative spirituality finds itself in danger of becoming self-serving and distorted. In contrast, conflict transformation offers many excellent models and frameworks for engaging the divide between self and other. However, if conflict transformation does not cast a grander vision than simply the resolution of conflict, the potential of deeper unity between self and other—and with it, a stronger and more lasting peace—goes unrealised. Indeed, without a grander vision of selfhood and the possibility of transformation that is carried by such a vision, would-be third parties risk entrenching conflict rather than transforming it. As a result, this thesis proposes that the two disciplines, as different from one another as they may be, not only enrich one another; they need one another to reach their full potential. Together, and with Buber’s support, the two disciplines provide a more fulsome answer to our key question than either discipline can achieve on its own.

Before proceeding further, it is critical that we define the terms “self” and “other” as these two words weave their way throughout this thesis. The concept of selfhood is correlated here with the individual and the collective self, just as the concept of otherhood is correlated with the individual and the collective other. In other words, the self-other divide can be understood as both a division between two individuals and a division between two groups. While a more positive and neutral understanding of the self-other divide is possible, for ease of writing, it is to the painful and conflicted division between self and other that the phrase, “the self-other divide” points. At times, this phrase is described as the self-other frame, the self-other dynamic, and the self-other relation.

Many layers drive the self-other divide, including (a) divisions within the self, (b) the interpersonal patterns and dynamics of the self-other relation, (c) the inter-group self-other relation, and (d) the social structures in which self and other exist that inform the nature of the self-other divide at each of the levels (a, b, c) already identified. A mutuality between each of these layers is proposed, as a change in any one of these layers can spill over to affect the remaining layers of the self-other divide. Nonetheless, while each of these layers is important, this thesis focuses primarily on layers (a) and (b), the divisions within the self and the inter-group or interpersonal dynamics between self and other. As a result, after an exploration of how the self-other divide emerges in the context of conflict, we consider how transformation within the self transforms the self-other frame, just as the transformation of the self-other frame also transforms the self.

Chapter 1

Overview of Martin Buber’s Concept of the I-Thou/I-It Frame

As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, the overarching question we are exploring is 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?” While relatively little has been written specifically about the interplay between our two disciplines of study—contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation—Martin Buber’s work crosses naturally into territory covered by each discipline, making Buber an excellent conversation partner for this exercise. In a sense, Buber’s work grounds this thesis, keeping it tied to a voice that asks questions of both disciplines, demanding accountability for the theories each might espouse. To allow Buber to play this role, we begin by providing a brief overview of Buber’s thought.

Writing in the shadow of two world wars and the horrors of the Holocaust, Buber, along with other twentieth century philosophers, wrestled with the existing philosophical understandings of the self, giving voice to an alternate reading of the nature of the relationship between self and other.¹ In particular, contrary to both radical individualism and radical nationalism—both of which allow the individual and the collective self to actualize without the other and both of which were options during this era—the philosophical foundation of this alternate philosophy states unequivocally that the self is not actualized alone. Instead, the self is seen as coming into existence in relationship with the other. Among the philosophers arguing in favour of this perspective, Buber provides a particularly persuasive argument.

The opening lines of Buber’s book Ich und Du, quoted below, provide an excellent beginning:

Das eine Grundwort ist das Wortpaar Ich-Du.
Das andere Grundwort ist das Wortpaar Ich-Es; wobei, ohne Änderung des Grundwortes, für Es auch eins der Worte Er und Sie eintreten kann.
Somit ist auch das Ich des Menschen zwiefältig.
Denn das Ich des Grundworts Ich-Du ist ein anderes als das des Grundworts Ich-Es.²

Buber’s concept here is deceivingly simple. Grammatically, he is playing with words that in English are translated as I-Thou (or I-You) and I-It.³ “It” in this case is a third person pronoun and when referring to
persons It is replaced with the words “he” and “she.” “Thou” or “You,” by contrast, is the second person pronoun used in direct conversation with the other. According to Buber, when the other is addressed in the third person rather than the second person something within the self also changes. The “I” in relationship with “Thou” is fundamentally different from the “I” in relationship with “he,” “she,” or “it.” Even more provocatively, Buber proposes that the “I” does not properly exist outside of an “I-Thou” relationship.4

In his most well-known book, I and Thou, and in the books and articles Buber subsequently wrote, Buber explores the nature of human existence, asking, “Who is the self? Who is the other?” Buber’s short answer is this: “All real living is meeting.”5 The self does not exist outside relationship with the other, nor does the other exist outside relationship with the self. However—and this is the great challenge of Buber’s exercise—the nature of this meeting determines whether self and other actually live and flourish as a result of an encounter with one another or whether this encounter perpetuates a truncated image of self and other. In other words, while all real living is meeting not all meeting is real living.

Buber differentiates between the two possibilities of encounter as follows:

The man who experiences has no part in the world. For it is ‘in him’ and not between him and the world that the experience arises. The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it. As experience, the world belongs to the primary word I-It. The primary word I-Thou establishes the world of relation.6

What Buber is exploring here is the manner in which the self engages the other. In the case of I-Thou, the self is a whole that engages the other as a whole. The self does not control the other; the self does not even seek to analyse or assess the qualities of the other. Instead, the self allows the territory between self and other—the relationship—to occasion opportunities for encounter that allow self and other to become more whole. Within the I-Thou relationship, the other is neither classified nor objectified. The other is not subsumed under a definition of the other created by the self. The self does not and cannot declare the nature of the other. There is only participation in a “dynamic, living process of an ‘other.’”7 Grammatically, in the I-Thou frame, both self and other are subjects: The self knows itself as subject and relates to the other as subject. Through dialogue, these two subjects engage in an ongoing process of “becoming.” Further, according to Buber, the I-Thou encounter is not reserved for human relations alone. The self can also encounter nature, art, and the ultimate Other as Thou. In these cases, the self-other lens of human relations mirrors the self-other possibility of these additional encounters, subject relating to subject and whole relating to whole.
By way of contrast, the I-It frame is driven by the need to categorize the other. The other is seen as the same as or as different from the self (or alternate others). The other is judged and assessed. In short, the other could be described as a thing the self can handle, manipulate, or experience. Although Buber does not use the word selfishness, in a non-moral sense it is this he appears to be describing. The self is selfish insofar as the self in the I-It frame is its own reference point. The other is caused to relate to the self according to the self as the primary point around which all else is oriented. In this frame, the other is an It, a thing, fixed in time and space. According to this dynamic, the self engages in a monologue with the other. The self perceives itself to be the subject of experience, rather than simply as subject. As the other is that which is being experienced, the other now becomes object not subject.

Buber acknowledges that the I-Thou frame, while ideal, is transitory. Although one can return to this frame, it cannot be sustained. To function in the day-to-day expectations of life, the self must shift to categorizing the other. With respect to the scientific realm this is logical. The world—that is nature—must also be understood in its “thingness,” how it functions, how it compares with other “things,” how it is remembered, etc. With respect to the encounter between people this appears less logical. Why should it be necessary that the other must be perceived as an It? Buber’s description of the It offers a clue. Buber explains:

Genuine contemplation is over in a short time; now the life in nature, that first unlocked itself to me in the mystery of mutual action, can again be described, taken to pieces, and classified—the meeting-point of manifold systems of laws. And love itself cannot persist in direct relation. It endures, but in interchange of actual and potential being. The human being who was even now single and unconditioned, not something lying to hand, only present, not able to be Experienced, only able to be fulfilled, has now become again a He or a She, a sum of qualities, a given quantity with a certain shape. Now I may take out from him again the color of his hair or of his speech or of his goodness. But so long as I can do this he is no more my Thou and cannot yet be my Thou again.

According to Buber there are conversations, required in the course of daily life, that simply do not occasion a genuine encounter. A doctor assesses the health of a patient; two people think through what to make for dinner; a child is pulled from danger…. In these moments, those involved are not seeking an I-Thou encounter; they are attending to the necessities of life. Buber suggests that even to regard the structure of the other’s physicality is to regard the other as an It. To be clear, Buber does not elevate the I-Thou over the I-It; Buber readily acknowledges that while not being genuine dialogue, the I-It frame is still necessary and, to that end, benign. Nonetheless, while to sustain the I-Thou frame may be impossible, it is the goal to which the self continually returns. Without this shift, the wholeness
of the self cannot be realized. It is only through I-Thou encounters with the other that the self becomes the self. As Buber states: “Without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man.”

Over time, Buber added nuance and interpretation to his perspective. Specifically, Buber saw the need to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy versions of the I-It frame. Rather than create a third word pair, Buber came to describe the interactions between people as three forms of dialogue: genuine dialogue (I-Thou), technical dialogue (I-It), and monologue disguised as dialogue (a distorted form of I-It). Buber saw that some difference must exist between benign I-It conversations and harmful I-It conversations. Genuine dialogue occurs when “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.” Technical dialogue occurs for objective reasons alone “because of the need for transitory reciprocity or a degree of objective understanding between persons, whether between coworkers puzzling over a task, strangers seeking and giving directions, or family members planning the evening meal.” Monologue disguised as dialogue, however, is qualitatively different. According to Buber, this is the “underworld of faceless specters of dialogue.”

Monologue disguised as dialogue involves people speaking “in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways.” This includes debate that seeks to “strike home in the sharpest way” and without the speakers really “being present to each other as persons.” This includes people communicating only to make an impression on one another. It can even include the talk between lovers when the focus of conversation is more on the self than one’s partner. While Buber argues that genuine meeting “is hidden in all kinds of corners” and can emerge even during technical dialogue and monologue, and while he allows for the need for technical dialogue, Buber laments monologues disguised as dialogues. This is the form of the I-It frame that most accurately reflects the danger associated with engaging the other in the third person. It is also the form that most significantly alters the quality of the “I,” the self. As we shall see, it is also the form that triggers the descent into conflict.

We have already seen that the self must experience I-Thou encounters in order to be human. We have also seen that benign I-It (or technical dialogue) encounters are necessary even if they involve regarding the other as It. Nonetheless, there is risk associated even with the benign expression of the I-It frame. If “he who lives with It alone is not a man” then it follows that those who languish too long in the I-It space will experience themselves and the other as less than human, making the fall into monologue disguised as dialogue more likely.

Some might surmise that if self and other come into being in relation to one another, then independently self and other do not exist. Buber, however, suggests otherwise, proposing that although
the self does not exist outside relationship with the other, the self in relation to the other is not
subsumed by the other. The I in relation to Thou still exists, just as the Thou in relation to I still exists.
The I-Thou encounter allows the wholeness of each—self and other—to flourish independently even
while at the same time allowing for unity or oneness between self and other. In his essay, *Distance and
Relation*, Buber proposes that two movements define human life: “the primal setting at a distance”
[Urdistanz] and “entering into relation” [In-Beziehungtreten]. Distance here is not meant to precede
relation in a temporal sense; instead, distance makes relation possible—distance creates space for
relation to occur. Buber states: “That the first movement is the presupposition of the other is plain from
the fact that one can enter into relation only with a being that has been set at a distance or, more
precisely, has become an independent opposite.” Here Buber recognizes that for genuine meeting
between self and other to occur, self and other must also exist independently. In this case, the divide
between self and other is neither negative nor neutral, but necessary and positive. To be clear, Buber
does not align distance with the I-It frame and relation with the I-Thou frame. While distance alone
allows the self to regard the other as object (I-It), relation to the other as subject (I-Thou) is not possible
in the absence of distance. Buber explains:

He who turns to the real that he has removed from himself and that has been completed and
transformed into a world – he who turns to the world and looking upon it steps into relation
with it – becomes aware of a wholeness and unity in such a way that from then on he is able to
grasp being as a wholeness and a unity; the single being has received the character of the unity
that is perceived in it from the wholeness and unity perceived in the world. But a man does not
obtain this view simply from the ‘setting at a distance’ and ‘making independent.’ These would
offer him the world only as an object, as only an aggregate of qualities that can be added to at
will – not a genuine wholeness and unity. Only the view of what I face in the world in its full
presence, with which I have set myself, present in my whole person, in relation – only this view
gives me the world truly as whole and one. For only in such opposition are the realm of man and
what completes in spirit finally one.

The implications of the “dance” between distance and relation are profound: As self and other
regard and accept one another in the wholeness and unity of their humanity apart from one another,
they also, ironically, (a) complete one another, and (b) make their humanity possible. While self and
other are independently whole, wholeness is incomplete in the absence of one another. Similarly, while
self and other are wholly human, humanity is only fully realised in relation with another. In the interplay
between distance and relation, Buber banishes all illusions that self and other disappear as they
encounter one another. Buber concludes: “[E]very actual fulfillment of relations between men, means
acceptance of otherness.”
The conclusion offered by Buber here is an excellent bridge to the thesis that follows. With Buber, contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation seek to accept otherness and in so doing, allow for a healthy relation between self and other to emerge. However, both Buber and contemplatives go further than conflict transformation is able to go, proposing that in the acceptance of otherness, oneness between self and other is made possible, even if only realised for a fleeting moment.

Contra the conclusions offered by Buber, those caught in conflict typically reject otherness. In this view, as seen through the lens of conflict theory, self and other are created in the mind of the self, reducing self and other to caricatures of themselves. Buber gives voice to this reality when describing the distorted I-It relation, or monologue disguised as dialogue. In this case, the self is selfish; it is the self-created self, constructed by the self’s collection of experiences, thoughts, and perspectives regarding the other—and regarding the self. In a sense, there is no space for otherness in this model; all reality is defined by the self; the other now has no permission to be its own self.

As we have seen, Buber argues that while genuine dialogue is necessary to be human, much of daily functioning occurs in the technical dialogue frame. While technical dialogue does not harm self and other, when no moments of genuine dialogue between self and other occur, self and other risk losing their humanity and falling into monologue disguised as dialogue. Conflict theory echoes Buber’s sentiments, proposing that those in conflict fall from disagreement into conflict whenever selfhood is perceived to be at risk. As conflict deepens, the possibility of I-Thou encounters recedes ever further into the distance. Conflict transformation enters this fray, proposing theories and strategies for rebuilding the self-other relation. While Buber himself did not offer analogous concrete strategies, Buber’s theories nonetheless become an important measure by which these theories can be tested and challenged.

As we have seen, according to Buber, the nature of the relationship between self and other determines the quality of the self that comes into being. Specifically, an I-It relationship will create a different self than the self that emerges in an I-Thou relationship. The self of the I-Thou relation is neither selfish nor selfless. It makes space for the other, allowing a deeper selfhood of both self and other to emerge—a selfhood within which a bridge between self and other is found. While conflict transformation theory would not disagree with this statement, it is in the discipline of contemplative spirituality that these words by Buber find greater resonance. As we shall see, when the voices of contemplatives are added to Buber’s, this conclusion is deepened, strengthened, and nuanced providing a compelling argument for the inclusion of contemplative perspectives in the transformation of conflict.
See, for example, the works of Emmanuel Levinas. While the social context of the twentieth century influenced Buber and Levinas, both took as their counterpoint the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, whose notion of self did not include the other.

2 Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 3. These words by Buber are translated by Ronald G. Smith in *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald G. Smith, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 3, as follows: “The one primary word is the combination I-Thou. The other primary word is the combination I-It; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words He and She can replace It. Hence the I of man is also twofold. For the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It.”

3 See *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (London: T & T Clark, 1937; New York: Scribner’s 1958, 1986), and *I and Thou*, trans. with a prologue and notes by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1970). All quotes from *I and Thou* in this thesis will be taken from the Smith translation. The advantage of the term “Thou” is that it conveys a level of honour of the other which is consistent with Buber’s writing; the advantage of the word “You” is that it conveys a level of nearness that Buber was seeking to convey with his use of “Du.” Given that Buber’s work in English is most commonly referenced as “I and Thou,” this translation of the term “Du” will also be used in this thesis.

4 It should be noted that while Buber’s “Ich” is translated most commonly as “I” and while he sometimes uses the term “man” to mean the same thing, we will translate his “Ich” as both “I” and “self.” Similarly, Buber’s “Du” and “Es” will be translated individually as “You” and “It” and collectively as the “other.”

5 Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

6 Ibid., 5–6.


10 Ibid., 40.

11 Ibid., 34.


13 Ibid., 22.


16 Ibid., 23.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 22.


21 Ibid., 207.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 208.

24 Ibid., 211. Buber states further: “Human life and humanity come into being in genuine meetings. There, man learns not merely that he is limited by man, cast upon his own finitude, partialness, need of completion, but his own relation to truth is heightened by the other’s different relation to the same truth—difference in
accordance with this individuation and destined to take seed and grow differently. Men need, and it is granted to them, to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings. But beyond this, they need—and it is granted to them—to see the truth, which the soul gains by struggle, light up to the others, the brothers, in a different way, and even so be confirmed.” (Ibid.)

25 Ibid., 206–207.
Chapter 2

The Self-Other Frame in Conflict Theory

2.a  Introduction

While some relationships begin on a landscape already deeply divided between self and other, others begin with the promise of a healthy self-other relation, one that makes space for both genuine dialogue and healthy forms of technical dialogue. Whether a relationship between self and other is perceived as healthy or not, differences, disagreements, and conflict with one another will occur. As we shall see, the absence of differences between self and other is perceived to be as problematic as the presence of differences. The question of import here is how differences shift the relationship of self and other. Borrowing from Buber, when do differences allow for an I-Thou encounter and when do differences sink self and other into the distorted I-It frame? The intention of this chapter is to explore how the self-other frame is created, revealed, entrenched, and challenged in the contexts of disagreement and conflict. To this end, this chapter will explore the following sub-themes: (1) We will define disagreement, conflict, and the nature of conflict escalation, linking these themes with the self-other frame; (2) we will consider the causes of conflict, applying these to the manner in which the self-other dynamic is established; and finally, (3) we will look at the nature of communication and how interactions between self and other contribute to the divide between them.

2.a.i  Primary Conversation Partners

While leaders, philosophers, psychologists, clergy, and others have explored the nature of conflict for millennia, conflict transformation as a discipline in its own right only emerged in the years and decades following the Second World War. The body of knowledge being collected and written about with respect to conflict and its transformation is vast and continues to grow. Our purpose is not to provide a survey of this writing. Instead, we will borrow from a range of conflict theorists and practitioners to build our understanding of the self-other divide. In addition, this chapter will draw from the experience of the author of this thesis as she has worked with and developed these concepts over her past twenty-six years as a conflict transformation specialist.1
2.b Conflict Escalation and the Construction of the Self-Other Frame

The context of conflict is critical for understanding the construction of the self-other frame. As we shall see, as differences shift from disagreement into conflict, the potential for harmony between self and other is compromised and the self-other divide begins. While disagreement still allows for I-Thou and healthy I-It encounters, when disagreement shifts into conflict the self-other divide is established and/or reflected. As conflict grows and escalates, this divide deepens, both limiting the possibility of transformation and entrenching the self-other divide. To understand this dynamic, we begin by defining the various terms associated with differences between self and other. Secondly, we consider how the self-other divide shifts over the course of conflict’s escalation. Throughout, we refer to the I-Thou and I-It frames, linking the self-other divide to the philosophical frame established by Buber.

2.b.i Definitions: Difference, Disagreement, Conflict, Disputes, and Entrenchment

What do we mean when we say that we or those people are “in conflict?” A cursory review of conflict theory literature reveals a variety of conflict definitions, offered here in authorial alphabetical order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Burton</td>
<td>Disputes... are short term disagreements that are relatively easy to resolve. Long term, deep-rooted problems that involve seemingly non-negotiable issues that are resistant to resolution are... conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis A. Coser</td>
<td>Conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Paul Lederach</td>
<td>Conflict situations are those unique episodes when we explicitly recognize the existence of multiple realities and negotiate the creation of a common meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker</td>
<td>Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas Yarn</td>
<td>Conflict is a state, rather than a process. People who have opposing interests, values, or needs are in a state of conflict which may be latent (meaning not acted upon) or manifest, in which case it is brought forward in the form of a dispute or disputing process. In this sense, ‘a conflict can exist without a dispute, but a dispute cannot exist without a conflict.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the definitions provided look somewhat at odds with one another, together they reflect two basic streams of thought. In one stream, conflict is positive and holds the potential for nurturing both healthy relations with the other and excellent tangible outcomes. In a second stream, conflict is negative, destroying both relationships and organizational potential. Here, the distinction between dispute and conflict provided by Burton is helpful. Whereas a dispute can be relatively easy to resolve
and therefore more likely something positive, conflict is deeply rooted, entrenched, and therefore more likely negative. Seeking to distinguish between these two terms, Yarn arrives at a somewhat different place than Burton, declaring conflict to be a state of being rather than a process, which, when made manifest, is experienced as a dispute. There is truth in both Burton’s and Yarn’s perspectives. As per Yarn, when parties are in a “state of conflict” with one another, they find specific (and sometimes illogical) issues or disputes through which to express that state. As per Burton, there is something qualitatively different between differences that are relatively easy to resolve and those that resist resolution.

There is another distinction that demands attention. Many would argue that conflict is necessary for the health of a relationship, family, community, or organization. In this case, the question is not, contra Burton, whether the conflict is difficult or easy to resolve. Instead, the question is whether the conflict is constructive or destructive. In this regard, Coser’s definition is particularly interesting. While Coser’s definition may appear to be the most despairing of the definitions—that conflict involves competition between “rivals” that wish, at best, to neutralize one another—Coser argues that conflict is necessary, suggesting even that social change cannot or does not occur in the absence of conflict.

Borrowing from the authors above and placing the definition of conflict within the self-other frame, this thesis proposes several definitions with respect to differences, disagreement, conflict, disputes, and entrenchment. The term “differences” is our generic and neutral overarching category under which disagreements, conflicts, and disputes reside. “Disagreement” happens when two or more parties differ from one another with respect to a shared problem. In a disagreement, the focus of the parties is their shared problem and not one another. Like differences, disagreement is also a neutral term in the sense that it describes differences still largely free of emotional freight or interpersonal difficulty. Disagreements can be calm or intense; they can be about trivial or significant matters. Disagreements are typically healthy and may even be enjoyable. Similar to the positive definitions already noted, disagreements allow for “the creation of common meaning.” The primary point of distinction here is that when parties disagree, they can articulate what the problem is; they focus on the problem as the problem and they place energy in addressing the problem without personalising the dispute—that is, without seeing the other as the source of the problem.

Disagreements are the types of differences for which many conflict theorists advocate, for the simple reason that the absence of disagreement is often as disastrous as the presence of conflict. When parties are not able to disagree with one another, one observes several consequences: (a) The wisdom of one of the parties (often a “weaker” party) is not heard, allowing for an unhealthy power dynamic of
one over another to take root, (b) those who propose an alternate perspective are perceived as betraying the norm or the decision trajectory of the group, and (c) self and other may reflect an absence of disagreement publicly while internally one or more of the parties already shifts into conflict with the other.  

With respect to our purpose here, what is notable is that at the stage of disagreement, the differences between self and other still allow for both technical dialogue and genuine dialogue. The benign frame of I-It is engaged as people puzzle through a problem. To be clear, in keeping with the definitions provided by Buber, while both parties could be in an I-It relationship with the problem over which they are puzzling, the parties are likely also engaging one another as “It”—that is, within the healthy expression of the I-It relation, technical dialogue. The I-Thou frame breaks in whenever mutual puzzlement promotes a genuine encounter between self and other. As we have seen, if at the stage of disagreement parties engage in technical dialogue only, they risk falling into monologue disguised as dialogue. Persistent I-It interactions that do not occasionally move in the direction of I-Thou, over time create a sense of dis-ease, allowing a distorted I-It dynamic to take hold. When the distorted I-It frame begins, the shift out of disagreement and into conflict occurs. Said otherwise, while disagreement reflects the healthy self-other relation, the shift away from disagreement and into conflict reflects the self-other divide.

When dialogue between disagreeing parties takes on the character of the distorted I-It frame, a shift in conversational quality occurs. The self now perceives itself as being unacknowledged by the other, and the initial steps out of disagreement and into conflict are taken. While parties may still present a face of external calm and harmony, inwardly they may begin to identify the other as the problem. Not only does the other shift in the mind of the self from second person to third person, the self now engages in internal monologues regarding the other. When this occurs, a further step from disagreement into conflict is taken. Indeed, disagreements transition into “conflict” whenever the focus of the parties shifts from their shared problem to the perception of the other as the problem. This also serves as our definition of conflict. The other, not the issue, is now seen as the problem. Over time, a mental process of “othering” the other occurs—those in conflict add data to their original irritation with one another, they draw in other parties to confirm their growing bias against each other, and they begin to view the other party (and those associated with the other party) through the caricature they have drawn of the other. The distorted I-It dynamic has now taken hold. This has profound implications: Once people have fallen into the trap of othering the other, a relationship pattern emerges that over time becomes difficult to notice, comprehend, or break, thus limiting the possibility of new and different
outcomes with respect to the growing conflict. Eventually, a tipping point is reached, and what was once a relatively small conflict held near to the key players now breaks out into the open causing significantly greater emotional harm and opening the door to the severing of relations with the other.¹³

Along this journey of escalation, “disputes”—tangible issues of difference created by and/or seen through the lens of conflict—manifest the underlying state of conflict between the parties involved. While both disagreements and disputes involve tangible issues of difference, unlike disagreements, disputes occur in the context of conflict. As a result, disputes are not free of emotional freight. Instead, they bear both the burden of the tangible issues of difference and they carry the emotional weight of the larger conflict itself. Because of this, disputes are significantly more difficult to resolve than disagreements. Said otherwise, disputes occur in a context where the distorted I-It frame has taken hold, whereas disagreements occur in a context where both the I-Thou frame and the more benign I-It frame are possible. In the former, the identities of self and other are at risk; in the latter, they are not. This determines how the parties engage the tangible issues over which they are wrestling.

As differences shift from disagreement to conflict and then continue to escalate, those involved encounter the possibility of entrenchment. Within the schema already established, we observe a deepening of the negative formulation of the I-It frame. What was once monologue disguised as dialogue no longer even disguises itself. Parties talk about one another or at one another rather than with one another. Conflict “entrenchment” is defined here as that condition where the differences between two parties resist resolution and where those differences emerge from intense, rigid antipathy for one another. Entrenchment can be divided further into two sub-categories: active and passive. While active entrenchment is accompanied by attempts to neutralize and injure the other, passive entrenchment refers to those situations where a stalemate between the parties has led to a parting of ways but where feelings of disregard for the other continue to exist. On the global scene, in conflicted workplaces, and in broken families, we observe ample evidence of these two types of entrenchment, often with disastrous outcomes for the parties involved. While multiple avenues exist at earlier stages of conflict escalation to lead parties back to healthy disagreement, the closer the parties come to entrenchment, the fewer options for resolution there appear to be.

Entrenchment not only deepens the self-other divide, it also weakens selfhood. Here we recall Buber’s proposal that the I of the I-Thou is functionally different than the I of the I-It. As those in conflict drift further and further from the possibility of an I-Thou encounter, the humanity of the self is increasingly compromised. The self now becomes defined by the felt loss of something deeper within itself, frequently expressed through powerful and deeply felt human needs. If, as per Buber, the self is
realised in relationship with the other, this avenue to selfhood now becomes increasingly closed as the journey toward entrenchment is taken. As we have seen, according to Buber, while the self exists in relation to the other, the self still needs its own identity in order for a genuine encounter with the other to occur.\textsuperscript{14} As conflict moves to entrenchment, however, those in conflict ironically seek to gain their self not from within but from the other. This is seen when the self perceives that the conflict cannot be resolved and/or that the self cannot come to peace until the other has changed, has been defeated, or has otherwise met the needs of the self in some way. Selfhood is further compromised by entrenchment insofar as, when conflict grows, the conflict itself risks becoming the source of meaning/purpose for the conflicted parties.\textsuperscript{15} Practically, this means that, as conflict moves toward entrenchment, the self gains its sense of identity through the conflict itself. In this case, the identity needs of the self are met by the continuance of conflict rather than its resolution. This further compromises the possibility that a genuine I-Thou encounter can occur.

While the inability to solve differences effectively can trigger the shift from disagreement to conflict, it is just as likely that when differences surface they do not begin on neutral ground; instead they begin on territory defined by the distorted I-It frame. In this case, the parties involved begin their conversations from the place of monologue disguised as dialogue rather than from the place of disagreement under the assumption that the other—and not the issue—is the problem. This can be true even if the difference is between strangers or groups unknown to one another. Indeed, in many conflicts people are so removed from their capacity to see the issue as the problem that they struggle even to name what the underlying issue is, limiting the possibility from the very beginning of engaging in healthy disagreement instead of conflict.

2.b.ii Power Dynamics and the Escalation of Conflict

The concept of power deserves particular consideration as it plays such a significant role in the escalation of conflict and in the experience of the self-other dynamic. As differences shift into conflict, the self tends to create a hierarchy between self and other. Specifically, as the other is “othered” in favour of the self, the self claims a hierarchic stance above the other. Power has now inserted itself into the relational equation.

Stated most simply, in the context of human relationships power is defined as the capacity to bring about change.\textsuperscript{16} According to this definition, power is neither good nor bad; it simply is. Many forms of power drive the capacity to bring about change—power associated with personality, position, identity, knowledge, access to resources and social networks, etc.\textsuperscript{17} While each person or group has
access to some degree of power, power imbalances—differentials in degrees of power—exist in most interpersonal or intergroup relationships, whether socially endorsed (such as the power differentials between parents and children, employers and employees, or even in-group vs. out-group), or interpersonally endorsed (such as between friends or partners). Theories of power suggest that in any relationship, power imbalances are first of all negotiated and secondarily endorsed in some way by those in the relationship. When imbalances become too great—whether in reality or perception—human needs for acknowledgement and recognition are awakened and differences quickly become conflicts.

As conflict escalates, power imbalances tend to grow. According to researchers, the greater the differential of power, the more difficult the developing conflict is to resolve. Further, when power differentials are great and one party has the capacity to impose a solution on the weaker party, settlements that may be perceived as mutually acceptable in the short term may not be sustained over the long term. “[Disempowered] groups may in fact believe that it is to their advantage to continue, create, or escalate conflict since the promotion of peace would only serve to maintain an unjust status quo.” The link between power and conflict is so significant one could argue for an additional definition of conflict, this time from the perspective of power. In this case, conflict is defined as the removal by at least one party of their endorsement of the existing power imbalance with another party.

Conflict theorists divide the use of power into three fluid and dynamic categories: destructive power, productive power, and integrative power. While these three uses of power are uniquely defined, in reality, two or more can be active at the same time. Integrative power, also sometimes described as love or respect, is the use of power that listens for the interests and needs of the other and speaks from the interests and needs of the self. In this stance, both self and other are empowered to the degree that a relative power balance is established, underlying interests and needs are valued, and mutually satisfactory solutions are sought. This approach is predicated on the notion that win-win solutions are possible, and that a gain for one might also be a gain for the other.

Productive power is the power associated with a group or an individual whose access to resources allows them to accomplish their aims. Also sometimes described as transactional or exchange power, this form of power includes the ability to attend to the daily needs of life and the puzzling over problems together. Productive power is also attuned to the division of resources, where access to resources (social, physical, or otherwise) may be imbalanced between self and other. This form of power becomes a crucial player in identity driven group disputes—those disputes where one group, by virtue
of its identity markers, is perceived as lesser and is disenfranchised by another group, as the group with more productive power limits access to resources.

Destructive power is the expression of force, whether physical or verbal, that seeks to coerce another. Subtle or overt, perceived or real, rationally or emotionally stated, it is this expression of power that is most often perceived negatively and that drives much of conflict escalation. In the context of negotiations over a disagreement, when parties perceive that their perspectives are not heard or valued, a sense of being under someone else’s coercive power emerges, awakening foundational human needs and driving the development of conflict. More generally, when the other takes an action that the self experiences negatively, the self quickly perceives the other as having used coercive power to gain an upper hand.

All three uses of power can be used positively or negatively, all three can lead to an I-Thou encounter, and all three can lead to an escalation or entrenchment of conflict, the distorted I-It frame. A mother pulling a child from an oncoming car uses coercive power positively, just as a director who employs effective performance management policies may use coercive power positively; a company that offers shares to all employees uses productive power positively; and a musician who kindly supports his student as the student struggles to learn a musical piece uses integrative power positively. In each of these scenarios an I-Thou encounter is possible. Conversely, when destructive power is used to harm another; when productive power limits access to resources; and when integrative power leads to a loss of self or the loss of accountability, the negative use of each of these powers is employed. In response to each of these latter scenarios, it is common for the one with less power to employ the use of an additional power source to undo or upend the power imbalance. When this occurs, a cascade of escalating reactions becomes possible, entrenching existing imbalances or creating new ones.

When an individual or group uses power to suppress another, over a period of time a type of relational stability can develop, even if that stability reflects a power imbalance and is harmful to the parties involved. Especially in cases where power imbalances are understood by those with greater power to be the norm, as power is balanced, even if by use of integrative power only, those with more power will experience this shifting balance as a loss of relative power over the other, creating the possibility of a reaction and further escalation. While this can appear unsettling, the new conflict can be a crucial and required step on the journey toward resolution of the original conflict. Indeed, some would argue that those with significantly less power cannot meaningfully access the integrative power stance—if this stance is defined by entering directly into negotiation processes with one another. Instead, those with less power must access a type of coercive, though possibly nonviolent, power stance...
long enough to demand a new relative power balance, at which point negotiations in an integrative power frame can occur.\textsuperscript{24} Whatever the type of power employed, what remains is that the capacity to transform conflict dynamics appears to depend on the pursuit of a relative power balance between self and other, one that values the voice, needs, and wisdom of both parties. If this does not occur, conflict driven by power imbalances grows and risks entrenchment.

It should be noted that while the integrative power stance appears to lend itself most readily to I-Thou encounters and while coercive and productive power are most closely associated with the I-It relation, those employing each of the latter stances can use this power to nonetheless create a space where an I-Thou encounter might occur. Herein lies a catch: If an individual seeks to create health by using the coercive stance, while in their mind’s eye “othering” the other, a subtle, possibly subconscious but nonetheless real, new power imbalance emerges where the differential between the individual and the other creates further conflict. Instead, the individual employing appropriate coercive power is asked to do so in the spirit of integrative power—that is caring for the other—even while applying the practices associated with a coercive power move.

2.b.iii The I-Thou and I-It Frames as Expressed in the Escalation of Conflict

As we consider the definitions above, we observe a series of transitions from disagreement into conflict and entrenchment. These dynamic and fluid transitions begin with the possibility of the I-Thou frame and end far removed from any notion of this frame. Placed alongside one another, these definitions create a model of conflict escalation, as seen below.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
Title & Focus & Behaviour & Goal \\
& \textit{Power Dynamics} & \textit{Relationship with Buber’s I-Thou/I-It Frames} & \\
\hline
Stage 1: Disagreement & Differences are Healthy. & The issue is the problem \\
& Power is balanced between the parties; their spirit is integrative in nature, even if other forms of & Differences tend to be substantive or procedural in nature. \\
& & Trust is strong. Parties are engaged, seeking to hear and understand one another. They articulate their own views without fear, collaborate, and seek greater good. \\
& & Differences are actively sought out, seen as normal, valuable. \\
& & To solve the problem. \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{TABLE 2.2}
\end{table}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 2: Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Other Construct is Established.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The person is the problem.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The perception of harmful power imbalances emerges.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences awaken psychological needs. Trust begins to weaken. The self is experienced as being under threat in some way. The parties pull back emotionally. The other is seen as the source of the problem. Assumptions begin regarding the intention of the other. Parties use relatively benign ways to influence one another. Differences are seen as problematic. Disagreements regarding tangible issues become disputes. Parties justify their view of the other as the problem by assessing the overall character of the other, allowing additional experiences to add “data” to the negative assessment of the other, thus attributing the cause of the problem to the character of the other. Over time, the character of the other is perceived as defective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To change the mind or character of the other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 3: Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expansion of Participant Circle.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Triangulation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others are drawn into the conflict to leverage the power of numbers. Power imbalances grow.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be in conflict creates a sense of vulnerability. This is resolved by drawing third parties into the conflict. As others are drawn in, camps begin to form and the conflict grows. Disputes proliferate. Language tends to polarize issues and people distort the issues exaggerating their experiences of conflict. Monologue now includes others who are seen to be aligned with the self. The relation with the other is now firmly established in the I-It frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be affirmed for one’s perspective of the other as the problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 4: Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tipping Point &amp; Escalatory Behaviour.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fight, Flight, or Freeze</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The conflict awakens coercive power or the perceived absence of power altogether.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conflict is moving rapidly to entrenchment. Disputes emerge as evidence to justify entrenchment. Assumptions regarding the other and their intentions are given the status of objective truth. A tipping point is reached. Hostile and mutually escalating behaviour occurs. The self justifies actions that humiliate, punish, or harm the other. Being “right” is more important than solving the problem or being seen as reasonable. Conflict is a matter of principle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-preservation at all costs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Power imbalances are no longer hidden. Alliances become solidified; leaders of alliances emerge. To resolve is a betrayal of both the self and one’s allies. The I-It monologue frame is increasingly hostile to the other.

### Stage 5: Entrenchment

Parties Entrenched & Change in Social Structure.

The self must win. Coercive power, whether in thought or deed, becomes normative.

Power imbalances are entrenched. The conflict is entrenched. Costs of withdrawal are seen to be greater than costs of defeating the others; continuing the fight is the only choice; one cannot stop fighting.

Parties alter social structure to absolutely exclude the other while still maintaining the conflict. Ironically, new disputes may be limited at this point, as contact between the parties is also limited. Memories of old disputes, however, continue to be rehearsed, becoming like codes that govern the behaviour of the parties.

Risk of violence occurs. Relationships may never recover.

The I-It monologue frame is deeply entrenched. To defeat or destroy the other.

Conflict escalation models reveal that rather than being a static condition, conflict evolves over time. Definitions that suggest conflict is a static condition are at risk of being simplistic and of promoting resolution techniques that might be successful at one stage while being disastrous at another. With respect to the self-other frame, we observe in the stages identified above a deepening of what Buber gave voice to but did not thoroughly develop—the character of monologue disguised as dialogue. As those in conflict shift from addressing the other in second person to third person, the other is increasingly disregarded; the other shifts from singular to plural; and as conflict grows, the other is increasingly vilified to the degree that harm and violence become possible. As the view of the other is increasingly distorted, the pathways that return self and other to a second person lens (disagreement) become ever more limited.

Conflict theorists Jeffrey Z. Rubin, Dean G. Pruitt, and Sung Hee Kim propose five “transformations” through which conflicts travel as they escalate: from light to heavy, small to large, specific to general, doing well to winning or hurting the other, and from few to many. To these five, we add two further transformations: from close to distanced, and from whole selves to caricatured selves. All seven correlate to the model above, and all give voice to the character of ever deepening forms of the distorted I-It frame.
(a) From Light to Heavy
The transformation from light to heavy recognizes that as parties begin to see one another as the problem, they initially seek to influence each other in relatively benign ways (Stage 2). Benign influence can include guilt trips, ingratiating overtures, and persuasive arguments. As conflict escalates, however, parties shift to more “heavy” influence techniques such as making threats or setting unrealistic expectations for resolution to occur, creating lines in the sand from which the parties cannot step back (Stage 4). By shifting their engagement with one another in this way, the parties paint themselves into increasingly smaller corners, thereby reducing opportunity for escape. The number of creative options for intervention and transformation decrease as the transformation from light to heavy occurs.

(b) From Small to Large
The second transformation, from small to large, observes that while a specific disagreement (Stage 1) may become a dispute and spark conflict, over time the issues in dispute proliferate (Stage 3 and following). In this case, it is not so much that a small matter becomes a large matter. Instead, it is that additional concerns are layered onto the original dispute. Conflict now becomes all-consuming for those involved. Those in conflict become increasingly addicted to the struggle and commit additional energy and resources to the conflict in order to triumph over the other (Stages 4 & 5).

(c) From Specific to General
The transformation from specific to general is so common it can go unnoticed while nonetheless remaining a powerful shift in the escalation of conflict. In this case, as conflict escalates, disputes shift from a specific issue between the parties to becoming a larger general concern of which the specific issue is perceived to be merely a symptom. Specific acts of the other are now generalized to represent the character of the other (Stage 2). As conflict grows, relatively small concrete concerns are replaced by “grandiose and all-encompassing positions” regarding the other that are hard to pin to a discrete dispute. These positions become more difficult to understand or meaningfully address, leading to the tipping point (Stage 4) and entrenchment (Stage 5).

(d) From Doing Well to Winning to Hurting the Other
As conflict escalates, the parties shift their focus from doing well to winning to hurting the other. In conflict’s early stages, the parties may not even be aware that their focus is to “do well.” This outlook can be described as “self-interest,” which is independent of the fate of the other (Stage 2). At its best—if indeed it can be seen this way—monologue at this stage is about doing well with limited or benign
regard for the other. As conflict escalates, doing well shifts to a focus on winning (Stage 3). The parties involved want to “outdo” one another. When pressed, those at this stage may have the capacity to articulate a desire to resolve the conflict, even as their conflict behaviour suggests a desire for retribution rather than resolution, escalating the conflict and limiting the possibility of positive outcomes. As the attempt to resolve the conflict by outdoing one another fails, the parties shift once more, now desiring harm to the others (Stages 4 and 5).³⁰

(e) From Few to Many

The fifth transformation is that of few to many. This transformation is so significant it deserves a somewhat more thorough explanation. As we have already seen, as conflict escalates, those involved have difficulty containing the conflict amongst themselves. Instead, others are increasingly drawn into the conflict to support the key players and to increase the strength of one side over and against the strength of the other side (Stage 3). The pressure to become one of the many can be profound. Those who do not join risk becoming associated with the other, even if only in the mind of the self (Stage 4). As conflict escalates, the alliances that form around conflicting parties are such that many (if not most) highly escalated conflicts involve groups in dispute. In some cases, the original parties may no longer be central figures in the conflict or they may be gone altogether. In other cases, the original parties remain lead figures in the conflict, those allied with them forming a support troupe in the background. Still other situations of conflict have no memory of a singular self-other stage; instead the conflict begins in the context of existing groups that differ from one another in some way.

While it is not surprising that conflict should emerge in groups or develop to include groups, the dynamics of group identity with respect to conflict can entrench rather than resolve conflict. Specifically, as the alignment associated with group identity does not typically make space for self-critical points of view, the shift from few to many serves to affirm the self-understanding of each side. Beyond numbers, strength is found in the emotional reinforcement associated with attracting those who agree with the self. Aligned individuals may become active players in the dispute, even overtaking the roles of the original key players. As conflict escalates and the parties become two (or more) camps, the disputing parties now form distinct groups with characteristics unique to each group (Stage 5).

In overt and subtle ways, those within a group are frequently coerced to maintain and abide by the norms and perspectives of their group. While alignment may have begun as a choice, as conflict escalates, the invitation to align becomes a matter of coercion.³¹ Real or perceived risks of exclusion and/or harm emerge for those who do not align. To remain neutral and/or to stay in relationship with
both parties is difficult. Frequently, both sides expect alignment. To stand between them is to risk being accused of aligning with the other. Those who do not align or those who differentiate from their identity group face a lonely existence, finding acceptance with neither of the groups in conflict. The caveat here is found when those who differentiate do so together with others, rather than alone. In this case a third group is formed, one that is accepted by neither original group but whose participants nonetheless have the support of one another. When individuals begin to differentiate from their identity groups, implicit (or at times explicit) permission can be given for group members to commit acts of aggression against these new outcasts. In extreme cases, these acts of aggression include serious acts of violence. In less extreme cases, these acts can include exclusion, gossip, ridicule, pressure, threats, hate speech, etc.

According to group identity theory, the assumption of likeness within groups becomes exaggerated just as differences with the other are also exaggerated. Similarly, the goodness of one’s own group is assumed, just as the wrongfulness of the other is also assumed. Over time, both sides are seen as homogenous, albeit opposing, wholes. In effect, the players involved are de-individuated. This is critical as the step between de-individuation and the more pernicious de-humanization is a small one. Once the other is de-humanized and reduced to an “It,” acts of harm are easily legitimatized. Similarly, as the self also is de-individuated and subsequently de-humanized, in the imagination of the self, self-as-individual no longer exists. Individuals now take on behaviours of the group (or their leader) to which they would never agree were they alone. One could argue perhaps that in this view, self and other have now entered an It-It relation. Given that the identity of the group has developed over a common dislike or disregard for another, the group’s existence comes to depend on this stance. As group identity is at risk when the cause for dislike and disregard is removed, groups work actively to maintain the underlying causes behind this stance—and the distorted self-other frame—if only to maintain the group’s identity.

(f) From Close to Distanced
The sixth transformation in the escalation of conflict is from close to distanced. When people are at the stage of disagreement parties are comfortable being physically and emotionally near to one another even if their positions on an issue differ. Even with respect to radically diverse perspectives, parties allow for nearness when they seek to understand one another and search for common ground. This is true whether parties are engaging in technical dialogue as they puzzle over a difference or in genuine dialogue as that puzzling opens up to a deeper encounter with one another.
As disagreements become conflicts, a type of psychological or relational distance emerges between the parties. This distance can often be observed physically—the parties express discomfort being in one another’s presence—and can also be observed with respect to the nature of the differences between the parties. Whereas disagreeing parties (Stage 1) are still able to seek out the truth in the other’s perspective, conflicting parties struggle to do so. Instead, the tenor of dialogue pushes those in conflict toward opposing poles. Rather than seeing the possibility of truth in the other (and falsehood in the self), the other becomes a caricature of illogic while the self becomes a caricature of wisdom. In short, the conversation and the issues in dispute are seen increasingly through a dualistic lens with few points of crossover between the two perspectives. Over time, the distance between the two parties becomes a chasm that is difficult to bridge.\(^{35}\)

Unfortunately, differences between parties do not remain at the level of issue-based polarization. Eventually, the distance between the parties is also applied to the character of the other. Whereas at one time, self and other may have perceived one another as belonging together in some way, in times of conflict and entrenchment the possibility of mutual “belonging” is lost. Self and other become strangers to one another. Even the basic perception of self and other is seen through the dualistic lens.\(^ {36}\) Three terms are pivotal for understanding polarization with regard to the character of self and other: cognitive dissonance, self-justification, and attribution.\(^ {37}\) Because people tend to regard their own needs positively and their own perspectives as “right,” when individuals are caught in conflict, they encounter cognitive dissonance: How can the self that is regarded as right, good, logical, and careful, be accused of behaviour that is wrong, bad, illogical, and unconsidered? The mind strains at holding these opposing truths together. As a result, those in conflict tend to self-justify their behaviour by attributing the cause of any harm done to the other (or to an external reason) rather than to the self.\(^ {38}\) Similarly, if an individual has decided the other is wrong, difficult, or bad and the other acts in a manner that could be perceived as right or good, cognitive dissonance causes an inner struggle with respect to this tension. How can an individual who is wrong, act in a manner that is right? This struggle is resolved by attributing the cause of the other’s good action to an unusual circumstance or external force, allowing the perception of the other’s character as “bad” to remain. In other words, the other’s good action does not shift the perspective that the other is bad. In this way, individuals are self-justified in their ill feelings toward the other. Bernard Mayer states: “We ascribe others’ actions as being ‘stupid, crazy, or evil.’ Though there may well be stupidity, irrationality, or maliciousness involved in conflict, these ‘crutches’ are very simplistic ways of understanding what has gone on, and they tend to justify our own behaviour even if it, too, could be viewed as ‘stupid, crazy or evil’.”\(^ {39}\)
In summary, when parties are in conflict, the actions of the other are perceived as dispositional (the disposition or character of the other is flawed) rather than situational (it is the situation that caused the other to behave in a certain way), whereas the actions of the self are perceived as situational rather than dispositional.\textsuperscript{40} Further, singular negative actions of the other are generalized to reflect the character of the other, whereas singular negative actions of the self remain just that—discrete actions, non-reflective of the character of the self. Mayer continues: “In reality, all behavior is a combination of personal and situational factors; but the more serious the impact an event has or the greater our emotional reaction to it, the more likely we are to narrow our thinking about the causes of it—and the more likely we are to ascribe dispositional attributions.”\textsuperscript{41} Similarly, when the other is a group, negative behaviour of individuals within the group are perceived as reflecting the negative character of the group as a whole whereas negative behaviour of individuals within one’s own group are perceived as isolated events, not reflective of the character of one’s own group.\textsuperscript{42} In a simplified form, this dynamic can be described as follows:

**TABLE 2.3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Action or Belief</th>
<th>Negative Action or Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive actions or beliefs are seen to reflect the character of the self or the group to which the self belongs.</td>
<td>Negative actions or beliefs are seen to be non-reflective of the character of the self or the group to which the self belongs. Instead, negative actions are perceived as situational or as a justifiable reaction to the other. In other words, the self was forced to behave badly by some circumstance in the self’s life or in defence against the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive actions or beliefs are seen to be non-reflective of the character of the other or the group to which the other belongs. Instead, positive actions are perceived as situational, or “one-offs.” In other words, the other was forced to behave well by some circumstance in the other’s life.</td>
<td>Negative actions or beliefs are seen to reflect the character of the other or the group to which the other belongs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to this dynamic, regardless of what occurs, as conflict escalates the brain tends less toward curiosity and more toward a pre-existing frame through which the other is judged negatively and the self is judged positively. The other is effectively “othered” and excluded from the possibility of being good. This is clearly beneficial to the self. The tendency to see self as good and other as bad allows one
to become increasingly removed from one’s own complicity in the problems that have occurred, decreasing one’s desire to take responsibility for one’s own portion of the situation. Buried within this dynamic, of course, is the problem that many enduring conflicts occur on a landscape already preconditioned to “othering” the other. In everyday parlance this is known as prejudice.\(^{43}\)

\((g)\)  From Whole Selves to Caricatured Selves

As we have seen, as conflict escalates, those in dispute shift increasingly away from the possibility of an I-Thou encounter, eventually arriving at painful expressions of the I-It frame. As this occurs, those in conflict allow themselves to shift from seeing the other as a whole person to seeing self and other as caricatures of themselves. The complexity of self and other is reduced, nuance of character is lost, and self and other are increasingly regarded according to a narrow (and distorted) image. When this occurs, those in conflict identify increasingly as one another’s victims, while casting the other in the role of villain. As third party individuals or groups are triangulated into the dispute, they are also given a role, this time as rescuers of one or more of the parties in conflict.\(^{44}\)

The victim–villain–rescuer dynamic is problematic for multiple reasons: (1) Both parties typically see themselves as victims and the other as villain; (2) over time, those who identify as victims give themselves permission to engage in villainous acts against the other; (3) if the presumed victim is held accountable for their villainous acts, the victim will claim innocence—they were “forced into” the villainous act as a result of the other, the true villain; (4) if the rescuer aligns with one against the other, they stabilize the established victim-villain identities, entrenching the conflict even further; and (5) as the rescuer aligns with one against the other, they join the categories of victim and villain. Once the victim–villain–rescuer dynamic is established, all are innocent and none are guilty; enough logic and legitimacy abounds to justify every villainous act.

There are, of course, cases with genuine victims and genuine villains.\(^{45}\) While genuine encounters of victimisation are painful—and there is no desire here to minimize this reality—the roles of the conflicting parties in the vast majority of conflicts are simply not so cleanly and clearly defined. Even in cases where someone has genuinely been victimised, when victims stay in this identity category for too long, they may become defined by this role in their imagination of themselves to the degree that, often unknowingly, they seek out new (imagined or real) villains and rescuers to stabilize the identity they have come to know as their own. This creates permission for victims to engage in villainous behaviour in these new situations, ostensibly because of the new conflict, though in fact in response to the earlier conflict, despite being far removed from the original dispute. This begins the victim–villain
cycle again, with new victims often unaware of their villain’s past experience of victimisation. To divide the world into categories of villain-victim or bad-good places self and other in an insidious impasse. As no human is fully good or fully bad, the dualistic frame of reference becomes a binding construct within which no one can healthfully exist. The frustrating reality is that in conflict, eventually, there are no innocents. And so we arrive at a stalemate. We also arrive at a version of the I-It frame far more sinister than the relatively benign I-It frame. The I-It frame is now both distorted and painful, minimizing the humanity of both self and other.

2.b.iv Conflict Escalation Summary

The definitions provided here and the escalation of conflict they propose reveal just how precarious the I-Thou frame is. As conflict escalates, the self moves increasingly away from the I-Thou frame rather than toward it. While Buber acknowledges that the self lives in the I-Thou frame only occasionally and momentarily, he nonetheless proposes that it is toward this frame that the self is called to move. It appears that throughout the encounter between self and other and at each conversational turn, self and other have choices to make: Will they engage their differences through the lens of technical dialogue? Will they open themselves to moments of genuine dialogue? Will they shift to monologue disguised as dialogue, or will they shift to even more sinister versions of monologue?

If the parties inhabit the technical I-It frame with regard to one another, they puzzle together over the problem they are seeking to solve. If in this puzzling they remain in the third person state and never move to the second person state, they risk falling into the negative distortion of the I-It dynamic. If they move toward the I-Thou frame, they engage their puzzling with a spirit of mutuality and humility. They seek to honour the personhood of the other, even as they disagree. Similarly, they seek the wisdom of the other, even as they share their own perspectives regarding their disagreement. If, however, the two parties inhabit the distorted I-It frame and in doing so place increasing distance between themselves and the possibility of the I-Thou frame, they move from disagreement to conflict, from Stage 1 to Stage 2 on the conflict escalation model.

As we have seen, it is at Stage 2 that the self-other (or distorted I-It) divide is established. One or both parties now see the other as the problem rather than the issue as the problem. Said otherwise, one or both parties see the other as an “It” (in the distorted sense) rather than the problem as an “It.” Here the intentions of self and other play a profound role in the trajectory that the differences between the parties will take. If the intention of the parties is to move in the direction of I-Thou engagement, they may indeed succeed in dialling the escalation of their differences back to the stage of disagreement. It is
not unusual, after all, for those who disagree to tarry for a time in Stage 2 before returning to Stage 1. The movement between these stages is a dynamic one, regularly shifting and always open to choice. If, however, the intention of the parties (whether consciously or unconsciously) is to move further in the direction of the distorted I-It frame and/or if the conversation between the parties increasingly communicates to the other that they are the object of the self, the conflict will remain at Stage 2 or escalate to Stages 3 and beyond. Indeed, it is the entrenchment of the distorted I-It dynamic that defines escalated conflict.

According to Buber, when the self inhabits the I-Thou frame, the other is received in their “wholeness”—a wholeness that includes the other’s complexity and the other’s limitations. When the distorted I-It frame is established, the opposite appears to be true. As conflict escalates, those involved reduce their capacity to perceive complexity: The other is now a simple caricature of negative qualities and the conflict is described simplistically. In other words, whereas the I-Thou frame allows for mutuality between self and other, and whereas the technical I-It frame allows for puzzling over a problem, the distorted I-It frame increasingly polarizes the differences between the parties—whether those differences are associated with substantive issues or with the character of the parties themselves. As this happens, the distorted I-It frame masquerades itself by taking on other names. It can associate itself with the moral categories of right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, virtue vs. evil, or it can take on the more technical category of the dualistic either-or. In short, the conflict becomes polarized. Mayer states: “As clashes escalate, disputants are more likely to see their choices in simpler and starker terms, and they are more likely to cast the conflict as a matter of right or wrong…. In other words, our thinking becomes more dualistic as conflict escalates.”

2.c The Causes of Conflict and their Impact on the Self-Other Frame

We have already seen how differences shift from disagreement to conflict to entrenchment and how the self-other encounter becomes increasingly distorted along the journey of escalation. To further understand this dynamic, we must consider the causes of conflict and how these causes (a) trigger the shift from disagreement to conflict, (b) drive the distorted I-It/self-other frame, and (c) point to the underlying conditions that make an I-Thou encounter possible. Identifying the causes of conflict is not straightforward: Conflict can be driven by multiple contributing factors simultaneously, some of which are deeply intertwined such that disentangling the causes may be impossible. Indeed, people in conflict may behave as though a particular cause is the key problem even as they seek to address a deeper cause, whether they know this consciously or not. Despite these challenges, articulating the causes of
conflict addresses important questions regarding the self-other frame we have been developing. To develop a fuller picture of the multi-layered causes of conflict, we consider a conflict “wheel” developed by Bernard Mayer; we pursue several key themes emerging from this wheel, with a particular focus on basic human needs as they relate to the experience of conflict; and finally, we compare basic human needs to the I-Thou and I-It frames.

2.c.i  How the Causes of Conflict Trigger the Shift Toward the Self-Other Frame

Although other conflict theorists have created “maps” to outline the causes of conflict, Mayer’s map, or “wheel” (Figure 2.1), is one of the most comprehensive and helpful in this regard. Mayer places three needs at the centre of his wheel: survival needs, interests, and identity needs, followed by two layers of additional factors that contribute to conflict. We will consider each of these factors briefly with focused attention reserved for the needs at the centre of this wheel.

![Figure 2.1]

(a)  Identity Needs

Identity needs are so core to each person, they define selfhood. Similarly, when identity needs are experienced collectively, they define the selfhood of group identity. While identity needs can be met in multiple ways, the needs themselves are regarded as non-negotiable; they cannot be traded away, as to do so would be to diminish one’s selfhood. According to Mayer, identity needs “are the needs we all have to preserve a sense of who we are and our place in the world… needs for meaning, community, intimacy and autonomy.” Identity needs are those factors within the self that cause an individual to seek connection, find meaning, and experience joy. They are also the needs that cause the self to bristle
when the desire for connection is rebuffed or destroyed. Indeed, identity needs are so foundational to the construction of the self, when these needs are not met, the shift into conflict occurs.

Mayer describes identity according to the types of needs identity creates: community, intimacy, autonomy, and meaning. (1) Community can be described as a need for belonging, that one matters to a group. More than simple affiliation with others, community describes one’s sense of connection or “social home” in the larger context of the world. (2) Intimacy is similar to community but brings this need to a much more personal level. Intimacy is the need for mutual recognition and acknowledgement, to be valued by another person. (3) Autonomy is the need for self-determination. While community and intimacy can be described as needs for connection, autonomy can be described as the need for independence or individuality. This is the need to have some power over one’s life and a voice in one’s future. This particular need is interesting insofar as the need for autonomy can be experienced as being in competition with one’s need for community and intimacy. In fact, one could argue that the relationship between these needs builds struggle into the very fabric of basic human needs. (4) Meaning is the need for a sense of purpose in one’s life and the world. Meaning, too, can be correlated with struggle. Although one’s belief that the other has thwarted one’s meaning in life can create conflict, conflict itself can become a source of meaning to the degree that resolution of conflict threatens a core sense of one’s identity. In this case, people can pursue the continuation of conflict in order to maintain meaning. 50

Within conflict theory literature, Terrell A. Northrup has provided one of the most concise and cogent explorations of identity needs as both a source of selfhood and as one of the key factors in conflict. 51 Northrup differentiates identity from the psychological sense of self—calling it more than one’s sense of self. Instead, identity “… encompasses a sense that one is safe in the world physically, psychologically, socially, even spiritually. Events which [sic] threaten to invalidate the core sense of identity will elicit defensive responses aimed at avoiding psychic and/or physical annihilation. Identity is postulated to operate in this way not only in relation to interpersonal conflict but also in conflict between groups.” 52 Jay Rothman echoes Northrup’s comments, correlating identity with conflicts that simply “won’t go away.” 53 Rothman defines identity-driven conflict as “rooted in the articulation of, and the threats or frustrations to, people’s collective need for dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy.” 54

According to Northrup, identity needs can be divided into two categories: personality-driven needs and socially-driven needs. While the former are associated with one’s core sense of self (how one functions in the world and perceives one’s role within it), the latter emerge from the groups with which
one identifies—including race, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc. Northrup notes that while group membership is contextual and can change over time, for those whose sense of self is defined, at least in part, by the group to whom they belong, when that group is perceived to be under threat, the self is also perceived to be threatened. Both personality- and socially-driven identity needs are given emotional significance to the degree that they act with force within the self. When either is perceived to be under threat, the reaction within the self is significant. Northrup states:

Identity, then, is postulated to operate as a dynamic because of the sense of self, whether personal or group, is not static. Rather, it is in constant relationship with the world—with people, things, time, and space. Some aspects of identity may change as experience is gained, but the core sense of self is relatively stable, as the individual attempts to maintain it in order to retain a sense of the world as a predictable place. If the events of one’s life in relationship to the world invalidate, or threaten to invalidate, the core sense of identity, then the individual or group will respond energetically to maintain the identity.

This echoes what has already been suggested: The shift from disagreement into conflict is correlated to a perceived threat to identity.

(b) Survival Needs
In concert with the categories of needs identified by Abraham Maslow in 1954, Mayer proposes an additional category of needs: survival needs. Described as the need for food, shelter, clothing, and security, these basic needs may appear less psychological in nature than identity needs yet their absence can create significant psychological distress. While these needs often dominate in larger inter-ethnic or international disputes, they can also be present, while perhaps less obviously, in interpersonal disputes. For example, a divorcing couple may fear financial ruin, the employees of a conflict-ridden company may fear for their job security, etc. Like psychological needs, survival needs are central to the experience of conflict; when triggered, they shift a discussion of differences from disagreement to conflict.

(c) Interests
In their book, Getting to Yes, Roger Fisher and William Ury define interests as “needs, desires, concerns and fears.” Mayer, who places interests at the heart of his conflict wheel, defines interests as “concerns,” “what is important,” or “needs.” Other conflict theorists expand on these definitions, recognizing that interests can be divided into multiple subcategories. Here, we borrow from Christopher Moore, who defines interests according to three categories, or three building blocks, that drive the positions people take in a disagreement and that can serve to escalate conflict: substantive,
procedural, and psychological. (1) Substantive interests are the logical, functional reasons behind a given difference. (2) Procedural interests concern how an issue or argument emerged or how it is being addressed. (3) Psychological interests emerge from the very core of one’s sense of self, including the desire to be treated well, to have the capacity to influence a situation, to be appropriately acknowledged, etc.

Moore’s division of interests into subcategories is helpful as it reveals common conflict dilemmas. For example, it is not unusual for people to argue hard at one interest level when in fact a different level of interests is the driving force behind the conflict. For example, those in conflict may believe they are having a dispute over substantive interests when in fact differing perceptions regarding what constitutes fair process may be driving the conflict. Or, a hard-to-crack negotiation over substantive interests may seem immovable because psychological interests have been triggered and remain unaddressed. Indeed, it appears as though the shift from disagreement (I-Thou / I-It) into conflict (the distorted I-It) occurs whenever psychological interests are triggered or perceived to be unmet.

Conflict theorist Herbert Kelman affirms the division of interests into substantive, procedural, and psychological interests, though with one important caveat. According to Kelman, psychological interests are needs, not interests. He also allows for a broad definition with respect to psychological interests/needs, incorporating needs of identity, security, and recognition into this category. Kelman proposes that while interests are tangible and negotiable, needs are intangible and so foundational to the construction of the self, that they cannot be negotiated. Conflict then is not so much a matter of disputing interests as it is a matter of competing needs. Differences with respect to interests, as per Kelman, are relatively easily solved. Differences with respect to needs are much more difficult to resolve.

According to Kelman, so long as differences are related only to substantive or procedural interests, those differences can remain disagreements. When differences include the psychological needs of the self, however, or when the nature of negotiation is such that needs are created (for example, the negotiation may take too long to solve or the discourse may feel unkind), selfhood is threatened and some type of conflict emerges: The self begins to see the other and not the issue as the problem, shifting the difference from disagreement to conflict. Using Buber’s language—when negotiations of an I-It nature trigger psychological needs that are seen, honoured, and addressed, the I-Thou frame not only becomes possible, it deepens and strengthens the connection between the parties. The I-Thou moment serves as the moment of transformation between the parties. On the other hand,
when psychological needs are triggered but neglected or ignored, the shift from the I-Thou frame to the distorted I-It frame with regard to self and other occurs.

Contra Kelman, Mayer argues against a sharp division between interests and needs. He believes that Kelman’s definition places interests outside the category of needs and argues that substantive and procedural interests belong in the category of needs, together with psychological needs, identity needs, and survival needs. Recalling the hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow, Mayer states the following: “Rather than conceiving of interests and needs as fundamentally different, I find it more useful to think of a system of human needs, roughly paralleling Maslow’s hierarchy.” While Mayer argues against the hierarchical structure of needs proposed by Maslow, he favours Maslow’s articulation of the variety of needs that each party may contribute to the construction of conflict.

Similarly, but from another angle, Northrup argues that while conflict at all levels of escalation has a subjective component, most but not all conflict has an objective component. Subjective components can be correlated with psychological needs; objective components can be correlated with substantive or procedural interests. Northrup argues this point in order to push against theories that seek to separate objective and subjective realities in the context of conflict. “... [Rather] than existing apart from each other, external [objective] factors and the meanings attributed to these external factors, and to the self in relation to them, interact dynamically in the course of most conflicts.”

Northrup goes further to argue that subjectivity is present whenever humans relate to one another: “All conflicts are considered to have a subjective element to them since, whenever people are involved in relationship, they are interpreting events and attributing meaning to the events.” As per Northrup, there is nothing surprising, odd, unusual, or irrational about the subjective being present in conflict. Northrup argues that there are many rationalities and systems of thought, each of which is relatively internally consistent. In other words, to call another irrational is, in and of itself, irrational. She states:

Problems of communication between parties whose rationalities are qualitatively different constitute a greater problem than misperception. The parties are operating from different rules and with different basic assumptions about the nature of people and of life. Differences due to gender, race, ethnicity, or culture may result in significantly different definitions of conflict, differential valuing of conflict, different values concerning how, when, by whom, and even if conflict should be resolved, as well as different existing formal and informal structures for dealing with conflict.

While, with Northrup, we can conclude that subjective psychological needs are present even when parties are at the stage of disagreement, the argument, as per Kelman, is with regard to whether those needs are triggered to the degree that they now define the conflict. According to the argument we have been developing, while psychological needs are present regardless of the level of escalation, it
is the expression of psychological needs that is triggered in the shift from the I-Thou frame to the I-It frame. As conflicts escalate, these needs increasingly become the drivers of conflict and, when unmet, become barriers to transformation.

(d) Interests, Needs, and Identity

By way of summary, we return to the inner circle of Mayer’s conflict wheel. While Mayer differentiates interests, survival needs, and identity from one another, we see that others carve out this inner circle differently, placing psychological needs and not identity at the centre of this circle. Specifically, we might ask what the difference between psychological needs and identity is. These two terms, after all, are defined similarly. Both psychological needs and identity are correlated with an underlying desire for belonging, recognition, meaning, self-determination and so forth. The problem to which this question points appears to lie with the focus of various authors. Northrup and Rothman discuss identity but not interests. Kelman and Moore discuss interests but not identity. As a result, the definitions offered by these authors are not designed to take the alternate term into account. As Mayer places these terms alongside one another we observe an overlap that, when recognized, might solve Mayer’s struggle with Kelman. In fact, Kelman appears to be less concerned with dividing psychological needs from interests (as per Mayer’s concern) and more focused on articulating the weight associated with psychological needs to the degree that his definition of psychological needs aligns closely with Mayer’s definition of identity. This said, a definitional difference between psychological needs and identity might still exist if psychological needs, as per Northrup, can be correlated with personality-driven identity needs, whereas identity needs are associated with the groups with whom one identifies. As both types of needs—together with the need for survival—are correlated with selfhood and as both can be triggered when disagreements go awry, this thesis proposes allowing both, the psychological needs of individuals and the identity needs of groups, to reside together at the conflict wheel.

The advantage of associating various needs (survival, identity, and personality needs) with basic human needs (rather than simply identifying psychological needs as interests, as per Moore) is that it is more difficult to disregard needs if they are described as human needs rather than psychological interests. In other words, we are not in conflict because the other has psychological problems; we are in conflict because the other’s basic human needs are not being met (or because the continuation of conflict in some fashion meets the party’s basic human needs). Mayer affirms this assertion with his statement: “Human needs are at the core of all conflicts.” Furthermore, this statement proposes that conflicts cannot be resolved when foundational needs are not somehow addressed. Mayer continues:
“[P]eople engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or resolved unless these needs are addressed in some way.” With this point, all conflict theorists identified thus far agree.

When we collect the fundamental needs identified by various authors together—however they are defined—we see five basic needs appear again and again. These five needs can be summarized as follows: meaning, belonging (community), recognition (intimacy), autonomy, and security (survival). With these needs in mind, together with insights from the various conflict theorists identified thus far, we propose a redrawing of Mayer’s conflict wheel. With Burton and Kelman, we allow the difference between interests and needs to stand. With Mayer, however, we place substantive and procedural interests very near to the center of conflict. Further, we place the five fundamental human needs at the center of the wheel. To this end, we propose a redrawing of Mayer’s wheel as follows:

While interests are seen in this new diagram as central to conflict, the difference between interests and needs is accounted for. This difference is important as it speaks to the shift from issue as problem to person as problem. So long as conflicts are about substantive interests, parties appear to be able to remain at the level of disagreement: Self and other disagree but selfhood is not at risk. As procedural interests are triggered, parties may or may not succeed at remaining at this level for the simple reason that procedural interests appear to trigger foundational human needs more quickly than substantive interests. Whether because of procedural interests or not, when foundational human needs are triggered it becomes difficult for those involved to remain at the level of disagreement. Selfhood is now at risk and the shift from issue as problem to person as problem has occurred. As disagreement turns to conflict, the distorted I-It/self-other frame has taken hold.
As we have seen, while negotiations over tangible differences are somewhat easier to resolve, conflicts are, by their association with foundational human needs, more difficult to resolve.\textsuperscript{78} Here we return to the original definition of conflict by Wilmot and Hocker: “Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.”\textsuperscript{79} When differences reside at the level of disagreement, questions regarding goals and resources may be tough, but they are negotiable. When these same differences are infused with unmet needs, conflict has begun; goals and resources are perceived as incompatible, the other is perceived as standing in the way of the self, and the ability to negotiate for a solution becomes more challenging. While those in conflict might suppress their needs to allow conflict to be resolved at the level of tangible differences, their intangible yet fundamental human needs can demand attention to the degree that conflict associated with these needs is perceived to be intractable. Resolving differences involving needs demands a type of intervention different than basic negotiation. Instead of “simply” seeking specific outcomes, disputes emerging from fundamental needs demand intervention efforts that focus on the relationship and system of communication between the parties in addition to, or in place of, specific outcomes.\textsuperscript{80} Here, conflict interveners must beware: Addressing conflict at a level too focused on tangibles limits attention on fundamental needs, creating the possibility of perceived or real intractability. However, addressing conflict at a level too focused on deeper needs can create unnecessary excursions into the self, slowing the resolution progress of the tangible elements of the conflict and potentially creating the possibility of perceived or real intractability.

It is critical to recall here that even in times of conflict, an I-Thou encounter is possible. Indeed, Buber’s description of what constitutes genuine dialogue correlates well with the five fundamental human needs: the creation of meaning, extension of belonging, and offer of recognition, all while maintaining mutual autonomy and supporting the security of self and other. In practice, an I-Thou relation in the context of conflict is naturally much more difficult to achieve. To disagree effectively, parties must know their own interests and be open to hearing the interests of the other. At the very least, this requires awareness regarding one’s interests and needs and an openness to the reality of underlying interests and needs in the other. Self-awareness allows disagreeing parties to recognize when foundational needs are triggered and when the slip from disagreement to conflict has occurred. Disagreeing effectively depends on the capacity to recognize this shift, resolve it, and return once more to healthy disagreement. Said otherwise, remaining at the level of disagreement depends on recognizing when one has perceived oneself as having been regarded as another’s distorted “It” (or that one has
regarded the other according to the distorted “It”) and that the dialogue has shifted to monologue disguised as dialogue.

When parties engage their differences through the lens of the other as the problem, when parties do not understand their underlying interests, and/or when parties lack self-awareness regarding their foundational needs (what this looks like, how this feels, why and how needs are triggered), remaining at the level of healthy disagreement becomes difficult. Although parties that differ often have common underlying interests and needs, the lens of conflict can blind them from seeing this reality. As conflicts escalate, those involved increasingly resist perceiving and understanding the interests and needs of the other. Further, even if parties did at one time know their own interests, their perception, understanding, and articulation of these interests becomes increasingly narrow as conflict grows. To some degree, there is logic to resisting understanding one’s own interests and needs. The deeper one “digs” into interests and needs, the more one encounters thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that lie at the centre of the self. These are so central to the construction of the self that naming them confronts the self with its vulnerabilities, something many are afraid to reveal to one another or even to themselves.

Beyond the vulnerability associated with needs, perspectives can be so deeply rooted in the subconscious they easily go unnoticed. When perspective is deeply embedded in the subconscious, the self can find it difficult to recognize that a different perspective even exists. Perspective, in this case, emerges from and is aligned so strongly with one’s life experience, with the group with whom one identifies, and a potentially misguided trust in one’s own logic, it is easily perceived as a matter of identity. The implication of this is profound: As conflict grows, acknowledging the perspective of another can become tantamount to betraying the core of one’s selfhood, one’s identity.

(e) Contextual and General Factors Surrounding Needs

Beyond the inner circle of his conflict diagram, Mayer proposes additional contextual factors that surround and define interests and needs. According to Mayer, to effectively resolve conflict one must also travel through the landscape of these contextual factors as they “…affect how people experience their needs and how they choose to pursue them.” Mayer proposes the following five categories as reflective of the contextual factors that influence the experience of conflict: communication, history, structure, values, and emotion. (1) Communication—or more accurately, the imperfect nature of communication—allows those in conflict to assume they have understood one another accurately when they have not. Alternately, communication is complicated by assumptions and stereotypes regarding the other, causing the self to draw conclusions regarding the meaning of what the other has said. (We will
address this more thoroughly momentarily.) (2) Emotions, as per Mayer, “are the energy that fuels conflict.”

Emotions are conflict’s engine—giving energy to communication, complicating one’s ability to communicate, and empowering (or overpowering) communication. (3) Values are generally understood within the field of conflict as a factor leading to intractability.Defined as beliefs about right and wrong, about what is important, or about which principles should govern how people lead their lives, values are associated with the central belief structure of the self. As a result, when values are under threat, the self can perceive its selfhood as being under threat. (4) Structure covers such categories as availability of resources, decision-making procedures, time constraints, legalities, the physical context, and mechanisms of communication. Structure represents external factors that create and drive conflict between the parties. (5) History, Mayer’s final category at this level, identifies that each factor already considered is influenced by the history of each of the parties and the history between the parties.

According to Mayer’s conflict wheel, an additional layer of conflict drivers also exists: personality, power, culture, and data. Calling these “general contextual factors,” Mayer suggests that these general factors impact and “cut across” each of the sources of conflict. For example, culture, personality, and power naturally impact the manner in which people communicate, how emotions are expressed, how needs are perceived and met, the narratives of history that define the self, etc. Mayer proposes further that while people can believe themselves to be in conflict over data (how information is to be interpreted), and while data influences conflict, data conflicts are not actually about differences in interpretation of information but instead about the structures, emotion, communication patterns, history, and even values that undergird these differences.

2.d Communication and the Construction of the Self-Other Frame

According to Buber, the self only fully exists in relation with the other. If this is true, then communication, the primary avenue of connection between self and other, must play a central role with regard to the nature of I-Thou and I-It encounters. Buber himself intimates as much when he uses the word “dialogue” to describe the different forms of encounter between self and other. Whether overt or subtle; written or spoken; verbal, tonal, or gesture-based; whether present or desired but absent, communication plays a pivotal role in the self-other encounter. Wilmot and Hocker state that (a) communication creates conflict, (b) communication reflects conflict, and (c) communication is also the vehicle for the destructive or productive management of conflict. Communication, as we shall see, creates conflict when parties misunderstand one another’s intentions; it reflects conflict when the style
of communication reveals the developing stress between the parties; it is the vehicle for destructive conflict when parties deliberately communicate in a manner that harms the other; and it is the vehicle for productive conflict and/or disagreement when parties use communication to address and transform their differences. In this section, we will firstly explore how communication contributes to the self-other divide. Secondly, we will examine the nature of emotions—so closely correlated with communication—to understand how the biology of emotion intersects with conflict and the self-other divide. Finally, we will consider the reality of the subconscious mind and the limitations this mind puts on the desire of those in conflict to communicate effectively.

2.d.i Communication and the Construction of Self and Other

In its simplest form, communication describes how an idea is translated into words, then spoken, received, and finally translated in the mind of the receiver from words to idea. While this sounds fairly straightforward, in reality it is fraught with the potential for misunderstandings. As an idea is translated into words, it is encoded by the speaker with meaning, much of which is extraneous to the actual words spoken. In the process of delivery, words are supported by body language and tone of voice—acts of communication which are also encoded with meaning. As the receivers translate words, voice tone, and body language back into ideas, they also decode or interpret this communication through their own code of meaning, much of which is again extraneous to the actual words spoken, tone of voice, or body language used.

**FIGURE 2.3**

Communication as Encoded and Decoded

Ideas are encoded with meaning, unique to the speaker.
Ideas are translated into words.
Ideas are delivered via words, tone, and body language.

Words, tone, and body language are received.
Words, tone, and body language are translated into ideas.
Words, tone, and body language are decoded with meaning, unique to the receiver.

These acts of encoding and decoding are complex. In the space of milliseconds, those communicating reference enormous amounts of external stimuli and internal data to give meaning to the actual words spoken. The range of information considered is large, including, but not limited to, the context, the
actual words spoken, tone of voice, body language, identity of the other, one’s history with the other, one’s social location (especially in relation to the other), one’s memory of similar past encounters (with or without this other person), one’s family of origin, personality, core values and beliefs, etc. Encoding and decoding are thus not neutral acts; they are acts of the self, laden with meaning.

With respect to communication, we learn that those wishing to communicate well are advised to limit the “noise to sound” ratio.\textsuperscript{88} From a radio signal perspective, this means that the sound crossing the wire must be as close as possible to the voice of the speaker. From a communication perspective, this means that speakers are advised to align their words closely with their intention. Those receiving communication must also seek to link the incoming words as closely as possible with the intention of the speaker. Naturally, this is difficult to do, even when the relationship between the parties is positive. When self and other are in conflict, it is even more difficult. As we shall see, the capacity to communicate effectively is one of the principal factors determining whether a difference becomes a productive disagreement or a destructive conflict.

While Figure 2.3 represents a linear view of communication theory, a more nuanced view of communication, especially as it relates to conflict, is seen in Figure 2.4.\textsuperscript{89} (For clarity, we will use the terms “actor” and “receiver” to describe the interaction between self and other in this model.) According to our second model of communication, actions—what one can see or hear—exist in the public domain; they are observable, and even though parties may disagree with respect to the interpretation of these actions, in principle, the actions can be analyzed objectively. The intentions behind one’s actions—unless revealed—are private to the actor just as the effects of the actor’s actions—unless revealed—are private to the receiver. Herein lies a problem that drives to the heart of the nature of conflict. Those receiving an action have a tendency to assume the intention of the actor based on the effect of the action on themselves. Likewise, actors tend to assume the effect of their action on a receiver based on their perceived intention. In other words, if one’s intention is positive, one assumes the effect on the other is positive; if one’s intention is negative, one assumes the effect on the other is negative. If one experiences the action of another negatively, one assumes the intention of the other was negative; if one experiences an action positively, one assumes the intention was likewise positive.
As already indicated, whether in conflict or not, communication happens at lightning speeds as the parties involved reference external stimuli and internal data to interpret their interaction. This impacts everything from how an action is constructed, to how an action is received, how the impact of an action is understood, and how an action is later recalled. Moreover, after an action has occurred, the parties draw data from their experience to confirm their respective biases (as actor or receiver). Referred to as confirmation bias, this phenomenon is so strong that, over the passage of time self and other may increasingly remember an action differently, to the degree that it can seem as though they were at separate events. As confirmation bias affirms the lens one places on a situation, the parties begin to add meaning to what has occurred. In this case, the actions of self and other are given import according to the lens of the self. For example, if someone experiences an action as hurtful, they will commonly draw data from this memory that confirms that the intention of the actor was to create harm. When this occurs, the receiver will create meaning from this situation regarding the characters of self and other and regarding the situation itself. From a conflict escalation perspective, this is the point where a problem is confirmed to be about the other and/or where the character of the other is confirmed to be flawed in some way.

One of the complicating factors with respect to this dynamic is that people typically identify a positive—or at the very least a self-perceived legitimate—intention behind their own actions. When the
receiver assumes the actor’s intention was not positive, this is received as curious at best and worthy of ridicule at worst. This is true even when the intentions of the self are less than pure. Because of the human tendency to self-justify one’s actions, the self modifies its memory regarding what happened to the degree that a new story with a purer, kinder intention with regard to one’s own actions is created. The self comes to believe that this is the true story, effectively removing the self from its original and less-than-pure intention. At the same time, those who receive harmful actions (harm being defined by the receiver) often feel utter disbelief—even anger—that the actor does not understand the degree of pain they have caused. At best, the actor is perceived as clueless. At worst, actors are perceived as lying—either intentionally behaving as though they do not understand, or obfuscating the truth regarding their intentions. As conflict grows, parties quickly reach the place where they believe they can objectively and confidently “know” the negative intentions of the other party even if the other does not see this themselves.

Earlier we observed that the shift from disagreement to conflict occurs when the person, not the issue, is seen as the problem. This shift happens readily whenever the other is perceived as intending to hurt the self, whether or not this assumption is accurate. Indeed, the more the parties involved assume the other intended to hurt them, the more they shift into a “fight,” “flight,” or “freeze” mode, limiting their capacity to see the perspective and intentions of the other through a lens different from the one they have created for themselves and limiting their ability to see their own contributions to the conflict. The issue is now no longer about understanding the other; instead, it is about survival—a reality that recalls the insights provided earlier by Northrup. The implications are profound: As the parties see themselves as the target of the other and as brain and body focus on survival, the parties increasingly restrict the emergence of new and disconfirming data limiting the ability to see creative options for understanding and resolving the conflict.

As Figure 2.5 reveals, the communication dynamic is further complexified by the addition of “back stories”—history and other contextual factors—that drive intention and effect. Actors have back-stories that reside behind their intentions, just as receivers have back-stories that determine how a received action is experienced and interpreted. Multiple factors converge to create back-stories that define how intentions are encoded and how communication is decoded. Given the reality of the subconscious mind, while many factors influence and give meaning to intent and effect, only a portion of these factors appear to be knowable to the self.
When an action is received—whether consciously or unconsciously—it is typically stacked up and measured against similar experiences in one’s history. If those past experiences were painful, then the meaning given to the new experience is imbued with the pain of the past. This is true whether or not those memories include interactions with the person responsible for the current action. In other words, when the self is impacted by the action of another, only a portion of this impact may belong to the current actor. The remaining portion may be associated with the back-story of the self: old wounds and memories that are triggered by the actions of another actor from one’s past. Unfortunately, people in conflict are often not conscious of their own back-stories. As a result, they may hold the current actor responsible for their words and actions and also for the memory of pain these words and actions trigger. The receiver now holds this actor responsible for the actions of previous others of which the current actor has no knowledge and for which the current other bears no responsibility.

A similar dynamic can be observed with regard to the back-story behind intent. Although one’s immediate intention is typically associated with the situation at hand, a deeper back-story intention exists behind the immediate intention not necessarily associated with the immediate situation. While individuals might regard their intentions as positive, legitimate, and directly connected to the current situation, the individuals’ underlying needs emerging from their own back-story easily leak into their current intention, influencing their words and actions to the degree that the other receives a bundle of mixed messages—some related and some unrelated to the present conflict between the two parties.
The back-story of the self that leaks into intention can be so endemic to the self (and reside so deeply in the subconscious) that the self is unaware of the back-story it is imposing on the other.

Taken together, the ordering of communication, which can happen in milliseconds, can appear sequentially as suggested in the numbering in Figure 2.6.

1. The “actor” conceives of an action behind which there is a “back-story” of intent.
2. The back-story is channelled through an immediate intent.
3. The actor acts.
4. The actor makes assumptions regarding the impact of their actions.
5. The receiver experiences the immediate impact of the action.
6. The immediate impact is filtered through the receiver’s back-story.
7. The receiver makes assumptions regarding the intention of the other.
8. Both actor and receiver regard the original action through their respective lenses, each drawing data from this action to confirm their intention or effect.
9. The two parties analyze, sort, interpret, and create meaning out of their experiences, typically through the lens of their bias(es).

**FIGURE 2.6**

*Complex Intent-Action-Effect Model, Sequentially Outlined*
With respect to the underlying self-other frame we have been developing, several points of connection can be observed between our communication model and the I-It / I-Thou frames. For example, even when two or more people wish to communicate from an I-Thou frame, communication is so fraught with the possibility of misunderstanding, a distorted I-It encounter may nonetheless occur. Back-stories, for example, may make it difficult to receive another’s I-Thou overtures. Alternately, one may be blinded from seeing how one’s own back-story seeps into one’s communication, leaving the receiver with the distinct awareness that a distorted I-It encounter has occurred. Further, the tendency to assume intent based on effect and effect based on intent is so strong, it appears hardwired in the brain.\(^{90}\) Without a deliberate curiosity and self-awareness regarding one’s assumptions, it is easy to fall into misunderstandings, construing distorted I-It encounters where none occurred. Finally, given that in the context of communication, self and other engage in “meaning-making,” they easily construct one another according to their own interpretations and assumptions. While some of this construction may be neutral or positive, as the self-other frame is established, the self is increasingly seen as good or right, just as the other is seen as bad or wrong. Over time, the other is relegated increasingly to an “It,” limiting the possibility of I-Thou encounters. According to Buber, this reality not only harms the other, it also harms the self. After all, those who engage in monologue disguised as dialogue become less whole as a result of their truncated encounters.

In the examples given, there are no innocents. Both self and other alternately stand in the role of actor and receiver, and both misconstrue intentions and effects, just as both may misunderstand or lack access to their own back-stories. Of course, another outcome is also possible: As conflict escalates, self and other may choose to use communication to open themselves to I-Thou encounters, communicating with one another in a manner that reveals and clarifies intent and effect, that honours and acknowledges complex back-stories and that addresses the impact each has had on the another.

2.d.ii The Biology of Conflict: Physiology, Emotions, and Rational Thought

When parties disagree but are not conflicted, we might imagine that they are engaging in rational, albeit at times spirited, debate. This perception is challenged by researchers who suggest that not only are there multiple forms of rational thought,\(^{91}\) emotion is present in all forms of dialogue, even if it is not recognized.\(^{92}\) Emotions provide texture and nuance to communication, influencing how both disagreements and conflicts are expressed. While emotion can nudge self and other into the space of genuine dialogue, emotion can also drive a wedge between self and other, widening an already growing chasm between conflicted parties.
At the stage of disagreement, emotion is generally positive. Emotions such as warmth, care, kindness, and respect, when combined with cognition, create an atmosphere conducive to engaging differences from the perspective of disagreement rather than conflict.\textsuperscript{93} When differences shift from disagreement into conflict—that is, when the self is perceived as being under threat and when vulnerabilities are awakened—negative emotions such as anxiety, hurt, anger, and shame trigger the alarm that something in one’s relationship with the other has gone awry or that the encounter has triggered an older memory of pain. In this sense, negative emotions are helpful. They awaken one’s attention to emerging challenges between self and other; they trigger memories of old wounds still in need of healing; and they alert the self to the boundary between disagreement and conflict. All of these alerts can motivate the self to attend to the disagreement, limiting the escalation of conflict.

Naturally, both positive and negative emotions can also be unhealthy. Negative emotions may escalate beyond their healthy function, opening the door to hatred, violence, self-abuse, self-justification, blame, shame, and escalatory behaviour. Excessive positive emotions can create blinders or states of ignorance or inaction, allowing real injustices and deluded self-understandings to flourish unchecked.\textsuperscript{94} From the perspective of healthy disagreement and conflict engagement, three goals emerge with respect to emotion, all dependent on self-awareness and self-regulation: (1) to nurture healthy levels of positive emotions, (2) to address the underlying concerns negative emotions reveal, and (3) to manage the escalatory potential of negative emotions.

Biology suggests that achieving these latter two goals is not straightforward. Negative emotions are associated with threats to the self that emerge from an ancient part of the brain, the amygdala. The amygdala causes the brain to react almost instantly to stimuli perceived as threatening, thus cueing behavioural, physiological, and endocrine responses, otherwise known as the “fight,” “flight,” or “freeze” response.\textsuperscript{95} As a survival skill, this is important. As a warning that something in one’s relationship with the other has gone awry, it is also helpful. As a response technique to conflict, assuming the conflict is non-life threatening, it is problematic.

The amygdala does not operate alone. In conversation with other portions of the brain, including the prefrontal regions, higher executive function is employed to support the cognitive control of emotion.\textsuperscript{96} In other words, while the trigger response of negative emotion might be endemic to the human condition, the management of this response is also endemic. According to authors Walter Mischel, Aaron L. DeSmet, and Ethan Kross, two closely interacting systems, also referred to as hot and cool systems, exist, as follows:
The cool system is a “know” system: it is cognitive, complex, contemplative, slow, rational, strategic, integrated, coherent, and emotionally neutral—it is the basis of self-regulation and self control. In this theory, it consists of a network of informational cool nodes that are elaborately interconnected to each other and generate rational, reflective, and strategic behavior. In contrast, the hot one is a “go” system: emotional, simple, reflexive and fast. It consists of relatively few representations, or hot spots, that, when activated by trigger stimuli, elicit virtually reflexive avoidance and approach reactions.\(^97\)

As the hot system interacts with the cool system, perceptions of threat can be considered and managed, such that appropriate, coherent, and rational thought prevails. Herein, however, lies a key challenge. Under stress, the cool system within the body naturally becomes limited as the hot system prevails. In other words, under stress, the self loses its ability to cognitively control its negative emotions.\(^98\) As conflict induces stress, the stress of conflict can limit the cool system such that the hot system dominates. “In this cycle, stress increases the potential for conflict, which in turn escalates the level of stress, producing a pernicious cascade of impulsive hot-system responses and consequences that further undermine any chance for rational and effective conflict resolution.”\(^99\)

The dance between the cool and hot systems can be visualized according to Figure 2.7.\(^100\) At the line of equilibrium, both hot and cool systems are in balance. As conflict escalates, stress increases, the hot system is engaged, and the availability of the cool system becomes limited. The rise of stress related to conflict triggers the adrenal system, readying body and brain for the looming crisis ahead: The self is now poised in the fight, flight, or freeze stance. Not surprisingly, the ability of the person in conflict to make effective decisions is negatively correlated to the rise of adrenaline. Exclusive focus on perceived threats limits brain function to the degree that the rational cool system is inadequately engaged and one’s view of reality is distorted to the degree that one can no longer accurately assess the situation. As high stress moments of conflict pass, adrenaline plummets and the body seeks to bring itself into balance again. This leaves the body in a natural state of depression—experienced physiologically and psychologically—before returning naturally to equilibrium again.

In this diagram, the curve of conflict de-escalation intentionally matches that of conflict escalation for the simple reason that the length of time involved in escalating a conflict is loosely matched with the length of time required for de-escalating this same conflict. In other words, conflicts that grow over a longer period of time typically require a longer period of recovery to allow those involved to relearn how to be with one another. Similarly, conflicts that grow over a shorter timeframe can require a correlated shorter period of recovery. These realities put a unique stress on the parties involved: Even when a conflict is resolved at the point of crisis, it is not yet experienced as such as the emotional state of those involved has not yet reached equilibrium. Further, given that depression
follows the point of crisis, those in conflict may blame the other for their depression. More alarmingly, to avoid the slide into depression, to make sense of the slow journey of conflict de-escalation, and to allow adrenaline and energy to flow once more, many will either re-escalate the old conflict or create a new conflict altogether.

The hot and cool system dynamic in situations of conflict can feel disheartening and even dangerous. As the cool system disengages, easy solutions and life-giving alternatives to escalated conflict (and its ensuing depression) are missed in service of hot-system fight, flight, or freeze responses that refuse to be contained. Fortunately, the self does not need to become a victim to its hot responses nor to the stress-imposed limits on the cooling system. The self can practice disciplines that nurture self-awareness and self-regulation (self-reflection in a self-distanced and curious rather than self-referential and judgemental manner), and can practice disciplines that nurture other-awareness and relational
regulation (including planning for constructive conversations with the other). As this occurs, hot and cool systems come into appropriate balance once more, allowing for effective and healthy conflict engagement—even in times of stress.

While biology clearly places stress on even those with the best of intentions, the body is also teachable. Just as the body impacts the intentions of the mind, so also does the mind influence the body: While the self can lose its I-Thou intentions under stress, preconditioning toward an I-Thou frame allows the self to return more readily to this frame. Nonetheless, the biological processes associated with conflict demand humility of those who claim an underlying I-Thou intention. While individuals may wish to nurture I-Thou encounters, and while, in balance, the actions of these individuals may do exactly that, moments in time will occur when the biological stress of conflict will allow the distorted I-It frame to emerge.

2.d.iii  Underlying Worldviews, the Subconscious Mind, and Conflict Behaviour

Conflict theorist Morton Deutsch describes four key steps that influence the construction of conflict: “(1) how the individual encodes or perceives the situation, (2) the expectancies and beliefs that become activated, (3) the feelings and emotions triggered and experienced, and (4) the goals and values engaged.” To some degree, we have seen each of these steps in the communication model with which we have been working. Individuals encode action according to the expectations they bring to the situation (and that they have of the other); feelings and emotions—from back stories or otherwise—drive the act of encoding. As those communicating make meaning of the situation they are encountering, goals and values are engaged which layer what has occurred with judgements and biases according to the lens of the encoder.

Deutsch takes this concept a step further, arguing that those who hold core values of cooperation also tend to bring cooperative behaviours into their communication—even in times of conflict. As these behaviours tend to generate cooperative outcomes, the individual’s core values of cooperation are reinforced. The corollary also holds: Competitive core values produce competitive encoding and behaviours, generating win-lose outcomes, reinforcing competitive core values. By extension, we can argue that those whose underlying worldview makes space for I-Thou encounters are more likely to experience such encounters, just as those whose worldview assumes a distorted I-It encounter are more likely to experience such an encounter. While I-Thou encounters may be desirable during times of calm, it is during times of conflict that the underlying frame becomes especially important. Because conflict encounters tend to push self and other ever further into the I-It frame, an
underlying world view that makes space for I-Thou encounters appears to resist this push making the possibility of healthy disagreement more likely.

While Morton’s argument has merit and is observable, the reality of the subconscious mind raises questions regarding how confidently one can hold to his conclusions. Morton’s proposal, after all, assumes the ability of those involved to be conscious of their choices and their intentions. Recent research argues for some humility with regard to this claim.\textsuperscript{107} New data\textsuperscript{108} suggests that buried assumptions appear to persist even when the self consciously seeks to live by other norms.\textsuperscript{109} Further, the self appears more likely to rationalize and justify beliefs and behaviours emerging from its subconscious than to engage these beliefs and behaviours with self-critical reflection.\textsuperscript{110} The subconscious mind, to which the self has limited access, appears to drive much of the functioning of the self to the degree that one could argue that the self is the servant of its subconscious even as the self has, at least to some degree, created its subconscious. Stated most simply, significantly fewer decisions reside at the level of the rational self than previously believed. For our purposes this is critical: The power of othering can be so great and so subtle, and can exist so deeply in the recesses of the mind, it can influence encounters between self and other and drive I-It encounters, even when self and other profess to desire otherwise. Similarly, while some might profess an underlying desire to relate collaboratively, the deeper recesses of the mind might think otherwise, causing the self to engage in less than collaborative behaviour. For our purposes, we will consider the subconscious through five lenses: generalizations, stereotypes, attributions, assumptions, and the visibility of the subconscious.

(a) Generalizations

The subconscious is associated with normal and healthy functioning insofar as it allows the self to process enormous amounts of incoming data quickly, allowing for efficient decision-making with respect to the mundane, or alternately, allowing for critical and fast lifesaving responses to situations of danger. The subconscious allows the self to read body language, to modify its memories, to make judgements based on non-verbal clues, to generate emotional responses for reasons unknown to the conscious self, to quickly judge situations and others—all in an effort to make life easier and safer.\textsuperscript{111} Similarly, when the self encounters another who belongs to an identity group that differs from the self, the capacity to make generalizations about the other’s group can help the self to understand the other and the environment in which self and other are encountering one another. In this case, negative intent is not ascribed to the making of generalizations. Generalizations, whether conscious or subconscious, simply help the self to understand the context and the situation at hand quickly and easily.
(b)  **Stereotypes**

Stereotyping is defined as the tendency to associate a set of attributes with a social group, to translate these attributes to a fixed mental picture of this social group and, subsequently, to associate all members of this group with this mental picture. Stereotypes can be positive, neutral, or negative. While holding to particular stereotypes is not normally socially acceptable, stereotypes persist, sometimes with difficult or drastic outcomes. In their study of conscious thought and subconscious beliefs, researchers Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald made two discoveries: (1) While the degree to which negative stereotypes persist in the self is correlated with conscious beliefs, negative stereotypes persist even when the self professes no such conscious beliefs; (2) negative stereotypes of particular groups exist even in those who identify with the group being negatively assessed. In study after study—with various stereotypes now under scrutiny—Banaji and Greenwald reached the same conclusion: Stereotypes persist in the subconscious even when the bearer of the stereotype has actively worked to undo these assumptions and even when the bearer of the stereotype is negatively impacted by these assumptions.

For our purposes, the results of Banaji and Greenwald’s tests are significant. Stereotypes, after all, contribute to the development and intractability of conflict. If the other belongs to a social group regarding which the self holds a fixed and negative mental picture, then the relationship between self and other does not begin on neutral ground. Instead it begins on territory already littered with unfavourable assumptions. The frustrating reality of stereotypes is the degree to which they are socially construed and thus beyond the “control” of the self. Although the self may consciously work toward being free of stereotypes, when these stereotypes are supported by the larger social context, the self appears to integrate these stereotypes into its subconscious space.

(c)  **Attributions**

While stereotypes represent one lens through which the subconscious exerts itself, in times of conflict, the attribution lens is similarly problematic. As already seen, according to attribution theory, the self readily establishes a somewhat static view of the other, as individual actions of the other are assumed to define the character of the other. While this static view can be lodged in the conscious self, it can also be lodged in the subconscious mind. Like stereotypes, the subconscious attributions the self associates with the other can persist even after self and other have negotiated an agreement or been reconciled. While the self, post-conflict, may consciously regard the other positively or neutrally, should problems in
the relationship between self and other re-emerge, the pre-existing static and unconscious view of the other easily re-emerges to influence the new conflict.

(d) Assumptions
Beyond stereotypes and attributions, the self is also governed at the subconscious level by a myriad of additional assumptions regarding self, other, and how the world “works.” The “truth” by which the self lives is coloured by inferences, perspectives, presuppositions, memories, assumptions, and experiences regarding the other—all of which lie deep in the subconscious—yet the real other is at best a shadow of the other the self perceives. Of course, the corollary is also true: The self also lives by a set of assumptions regarding the self and how the world “should work,” typically, according to the lens of the self’s own beliefs and customs. In some cases, subconscious assumptions may be benign but contribute nonetheless to conflict. For example, the self may live according to a set of assumptions to the degree that the self, quite innocently, cannot even see that another set of assumptions may be driving another individual. In other cases, subconscious assumptions are more sinister: The self may hold subconscious assumptions that place the self above the other—even if consciously the self would say otherwise. Alternately, memories of harm between self and other can create wounds deep in the subconscious that—although consciously forgotten or resolved—persist in the subconscious. During times of conflict, old wounds can reach out from the recesses of the self into the space between self and other, holding self and other in their grasp. In a subtle but profound manner, old wounds awaken a sense of threat within the self, giving permission for a new transition from disagreement into conflict. In each of these ways, persistent assumptions emerge and “speak” into the interactions between self and other, defining these interactions, complicating them, and ultimately leading self and other into conflict.

(e) The Visibility of the Subconscious
Perhaps the most alarming conclusion emerging from research regarding the subconscious is this: Even if the self has taken no conscious action, that which the self harbours in its subconscious regarding the other and/or regarding the self can nonetheless be read by the other and can contribute to conflict. While the subconscious is experienced as inaccessible, that which resides in the subconscious is not necessarily hidden. Studies reveal just how powerfully the subconscious mind can reveal itself. The subconscious mind causes the body to reveal the self’s inner thoughts through subtle movements of the body, eyes, and face. The other—also subconsciously—notices these behaviours and responds accordingly. Self and other may have no conscious awareness that they are communicating in this fashion. This subtle yet powerful “dialogue” challenges the landscape of conflict transformation.
Leonard Mlodinow reports: “In humans, body language and nonverbal communication are not limited to simple gestures and expressions. We have a highly complex system of nonverbal language, and we routinely participate in elaborate nonverbal exchanges, even when we are not consciously aware of doing so.”

In the context of conflict, the dis-ease one party has with another is communicated—whether this dis-ease is associated with stereotypes, with a static set of attributions regarding the other, or with regard to underlying assumptions.

By way of example, let us consider for a moment a conflict where the self has acted honourably but where the self has harboured a subconscious disregard for the other. This dis-ease is valuable insofar as it drives the self to maintain boundaries that keep the self safe. On the other hand, this disease, though unspoken and unconscious, communicates itself to the other. While some relationships benefit from the safety a sense of dis-ease creates, other relationships—particularly those that wish to shift from conflict to reconciliation—suffer as a result. Specifically, when the other receives nonverbal messages of discomfort from the self, even if only at a subconscious level, the other can mirror this disease, limiting the possibility of reconciliation.

Similarly, if the self has an old emotional wound that resides at the level of the subconscious, what is hidden to the self (or what the self knows but seeks to hide) is not necessarily hidden to the other. This wound may be associated with a memory of harm, a sense of shame, feelings of jealousy, a sense of being lesser than the other, etc. Whatever the cause of the wound, the self communicates this wound, even if in very small ways. This inner wound can cause the self to be especially vulnerable to comments or actions that target this wound. More alarming is another more sinister reality: When the other observes the self’s wound, the other—also subconsciously—may target the self at precisely the place where the self holds its deep wound. If the other is challenged in this regard, they may self-justify their behaviour. Just as assumptions can reside in the subconscious, so also can self-justification reside in the subconscious. Self and other “know” themselves to be innocent because subconsciously they have already reconfigured reality to entrench this view.

Of the assumptions the self carries regarding the self, one of the most galling to the other is the belief that the self is innocent. Why? Because the other sees what the self does not wish to see: The complicity of the self in the construction of the conflict. This appears to be true whether this complicity emerges from intentional behaviour that is self-justified and translated into innocence, or unintentional behaviour associated with subconscious wounds, needs, inferences, stereotypes, or assumptions regarding self and other. What is clear is that absolutely realistic self-appraisals are not possible. The motivations of the self are simply not as pure as presumed by the conscious self. At the very least,
these conclusions should drive the self toward a profound state of humility. We are forced to ask: If forces blind the self to that of which the self is, at best, only vaguely aware, is it possible to engage in genuine dialogue or conflict transformation?

2.e Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to understand how conflict theory explains the self-other divide. As we have seen, when one’s sense of selfhood is perceived to be under threat, the shift from disagreement into conflict readily occurs. As this divide takes root and grows, the distance between self and other widens, leading to entrenchment between the parties. The self-other divide, as seen through the lens of conflict theory is, at best, problematic; it weakens the ability of those in conflict to relate well to one another. At worst, it is dangerous, as it gradually (or rapidly) dehumanizes both self and other.

One of the key foundations upon which conflict theory relies to explain the fall into conflict is the structure or architecture of identity. Conflict theory identifies five key needs that reside at the centre of selfhood, whether that selfhood is understood individually or collectively. These needs can be described as the need for belonging, recognition, autonomy, meaning, and security. Because selfhood is defined by needs, selfhood is threatened when needs are unmet or triggered, allowing the step from disagreement into conflict occur. While we will return to these needs in the chapters that follow, for now, it is important to recall that while interaction regarding needs may generate mutual understanding between self and other, just as often needs drive self and other apart, generating misunderstanding or placing self and other in competition with one another. In conflict, self and other may well regard one another’s self-perceived needs as delusional, just as they will regard their own needs as legitimate even when they are distorted. A complicating factor with respect to conflict is the tendency to create social hierarchies, preferring the needs of some over those of others, thereby giving power to some while withholding power from others. The complications associated with communication (back-stories, assumptions, confirmation bias, meaning making) create, escalate, and entrench conflict. Even when those with differences bring positive intentions into their interactions, the needs associated with selfhood—especially when they reside at the subconscious level—can trigger a stress response that escalates negative emotions and minimizes positive emotions, thereby increasing both conflict and the divide between self and other.

Given the challenges associated with biases that exist at the subconscious level, the advice given to those who wish to genuinely reflect the worldview they profess is to practice self-awareness and self-regulation alongside other-awareness and the regulation of one’s relationships. In other words, one (or
one’s group) must develop habits that allow one to discover that which is fundamentally true within oneself; one must hold what one knows with humility; one must manage one’s behaviour; one must practice accurately “reading” or hearing the other; and one must act according to the needs of the relationship, as opposed to only the needs of the self. This advice, while sounding hopeful, is also difficult to practice. How does the self actually manage this level of awareness? We will return to this question in various ways throughout the chapters that follow.

To close this chapter, we return to our interlocutor, Martin Buber. How has his contribution influenced our work thus far? Using Buber as our guide, we recall that the I-Thou, I-It, and distorted I-It frames allowed for a finer articulation of the shift from disagreement into conflict and into entrenchment, bringing clarity and insight into this dynamic. Read through Buber’s lens, conflict theory is sharpened. While Buber laments the distorted I-It frame (monologue disguised as dialogue), conflict theory supports Buber’s work by offering important depth and nuance to his contributions in this regard.

According to Buber, self and other come into being in relationship with one another. The relational space between self and other depends on communication, whether spoken or unspoken, verbal, tonal, or behavioural. As we have seen, communication is a complicated bridge over which the relationship between self and other travels. This bridge is fraught with misunderstandings, assumptions, the possibility of slights, and the risk of intentional acts of harm, all of which can further the divide between self and other—and, by extension, all of which threaten the identity of self and other. If Buber is correct in his statement that self and other come into being in relationship with one another and if we are correct that the relational bridge between self and other is fraught with risk, then conflict transformation is not simply a nice activity in which to engage. Instead, it is essential to selfhood.

When we place conflict theory alongside Buber’s articulation of the I-Thou and I-It frames, a question emerges: If those in conflict do, in fact, meet one another’s needs for recognition, belonging, meaning, security, and autonomy, are they having an I-Thou or an I-It encounter? While it is possible for an encounter regarding needs to generate genuine dialogue between self and other, it is just as possible that such an encounter remains at the level of technical dialogue, or, when needs are met begrudgingly, even monologue disguised as dialogue. If this is true, then dialogue with the intention of mutually meeting one another’s needs may nonetheless limit the possibility of selfhood. Said differently, if the “I” of I-Thou is different from the “I” of I-It and if the satisfaction of needs does not necessarily generate an I-Thou encounter, a problem presents itself: While conflict theory associates selfhood with the meeting of one’s fundamental needs, and if, as per Buber, full selfhood is associated with the I-Thou, then it
appears that meeting needs alone does not necessarily produce selfhood. In other words, selfhood must lie with something different or deeper still than needs. We will return to this conclusion throughout this thesis as we seek to understand the self-other divide.

When self and other are in conflict, they regularly engage the other as “object,” with self as the “subject” of experience. According to Buber, so long as the self carries on a monologue with or regarding the other and/or if the self deconstructs the other according to a self-referential frame, the self remains the “I” in relation with an “It.” Over time, this stance will cause the self to fall into relation with the other according to a distorted I-It frame, limiting the selfhood of both self and other. When the self moves toward the I-Thou frame—even when in conflict—the self releases thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of the other in order to relate as mutual subjects with the other. In other words, for Buber, selfhood not only occurs in relationship with the other, it occurs when that relationship is defined by a subjective mutuality. When this happens, the divide between self and other is transformed. It is to this that we now turn: What does conflict transformation mean for the self-other divide, how does it come to pass, and how is the self-other frame engaged as a resource for transformation?

1 As mediator, conflict coach, group facilitator, conflict skills trainer, and organizational leader.
10 See Johnson et al., “Constructive Controversy.”
For more on this perspective see the work of Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton in *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*, 2nd ed. (Penguin Books, 1991).

See the books by Chip and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), and *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (New York: Crown Business, 2013), and also Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012). The business world has provided many dramatic examples of the implications of forced agreement and the same problem can be observed in other environments, including in the political and religious realm.


Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 72–74.


See Fisher and Ury, *Getting to Yes*.

Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 69–70. A word of caution is merited here: According to Mayer, the concept of power is so complex—and so context-based—that it is not really possible to identify the qualities of an absolute power balance, nor is it objectively achievable. Mayer even challenges the mediators’ language of “level playing field.” This concept assumes that the mediation process can limit the unfair advantage one party may have over another regardless of the power imbalances inherent in the relationship. According to Mayer, even good process is limited in its capacity in this regard.


While the model and definitions provided are my own, credit belongs to both John Paul Lederach and Speed Lees, whose conflict escalation models I have worked with for many years. Their fingerprints are no doubt on what I have written.


Ibid., 70.

Ibid., 70.

Ibid., 71.

Fisher, “Intergroup Conflict,” 239–240. See, for example, such acts in situations of social upheaval—from dissidents during Nazi Germany to perceived traitors during apartheid South Africa.

See Fisher, “Intergroup Conflict.”

Fisher, “Intergroup Conflict,” 239–240. See also Leonard Mlodinow, *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behaviour* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 167: “We may not like people in general, but however little or much we like our fellow human beings, our subliminal selves tend to like our fellow in-group members more.” That we like those in our in-group more allows us to see our own as “more variegated and complex” while the other is reduced to a simple uniform caricature (Idem, 168).


Leigh L. Thompson and Brian J. Lucas, “Judgmental Biases in Conflict Resolution and How to Overcome Them,” in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., eds. Peter T. Coleman, Morton Deutsch and Eric C. Marcus (Jossey-Bass, 2014, 255–282), 260–268. This includes the exaggeration of conflict—overestimating the extremity of the other side’s beliefs; the assumption that one’s own behaviour is always as a result of the other and never the start of the cycle; the illusion of transparency—overestimation of the other’s ability to sense one’s needs; and a generalized lack of awareness regarding one’s egocentrism—we think we are fair when in fact we are not.

The victim, villain, rescuer triangle was first articulated by Stephen Karpman in a 1968 article entitled, “Fairy tales and script drama analysis” in Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 7(26), 39–43.

Based on the author’s experience as a mediator, these cases are also generally easier to solve. A serious victim-offender dispute between strangers (where there will be no ongoing relationship between the parties) is often easier to resolve than a minor dispute between neighbours over property lines (where there will need to be an ongoing relationship between the parties).


Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 10.

Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 27. These are also very similar to the needs and interests described in Fisher and Ury, 48; and in *From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of Deep-Rooted Conflict can open Paths to Reconciliation*, by Vern Neufeld Redekop, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002), 31–60 and in Rothman, *Resolving Identity-Based Conflict*, 7.


Ibid., 64.

Rothman, *Resolving Identity-Based Conflict*, 5.

Ibid., 7.

Northrup, “Dynamic of Identity,” 65, supports this perspective by drawing from the work of personality theorist George Kelly. According to Kelly, each individual develops “core constructs” that govern or define how one functions in the world and how one perceives one’s role within the world. Core constructs thus allow one to maintain both a sense of identity and a sense of predictability. In short, they allow the world and one’s place in it to “make sense.” The problem is this: Core constructs are so deeply rooted in the self, they cannot easily be changed without disturbing the very roots of one’s identity. When the self does encounter constructs that are incompatible with or are perceived to “violate” its core constructs, two possibilities emerge: (a) The self redefines the incompatible construct in order to allow it to more easily integrate into its existing construction of identity. While this approach appears benign, it does not actually represent a change in the core construct of the self, allowing conflict to develop, albeit more slowly. (b) Alternately, the self rejects the alternate constructs. As the alternate construct represents a threat to the self, some type of conflict—whether interior to the self or expressed—appear to be inevitable. Northrup states: “… [If] one’s core sense of self, the identity, is threatened by the demands, behavior, or identity of another person, then psychic or even physical annihilation will seem to be imminent. Severe conflict will ensue.”


Fisher, Ury & Patton, 40.

Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 24.


Moore, 127–130.

Substantive interests can further be described as differences in perspective regarding core beliefs about the issue at hand, structure, key information, or data, even values regarding how beliefs, structure, or data are perceived.

Procedural interests can further be described as differences in perspective regarding how the structure is experienced, varying access to information or data, even values regarding how the process of sharing information or access to structure is perceived.


Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 25.


69 It is worth noting that conflict theorists identify the drivers of conflict variously. Christopher Moore’s work in this regard has already been noted. See also Fisher, *Intergroup Conflict*, 233.
72 Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 21.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 11.
77 Ibid.
78 Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 27.
80 This insight is affirmed by Bush, Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger in *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).
82 See research by Tavris and Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*. In their collected research, Tavris and Aronson note that even in matters as banal as car shopping people tend to self-justify their decisions and in the process resist truths or perspectives that differ from the conclusions at which they have arrived.
83 Mayer, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 11.
84 Ibid., 13.
85 Ibid., 18.
88 Ibid., 170.
89 I learned a basic version of this concept, known as the Intent-Action-Effect Communication Model, in 1993 at Mediation Services in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. I have since expanded on this concept based on my experience with clients. Over the years, this concept has become one of the most important concepts in my mediation practice and in my conflict transformation teaching.
93 Ibid., 302.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 315.
Ibid.


98 Ibid., 317.

99 Ibid., 318.

100 The lines associated with adrenaline/depression and ability to make good decisions are borrowed from Mediation Services, Winnipeg, MB. The addition of the conflict escalation line, the link between these lines, the concept of hot and cool systems, and the interpretation that follows are my own. In addition, another line can be added to this diagram: This is the line of systemic conflict. However, it is not added here because it lies somewhat outside the scope of this chapter. The systemic line of conflict roughly follows the conflict escalation and de-escalation line. When groups are in dispute, the system often leads players into conflict. Over time, these players act “worse” than the system expected them to. For conflict to be resolved, the systemic line must return to equilibrium, along with the conflict escalation line.

101 For more in this regard, see the work of Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1994).

102 Mischel et al., 322–325.

103 Walter Mischel et al., “Self-Regulation,” 312–313.


105 Deutsch, “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict,” 18–19. Deutsch argues for five values to undergird constructive conflict resolution: Reciprocity (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), human equality (all people are entitled to just and respectful treatment), shared community (conflicted individuals exist within a broader community the value of which is greater than those in conflict), fallibility (one’s judgement and the judgement of others can be in error) and nonviolence (a commitment against physical or psychological coercive tactics). These values create a set of conflict norms (what these values mean for us practically) that in turn undergird the processes by which conflict is constructively addressed.

106 Ibid., 5. Basic psychological processes upon which social interactions are built will influence the values an individual brings to a conflicted relationship. These processes include substitutability (the degree to which one accepts the activities of another to fulfill one’s own needs), attitudes (the predisposition to respond favourably to that which is seen as beneficial and negatively to that which is seen as harmful), and inducibility (the willingness to be influenced by another to do what the other wants). See also Fisher, “Intergroup Conflict,” 239–240.


111 Mlodinow, *Subliminal*, 194. See the incredible number of studies done that reveal precisely this point.

112 Banaji and Greenwald, 73.

113 Ibid., 94ff.
See K. Allred, “Anger and Retaliation in Conflict.”

See Mayer, 14-16; Fisher, 234–236; Krauss and Morsella, 168–181.

Mlodinow, Subliminal, 107–125.

Ibid., 119.

See Mlodinow, Subliminal, and also Tavris and Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me).

Chapter 3

Transformation of Conflict and the Self-Other Frame

3.a Introduction

When interactions between self and other are healthy, the I-Thou frame makes space for a genuine self-other encounter, allowing the full humanity of each to emerge. By way of contrast, as disagreeing parties inhabit a polarized self-other divide, they shift from disagreement to conflict and from conflict to entrenchment. Borrowing from Buber, we have described this frame as monologue disguised as dialogue, or the distorted I-It frame. If genuine dialogue positively humanizes self and other, then monologue disguised as dialogue does the opposite, reducing the humanity of self and other. In response to this trajectory, those engaged in conflict transformation seek to turn the process of de-humanization around, shifting entrenchment and conflict to healthy disagreement and even harmony. If conflict represents a shift from the I-Thou frame to a distorted I-It frame, then conflict transformation seeks to return self and other to the I-Thou frame. Herein lies a curious twist: Rather than rejecting the self-other divide outright, the conflict transformation model proposed in this chapter will use the self-other frame as a vehicle by which dehumanization and conflict can be transformed.

The guiding question for this chapter is quite simple: How is conflict transformed? When differences are at the stage of disagreement, transformation of conflict is not necessary as the parties are not yet in conflict. They also more readily inhabit the I-Thou frame. While staying at or returning to the level of disagreement involves achievable skill and commitment, not all differences remain at this level. Even in the lives of the most skilled people, conflicts can emerge that inch—or race—their way toward entrenchment. In these cases, the shift to the I-Thou stance becomes immeasurably more difficult. Further, as we saw in chapter 2, the human brain appears wired to resist the perspective of the other, just as the human brain appears wired to justify its own perspective. How then do we understand the practices that support this shift?

While the field of conflict theory is riddled with articles and books regarding practical skills for avoiding the escalation of conflict and engaging in conflict conversations, the purpose of this chapter is
not to provide a handbook for conflict transformation. Instead, this chapter will return to the self-other frame already established in chapter 2 to consider the wisdom emerging from this underlying perspective for the purposes of conflict transformation. Specifically, if the self-other divide provides an underlying frame for understanding why or how people engage in conflict, can this same model guide the trajectory from conflict to its transformation? To pursue this idea, we will take the following path: (a) We will clarify the language and scope associated with the transformation of conflict; (b) we will consider a “polarities model,” to add language and a framework for the self-other frame; (c) we will observe how the polarities model is used in the research of several different authors with a particular view to how this model understands selfhood and otherhood; and (d) we will consider an approach—“triangulation”—that articulates a pathway for addressing polarities and the self-other frame that polarities reveal. Throughout, we will invite our interlocutor, Buber, to speak into our work.

3. a. i Conflict Transformation Defined

To begin, we turn to definitions in order to establish the meaning of conflict transformation. Over the last number of years, multiple terms or titles have emerged within the field of conflict theory to describe and define what happens when people seek to address conflict. Two have received the most academic attention: conflict resolution and conflict transformation. While other titles, such as conflict management, transformative conflict resolution, conflict settlement, dispute resolution, and transformative mediation have also been used, we focus here on the first two terms as they are most prevalent. No commonly-agreed upon definitions of these words exist, mainly because those proposing various terms do not necessarily agree with one another. To some degree, the differences between terms is artificial, as the definitions of various terms can be perceived as nearly identical to one another. For example, to resolve conflict assumes, according to some, that one also transforms the conditions that lead to conflict. Others, however, declare that the difference in terms matters, arguing that conflict resolution takes a short view of conflict engagement, settling the immediate dispute while not addressing the conditions that caused the conflict in the first place. Conflict transformation is therefore proposed as an alternate title, one that declares that engagement with conflict must seek to change or modify the conditions that have caused the conflict to emerge. John Paul Lederach, arguably the one of the strongest voices in favour of the term conflict transformation, states:

Both resolution and transformation claim to be process-oriented. Resolution, however, sees the development of process as centered on the immediacy of the relationship where the symptoms of crisis and disruption take place. Transformation envisions the presenting problem as an opportunity to engage a broader context, to explore and understand the system of relationships
and patterns that gave birth to the crisis. It seeks to address both the immediate issues and the system of relational patterns.\textsuperscript{4}

Still others argue that those in favour of conflict transformation miss opportunities to resolve specific disputes, keeping systems artificially in tension in pursuit of a grander vision that not all desire.\textsuperscript{5} Some, seeing the value of both terms, have put these two together with the resultant term, “transformative conflict resolution.”\textsuperscript{6}

For our purposes, the discussion of terms is helpful insofar as the attempt among academics and practitioners to define these terms has raised to the fore several valuable underlying philosophical concepts. In particular, academics and practitioners have been forced to ask the question: “What does it mean for a conflict to be adequately addressed?” While the resolution of specific, high-crisis situations is valuable, the discussion over terms has raised into the conflict discourse the equally valuable need to transform the dynamics contributing to the crisis, whether these are historical, sociological, political, relational or psychological. Depending on the context in which conflict transformation is applied, the emphasis with respect to that which is transformed naturally differs. Peacebuilders in the international context, for example, speak of the need for larger systemic and social changes in addition to relational transformation.\textsuperscript{7} While not ignoring the need for social change, mediators in situations of interpersonal conflict typically prefer to emphasise relational transformation.\textsuperscript{8} In both contexts, conflict specialists identify the relationship between various players as the key unit of transformation. Accordingly, peacebuilder John Paul Lederach defines constructive social change as follows: “… [the] pursuit of moving relationships from those defined by fear, mutual recrimination, and violence toward those characterized by love, mutual respect and proactive engagement.”\textsuperscript{9} With this phrase, we hear echoes of the significance Buber placed on the relationship between self and other.

While not negating the pivotal nature of the space between self and other, both transformative-oriented, international, and interpersonal mediators also allow that the transformation of relationships depends on some type of transformation of the selves within those relationships. Said otherwise, if, as per Buber, the “I” of the I-It frame is qualitatively different than the “I” of I-Thou frame, and if, as we are proposing, conflict transformation represents an opening in the self to the I-Thou encounter, then conflict transformation must also depend on some type of shift in the “I” to allow this encounter to occur. As a result, we must also ask the following questions: (1) How is the “I” (or the self) changed in the context of conflict transformation? and (2) How does this change impact the other such that “Thou” and not “It” becomes possible?
Several theorists support the transformation of the self as critical to the transformation of conflicted relationships. Northrup offers the following: “Transformation has a better prognosis of occurring when there are specific modifications in the identities of the parties, the nature of their relationship is redefined, and changes in their core sense of self are possible.”\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, Edwin Friedman states: “If you want your child, spouse, client, or boss to shape up, stay connected while changing yourself rather than trying to fix them.”\textsuperscript{11} Neither Friedman nor Northrup propose a focus on self as a nod to individualism. Nor do mediators Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, whose emphasis is similar. Indeed, Bush and Folger state that to pursue conflict resolution in the absence of personal transformation is to entrench unhealthy forms of individualism.\textsuperscript{12} If, in the pursuit of transformed relationships, the self is not transformed, the self remains unattached, stoic, and unmoved. Instead, the focus on self allows for “an emerging, higher vision of self and society, one based on moral development and interpersonal relations rather than on satisfaction and individual autonomy.”\textsuperscript{13}

Because of the profound connection between self and other, to transform the self is a powerful beginning through which the relationship between self and other is simultaneously transformed. Similarly, the corollary must also be true: If the relationship between self and other is transformed, so also is the selfhood of self and other transformed. When these transformations occur, larger social changes also become possible. Transformation of self and society thus become parallel pursuits, each supporting the other—and each made possible through the transformation of that which stands between self and society—the relationship between the self and the one with whom the self is in conflict: the other. As conflict specialists have reflected on the transformation of the self, they have cast the focus of transformation onto themselves as well, acknowledging that to be effective as third party interveners, the same principle applies. In this regard, mediator Adam Curle states the following: “I have come to see that the way we perceive human nature, especially our own, is of overarching importance. It is indeed an absurd illusion to consider that we can work for peace, which means to be actively involved with people who are behaving in an unpeaceful way, if we are inwardly turbulent and ill-at-ease....”\textsuperscript{14}

In summary, conflict specialists appear to agree that to address conflict involves the transformation of social contexts, the transformation of relationships, the resolution of specific conflicts, and the transformation of the self. The two terms we have been considering, conflict resolution and conflict transformation, while not mutually exclusive, reveal a difference in emphasis with regard to these goals. For our purposes, we shall allow the difference in emphasis between these two terms to stand. Conflict resolution, while inviting transformation, emphasizes addressing and bringing closure to
specific disputes. Under this definition, a conflict could be resolved without a significant change in the conditions that led to conflict and/or without a significant change in the parties to the dispute. By way of contrast, conflict transformation, while allowing for the resolution of specific disputes, emphasises altering the conditions that lead to conflict in the first place, allowing for a change in the parties themselves. Defined in this way, this thesis will primarily use the term conflict transformation, as the purpose of this thesis is less about resolving specific disputes and more about engaging and transforming the deeper dynamics that lead to conflict in the first place, including the deeper dynamics within the self.

3.a.ii Primary Conversation Partners

Our primary conversation partners for this chapter will change somewhat as we move from one section to the next. To begin, we will work primarily with two authors who work especially with the concept of paradoxes and polarities—a concept that, as we shall see, can be used to reflect the self-other divide. The first of these authors, Bernard Mayer, we met in chapter 2. His book The Conflict Paradox: Seven Dilemmas at the Core of Disputes is especially helpful in describing the nature of the divisions that emerge between self and other in the context of conflict. The second author we will meet is Barry Johnson. In his book Managing Polarities: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems, Johnson maps the concept of polarities onto an image, which, as we shall see, not only strengthens our understanding of the self-other divide, it also proposes a strategy for bridging this divide.

With Johnson’s image as our roadmap, we follow the work of several different authors who directly explore the self-other divide: Robert Bush and Joseph Folger, Edwin Friedman, and Miroslav Volf. These authors will deepen and expand our understanding of the self-other dynamic and will offer strategies for its repair. We will follow this conversation with a somewhat deeper dive into the theme of forgiveness and justice, as this theme also reflects the self-other divide. To support us in this section we will consider the works of a variety of authors, including Miroslav Volf, Martha Minow, and Sharon Lamb.

The polarities concept proposes that the self-other divide is solved not with “either-or” but with “both-and” thinking. To help us understand the qualities of the both-and frame we turn to the work of Family Systems Theory. First developed by Murray Bowen, then articulated further by Edwin Friedman and others, Family Systems Theory is a multi-layered set of principles that articulates the nature of how individuals and groups in conflict interact with and mutually influence one another. While Family Systems Theory, in itself, is an excellent roadmap for understanding conflict, our intention is to
lift one particular aspect from this theory into our conversation. Specifically, we will consider the concept of emotional triangles to understand (a) the divisions between a range of polarities, including self and other; and (b) how the addition of a third player that forms the triangle can entrench or transform the dynamic between self and other. While Friedman will be our primary guide for this conversation, our understanding of these triangles is also driven by the author’s own use of this concept over the past twenty-six years of practice.

3.b Modelling the Self-Other Frame

As we saw in chapter 2, while each building block of conflict offers a unique contribution to the logic of how two or more people shift from the I-Thou frame to the distorted form of the I-It frame, each building block also appears to reflect, in one way or another, the self-other divide. This thesis does not propose that the self-other divide is the only underlying model by which to explain conflict. Instead it offers the self-other lens as one window through which to understand how the building blocks of conflict work together and how, together, these blocks create, escalate, and entrench conflict. Here, we return to the same self-other lens to consider its contribution to conflict transformation. Specifically, in this section, we will (1) explore the nature of the self-other frame, recognising that this frame also goes by other parallel titles; (2) establish a model to describe the self-other frame; (3) identify how this model establishes a bridge between self and other; and (4) explore how this model resonates with Buber’s writing.

3.b.i Paradoxes and Polarities: A Model of the Self-Other Frame that Encourages a Shift from Either-Or to Both-And Thinking

As already observed in chapter 2, the I-It or self-other frame also goes by other names. For example, those caught in the self-other frame can perceive self as good and other as bad (the good-bad frame), just as they tend to perceive their proposed resolution to the conflict as reasonable and the other’s resolution as unreasonable (the reasonable-unreasonable frame, or the my idea-your idea frame). Similarly, the deeper a conflict is entrenched, the more likely it is that those in dispute see their conflict through a win-lose frame. Stated more generally, the self-other frame and its parallel manifestations rest on an underlying dualism that separates self and other and that, in conflict, allows one to dominate another. Either the self will win and the other will lose, or the other will win and the self will lose. This either-or construction, like the self-other frame, is so endemic to entrenched conflict that the self-other
and either-or frames walk in lockstep with one another, driving the escalation of conflict. As with the self-other frame, the either-or construct is symptomatic of entrenchment: It both encourages entrenchment and causes those in conflict to resist transformation. As we have seen, as conflict escalates, the involved parties reduce their perspective of the other to a simple, negative caricature of the other, just as they create an internal, positive caricature of themselves. Similarly, they reduce their perspective of the problem to simplified assessments of what happened, what went wrong, and why the conflict became so difficult. As differences grow, it becomes increasingly difficult for those in conflict to bridge their opposing perspectives and experiences. Those in escalated conflict feel they must choose one pole, just as they believe the other has chosen an opposing pole. The consequences are significant: creativity is lost, lateral thinking is compromised, and the possibility of transformation becomes limited.¹⁹

By way of contrast, the work of conflict transformation finds its niche in a space beyond the opposing poles—gently, kindly, carefully, and sometimes boldly drawing self and other into this shared space. The space to which we are referring appears to lie beyond rather than between the poles as conflict transformation appears to rely less on finding compromise between opposing poles and more on entertaining possibilities that go beyond opposing poles.

According to Mayer, as those in conflict seek to address their differences with regard to their foundational human needs and underlying interests, both they and the third parties appointed to support them can become caught in these polarities, feeling the need to choose one pole over the other.²⁰ Mayer outlines seven paradoxes or polarities that dominate efforts to resolve conflict: competition and cooperation, optimism and realism, avoidance and engagement, principle and compromise, emotions and logic, neutrality and advocacy, and community and autonomy. Mayer states: “Everyone involved in a dispute, including conflict professionals, tends to stumble over these polarities or tries to find easy ways to rectify the very real contradictions they represent. The more people succumb to dualistic thinking in response to these polarities, the more they become trapped in a conflict.”²¹ For example, in the process of engaging conflict, should one compete or cooperate with the other? Should one be optimistic or realistic, avoid or engage, etc.? According to Mayer, to force a choice between these paradoxes—as opposite from one another as they may appear to be—is to force a false choice.²² The tendency to choose one pole over the other is precisely what causes people to become entrenched in conflict. Instead, Mayer proposes that to transform conflict one must choose both sides of the paradox. One must both compete (state one’s own needs) and cooperate (listen for the needs of the other). One must be optimistic (hopeful that a resolution can be found) and realistic (recognise the
limitations that self and other are under). One must avoid (some perspectives, regardless of how objectively true they might be, do not need to be stated) and engage (transforming the conflict depends on speaking about one’s experiences). Mayer continues:

We can view these polarities collectively as the conflict paradox—the inevitable and defining contradictions that we face when deciding how to approach a conflictual interaction. In essence the conflict paradox is about the intellectual and emotional maturity we bring to conflict. The higher the stakes the greater our tendency to view these polarities in a more primitive or immature way—to believe that we must choose between one side or the other and to see one element as right and the other as wrong.... [Effective] conflict work requires a more sophisticated, nuanced, and complex approach that recognizes that in most instances, both sides of these polarities must be embraced, and we have to get past understanding them as contradictions.23

But how do people shift away from their poles and into the space beyond them? Mayer makes several practical suggestions, including using the “accessible” space beyond one set of paradoxes to access the space beyond another set of paradoxes: If the parties can observe, hold, and value the truths associated with one set of opposing poles, they are more likely to transfer their learning to another set of opposing poles.24 For some parties, simply identifying the paradox dynamic can be enough to shift their conflict stance. For others, these options are not enough; self and other need assistance reframing their conflict to see it from a larger, more integrated perspective. Practically, this involves listening for the underlying interests and needs behind polarized positions and reframing these in a manner that links those interests to the larger picture of conflict that is being developed. Reframing is a challenging skill precisely because it nudges conflict from its poles to the space beyond the poles. While conflict transformation practitioners can assist others in this regard, the first and possibly greatest step begins with the practitioners themselves. When practitioners develop the capacity to see the wisdom in each pole, they more easily lead those they support in this same direction.25

Mayer’s work in articulating the nature, quality, and form of paradoxes in the context of conflict provides an excellent contribution to the field of conflict transformation. There is another author, however, Barry Johnson, whose work is older and of whom Mayer seems to be unaware. Johnson’s construction of how paradoxes function has the capacity to clarify and expand that which Mayer is proposing. With Mayer, Johnson observes that there is “truth” or wisdom at each end of two opposing poles. Both acknowledge the limitations of focusing on one pole to the exclusion of the other. While Mayer focuses primarily on the paradoxes experienced by those already in conflict, with regard to how to think about or engage a conflict that is already occurring, Johnson focuses primarily on the paradoxes that cause conflict in the first place. From Johnson’s perspective, people become caught in conflict as they struggle over daily life paradoxes, seeing them as matters of either-or rather than both-and. This is
seen when people wrestle over whether to pursue stability or change, to be clear or to allow for flexibility, to engage in planning or action, or to focus on self or other, etc. According to Johnson, the tendency to flee to one’s favoured pole on issues that are in fact paradoxes creates conflict where no conflict needs to exist.

Johnson proposes that while problems can be solved, polarities can only be managed. We might add to this that while problems can be solved, conflicts can only be resolved. With these statements, we add further nuance to the escalation of differences established in chapter 2. Linking Johnson’s words to the definitions we established there, we can say the following: (a) When differences are at the stage of disagreements, they are issues-as-problems and can be solved relatively easily. (b) When differences become conflicts, they are more entangled and although they may involve one or more problems that could, in principle, be solved, the emotionally charged dynamics are such that for resolution to be found, the conflict must be resolved rather than solved. Resolving a conflict implies coming to a deeper understanding regarding self and other and the issues in dispute. It also implies a type of letting go, recognising that in most conflicts many issues remain unresolved even as the parties move on with those that are. (c) Differences become polarities when the essence of the difference cannot be solved in an either-or fashion. Said more boldly, according to Johnson, while problems are either-or in nature and can thus be solved in a simple binary fashion, polarities are never either-or and, as a result, can only be managed or addressed according to a both-and frame. As polarities are neither problems nor conflicts (although they can be experienced in this way), to see them as such—to force an either-or outcome on an issue that must be seen from a both-and lens—is to push a disagreement into intractability.

Johnson’s contribution to the polarities conversation is further strengthened by his modelling of the polarities dynamic, as seen in Figure 3.1.
In this case, X and Y are two ideas that reside at opposite ends of a continuum—ideas over which two parties differ. There are truths and strengths associated with each idea, just as there are weaknesses and limitations associated with each idea. A line divides the continuum between X and Y—this is the place where one idea dissolves and another begins. Similarly, a line along the vertical axis divides strengths and truths from weaknesses and limitations.

When the self pursues an idea described here as Pole X, the self typically perceives itself as drawing from the truth or strengths of that idea just as the other, who pursues an idea described as Pole Y, typically perceives themselves as drawing from the truth or strengths of that idea. If self and other honour the strengths and own the weaknesses of each of their perspectives, healthy disagreement is possible. However—and here is where paradoxes are experienced as conflict—frequently, self and other do not regard the “whole picture” of the polarity with which they are wrestling. Instead, self and other tend to see their own perspectives from the strengths of their favoured poles, just as they perceive the other’s perspective from the limitations of the opposing pole. In practice, this can be described as having a “diagonal” argument, as seen in Figure 3.2.
This imbalanced view of self and other—and the polarity itself—creates conflict, exacerbates conflict, and, if not addressed, ultimately entrenches conflict. Even more alarming, when people align themselves with one pole—perhaps because they do not recognise that another pole is possible, because they fear the opposing pole, or because they have bound themselves to a particular perspective—they will fall into the negative expression of that pole. Said differently, the more one avoids the opposing pole, the more one falls into the limitations or weaknesses of one’s own pole. To counteract this negative pull and to gain and maintain the benefits of one’s favoured pole, one must also pursue the benefits of the other pole; that is, to gain the strengths of X one must also pursue the strengths of Y. In other words, because polarities must be answered by both-and thinking, it is the tendency to answer them as either-or that leads to their negative expression and ultimately exacerbates and entrenches conflict.

Johnson goes even further, observing a type of “aliveness” to the manner in which polarities function, in this case within groups. When a group falls into the negative expression of a pole, some within the group—“crusaders”—will observe this shift and will act to push the group to the opposing pole. Meanwhile, others within the same group—“tradition-bearers”—will observe the move to the opposing pole and will become alarmed, whether as a result of fear of the opposing pole or inexperience with it. The tradition-bearers will act to keep the group at the original pole, or if the group has already shifted to the new pole, they will become the new “crusaders,” pulling the group back to the original pole. When this occurs, a dance appears in the functioning of groups: The group begins at X, falls into the negative of X, is pushed or pulled to Y, falls into the negative of Y, is pushed or pulled to X again, and so on. Now polarities look less like two ends of a continuum and more like an ongoing looped cycle, similar to the mathematical symbol for infinity. The result is that the group is never at rest. Instead, it is regularly pushed and pulled into conflict as “lobbyists” within the group seek to pin the group into place.
at either X or Y. The key problem is this: If the group were to drink from the wells of both X and Y, engaging with a both-and rather than an either-or frame, the movement between X and Y would stay above the negativity line and would be life-giving. Instead, from the lens of either-or, the movement between X and Y exists primarily below the negativity line, pulling groups from one broken reality to another.  

Both Mayer and Johnson agree that when parties are operating from opposing ends of a polarity continuum they believe they must choose either X or Y. According to polarities thinking, however, to gain either X or Y, parties must nurture a both-and frame, drawing from the strengths of both X and Y. Some might counter that surely there must be conflicts that demand a decision, that depend on the parties choosing between two options. Indeed, there are many differences where a concrete decision is, in fact, necessary. However, most yes-no differences are not as simple as they appear. Behind many differences, we find at least one or more both-and polarities. When self and other observe their concrete, specific disputes through the lens of the polarities underlying these differences, the possibility of transformation is increased. Either-or decisions, after all, represent a win-lose scenario where the goal of at least one of the disputing parties is lost as a result of the conclusion. When parties engage in conversations in an either-or fashion, the other can feel shut down, disagreements turn into conflicts, and the possibility for new understandings and agreements becomes limited. By way of contrast, when disputing parties draw from both X and Y with respect to the polarities that undergird their yes-no differences, understanding is increased, the weight of the yes-no decision is relativized, and the potential for additional yes-no decisions is generated. This latter dynamic expands the landscape of resolution, allowing for potentially multiple wins to be shared among the various parties involved.

Friedman also argues against the tendency toward either-or thinking, adding nuance to the polarities model. Friedman’s purpose is to stake a claim for healthy leadership as key to the transformation of broken or gridlocked relationship “systems,” whether those leaders are CEOs or parents. According to Friedman, three characteristics define conflicted organizational systems: “An unending treadmill of trying harder; looking for answers rather than reframing questions; and either-or thinking that creates false dichotomies.” While our focus here is on the last of these characteristics—false dichotomies or polarities—each of the characteristics Friedman identifies build on one another. Together, they form a strong argument against either-or thinking. For example, Friedman identifies “trying harder” as the assumption that when conflict has not been transformed, it is because one did not have the right information or the right technique. This treadmill of trying harder to get more information overlooks the reality that stuck conflict systems are typically not stuck because people have
not thought clearly enough. Instead, as per Friedman, they are stuck because of underlying and unaddressed emotional processes within the system.\textsuperscript{35} Emotional processes not only cause people to struggle with thinking clearly, they cause people to fixate on the wrong questions to which the answers lead only to either-or thinking and further entrenchment.

Friedman proposes that systems further entrench their “stuckness” by searching for new answers to old questions rather than reframing the questions themselves. He states: “In the search for the solution to any problem, questions are always more important than answers because the way one frames the question, or the problem, already predetermines the range of answers one can conceive in response.”\textsuperscript{36} A paradigm shift, Friedman argues, is not an innovative answer to an old question. Instead, it is a reframing of the question that changes the “information that is important” and eliminates “previous dichotomies.”\textsuperscript{37} Said otherwise, reframing the question shifts those in conflict away from questions that entrench the either-or dynamic, allowing for an engagement of the issues that opens possibilities for a both-and frame.

It is this latter goal that drives Friedman to his third claim and the one that is particularly relevant to our purpose here. Friedman states: “The third characteristic of gridlocked relationship systems is either/or, black-or-white, all-or-nothing ways of thinking that eventually restrict the options of the mind. Paradigms that begin simply as theoretical differences become hardened into intense, oppositional, emotional commitments over even the most unemotional subject matter.”\textsuperscript{38} According to Friedman, whenever people become polarized, it is not an intellectual argument that is driving the disagreement. Instead, polarization is symptomatic of underlying emotional processes. When conflicts are transformed, for example, it is not always the case that underlying differences have gone away. Instead, those in conflict have become less reactive to these differences. Those in transformed conflicts are no longer driven to their respective either-or poles when they differ from one another.

With Mayer and Johnson, Friedman identifies the danger associated with either-or thinking and the barriers such thinking poses for conflict transformation. All three argue, in one way or another, for enhanced capacities for both-and thinking to the degree that both-and thinking emerges as a critical skill for those who wish to engage in conflict transformation. By promoting a both-and frame, the concept of polarities alerts the self to the possibility of the good (and weakness) in the perspective of other, just as the self is alerted to the possibility of weakness (and good) in the perspective of the self.

Here, Johnson and Mayer diverge from one another once more. While Johnson promotes both-and thinking, one could argue that his approach is more of a serial either-or stance, going from the strength of one pole to the strength of another pole in an alternating fashion.\textsuperscript{39} In contrast, Mayer
proposes that one can hold the strengths of both poles together at the same time; for example, at once practicing both competition and collaboration or both optimism and realism. Lederach joins Mayer in his approach, proposing that when two competing energies are met with a both-and stance, the interdependence of competing ideas is seen, allowing for genuine both-and responses to emerge.\textsuperscript{40}

With the view proposed by Lederach and Mayer, the polarities model challenges common thought patterns: Both-and thinking does not look for a compromise between X and Y, nor does it propose alternating between X and Y. Instead, both-and thinking seeks to find the space beyond either X or Y and invites those in conflict to hold two contradictory truths together at the same time. Lederach, who speaks briefly about this concept, calls the capacity to inhabit the both-and frame, \textit{paradoxical curiosity}: “This is not primarily a thrust toward finding the common ground based on a narrowly shared denominator. Paradoxical curiosity seeks something beyond what is visible, something that holds apparently contradictory and even violently opposed social energies together.”\textsuperscript{41}

The polarities model drives directly to the heart of this thesis. As we already observed in chapter 2, the underlying frame behind so much of conflict is the tendency to choose self over other: to see self as right and other as wrong, to see self as good and other as bad, to see self as victim and other as villain, to see one’s own needs as vital and to regard the needs of the other as manufactured or less relevant. The framing of this choice between self and other correlates with the polarities model. As the polarities model proposes, those in conflict can feel forced to choose between satisfying the needs and interests of either X (self) or Y (other). With Buber, the polarities model affirms that selfhood comes into being in relationship: To gain the self, the self (X) must pursue both self (X) and other (Y) at the same time.

3.b.ii An Illustration of the Self-Other Dynamic in the Transformation of Conflict

To illustrate the both-and frame, we turn to a story of conflict transformation written by Lederach. While Lederach uses this story to demonstrate the conflict transformation principles he is pursuing in his book, \textit{The Moral Imagination}, we use it here as an example of a both-and response to polarization. The story we are considering involves long-standing tension between two ethnic groups in Ghana, the Dagomba and the Konkomba. In 1995, a cycle of violence between these two groups was at risk of exploding once again—this time over disputed land and in the shadow of an election campaign. As conflict grew, the stability of Ghana’s northern region was threatened. African mediators descended into the region, creating space for dialogue between representatives of the two groups. The following, in Lederach’s words, describes a pivotal dialogue session:
In the first face-to-face meeting of the two groups, the Dagomba paramount chief arrived in full regalia and with his entourage. There were designated persons who carried his staff and sat at his feet. In the opening moments of the meeting he assumed a sharp attitude of superiority. Taking the role of the paramount, he wasted no time in denigrating and verbally attacking the Konkombas. Given the traditions and rights afforded the highest chiefs, little could be done except to let the chief speak.

“Look at them,” he said, addressing himself more to the mediators than to the Konkomba. “Who are they even that I should be in this room with them? They do not even have a chief. Who am I to talk to? They are a people with nothing who have just come from the fields and now attack us in our own villages. They could have at least brought an old man. But look! They are just boys born yesterday.”

The atmosphere was devastating. Making matters worse, the mediators felt in a very difficult bind. Culturally, when facing a chief, there was nothing they could do to control the process. You simply cannot tell a chief to watch his mouth or follow ground rules, particularly in the presence of his entourage and his enemies. It appeared as if the whole endeavor [sic] may have been misconceived and was reaching a breaking point.

The Konkomba spokesman asked to respond. Fearing the worst, the mediators provided him the space to speak. The young man turned and addressed himself to the chief of the enemy tribe:

You are perfectly right, Father, we do not have a chief. We have not had one for years. You will not even recognize the man we have chosen to be our chief. And this has been our problem. The reason we react, the reason our people go on rampages and fights resulting in all these killings and destruction arises from this fact. We do not have what you have. It really is not about the town, or the land, or the market guinea fowl. I beg you, listen to my words, Father, I am calling you Father because we do not wish to disrespect you. You are a great chief. But what is left to us? Do we have no other means but this violence to receive in return the one thing we seek, to be respected and to establish our own chief who could indeed speak with you, rather than having a young boy do it on our behalf?

The attitude, tone of voice, and use of the word Father spoken by the young Konkomba man apparently so affected the chief that he sat for a moment without response. When he finally spoke he did so with a changed voice, addressing himself directly to the young man rather than the mediators:

I had come to put your people in your place. But now I feel only shame. Though I insulted your people, you still called me Father. It is you who speaks with wisdom, and me who has not seen the truth. What you have said is true. We who are chiefly have always looked down on you because you have no chief, but we have not understood the denigration you suffered. I beg you, my son, to forgive me.

At this point the younger Konkomba man stood, walked to the chief, then knelt and gripped his lower leg, as a sign of deep respect. He vocalized a single and audible “Na-a,” a word of affirmation and acceptance.42

If we apply the concept of polarities to the conflict described in this story, what do we see? In this case, as with so many others, there are multiple polarities layered on top of one another that
challenge a simple binary description of the issue. To some degree, the following polarities are all present in this dispute.

<table>
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<th>Change</th>
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<td>Respect for masses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on authority</td>
<td>Focus on needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on self / needs of self</td>
<td>Focus on other / needs of other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle</td>
<td>Compromise</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The actions of the young Konkomba man are instructive. Rather than being caught in his own pole of focus on self, he moves to the opposing pole and focuses briefly but powerfully on the needs of the other, acknowledging the authority of the other at the same time. By using the word “father,” he honours the traditional status of the chief. With this same word he also establishes a relational tie between himself and the chief. As he does so, the Konkomba man finds a statement made by the chief to which he can say an unequivocal “yes.” The Konkomba do not have a chief. With this statement, the young man acknowledges the chief’s perspective. He also honours the chief’s place. Then, quite courageously, the young man returns to his pole, to his desire for change and to the focus on self (his group) and the needs of self (his group).

Using the language already proposed by this thesis, the young Konkomba man refuses to become caught in an either-or frame. Had he operated according to this frame, he would have responded to the chief’s opening statement with a similar and equally confrontational response. The mediation would have been lost and the conflict would likely have escalated. Alternately—but still within the either-or frame—the young man could have acquiesced to the chief’s wishes and simply agreed to peace according to the chief’s terms. Had he done so, the young man could have been at risk in his own community as his people might have seen him as a traitor to their needs. Instead of either of these options, we see the young Konkomba man operating from a both-and frame. He both honours the chief and he honours the needs of his community. He is both competitive and he is cooperative. He focuses both on self and on other. The impact of the young man’s words and subsequent actions are powerful. As Lederach indicates, while the path to peace between these communities was not solved in this encounter, “… something happened in this moment that created an impact on everything that followed.”

43 With respect to conflict transformation, the young man clearly establishes a pathway to
peace, that honours the values of both poles while simultaneously refusing to become stuck in either pole.

There is another level of analysis with regard to polarities that the situation between the two men illustrates that is worthy of exploration: the connection between conflict over ideas and conflict between self and other. The Konkomba man holds multiple ideas in the both-and frame at the same time. He allows for competition and cooperation; he honours authority and needs; he respects hierarchy and masses, and so forth. Nonetheless, his conversation also leads to a type of I-Thou encounter between himself and the Dagomba leader. In their conversation, the self-other divide appears to have been bridged. How did this happen and what is the connection between the conflict over ideas and the conflict between self and other?

At this point, we recall Buber’s definitions regarding genuine dialogue and technical dialogue. Genuine dialogue, Buber states, occurs when “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.” Technical dialogue occurs “because of the need for transitory reciprocity or a degree of objective understanding between persons, whether between coworkers puzzling over a task, strangers seeking and giving directions, or family members planning the evening meal.” One could argue that in this case, the men are engaging in both technical and genuine dialogue. When they puzzle over how to manage their dispute, they are engaging in a technical dialogue over ideas. When they are present to one another in a manner that honours the other, they are engaging in genuine dialogue that allows their core selves to meet. Which of these comes first? According to the story, the Konkomba man intertwines these two types of dialogue to the degree that one cannot accurately remove one from the other. He calls the Dagomba chief “father” (a genuine dialogue move) even as he makes his claim for the rights of his people (a technical dialogue move).

Borrowing from chapter 2, could we argue that the technical dialogue in the story is about interests while the genuine dialogue is about identity needs? In chapter 2, we suggested that the meeting of needs can occur at the technical level. In this story, however, we see that the meeting of recognition needs opens up the both-and space. This analysis leads naturally to the next question: Are conversations regarding substantive interests always technical and conversations regarding identities or relations always genuine? In the second chapter, we differentiated between disagreements and conflicts. In times of disagreement, the parties focus on the problem (technical dialogue) while honouring the other (genuine dialogue). Disagreements fall into conflict when honour for the other is rescinded (loss of genuine dialogue). When this occurs the ability to focus on the problem is threatened
(loss of technical dialogue), causing the parties to focus on the other as the problem (monologue disguised as dialogue). Thus, to answer the question that begins this paragraph, genuine and technical dialogue are so closely hinged, they themselves appear to operate according to the both-and frame. While conversations regarding the concrete may be technical and while those that honour the other may be genuine, they require one another for healthy disagreement and genuine encounters to occur. Thus, the polarity between self and other must be solved by simultaneously engaging in genuine dialogue and in technical, “nuts and bolts” conversations that drive self and other apart. In essence, what we observe here is two polarities working together simultaneously. The self-other polarity and the “my idea-your idea” polarity together form a third polarity, that of genuine dialogue and technical dialogue, all of which, when held together in the both-and frame, allow conflict—at multiple levels—to be transformed.

3.b.iii Paradoxes and Polarities: Martin Buber Revisited

As we have seen, over the course of his career, Buber expanded on his original I-Thou and I-It word pairs, offering three terms to describe the encounter between self and other: genuine dialogue, technical dialogue, and monologue disguised as dialogue. This thesis proposes that these three forms of dialogue can be placed on Johnson’s polarity model as shown in Figure 3.3.

According to Figure 3.3, both technical dialogue and monologue disguised as dialogue are expressions of the I-It pole. Whereas technical dialogue represents the positive expression of this pole, monologue disguised as dialogue represents the negative expression of the I-It pole. Similarly, genuine dialogue represents the positive expression of the I-Thou pole. Obviously, Buber was not seeking to fit his categories into this model, nor did he declare a fourth form of dialogue. As per the definition of
polarities, however, genuine dialogue in the absence of space for technical dialogue must cause an individual to fall into the negative expression of the I-Thou pole. What would this negative expression be? Because genuine dialogue represents the honouring of the other in their wholeness, and technical dialogue allows people to puzzle over a task, one could argue that the overexpression of genuine dialogue to the exclusion of technical dialogue could lead to an inability to perceive the world accurately or to act within it. Those caught in the overexpression of genuine dialogue become like new lovers swept away by the wholeness of the other (and the realization of the wholeness of the self). Knee-deep in reverie, they forget to eat and may be too distracted to operate a vehicle safely. They may also be unable to make a good judgement regarding whether they are a healthy fit for one another. If technical dialogue creates an ability to converse such that one can function more effectively, then the overexpression of genuine dialogue is the absence of the ability to function. Said otherwise, the negative expression of the I-Thou pole is dialogue that is ungrounded in reality. Thus, our diagram could be revised as Figure 3.4.

**FIGURE 3.4**

Whether Buber would have agreed with Figure 3.4 is unknown. What is known, is that Buber favoured both-and ways of thinking and agitated against discourse that posited one extreme against another. Buber recognised dualities—note the I-Thou and I-It word pairs—yet saw these dualities as polarities to be held in tension rather than as differences to be solved in an either-or fashion. Authors Anderson and Cissna write:

Buber did not ask people to choose between I-Thou or I-It, being or seeming, person or individual, distance or relation, imposing or unfolding, or even good and evil. Rather, Buber would have persons live in the tension between these polarities or dualities, and recognize how the poles interdefine one another, as do the yin and the yang, and to see both their connection...
and their distinctiveness. The concept of the “between” is inherently dual, as it cannot exist without the active participation of two parties, and even dialogue itself is a tensional practice.

3.c The Self-Other Frame in Context

The root concept of polarities cannot be attributed to either Mayer or Johnson alone. Indeed, many affirm and/or struggle with the principles of polarities, including the particular polarity that is the focus of our thesis—the self-other divide. For our purposes here, we will explore four unique expressions of the self-other polarity, considered by several different authors and each pivotal to the transformation of conflict. These four polarities can be described as follows: (1) Empathy and Nerve (Edwin Friedman); (2) Empowerment and Recognition (Joe Folger and Baruch Bush); (3) Distance and Belonging (Miroslav Volf); and (4) Forgiveness and Justice (Miroslav Volf, Martha Minow, Sharon Lamb, and others). In the following pages, we will consider the contribution of each one of these authors in an effort to understand the self-other frame more deeply. First, however, we will briefly explore the self-other frame itself through the polarities lens.

3.c.i Focus on Self and Focus on Other

While we have been calling our foundational polarity the self-other frame, in the works of the authors that follow, this frame is made somewhat more precise by being described as focus on self versus focus on other. At its best, a focus on self generates self-awareness and self-confidence. Those who focus on self are clear about their needs, interests, identity, and purpose. They recognise when they are triggered, regulate their reactions, and exude inner peace. Focus on other, at its best, gives positive esteem to the other. Those who focus on others practice other-awareness; they recognise the needs and interests of others; they regulate their interactions with others in recognition of these needs; and they exude compassion. At their best, both foci are good. If focus on self and focus on other are placed on a polarities model, the outcome could look as shown in Figure 3.5:
According to the polarities model, exclusive focus on the self distorts the gifts associated with this end of the polarity spectrum. At its worst, focus on self is narcissistic. The self is either elevated to be untouchable and better than others, or the self is denigrated and perceived as worse than others. Either way, the image of the self is not only unrealistic, it is dangerous to the self. An inflated or denigrated self harms the self by virtue of the distance created between the imagined self and the self that emerges in this negative space. This distance is a chasm that, over time, becomes harder and harder to cross, creating psychological distress and pain. Of course, an inflated or denigrated self also harms the other. The absence of the other in the construction of the self suggests that the other does not functionally exist in the eyes of the self. At best, this gives the self permission to disregard the other. At worst, this gives the self permission to engage in acts of harm vis-à-vis the other.

Similarly, over-focus on the other also causes a slide into the distortion of all that is good with regard to focus on other. At its worst, focus on the other is, ironically, also narcissistic insofar as this focus, in the end, is also about the self. The absence of the self creates a vacuum in the construction of the self, which the self increasingly uses the other to fill. Acts of perceived kindness by the self for the other are generated not by compassion but by a needy grasping. In this space, the self uses the other to fill a well of unending need for a self. If the other cannot meet this need—and the other never can do so because the other is another and not the self—the self only grasps more strongly, placing the other in a state of perpetual obligation. In this relationship, the other is bound and ultimately smothered or asphyxiated. And the self? Although the self is perceived not to exist, the absence of self-awareness creates a type of blindness in the self: The self that is invisible to the self is ultra-visible to the other. The self and its needs bump up relentlessly against the other, using its other-focus to wield power over the other, power that the self cannot or will not see or acknowledge.
As already indicated, we can observe this same polarity—focus on self versus focus on other—in the work of several different authors. Although each of the following authors gives this polarity a slightly different name, each is speaking about the same foundational struggle: How does one positively focus on both self and other in a manner that does not allow the slide into the distortion of either of these two poles? Speaking from their own unique contexts, each of the following authors adds nuance to the polarities argument, deepening our understanding of the model and its implications for conflict transformation.

3.c.ii Empathy and Nerve

In his book *Failure of Nerve* Edwin Friedman examines two seemingly opposing concepts, empathy and nerve, both of which can be correlated with the focus on self / focus on other polarity. According to Friedman, empathy focuses on the other; nerve focuses on the self, or more specifically, on self-definition.47 Friedman’s intention is to argue with an American zeitgeist that, in his perception, favours empathy over nerve and by doing so, hinders the development of healthy relational systems. By extension, Friedman’s argument suggests that focus on empathy limits conflict transformation.

According to Friedman, leaders (whether in families, workplaces, or nations) frequently use empathy as a cover for their inability to deal with their own emotional wellbeing.48 By focusing on the other, the empathic leader deftly avoids personal accountability. Seeking to please the other at all costs, empathic leaders miss opportunities to move their organizations forward, keeping the systems they lead locked in dysfunction. Leadership, as per Friedman, involves nerve: the capacity to self-define even if that self-definition causes dis-ease. While creating discomfort is not pleasant, it is precisely this that systems need in order to become healthy. According to Friedman, empathic leaders risk creating leaderless institutions entrenched in dysfunction.49 He states: “Indeed, the focus on being empathic toward others, rather than on being responsible for one’s own integrity, can actually lessen the odds for an organism’s survival by lowering the other’s pain thresholds, helping them to avoid challenge and compromising the mobilization of their ‘nerve.’”50 Said otherwise, those who feel deeply understood are not necessarily motivated to change. Friedman argues that empathy in deeply conflicted relationship systems is counterproductive as it does not effect change: Deeply conflicted systems, he argues, are “totally unresponsive to empathy,” are “not capable of self-regulation,” and “cannot learn from their experience.”51 Instead, such systems will use empathy to further their lack of self-regulation.

Friedman’s antidote to empathy-oriented dysfunction is a focus on self and self-regulation, especially for leaders (whether parents, managers, friends, etc.). Self-definition, Friedman argues,
requires nerve or courage. Friedman defines self-definition as the capacity to maintain a non-anxious and well-principled presence in the context of relational and system anxiety. Specifically, Friedman points to five characteristics that self-defined leaders possess:

- “the capacity to separate oneself from surrounding emotional processes;
- the capacity to obtain clarity about one’s principles and vision;
- the willingness to be exposed and to be vulnerable;
- persistence in the face of inertial resistance; and
- self-regulation in the face of reactive sabotage.”

While Friedman makes room for empathy, he does so only after the qualities of nerve have allowed leaders to self-define and to call the system they are leading to do the same.

Friedman acknowledges that the transformation of relational systems is not easy. As those around leaders observe the leader self-defining, they will experience the pain associated with not receiving what they believe they need. Friedman distinguishes here between pain and harm. Those around leaders may feel pain as they are forced to self-define in response to the transformation of their leader; they may even engage in sabotage to return the relational system to its old dysfunction. Nonetheless, their pain is not harm, and this pain can be the beginning of transformation toward health. Friedman encourages leaders to stay the course in the face of sabotage and, by so doing, to function as the immune system for their organizations or families. For families and institutions alike, it is self-definition that returns the system to health.

Friedman recognizes that it can appear as though he is forcing an either-or choice between empathy and nerve. He proposes a third way, one which cares for the other and preserves the self—though this depends on raising one’s threshold for tolerating the pain or injured sensitivities of the other. While Friedman recognizes that his argument risks being perceived as a nod to an either-or frame and while Friedman claims to not desire this, his argument nonetheless appears to fall into this very trap. Indeed, throughout his book, Friedman regularly engages in a “diagonal” argument, comparing the negatives of empathy with the positives of nerve, rather than the positives of empathy with the positives of nerve or the negatives of empathy with the negatives of nerve. Friedman’s argument, placed under the lens of Johnson’s polarity grid, can be demonstrated, as follows (Figure 3.6):
If we fill in the gaps in Friedman’s argument, we might propose that the gift of empathy is an expression of compassion for the other, just as an over-focus on courage and self-definition results in a loss of compassion for the other. This allows us to redraw Friedman’s argument, as seen in Figure 3.7:

While Friedman is right—leaders require nerve, and empathy has been over-emphasized in some places—the polarity model we have been exploring suggests that exclusive focus on nerve is as risky as the exclusive focus on empathy. Both result in a descent into the negative expression of their poles, and, alone, both limit the possibilities of conflict transformation. By virtue of his heavy focus on
nerve, Friedman seems to miss the notion that empathy and nerve are not problems to be solved by either-or thinking. Instead, they define a polarity that can only be solved with both-and thinking. According to the polarity model we have been developing, both empathy and nerve are necessary for systems to become healthy and for conflict transformation to occur. Empathy allows the young Konkomba man to say, “I care about what you need.” Nerve allows the same man to say, “I want you to care about what we need.”

3.c.iii Empowerment and Recognition

In 1994, the mediation world was taken by a storm of interest in a new book that promised to turn the mediation field on its head. *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict through Empowerment and Recognition*, by Joseph P. Folger and Robert A. Baruch Bush, declared a new standard by which the success of mediation might be measured. Instead of focusing on the quality of the mediation settlement (known as settlement driven mediation), Folger and Bush proposed a focus on the quality of the transformation experienced by the mediation participants (known as transformative mediation). While Folger, Bush, and Friedman may not have been aware of one another’s work, a clear parallel can be drawn between empathy and recognition on the one hand, and nerve and empowerment on the other. While Friedman focuses on leadership, Folger and Bush take their similar polarity and explore it from the perspective of the mediation room.

Focusing on the quality of the transformation within and between conflicted parties, Folger and Bush argue that the two principal tasks of the mediator are to make space for recognition (that the parties honour and value the voice of the other) and empowerment (that the parties find their voice and speak their truth). Folger and Bush define these two key tasks as follows:

> [E]mpowerment is achieved when disputing parties experience a strengthened awareness of their own self-worth and their own ability to deal with whatever difficulties they face, regardless of external constraints. Recognition is achieved when, given some degree of empowerment, disputing parties experience an expanded willingness to acknowledge and be responsive to the other parties’ situations and common human qualities.  

Empowerment, like nerve, requires self-definition. According to Folger and Bush, effective mediation creates space that allows parties to shift from a stance of weakness, confusion, or fear to one of coherence, clarity, and confidence. This latter stance is seen when parties are organized in thought and decisive in speech. Mediation guided in this way imparts skills, encourages decision making, allows the self to see options, and invites the self to sense and draw from their inner resources. Similarly, recognition, like empathy, makes space for the other. Folger and Bush state,
In the heat of conflict, disputing parties typically feel threatened, attacked, and victimized by the conduct and claims of the other party. As a result, they are focused on self-protection; they are defensive, suspicious, and hostile to the other party, and almost incapable of looking beyond their own needs. From this starting point of relative self-absorption, parties achieve recognition in mediation when they voluntarily choose to become more open, attentive, sympathetic, and responsive to the situation of the other party, thereby expanding their perspective to include an appreciation for another’s situation.57

While Folger and Bush are not working with Johnson’s polarity and do not identify the negatives associated with over focus on either empowerment or recognition, their schema fits well into the polarities model we have already established, as seen in Figure 3.8. They argue for the value of both empowerment and recognition, stating clearly that both are necessary for mediation to be successful. Indeed, according to Folger and Bush, when empowerment and recognition are achieved, the mediation is valuable—even successful—regardless of outcome.

FIGURE 3.8

While the themes of empowerment and recognition fit well into the polarities model, and while this schema avoids the trap of the “diagonal argument” into which Friedman falls, Folger and Bush achieve their understanding by falling into another either-or trap. In their pursuit of empowerment and recognition, Folger and Bush place transformative mediation at one end of the mediation spectrum and settlement-driven mediation at the other. They then describe the differences between these two approaches by using a “diagonal” argument, contrasting the positives of transformative mediation with the negatives of settlement-driven mediation, as seen in Figure 3.9.
Thus, while Folger and Bush’s empowerment and recognition argument does not fall into the either-or trap, the transformative and settlement-driven mediation argument does. For our purposes here, it is interesting to note that Folger and Bush’s descriptions of transformative and settlement-driven mediation also closely mirror the debate we saw earlier between conflict resolution and conflict transformation, creating a polarity that looks as follows:

3.c.iv Separating and Binding

Theologian Miroslav Volf also explores the focus on self / focus on other polarity, though like Friedman, Bush, and Folger, Volf is not consciously working with Johnson’s modelling of the polarity dynamic. While the works of Friedman, Bush, and Folger each serve to confirm and explain the polarity model,
Volf’s exploration of this dynamic is the most exciting. Not only is Volf’s perspective the most thorough, his writing in this regard adds new dimensions and perspectives to Johnson’s polarity model.

Volf calls the two poles of focus on self / focus on other “separating and binding,” correlating focus on self with separating and focus on other with binding. According to Volf, the healthy self must both separate from and bind with the other. The healthy self must bind with the other insofar as being human depends on the connections self and other create with one another. Self and other are mutually influencing to the degree that the identities of the self (child, sibling, friend, spouse, parent, employee, leader, etc.) are formed by the relationships in which the self is engaged. For selfhood to exist, the self must include the other, or be bound in some way to the other. On the other hand, the healthy self must also separate from the other. Like Buber, Volf proposes that the self must have a self in order to engage the other. Engagement with others becomes possible because of the discrete and unique identities each person brings to their relationships. Quoting Paul Ricoeur, Volf writes: “The selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other.” The implication here is that the more clearly the self is itself, the more freely the self allows the other to be other and, somewhat ironically, the more healthy and mutually influencing the relationship between self and other can become.

In the spirit of the polarities model we are pursuing, Volf argues against an exclusive focus on either separating or binding, recognizing the negatives of each without the other. When a separate self removes itself from the other, the self gives itself “sovereign independence,” and becomes the sole arbiter of truth. This isolated, separate self can now regard the other as either superfluous or as an enemy of the self. In the case of the former, the other can be disregarded or abandoned. In the case of the latter, the other can be pushed away, punished, or become the source of significant tension. According to Volf, the separate self alone—in the absence of binding with the other—not only damages the other, it also damages the self. The self that separates from all that is not of self, must also separate from the diverse non-logical realities within the self. As this occurs, even the self becomes distorted.

By way of contrast, Volf argues that the self that binds too much to the other is also a distortion. This self erases the difference between self and other to the degree that (a) the other is not permitted to have a self or the other must be assimilated into the self (or, presumably, the self into the other), denying the unique identity of the other, or (b) the other is declared inferior and must be subjected to the self. Volf states:

First, exclusion can entail cutting of the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence. The other then emerges either as an enemy that must be pushed away from the self and driven out of its space
or as a nonentity—a superfluous being—that can be disregarded and abandoned. Second, exclusion can entail erasure of separation, not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence. The other then emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or be subjugated to the self.  

Although Volf does not place his argument on Johnson’s grid, Volf’s argument falls neatly into this model, with one significant addition. What Johnson created as a grid with a primary horizontal axis and a relatively unexplored vertical axis (apart from using the vertical axis to demarcate the strengths and limitations of X and Y), Volf now establishes a grid with two primary axes, vertical and horizontal. Volf gives a name—differentiation—to the positive end of the vertical axis. This is the both-and frame, which, in this case, holds separating and binding together. Volf also gives a name—exclusion—to the bottom end of the vertical axis. This is the either-or frame, which represents the act of falling into the negatives of exclusively separating from or binding with the other. In summary, Volf’s argument, placed on Johnson’s modified grid, looks as follows:

**FIGURE 3.11**

Differentiation, according to the polarities model, is the capacity to hold both X and Y together. Within the context of our specific polarity, separating and binding, Volf defines differentiation as the capacity to lay claim to the interdependent self. The identity of the self necessarily both binds and separates. The self is both formed in relationship with the other and is distinct from the other. Volf
states, “Identity is a result of distinction from the other and the internalization of the relationship to the other; it arises out of the complex history of ‘differentiation’ in which both self and other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with one another.” Conversely, exclusion, according to Volf, actualizes all that is broken when either separating or binding become the singular focus of the self.

Volf declares that while the horizontal axis is resolved with both-and thinking, the vertical axis cannot be. Instead the vertical axis must be resolved in an either-or fashion. Creating what could be seen as an either-or within an either-or, Volf argues that actions taken by self and other either represent a positive both-and expression of separating and binding (differentiation) or they represent a negative either-or expression of the same (exclusion).

Leaning on the word “judgement” to animate the vertical axis, Volf argues that self and other must have permission to judge certain actions as exclusionary and others as within the realm of differentiation. Wrestling with and against those philosophies that call any form of judgement exclusion, Volf suggests that quite the opposite is true. If, out of fear of exclusion, the self resists judgement, then aided and abetted by the silence of the self, any form of exclusion becomes acceptable. By way of contrast, judgement allows the self to call starvation, persecution, and oppression for what they are: an objective evil. Volf states, “A judgement that names exclusion as an evil and differentiation as a positive good, then, is itself not an act of exclusion. To the contrary, such a judgement is the beginning of the struggle against exclusion.”

Volf’s argument in favour of the either-or stance with respect to differentiation and exclusion is risky because the vertical differentiation/exclusion polarity can easily become realigned. When this occurs, the vertical axis tips to become the horizontal axis (Figure 3.12).
The good once associated with differentiation becomes associated with self, just as the objective evil once associated with exclusion becomes associated with the other. According to Volf, the vertical either-or polarity must contend with the tremendous inclination within self and other, “to misperceive and misjudge because [of the] desire to exclude.” In other words, judgement—so necessary to call exclusion for what it is—can be and is frequently used to create rather than unmask exclusionary judgements. In this case, judgement becomes a partner to exclusion rather than a revealer of exclusion, allowing the other to be regarded as enemy or superfluous once more. According to Volf, when it comes to exclusion, the self tends to exclude the wrong things, focusing on its own false purity and excluding those who differ from the self. When this occurs, the polarities model loses its capacity to reflect the vertical axis Volf promotes. Instead, the model now reverts to the diagonal argument, looking very much like the self-other grid we observed in chapter 2.

Despite the risk associated with judgement, Volf continues to argue for its value, given the danger associated with the inability to name evil for the exclusion that it is. Instead, Volf proposes an enhanced or healthier judgement capacity, judgement that can distinguish between “legitimate differentiation” and “illegitimate exclusion.” Such judgement, Volf suggests, depends heavily on humility, recognising how vulnerable the self is to distortion in this regard.

3.c.v Forgiveness and Justice

With respect to conflict transformation, there is one concept—justice—that is frequently seen as standing in the way of transformation, just as, in some circles, there is another concept—forgiveness—
that is proposed as the logical path for those seeking transformation. As with so many other word pairs, forgiveness and justice can be seen as falling generally into the polarities model and more specifically as aligning with the root polarity we have been exploring, focus on self versus focus on other. Consistent with the concept of polarities, those who argue for or against forgiveness and justice can become caught in diagonal arguments, arguing for the upside of forgiveness and against the downside of justice or for the upside of justice and against the downside of forgiveness. As we have seen, when this occurs, those engaging in dialogue miss the possibilities the opposing perspective has to offer while similarly missing the dangers of their preferred perspective. The forgiveness-justice discussion is also critical for this thesis as it is especially effective at exploring the relationship between foundational needs and the focus on self / focus on other polarity. An incident of harm is seen to create needs for both victims and offenders that correlate with the needs established in chapter 2. While it is not the intention of this thesis to provide a thorough exploration of forgiveness and justice, we will briefly consider these themes through the polarities lens to see what might emerge from this analysis.

For clarity, it is important to identify a starting definition of the terms forgiveness and justice. Stated most simply, forgiveness can be associated with a focus on the other, insofar as it is frequently presumed to release the other from the judgement and consequences associated with the harm the other caused, releasing the other from meeting the self’s needs. Justice, in contrast, is often associated with a focus on self, insofar as it is presumed to meet the demands of the self for recognition of the harm the other caused and the needs this has created. Together, forgiveness and justice realise the positive expression of each pole, both recognition and release. Alone, each falls into the negative expression of its pole; an over-focus on justice establishes the other as beyond redemption whereas an over-focus on forgiveness establishes the self as unworthy of recognition. From the perspective of a polarity map, this view of forgiveness and justice creates an image as follows:
FIGURE 3.13

Holding forgiveness and justice together, according to the definition just provided, is not easy. Using the word vengeance in place of justice, Martha Minow explores the forgiveness-justice/vengeance polarity, finding satisfaction in neither concept. In keeping with the opening definition, Minow suggests that forgiveness releases the other from the harm done whether or not justice has been achieved. On the other end of the spectrum, she allows that while vengeance acknowledges the harm done to the victim, vengeance defies constraint, opening the door to more rage, pain, violence and, in the end, more victims. Drawing on our polarities model, Minow’s concern with these two concepts can be represented by Figure 3.14.

FIGURE 3.14

For Minow, the term vengeance is not an objectively negative term. Instead, it is a descriptive term that honours the human need to call out the infliction of harm for the wrong that it is. Minow acknowledges, however, that the desire for vengeance, while understandable, easily spins out of control, dragging victim and offender into a spiral of actions and reactions, “trapping people in cycles of
revenge, recrimination and escalation.” While some would argue for the value of revenge within a set of sanctioned limits (such as state-sponsored retributive justice), others push back, suggesting that revenge simply does not bring the relief it promises:

Traumatized people imagine that revenge will bring relief, even though the fantasy of revenge simply reverses the roles of perpetrator and victim, continuing to imprison the victim in horror, degradation, and the bounds of the perpetrator’s violence. By seeking to lower the perpetrator in response to his or her infliction of injury, does the victim ever master the violence or instead become its tool?

Even in cases where escalating vengeance does not occur, the absence of forgiveness which is associated with vengeance can cause self and other to become crippled by the past. Alternately, forgiveness without some form of justice can be experienced as a type of denial, adding harm to the harm already experienced. Donald Shriver states:

Pain can sear the human memory in two crippling ways: with forgetfulness of the past or imprisonment to it. The mind that insulates the traumatic past from conscious memory plants a live bomb in the depths of the psyche—it takes no great grasp of psychiatry to know that. But the mind that fixes on pain risks getting trapped in it. Too horrible to remember, too horrible to forget: down either path lies little health for the human sufferers of great evil.

With respect to our polarities model, perhaps we can regard revenge as the negative expression of justice. If this is so, what does the positive expression of justice look like? Most would agree that justice must include some recognition of the harm done, the taking of responsibility, an apology, and acts of reparation, insofar as these are possible. Most authors also agree that justice supports healing, despite the reality that history cannot be rewritten; a murdered child cannot be brought back to life; a self harmed by another cannot simply forget the wound that has been created. Justice alone fails to heal for the simple reason that according to the harsh mathematics of conflict, no act can undo what has been done. And yet, most authors agree that acknowledgement of harm done, apologies, reparation, and the taking of responsibility, in some way, help to heal the wounds of conflict—for the victim and the offender. After all, offenders, too, are diminished by what has occurred between them and their victims.

There is a conundrum buried in the arguments made thus far: The strict association of victims with innocence and offenders with guilt is not necessarily borne out in reality. While, as per Volf, it is critical to call an objective evil for what it is, the nature of humanity is such that the line between victim and offender is rarely as neat as is suggested by the polarity as we have defined it thus far. Who in the conflict is truly innocent or guilty? To these questions, Volf offers the following:
A descent into the conflict-ridden underworld of evil reveals a strange but persistent anomaly. If we listen to what its inhabitants tell us about their enemies, we are overwhelmed by the ugliness and magnitude of wickedness. If we let these same enemies talk about themselves, however, the ugliness mutates into beauty and the wickedness into innocence; the magnitude remains the same. The clashing perspectives give rise to a glaring incongruity: in a world so manifestly drenched with evil everybody is innocent in their own eyes. Those who do accept the blame hasten to mount equal or greater blame on the shoulders of others. And since in the twisted arithmetic of sin, blame on the one side and blame on the other do not add up but cancel each other out, acceptance of blame amounts to a clandestine proclamation of innocence. Yet all know and all agree that somebody must be guilty; somebody’s eyes must be deceiving them badly. But whose eyes? The eyes of the perpetrators? Of the victims? Of both, I want to argue, and in addition declare a “third party” complicity in the generation of contrived innocence, that chimerical goodness of the self that is but the flip side of the evil it projects onto others.”

Volf maintains that the closer one comes to those in conflict, the less clear the lines of innocence and guilt become. Instead, we “see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations, brutalities, each reinforcing the other.” Further, many conflicts occur on landscapes of long and conflicted histories, where “yesterday’s victims are today’s perpetrators and today’s perpetrators tomorrow’s victims.” As a result, the categories of victim and offender are not necessarily helpful.

Even more confounding, perhaps, are the larger social forces from which no one can escape. These forces that preference some and disenfranchise others ensnare all: victims, offenders, and third parties. The landscape these social forces create inhabit the soul to such a degree that those within this landscape hardly notice the subtle and not-so-subtle manner by which they are influenced daily, whether consciously or subconsciously, and according to which they daily contribute to conflict. On one level, this contribution is seen in those situations where victims and offenders do not match the socially accepted norms of what victims and offenders should look, act, and talk like. These social biases distort the capacity of third parties to support those in conflict effectively; victims are blamed for their victimhood and offenders are not held accountable for their actions. On another level, even when victims and offenders do match the socially accepted norms of what victims and offenders should look like, the larger culture of social imbalance can produce an image of social change that simply shifts the seat of power from one group to another, from offender to victim, or from one generation to the next. Whether one is engaged in conflict directly or in the third party role, Volf argues that there is no space from which one can make pure judgements. Every judgement is already tainted by the lack of “purity” within each person sitting in the judgement seat. Marjorie Suchocki cautions: “To break the world
cleanly into victims and violators ignores the depths of each person’s participation in cultural sin. There simply are no innocents.”

The tendency to divide the world into neat categories of victim and offender, and then to align with one against the other, expresses the dualistic, either-or frame we have been considering. Lederach remarks: “Side-taking, unfortunately, seems to accompany social battlefields and therefore accepts the premise that change is inherently a dualistic struggle.” Unfortunately, this approach is more likely to entrench conflicts rather than transform them. If the either-or frame has taken up residence in one’s mind and if the conflict is negotiated on either-or terms, then it will be difficult to shift into a both-and frame when the battle is won. The “imprint” of the unhealthy self-other divide will simply carry over to the new post-conflict dynamic, dropping new seeds of either-or conflict into the relational environment.

Surely, some might argue, there must be those who are truly innocent—those who were at the wrong place at the wrong time, those who were children when the violence occurred, or those who were abused to the degree that their capacity to make alternate choices was effectively removed from them. While Volf does not deny this degree of victimisation and argues that perpetrators of any type of harm must take responsibility for the harm they have done, he also states that while not all conflicts involve two or more parties mutually harming one another, most conflicts nonetheless involve harbouring some form of “hatred [or disregard, or exclusion] in one’s heart.”

At the most obvious level, this hatred is often directed at one’s offender. Just as often, however, it can be directed toward the self (hatred turned inward) or at a stand-in for the perpetrator, such as a child, colleague, or stranger (hatred turned elsewhere). Volf states: “[M]ost of us when we are victims... need to repent of what perpetrators do to our soul. Victims need to repent of the fact that all too often they mimic the behavior of oppressors, let themselves be shaped in the mirror image of the enemy.” Whatever form hatred takes—whether to one’s offender, to oneself, or to a stand-in for the offender—for victims, being shaped in the mirror image of the enemy bears significant consequences. Harbouring hatred in one’s heart is, after all, the first step toward dehumanization of self and other, a step that over time gives inner permission for acts of harm to occur to the other, a stand-in for the other and/or to the self.

Lamb adds an additional conundrum to this puzzle: The logic used to convince victims of their innocence also by extension limits their agency. By calling victims helpless, victims now become victims twice over—once at the hands of their perpetrator and once by a society that views them as incapable of agency. Further, the same logic used to defend the helplessness of victims can also be applied to offenders. If victims, by virtue of age, circumstance, or conditioning, cannot save themselves, then it
might follow that offenders, by virtue of these same factors, also cannot prevent themselves from committing acts of harm. Many offenders, after all, have themselves been the victims of personal and social harm at some point in their lives. By these twists of logic, all are victims and all are helpless. No one is left with agency and no one is left who can be held responsible for harm caused or received. Without agency, there is also no one left who is able to forgive since forgiveness also depends on one’s agency to do so. Of course, if no one can be held responsible for the harm caused, there is also no one left to forgive. People on all sides of the equation are caught in a broken limbo from which there is no meaningful escape. Lamb states: “[I]f victims are apportioned more blame, or any bit of blame, there is an automatic assumption that the perpetrator is apportioned less.... The implication is that if the victim takes or can be apportioned some responsibility, the perpetrator is off the hook. But it doesn’t have to be that way.” To “apportion blame without descending into blaming behaviour” is to reach for a type of justice that allows people on all sides of conflict to take appropriate responsibility for their portion of the situation in a manner that allows conflict and those impacted by conflict to be transformed.

Luskin proposes four barriers to forgiveness, all of which correlate with the responsibility of victims for their own contribution to the ongoing pain in their lives, and all of which correlate closely with the Intent-Action-Effect communication model we explored in chapter 2. These four barriers include (a) assuming the other person’s intention is about oneself (forgetting the back-story that drives the other person’s behaviour and has nothing to do with oneself); (b) blaming the other person for the impact their actions have had on oneself (reducing one’s agency by not owning one’s feelings as one’s own); (c) holding the other to unenforceable rules (the other cannot, by virtue of their own barriers, meet the self’s expectations); and (d) creating a grievance story that comes to define one’s life (allowing an incident of pain to become a life defining story). Together, these barriers lay the groundwork for self-harm (the grievance story harms the self by keeping the self locked in pain) and for harming others (the depth of pain caused by these barriers often causes victims to harm others, whether that other is the offender or a stand-in for the offender). While Luskin’s barriers are practical in nature, they echo Volf’s earlier suggestion that victims can take responsibility for what an experience of harm has done to them. Further, when victims take responsibility for any of the barriers above, they become active agents in their own transformation.

Behind the arguments made thus far regarding the categories of victim and offender, three sub-themes can be detected, each of which challenges our opening definitions of forgiveness and justice. These themes explore the following three questions: (a) To what degree is forgiveness for self or for other?; (b) Is forgiveness unconditional or conditional (i.e., is it dependent on some form of justice or
apology)?; and (c) What is the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation (i.e., to what degree is the relationship between self and other restored when forgiveness and justice are held together)?

(a) Within the North American context, popular writer and forgiveness researcher Fred Luskin states that forgiveness is “for you and not the offender;” it “is taking back your power” and “is about your healing and not about the people who hurt you.” South African Bishop Desmond Tutu echoes these sentiments when he states: “To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. [Forgiveness] gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.”

What both Luskin and Tutu point to is that forgiveness appears to release the self not only from the other person but also from the power the incident of harm can have over one’s life. For many, forgiveness can also include forgiveness of one’s own complicity in the conflict under which the self is now suffering.

Acknowledging these therapeutic definitions of forgiveness, Deutsch nonetheless moves the definition further, stating the following:

I shall use the term to mean giving up rage, the desire for vengeance, and a grudge toward those who have inflicted grievous harm on you, your loved ones, or the groups with whom you identify. It is also a willingness to accept the other into one’s moral community so that he or she is entitled to care and justice.... [It does not mean you have to forget the evil that has been done, condone it, or abolish punishment for it. However, it implies that the punishment should conform to the canons of justice and be directed toward the goal of reforming the harm doer so that he or she can become a moral participant in the community.

Using Deutsch’s definition, while forgiveness is good for the self (the persistent desire for vengeance is seen as harmful to one’s mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health), forgiveness also goes beyond the self to include the other insofar as the other is entitled to exist within the self’s same moral community. To be clear, the concept of moral community does not assume face-to-face contact between self and other. A shared moral community means self and other are equally worthy of care and justice. This can be contrasted with a shared social community where self and other share social spaces with one another. When forgiveness is more for the self than for the other, the other may not even know that they have been forgiven. Forgiveness can nonetheless allow the person who has been harmed to wish for a just and humane process by which an offender is held accountable—a process that seeks to heal rather than dehumanize the other.

(b) Is forgiveness conditional or unconditional? Conditional forgiveness suggests that justice must occur before forgiveness is offered; unconditional forgiveness waives this requirement. Minow is suspicious of unconditional forgiveness as, to her, it appears to simply accept the wrongs done. While Luskin states that forgiveness is not about condoning unkindness, forgetting or excusing poor
behaviour, he remains committed to forgiveness as unconditional for the simple reason that, in his view, forgiveness is for the self and not the other. From Luskin’s perspective, to hook forgiveness to the other’s capacity to take responsibility for the harm they have done is to shackle the victim to the offender’s life journey—something the victim has already experienced once to deleterious effect. Others such as Deutsch give space for differences in this regard. For Deutsch, while forgiveness may be a conditional act for some, it may be an unconditional act for others.

(c) What is the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation? Most forgiveness authors acknowledge that forgiveness and reconciliation are two distinct concepts. While forgiveness allows self and other to exist within the same moral community, reconciliation depends on the capacity of self and other to co-exist within the same social community, even if for only a short time. In other words, while forgiveness can occur within the self and without the presence of the one who has committed harm, reconciliation depends on some form of meeting between self and other, however brief, and some capacity on the part of the other to take responsibility for the harm they have done, lest the encounter between self and other become unsafe.

Given what we have said thus far, this thesis proposes the following definition of forgiveness and justice: Forgiveness and justice are each for both self and other. Forgiveness involves healing for the one who has been harmed and an extension of grace to the other insofar as the other is welcomed into the self’s same moral community. The dignity associated with the moral community to which self and other belong suggests that forgiveness includes seeing both self and other as fully human (both capable of good and evil). Justice involves inviting the other to take responsibility (a) for the harm done to the self; (b) for the harm done by the self to the other (if harm was done to the other); (c) for the harm done by the self to the self; (d) for the harm done by the other to the other; and (e) for the harm done by the self to others who stand in for the other.

With these new definitions in mind, we return to the polarities model once more, now to observe how the model engages and reflects the complexity of these two concepts. Forgiveness and justice now each appear, in different ways, to involve both self and other. As a result, three polarity models are proposed, the first contrasting forgiveness for oneself vs. forgiveness for the other; the second contrasting justice for oneself vs. justice for the other, and the third contrasting forgiveness and justice once more but this time with both defined as for self and other.
1. The forgiveness polarity

In this polarity, both self and other are seen as fully human, capable of both good and evil. As a result, it follows that both self and other are worthy of inclusion in the same moral community. When forgiveness is for the self only, self-justifying thoughts and disregard for the other become possible, opening the door to increased complicity of the self in the conflict dynamic. Similarly, forgiveness that focuses exclusively on the other denies the self’s personhood and the self’s truth, reducing the likelihood for justice to occur and, by extension, limiting the possibility of a genuine, reconciling encounter. Healthy forgiveness drinks from both wells, allowing forgiveness to be for self and other.

FIGURE 3.15

2. The justice polarity

The justice polarity covers some of the same territory as the forgiveness polarity. Justice focused on the other holds the other appropriately accountable for their actions; justice focused on the self holds oneself appropriately accountable for one’s own actions. Focus only on self leads to inappropriate levels of self-blame; focus only on other leads to brutality and vengeance. As with all other polarities, to appropriately engage the question of justice requires a both-and rather than an either-or response. As in Figure 3.16, both self and other are invited to responsibility.
3. The forgiveness-justice polarity

If we accept that justice and forgiveness are each for both self and other, then the new combined polarity invites both accountability and release at the very same time, preferring neither above the other. When forgiveness and justice are held together, they preserve and call one another forth. In the spirit of polarities, it is impossible to declare which of these goes first. Instead, the struggle between these concepts is resolved by allowing the two to exist in tension with one another, neither precluding the need for the other.

As we have seen, Volf calls the both-and stance differentiation. To this we might add another word, one that is perhaps more closely associated with the conundrum of forgiveness and justice:
“reconciliation.” Rather than being the same as forgiveness, reconciliation is found in the both-and space beyond justice and forgiveness. Reconciliation may become possible when both justice and forgiveness have occurred, for both self and other.

3.d Differentiation: Engaging the Both-And Frame

If the problem of polarized thinking is found by drawing from the strengths of two seemingly opposing poles, how does one actually accomplish this task? This question is more complex than might appear at first glance. Does one alternate between poles to ensure that the strengths of both poles are pursued? Or, is there another approach that allows one to hold two opposing principles together simultaneously? This thesis proposes that while alternating between two poles can occur, this is unsustainable over the long term, as this would simply maintain the either-or stance, now in alternating fashion. Instead, this thesis proposes that, like the Konkomba man, conflict transformation rests on the capacity to hold two opposing principles together simultaneously, seeking the both-and rather than the either-or of two or more disparate perspectives. What follows is a strategy for how this might occur practically.

One of the most helpful images that can be interpreted as modelling the both-and dynamic is found in the concept of emotional triangles. A core principle within Family Systems Theory, emotional triangles describe how conflict shifts from one person to another and how third party players influence whether a conflict is entrenched or transformed. While this theory was not designed with the polarities model in mind, by placing these two concepts alongside one another, a strategy for inhabiting the both-and space is revealed. To arrive at this strategy, this section begins by exploring the concept of emotional triangles as proposed by Family Systems Theory and as developed by the author of this thesis. While it will take some time to fully explore the concept of emotional triangles, the intention is to explore enough of this theory to see the wisdom it has to offer for conflict transformation. Then, we will set this model alongside the polarities model in order to discover what the two models together reveal about the both-and space, the transformation of conflict and the self-other frame. Finally, consideration will be given to the qualities of the both-and stance.

3.d.i The Concept of Emotional Triangles

According to Family Systems Theory, patterns of conflict are replicated in interpersonal relationships and in relational systems through an emotional triangle mechanism. In fact, all entrenched and enduring conflicts are believed to include one or more emotional triangle(s). The three points of an emotional
triangle can be described as representing one person and two issues, two people and one issue, or three people. The primary line of tension exists between the two primary players, parties A and B.

Figure 3.18

For ease, we begin by describing the emotional triangle of three people. This triangle is observed whenever two people who experience discord with one another draw in one or more third parties to release the tension that has arisen between them. Often referred to as “triangulation,” the choice of third party players is not random, as third parties are asked to take on a specific role with regard to the tension between the primary players. Third parties may be called in to (a) align with one of the conflicting parties against the other; (b) deflect energy from the conflict between the original parties; or (c) support the original parties in their attempt to transform the conflict that has arisen between them. These three tasks are quite different from one another, naturally producing different results.

In the case of both alignment and deflection, it is common that the entry of the third party will entrench the conflict between the original two parties. With respect to alignment, this is so because as third parties become allies to one “side” of those in dispute, the logic of the discord is strengthened. Said otherwise, third parties that align themselves with one side of a dispute between the primary players do so through an either-or rather than both-and lens, supporting either A or B. When this occurs, the party with whom the third party has aligned is fortified in their sense of “rightness” regarding the other. As third parties align themselves, a new conflict emerges, this time between the third party and the original party with whom the third party did not align. This new conflict deflects energy from the line of tension between the original two players in the dispute, reducing the potential for its transformation. Alternately, it is also possible that the original parties intentionally create a
problem with one or more third parties, not for alignment but to distract and deflect attention away from the original conflict. Again, this action entrenches the original conflict, simply for the lack of concerted effort being expended for transformation.

Whether a secondary conflict is created intentionally or as a result of alignment, this new conflict can begin a cascade effect as increasing numbers of new players are drawn in and as additional conflicts with and between new players grow “on top of” the original dispute. What began as a conflict between two original parties now has grown to include many people and many additional emotional triangles. This is significant as the conflict is now perpetuated by a system that has neither one face nor one name, causing the conflict to become amorphous, hard to grasp, and more difficult to transform. Furthermore, the presence of systems as players in the conflict allows individuals to abdicate responsibility for their own conflict-driven behaviour: “The system made me do it.” It is for this reason, that for third parties who are at risk of alignment but do not wish to entrench a conflict, a better strategy is to exit the third party role altogether. To be clear, exiting the third party role does not demand an exit from the relationship with the primary conflict players. Instead, it suggests a departure from the emotional triangle in which the primary players are caught.

It is possible, of course, for third parties to act as agents of transformation. Indeed, mediators, peacebuilders, and therapists regularly inhabit the third party role precisely for this purpose, as do parents, managers, and “accidental” third party players such as friends, family members, and strangers. Rather than being problematic, this form of triangulation may be required if the conflict between the original parties is to be transformed. In this approach, third parties come alongside the disputing parties and, rather than aligning with either, they seek to support the disputing parties as they work toward transforming their differences. According to Friedman, third parties must learn to act as a non-anxious presence—remaining connected to those involved without taking on the anxiety of the relational system into which they are being drawn. Also known as differentiation, third parties who wish to act as agents of transformation, manage their own ego needs and interior dynamics in order to resist the pull into the discord between the primary parties. Drawing from the language provided by Volf, differentiated third parties neither abandon people to their problems (separation only) nor do they align with people against their problems (binding only). Instead, third parties inhabit a both-and frame, allowing them to create a safe “container” in which conflicting parties can have the critical conversations with one another that they must have. In cases where individuals take the third party role in a system filled with a web of emotional triangles, differentiated third parties slowly nurture health back into the system, one emotional triangle at a time.
In practice, inhabiting the third party role well is complex. Alignment, after all, can emerge both consciously and unconsciously. While conflicting parties may actively seek to draw third parties to their side, questions of alignment are made more challenging by the interior condition of the third party. Personal histories, underlying ego needs, personality patterns, and hidden biases all converge to influence the manner in which third parties play their role. To manage these dynamics, third parties must pay attention to their own emotional processes, recognising when they are being hooked and when their own needs are being triggered, taking action to ensure the focus stays where it belongs.

To practice differentiation, those in third party roles are encouraged to regard both primary parties with a spirit of unconditional positive regard, as those in conflict are more likely to respond well to conflict transformation processes when they are fully and unconditionally accepted by third parties. To be clear, the spirit of unconditional positive regard is not about permissiveness or boundary-less compassion. Instead, for third parties unconditional positive regard is partnered with significant nerve. Otherwise, as Friedman rightly points out, the boundary between the third and primary parties is lost and the identities of third parties “bleed” into that of the primary parties. When this occurs, the cause of the primary parties becomes that of the third party, alignment is likely, and the possibility of transformation is minimized.

3.d.ii Additional Emotional Triangles

Thus far, we have explored the concept of emotional triangles through the lens of two conflicting parties into which a third party is drawn. However, emotional triangles can also be applied to one person and two issues or to two people and one issue. For example, with regard to a disagreement or conflict regarding two opposing ideas, an emotional triangle may be established with two opposing perspectives held by the self and the other, into which the self is drawn. What makes this triangle complex is that one person inhabits two stations of the triangle at the same time—both as the person behind one of the opposing perspectives and as the person in the third party position. We will call this the triangle of opposing ideas.
When the identity of the self (in the third party role) is aligned or fused with the self’s ideas (in the primary player role) in opposition to the other’s ideas (also in the primary player role), three realities emerge: (a) Any challenge of one’s ideas become a challenge to one’s identity; (b) as the identity of the self is fused with its ideas, little space is left to see or hear the wisdom emerging from the other party; and (c) if the identity of the self is fused with its ideas, then the self readily assumes that the identity of the other is similarly fused with the other’s ideas. When this occurs, the other’s ideas are taken as a reflection of the other’s character. Together, these realities limit the possibility of healthy dialogue.

When the identities of self and other are fused with their own respective opinions, dialogue quickly regresses from issue-as-problem to person-as-problem. In contrast, when the self regards its own ideas at arms’ length without aligning with them, the self can “walk alongside” both sets of ideas—those of self and other—in a differentiated manner. By not conflating identity with perspective, the self retains a more “human” view of self and other—self and other are greater than the ideas each holds. Further, by differentiating from one’s ideas, the self holds its ideas with humility, making space for the wisdom associated with the ideas of the other.

An alternate emotional triangle related to two issues and one person is also possible. We call this the triangle of the interior condition. In this triangle a person may be experiencing psychological stress with regard to a given issue. This stress can be related to psychological pain, trauma or mental health issues, or any unmet foundational human need. Unmet needs do not need to be extreme for this triangle to be established. As we have seen, when foundational needs are unmet, it is common for conflict to occur. In practice, this conflict occurs when the self engages in conflict within itself over its unmet foundational needs. These two (the self and its unmet needs) become the primary players into which an alternate issue or person is drawn. Stated more simply, the self creates a conflict with another...
issue or person to escape the pressure of the conflict within its interior condition. By way of example, a person with a problem at home (with regard to an unmet need) may create a problem at work in order to deflect attention away from the problem at home. The mostly unconscious rationale behind this act is that the problem at work—even if difficult—is less painful than the problem at home.

**Figure 3.20**

The triangle of the interior condition is so commonplace it can occur unknowingly over dinner table conversations, in lunch rooms, and at checkout counters, even as it takes place more intentionally in the presence of a therapist. It is also the base triangle behind many conflicts. When a disagreement between two people becomes a conflict, it is likely that the two parties are mutually drawing one another into pre-existing conflicts with their interior conditions, in addition to the particular problem with which the two are wrestling. While two parties may believe they are having a conflict over a tangible issue, this issue may, in fact, be a secondary conflict dependent on a more basic triangulation related to the triangle of the interior condition. While this form of the emotional triangle is suggestive of intrapersonal tension into which another person is drawn, the same dynamic can exist in the context of intra- or inter-group tension. When a group experiences tension within itself (for example, when a group struggles with its sense of identity), the group may resolve this tension by drawing another issue or group into the third party role, deflecting the tension of the original issue onto this third party.

Multiple factors may motivate individuals or groups to draw others into a conflict between themselves and their interior condition: (a) It is often easier for the self to manage conflict with another person than it is to manage a conflict with one’s interior condition; (b) the self may project its unmet needs onto another person out of a pattern of inhabiting the victim stance—in this case, the self needs a “villain” to maintain its self-perception as victim (or vice versa); or (c) the self may not have much self-awareness with regard to its interior condition—when this occurs and an interaction triggers the interior
condition, the self can accuse the other of having caused the self pain, even if, in this moment, the self was triangulating the other into the dynamics within its interior condition. Whatever the reason, when the other is drawn into a conflict between the self and its interior condition, if the other becomes hooked by this triangle, the other now becomes “responsible” for the self’s wounds which, naturally, the other cannot solve, as this condition belongs to the self and not the other.

Third party players can become agents of transformation even in the triangle of the interior condition. This is the role that therapists and coaches seek to inhabit when people come to them for support. According to the principle of emotional triangles, however, to inhabit this role, those in the third party role must accept both primary players (the self and the self’s interior condition) with a differentiated stance and with unconditional positive regard. If this does not occur, third party players risk aligning with the self against its interior condition (or vice versa) and by so doing, risk becoming agents of entrenchment.

In the concept of emotional triangles, the station of the third party player is the seat of transformation. It is from this station that actions can be taken to transform the dynamics between the two primary players. This raises the question of whether the self must depend on a third party for transformation within the self to occur. Fortunately, it is also possible for the self to inhabit the third party role with respect to itself. This is the case when the triangle of the self in three places is considered. In this model, the self does not draw others into conflict with its interior condition. Instead, the self becomes its own agent of transformation with regard to its interior condition. Two options present themselves in this regard. In the first iteration (Figure 3.21), the line of tension is held by two primary “players” within the self—the self as victim and the self as villain. In this case, a deeper sense of self takes on the third party role. While this may sound complex, it creates a roadmap by which one can become an agent of transformation with regard to one’s own interior condition, and by extension, with the conflicts that might emerge between self and other.

When conflict occurs, it is common for the self to inhabit two stances at the same time: The self may experience a sense of victimisation, given the actions of the other, and the self may experience itself as villain, as the self responds to the actions of the other (whether in reality or in mind only). When this occurs, those who engage in self-reflection will experience a double pain—one from the experience of having been harmed, and another from the experience of shame associated with the guilt of villainous thoughts and behaviour. Consistent with the emotional triangles model, a line of tension emerges between the victim and villainous forms of the self. To escape the pressure this line creates, the self may triangulate another person into this triangle onto whom to cast this conflict. Alternately,
the self can inhabit all three stations at once, placing the self’s deeper identity in the third party station. This deeper identity is neither a broken, victimised self nor a shamed, villainous self. Instead, this deeper self is most closely identified with the “I” of Buber’s I-Thou frame.

**Figure 3.21**

![Deeper Self Diagram](image)

If the deeper self aligns with its sense of victimisation against its culpability, the identity of the self is fused with its brokenness. Alternately, if the deeper self aligns with its culpability against its sense of victimisation, the identity of the self is fused with its guilt. Either way, these alignments have devastating implications for the self: When the deeper self is fused with the victim stance, the self is likely to replicate this stance elsewhere, inviting further victimisation from the same and/or other offenders. Similarly, but conversely, when the deeper self is fused with its culpability, the self may either be crushed by its shame or it may give itself permission to wield new harm. In each of these circumstances, the fused self becomes an agent of entrenchment not transformation. Alternatively, if the deeper self comes alongside its broken and culpable self in a spirit of differentiation and unconditional positive regard, the self sees the gift in its brokenness (the broken self gives voice to the self’s experience of pain) and in its culpability (the culpable self allows the self to take responsibility for its complicity in conflict). Moreover, when this occurs, the identity of the deeper self retains its capacity to call to life a selfhood that is bigger than the immediate circumstances in which a person may find themselves. A differentiated deeper self relates to both the broken and culpable self, coming alongside both and aligning with neither. The differentiated deeper self can say with the culpable self, “Yes, I made a mistake, which I need to make right,” and it can say with the broken self, “Yes, I feel harmed about this,” without violating the core nature of selfhood.
In the second iteration of the triangle of the self in three places, the deeper self is triangulated into the tension between the larger arc of the self’s life and the self’s immediate experience of an incident of pain.

Figure 3.22

In this case, if the self is negatively triangulated by its experience of pain and the larger story of its life, then the self is at risk of over-identifying with an experience of pain, allowing an incident of pain to define its life. Alternately, the self may over-identify with the larger arc of its life, denying the significance of its pain altogether. In the concept of emotional triangles, the differentiated deeper self can hold both the larger arc of its life and the immediate story of pain with unconditional positive regard, thereby resisting a shift in the line of tension, neither over-identifying nor under-identifying with an incident of pain or the larger arc of one’s life. When this occurs, the differentiated deeper self becomes freed from the power of a particular incident—this incident no longer defines the self. Similarly, the differentiated deeper self is freed from its need to ignore its incident of pain—the larger life story can include this particular incident of pain.

In each of the examples of emotional triangles provided thus far, as third parties differentiate, they transform the emotional triangle to which they belong, acting as agents of transformation with regard to the primary tension between the primary conflict players. As we have seen, primary conflict players may be two competing ideas, two people, two groups, one person and an issue, one group and an issue, or two forms of the self. Or, the primary and third party players may be part of a much larger web of interlocking triangles. According to this model, whenever third party players differentiate, aligning with neither primary player and practicing unconditional positive regard for both, while nonetheless inviting necessary accountability, the relational system begins to shift, opening the
possibility for transformation to begin. Similarly, a differentiated self no longer triangulates others into its needs, becomes consumed by its needs and wounds, or become negatively triangulated into others’ needs. Instead, differentiated and compassionate third parties—by the nature of their engagement with primary parties—bring transformation to conflicted emotional triangles.

3.d.iii Emotional Triangles and the Polarities Model

While the concept of emotional triangles can help to explain both conflict and its transformation, it is especially helpful for us, as it offers insights with regard to how one might hold the both-and space upon which conflict transformation depends. As we have seen, if third parties wish to act as agents of transformation they must come alongside the primary players rather than aligning with one against the other. Said otherwise, they must regard the primary players through a both-and lens rather than either-or lens. Earlier, we also observed that a both-and lens is critical for the bridging of polarities. In this section, we pose the question, “What emerges when we put these two models—polarities and emotional triangles—together?” By way of image, when the two models are placed together, they might appear as follows:

According to Figure 3.23, the third party position of the triangle (represented by the apex of the triangle) and the differentiation point of Volf’s vertical axis reside at the same location. It is interesting that both Volf and emotional triangle theorists uses the same word—differentiation—to describe the healthy expression of this point. Both lean on this word to describe the stance required to effectively
engage conflict. Further, both models place differentiation beyond rather than between the extremes of the horizontal axis. This allows both to express the conviction that a both-and “solution” depends on simultaneous engagement with both ends of the horizontal axis, that of the primary parties or of X and Y. And finally, both the polarities model and the emotional triangles model wrestle with the negative engagement with the primary parties or X and Y. While we placed exclusion, as described by Volf, at the bottom of the vertical grid, Family Systems Theory simply allows the apex of the triangle to be expressed in three different ways: one can become a force of transformation (differentiation), one can become a force of entrenchment (exclusion), or one can exit the triangle altogether. If we assume that the third party remains in the triangle, rather than exiting the triangle, we might enhance the parallel between the two models, as shown in Figure 3.24 below.

Placed alongside one another, the polarities model and the emotional triangles model make several important claims with regard to conflict transformation and the both-and stance required to allow transformation to occur.
(a) Differentiation

For Volf, differentiation is used to express the both-and stance of holding separating and binding together.\(^\text{110}\) The differentiated self is the self that both separates from and binds with the other. From the perspective of emotional triangles, the differentiated self is the self that, akin to Volf’s description, is present to others (binding) but also does not take on the anxiety of others (separating). In this regard, there is an easy alignment between the two models. Where the alignment between the models jars somewhat is with regard to scope. Whereas the polarities model, as per Johnson and Mayer, explores the relationship between two ideas, and, as per Volf and others, explores the relationship between self and other, the concept of emotional triangles explores the relationship among three entities—e.g., the self and two others. Volf’s intuition to give language to the third space—the energy that holds the two poles together—points to the insight that the concept of emotional triangles can contribute to the polarity model. The both-and frame upon which polarities lean is made possible by the third space that exists beyond the two poles while nurturing the capacity to hold the energies of the two poles together.

The presence of the third space changes the energy of the polarity model. Although Johnson states that “a polarity can only be managed,”\(^\text{111}\) differentiation proposes that those engaging a polarity must do more than manage it. The term “management” carries with it a transactional energy—energy that seeks to keep things distant, organized, and controlled. Our exploration of the polarities model, its derivatives, and the concept of emotional triangles reveals instead an energy that is transformational rather than transactional. While still maintaining healthy boundaries, differentiation energy is alive, engaged, and motivated by something as audacious as unconditional positive regard for both parties. Polarities are managed not only because those who engage them solve the polarity puzzle in a healthy I-It fashion; polarities are managed because those who engage them do so in a manner that also allows for an I-Thou encounter (between self and other or between third parties and primary parties) to occur.

(b) Unconditional positive regard

In the concept of emotional triangles, one maintains the differentiation stance by practicing unconditional positive regard with respect to A and B. By extension, to inhabit the differentiation stance of the polarities model, one must practice unconditional positive regard with respect to the two poles of the horizontal axis. The polarities model already pushes in this direction as, by virtue of how the model is drawn, it asks those engaging the two poles to see the gifts and not simply the limitations of each pole. In both models, to practice unconditional positive regard, one must see the wisdom in the perspectives of both extremes—and the primary parties who inhabit these extremes (even if one of
those parties is the self). Similarly, one must remain open to seeing the limitations in both perspectives, including the perspective of the self.

(c) The both-and stance

As we have seen, the manner in which the self functions within these models significantly impacts whether a conflict is entrenched or transformed. Transformation, it seems, depends on the both-and stance. While the concept of emotional triangles speaks about coming alongside rather than aligning with the primary parties, the addition of the polarities model makes clear that the nature of coming alongside is governed by a both-and rather than either-or frame and provides a clear tool—the polarities model—for self-monitoring one’s perspectives.

As Volf has indicated, the inclination to judge in a manner that excludes is profound. Whether one aligns with one party over another or with one idea over another, the outcome appears to be the same: A win-lose, either-or dynamic is established and the possibility for genuine transformation is minimized. Third parties now become a force of entrenchment. Using Volf’s words, the third party now draws from the energy of exclusion rather than differentiation. By explicitly revealing the negative expression of what occurs when one regards the primary parties through an either-or frame, the polarities model provides a warning to those who inhabit the third party role. When the third party aligns with one party against another, the third party pursues only one pole. As we have seen, when this occurs, the third party will fall into the negative expression of this pole, whatever this pole might be.

(d) Humility

According to Volf, the differentiated self has an obligation to judge between actions that are both-and in nature and those that are either-or in nature. While the emotional triangles model does not speak to this directly, it does make space for this impulse by encouraging third parties not to over-empathize with either of the primary parties. This allows for a critical eye that, ideally, is able to see clearly with regard to the arguments and actions of the primary parties. Just as importantly, this allows third parties to extend the critical eye to themselves—ensuring that they too are maintaining a both-and rather than either-or stance. Volf takes this concept a step further, suggesting that the self must take an either-or stance about that which excludes in order to maintain the both-and stance. In a world marked by harms large and small, this either-or stance allows third parties to call out harm for what it is even while offering positive regard to both parties. As Volf has shown, the temptation to judge incorrectly, to evaluate what has occurred according to one’s non-differentiated self-interest, is profound. As a
result, to lead the both-and space in a manner that judges well depends on a stance of humility. Third parties do their best with regard to both-and thinking even as they struggle to consistently achieve this standard.

(e) Self-awareness

There is a type of maturity required of the self in order for the self to inhabit the differentiation space. Regardless of the nature of the emotional triangle under consideration, whenever the self takes ownership over the conflict between the primary parties, takes on the anxiety of the emotional triangle, or feels as though their identity depends on a resolution between the primary players, a shift in the line of tension occurs, causing the conflict between the primary players to entrench. As a result, in the concept of emotional triangles, the self must practice (a) self-awareness to understand how it is being hooked by a particular triangle; (b) self-awareness with regard to how it is using judgement and/or what biases are driving the self; (c) other-awareness, recognising how the other is being impacted by the self; and (d) self-regulation to moderate its actions in response to both self-awareness and other-awareness.\textsuperscript{113} Consistent with the I-Thou frame, while the “I” is created in relationship with the other, the I of the third party must still possess an I in order for a genuine I-Thou encounter among the three points of the triangle to occur.

(f) Patience

In the concept of emotional triangles, third parties may not coerce a relational change between the primary parties. While third parties can create a space where an I-Thou encounter between the primary parties can occur, third parties may never force the primary players into this space. To maintain the differentiated stance, the self requires significant (and sometimes long-suffering) patience to walk alongside the primary parties, in whatever form they might come. From the perspective of the polarities model, the principle of patience also holds. Differentiation depends on the search for the both-and, whether with regard to ideas or people. This search takes time and a willingness to engage difficult conversations. While transformation can come quickly, more often it is measured in small steps. Indeed, it is often the desire to “speed things up” that leads to coercive third party energy, invariably causing resistance and slowing the transformation process.
(g) Vulnerability

Maintaining the both-and stance demands vulnerability. All people harm others, whether consciously or unconsciously. Sometimes this harm is created by third parties who seek to be a force for transformation. Other times, this harm occurs when one party triangulates another into its unmet needs. Whether the self is “victim” or “villain,” the self is cast into a vulnerable space. As we have seen, if the self denies its pain or its complicity, the self risks creating new emotional triangles, this time with regard to the negative expression of the triangle of the self in three places. From the perspective of the polarities model, denial of one’s pain and/or of one’s complicity in harm correlate with the focus on self / focus on other polarity, causing the self to fall into the negative expressions of one of these poles. In contrast, vulnerability allows the self to accept both its pain and its complicity in harm. When this occurs, the self neither denies its responsibility nor blames others for its pain, allowing transformation to occur.

(h) Self-compassion

To show compassion to another appears to depend on one’s capacity to be compassionate to oneself. As already seen within the polarities model, both self and other are capable of good and evil. By extension, this means that despite the self’s best efforts, the self will not consistently maintain the both-and space—with respect to two primary conflict players, two issues of dispute, or the differences between self and other. The triangle of the self in three places acts as a corrective to the self’s inability to hold the both-and space. By allowing the deeper self to differentiate from the harm and complicity of the self, the self can extend self-compassion to itself in the same manner that the self extends compassion to any primary parties caught in conflict. When the deeper self can accept its broken self and guilty self unconditionally yet in a differentiated manner, these forms of the self can begin to heal.

(i) Self-Definition and Empathy

The triangle of the self in three places is also critical for the twin conflict transformation goals of self-definition and empathy. As we have seen, when one moves too far to self-definition, one excludes the other; if one moves too far to empathy, one excludes the self. When the self (whether this self is a group or an individual) is caught by pain and shame in its interior condition, it is more likely to judge this polarity incorrectly and as a result, the self risks falling into the negative expression of one of these poles. Said otherwise, the self that is undifferentiated with regard to the triangles of the self is more likely to lose the capacity for the both-and frame with regard to the additional triangles and polarities in
which the self is thrust. When the self differentiates with respect to the triangles associated with the self in three places, the self is freed to engage more maturely and wholesomely in the other polarities and triangles into which it is drawn. In short, the risk of over-separating and over-binding or leaning into the either-or rather than the both-and is mitigated by differentiated attention to the triangles that reside within the self. When the self attends to its own inner dynamics (transformation of the self), the potential for the transformation of the divisions and conflict between self and other is enhanced. Similarly, when the self is transformed, it can more “cleanly” take on the third party role to two others in conflict. Borrowing from Buber, if the self must have a self to engage in the I-Thou encounter, then the healthier the I, the easier it is for the I to open space within itself for the I-Thou encounter to occur. While it may be true that the I exists in relation to the Thou of the other, the I must also have a Thou relationship with itself to allow an encounter with the Thou of the other to occur. Those with only an I-It relationship with themselves will find it difficult to come into being in the presence of another’s Thou.

3.e Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 3 opened with the question: If conflict represents a shift from the I-Thou frame to a distorted form of the I-It frame, can conflict transformation return self and other to the I-Thou frame? If so, how does this occur? In an effort to answer this question, we have observed that our goal is in fact not simply to return to the I-Thou frame. Instead, the polarities model proposes that we must change our original question. As we have seen, to live into the I-Thou frame depends on the capacity to simultaneously live into the healthy iteration of the I-It frame. The question, therefore, must be revised as follows: If conflict represents a shift from a both-and expression of the I-Thou/I-It frames to a distorted form of the I-It frame, can conflict transformation return self and other to both the I-Thou and the healthy I-It frame? If so, how does this occur?

As an answer to this question, we observed that by mapping and then engaging the self-other divide, we create an avenue for bridging this divide. Specifically, chapter 3 considers an image known as the polarities model as a vehicle for understanding the self-other frame and as a strategy for moving beyond this frame. Whereas the self-other frame of conflict forces a choice between either self or other, the self-other frame of conflict transformation proposes that one can choose both self and other. This principle is also applied more broadly to multiple additional polarities, each of which can appear within the context of conflict and each of which, when engaged with a both-and frame, points the way to conflict transformation.
While the multiplicity of applications of the both-and frame is interesting, the focus on self / focus on other polarity is particularly important with regard to the exercise of conflict transformation. With every disagreement and conflict, those involved must determine the degree to which they will focus on their own needs vs. the needs of the other. As we have seen, the temptation, inclination, and hard-wiring of those in conflict favours focusing on the needs of the self rather than focusing on the needs of the other, whether this occurs at the conscious or subconscious level. The philosophical frame we have been developing here proposes that the capacity to focus on both self and other at the same time—the both-and frame—as difficult as this may be in the context of conflict, can significantly transform conflict. To do this requires of the self the capacity to separate from and bind with the other, to both self-define and practice empathy, to claim one’s voice (empowerment) and give recognition, to both forgive and pursue justice.

By exploring the polarities model through the lenses of various authors, the model itself has been expanded and enhanced. Specifically, Volf’s engagement with these same questions has given definition to the vertical axis. The capacity to hold the two poles together is described as differentiation; the inability to hold the two poles together is described as exclusion. Further, Volf proposes that the vertical axis is never both-and. It must be either-or, as the self must be able to call out harm (exclusion) for what it is, lest the self become complicit in the harm itself.

In an effort to discover how one might live into the differentiation stance, we turn to the emotional triangles model, creating a three-pointed bridge between self and other. This model significantly expands the polarity model by adding additional iterations of what might reside at the extreme end of the two poles, by providing language for how the self can inhabit the differentiation space and by identifying what is required of the self to do so. The concept of emotional triangles is particularly instructive for the polarities model insofar as it defines the nature of the third space beyond what Volf was able to do and because it begins to articulate the qualities associated with the differentiation stance—qualities such as unconditional positive regard, the capacity to hold the both-and space, humility, self-awareness, patience, vulnerability, self-compassion, self-definition, and empathy. In conclusion, the self-other frame—while so confounding in its capacity to contribute to conflict—also becomes our avenue for conflict transformation. The problem, it appears, is not simply the self-other divide. Instead, the problem is the tendency to regard self and other through the either-or lens. As we have observed, conflict thrusts self and other into a landscape of binary choices; however, when those binary choices are regarded through the both-and frame, transformation becomes possible. Accordingly, the both-and frame now becomes the conflict transformation goal (what we are seeking when we
transform conflict), it influences the path toward this goal (how we engage with others regarding conflict that has occurred), and, for those committed to transformation, it can even influence conflict itself (how we engage others when we are in the midst of conflict), while still, as per Volf, allowing for clear judgements that enshrine a vertical either-or into the horizontal both-and frame.

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2 Botes, “Conflict Transformation.”
5 Botes, “Conflict Transformation,” 10.
6 Ibid., 9.
12 Bush and Folger, The Promise of Mediation, 229ff.
13 Ibid., 3.
16 Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1996.
19 Echoed by Mayer in his comments in Paradox, 13: “Conflict provides us with both an opportunity to grow and a vehicle to regress. As disputes escalate, we are more likely to resort to ways of thinking and behaving that are characteristic of earlier stages of development. Our challenge in working on conflict is therefore to help promote more complex thinking that accepts ambiguity, the truth in seemingly contradictory realities, and the truth in the contradiction or paradoxes themselves.”
20 Ibid., 1.
21 Ibid.
and of the greater good of our community (or family, or country, or organization). We therefore see those we are in conflict with as competitive, irrational, emotional, unrealistic, and out for themselves alone. And the more a conflict escalates, the more we are likely to see things this way. So the more we see things in these polarized terms, the more we contribute to conflict escalation—even when we don’t want to. We tend to assume the side of the polarity we have chosen is the wiser or more moral element and that the approach of those we are in conflict with is not as good as ours (we are realistic, they are naïve; we are principled, they are not; we are committed to the greater good, they are out for themselves). The value we put on our approach to a polarity, coupled with our tendency to dismiss the approach of others, deepens the conflict.”

Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (Amherst, Mass: HRD Press, 1996), 265–267. To this list, Johnson adds: rights of individuals vs. rights of group, critical analysis & encouragement, thinking & feeling, autocratic & participatory, centralized vs. decentralized decision making, extroversion & introversion...


Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 34.


Anderson and Cissna, “Martin Buber: Bearing Witness to an Experience,” 134.
Ibid., 135.
55 Bush and Folger, The Promise of Mediation, 84–85.
56 Ibid., 85.
57 Ibid., 89.
59 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 66. See Volf’s consideration of feminist thinkers in this regard.
60 Ibid., 67.
61 Ibid., 66. See also Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
62 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 66.
63 Ibid., 67.
64 Ibid., 67.
65 Ibid., 66 (Volf’s italics).
66 Ibid., 68.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 83.
70 Ibid., 68.
72 Minow, Between Vengeance and Forgiveness, 10.
74 Minow, Between Vengeance and Forgiveness, 13.
75 Quoted by Minow, Between Vengeance and Forgiveness, 17.
78 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 79.
79 Ibid., 81.
80 Ibid., 80.
81 Ibid., 83. See also Lamb, The Trouble with Blame, 88f.
82 Recall here the conversation regarding the subconscious and conflict from chapter 2.
84 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 116.
85 Quoted in Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 80. See Marjorie H. Suchocki, The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology (New York: Continuum, 1995), 149.
86 Lederach, Moral Imagination, 87.
87 Ibid., 88. Lederach continues: “Social change that depends heavily on the magnetic attraction of shared opposition creates social energy that can generate large numbers in discrete time frames but has difficulty sustaining the longer term change.”
89 Ibid., 117.
91 Ibid., 96.
93 This reality is echoed in the following (unattributed) quote: “Hanging onto resentment [or a grievance story] is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”
94 The term forgiveness can be defined so variously, those writing on the theme sometimes talk past one another. See for example, Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, rev’d ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).
98 Ibid., 49.
99 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 16.
100 Luskin, *Forgive for Good*, viii. Lewis Smedes echoes this sentiment in *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve*, 59ff, when he states that, rather than permitting bad behaviour, the need to forgive enshrines that harm was done.
104 See Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, for example, in this regard.
106 See Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*; Friedman, *Generation to Generation*.
107 Here, we note the connection to the work of René Girard; see, for example, his book *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986). Girard’s body of work includes two primary concepts: mimesis and scapegoating. While an excursion into Girard’s work is beyond the scope of this thesis, the parallels to the triangle model are worth noting here. Girard proposes that the root of conflict occurs when one party wishes to mimic the interiority of another and, eventually, to have what the other has. The other mimics the self and eventually a form of escalating reactions/counter-reactions between the two parties begins. This is “resolved” with the scapegoat mechanism: The two parties release the tension they have with one another by casting it on a third party, on whom this tension is vented. While this thesis doesn’t disagree with Girard’s concepts of mimesis and scapegoating, this thesis would see the desire to mimic another and/or the desire to scapegoat another as one among several concerns that occur in the context of conflict. Further, as we shall see, this thesis proposes that the third party role—rather than being solely a location where the scapegoat resides—can also be the location into which a third party is intentionally drawn, not as a scapegoat player but as one who can initiate a process of conflict transformation. Also, according to the model being developed here, the triangle is not limited to three persons but can include issues as well as people, complicating the mimeses/scapegoating analysis.
108 Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 27.
The term “unconditional positive regard” is borrowed from 20th century psychologist Carl R. Rogers. Rogers promoted client-centred therapy, proposing that unconditional positive regard—deep acceptance of the client by the therapist—honours the deep inner resources in each client to actively participate in their own transformation. This becomes possible when the client is cared for by the therapist in a manner defined by grace. The therapist separates the essence of the client from whatever failings they exhibit. Deep acceptance allows change to occur. For more by Rogers, see Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 65–68.

Johnson, Polarity Management, xviii.


Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence (New York: Bantam, 1994).

Chapter 4

Contemplative Spirituality and the Self-Other Frame

4.a Introduction

In chapter 1, borrowing from Martin Buber, we set an initial framework for the self-other divide. In chapter 2 we sought to establish how, in the context of conflict, the self-other frame develops and takes hold. In chapter 3, using the self-other frame itself and staying more-or-less within the field of conflict transformation theory, we developed a strategy for bridging the self-other frame. In chapter 4, we search for an additional lens for bridging the self-other frame, this time from the field of contemplative spirituality. The rationale for the leap from conflict transformation to contemplative spirituality is this: Both disciplines engage themes related to the divide between self and other, both explore both-and thinking, and both speak into the concept of threefoldness, albeit in very different ways. While both disciplines cover the same terrain, they rarely engage one another directly in dialogue. The two disciplines naturally differ from one another in multiple ways. Nonetheless, as we shall see, these differences make for a rich dialogue—one that enriches each discipline and influences how the divide between self and other is healed.

For this chapter, our primary question is this: What can contemplative spirituality offer us with regard to our search for a bridge between self and other? A secondary question follows: How will what we find in the field of contemplative spirituality further the concept of conflict transformation? In pursuit of these questions, (1) we will define contemplative spirituality; (2) we will explore the meaning of identity from the perspective of contemplative spirituality, applying this understanding to the transformation of the self-other frame; (3) we will engage the theme of unitive consciousness to better understand this concept and begin applying it to the bridge between self and other; (4) we will review three rhythms associated with contemplative spirituality, making the parallel between these and the experience of conflict; and (5) finally, we will investigate the doctrine of the Trinity and a “Law of Three,” as these are described by contemplatives, in order to consider whether these concepts have anything to add to our modelling of the three-pointed bridge already established in chapter 3.
Contemplative spirituality is a broad term that captures several different but related words within its fold. It is used interchangeably with the term mysticism, it is correlated with the terms unitive and nondual consciousness, and it is associated with spiritual disciplines such as mindfulness, meditation, Lectio Divina, and centering prayer. Within Christianity, contemplative spirituality emerges in and has been influenced by diverse Christian traditions over the past 2000 years, by the experience and writings of contemplatives throughout these centuries and from contemplative voices from other religious traditions. In her book, Radical Optimism, Beatrice Bruteau defines contemplative spirituality as follows: “The spiritual desire of the contemplative is usually framed in one of two ways: (1) the desire to find the ultimate truth and reality and to live in conformity with that, free from any illusion; or (2) the desire to give oneself without qualification to God in perfect obedience and full love.”\(^1\) Using the term mysticism rather than contemplative spirituality, theologian Dorothee Sölle references the most common scholastic definition, “cognito Dei experimentalis (knowledge of God through and from experience).”\(^2\) Sölle also proposes her own definition, offering that Christian mysticism is the lived experience of love for God.\(^3\) Noteworthy in both of these definitions is that contemplative spirituality prefers the lived experience of God’s presence over (a) academic discourse, and (b) the mediation of God’s presence through liturgy or sacrament. To be sure, Bruteau, Sölle, and untold additional contemplatives support academic discourse, just as many would agree that liturgy and sacraments can open the self to experiences of God’s presence. The question is simply, yet importantly, where one begins. According to Sölle, love for God emerges from a type of innocence or humility of soul, where the soul allows itself to experience God not merely as an abstract idea (as in academic discourse) or as an “other” that must be mediated by religious institutions (as through liturgy or sacraments). Instead, contemplative spirituality opens oneself to direct, unmediated encounters with God. In this same vein, Bruteau writes toward the end of her book, Radical Optimism: “I have shared some of how I see it. But I believe that the real contemplative never takes anyone’s experience at secondhand. The real contemplative goes for original, firsthand experience. Contemplation can’t, in the end, be talked about. It has to be practiced.”\(^4\)

There is an important addition to consider with respect to the definition of contemplative spirituality or mysticism. Mysticism can be perceived by some as a flight from reality. Indeed, Buber rejected mysticism for this very reason.\(^5\) Buber’s definition of the term, however, differs from how contemplative writers use the term today—precisely in this regard. Engagement with reality and regard for the other are so central to the definition of mysticism among contemplative writers that any mysticism that does not inherently include regard for the other is considered false.\(^6\) As we shall see,
Buber’s I-Thou frame, which emerged as an expression of his regard for the other, makes a fitting dialogue partner with the contemplative exercise.

In addition to mysticism, the opening sentence of this section associated six additional terms with contemplative spirituality: unitive consciousness, nondual consciousness, mindfulness, meditation, *Lectio Divina*, and centering prayer. To lay the groundwork for the chapter that follows, it is important to establish the meaning of these terms. The latter four terms—mindfulness, meditation, *Lectio Divina*, and centering prayer—represent spiritual practices of the contemplative. While we will consider the theme of spiritual practices later in this chapter, it is enough to say here that while contemplatives cannot self-create an experience of God, contemplatives can engage in practices that open themselves to experiences of God already present in their lives. While the primary purpose of this chapter is to explore how, from the perspective of contemplative spirituality, the bridge between self and other is built (rather than the disciplines of contemplation themselves), it should be acknowledged that if the bridge between self and other is to bear the weight of self and other upon it, spiritual practices are required to translate the theory presented here into practice.

The terms unitive consciousness and nondual consciousness require a brief overview before we proceed, as they go directly to the heart of this thesis and as they are terms to which we will return throughout this chapter. For now, it is enough to provide a short overview of the terms. For this we borrow from an analysis provided by modern-day contemplative Cynthia Bourgeault. According to Bourgeault, unitive consciousness—the term used most commonly among Western Christian contemplatives—expresses where the experience of love for God naturally leads; it is an experienced type of oneness with God. The term *nondual consciousness* has its roots in Eastern religions, though not Eastern Christianity. Translated and brought from that context into Western Christian spirituality, it fits somewhat awkwardly into Western Christian discourse and is used variously by Christian contemplatives. Bourgeault paints the landscape of interpretation regarding this word: On the one hand, nondualism is associated with a kind of practical spiritual energy that moves self and other beyond polarization; on the other hand, nondualism is associated with transitory mystical experiences of union with the divine. A third option is like the second but differs insofar as union with God is experienced as a stable rather than a transitory state. This third option closely matches the definition of unitive consciousness. For some, this latter definition would suggest that unitive and nondual consciousness are essentially the same. While agreeing that the latter option is “close,” Bourgeault nonetheless proposes that none of the three options is a perfect fit with the term nondual consciousness.
In part, the difficulty of defining unitive consciousness and nondualism lies with the philosophical goal of the spiritual exercise: Within the Eastern religions, nondual consciousness means to achieve Oneness—the self is fully one with ultimate reality or God. In Western Christianity, unitive consciousness is relational—the self experiences unity rather than complete oneness with God. Because of this, Bourgeault proposes that unitive consciousness and nondual consciousness must be held separately. Rather than throwing out the term nondualism, Bourgeault proposes that, within Christianity, nondualism represents a fundamental shift in perception that is somewhat different from unitive consciousness: “[I]t betokens not so much a new level of conscious attainment as [it does] a permanent shift in the structure of consciousness itself....”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, there is something about nondual consciousness that changes at a fundamental level how the seer sees and how the seer engages the world. Some, such as Finley, would argue that unitive consciousness does the very same thing.\textsuperscript{12} Is Bourgeault splitting hairs? While the differences between East and West are important, when Western Christian contemplatives explore the nature of union with God—unitive consciousness—both a shift in the structure of consciousness and an experienced type of oneness occur. The key difference between East and West rests in the Western Christian contemplative’s preservation of distinction between self and other even in the context of oneness. As we shall see, this distinction-yet-oneness will become a critical contribution of contemplative spirituality to the transformation of conflict. This thesis favours Finley’s approach, suggesting that the terms nondual consciousness and unitive consciousness both propose a shift in consciousness while recognizing the important distinction-yet-oneness the term unitive consciousness upholds.

While we will primarily use the term unitive consciousness in this thesis, we will also at times borrow the term nondual consciousness as its linguistic composition betokens the shift out of polarized thinking, conflict, and the unhealthy divisions between self and other. Recalling the imagery from our third chapter, the both-and stance of the unitive/nondualist does not simply occupy the space between two poles, nor is it a transitory holding together of two opposing poles. Instead, the unitive/nondualist inhabits a third space beyond the two poles that is qualitatively different from either pole and qualitatively different from a middle ground between the poles. While our third chapter already explored this third space from the perspective of conflict transformation, unitive/nondual consciousness will push the understanding of this third space beyond where conflict transformation has been able to go. Unitive consciousness and nondualism represent a change in being itself.
4. a. ii  Primary Conversation Partners

The collection of contemplative writing and teaching is vast, spanning 2000 years of history within the Christian tradition (including both Eastern and Western Christianity), and even more years and landscapes when the writings and teachings from other faith traditions are included. Throughout history, Christian contemplatives have typically remained rooted in their religious traditions even when misunderstood or disregarded by their own tradition. While honouring their Christian identity, many have also engaged in dialogue with those outside the Christian tradition. For reasons of focus, this thesis intends to stay primarily in the Western Christian tradition. Nonetheless, in keeping with contemplative practice, voices from outside of this tradition will also be included. Further, while voices from the past 2000 years of Christian contemplation are included, we focus our dialogue on the works of seven twentieth and twenty-first century contemplatives, given here in alphabetical order: Cynthia Bourgeault, Beatrice Bruteau, James Finley, Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, and Dorothee Sölle.

Each of these authors, in various ways, explores the nature of the self in relation to the world, making them natural conversation partners for the purposes of this thesis. To a lesser degree, this thesis will also draw on the works of Ilia Delio, Raimon Panikkar and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose focus goes beyond the self in relation to the world to include the transformation of the world from the perspective of evolution.

While each of the authors identified here acknowledges the profound implications of contemplative spirituality for the relationship between the self and other, few explore this theme thoroughly. That the balance of authors do not explore the theme of this thesis is not an indictment. It simply stands as an indicator that the depth with which this thesis seeks to explore this theme takes us into relatively uncharted territory. What we do see among the contemplatives identified here is a threefold focus that can be seen as a set of concentric circles: Some (Bourgeault, Bruteau, Finley, Keating, Merton, and Rohr) focus heavily, though not exclusively, on the inner circle—the self and how the self is transformed in the context of contemplative spirituality. By contrast, Sölle’s attention is drawn primarily to a second circle—contemplation and the transformation of the geopolitical forces that bind people in poverty and injustice. Delio and Teilhard go somewhat further than Sölle as they propose a contemplative understanding of the ongoing evolution of the earth itself. This thesis seeks to wedge an additional circle between the first and second of these concentric circles as it explores how the relationship between self and other is transformed in the context of contemplative spirituality. In keeping with the understanding of conflict transformation proposed in chapter 3, each of the concentric circles identified here are mutually influencing and mutually reinforcing. In other words, when the
qualities of the self-other circle are articulated, reverberations will be experienced at all other levels of contemplative spirituality, just as all other levels of contemplative spirituality influence the self-other circle.

Despite the manner in which each of the concentric circles influences one another, a singular focus on any one of these circles can create a sense that something is missing. For example, Sölle’s book *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* is an excellent contribution to the understanding of contemplative spirituality. It also becomes an interesting case study with regard to the focus one chooses with respect to the concentric circles. Sölle’s purpose, in part, is to demonstrate that a commitment to peace and justice is essential for mysticism to be “true.” Because of this focus, perhaps, Sölle misses offering insights regarding the impact of contemplative spirituality on interpersonal relationships and the alignments and biases that emerge in that context. While Sölle explores the dispossession of one’s attachments and aversions, she does so with respect to the larger societal issues she is addressing rather than with regard to the direct engagement of the other. There is a risk inherent in this approach; without a deep transformation of the self and the deeply internal biases that reside within the self, the self may well participate in actions of resistance to end violence and injustice (Sölle’s focus) in a manner that contributes to entrenchment rather than the transformation of injustice. To be fair, Sölle does engage the theme of ego-based attachments. Nonetheless, her engagement with these questions is refracted so thoroughly through the dual lenses of violence and consumerism that no time is spared for a deeper exploration of the interior and more hidden attachments of the self. Sölle acknowledges that the self must be dispossessed of its desires for possessions and its proclivity toward violence, yet seems to avoid the self’s reckoning with its self, from which these desires and proclivities ultimately spring.

The gap in Sölle’s work with respect to the self-other dynamic leaves Sölle ironically vulnerable to repeating the injustice she seeks to upend. Here, we are reminded of the challenge presented by Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace*, and discussed in chapter 3: How can the self be sure that its judgements regarding injustice are not simply acts that satisfy its own, perhaps hidden, attachments? As Sölle extols the need to stand against injustice and violence, she risks a kind of exclusive alignment with those she seeks to support. As we have seen, this can easily lead to more entrenchment rather than less. In the shadow of the Second World War and numerous other twentieth and twenty-first century atrocities, Sölle’s stance makes sense. What we will see, however, is that for contemplatives to effectively stand with the oppressed, it is imperative that they see the underlying truth, need, pain, and likeness of God in each party, including self and other. Furthermore, when those in the third party role address their own
deeper attachments, including the temptation to align, the ability to work for justice and peace in a manner that is genuinely transforming becomes more readily possible.

The conversation regarding Sölle’s work suggests implications for this thesis. If the gaps in Sölle’s work emerge, in part, because of her primary engagement with only one of the concentric circles, the strong focus of this thesis on other concentric circles suggests that this thesis may also be vulnerable to blind spots. In part this thesis benefits from the generalized definition of self and other: The “other” is defined as any other (an individual, a larger group, or nation) just as the self is defined as any self (an individual, a larger group, or nation), allowing the insights related to our concentric circle to shift naturally to include the next concentric circle. That said, the acknowledgement of blind spots emerging from a somewhat singular focus proposes a stance of humility: This thesis is only one part of a larger conversation regarding the implications associated with the practice of contemplative spirituality.

4.b Contemplative Spirituality and the Meaning of Identity

Throughout the history of both contemplative spirituality and philosophy, we observe a recurring theme regarding the structure of human identity: the recognition of a self that is deeper than the self defined by the roles it carries. Specifically, the question is raised regarding what actually is meant when the term “I” is used. Said otherwise, where is the “I” located—with one’s socially constructed identities or at the level of something deeper? Twentieth century American contemplative Thomas Merton refers to these expressions of the self as the true self and the false self. Bruteau reminds her readers that 2500 years earlier, Plato referred to the two selves of the person as the life chosen by the self before the self is born (which the self forgets), and the life lived by the self (as defined by the roles the self inhabits). Bruteau notes the Hindu concept of avidya which suggests that people are inclined to not-seeing, mistaking selfhood with one’s ego personality and temporal history. Buber’s attempt to differentiate between the I-Thou and the I-It relation can be interpreted as an attempt to explore this same difference. Bruteau refers to the two expressions of the self as the descriptive self and the transcendent self or as ego-consciousness and the true self. Cynthia Bourgeault refers to these two selves as the small or egoic self and larger Self. The list could go on. Bourgeault writes:

[V]irtually all the great spiritual traditions of the world share the conviction that humanity is the victim of a tragic case of mistaken identity. There is a “self” and a Self, and our fatal mistake lies in confusing the two. The egic self... is in virtually every spiritual tradition immediately dispatched to the realm of the illusory, or at best, transitory. It is the imposter who claims to be the whole. This imposter can become a good servant, but it is a dangerous master. Awakening... is a matter of piercing through the charade of the smaller self to develop a stable connection to the greater Self.
Bruteau echoes Bourgeault’s words: “This distinction and the shifting of our experienced center of gravity, or sense of selfhood, from the ego to the true self, constitutes the core of the spiritual exercise.” As we shall see, for contemplatives, it is this shift in the sense of selfhood that holds one of the principal keys to unlock the division between self and other.

According to contemplatives, the problem of the ego emerges whenever the self sees the ego (or the descriptors of the self that make up the ego) as the centre of its identity. In this view, the architecture of the person involves two spheres—the deeper self and the descriptive self. Both selves are necessary and, as we shall see, both selves mutually depend on one another to create the person. Together, the two could be described as the full self. Despite the mutuality between the two selves, among contemplatives an ordering between the two selves appears to be critical, placing the deeper self at the core of identity and the descriptive self as secondary to the core. According to Bourgeault, reversing this order is akin to believing that the sun revolves around the earth rather than the earth around the sun. When this misplacement occurs, not only does the self suffer from a sense of dislocation, the possibility of a healthy descriptive self is compromised. As contemplative authors use the terms associated with the self variously, it is important to clarify that, for the purposes of this thesis, we will refer to the two selves as the deeper and descriptive selves. While the descriptive self includes a healthy ego, we will employ the terms ego-consciousness and the false self to identify those moments or states when the core of one’s identity is located with the descriptive self to the exclusion of the deeper self or with the deeper self to the exclusion of the descriptive self. We will generally use the term unitive consciousness to describe the self in union with God and with all that is, including the other.

4.b.i The Descriptive Self Within Contemplative Spirituality

To understand the distinction that is being made between forms of selfhood, it is important to explore more thoroughly what is meant by the ego and how this term differs from how we are using the term ego consciousness. One of the most helpful summations of the ego is provided by Finley, who states that the ego is simply “our self-reflective bodily self in time and space.” Seen in this light, the ego is the self as regarded from the perspective of the body (one’s physical reality and needs), the mind (one’s thoughts and memories), and what is often described as the heart (one’s feelings and desires).

According to Finley, “[The ego] is the day-by-day consciousness in which we tend to get up in the morning, go through our day, and go to bed at night.” Reviewing Thomas Keating’s work, Bourgeault proposes further that the ego also includes that which arises from the unconscious realm of the self. The ego is necessary because the self must decide what to eat, where to live, how to interact with
incoming information, relate to others, choose between options, and so forth. Said most simply, the ego is necessary in order to function in the world. This understanding echoes Buber’s explanation of the I-It relation. Buber recognizes the necessity of more neutral versions of the I-It for daily existence—a reality he later describes as technical dialogue. Similarly, the ego is necessary in that it gives life to the characteristics—or descriptors—with which each person is born.

The problem with the ego lies not in its existence but in the shift from the deeper self as the centre of one’s identity to the descriptive self as the centre of one’s identity—a shift we are referring to as ego consciousness. Several factors define ego consciousness and lie at the root of the problems it creates for self and other: (1) in ego consciousness the entirety of the self is defined by its descriptors—the roles and socially constructed identities it inhabits: age, gender, race, profession, social class, marital status, sexuality, body shape, physical abilities and limitations, emotional wounds, family history—really any descriptor that the “I” can apply to the self. In ego consciousness, even if the self recognizes a deeper self within, the primary point of reference for the self rests with socially constructed categories. While contemplatives do not deny socially constructed categories—a 48-year-old Canadian woman is not a 58-year-old African man—contemplatives nonetheless argue that ego consciousness fails the self whenever it locates the centre of the self’s identity exclusively with socially constructed categories rather than with its deeper self and that deeper self’s “connection to divine being.”

(2) Ego consciousness fails the other in relation to the self for the very same reasons that it fails the self. When the self’s identity is located in its socially constructed categories, the self cannot help but locate the identity of the other with these same socially constructed categories, functionally reducing the other to their descriptors (as defined by the self) rather than by the other’s deeper self. Here we should hear echoes of Buber’s I-It frame. When the self defines the other according to their descriptors, the other is relegated to object while the self retains the role of subject. One of the complicating factors associated with ego consciousness is that the socially constructed categories according to which self and other are defined are not neutral. As already observed in chapter 2, identity categories are associated with varying degrees of social value to the degree that one’s descriptors become, whether consciously or unconsciously, a vehicle by which power or powerlessness is felt and expressed. At the level of socially-constructed identity, descriptors such as age, gender, and ethnicity give power to some identity groups while other groups are denied access to these same sources of power. At the level of selfhood, descriptors such as physical characteristics, skill sets, and personality types, as well as illness, loss, and trauma can become aligned with shame (“I am not good enough, strong enough, thin enough, tall enough, etc.”) or with a cover for shame (“I am better, stronger, thinner, taller, etc.”). Either the self
does not deem itself worthy of being considered a person of value or the self deems itself as being of more value than the other. The self now becomes caught in a web of comparisons that naturally brings the self into unhealthy competition with others, causing the self (and often the other) to engage in acts of self-defence (emotional or otherwise), which lead to or constitute conflict. According to Bruteau, the imbalance between self and other implicit in these statements lies at the root of evil.\textsuperscript{29} It is the argument of this thesis that this imbalance also lies at the root of conflict.

(3) By limiting the self to ego consciousness, \textit{the self loses its capacity to differentiate between the various needs that emerge from the landscape of the descriptive self}. The self also struggles to discern between the options of how to meet these needs. The “self-reflective body in time and space” has multiple needs as we already observed in chapter 2—needs for recognition, belonging, autonomy, security, and meaning. When the centre of the self is located in the deeper self, the self can engage the needs of its descriptive self with a quality of discernment that is difficult to achieve when the centre of the self lies with the descriptive self. Said otherwise, if the location of discernment rests in the same place as the location of one’s need, the ability for a considered, grounded, and Spirit-aligned response is compromised. The two—discernment and need—are simply too near to one another for a wise response to present itself. In this view, the descriptive self and the satisfaction of its needs becomes the sole measure by which decisions of right or wrong, good or bad, are made. Bruteau echoes this sentiment when she writes, “Ego-consciousness is that which judges everything in our experience according to whether it is good or bad \textit{for me} as a private, separate individual, rather than according to whether it is good or bad in itself, or within the context of the greater whole, or from God’s point of view.”\textsuperscript{30} Given the strong link between conflict and the satisfaction of the ego’s needs, one’s own ego consciousness also fails \textit{the other} because the limited capacity of the self to appropriately discern its needs propels the self into unnecessary conflict with the other. Even if disagreement is necessary, the limited capacity to discern how to satisfy the self’s needs easily drives self and other into unhealthy expressions of conflict.

To locate one’s identity with one’s descriptors is to limit one’s identity to the finite or tangible. Borrowing from philosophical discourse, Bruteau reminds her readers that the self located in description exists by virtue of negation: “I am \textit{this} rather than \textit{that}” or “I am insofar as I am not you.”\textsuperscript{31} This creates an unhappy playground for self and other. Individual traits are celebrated (or denigrated); personal moral acts are lauded (or decried). The self gains value precisely because the self is not the other. Here we observe a parallel to polarization similar to that seen in chapter 3. To locate the fullness of one’s identity with one’s descriptors is to become vulnerable to the focus on self / focus on other polarity.
The challenges associated with locating the identity of the self with one’s descriptors is further complicated by the tendency to believe that descriptors gain value when they are scarce. It is scarcity, not abundance, that gives value to descriptors. If all have equal value, none have value—or so it would appear. If, for example, all beauty is considered equal the descriptor of beauty loses value. Sameness does not equal specialness. As we have already seen, the self is inclined to create hierarchies within descriptor categories, giving some descriptions more value and others less. Scarcity and the value associated with descriptors generate envy or pride and a sense of diminishment or aggrandizement, all of which drive the conflict cycle. When this happens, Bruteau reports, “My ‘who I am’ is injured, and this injury seeks compensation. The injured self feels that it has to have compensation in order to maintain its being.” Compensation—in the context of the contrast between self and other—is thus measured in the pursuit of having that of which the self has been deprived (which frequently is impossible or becomes a receding horizon) or by putting another down in order to be above someone else. In other words, as per Bruteau, because the measure of difference between self and other is not neutral, it inherently establishes a power imbalance that generates and drives conflict behaviour.

When the core of the self is located with its descriptors, when those descriptors inherently prioritize one social type over another (whether in reality or perceived), and when selfhood, located with the descriptive self, is perceived to be under threat, the inclination to maintain one’s being is set in motion. In this, we find resonance with the explanation given in chapter 2 regarding how conflict escalates. When the difference between two parties rests at the issue-as-problem stage, the self is not perceived to be under threat; one’s ego consciousness has not been triggered. As the parties shift to seeing one another as the problem, the self now perceives its selfhood or self-image to be under threat. To be clear, the self-image that is under threat is not the deeper self; it is the self-image of the descriptive self. Bruteau writes: “It is the self-image which the agent endeavors to maintain in being and enhance in being, because the agent believes that this is all the self-being the agent has, and that if the agent does not tend to its sustenance and welfare, it will suffer diminishment, because nobody else is going to sustain it.” This diminishment can take many forms—everything from the loss of one’s self-esteem to the loss of one’s welfare to the loss of life. Some will respond to this sense of diminishment by seeking to develop a self-description that is deemed acceptable (whether this is possible or not; when not, significant mental distress can follow); others will seek to have their self-description declared worthy by the other; and still others will turn to conflict to defend their self-description. Whatever the choice (and frequently the self pursues all three at the same time), the root problem remains the same: The self locates the core of its identity with its descriptors.
While the challenges associated with the descriptive self can be understood at the personal and psychological level, collectively they can also be seen as part of the larger struggle to define the nature of society and the self’s experience within that society. As Sölle makes clear, the ego is not simply a construction of the psyche. It is also a construction of a culture that easily places the ego at the centre of identity and by doing so, clothes its people with false needs such as consumerism, addictions, and violence. These “vices” keep the self (individually and collectively) in an entrenched self-other construct. Consumerism, after all, tends to divide the world into those who have and those who do not; addictions (understood broadly) tend to alienate the self in a self-referential sphere from which the self cannot escape and into which the other cannot enter; and violence only really becomes possible when the self-other construct is established. With eyes focused exclusively on the needs of the descriptive self, the self falls into ego consciousness, thereby losing its capacity to appreciate the injustices upon which the satisfaction of these needs depends; the self also loses the freedom that emerges in the absence of needs that may, in fact, be false, relativized, or confronted in a manner that nonetheless honours the other.

In the course of daily living, the descriptive self can dominate to the degree that the lived experience of many people rests primarily with the descriptive self. In other words, many people have more experience with the descriptive rather than deeper self. This, together with the dangers of exclusive alignment with the descriptive self, and because of a desire to introduce readers to the deeper self, contemplatives are sometimes accused of regarding the descriptive self as entirely negative, or at the very least, appearing to do so. In general, contemplatives do not seek to denigrate the ego or the descriptors of the self; instead, contemplatives—while honouring the descriptive self—notwithstanding propose that descriptors are not the centre of selfhood. Bruteau writes:

I should say here clearly that these relations, roles, and functions are all real and true... The question is whether the spiritual self should settle its identity-location in any of them, whether the very heart of selfhood should find itself here. The suggestion is that when it does so settle, locate, and identify itself, it mistakes one of its functional or artificial faces for its natural face.

Merton uses the term “false self” for the descriptive self, though this is problematic insofar it can lead to an assumption that a person’s characteristics are somehow “wrong.” The intention behind this term, however, is precisely to make Bruteau’s point. Merton is seeking to clearly define the problem—or the falseness—that emerges whenever the core identity of the self is located exclusively with the self’s descriptors. For reasons of clarity and to avoid Merton’s dilemma, this thesis diverts from most contemplatives by proposing three selves: the deeper self, the descriptive self (with a healthy ego), and the false self (ego consciousness). One can argue, after all, that if the descriptive self is necessary and
neutral, then the exclusive alignment with one’s descriptors produces a third self, the false self. The false self can be imagined as a second skin that emerges when the self seeks to cover the characteristics, limitations, and skill sets of the descriptive self with ego consciousness and shame.

While the descriptive self may not be the centre of the self, learning to appropriately identify with one’s descriptors is an essential aspect of human development. By so doing, the person learns to establish a sense of the possibilities and limitations associated with the characteristics they have been given and through which the deeper self can find expression. In other words, borrowing from imagery proposed by Merton, while a tree is created to inhabit the descriptors of a tree, so also is a child with certain characteristics created to inhabit their personhood as expressed through those characteristics. The challenge for the developing child is to learn to engage these characteristics with an open and non-clinging spirit. In keeping with this perspective, Sölle encourages her readers to recall that the ego is simply on “loan” to its user. Like a cloak that a person wears for a season, the descriptive self is given to be used, not possessed. Referencing the fourth century BC Chinese mystic Lao-tzu, Sölle states:

He understood the ego to be “a gift on loan to us by the universe.” What is on loan is not taken as a possession but as a temporary and care-filled and loving acceptance of something that connects us with others around, before, and after us. An ego on loan is at home in the cosmos rather differently than the one possessed as one’s own; it can leave itself behind and weave itself into larger webs.

The image of an ego on loan alters the understanding of identity. An ego on loan cannot become the equivalent of one’s full identity. By definition, this image demands an open, surrendered stance with respect to one’s descriptive self even as one engages the loan one has been given.

4.b.ii The Descriptive Self and the Escalation of Conflict

To more finely explain the dynamics associated with the descriptive self and the descent into the false self, contemplative Thomas Keating proposes a model to describe how problems for the self arise when one’s identity is located exclusively with one’s descriptors, as represented in the Figure 4.1. The nine stages in Keating’s diagram represent various points along a cycle that reinforce and entrench three particular “emotional programs” for happiness. According to Keating, at the unconscious level, each person employs one or more of these programs for happiness. Keating identifies these programs as the needs for Power/Control, Esteem/Affection, and Security/Survival. These needs reside at the unconscious level and, from that place, operate as the “basic building blocks of the false self system.” These needs also correlate with three of the five foundational human needs identified in chapter 2: autonomy (power/control), recognition/acknowledgement (esteem/affection), and security
(security/survival). In chapter 2, we proposed that foundational human needs are so foundational that when they are not met, conflict ensues. Keating would appear to agree—assuming the identity of the self is located with foundational human needs. As we shall see, when the core identity of the self is placed with the deeper self, human needs—while they continue to exist—no longer carry within themselves the power to threaten the self or to thrust the self into unhealthy conflict behaviours. As a result, the question of where one’s core identity lies, as seen through the lens of contemplative spirituality, becomes one of the most important contributions of this paradigm to the transformation of conflict.

FIGURE 4.1

Staying with Keating’s model, we observe an interpretation of how the self functions when one’s identity is located with one’s descriptors. According to Bourgeault, who works with Keating’s model, emotional programs for happiness seep into the self’s consciousness as both attachments and aversions—the self becomes attached or averse to certain ways of structuring reality, ways of being, and/or self-understandings. These become hidden agendas that drive the manner with which one engages the world one inhabits. While in Keating’s model these appear in the category of the conscious, Bourgeault allows that most people are only semi-conscious of their attachments, aversions, and hidden agendas, usually self-justifying their ideas, feelings, and behaviours rather than linking these to their underlying unconscious emotional program for happiness. It bears noting that Keating is not suggesting that one’s hidden agendas are necessarily pathological. On the contrary, attachments,
aversions, and hidden agendas, together with the underlying human needs they represent, are so normal as to appear banal and uninteresting. For example, people whose emotional program for happiness includes a need for affection may choose to surround themselves with people they can “save” (attachment) in order to receive the accolades and affirmation they are seeking (hidden agenda). When in the presence of someone who does not need saving and/or of someone who does not appear to give adequate affirmation (triggering events), these persons can experience intense irritation (frustration), setting off the next stages in Keating’s false self cycle. Similarly, those with a need for control may choose to organize their time very carefully (attachment) and avoid unpredictable places (aversion) in order to maintain a sense of clear structure in their lives (hidden agenda). When another person interrupts the organized schedule, irritation (frustration) sets off the false self cycle.

According to Keating’s model, it is just ahead of the point of frustration that a triggering event occurs and what was hidden now breaks open into consciousness. While Keating does not use the term conflict here, it can be assumed from the model that at this stage conflict—whether external or internal—now occurs. In this regard, Bourgeault states: “There seems to be a karmic law that hidden agendas will attract their corresponding ‘triggering event’ or ‘troubling situation.’” In other words, hidden agendas can only remain hidden for so long. Eventually, they appear to create or attract a triggering event, driving the self into conflict. Whatever the situation, when frustration occurs and escalates, a range of emotions flood the body (afflictive emotion), following which an internal dialogue ensues, this time flooding the mind with self-stories that reinforce both one’s sense of victimisation by the other and one’s self-justification with respect to one’s response to the other (internal dialogue). The ensuing internal tumult can live on for minutes, hours, months, or even years in the self (emotional turmoil). Over time, this turmoil seeps into the unconscious, reinforcing the emotional program for happiness that began the cycle in the first place.

Keating’s diagram clearly echoes the Conflict Escalation Chart explored in chapter 2. Like the Conflict Escalation Chart, Keating’s diagram proposes that when one’s sense of self is triggered, the self adopts a defensive stance, causing frustration to escalate and possibly explode. Keating, however, takes the Conflict Escalation Chart further in two important ways: (1) While within his diagram Keating does not identify a healthy disagreement stage (Stage One), he parses out the internal steps required to move from this stage into the self-other dynamic (Stage Two). One could argue, in fact, that Keating’s diagram is, in and of itself, an expansion of what occurs at Stage Two on the Conflict Escalation Chart. (2) By identifying “emotional programs of happiness” with the false self, Keating proposes that while foundational human needs might be just that—i.e., foundational—they are foundational to the
descriptive self but not to the deeper self. This is a vitally important distinction: *While conflict theorists place their hopes with the satisfaction of people’s basic underlying needs, contemplatives propose an alternative operating system altogether—one that does not deny these needs yet relativizes them by placing the foundation of being elsewhere.*

4.b.iii The Descriptive Self, Sin, and Suffering

When the descriptive self becomes the seat of one’s identity, this self becomes problematic not only for the self but also for the other. In the language of contemplatives, locating the core of one’s identity with one’s descriptors, whether through emotional programs for happiness, competition, comparisons, or value judgements, is one of the key factors in “sin and suffering”—both of which are correlated with conflict. Sin, defined in this manner, is less about a moral failing and more about an ontological reality—the reality of placing one’s centre in the wrong location. Finley states: “For Merton, the matter of who we are always precedes what we do. Thus, sin is not essentially an action but rather an identity. Sin is a fundamental stance of wanting to be what we are not. Sin is thus an orientation to falsity, a basic lie concerning our own deepest reality.”

Buddhist contemplatives use the language of suffering in place of Merton’s use of the word sin. In this view, suffering occurs whenever the self longs for things to be different than they are; that is, whenever the self is attached to its existing descriptors or its longed-for descriptors. What does the self want to be that it is not? On one level, one could argue that in the competition of descriptions between self and other, the self wishes to be what the other is, or that the self wishes to have what the other has. Alternately, in the competition of descriptions, the self may seek to assure itself as being more or lesser than the other. This too is a desire to be what one is not. While all of these interpretations of sin and suffering have merit, what Merton is driving at is something deeper. *The falsehood of the self rests in its desire to regard the descriptive self as the sum total of the self.* Sin is the act of giving one’s descriptors the final say in who one is. It is to become attached to one’s descriptors to the exclusion of the deeper self.

By extension, we can argue that sin and suffering are also associated with the orientation to falsity concerning the deepest reality of the other. When the self locates the full identity of the other with descriptors rather than with the other’s deeper self, the self has also chosen a lie. It is this with which Buber appears to be wrestling in his construction of the I-Thou and I-It frames. To identify others exclusively according to their descriptors or to speak of the other in the third person is to thingify the other, to regard the other as an ‘It’ and, accordingly, as other than their true full self—their deeper and descriptive self included. When this occurs, the self is naturally also thingified. We recall that, according
to Buber, the I of the I-It relation is different from the I of the I-Thou relation. In the I-It frame, the other is an object that can be measured, described, compared, and given various units of value. In the I-Thou frame, objectification falls away, both are subject, and the question of degrees of value falls away entirely. Instead, in the I-Thou frame, self and other find themselves in the landscape of their full selves, where both are infinitely valuable and, as we shall see, where both are also infinitely nothing at the very same time.

If we argue that sin and suffering are associated with wanting one’s reality to be different than it is, or wanting self and other to be different than they are, then at some point we face the question of passivity. Do sin and suffering, defined in this way, ask self and other to simply accept suffering? Surely, one must allow for an attachment to justice. While we will look at how these words are applied in the context of conflict and injustice later, for now it is enough to say that the idea being proposed here is that for a person to have the fortitude to discern and engage reality as it is, attention to the architecture of one’s selfhood is critical. It is not that suffering is good or that suffering must simply be accepted. Attachments and aversions, however, cause the self to fall from the deeper and descriptive selves into the false self, binding the self to conflict and broken social structures rather than liberating the self, thereby limiting effective and transforming actions. Instead, by accepting the reality of one’s situation one can more effectively discern an appropriate response. Said otherwise, if one is attached to justice, that is, if one’s acts in defense of justice are made without connection to the deeper self, one’s identity is located in the location of one’s need making discernment regarding effective action difficult.

Bruteau states that the dynamic of sin and suffering is not simply a personal inclination toward the I-It frame. It is also a social paradigm that locks self and other in this frame. Bruteau offers the following strong critique of a world ordered according to the descriptive self at the centre. Because Bruteau’s statement is so important for this thesis, her words are offered here with some length:

We want the world to be a better place. We want the quality of life to be better. We want people to have goodwill toward one another and to behave respectfully and cooperatively. So we have devised ethical systems and we have preached a great deal about morality. We have found it necessary to back up our preaching with sanctions and the cultivation of guilt feelings. This method still does not work very well and we feel rather frustrated about the whole matter.

Why has our preaching and our punishing been so futile? My suggestion is that we have not had a metaphysics to sustain our morality. By metaphysics I mean a spontaneous and natural worldview,... the perception of being, or outlook on life. Our morality tells us to love others as ourselves. But our metaphysics says that others are alien to ourselves. Others are outside us, different, in competition with us, holding themselves in existence by repelling us, even as we must hold ourselves in existence by repulsing—or manipulating—they.
We believe in our bones that each of us is an island. All our cultural institutions... are set up on this basis and encourage us by their very structure, as well as by their words, deed, and omissions, to see the world in terms of separation, alienation, and domination. The result of course, is that we experience a head-on internal conflict, and it is not to be wondered at that we feel confused and frustrated.

The metaphysics that will sustain the morality we preach, and the world we long for, is a metaphysics that genuinely perceives other persons as ourselves. The basic recommendation for the good life is not to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself, or even in the same way as you love yourself. It is to love your neighbor as actually being yourself. The fundamental perception of selfhood has to change before we can have the moral world we want.

As per Bruteau, at the place of the deeper self, the possibility of oneness between self and other becomes possible—a oneness upon which a moral social structure has the potential to thrive. While we will say more about the deeper self momentarily, we highlight this statement by Bruteau for its clarity with respect to the dangers associated with a misplaced centre of identity. Bruteau observes that while we live under a metaphysics that (a) prefers the descriptive self, and (b) orders the world according to domination, alienation, and separation, we nonetheless expect the other to relate to us from their deeper self and the metaphysics of oneness this implies. When the other cannot manage this dualism—this expectation naturally sets up an inner conflict from which the other can scarcely escape—the self becomes angry with the other’s selfishness and inability to operate according to their deeper self.

Herein lies another critical contribution of contemplative spirituality for the transformation of the self-other frame: A “new” metaphysics—one that understands the deeper self—is required if the self-other frame is to be transformed. It is to this new metaphysics and the associated understanding of the deeper self that we now turn.

4.b.iv The Deeper Self Within Contemplative Spirituality

As we have seen, contemplative spirituality proposes that over-identification with one’s descriptors lies at the root of human sin and suffering. It is the contention of this thesis—and in keeping with contemplative spirituality—that living exclusively by descriptors also lies at the root of conflict. In response, contemplative spirituality proposes a different location for the central identity of the self. Sometimes called the core self, the transcendent self, the deeper self, the true self, or the essential self, this self can be regarded as the “I” of the I-Thou relation. As we shall see, the deeper and descriptive selves are deeply connected to one another. Nonetheless, in its essence, the deeper self is free of all descriptors: The deeper self is neither good nor bad; it is not defined by the self’s successes nor its failures, not by past nor by future, not by the self’s strengths nor its weaknesses, not its trauma nor its
flights of exhilaration, nor any descriptor the self can apply to itself. At this place, the self is not even its
gender. In fact, the deeper self cannot be described. Bruteau argues that the deeper self is “undefined, indescribable, and transcendent of all categories, roles, and descriptions.” The deeper self simply exists in a “naked” state of being. For Christians, this is the self that seeks to know God, the ultimate Other, “in his naked existence.” It is upon this state of being, together with this basic desire, that contemplative spirituality stakes its claim. At this location, the self is both nothing and one with God and all of creation—including the other. Here the self is able to open its ears to hear the words of God, once spoken to Jesus, now spoken to the self: “You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased.” To locate the core of one’s identity with one’s deeper self as it abides in the “infinite love of God,” over time opens within the self a unitive sense of being upon which the transformation of self and of conflict both become possible.

Christian contemplatives uniformly propose unity with God as the true identity of the deeper self and as the telos of being. It is at the point where self and God are realised to be one that the self discovers it is at home. As has already been suggested, Christian contemplatives are careful not to propose that human beings are, in and of themselves, God. Nevertheless, Bourgeault states the following: “As we move toward our center, our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven.” Bruteau is bolder, claiming as follows: “The deepest truth is our union with the Absolute, Infinite Being, with God. That’s the root of our reality.” Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart writes: “There is in the soul a something in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a something in which the soul dwells in God.” Merton describes this state as follows: “[I]t is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit.” Sölle proposes that union with God is possible for the simple reason that the divine beyond the self is united to the divine within the self. It is the same “substance” that is united in mystical union with God. She states: “This union of the divine-within and the divine-without occurs in the spark of the soul. There is a fusion of the divine that resides in every human being’s soul with the divine, who is absolute being and the ground of all that is.” Calling God infinite love, Finley states: “[I]nfinite love creates our hearts in such a way that only an infinite union with infinite love will do.” Elsewhere, using flowers rather than the self as his point of reference, Finley articulates the nature of this union as follows:

It’s not that the flowers are God. On the contrary, it would be to assert the absolute nothingness of the flowers without God. If God were to cease loving the flowers into the present moment... the flowers would vanish. The flowers are nothing, absolutely nothing outside of God’s creative love as Reality itself giving itself as the very reality of those flowers. But it is the very
nothingness of the flowers without God that makes the presence of the flowers the presence of God.\[^{61}\]

While Sölle would agree with Finley, she would likely add that it is not only that flowers cannot exist without God; God cannot exist without flowers, or creation more broadly. Mysticism reverberates with a mutuality between self and God.\[^{62}\] With affirmation, Sölle quotes the Sufi poet and mystic Rumi as follows: “[I]t is not only the thirsting who seek water; it is water that also seeks the thirsty.”\[^{63}\] Said otherwise, it is not only creation that seeks God; it is also God who seeks creation. Pushing out this dynamic even further, Bourgeault offers a unique and somewhat provocative perspective. She proposes that God (who is formless) requires creation (which is form) in order to express the full character of God. There are characteristics of God that require form to find expression.\[^{64}\] Love, for example, becomes tangible in the gestures of love between people; wonder finds expression in the beauty of a sunset; awe is discovered with a newborn’s first smile. While love, wonder, and awe are all characteristics that can be attributed to God, the concreteness of form allows for a fullness of expression not possible in formlessness alone. Further, given that in the view of contemplative spirituality God is the reality of all that is, the fullness of God must also include form.

It is neither hubris nor arrogance that pushes contemplatives to articulate the sense of union and even mutuality with God. Instead, it is an ineffable experience of union with an infinite love that simultaneously makes secondary every descriptor the self could apply to itself (giving the self an experience of nothingness) while bathing the self in a love so profound nothing short of union with God adequately describes the encounter. The experience of oneness with God at the centre of the deeper self is so profound, it is the pearl of great price. Merton describes the place of unity with God as follows:

> At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely…. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.\[^{65}\]

The image of the deeper self as a point of nothingness is extreme and appears harsh. What Merton is trying to do, however, is put into words a concept that defies description, calling it something that is “beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained.”\[^{66}\] He is also describing what occurs to one’s descriptors when the self has found its home in God. What is left of the
self when attachment to all descriptors is removed? For those regarding the experience from the standpoint of ego consciousness, it indeed appears as though nothing remains. From the standpoint of unitive consciousness, however, that nothingness opens to the self a profound presence in the now, as lived through the descriptors that remain following this winnowing process. It is an experience of nothingness and fullness at the very same time.67

To further deepen this concept, Merton draws from the Adam figure in the creation story. According to Merton, Adam’s sin is not that he wants to be like God. We are told, after all, that humanity is created in the image of God. A desire to be like God therefore fulfills what humanity was created to be: “Adam’s desire to be like God springs from the very core of his God-given, God-created identity.”68 Instead, according to Merton, the problem with Adam’s desire is that he wants to be like God without God. Borrowing from Finley’s analogy, it is as though the flower seeks to manifest its God-given identity as a flower without God. This is impossible as the flower exists only insofar as it manifests God’s creative love loving the flower into existence. Similarly, Adam cannot properly manifest his God-given identity as a man without God. Herein lies the core problem with misplaced identity. The self, having been created by God, cannot exist outside of God. The serpent’s false promise is that Adam can know good and evil independently—that is, without God. In practice, the implication of this false promise is as follows: To exist without God is to locate one’s identity with one’s descriptive self while ignoring one’s identity in God. This is the root of suffering.69

Merton proposes that the discovery of God is the discovery of selfhood. Again and again, contemplatives return to this same point. Union with God—while profound—never leaves the self in an ephemeral heavenly state. On the contrary, union with God reveals to the self something very earth-bound: the rediscovery of one’s full self and the meaning of reality itself. This union is, in the words of Finley, “the very reality of ourselves and of everyone and everything around us.”70 Merton states:

But whatever is in God is really identical with Him, for His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him. Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence. Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.71

One might call the location of the true or deeper self within the body a type of “holy of holies.”72 Quoting Augustine, Finley states that this is where God is experienced as “closer to us than we are to ourselves.”73 It represents a centre within the self that recognizes what it already is—an expression of the divine within the self. The eleventh century mystic Bernard of Clairvaux describes his experience in this regard as follows:
It did not come through the eyes, since it has no color; nor by the ears, since it makes no noise; nor through the nostrils, since it does not mingle with air; ... nor by the throat, neither, for it cannot be eaten nor drunk. Nor did I discover it by touch, since it is impalpable. I rose above myself and found the Word was higher still. Curious to explore, I went down into my depths, and found in the same way that it was lower still. I looked outside myself and saw that it was outside all that was outside me. I looked within and saw that it was more inward than I. And then I recognized as truth what I had read; that in it we have Life, Motion and Being.  

To experience the outpouring of God's presence is never an achievement that can be measured, nor does it emerge as a result of one's striving—though the practice of spiritual disciplines can “stack the deck” in favour of experiencing God in this way. The sense of union as the very meaning of reality itself is not discovered by way of “thinking, willing, remembering, or any other aspect of ego consciousness.” According to contemplatives, while moments of “oceanic oneness” with God may occur unbidden taking one by surprise, to experience oneself at the place of the deeper self is always a gift and is always bestowed rather than achieved. One cannot earn God's favour, or, as per Sölle, “God is not for sale.” To live in an ongoing state of oneness with God is nonetheless made possible by an ongoing spirit of surrender within the self. Surrender is necessary for the simple reason that all aspects of striving immediately return the self to the place of ego consciousness and, by extension, to one's identity as located exclusively with the descriptive self.

Contemplatives agree that, like the Biblical parable of the lost sheep, God pursue the self like a shepherd who will not be dissuaded in order to return the self to its identity in God. The fourth century writer Augustine poetically describes his experience in this regard as follows:

You were within, but I was without.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
So you called, you shouted, you broke through my deafness,
you flared, blazed, and banished my blindness,
you lavished your fragrance, and I gasped.

Augustine's short poem reflects two key contemplative insights: (1) As has already been suggested, while God is experienced as other-than-self (“you flared, blazed, and banished my blindness”), God is also found within the self, even if the self has located its identity among its descriptors (“you were within, I was without”). Said otherwise, the lived experience of an encounter with God is simultaneously transcendent (other-than-self) and imminent (within the self). (2) Transcendent imminence is both persistent (“you called, shouted, broke, flared, blazed, and banished”) and abundantly loving (“you lavished your fragrance”). It is infinite love that gives life to every breath, every bird, every flower, every person, every moment, every joy, and even every grief. Finley states:
According to contemplatives, God’s infinite love is the reality of all that is, the foundational force-field within which the self discovers its identity and purpose.

The overriding feeling among those who have encountered God in this way is of a profound humility mixed with a curious greatness or dignity. Thirteenth century mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg states: “Of what are you made, soul, that you rise so high over all creatures, and mingle with the holy Trinity and yet remain wholly in yourself?” Almost as an answer to this question, the Jewish Rabbi Bunam states: “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In the right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake was the world created,’ and in his left: ‘I am earth and ashes.’ For our purposes, Rabbi Bunam’s words are critical: An entirely earth-and-ashes view of the self (and by extension, the other) makes the positive regard necessary for the transformation of conflict difficult to embrace. Similarly, a view consisting entirely of “for my sake was the world created” creates a kind of ego attachment that cannot help but place descriptive distinctions between self and other, again leading self and other into conflict. Instead, Rabbi Bunam’s words imply the both-and nature of humility and dignity—both of which are critical to the transformation of the self-other frame. With the words of both Rabbi Bunam and Mechthild von Magdeburg in mind, Sölle asserts: “As the experience of oneness with God, mysticism is the radical substantiation of the dignity of the human being.” This dignity rests on compassion for the human being as it is, even in its humble and untransformed state, just as it pulls the self into the deeper and “greater” dimensions of self. As we shall see, both humility and dignity of the self—and by implication the other—form a key foundation piece upon which the transformation of conflict rests.

4.b.v Nondual Unitive Consciousness

When selfhood is firmly located in union with God—recognizing that being located there is a lifelong journey with many (even daily) moments of struggle with ego consciousness—the nature of one’s consciousness is changed. Commonly referred to as unitive or nondual consciousness, this type of awareness shifts the basic “operating system of the self.” With this operating system, the series of either-or constructs that once served the self’s ego consciousness begin to fall like tumbling dominoes, transforming the self’s relationship to itself, to the other, and to all that is, including conflict. A mirror
effect exists between how the self relates to God and how the self relates to the world, causing one’s understanding of God to extend to the structure of life itself.

Two of the first either-or constructs that fall away in unitive consciousness are that of a dominating God and its corollary, the dominance-based social structure. An image of a dominating God, after all, legitimises the structure of dominance in the world. In this regard, Sölle states the following:

The distinction between creator and creature is, after all, not a purely religious matter. Various dualisms derive themselves from it, in particular those that like to think of themselves as in accordance with creation: man and woman, soul and body, human and nonhuman, spirit and matter, as well as such unbridgeable social dichotomies as parents and children, masters and slaves, and whites and people of color. Sexism, feudalism, racism, class-domination, and the desacralization of nature have again and again at least used this dualistic either/or in the dominant understanding of God for their purposes.88

Sölle’s comments go directly to the heart of this thesis. If divisions between self and other are to be healed, then a paradigm where one is above another is no longer tenable. This holds true even for the relationship between the self and the ultimate Other, God. Elsewhere, Sölle adds:

There is no room in mystical devotion for the recognition of a higher power, the worship of lordship or the denial of our own strength. On the contrary, the master-slave relationship is very often expressly criticized in mystical texts. But above all it is surpassed through creative language. Here religion is the feeling of oneness with the whole, intimate connection, not subjugation; human beings do not honor God because of his power and lordship, but submerge themselves in him, or as they always say, in his love.89

Unitive consciousness, born out of union and mutuality with God, proposes not dominance but oneness as the ordering principle of the self-other relationship. With this, a second either-or construct tumbles. In this view, at the level of the deeper self, self and other are already one. As we have seen, this worldview does not regard the command to love one’s neighbour as oneself as a command to love one’s neighbour as much as one loves oneself—to do so is simply an expression of ego-consciousness; instead, the command is to love one’s neighbour as though one’s neighbour is oneself.90 Merton articulates the implication of this command as follows: “The more I am able to affirm others, to say ’yes’ to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am.”91

Unitive consciousness recognizes what the self in ego consciousness could not see—the already existing unity between self and other. The idea is not that unity with the other is achievable; instead unitive consciousness proposes that unity with the other is already the nature of reality. This statement does not declare that the descriptors carried by self and other are the same or even compatible. Rather, this statement suggests that at the level of the deeper self, self and other are already, and have always been, one. For our purposes, this understanding is especially provocative: The work of conflict
transformation is now not about seeking unity between self and other—this unity is already assured. Instead, the work of conflict transformation is about navigating differences that have occurred upon the landscape of a pre-existing unity. While this may seem like a matter of semantics only, as we shall see, this worldview has significant implications for both conflict and its transformation.

Here, we invite Buber back into the conversation. As we have seen, Buber states that the possibility of I-Thou encounters rests on the unique identities of self and other. It is, perhaps ironically, difference that allows unity or genuine dialogue to occur. If this is true, how do we regard the voices of contemplatives who propose a oneness between self and other at the level of the deeper self? To answer this question, we return to the fundamental unity between the descriptive and deeper selves, a reality we have thus far only briefly acknowledged. As we shall see, the interaction and intersection between these two selves enshrines both oneness and uniqueness. At the level of the descriptive self, self and other are unique. At the level of the deeper self, self and other are one. In the spirit of Finley, when these are held together, the self both *is* and *is-not* the other.92

The assertion that self and other are one and not-one becomes a critical foundation for conflict transformation, allowing a third either-or construct to also fall. This construct is the tendency toward polarized thinking. The nondualist becomes able to hold divergent ideas, needs, paradoxes, and polarities together, to catch nuance and “to rest comfortably with ambiguity” while resisting “the tendency to demonization and exclusion.”93 To understand the argument here, it is important to recall that, according to the architecture of selfhood we have been developing, conversations regarding divergent ideas, needs, paradoxes, and polarities are associated with the descriptive self. Unitive consciousness proposes that the oneness found between self and other at the level of the deeper self extends beyond this centre to reach into the realm of the descriptive self and the differences between self and other that exist in that sphere. As the self, in oneness with the other, sees with the eyes of the other and hears with the ears of the other, the logical coherence of the other’s arguments with respect to the discussion of competing needs and ideas becomes visible. The assumption here is not that self and other agree; rather, it is that, grounded in their deeper selves, self and other are able to engage their differences with a non-polarizing stance. Borrowing from the language of Buber, when self and other are engaged in genuine dialogue (the I-Thou relation), non-polarizing technical dialogue (the I-It relation) becomes possible. The self now recognizes the wisdom and needs expressed in what appear to be opposing perspectives. Even where self and other continue to disagree, the self nonetheless sees the “reasonable reasons” behind the other’s “unreasonable” actions or opinions. Nested in the deeper self,
the self can go out from this space into the realm of the descriptive self carrying the energy of unitive consciousness into this space.

Rooted in the deeper self, the self can also become a significant transformational force with regard to the self-other relationship. Bruteau describes this potential by differentiating between what she calls “creative freedom” and “choice freedom.” Choice freedom is the ability to decide how one will respond to the stimuli in one’s environment. These stimuli are anything in the descriptive world with which—or with whom—the self interacts, including the other, situations of conflict, injustice, hunger, pain, suffering, moments of joy, etc. Depending on how the self uses choice freedom, the expression of this freedom can be positive or negative; the self can either be reactive to its environment or the self can be holistically responsive, bringing a transforming presence into its interaction with the stimuli in the environment. As useful as choice freedom is for engaging the world, it remains, according to Bruteau, at risk of being defined by ego consciousness. Choice freedom, by being responsive to the environment, still creates a context where the self judges the situation according to what is best for the self or, even if the response is an act of charity, how the descriptive self will be regarded or will regard itself as a result of the self’s response. Said otherwise, when the self is identified by its descriptors, the self is confined to responding or reacting to the other according to its descriptors and how its descriptors have been or will be impacted. For example, when identity is located primarily with descriptors, self and others may use choice freedom to measure their desire for an ongoing relationship according to the compatibility of the descriptors each carries. The practical implications of this are real: For multiple reasons, it can be difficult for self and other to resolve conflict with one another when choice freedom alone is employed. To address this dilemma, Bruteau proposes creative freedom as an alternative to choice freedom.

Creative freedom does not simply react to its environment. Rather, it springs up from the place of unitive consciousness—the deeper self in union with God—allowing creative and “free” agapé love to emerge. It is this energetic centre that has transformational potential. Stated most simply, the self’s deeper self recognizes its oneness with the other’s deeper self. This awareness releases an energy within the self that Bruteau calls “spondic,” generative, generous, and honouring of self and other. It is also a type of “first mover” energy that is not dependent on the actions of the other or of any descriptor of either self or other or of any reality within the environment. This energy is a genuinely free, new creation emerging from the energetic centre of the self. This centre allows the self to say “I am” at the same time as saying to the other, “May you be.” Using the word “will” for the energetic centre of the self, Bruteau states:
When we say that the will is free, we mean that its act is not determined for it by anything else. The disagreeable personality of another does not force the will to reject that individual. A history of having suffered injustice from a certain group does not oblige the will to hate all members of that group. Nor does the will have to wait for a pleasant and attractive quality to show up in another person in order to be moved to accept and join with that individual. The will doesn’t have to remain inactive until the prospect of an advantage to itself moves it. The will is free with creative freedom: it can initiate its own movement, even without any stimulus in the environment.  

At the place of creative freedom, the acts of the self are inherently acts of love rather than evil. According to Bruteau, evil, by definition, emerges in response to the environment. As a result, evil is always confined to the realm of choice freedom. While choice freedom can result in actions both loving and unloving, creative freedom can only generate loving actions because it is the nature of “first mover” energy to be generative and to create, and to do so in a spirit of unconditional love. It is “in God’s image,” after all, that creative freedom occurs. In this view, just as God creates and recreates the world in a spirit of generous love, so also does the person, whose centre is in God, create and recreate the world in a spirit of generous love.

In this view, the deeper self is “self-diffusive, active, and self-communicating;” the deeper self “goes out from itself” and, rather than establishing selfhood by negating the other (as is the culmination of a life lived exclusively in the descriptive self), the deeper self affirms the other. The self can affirm the other because the other, like the self, is a person whose centre is in God and whose descriptors are secondary to the centre. Further, when the identity of the self is located with its deeper self, the energy once expended on defending the descriptive self can now be channelled into love for the other. “When we affirm another with our spondic energy, it is the personal being that is being affirmed, the central selfhood.... To affirm another, we need not sanction his behavior. Indeed we ought not, if that behaviour is evil. And we need not like her, in the sense of feeling an emotional attraction to her empirical personality.” Using the term “individual” for the descriptive self and “person” for the deeper self, Bruteau writes, “All these [characteristics] belong to the ‘individual,’ not to the ‘person.’ The person transcends the individual’s qualities, and the person is spondic energy, fresh every moment, having no past, utterly spontaneous and capable of new manifestation.” The vision Bruteau casts of the power associated with this type of energy is captivating. The loving feelings she describes are neither an emotional rush nor a dry decision to simply affirm the other. Instead, the love of which Bruteau speaks is self-giving, pouring itself into the other, such that self and other become genuinely one. In so doing, this love transforms the relationship between self and other. According to Bruteau, this love also contributes to the evolutionary turns of the world. While some might fear that to give oneself so fully to
another is to lose the self entirely, Bruteau argues that the act of pouring oneself into the other, as described here, rather than negating the self, intensifies the self. The self does not become “merged” or “submerged” into the other. Instead, the act of pouring oneself into the other allows the self to become more alive, more centred, more itself. The full self takes on an almost luminescent quality.

4.b.vi The Intersection Between the Descriptive Self and the Deeper Self

Thus far, we have sought to hold the deeper and descriptive selves apart in order to see them clearly before reintegrating them with one another. As already suggested, because the focus of contemplatives so frequently explores the landscape of the deeper self, one could reach the conclusion that it is this and not the descriptive self that contemplatives honour. Rather than removing the self from its descriptors, however, contemplatives propose a changed relationship between the self and its descriptors. One could say that when the self finds itself in union with God, the self also finds itself in union with itself. In the exclusive company of the descriptive self, the self is divided against itself—clinging to some characteristics and rejecting others, engaging the world and the other through assessments, comparisons, and judgements. By contrast, the discovery of one’s deeper self not only reveals the self’s larger identity, it also animates the descriptive self. As the sun gives life to the earth, so also does the deeper self breathe life into the descriptive self. If the self is at home in its deeper self, the power of one’s descriptors over one’s sense of identity is relativized. There is no longer pain or shame in being shorter, taller, stronger, or weaker. Nor is there a need to cling to or reject various descriptions. The descriptive self is simply what it is—descriptions inside which the deeper self is housed.

When the relationship between the deeper and descriptive selves is such that the deeper self is at the centre of the self’s identity, then the deeper self animates and energizes the descriptive self, allowing the latter to become a healthy expression of the presence of God in the world as mediated through the unique character of the self. When this ordering within the self is embraced, the deeper and descriptive self join with one another, allowing the unique character of each person to become the vehicle by which full personhood is expressed. Bruteau states: “[The self] does manifest itself through [the categories by which the self can describe itself]; it does extend its identity to the descriptions in which it clothes itself in time and space. But, it is not bound by them. It gives its name to them; they do not give their name to the self.”

Contemplative spirituality borrows from the concept of incarnation to explain the relationship between the deeper and the descriptive self. Within the Christian tradition, the formlessness of God finds expression in the incarnation or form of Jesus. Analogously, the formlessness of the deeper self,
that is, the self in God, finds expression in the form of the descriptive self. The deeper self, as real as it is said to be, is nonetheless a manifestation of formlessness. To find expression, the deeper self communicates itself through the concrete and the this-ness of life, the descriptive self. Theologically, as both human and divine, Jesus becomes the root metaphor of unity between form and formlessness within the self and between the form of humanity and the formlessness of God. To throw out form (the descriptive self) in favour of formlessness (the deeper self) is like “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” Earlier we stated that certain characteristics of God (formlessness) require creation (form) to find expression. Within the context supplied here, the deeper self needs the descriptive self in order to give expression to the breadth and depth of the experience of the deeper self in unity with God and the other. The corollary, of course, is also true; the descriptive self, as we have seen, also needs the deeper self. The full person thus includes both the descriptive and the deeper selves, both form and formlessness.

In addition to what has been said thus far, formlessness and form also cooperate to establish the both-and quality of oneness and distinctiveness—between the self and God and between the self and the other. Christian contemplatives propose relational unity with God rather than sameness with God, allowing self and God to be one with one another while also being distinct from one another. This dynamic also holds true for the relationship between self and other. At the level of formlessness, the self is un-boundaried. It is this quality that makes unity with the other possible. At the level of form, the self is boundaried. Form affirms the differences between self and other. Formlessness and form once again depend on one another to complete the picture of the person, and by extension, self and other. In this model, self and other are and are not one, just as self and other are and are not distinct from one another.

From the perspective of conflict transformation, the possibility of oneness between self and other can be so appealing that the value of distinction can be lost. Here Sölle offers a word of warning: “Without self-limitation, without fixed boundaries—like those given in creation between day and night, summer and winter, being young and growing old—life loses its humanness.” According to Volf, as seen in chapter 3, without self-limitation, the self can become dangerous, consuming, or subsuming the other rather than participating in a healthy mutuality of oneness. Bruteau offers the following: “[W]e are both finite and infinite, both conditioned and unconditioned, both describable and indescribable, both particular and involved in all.” Why then are contemplatives so often accused of preferencing the boundarylessness of selfhood over the boundaried self? According to contemplatives, this impulse emerges from the need to bring the voice of the deeper self into the conversation. Bruteau states:
“...Because we are used to experiencing ourselves only as the conditioned, descriptive, particular being, we need to turn our attention... to understanding how we are also unconditioned, undefined and intimate to the Whole.”

In summary, we can create an image of the deeper and descriptive selves, as seen in Figure 4.2. As we have seen, while these two selves are regarded through a both-and lens, contemplatives nonetheless “order” these selves, as visualized by putting the deeper self in the most central concentric circle, followed by the descriptive self. Existing at the centre, the deeper self is energetic, radiant, and generative in its activity. This self animates the secondary, descriptive ring, “on loan” to the deeper self in order that its formlessness has a vehicle through which to find expression. This thesis adds a third ring, the false self, to describe the state of selfhood that emerges when the centre of one’s identity is with the descriptive self only and when the descriptive self is regarded through the lenses of ego consciousness and shame. While most contemplatives speak of only two rings, the addition of a third ring clarifies what contemplatives are trying to say. For example, while contemplatives are disinclined to engage in dualistic thinking, when only two selves are present, one observes a type of verbal gymnastics in some of their writing: The contemplative wishes to honour the unity between the descriptive and deeper selves—as seen in the incarnation of Jesus—yet they find it difficult to sustain this unity when the portrayal of the descriptive self includes the false self. Furthermore, it is difficult to honour the gift of the descriptive self or the ego that energizes it when this gift is so readily marred by ego consciousness. By adding the third layer, the false self, Figure 4.2 reveals the state that occurs when identity is located exclusively with the descriptive self and when the characteristics the self has been given to carry are judged as better or worse than another and covered by ego consciousness or shame.

FIGURE 4.2
4.c  Contemplative Spirituality, the Self, and Polarities

The majority of contemplatives we have considered thus far propose that an understanding of selfhood that honours the deeper self opens space for the other in a manner that is transforming not only for the self, but also for the relation between self and other. We recall, however, that Buber rejected mysticism because of his concern that it focused too heavily on the deeper self to the exclusion of the other. Buber is surely not alone in this assertion. Indeed, modern day contemplatives work to disabuse detractors of precisely this critique. To answer this critique, we borrow from the polarities model already seen in chapter 3. By placing contemplative spirituality under the lens of this same model, we allow the concept of polarities to drive an analysis of this discipline. Three questions guide this analysis: (a) How does contemplative spirituality intersect with the polarities model?; (b) How does the polarities model challenge and expand what we have said thus far regarding contemplative spirituality?; and (c) How does contemplative spirituality challenge and expand what we have said thus far regarding the polarities model?

4.c.i  Contemplative Spirituality and the Polarities Model

If we map the arguments we have been making about contemplative spirituality thus far onto the polarities model, we observe the following:

FIGURE 4.3

In Figure 4.3, “flight from the deeper self and attachment to descriptors” is associated with what we have been calling the false self or ego consciousness. Here the self is focused heavily on its own needs. In this context, the other is, at best, a competitor and, at worst, a threat to the satisfaction of the self’s needs. At the other end of the continuum, “flight from descriptors and attachment to deeper self” is
associated with the accusations sometimes levelled against contemplative spirituality. This is the flight from the “real world,” from the this-ness of life. The pursuit of a deeper self, after all, can also become an attachment. As a result, it too, can be an expression of the false self. Instead, a both-and view of the two selves allows the strengths of the deeper and descriptive selves to be deeply interwoven with one another.

While contemplatives seek to honour the descriptive self, we have also seen that they order the deeper self ahead of the descriptive self. In defense of this ordering, Bourgeault states:

> Whether healthy or unhealthy, the ego is still the ego and as such is still inescapably tied to the domain of the lower, or provisional, selfhood. In the classic language of the Christian spiritual path, it cannot exceed the ‘illumination’ stage because it is trapped within the experience/experiencer dualism by virtue of its basic operating system: the self-reflexive ‘I’ that sees the world through the subject/object polarity.

Buber himself seems to struggle with this same dynamic insofar as he initially elevates the I-Thou relation over the I-It relation but finally concludes with a type of both-and between genuine and technical dialogue.

Some might argue that a genuine both-and between the two selves is not necessary; if the deeper self comes first, and if this ordering allows for an inner peace that transforms interpersonal relationships, then so be it. Others might argue that a problem lies in this ordering of the self. Conflict, after all, occurs at the level of the descriptive self, causing the fall into the false self. It is here that slights, suffering, and injustice occur. If the deeper self is ordered ahead of the descriptive self, can the self engage well with conflict? Will the self not be tempted to ignore its own legitimate descriptive self needs or the legitimate descriptive self needs of the other, escaping instead into an ephemeral world of inner peace? As the descriptive self can also be seen as the landscape where the self meets the needs of the other, if the descriptive self comes second, do the needs of the other also come second?

To explore these questions, we begin by recalling the polarities model we developed in chapter 3 to describe Buber’s conclusions (Figure 4.4). In this image, both the I-Thou and the I-It relations are necessary. If one resides only at the I-It pole, one will fall into monologue disguised as dialogue and if one is only at the I-Thou pole, one will fall into flight from reality. The only way one can remain in either genuine dialogue or technical dialogue is to engage the two forms of dialogue through a both-and frame. Genuine dialogue must honour technical dialogue; just as technical dialogue must honour genuine dialogue. For our purposes, the corollary must also hold. Honouring the deeper self must involve an honouring of the descriptive self just as an honouring of the descriptive self must involve an honouring of the deeper self.
The unitive consciousness proposed by contemplatives depends on the honouring and interweaving of the descriptive and deeper selves. As a result, our polarities model is helpful to contemplatives, insofar as it demands an accountability to the reality of the full person, the deeper and descriptive self in self and other. In a sense, the self-other frame, as seen through the arguments we have been making, can be imaged according to Figure 4.5.

If we allow Figure 4.5 to be our base polarity, then, in times of difference, a secondary polarity, Figure 4.6, emerges that is layered on top of the base polarity. When self and other are engaging in a disagreement over X and Y—whatever X and Y might be—when they bring unitive consciousness and their full selves to the table—deeper and descriptive selves included—they are able to engage X and Y from their strengths, leading to a healthier, more fulsome, and more transformative conclusion. If, however, they bring only their deeper or descriptive selves to the conversation, they will fall into the
weaknesses of either X or Y, missing opportunities for both genuine and technical transformative dialogue. In this latter case, if the two parties bring only their descriptive selves to the conversation, they will become bound by comparisons, judgements, and desires for domination. If the two parties bring only their deeper selves to the conversation, they will miss opportunities to engage in the difficult and hard work of attending to the real and legitimate needs at the heart of their conflict.

**FIGURE 4.6**

To understand Figure 4.6, we lean on Volf’s contribution to our conversation, as seen in chapter 3. Full and “partial” selves represent the two extremes on the vertical axis. Over the course of their relationship, the full self and partial selves of self and other will engage in multiple disagreements and conflicts that can be mapped onto the polarities model as X and Y. While X and Y may relate to the root polarity of focus on self / focus on other, they may also include polarities relevant to a different topic under consideration. Fitting with Volf’s argument, while the partial self tends toward exclusionary behaviour of one form or another, the full self appropriately differentiates between the conversation at hand and its own triggers that could cause unhealthy judgements and a fall into the partial self.114

4.c.ii  A Contemplative Approach to Polarities and the Self-Other Frame

In chapter 1, we observed that, drawing on the grammatical construction of the I-Thou and I-It relations, Buber proposed that the I-Thou allows a subject to subject encounter, while the I-It relegates self and other to the subject-object sphere. In the case of the latter, the self cannot discover the interiority of the other— that is, the self cannot stand in the shoes of the other— because the self is the reference point
through which the existence of the other is regarded. In contrast, the I-Thou relation allows for a
subject-subject conversation; both self and other regard one another as mutual reference points,
allowing for a type of nearness between self and other to emerge. In the negative expression of the I-It
relation the self talks about the other (whether to a third party, to themselves, or directly to the other
but in a spirit of talking about the other). In the positive I-Thou relation the self talks to and with the
other. The mutuality of this dialogue, according to Buber, allows a genuine meeting between the self
and other to occur.

While Bruteau somewhat agrees with Buber, she also challenges him on his grammatical
framework. She allows that a subject-subject relation may not be possible when self and other are still
face to face.\textsuperscript{115} Said otherwise, if the relation between self and other must travel over the airwaves of
communication, is subject-subject even possible? Self and other, after all, must still encode their
messages (through speech, body language, tone of voice, etc.) and decode the messages they receive
from the other. When this happens, while self and other may be inclined toward subject-subject
relations, in practice, a subject-object relation must still exist.\textsuperscript{116} In response, Bruteau proposes a third
relation, the I-I relation. She states:

We must enter into the other and experience what the other experiences as the other
experiences it. Instead of being “face to face,” the two faces are superimposed, so to speak,
both facing the same way, so that they look out through coinciding eyes and speak through
coinciding lips. The activities of the two subjectivities are confluent and simultaneous, instead of
being responsive, alternating, as in dialogue. Each of them knows the other from the subject
side, in terms of the experience of actually doing what the subject does. And each totally loves
the other by uniting with the other in this complete way.\textsuperscript{117}

The I-I relation, as proposed by Bruteau, is of another dimension altogether. More akin to
nondual consciousness, it appears to nullify all differences between self and other.\textsuperscript{118} The self in the I-I
relation sees through the eyes of the other precisely in order to honour the needs of the other.
Bruteau’s proposal may seem impossible. Can the self really come to know the other so well as to live
and breathe as the other, just as the other lives and breathes as the self? Is it not hubris—even
dangerous perhaps—to assume that the self can know the other that well? In fact, we might hear
echoes here of Volf’s warning, heard in chapter 3, that such a focus on the other means that either the
self is subsumed by the other or the other is subsumed by the self. It is easy to imagine, after all, an
individual whose attempt to move toward the I-I frame is driven by ego-consciousness rather than a
both-and frame. In this case, individuals may assume they are engaging the I-I without actually
practicing the necessary listening, discernment, self-regard, and self-emptying to practice this frame
well.
If we allow Bruteau’s interpretation of Buber’s work to stand—that the I-Thou frame is still a version of the subject-object relation—then we can argue that neither Bruteau’s I-I frame nor Bruteau’s understanding of Buber’s I-Thou frame can stand alone. Instead, the answer appears to be that the I-I and I-Thou frames must exist in a perpetual, mutually reinforcing dance. The two cannot be held separately; if they are, either will fall to the preference of one over the other, leading to a subjugation of either self or other. Laid upon the polarities model, these two frames appear as follows:

**FIGURE 4.7**

It is important to note that Bruteau is proposing the I-I frame from the perspective of contemplative spirituality and, more specifically, as a Christian contemplative. In this regard, there is a perpetual and dynamic *holding together* of the *is* and the *is-not*. In the words of Finley: “We are not God. But we are not other than God, either.” Similarly, the self is not the other and is not other than the other, either. In these statements, we observe both Bruteau’s and Finley’s attempts to inhabit the very complex nature of the both-and frame. Unitive consciousness, we recall, maintains that experienced oneness with God allows for both distinction and unity simultaneously. Unitive consciousness also proposes a simultaneous distinction and unity between the self and all that is, including the other. If this is true, is our placement of the I-I frame falling in upon itself? Is perhaps the most accurate base polarity found in Figure 4.8?

In this model, we have, to a large degree, returned to the diagram developed in chapter 3 with respect to the focus-on-self / focus-on-other polarity. Have we ended where we began? In the spirit of both-and, the answer to this question is both yes and no. Conflict transformation crosses some of the same terrain as contemplative spirituality, and, as a result, the insights established in the two disciplines mirror one another. By offering a model to describe the both-and frame, conflict transformation offers
something contemplative spirituality does not yet have: a clear vehicle by which the nature of the both-and is described. Contemplative spirituality, however, goes beyond where conflict transformation is able to go, creating a rounder and more robust vision for the nature of selfhood that makes full self possible and the state of consciousness required that allows both the full self and healthy relations with the other.

**FIGURE 4.8**

4.d **Identity and the Threefold Path of Contemplative Spirituality**

Contemplatives have long known that the spiritual path is a journey more than a destination. The movement toward unitive consciousness is regarded as a never-ending journey of three intertwining phases or rhythms, described in this thesis as wonder, suffering, and transformation. According to Rohr, there are three things in life of which one can be assured: that God loves each person (wonder), that pain will come (suffering), and that, in the midst of suffering, a hand will reach toward those who suffer to pull them into peace once more (transformation). In Christian history, these three rhythms have sometimes been called the via unitiva, via purgativa, and via illuminativa. Sölle calls these three phases being amazed or *via positiva*, letting go or *via negativa*, and resisting or *via transformativa*. According to Sölle, to be amazed is to see the wonder of the world and to celebrate the fundamental goodness of creation. To let go is to enter into the dark night of the soul and surrender one’s attachment to violence, possessions, and ego. To resist is to live consciously in the presence of God, to see with God’s eyes and ears, to take on God’s pain and God’s joy, and quite literally, to become God’s transforming hands and feet in the world. In the view of this thesis, each of these phases also speaks into the transformation of the relationship between self and other.
The threefold path is most accurately represented as a repeating cycle or even as a spiral. There is no declared end point, no finality to this cycle. Instead, wonder opens to suffering, which opens to transformation, which opens to wonder once more, and so on. As we shall see, as the self rounds this course multiple times, a more stable unitive consciousness emerges that finds its expression in and at each place on the threefold path.\textsuperscript{123} As the self travels this path, the divisions between the descriptive and deeper selves dissolve to the degree that a genuine both-and embrace of the two selves within each, self and other, becomes possible.

While there is no end point to the threefold path, and as such no chronological starting point (though birth and childhood are often associated with the stage of wonder), an ontological beginning is nonetheless proposed. Whereas some formulations of these three rhythms begin with an assumption of “original sin,” of which the self must be purged (suffering), Sölle, together with other contemplatives, begins with wonder—an “original blessing” which gives the self a ground of hope from which to enter the paths of suffering and transformation.\textsuperscript{124} Where one begins is important: A starting point of wonder changes the experience and the implications of the threefold path,\textsuperscript{125} including for those in conflict.\textsuperscript{126} We turn now to an exploration of the threefold path and its implications for the self-other frame.

4.d.i Wonder

A child is born, the sun glints off the water of a small stream, friends laugh over a shared experience, lovers gaze into one another’s eyes, a soul is at rest…. In each of these moments, the self is lifted out of the mundane into an experience of amazement, wonder, and joy. In wonder, the deeper self is awakened, together with a momentary sense of oneness—with God and with creation. Sölle describes this state of wonder as amazement, suggesting that “[to] be amazed means to behold the world and,
like God after the sixth day of creation, to be able to say again and for the first time, ‘Look! How very good it all is!’” Wonder, she states, “plunges us into jubilation, a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality. Nothing is to be taken for granted, least of all beauty!” Meister Eckhart describes wonder as a state that needs no explanation, no purpose, and no goal. According to Finley, there are moments of awakening, even in the mundane of the world, where a sense of union with God breaks through, and the self, all at once, is plunged into a peaceful and deeper awareness of the inherent unity of all that is.

When a foundation of wonder is laid and affirmed as “original blessing,” the self-other frame is seen through a new lens that generates several implications for consideration. (1) To begin, it is precisely because the threefold path begins with amazement and not with banishment or sin that exclusion, conflict, and suffering can be seen for what they are. In a sense, wonder is the light that reveals the darkness of conflict; it is the custodian of hope in a conflicted landscape bereft of hope. Memories of wonder declare—and create the yearning—that even in situations of conflict, an I-Thou encounter may break through. Said otherwise, wonder asserts that to be amazed by the other may be possible.

(2) Amazement and wonder dispossess the self of its “normal” ways of ordering the world. Wonder implies that the self is released—at least momentarily—from ego consciousness. This allows the self to be present to the other as they are and to the self as it is without judging or analysing either, making the possibility of an I-Thou encounter more likely. According to Sölle, when we are enslaved to our egos, we “…make the world our own and look upon it as our property.” The self becomes the primary reference point to which all else must cohere (or be rejected). In contrast, Sölle states: “The soul needs amazement, the repeated liberation from customs, viewpoints, and convictions, which, like layers of fat that make us untouchable and insensitive, accumulate around us. What appears obvious is that we need to be touched by the spirit of life and that without amazement and enthusiasm nothing new can begin.”

(3) Functioning like momentary states of unitive consciousness, amazement and wonder generate a quality of aliveness that is simultaneously self-forgetful and fully present. In this state of presence, the self is driven neither by past wounds nor by fears for its future. Instead, the self comes near to the now of each moment as it is—even in the midst of conflict. This is the precondition for genuinely hearing the other and for genuinely understanding oneself. Contemplatives propose that self-forgetful attentiveness is the “precondition for joy.” When the self is present to itself in a self-forgetful yet present way, the capacity for a type of self-distancing or detachment emerges, allowing for
discernment regarding that which the self is actually experiencing. This is a critical beginning point for conflict transformation. This experience—and the wonder it opens within the self—begins to change how and what the self sees.

(4) As God is present in both self and other, conflict must also involve the God that each, self and other, reflects. By extension, engagement of the self with the other is an engagement of the presence of God in the self with the presence of God in the other. Just as a sunrise can be seen as an in-breaking of God’s presence, so also—given that self and other each bear the image of God—do self and other, in some strange way, testify to the creative in-breaking of God’s presence. In reality, when self and other are conflicted, just seeing the presence of God in the other can be difficult. Nonetheless, when the self honours wonder, the other becomes a person one can neither dismiss nor reduce to the object of one’s dislike. Instead, the other must remain an expression of the image of God and the wonder of creation.

(5) Wonder affirms the essential worth of each person and resists the division of the world into “us” and “them” or between those who are “in” and those who are “out.” According to Sölle, “[the] reality of the original blessing that rests upon creation was again and again invoked in the late Middle Ages against inequality and oppression.”¹³⁵ Original blessing issues a direct challenge to those in conflict: Both self and other are equally worthy of honour, dignity, and respect.

(6) Wonder affirms that regardless of what happens in conflict (or its sought-after transformation), the self is already “home;” nothing can remove the self from its foundational home in God. Sölle states: “What this means is that in relation to where the journey takes its beginning is that we do not set out as those who seek but as those who have been found.”¹³⁶ When both self and other are home in God, then conflict conversations—as bleak as they may sometimes be—never put self and other at risk. Both remain, as they began, as people already “found.”

4.d.ii  Suffering

The path of suffering goes by many names. It can be called the way of descent rather than the way of ascent. It can be called dying before one dies,¹³⁷ guilt, shame, loss, loss of God, self-emptying, pain, surrender, confession, opening, waiting, letting go, the desert, and the dark night of the soul.¹³⁸ The threefold path affirms that suffering, by whatever name it is spoken, is an inevitable part of life. Life does what life does. For one reason or another, suffering will come. If human suffering was the result of aging and natural disaster only, its reality might be easier to embrace. Unfortunately, suffering also comes from acts of harm, whether intentional or unintentional, inflicted by self and other upon one
another. Suffering can include attachments and aversions that harm the self; it can be found by walking with others in their pain; it can come from the intentional stance of letting go in acts of prayer; and it can come from the felt “loss” of God. For our purposes, it is important to acknowledge that it is precisely in this phase of the threefold path that conflict is housed and becomes most real.

As we already saw in chapter 2, conflict and the suffering it produces can cause tremendous pain—pain that only becomes worse as conflict grows. Whether conflict occurs interpersonally or at an intra/inter-group level, the reality of conflict triggers human needs that are so foundational, that when they are not met, those in conflict can feel de-humanized, just as they may also participate in de-humanizing the other. When conflict is associated with a significant imbalance of power, the division between self and other can become a matter of injustice, discrimination, exploitation, or abuse. The pain associated with conflict—especially at extreme levels—cannot be stated too strongly. While some may retain the capacity to stay grounded in their deeper selves in times of conflict, many (most?) drift during times of conflict, even if only momentarily, toward locating the centre of their identity exclusively with their descriptive selves and the foundational human needs associated with that space. As the deeper self is forgotten in the rush of energy associated with conflict, the descriptive self alone defines the self, causing the descent into the false self. When this occurs, the self is left vulnerable to inhabiting the distorted I-It relation. The other is now simply an object to be measured, judged, and, in some cases, discarded.

Conflict is, of course, also the play space for the ego consciousness of the false self. Ego consciousness both drives the self into conflict and is triggered in times of conflict. Ego consciousness divides the world according to an evaluation of who is better and who is worse, who can be dominated and who can dominate, who is right and who is wrong, thus creating a need to defend the sense of selfhood established on this foundation. Ego consciousness is also defined by the self’s attachments and aversions—compulsions of the self that drive the self into further suffering and that cause the self to place expectations on the other that the other may never be able to meet.

While the phase of suffering naturally emerges from one’s own experiences of division and conflict, suffering is also sometimes entered voluntarily by those who walk alongside the suffering of others. In chapter 2, we observed how interpersonal conflict easily grows to involve others, whether by choice or coercion. Often, this participation is less than noble, as new conflict players simply add to the division between self and other. In her description of this phase, however, Sölle takes a different, more noble stance, imploring mystics to love others and to care for their needs to the degree that mystics must also stand with victims against those who harm them, even at the cost of personal suffering. 

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Sölle states: “The way of suffering that is not just tolerated but freely accepted... [becomes] part of the disciple’s way of life.” The surrendering self bears the same pain God suffers, including the wounds of a world fragmented by domination and division. Sölle says further: “Suffering does not necessarily separate us from God. It may actually put us in touch with the mystery of reality. To follow Christ means to take part in his life.” Echoing this sentiment, Finley writes: “Love for God and love for others are not two loves, but rather two manifestations of one love. These two manifestations are bound so closely to each other that one is impossible without the other.” Herein we encounter a dilemma: While most modern-day contemplatives readily agree with Sölle, and while most accept and even welcome the cost of personal suffering associated with supporting others, if in doing so the self becomes driven by ego consciousness on behalf of those who suffer, the self risks contributing to entrenchment rather than the transformation of conflict, as we observed with the concept of emotional triangles in chapter 3.

Deep in suffering and conflict, self and other risk losing even God. Removed from the deeper self and driven from the descriptive self to the false self, the self experiences itself as losing the tether that binds it to its deeper self and through the deeper self to God. In this space, the felt sense of God’s presence is lost. This becomes an additional form of suffering. It is, borrowing from St. John of the Cross, the dark night of the soul.

Throughout history, people have wrestled with the reality of suffering, and in particular, the reality of suffering associated with acts of harm between self and other. In response to this reality, Bourgeault poses the following question: “What if—as poets and mystics have long intuited—the reservoir of human darkness is not so much a disease as the raw material of our transformation; or in other words, without the false self system as the precondition of our humanity, there would be no journey and no transformation?” In this view, struggle is hardwired into the human condition in order to produce something beautiful that the absence of struggle could not accomplish. Entrusted into God’s mercy, the wounds of suffering create a longing, which, like fuel in the soul, propels the self forward to seek not only healing but also the beginnings of unitive consciousness that emerge when transformation takes root. Bourgeault continues: “True self comes into being as a kind of sacred alchemy, through the conscious acceptance and integration of our shadow side. It is not so much a curing of a pathology as the birthing of something that would never have existed apart from struggle, like a candle that reveals its true nature only when tallow and wick are set aflame.”

Looking at the problem of suffering from an evolutionary perspective, paleontologist, priest, and contemplative Teilhard de Chardin echoes Bourgeault’s insight proposing that the essential nature of disorder is being as a state of becoming. In this view, author Brie Stoner states, “Sin is not a problem to
be eradicated; it is simply the counterstroke of life itself in the process of becoming more complex, more organized, and *more unified.*" According to Teilhard, not only is evolution ongoing; it is the nature of evolution to require disorder in the pursuit of the new. Stoner continues:

> For Teilhard, the original state of disorder and sin is the cost of evolution; an essential part of the universe all along, not a corruption of paradise incurred by an individual’s actions in a garden. Suffering is the painful by-product of a universe in motion, the price of an ecstatic creation infused with free will on its progressive groping path toward more complex unified being."  

Naturally, there is a danger in Bourgeault’s and Teilhard’s perspective. We do not wish to instrumentalize suffering—blessing somehow the abuses and injustices borne by so many in the context of conflict. Finley cautions the same, offering, “We should never romanticize trauma with spiritual sayings. It’s a horrible thing. It should be avoided at all costs. It matters that you get as free from it as you possibly can.” Contemplatives agree that sin is not ultimately “willed” by God, nor should it be experienced as an act of punishment. God remains, to the end, a lover, loving creation into life, including those in conflict. Delio states: “There is no doubt that suffering and violence abound in the crevices of life, but suffering is not a punishment of a vengeful God.” Instead, contemplatives affirm even suffering as a landscape for God’s presence. Sölle states: “Darkness, night, and suffering cannot be excluded from the wholeness of God...” Speaking more pastorally, Finley states: “God’s love can save you from nothing but can sustain you through everything.”

If Teilhard and Bourgeault’s insights hold, then conflict also can be seen as a by-product of relationships in motion, the price of self and other becoming more unified with one another. In this view, the absence of conflict is as truncating to human development and relational health as the overabundance of conflict. Contemplatives assert that in a mysterious way, the path of suffering opens the self to a transformation that would not be possible without the experience of suffering. Suffering functions as a refiner’s fire, calling the self to surrender its multitude of attachments and aversions, reacquainting the self with the deeper self, drawing the self to God, and ultimately, opening self and other to the possibility of transformation with one another. The word *surrender* is important here as it betokens not only a letting go of attachments but also an acceptance of whatever self and other may be experiencing. This is not a lying down before the pain of conflict. Instead, it is a letting go of denial—an acceptance of current reality and its associated pain together with the conviction that God has not forgotten the one who is suffering. Sölle states: “It is not patience with or acquiescence in suffering that is taught but an active, self-determined acceptance of reality that cannot destroy one’s being-lost-in-
God." This stance, hard won at best, allows a new energy to spring forth, one that allows creative and transformative action to emerge, including with respect to the division between self and other.

While life produces suffering, by their nature, the practices of contemplative spirituality do the same—whether or not the self is experiencing suffering directly. As we shall see, contemplative spiritual disciplines are intended to do exactly what this stage promises, releasing the self from its exclusive alignment with its associated attachments and aversions and driving the self to see that of God in both self and other. Reviewing the writings of St. John of the Cross, Sölle writes that in contemplation, “the I ceases to be at work, to analyze and to look for an escape. It falls into emptiness. Contemplation renders us defenseless and delivers us into the dark night.” In the dark night brought on by contemplation, the self may even willingly lose God, shifting from knowing about God (kataphatic knowledge) to the mysterious not-knowing of God (apophatic knowledge). Meister Eckhart writes: “And so I ask God to rid me of God. The God who is known and familiar is too small for him. To know God like another object of our cognition means to turn God into something that is usable, at our disposal. There are many places in mystical piety where the call is heard to leave God for God’s sake.”

Whether by life or by contemplation, as the phase of suffering dispossesses the self of itself, the self can no longer depend exclusively on its descriptive self to survive; nor can the self isolate itself from its need for God or the other. In suffering, the self is no longer in control and cannot manage alone. The self-other construct—which, in itself, creates loneliness and fear—is broken open. While this is experienced as pain, the very breaking of the construct allows a transformed communion with the other and with God to become possible. Those who allow suffering to become their teacher learn to see what they earlier missed—the unity that underlies and sustains both self and other. Writing about this experience, Finley states: “When we enter the dark night, we fall into a chasm so deep, we lose even God. And then with nothing left but darkness, we see a path we had not seen before... a way emerges. We take this way and discover a deeper wisdom, a deeper joy than before we ever thought was possible.” Merton adds: “This act of total surrender is not merely a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious. It is an act of love for this unseen person, who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to his reality also makes his presence known to us.”

Sölle raises a cautionary flag with regard to the suffering associated with this phase: Both resistance to suffering and over-attraction to suffering can be forms of ego consciousness. After all, the one who best engages in suffering can be as ego driven as the one who resists suffering altogether. With respect to the theme of this thesis, we observe a similar dynamic: When one has suffered or been in conflict for a period of time, one can come to love one’s suffering and one’s conflict—even as one
protests it. The false self can require conflict in order to maintain one’s self-image as victim—an image that ironically bestows moral status onto the self and places the self above the other. Similarly, ego consciousness can deny that conflict exists at all, attaching the self to a self-image far removed from reality, in the process opening the self to committing acts of injury made possible by a stance of denial and resisting the relational depth made possible by the “counterstroke of life.” This phase of the threefold path is a hard teacher: It allows suffering in order remove the self from its exclusive identification with its descriptive self; having done so, this phase now asks the self to let go even of suffering itself.

4.d.iii Transformation

At some point along the journey through suffering the path changes. Or, more accurately, in response to suffering, the self changes and the path of transformation opens. Suffering and surrender are not the end. The self begins to recognise the hand that is reaching toward it, pulling the self into its deeper self and realised union with God once more. The consistent affirmation of contemplatives is that God deeply loves each person. While this may sound simple, in the lived experience of contemplatives, this love is unconditional, profound, and transforming. Contemplatives also agree that this love is consistently present, even in suffering. While some are keenly aware of this love in suffering, for others, it is in the phase of transformation that the love that was always there is seen anew.

When the self grasps the hand that is reaching toward it, wounds become the teachers that open the self to transformation. In this assertion, we hear echoes of the Intent-Action-Effect communication model discussed in chapter 2, where we acknowledged that the triggered back-story behind an effect is a gift insofar as it awakens the self to wounds that still require healing. In this same vein, wounds held in the embrace of God’s unconditional love propel the self to surrender its attachment to its own descriptors, to the descriptors it has ascribed to the other, and to the descriptors it has associated with the relationship between self and other.

As the self is dispossessed of its attachments a new and sometimes painful awareness comes into focus. The self now becomes aware of how it has wounded those in its sphere, including how it has wounded itself. As back-stories come into focus, personal culpability in one’s actions and reactions become clear, the limitations (original sin?) of one’s personality become visible, and even the back-stories of the other become clearer. With such clarity of vision with respect to self and other, who the self has been, and how the self has been perceived, the self can often do little other than weep, “Forgive me, for I did not know what I was doing.” It is in part for this reason that the mystical journey is known
as the way of descent rather than the way of ascent. The journey into loss of ego consciousness is fraught with pain and includes the disciplines of both lament and confession.

As suffering is held in a spirit of surrender a curious mix of judgement and non-judgement with respect to self and other emerges. Self and other, mutually regarded as children of God, are held with a non-judgemental spirit or, as seen in chapter 3, unconditional positive regard. A secondary form of non-judgement also emerges as back-stories and social contexts are understood for the logic they created—even if that logic was misguided. Resting on both of these forms of non-judgement, a healthy judgement nonetheless emerges with regard to the actions self and other have taken, allowing self and other to identify harm where and when it occurred. In this we hear echoes of Volf’s distinction in chapter 3 more “cleanly” between differentiation and exclusion: A world without judgement is a world that risks calling all things good or seeing all things neutrally, including harm—creating complicity in ongoing harm.

Sölle’s voice in this regard is also especially clear. She argues that the transformed self must practice resistance to injustice, and that such resistance is an indicator of this phase of the threefold path. Sölle’s work generates an important question. How does one resist in a manner that reflects a spirit of transformation rather than in a manner that entrenches suffering? To resist, after all, can imply dividing the world into simplistic victim and offender categories, quickly returning the self to judgement, ego consciousness, and the self-other frame.

The dilemma posed by the word “resistance” is solved, in part, by Bruteau, who adds the word nonresistance to the discussion and differentiates between these words by adding the terms wishing and willing to the discussion. Nonresistance accepts the world as it is, without wishing that it were different. This is an important contemplative stance associated with Gelassenheit, a term used by another contemplative, Meister Eckhart. In contrast, resistance acts thoughtfully to work toward and will the transformation of injustice or conflict. Together, the words resistance and nonresistance represent two important contemplative stances. These words can also be refracted through the lens that differentiates between the identities and actions of self and other. If the deeper selves of self and other both reside in unity with God, if the descriptors each has been given to inhabit are neutrally regarded, and if the brokenness of self and other are regarded with compassion, then self and other can practice nonresistance to and love for self and other in their personhood, even as they allow for a discerning judgement (resistance / engagement) regarding the actions each has taken. Ironically, it is when self and other are loved unconditionally, as they are in their personhood, that change becomes more likely. As Rohr is fond of saying, “We change because God loves us, not in order to win God’s love.” The same is true here: The other changes because we love them, not in order to win our love.
While transformation restores the unity between self and God, it also sees a changed self and a new relational dynamic between self and other emerge. The transformed self no longer needs to be right, it does not need to nail down that which will always be mystery, nor does it need to divide the world into categories of right and wrong, good and bad, self and other; the transformed self is able to name harm with a type of openness that still honours the image of God in the other. Where the self once engaged in self-consciousness and ego consciousness, the self is now able to be present to self and other with a spirit of unitive consciousness. Slowly, the self finds itself more and more beating with the heartbeat of God.

St. John of the Cross writes: “The suffering for the neighbor [or the other] grows the more as the soul unites itself through love with God.” Can the self suffer for the other when the other is the one with whom the self is in conflict? According to the conviction of contemplatives, the transformed self is no longer a singular self, alone in the world. The self is one with all who suffer including the other; even more tragically, the self is also one with all who cause suffering. The other cannot be “othered,” regardless of who the other is. In transformation, we become the love that is giving itself to the world. Contemplative writer Kerrie Hide states: “Christ-consciousness awakens. In participatory loving knowledge, intuited from the luminous dark ground of the source of consciousness itself, the ‘eye’ of our heart sees from oneness… from the intimacy of encircling, indwelling love-energy.” The encircling, indwelling love-energy is seen whenever the self acts with compassion to support another who is suffering. It is seen also in the actions taken by the self to heal divisions within the self, alongside acts of compassion toward those who suffer the results of these divisions, including the other.

4.d.iv Spiritual Disciplines of the Threefold Path

Contemplatives throughout history have acknowledged that re-centring the core of one’s identity is fraught with challenges. The ever-present, everyday nature of the descriptive self in relation and in comparison to other descriptive selves allows this self to become the dominant force in one’s life, eclipsing the deeper self and causing the self to govern its life according to ego consciousness, the false self. According to Bourgeault, it is for this reason that contemplatives throughout history and of every faith tradition agree that transformation depends on solitude and silence—practices that awaken the deeper self and release the self from the grip of ego consciousness. Confusion with regard to the nature of one’s identity is the “core illusion of the human condition,” Bourgeault writes, adding that “penetrating this illusion is what awakening [or contemplation] is all about.” While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a how-to manual with respect to contemplative practices, a brief look at
the overarching principles of contemplation is nonetheless important as it is contemplation that allows
the journey from ego consciousness to unitive consciousness to become stabilized in the self. It is also
this practice upon which a contemplative approach to conflict transformation rests.  

As has already been suggested, the spiritual disciplines associated with contemplative
spirituality are multifold. They include, but are not limited to, meditation, centering prayer, walking
meditation, spiritual reading (*Lectio Divina*), and a mindful presence in the day-to-day of life. While the
latter two can involve conversation or reading, the former three all depend on a daily practice of
solitude and silence. Contemplative prayer operates “without an end or a means for a particular
goal.” It does not petition for aid, offer thanksgiving for blessings, or complain about pain. While
prayers that do the latter have a time and place, it is the regular practice of contemplative prayer that
simply delights in the presence of God, in being “smitten by a love that pre-empts all other loves.” This practice transforms the relationship of the self with itself. It also transforms the relationship of the
self with the other. Bruteau states:

> As [the self] looses itself from identification with each of these bonds—the attachments of theody and its passions, the cravings and griefs of the emotional nature, the localization of the self
by its relations, roles, and history, its memberships and allegiances, even its taxonomic position
according to biology and various schemes of metaphysics—as it “loses” each of these “selves,”
the praying consciousness “finds itself” more and more at liberty. The more you take off
bondage, the freer you become; the more you lose restrictions, the vaster you become. The
more you empty yourself of predicates, the more you become full of Being.

Echoing Bruteau’s words, Finley writes: “...[A] sincere commitment to the simplicity and poverty of daily
meditation opens up meditative states of awareness that call for serious adjustments in our customary
way of experiencing ourselves and the world around us.”

Breath-by-breath, sometimes with joy and often with struggle, a stable unitive consciousness
emerges in the regular practice of contemplation. Somewhat playfully, Finley offers the following
analogy to describe the journey into union with God:

Imagine that you have fallen asleep in a small boat that is moored with two ropes between two
piers. Imagine that one rope moors your little boat to your customary ways of experiencing and
understanding your relationship to God. The other rope moors your little boat to your
customary ways of experiencing and understanding your relationship to yourself, others, and all
other earthly things. Imagine that as you are sleeping soundly in your little boat, God quietly
unfastens the rope that moors you to your customary ways of experiencing his presence in your
life and drops it into the water. God then quietly goes around to the rope connecting you to
your customary ways of experiencing yourself in relationship to the things of this earth,
unfastens it, and drops it into the water as well. Then God, trying not to laugh and wake you up,
gives your boat a little nudge that sends it out into the open water. When you awaken hours
later, you sit up to discover you are out in the open sea, with no land in sight! And so it is that
God, in the darkness of night, unmoors us from our customary ways of relating to things both divine and human. We are left in a strange and solitary silence, in which an utterly unforeseeable union with God begins to emerge.\textsuperscript{175}

Out on “open water,” the self typically works hard to return to shore. Unfortunately, returning to shore is fairly easy to do. If the self loves the experience of the open water \textit{and seeks to hold onto it}, the self is immediately returned to shore. If the self is frightened by the open water, the descent into fright immediately returns the self to shore. If the self misses its customary ways of experiencing and understanding the world, the self is returned to shore. If the self becomes attached to an analysis regarding the physics of how boats stay afloat in water, the self is again, immediately returned to shore. At issue here is not whether joy, fear, longing, or analysis are good or bad. Instead, the challenge with which the self is presented is whether the self can be present to its joy, fear, longing, or analysis without clinging to or rejecting any of these thoughts or feelings. As the self quickly discovers, the wayward heart and mind are difficult to master. The self’s longing for the open water is easily overtaken by its desire for the comfort of the shoreline it knows so well.

Contemplatives speak about several forms of pain associated with the “open water.” On one level, an existential pain emerges from the recognition that one’s preferred home is at the “outer circumference of one’s life”\textsuperscript{176} rather than in an increasingly nearer relationship with God. The self longs for union with God, yet the self resists the journey this union requires. Finley writes:

The core of our being is drawn like a stone to the quiet depths of each moment where God waits for us with eternal longing. But to those depths the false self will not let us travel. Like stones skipped across the surface of the water we are kept skimming along the peripheral, one-dimensional fringes of life. To sink is to vanish. To sink into the unknown depths of God’s call to union with himself is to lose all that the false self knows and cherishes.\textsuperscript{177}

According to contemplatives, to sink into the unknown depths of God is, in and of itself, a transforming act that changes the relationship of the self to itself and simultaneously, changes the relationship between self and other. When the self comes into union with God, it is asked to release its ingrained desire to have, to contrast, to possess, to create hierarchies of good and bad, better and worse, to live by concealment rather than light. Of course, over time, the self has come to love its attachment to its descriptors—even the painful ones—because they have become a source of meaning for the self. Similarly, the self has become attached to the descriptors it tells itself about the other person, whether or not these are accurate and whether they are positive or negative. To sit in contemplation is to allow oneself, little by little, to be stripped of one’s \textit{attachment} to one descriptor after another—including the descriptors of the other, until nothing is left—or at least what is seen to be nothing from the perspective of ego-consciousness. To approach the place of nothingness can be
frightening. What is the self if not its descriptors? From the perspective of unitive consciousness, the self at the point of nothingness is infinitely real, but it takes the courage of approaching this place to discover that this is so.\textsuperscript{178}

Another pain emerges in contemplation as the self awakens to the ways it has harmed the other and to the lies it has told itself about itself. Contemplation—by virtue of acting as the pathway from the descriptive to the deeper self—allows some descriptors to become less important, some that are associated with wounds to be healed and others—those that have been hidden to the self—to be revealed for the first time. When this occurs, an awareness arises that allows the self to say, “I have seen the enemy and it is me.” This is not to hold the self at fault for all conflict between self and other. Instead, it is that in contemplation the self now sees the ways in which it has been complicit in its own wounding and the ways in which it has been complicit in the wounding of others.

Finally, in contemplation the self encounters the basic yet agonizing difficulty of simply practicing silence. As the self seeks to practice silence, thoughts, feelings, and bodily aches emerge unbidden into the consciousness of the self. Thoughts and feelings range from mundane (grocery lists and unfolded laundry on the bed), to exquisite (deep thoughts and delightful memories), to traumatic (old pains and obsessive thoughts). Those new to contemplation frequently respond to the wandering mind with a spirit of self-judgement or frustration, both of which firmly plant the self in ego consciousness. When moments of insight or consolation occur, many grasp onto the moment only to be returned again to ego consciousness.\textsuperscript{179}

Contemplation, it seems, is persistent in its exposure of one’s frailty, suffering, and complicity in the suffering of others. Even more complex, clinging to or rejecting any of these only roots the self further in ego-consciousness. In one way or another, contemplatives consistently offer one response to the challenges that arise in contemplation: compassionate acceptance of the self, neither clinging to nor rejecting one’s frailty, suffering, or complicity. Only a compassionate acceptance of oneself as one is in any given moment seems to unlock the self from the prison that moment will become, if either a clinging or resistant response is offered. A compassionate acceptance of self also opens the possibility of an acceptance of the other as the other is.

While a daily practice of silence and solitude is the cornerstone of the contemplative life, there is another spiritual discipline that emerges as a by-product of the daily practice of silence. Identified earlier as bringing a mindful presence to one’s day-to-day life, this spiritual discipline is known among some contemplatives as “Welcoming Prayer.”\textsuperscript{180} Stated most simply, this discipline is the lived expression of the same acceptance already practiced in silence and solitude. While the details of how
this prayer is taught may change from one context to the next, the underlying principle of this prayer remains the same. The self allows itself to experience the reality of the current moment; the self accepts the reality of the current moment; the self releases what it is experiencing into God’s care; and finally, the self rests in God’s compassionate care.

Almost like peeling back an onion, the self is invited to accept deeper and deeper layers of the current moment and the attachments and aversions this moment reflects.¹⁸¹ For our context, this prayer can include (a) the emotional impact of conflict (I allow myself to feel my pain; I accept that I am feeling wounded; I release my feelings into God’s care; I rest in God’s compassionate love); (b) one’s spirit of judgement (I allow myself to feel the weight of my judgement regarding the other; I accept that I am feeling judgemental regarding the other; I release these feelings into God’s care; I rest in God’s compassionate love); (c) the history of relationship between self and other (I allow myself to feel the brokenness of this relationship; I accept that my history with this person is unresolved; I release these feelings and this history into God’s care; I rest in God’s compassionate love); (d) the spirit of self-judgement (I allow myself to feel the pain of my self-judgement; I accept that I am angry with myself for feeling judgemental; I release these feelings into God’s care; I rest in God’s compassionate love); (e) the emotional programs for happiness the conflict has awakened (I allow myself to feel the weight of my emotional triggers and attachments; I accept that I have brought my own underlying emotional triggers and attachments into this situation; I release these triggers and attachments into God’s care; I rest in God’s compassionate love); (f) the fact that the self has not yet “arrived” (I accept that I am still not fully healed with regard to my underlying emotional triggers and attachments; I release my unfinished self into God’s care; I rest in God’s compassionate love); (g) the other (I accept the other as they are and release this person into God’s care); (h) the self (I accept myself as I am and release myself into God’s care); and (i) the inability to practice acceptance (I accept that I am struggling to practice acceptance and I release my inabilities in this regard into God’s care).

Bourgeault remarks that “ego-acceptance” and “ego-transcendence” always seem to happen simultaneously.¹⁸² There appears to be no way to jump over acceptance to transcendence. Nor do the two appear to be linear—that once acceptance occurs transformation follows. Rather, it appears that in the moment that the broken, wounded self is genuinely accepted, transcendence occurs. Realistically, the self must revisit the landscape of ego-acceptance again and again. Herein lies a mystery. When the self has both accepted and transcended its egoic self, the descriptors themselves are seen differently. Some lose their power, others are held with self-compassion, and still others are infused with great purpose, meaning, and strength. While some desires associated with ego consciousness now fall away,
other desires associated with ego transcendence emerge. The self can now go about its daily tasks with a kind of non-grasping freedom. Of course, with this freedom comes great risk: The “success” of living with this freedom can tickle the self’s ego consciousness, causing the self to risk once again exclusively locating its identity with its descriptors.183 When this occurs, the journey begins again. Contemplatives promise with one voice: We never arrive, though the journey becomes easier. The practice of contemplation is never to achieve perfection, nor is perfection possible. In fact, the pursuit of perfection would simply be the pursuit of another attachment. Bourgeault states: “To arrive at this unified whole, there is only one route to get there, and it is known to all the spiritual traditions of the world: dying to self.... One does not ‘snatch’ at insights, illuminations, experiences, because the only known route to unitive freedom is in the dying, in the moving not toward more, but toward less.”184

4.e Contemplative Spirituality, Identity, and Transformation of the Self-Other Frame

Contemplative spirituality proposes that as the self is transformed, so also is the self-other relationship transformed. In this section, we want to make explicit what has already been implied, recounting the various ways in which a contemplative understanding of identity speaks into, informs, and transforms the self-other frame. It is the proposal of this thesis, consistent with the writings of contemplative authors—and consistent with at least some conflict transformation practitioners—that the transformation of the self and the transformation of the self-other dynamic are mutually reinforcing. The dance between self and other is mirrored by the dance between the deeper self and descriptive self. In the real life experiences of those who have facilitated conversations between those in conflict, a genuine transformation of the self-other relation always depends on a corollary transformation of the self.185 While an agreement to end a particular conflict can occur without significant transformation of the self, to authentically transform tension between self and other, a parallel shift must also occur within the self.186

One might ask which of these two comes first—the transformation of the self or the transformation of the self-other dynamic. This question cannot be answered. A transformation of the self transforms the self-other dynamic just as a transformation of the self-other dynamic transforms the self. That said, in some situations, direct access to the self-other relation may be limited: The other may not be available for a self-other encounter or it may be unsafe for self and other to meet. Alternately, a conflict may have become so painful that, despite resolution, a residue of pain remains such that the self
is not yet free of the conflict. In still other situations, the social systems in which the conflict has occurred may be so entrenched that a resolution between self and other does not yet address the deeper dynamics driving the conflict. In each of these examples, an encounter between self and other is either not possible or it is insufficient for full transformation to occur. In such cases, an encounter by the self with its own pain and complicity not only helps the self to heal, it can, by virtue of the self’s healing, support the transformation of the self-other dynamic. As the self heals, the self’s relationship with its descriptors changes, its sense of its needs changes, its understanding of the other changes, and the basic “operating system” of the self also changes. Unitive consciousness spills over into the nature of the self’s participation in the self-other dynamic, a shift that lays the foundation for a changed self-other relationship.

Bourgeault reminds her readers that the gifts that emerge from the practice of contemplative spirituality are never for the self alone; nor is contemplative spirituality, in and of itself, a program for healing. While Bourgeault would agree with Finley’s statement that “[i]t matters that you are freed from your suffering,” she nonetheless states: “The human condition exists for a purpose far more majestic and compelling than simply getting well.” Instead, contemplative spirituality and the unitive consciousness it welcomes, awaken the self to the structure and purpose of reality itself. Said otherwise, contemplative spirituality doesn’t simply change what people think, it changes how people think. Changing how people think—transforming one’s worldview from one of dominance to one of mutuality—is, of course, a healing act. By definition, a shift in worldview to one of mutuality is never for the self alone.

4.e.i Identity, Conflict, and the Transformation of the Self-Other Frame

Sölle writes, “What really happens in mystical union is not a new vision of God but a different relationship to the world—one that has borrowed the eyes of God.” Unity with God, alongside God’s acceptance of the self as one is—even in and as one’s brokenness—changes the eyes with which one sees the world, influencing the transformation of conflict. As the self begins to see itself with compassion, so also does the self make gracious space available to the other. Finley writes:

*As we learn to see ourselves through the eyes of Christlike compassion, we learn to see others through the eyes of Christlike compassion as well.* In learning to be compassionate toward ourselves as precious in our frailty, we learn to be compassionate toward others as precious in their frailty. In this way we begin to sense how meditation renders our heart ever more sensitive and responsive to ourselves and others. This is one of the refrains that run throughout the lives and teachings of the Christian mystics—that only love and all that is given in love is real. Love is at once the means and end of the journey into God who is love itself. And since love impels us to
act lovingly, we can begin to see as well the radical and intimate connection between a nonviolent, Christlike response to our own suffering and our response to the suffering of those we encounter.\textsuperscript{190}

While compassion for the other undergirds the transformation of the self-other frame, compassion alone is not enough to transform the nature of conflict. The self can, after all, be compassionate to the other but still regard the other as lesser than the self or the self can be attached to the pain of the conflict that has occurred between self and other such that compassionate engagement with the other nonetheless acts to recreate the past conflict in one way or another. Instead, as we have seen, contemplative spirituality offers an additional or, more accurately, a prevenient foundation for conflict transformation: unitive consciousness.

Conflict establishes divisions between self and other. According to contemplative spirituality, however, this divide is an illusion. The \textit{is} and \textit{is not} union of self and other is already the reality, whether self and other wish to acknowledge this or not. Furthermore, in unitive consciousness the operating system of domination, alienation, separation, and self-defence of one’s descriptors falls away. This reality of oneness changes the landscape upon which conflict occurs. If the nature of this union rests on the \textit{is} and \textit{is not} of unitive reality, then nothing is at risk. The self can flow into others and admit others into the self without a fear associated with the loss of one’s identity.\textsuperscript{191} This is possible because, in the naked state of being, the self is already complete. No injurious act can damage the core; no harmful word, no shame, no injury—not even death—can remove the self from its core identity as the beloved of God. Speaking pastorally and somewhat freely, Bruteau writes:

Let us ask ourselves. What is it that I really want? What am I trying to obtain by my demands that my personality be dominant—or at least be protected, not humiliated, and be able to “feel good about” itself? And clearly, what we want is to be free from worry about the well-being of the self. We want a state in which we won’t have to make ourselves tense and anxious by demands such as these. The way to release, then, is to trace back the demand, to see what it is really, finally, seeking, what we really want. And when that is clearly seen, we can turn to our tradition... and hear it say, But you already have that. There’s nothing to worry about. Even if human beings don’t give you the respect you want, God does. Doesn’t that mean more? Even if your phenomenal human personality isn’t in the most advantageous position relative to other human personalities, your real self isn’t relative! It doesn’t have to struggle for recognition and good position. The only “you” that really matters is quite safe and in good condition. Believe that, relax, and enjoy life.\textsuperscript{192}

Bourgeault echoes Bruteau’s sentiments as she states: “When surrounded by fear, contradiction, betrayal; when the ‘fight or flight’ alarm bells are going off in your head and everything inside you wants to brace and defend itself, the infallible way to extricate yourself and reclaim your home in that
sheltering kingdom is simply to freely release whatever you are holding onto—including, if it comes to this, life itself.”

Someone caught in deep, systemic, and painful conflicts may find Bruteau’s and Bourgeault’s recommendations too easy. Can transformation be this simple? Neither Bruteau nor Bourgeault intend to be flippant; nor do they wish to suggest that addressing conflict is unnecessary. In fact, quite the opposite is true—both are deeply committed to transforming the systems of domination, alienation, and separation that keep people bound in harmful situations. Their intent is to make a critical point: When the self honours its own deeper self and the deeper self of the other, the self can relate to the other without anxiety. Practically, this means that the self can engage freely in disagreements without risking the shift from issue as problem to person as problem, as the self neither diminishes the other nor is threatened by diminishments by the other of the self. Freed of its attachments and aversions, the self is able to discern wisely and act thoughtfully in response to difficult and harmful conflict situations.

Contemplative spirituality allows the self to pour itself into the other and also to receive the other into the self in mutual reciprocity. Even if the other is disinclined to honour its deeper self, this does not inhibit the self’s capacity to love the other unconditionally. It is, after all, at the place of the deeper self where self and other are one, where self and other are neither their pasts nor their futures, neither their strengths nor their weaknesses, neither their beauty nor that which makes them distasteful. In other words, while it may be difficult to love unconditionally one who has harmed the self or whose characteristics are distasteful, in unitive consciousness, these characteristics are secondary to the prevenient unity between self and other, a unity that in Christian faith is simultaneously realized as union with God. Reflecting on this shift in understanding, Bruteau states: “One begins to be able really to love all other beings as one’s self. This is simply not possible before one remembers and identifies with one’s ‘natural face,’ the central self in which God’s agapē is the source of life.” Finley states,

[A]s meditative awareness slowly seeps in, we are able to grow, day by day, into a more patient, gracious recognition and acceptance of and gratitude for others. Little by little the graciousness of Christ’s empathic mind of oneness with others is translated into a thousand little shifts in the way we think about people, our attitudes toward them, and the way in which we actually treat them day to day.

The practical implications of contemplative spirituality for the transformation of conflict and the self-other frame are several. Firstly, when the self operates with unitive consciousness, many conflicts are avoided or, at the very least, not escalated. In part, conflicts are avoided because the self no longer practices attachment or aversion to its descriptors or its deeper self. An off-handed comment, a hurtful remark, significant differences—none of these threaten the identity of the self. Without a descriptive
self to defend, the self can remain energetically centred in unitive consciousness, continuing to love self and other unconditionally.

Secondly, when the self is centred in unitive consciousness, the self is freed from a cascading reaction/counter-reaction cycle that closely parallels the Intent-Action-Effect communication model seen in chapter 2. In that model, we observed that buried and sometimes hidden intentions of an “actor” generate stated intentions that produce actions that create effects in the “receiver,” some of which are readily known to the two parties and some of which are associated with painful back-stories within the receiver that are triggered by the actions of the actor. As the receiver sorts through the effects of the action, the receiver frequently makes assumptions regarding the actions and intentions of the actor, creating meaning out of the interaction that occurred. Assumptions and meaning—whether right or wrong—converge to give legitimacy to an intention and new action now taken by the receiver with regard to the original actor. Bruteau describes the reaction/counter-reaction cycle as follows: “We make choices, and each of these choices has been presented to us by the environment and conditioned by our past experience, just as the choice itself, once enacted, will become part of the public environment for ourselves and others and will condition both them and us for our next piece of behavior. This is a chain and a network of reactions.”

The reaction/counter-reaction cycle traps the self by offering only choice freedom. While the self can choose how to respond to the stimuli presented by the environment, the self is always only in reaction mode. Bruteau states: “The essence of suffering, we might say, is to be trapped on this level, unable to do anything except react to whatever the environment (including things that go on in our own bodies and psyches) puts up.” The alternative is to transcend the reaction/counter-reaction cycle by locating the identity of the self in the place of unitive consciousness. At this place, creative freedom becomes available to the self, allowing the self to be a “first mover” in the dynamic between self and other. According to Bruteau, creative freedom mirrors the creative acts of God. To engage in creative freedom is to participate in the ongoing creation of reality. It is the “characteristic divine act” and attests to the entrainment of the self with the character of God. Like God’s favour which is dispensed equally to rich and poor, good and bad, so also is the unitive act of the self impartial. The self simply loves the other unconditionally. Bruteau offers:

We are to love our enemies as we love our neighbors, pray for those who persecute us as we pray for our benefactors. The point is to be impartial, that is to say, we are to love them not because of their behaviour either way. We are not to love them because they are our enemies, any more than we are to love them because they are our friends. This means, of course, that we cannot advert to the fact that it is an “enemy” that we are loving and congratulate ourselves on our virtue. We have to transcend the label of “enemy.” That means that we have to strip off,
both from ourselves and from that other, all those attributes and past behaviors that make up the action-reaction pattern in which we and they could be labeled mutual “enemies.” This stripping may have to go so deep that there is nothing left on either side but the sheer “I am” of the person, beyond anything in the natural order.  

To concretise how this appears in practice, let us return for a moment to the False Self cycle proposed by Thomas Keating and developed by Cynthia Bourgeault (Figure 4.1). According to Bourgeault, there is a “nanosecond” where transformation is possible, following the moment when frustration begins and before afflicting emotions set in. While this moment is about transformation of the self, by extension, the transformation within the self transforms how the other is regarded. Bourgeault proposes that this nanosecond, pregnant with opportunity for transformation, is the moment where the self—rather than becoming identified with the flood of feelings washing over the self—can choose to return to its centre in unitive consciousness.  

In chapter 2 we observed that the self is frequently unaware of that which resides in its subconscious. If the self is caught in ego consciousness, it is difficult for that which is in the subconscious to rise to the surface. Ego consciousness will simply justify or blind the self to that which is emerging. Even if the self becomes aware of that which is arising from the subconscious, when the identity of the self resides with its descriptors, the temptation of the self is either to blame others or to shame the self for what is emerging. In contrast, practices of contemplative spirituality effect precisely this nanosecond moment. By spending time in meditation, the self awakens its deeper self and its deeper oneness with God, making the awakening of the subconscious less threatening and allowing the self to be present, even self-compassionate, to its underlying “emotional programs for happiness.”  

The nanosecond to which Bourgeault refers is also the moment where the self shifts from choice freedom to creative freedom. While choice freedom allows the self to be self-aware of the underlying “programs for happiness” and reflective regarding how to manage and/or respond in a given situation, creative freedom goes further by allowing the self to remember and manifest the already present union between self and other. **Herein lies the crux of the difference between conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality. While conflict transformation seeks to nurture effective choice freedom, helping people to learn and practice self-awareness and more appropriate responses to conflict, contemplative spirituality promotes creative freedom, which grounds the relationship between self and other in union and unconditional love.** It is upon this foundation that contemplatives propose tough conversations between self and other can meaningfully occur.
4.e.ii  Contemplative Spirituality and the Practice of Forgiveness

In the view of contemplative spirituality, the practice of forgiveness can be seen as the fulcrum upon which a commitment to the past turns toward a commitment to a healthy future. The past, in the view of contemplatives, quickly becomes a collection of descriptors. By definition, the past is something that is thought about. As such, the past cannot create an arising of creative energy from the self. Similarly, an imagined future is a collection of past experiences, fears, or hopes projected onto an anticipated future. This constellation of past and future binds self and other to recreate the narratives they have established between themselves, including narratives of conflict. By relegating both the past and an imagined future to the landscape of the descriptive self, contemplatives propose that these two categories similarly become secondary in the ordering of selfhood. When this occurs, space is made for creative freedom; self and other are now freed to create each moment anew, unfettered by the past. Delio states: “A person is not the accumulation of the past, the spatialized substance that has some volume or weight to it, but the creative activity of life as it projects itself to the next instant. The person is not the product of the past but the process of the future. To be a person is to live in openness to the future because we are in evolution and thus in a process of becoming more whole and more unified.”

In this view, forgiveness becomes a critical act in the transformation of the self-other frame, freeing self and other from the past in order to awaken to a new—and real—future. Summarizing Bruteau, Delio writes: “To engage the present moment as a creative act requires a consciousness of forgiveness and reconciliation. If we relate only to the past deeds of others, we will always be at least one step behind where they themselves presently are and thus we will never really be in relationship with them, only with their ‘remains.’” There is a level of nuance here that is important to catch. The intention of contemplative spirituality with respect to the self-other frame is to consciously relate to the other from the place of unitive consciousness. Given that the past, by definition, exists on the landscape of the descriptive self, the only way to properly relate to the other according to their whole self is to release the past and be present to the now. Delio is not suggesting that harms done in the past are ignored. What she is suggesting is that for creative freedom energy to be possible, the self must become radically present to the now. In this way, a genuinely transformed future becomes possible. Agreeing with Bruteau, Delio states, “[Forgiveness] is not a statement about the past; forgiveness is the act of making a new future because it [is] the essence of love in general, the energetic radiation of good will for the sake of the future.”

What immediately emerges in this view of forgiveness is a focus on the other rather than on the self. As we have seen, within conflict transformation much of the language around forgiveness is about
the transformation of the self, though this thesis proposes a definition that also includes the other. Contemplatives agree with conflict theorists: Forgiveness does transform the self. Forgiveness frees the self from its attachment or aversion to descriptors of trauma, pain, and suffering. Nonetheless, contemplatives propose that forgiveness is also an affirmation of the goodness of the personhood of the other—regardless of what the other has done. It is an awakening to the existential unity between self and other. It is an act of outpouring of self that allows a transformed future to be imagined. Bruteau offers the following: “More than a reconciliation between empirical egos, a make-up of estranged personalities, or the more profound joint effort of wrong-doer and wronged to undo the wrong, perhaps forgiveness can be seen as an act of faith in the future and as evidence that one knows where the living being is truly lodged and will not be distracted from it by the dead husks of past deeds.”

In this construction of forgiveness, what happens to the pain of memories that will not subside? Unitive consciousness deals with the dilemma of memory by relativising memory just as the descriptors of the self are also relativised. The principle of relativising both memory and one’s descriptors rests on living in the current moment, the now, without past or future as reference points. The current moment—and whatever descriptor is present in that moment—simply is. While memory is used to function in the current moment, memory does not define the current moment. Without past and future as reference points, without being bound by memory, there is no social power or value accrued to any particular descriptor. Imbalances of any type, after all, depend on references to past and future to exist. Without past and without future, all comparisons naturally fall away. Recalling that in unitive consciousness all that is real and all that is illusion are revealed, Bruteau writes: “The present moment is the intersection of eternity with time, and when our consciousness is stayed on this, it rests and finds peace, because it is released from the fantasies of the ego and is in touch with reality.” Contemplation thus “leaps free” of both the conceptualizing mind and the memories that drive that mind, even as memory is present in the experience of contemplation. Finley states:

[If we are always going about wholly identified with our remembering and remembered self, we tend to remain exiled from who we are in the virginal newness of the present moment. This is what makes our moments of spontaneous experience so freeing. In a flash we are set free from the tyranny of memory. We are set free of the illusion of going about imagining we are nothing more than the ongoing momentum of who we used to be.... In meditative experience we taste first-hand the eternal newness of the present moment. And in the newness of the present moment we taste something of the eternal newness of God. We glimpse, however obscurely, that God is the infinity of the perpetually unfolding newness of the present moment in which our lives unfold.... Immersed in the newness of the present moment, we are given to realize that nothing that has happened to us in the past, nor anything we have done in the past, has the power to
name who we are. In this moment we realize ourselves to be one with the virginal newness of the present moment, which is always just now appearing, fresh and free of all that used to be.  

We can add that, immersed in the newness of the present moment, we are given to realize that nothing that has happened between us and the other in the past, nor anything we and the other have done to one another in the past, has the power to name the nature of the now, nor the nature of the ongoing relationship between self and other.

4.f Contemplative Spirituality, the Trinity, and Triangulation

Throughout history, contemplatives have looked for metaphors and images to help them put into words their lived experience of the ineffable mystery of God in whose outpouring of love they found themselves. In this search, they inclined themselves toward the language of Trinity; they saw the Trinity “not as a dry, abstract doctrine, but as the Christian love poetry of the divine mystery, in the face of which all words prove to be poor translations of what remains ultimately ineffable and hidden in silence.” In this view, the Trinity is an expression of outpouring, self-emptying love. Rather than representing the Trinity as three static persons, among contemplatives the Trinity is regarded as the flow of three energies, each pouring into the other as a perpetually cascading waterwheel of love. As we shall see, this interpretation of the Trinity is regarded as the central foundation upon which the structure of reality itself rests. While it is not the intention of this thesis to provide a detailed exploration of the Trinity as a theological frame, we will provide enough of an overview to consider its application to the transformation of the self-other frame.

Several contemplatives have explored the notion of Trinity over the past century, influencing the way the Trinity is understood. In 1967, Jesuit Karl Rahner lamented that for most Christians the Trinity was meaningless. Twenty years later, this statement led one of Rahner’s readers, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, to reimagine the Trinity. Her book, God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life, set in motion a flurry of reflection that continues to this day. According to LaCugna, over the past thousand years of theological thought, the doctrine of the Trinity morphed from an image that described the nature of God’s redemptive work in the world (the economic Trinity) to a model describing the inner life of God (the immanent Trinity). In different ways, the immanent Trinity increasingly became dominant in Western Christian theological reasoning, thereby distorting the implications of the Trinity for both the Christian life and the cosmos. Challenging this approach, LaCugna affirmed and nuanced Rahner’s assertion that the Trinity is both “economic” and “imminent,” stating: “There is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity; there is only the Oikonomia that is the concrete realization of the mystery of
theologia in time, space, history, and personality.” Far from being a logical brain teaser or asserting that God is three static beings, LaCugna’s contention is that the Trinity is dynamic, engaged, relevant, and, perhaps most importantly, deeply connected to everything from the moral life of the person to the reality of the cosmos itself.

At the same time, another Jesuit, Raimon Panikkar, proposed that the Trinity is “the ultimate triadic structure of reality.” Together, these authors, alongside Teilhard de Chardin, whose theological work was focused primarily on an understanding of evolution, have inspired significant, ongoing theological reflection among contemplatives regarding the Trinity and, more specifically, how a theology of the Trinity coheres with, explains, and develops the contemplative frame. Bruteau offers a word of caution, reminding her readers that all models, including the model of the Trinity, must be held with humility. Models, she states, are by their nature finite and, therefore, are not reality itself. They remain, to the end, a finite attempt to describe the infinite. With this in mind, we turn now to consider the metaphor of Trinity and its implications for the transformation of the self-other frame.

4.f.i Contemplative Perspectives Regarding the Trinity

Contemporary contemplatives, like their forebears, have generally chafed against the notion of an uninvolved God and against a metaphysical split between spirit and matter, a split that is seen to rest on the either-or dualistic frame. This split is regarded as limiting or inadequate, especially in the twenty-first century context, where the dualism between substance and energy is no longer seen as scientifically tenable. Coining the word *cosmotheandric*, Panikkar proposes an alternate perspective: that of the world (cosmos), God (theos), and humanity (andros) fused in “a continuous intercirculation among these three distinct planes of existence in a single motion of self-communicating love.” While this phrase reflects the nature of *cosmotheandric* reality, these same words apply just as easily to Panikkar’s notion of the Trinity. Just as God, world, and humanity are one (“in a single motion”) and not one (“three distinct planes”) while mutually intercirculating with one another, so also are the three “persons” of the Trinity in continuous intercirculation, both distinct from and one with one another. The “Father” pours himself as love into the “Son,” who pours himself as love into the Spirit, who pours herself as love into the “Father.” Or, said otherwise, formlessness empties itself into form, which empties itself into transforming energy, which empties itself into formlessness once more. In this view, the three persons of the Trinity are intimately in relationship with one another, not as three static or stationary beings, but as three energies of love, each giving to and self-emptying into the other just as each receives from and is filled by the other. Bourgeault states: “Between the poles of maximum unity
(conveyed in Jesus’s powerful assertion, ‘The Father and I are one’) and maximum differentiation (conveyed in his shockingly tender ‘Abba, Father’) flows an unbroken current of kenotic love (representing spirit) through which all things are invited to participate in that one great cosmotheandric intercirculation.” This unbroken current of intercirculation becomes the template upon which reality itself rests, including the relationship between self and other.

To allow the Trinity to act as an intercirculatory template for self and other, we must establish several core principles. (1) Firstly, as has already been suggested, the three “persons” of the Trinity are not understood as substance or as static individuals. Instead, they are three distinct energies or “persons in relationship” with one another. As Rohr states, in this view, God is more verb than noun.\(^{220}\) The Trinity as energy, is more about being as becoming rather than being as stationary existence.

Bruteau differentiates between the terms “individual” and “person” to explain this difference.\(^ {221}\) While an individual (whether in the Trinity or within humanity) is defined by the desire to possess and by an inclination toward independence, a person is defined as a being-in-relation, capable of self-giving to another in love. Bruteau derives this distinction from the Latin word for person, sonare. Delio, describing Bruteau’s work in this regard, writes:

> The word person has the Latin root sonare (literally, ‘to sound through’) so that a person is one in whom there is a sounding through (per) rather than an ‘individual substance.’ The notion of person arose in Christian thought from the Greek Cappadocian Fathers and their understanding of the Trinity as three communicable centers of shared life. The Greek view of the Trinity emphasizes not so much the singular nature of the Godhead as the intercommunion of the living persons. Each person is so filled with the energy of self-giving to the others in outpouring love that a reciprocal irruption or unceasing circulation of life results. This is the perichoresis of the Trinity, whereby each person indwells the others and this interchange of love and life is what produces or constitutes the divine unity.\(^ {222}\)

In other words, by defining the Trinity as three persons rather than as three individuals, interbeing is already established. The three persons, by definition, sound through one another. Similarly, if the differentiation between individual and person defines the Trinity, so also does this differentiation inform the nature of the human being. While the individual, or the descriptive self, is defined by ego consciousness, the desire to have, to possess, to judge, and to analyse, the person or full self is defined by union with God, and by extension with the ability to sound through the other.\(^ {223}\)

Bruteau offers an important caveat with regard to the perichoretic love of the Trinity: The three persons of the Trinity, despite their indwelling in the other, nonetheless maintain their boundaries. Interbeing does not assume negation of the other or of the self. Quite the opposite, interbeing depends on unique identities: A being-in-motion must still be an independent being in order to give being away.
Bruteau states: “The Persons are quite independent, quite themselves, quite unique, perfectly free. If they were not, they would not have been able to give creative love and thereby achieve that special kind of unity, the Trinity unity of freely shared life, in which the differentiation is as true as the union.” If the underlying principle behind the perichoretic Trinity is interbeing and if this interbeing is the source of all that is, then relationship becomes the basic ordering principle of not only the Trinity but of reality itself. In this view, Delio states, “God is relationship, matter is relationship, and human life is relationship.”

(2) Secondly, the nature of interbeing within the Trinity is, in Bruteau’s words, an enstatic-ecstatic expression of agapē love. Bruteau coins the word ‘enstasy’ to provide a counterpoint to the ecstatic nature of agapē love. Just as the Trinity expresses both maximum unity and maximum differentiation, so also does it release the parallel energies of enstasy and ecstasy. Bruteau defines enstasy as “pure transcendence, the exquisite inner tranquility of being grounded and remaining within one-self. It is primordial oneness, the energy-less energy of the shimmering stillness of pure silence.... It evokes the most inner pointless point.” Said otherwise, enstasy is love turned inward and at peace in the self. It is the interiority of God manifesting as inner unity. By contrast, ecstasy is the release of love energy, now turned outward to the other. “Ecstasy... encapsulates the enflaming experience of mystical union, of being drawn beyond oneself, floating in endless expanse in the mystery of Love’s boundlessness. The fluidity of the term enables it to hold the experience of transcendence in union with God. Whether we dissolve in darkness, or are filled with light, ecstasy describes expanding beyond the mind, releasing all boundaries, feeling lost in another, becoming no-thing.” According to Bruteau, God is perpetual simultaneous enstatic-ecstatic energy, perfectly still and unified within Godself, while nonetheless ecstatically emptying as formless agapē from one person to another within the Trinity. It is not that God’s character is loving or that God relates through love; rather love energy, agapē, is God. In the threefoldness of God, each person of the Trinity unfolds into the other in an ecstatic ongoing expression of love. Reflecting on Bruteau’s work in this regard, contemplative Kerrie Hide writes:

[A]gape is not a response. Nor is it a divine attribute. God is Agape. God cannot be God without being Agape. God-Agape is personal, intimate, self-disclosing and self-giving. God-Agape is the bountiful Love-energy that is existence. Endless, without origin, without source, Agape arises from emptiness, from nothing. It is prevenient, unconditional, loving because Love loves. Agape is intimate creative union that ‘ones’ as it seeks the fullness of love. It is the fire of Love-energy that is at the core of evolution that Teilhard urges us to harness. Agape is who we are.

(3) A third principle of the Trinity emerges from the understanding that creation is joined with the Trinity through its participation with the cosmic Christ. This assertion rests on the differentiation between the human Jesus and the cosmic Christ. While the human Jesus manifests his personal union
with God, the cosmic Christ manifests the union of all creation with God. Jesus, as human and divine, is the full flowering of a self through whom a healthy both-and relation of the deeper and descriptive self has emerged. In Jesus, the formlessness of God unites with the formlessness of the deeper self to create the form of Jesus’ descriptive self. The cosmic Christ, however, is larger in scope than the human Jesus. If Jesus is the unity between form and formlessness within one person, then the cosmic Christ is the unity between form and formlessness in all of creation. While in this view Jesus is understood as the Christ, the Christ is not limited to the person of Jesus. From a Trinitarian perspective, the implication is profound: If creation is the cosmic Christ, then all of creation, alongside Jesus, participates in the Trinity. Self and other enter into union with the Trinitarian God through participation in Christ. In this view, the Trinity now explodes with meaning. No longer an intellectual construct with little meaning for the human condition, the self, through Jesus and as a participant in the cosmic Christ, participates in the waterwheel of Trinitarian love and in the ongoing creation of the world. The self becomes a co-participant in the Trinity and by extension, becomes a co-participant in the ongoing creation of the world.

As forerunner of the Christ and as an exemplar of the pre-existing Christ, Jesus becomes a template for the pathway from ego consciousness to unitive consciousness. More than template, Jesus is also the primary person-to-person relationship through whom the self becomes entrained to the energy of the Godhead. Recalling the I-I frame, Bruteau proposes that to entrain oneself to Jesus is to “lean back” into him, to engage in the subject-subject nature of the I-I experience, coming to think as Jesus thinks, feel as Jesus feels, breathe as Jesus breathes. She states:

[T]he last dualism to go is the dualism between subject and object. To say that we cannot know as an object is to say that we cannot know it as another, as something that stands opposite us that we look at. That is why we do not face Jesus in order to move closer to him, but rather lean back into him. Were we to face him, we would always remain outside him. We do not look at him. You can’t see a subject that way. ‘Looking at’ would turn him into an object and you would see only the surface of his being, the outside. To know the subject, you have to enter inside the subject, enter into that subject’s own awareness, that is, have that same awareness yourself in your own subjectivity: ‘Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 2:5).

It is like receiving the stigmata of the crucified. You do not look at the crucified one; you yourself feel the pain in your own body. You become the crucified. Entering the heart of Jesus is like that. You don’t regard the experience of Jesus, you become the experience. You yourself experience it in your subjectivity.”

(4) A fourth principle that allows the Trinity to act as an intercirculatory template for self and other, is found in the conviction that to participate in the Trinity is to take on the mind of Christ, to participate in kenosis. Kenosis is the self-emptying energy observed in the hymn from Paul’s letter to the
Kenosis is Jesus on the cross. It is also Jesus ministering to the woman who touched his cloak. In short, kenosis is the very life breath of the energy of Jesus' ministry. Kenosis also reveals a key point of wisdom associated with the contemplative journey, already seen earlier in this chapter: The journey to God is more a way of descent as it is a way of ascent. The self does not attain unity with God by its own effort or by the accumulation of achievements. Instead, the self falls into unity with God through perpetual surrender into the oceanic love of God, the ultimate Other. Bourgeault states: “[T]he way to God is not up but down.... [T]he Jesus mystery is ultimately not about ascent but about descent; its epicenter lies not in subtilization but in kenosis, self-emptying.” To be clear, the point here is not to denigrate the self. Instead, the contemplative insight draws its strength from the model of the Trinity: Kenosis, after all, is precisely what the three persons of the Trinity do with one another—each emptying into the other. In this spirit, the self-emptying of the self is the gift of love from one to another (or even to oneself) that arises from the energetic life source of the deeper self, where God and self are one. In other words, self-emptying has a dual purpose: It releases the tendency to cling to or reject the deeper or descriptive selves, and in so doing, it opens the self to a grander purpose—creative participation in creation itself, the self-emptying giving away of love only to be refreshed by love returned.

(5) The fifth principle of the Trinity as template for self and other is found in the very structure of the Trinity as a prerequisite for the expression of agapē love. This principle depends on a comparison of solitariness, twofoldness, and threefoldness. Solitariness cannot love, as alone there is only self-love. Twofoldness cannot easily love insofar as twofoldness readily falls into dualism, polarities and symmetrical mutual entrenchment. By contrast, threefoldness by its asymmetrical nature releases energy and demands movement and change. By this definition, threefoldness is required for love to flow. Said otherwise, a waterwheel of love cannot flow between two poles. By breaking symmetry, threefoldness creates the possibility of the energetic and perpetual outpouring of love. Author Oliver Clément states:

A solitary God could not be “love without limits.” A God who made himself twofold, according to a pattern common in mythology, would make himself the root of an evil multiplicity to which he could only put a stop by reabsorbing it into himself. The Three-in-One denotes the perfection of Unity... fulfilling itself in communion and becoming the source and foundation of all communion. It suggests the perpetual surmounting of contradiction.

Bourgeault adds: “God must exist as a ‘community of God-persons’ to express this radically diffusive and interabiding nature of love.” Reflecting on Bruteau’s perspective in this regard, Hide states as follows:

In order for love to flow there must be a minimum of three persons, so that the Self-giving is total, mutual indwelling as one and many. The persons remain within themselves in enstasy, yet
simultaneously express their differentiated identity giving themselves ecstatically, creating perichoresis, an encircling dance of one in another.

In the encircling perichoresis, each Lover gives Self to the other person in ecstasy, unites in the Loved One’s enstasy, and together as one, they love the third Beloved. The three persons become one ‘I.’ … The encircling enstatic-enstatic burgeoning of one in another continues. Each Lover loves totally. Each is both Lover and Beloved. Each is both one and many. The whole Trinity is an exchange of creative union, one in another in communion. Each says to the other: ‘May you be.’ Each imparts pure, conscious, creative, dynamic Agape. This same encircling dance of Love, Beloved, Lover exchanging Agape naturally overflows into creation. Agape incarnates, becomes flesh through speaking the Word into creation, and God’s ecstasy creates the world.

(6) The culmination of this understanding of the Trinity leads us to a sixth and final principle: the ongoing evolution of consciousness and creation itself. According to Bourgeault, the Trinity is a cosmogonic organising principle that is replicated in the world and is stamped into the “face” of creation. Delio echoes this sentiment when she proposes that “[creation] is generated out of the fecundity of God’s love.” The triadic structure of the Trinity and perpetual outpouring of love it makes possible drives evolution and the perpetual recreation of the world. Seen in this way, Trinity becomes a creative force, continually creating through the force field of kenotic love, participating in and creating the evolutionary emergent future. Just as the three energies of the Trinity are in perpetual motion, so also is the cosmos in perpetual motion, always being formed and reformed anew. Bourgeault states: “[T]hreefoldness is by nature ‘ecstatic’ or, in other words, self-projective. By its very threefoldness [the Trinity] … projects the agapē loves outward, calling new forms of being into existence, each of which bears the imprint of the original symbiotic unity [of God] that created it.”

If the threefoldness of God and the nature of agapē love are inherent in one another, then agapē demands threefoldness just as threefoldness demands agapē. According to Delio, Trinitarian agapē love is not simply a feeling or a chemical rush in the brain: It is the nature of evolution itself. As the three persons of the Trinity pour love into one another and receive love from one another, their triadic energy must be transformational in nature. Not only does it “resolve” the binary polarity of the opposing forces of twofoldness, by virtue of the energetic field created by the interplay of the three, the Trinity creates the new. From the perspective of the history of the world, this is evolution. Trinity’s ongoing and perpetual energetic interbeing as the source of creation was not simply a one-time event in history. Rather, the Trinity continues to be expressed in the ongoing recreation of creation—i.e., through evolution. Referring to Teilhard’s work in this regard, Delio writes: “For Teilhard, love is a passionate force at the heart of the Big Bang universe, the fire that breathes life into matter and unifies
elements center to center; love is deeply embedded in the cosmos, a ‘cosmological force.’” More than an emotion of attraction, love is the energy of creation itself. Delio continues:

Love is not sheer emotion or simply a dopaminergic surge in the limbic system; it is much more deeply embedded in the fabric of the universe. Love is the integrated energy field, the center of all centers, the whole of every whole, that makes each whole desire more wholeness. While love-energy may not explicitly show itself on the level of the pre-living and the non-reflective, it is present inchoately as the unifying principle of wholeness as entities evolve toward greater complexity.

The principle of ongoing creativity and evolution has significant implications for both the cosmos and the human condition within it. In this view, an obvious yet oft-forgotten truth is remembered: Creation is unfinished; creation is still in the act of becoming. Moreover, rather than a static universe and a distant God, the contemplative view of evolution argues for a loving participant God, who, by activity of the Trinitarian relation, is still creating the universe in an ongoing way. Furthermore, as co-participants in the Trinity, human persons, as members of the cosmic Christ, become co-participants in an ongoing and emergent future.

What Teilhard saw at a cosmological level with regard to the Trinity, Bruteau translated to the interpersonal. If \textit{agapē} love is the expression of cosmological evolution, so also is \textit{agapē} love the expression of personal transformation or “evolution” at the personal level. The perpetual kenotic outpouring of \textit{agapē} love creates and recreates itself in the transformation of self and in the relationships between self and other, whether interpersonally or globally. We recall here that as the three persons of the Trinity give themselves to the other, while their distinctiveness is retained, they nonetheless move toward becoming a unified whole. This principle holds within humanity as well. As the self pours itself into the other, self and other remain distinct even as they become a unified whole. Delio echoes this sentiment, suggesting that “Love is a consciousness of belonging to another, of being part of a whole. To love is to be on the way toward integral wholeness, to live with an openness of mind and heart, to encounter the other—not as stranger—but as another part of oneself.”

Likely, Bruteau would nudge Delio further, saying that one’s encounter with the other is not as another part of oneself but as oneself in the both-and nature of self and other, \textit{as} and \textit{as-not} one another.

\textbf{4.f.ii The Trinity and the Transformation of the Self-Other Frame}

Several implications of the Trinity for the transformation of the self-other frame readily present themselves. If the self is to pattern itself after Jesus and the template his life creates, if the nature of Jesus’ life is kenotic love, and if that love is the nature of Trinity itself, then it follows that the
relationship between self and other is to be defined by this same kenotic self-giving and outpouring of agapē love. Said otherwise, if the Trinity manifests as three persons sounding through one another in a perpetual waterwheel of kenotic love and reveals both independence and interbeing through whom threefoldness creates the new, then the Trinity becomes a metaphysical masterpiece with implications for human relationships. According to Teilhard and Bruteau, agapē love is the energy of evolution—both at the cosmic and interpersonal levels. If this is so, then agapē also becomes the moral imperative that drives the evolution or transformation of the self-other frame. Bruteau states:

If the paradigm of being is the Trinitarian perichoresis, the mutual indwelling of the Divine Persons in one another and the production of their unity out of the intensity of their self-giving to one another... then we ourselves must also be like this.... And thus [we] may all overlap and interpenetrate each other with an intimacy that we can scarcely imagine, because we think of intimacy and maintenance of individual personhood as inversely proportional. But the revelation of the Divine Being may be precisely this, that it extends the intimacy of its interior life to all of us and that in fact this is the only way in which it is possible for a spiritual being to exist.245

The nature of the Trinity creates a template upon which the true nature of being can rest. Bruteau laments that “we have not had a metaphysics to sustain our morality.”246 By this she means that the underlying philosophical frame that governs society has been driven by competition, by seeing others as other than self, by seeing the self as the primary point of reference, and by, in the words of Buber, living according to a distorted I-It frame. As already quoted earlier, Bruteau states: “The basic recommendation for the good life is not to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself, or even in the same way as your love yourself. It is to love your neighbour as actually being yourself. The fundamental perception of selfhood has to change before we can have the moral world we want.”247 Here we come full circle to the descriptive and deeper self. The deeper self that is one with God is also one with all that is. By extension, the deeper self must also be one with the other. In the context of conflict, this changes the playing field. Self and other are already one. The question is not how to become one or united with one another; the question is how to live into the oneness that already exists.

In addition to kenosis and the outpouring of agapē love, it is the threefoldness of the Trinity that gives language, frame, and structure to the nature of this love. As already stated, twofoldness is, by its nature, dualistic, which encourages the creation of a stalemate. By contrast, the Trinity allows for the imbalance required for energy to flow and the new to be created. Recognizing that the frames of domination and separation are associated with dualistic and binary thinking, Bruteau argues for a new metaphysics based on threefoldness rather than twofoldness. However, as we observed in chapter 3, threefoldness by its nature does not necessarily lead to an agapē outpouring of love. Indeed, the arrival of a third party can just as easily entrench conflict as transform conflict. The difference between these
two outcomes, we stated, depends on whether the third party aligns or walks alongside the primary parties. While an aligned third party can be regarded as an expression of threefoldness, in reality it is an expression of deepening twofoldness, as alignment only duplicates the binary nature of twofoldness rather than awakening the transformation threefoldness allows. Dualisms, as we have seen, are by their nature an expression of entrenchment. The conundrum here is whether dualism, like triadic structures, can be self-multiplying. The evidential answer in this regard must be yes. The difference here is that dualisms self-multiply as dualisms and are actually an expression of devolution, whereas triadic structures self-multiply as the creation of something new and, as a result, are an expression of evolution. In chapter 3 we stated that for third parties to become agents of transformation, they must regard the primary parties with a stance of unconditional positive regard. It is in an environment of unconditional positive regard that avoids alignment and the deepening of twofoldness. Akin to unconditional positive regard, it is when the waterwheel of agapē love flows that the evolution of relationships from conflict to transformed conflict can occur.

If what has been said thus far is true, then self and other can take comfort in the fact that their conflict and the transformation of their conflict is taking place on a landscape already established by the Trinity. It is not simply that the Trinity creates a moral imperative. It is that the Trinity establishes the landscape of reality itself, changing the very operating system of the mind. As the self, in the practice of contemplative spirituality, is drawn ever further into unitive consciousness and into co-participation in the Trinity itself, the self begins to see and experience the world differently. The self comes to embody the energy of threefoldness, shifting out of binary ways of thinking and sinking into the agapē love that drives the waterwheel of transformation.

4.f.iii The Law of Three

As contemporary contemplatives reflect on the Trinity, an additional principle emerges. While the Trinity is seen to reveal the nature of evolution at the level of the cosmos and the personal, many propose that the triadic structure of the Trinity reveals a deeper structure of reality itself. Specifically, the interaction between three forces is seen to be the nature of not only theology, philosophy, and metaphysics but also of science, dance, nature, and also conflict. As we have already seen, binary systems are either stable as the poles mutually oppose one another, or they simply swing like a pendulum from one extreme to the other. Alternately, binary systems may also resolve their tension by seeking a compromise between the opposing forces, rather than producing something entirely new. In contrast, as with the Trinity, triadic systems are asymmetrical and therefore dynamic and energetic.
The presence of a third force transforms the energy between the first and second forces, generating something new altogether. This is neither a pendulum swing nor a compromise solution. The asymmetry inherent in threefoldness propels the three forces forward, making the creation of something entirely new possible. This is, in Bourgeault’s words, a “dialectic whose resolution [by the insertion of a third force] simultaneously creates a new realm of possibility.”250 While the expression of threefoldness and the association with evolution is affirmed by a contemplative understanding of Trinity, a Law of Three is proposed by some contemplatives to explain multiple dimensions of threefoldness and to untie threefoldness from strict association with the three persons of the Trinity. In this view, the Trinity is the prototype that presages and reflects a metaphysical Law of Three.

To support an understanding of the Law of Three, Bourgeault borrows from her training in the teachings of G.I. Guerdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky.251 These twentieth century esoteric mystics, while complex and problematic in their own right, nonetheless articulate a Law of Three from which Bourgeault draws. According to Bourgeault, the intuition among Christian mystics regarding the import of the triadic structure of the Trinity finds resonance in the teachings of these esoteric mystics who similarly observe a Law of Three in the structure of creation. Bourgeault states: “The Law of Three... stipulates that every phenomenon, on every scale (from subatomic to cosmic) and in every domain (physical, sociological, pyscho-spiritual) is the result of the interweaving of three independent forces: the first active (or ‘affirming’...), the second passive (or ‘denying’), and the third neutralizing (or ‘reconciling’).”252 According to Bourgeault, correctly establishing the nature of these three forces is important. The Hegelian model of thesis/antithesis/synthesis, for example, does not cohere with the Law of Three because synthesis is seen as a compromise between thesis and antithesis, rather than the birth of something new. Bourgeault continues:

[T]he third force is the independent line of action, co-equal with the other two, and not simply a product of the other two. Just as it takes three strands of hair to make a braid, it takes three individual lines of action to make a new arising. Until this third term enters, the two forces remain at impasse. Once it enters, the situation is catapulted into a whole new ballpark.253

Several principles emerge from the Law of Three to support its positioning as the structure of reality itself. (1) While first and second forces are respectively described as active or affirming and passive or denying, these titles are not offered as value statements. Instead, first and second forces, and the words used to describe these forces, are neutral terms meant to convey the nature of the energetic experience. The conflict between first and second forces, for example, can be seen as affirming current reality and denying current reality, leading to an impasse that the incursion of third force is able to transform. (2) First, second, and third forces are roles, not titles. They can represent three people, three
groups, three ideas, three things of matter, or any combination of these categories. Those who inhabit these roles do so situationally only, as new situations allow for a reassignment of roles in new configurations. (3) The incursion of a third force depends on the capacity for both-and thinking. (4) The transformation of the impasse between first and second forces creates something new—a fourth energy. (5) Fourth energy creates the new “normal” upon which the next energetic triadic relationship begins. In other words, fourth energy becomes the new first force. (6) The nature of how the triadic structure evolves over time follows a Law of Seven, which describes the distinct stages of transformation a system undergoes as it moves toward “completion.” While the Law of Seven lies beyond the scope of this thesis, it is enough to say that the Law of Seven intuits what we have already seen with respect to the threefold path: Any system makes multiple passes through the Law of Three on its ongoing journey of transformation.

Several examples of the Law of Three readily present themselves. The threefold path, seen earlier in chapter 4, is an example of the Law of Three. Wonder and suffering can be seen as first and second force. Transformation interacts with these two forces to create the new. One could also argue that when two people are in conflict they represent first and second forces. The addition of the mediator may or may not function as third force. If the mediator simply brokers a compromise, nothing new is created and the situation is not fundamentally transformed. If the mediator aligns with either of the parties, the binary frame they inhabit is simply duplicated. If, however, the mediator comes alongside both parties, bringing an energy that transforms the relationship between the parties, something new is created, and the interpersonal evolution of the relationship between the parties turns once more.

4. f. iv The Law of Three, the Trinity, and the Triangle-Polarities Model

Both the Law of Three and the triangle-polarities model established in chapter 3 see the incursion of a third force as the transforming potential for change and both use a triadic structure to map reality or conflict, respectively. Where the two differ lies in scope—the triangle-polarities model does not seek to establish a metaphysics to describe reality. Instead, it is focused primarily on conflict, whether intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, or intergroup. The models also differ with respect to their interpretation of third force energy. While the Law of Three declares that third force energy depends on both-and thinking, the triangle-polarities model provides concrete tools and strategies for recognising and manifesting this form of thinking. The triangle-polarities model, like the Law of Three, proposes that the addition of a third force changes situations. The triangle-polarities model suggests, however, that
when third force energy aligns with first and second forces, the third force only “changes” the situation insofar as it duplicates itself rather than creating something genuinely new.

When the triangle-polarities model and the Law of Three are placed in dialogue with the concept of Trinity, additional parallels—and points of tension—present themselves. All three models share in common the discovery that triadic structures and third force energy contribute to the birthing of the new, including the birthing of transformation. All three also make a value claim regarding the nature of third force energy though this value claim is developed more thoroughly by the concepts of emotional triangles and Trinity. While a natural parallel exists between the unconditional positive regard seen in the concept of emotional triangles and the Trinitarian concept of *agapē* love, the Trinity differs from the triangle-polarities model in that it assumes *agapē* for all three forces.

As we have seen, threefoldness can become driven as much by ego consciousness as twofoldness, leading to devolution rather than evolution. With respect to conflict transformation, Trinity can influence how third force interacts with first and second forces. If the outpouring of *agapē* love is the nature of Trinity, if the kenotic outpouring of love is the structure of evolution itself, and if would-be third force players wish to participate in evolutionary transformation, then the moral imperative of third force players is that they must be governed and govern according to this same *agapē* love.

While Bourgeault allows for the words “active, affirming; passive, denying; neutralizing and reconciling” to describe the three forces, she recognizes that they are problematic insofar as existing associations with these words create misunderstandings. From the perspective of conflict transformation, these terms are similarly problematic. Even a more neutral term, such as ‘second force,’ can become problematic when first and second force are seen as static conditions. While according to the Law of Three, the three forces are roles and not static positions, even the association of first force with “current reality” and second force with “change” nonetheless establishes a hierarchy that limits the possibility of transformation. In the reality of conflict, by the time the parties know they are in conflict, first and second force energies have alternated roles so often and with such rapidity that the players, if they are honest with themselves, can hardly parse out who played what role when. Ironically, one of the key features of conflict is that those involved frequently wish to determine precisely who played first and second force roles. While conflict participants will not likely use this language, their inclination to determine who represents the established norm and who represents the trouble-maker norm casts people into roles that themselves become a source of tension. Unfortunately, the impulse to establish who “affirmed” and who “denied” entrenches conflict further. While recognizing this dynamic and seeking to neutralize the three force terms, the Law of Three nonetheless falls into a potential trap by
ignoring the dynamic and rapidly changing nature of these roles. As we have seen, by intentionally equalizing, honouring, and engaging the primary conflict players with unconditional positive regard, conflict transformation seeks to upend the hierarchy games conflicting parties seek to play with one another.

The challenge of language aside, the Law of Three makes an important contribution with respect to the value of resistance or conflict, or what the Law of Three refers to as second force. Although Teilhard did not pursue a Law of Three metaphysics, his intuition regarding the nature of evolution led him to a conclusion that the Law of Three naturally affirms. As we have already seen, according to Teilhard, sin, resistance, and suffering are endemic to the ongoing nature of being as becoming. They are the “counterstroke of life.”257 Given the close association between conflict and sin, we can modify this statement to say that conflict, too, is not a problem to be eradicated but rather a counterstroke of life. Bourgeault echoes Teilhard’s insight when she states:

Denying (second force) is never an obstacle to be overcome but always a legitimate and essential component of the new manifestation.... The ‘enemy’ is never the enemy but a necessary part of the ‘givens’ in any situation, and solutions will never work that have as their goals the elimination of second force.... [R]esistance must be factored in: not simply to cover one’s bases but because it is an indispensable ingredient in the forward motion.258

The Law of Three affirms that resistance, sin, and conflict are not simply unfortunate by-products of misguided human behaviour. Instead, according to this view, “second force” energies may be required for change to occur. Said otherwise, suffering and conflict may be written into the human condition in order to produce enough dynamism in the triadic system for evolution to occur. As stated earlier, this is not an easy conclusion as it risks instrumentalizing suffering.

The necessity of suffering may be easier to accept at the cosmic level. It can be even easier to accept at a theological level where crucifixion is affirmed as the precursor to resurrection. Nonetheless, this assertion can be harder to accept at the very personal level. In this regard, the theological model of the Trinity offers greater comfort than the abstract Law of Three is able to provide. When the Trinity is taken as the underlying structure of reality, the suffering of the self occurs on the landscape of a God who co-suffers, on the foundation of a God who sustains through suffering, and in a force field of love so profound and so deep that the self is already “saved” despite all appearances to the contrary. This is not to suggest that “life will be better after you die.” Instead, this is a theology that promises that even in the midst of suffering there is meaning and that the self, even in suffering, is never alone. It is a theology that holds that when the self exists in unity with the Godhead, the experience of suffering changes in multiple ways. The self moves into suffering without (or with reduced) fear alongside a type of
acceptance of the reality of the now. It is a suffering that knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is held in the embrace of a sustaining power and love. It is also a theology that recognizes that the self in union with God gains a strength of discernment regarding appropriate actions to be taken in response to suffering that in a state of ego-consciousness are harder to see. It is also a theology that allows self and other to move through the suffering of conflict in a manner that allows a bridge between them to emerge.

4.4 Summary and Conclusions

Given what we have said thus far, what emerges with regard to what contemplative spirituality offers us with regard to our search for a bridge between self and other? And how does contemplative spirituality further the concept of conflict transformation? In response to these questions, the following summary and conclusions are proposed:

(1) One of the unique contributions of Christian contemplative spirituality is its ability to uphold the *is* and *is-not* nature of reality, honouring both distinction and union with respect to self and God and, by extension, with regard to self and other. This correlates closely with the polarities model developed in chapter 3. It also suggests that with regard to the self-other divide, while self and other are distinct, they are also one. With a view to conflict transformation, unity with the other is not simply conceivable, it is already the nature of reality, even as self and other are distinct from one another. While conflict theory already understands that self and other are distinct, the insight that self and other are also already one is a unique and critical contribution to the conflict transformation conversation. This proposes that conversations about differences begin on a landscape of unity rather than disunity. This insight has the potential to influence and inform how conflict transformation occurs.

(2) By differentiating between the deeper and descriptive forms of selfhood, contemplatives offer several key insights that influence the self-other divide and that bring into focus the transformation of conflict. If self and other operate at the level of their descriptive selves only, their relation can be regarded through the I-It frame or technical dialogue. If self and other disregard their deeper selves altogether, monologue disguised as dialogue may well occur. If self and other locate the centre of their selfhood with their deeper self, however, then necessary technical dialogue will allow for moments of genuine dialogue to occur.

(3) While contemplative spirituality recognises the need for both selves, it also proposes that it is the exclusive alignment with the descriptive self that causes the fall into the false self and establishes the self-other divide. When the descriptive self is taken as the sum total of identity, whether for self or
other, and when the deeper self is excluded from the full nature of selfhood, the negative expression of
the descriptive self emerges. Described as ego consciousness, this negative expression is associated with
the tendency to divide the world according to judgements of good-bad, better-worse, right-wrong, etc.
It is also driven by attachments and aversions, wanting self, other, and the world to be different than
they are. At the level of the false self, the self gains its identity precisely because it is not the other,
setting up false hierarchies based on manufactured scarcity and subjective judgements of what does and
does not have value. The naturally dualistic frame of the false self puts one above the other, creating
systems of domination that alienate and separate self and other. Furthermore, in this frame when the
descriptive self is injured, one’s “who I am” is injured. This drives a need for compensation, thereby
dividing self and other further, causing conflict to ensue.

When differences shift from disagreement into conflict, a corollary shift from the full to the false
self occurs. Because conflict is associated with the division between self and other at the level of the
descriptive self that causes the fall into the false self, and because the needs that conflict awakens
reside at this same level, when the centre of one’s identity also resides at the place of one’s needs it
becomes difficult to discern well. In other words, if the location of discernment rests in the same place
as the location of the need, the self cannot effectively determine which needs are being awakened by
the other and which are being awakened by the back-story of the self. As a result, the self cannot
effectively discern how to respond to the other in a transformative fashion: Wounds trump effective
reflection; pain overrides compassion.

(4) As already stated, at the level of the deeper self, self and other are already one. Because of
this, the pursuit of the deeper self, rather than being an act of individualism, by definition is an act of
community. Ironically, it is the reduction of self and other to their descriptors that places the self ahead
of (or behind) the other. The deeper self is not defined by the categories of good-bad, better-worse,
etc., or past and future. This creates a type of freedom within the self and in the relationship between
self and other, allowing self and other to open themselves to surprise, wonder, and the newness of the
present moment. From the perspective of conflict transformation, this opens those involved to the
possibility of an I-Thou encounter. The release of past and future also allows for a contemplative
definition of forgiveness to emerge. By living in the now and by being grounded in the awareness of the
deeper selves of both self and other, forgiveness becomes a creative act, affirming the essential deeper
self of the other while not negating the harm done.

(5) In chapter 2 we saw that one of the key elements that causes disagreement to shift into
conflict is when selfhood is perceived as being under threat; contemplative spirituality speaks directly
into this dynamic. When the core of one’s identity is located in the deeper self, selfhood is never at risk. The self can relate to the other without anxiety. This reduces the shift from disagreement into conflict; it also allows the self to more readily return to the place of disagreement when steps into conflict have been taken. Rooted in the deeper self, the self neither diminishes the other nor is threatened by diminishments to the self by the other.

(6) According to Bruteau, the tendency to order the world according to the false self creates a metaphysics that enshrines domination, alienation, and separation, dividing self and other and driving conflict. Bruteau proposes a new metaphysics, one that profoundly honours the fundamental unity of self and other. This unity is not simply a unity of the deeper selves of self and other. Instead, while preserving distinction, this unity honours the unity of self and other in the fullness of themselves. To drive this point home, Bruteau proposes an I-I rather than I-Thou frame, where the self learns to see with the eyes of the other, allowing the needs of the other—even at the level of the descriptive self—to become the needs of the self. This allows self and other to genuinely meet their mutual human needs for belonging, recognition, autonomy, security, and meaning without descending into the division these needs frequently create.

(7) While contemplatives seek to hold the descriptive and deeper selves together, they nonetheless prioritize the deeper self over the descriptive self. The deeper self animates the descriptive self, giving it life and meaning. This ordering establishes a key difference between conflict theory and contemplative spirituality. While conflict theory places foundational human needs at the centre of selfhood, contemplative spirituality places the centre of selfhood with the deeper self, transferring human needs to the landscape of the descriptive self. While the full self, as proposed by contemplatives, honours human needs, these needs no longer carry within themselves the power to threaten the self or to thrust the self into unhealthy conflict behaviours. This is key: While conflict theorists place their hopes on the satisfaction of people’s basic underlying needs, contemplatives propose an alternative operating system altogether—one that does not deny these needs yet relativizes them by placing the foundation of being elsewhere.

(8) Within the Christian contemplative tradition, an alternative operating system is proposed, one that is referred to as unitive consciousness. Unitive consciousness emerges within the self as the self comes to know itself as being in union with God, with the other, and with all of creation. The incarnation of Jesus becomes the root metaphor of the unitive frame. As both human (descriptive self) and divine (deeper self), Jesus establishes the unity between the two selves. At the same time, Jesus becomes the example of the possibility of true agapē love. In unitive consciousness the either-or, self-
other divide begins to crumble, allowing a both-and view of the world to emerge. While contemplatives have preferred the deeper self over the descriptive self, by applying the polarities framework to the model of the self, we have proposed that a more accurate reading of unitive consciousness also allows the two selves to be regarded through a both-and rather than an either-or frame. It is the distortion of each, the deeper and the descriptive selves, that causes the fall into the false self. Unitive consciousness allows several either-or constructs to fall away, including that of a dominating God and its corollary, the dominance-based social structure, as well as the either-or of daily life polarities, and the either-or of the self and other divide.

(9) In the field of conflict transformation, the transformation of self, self-other, and society are the “products” being pursued. In contemplative spirituality, unitive consciousness is the product or goal; transformation is the by-product, albeit one that is simultaneously achieved. For contemplatives, this changes the starting point with regard to the building of bridges between self and other. Unitive consciousness assures self and other of their natural home in God where both are already secure; it dispossesses the self from over-alignment with its descriptors so that a healthy and meaningful engagement with self and other can occur; it establishes the existing unity between self and other; it dispossess the self of its attachments and aversions, including the attachments to the self-other divide; and it allows an ease or peacefulness to emerge, even in the midst of difficult-to-solve conflicts.

(10) Contemplatives propose the practice of spiritual disciplines, following a threefold path of wonder, surrender, and transformation to awaken unitive consciousness and to transform both the self and the self-other relation. These disciplines and this path honour the presence of God in self and other, they respect the descriptive cloaks each is given, they surrender attachments and aversions, and they open space within the self for the other, even as the distinction between self and other is upheld.

(11) The Trinity, as seen through the contemplative lens, becomes an important template upon which the self-other dynamic can be transformed. If the nature of Jesus’ life is kenotic love, if that love is the nature of Trinity itself, and if the self participates with the Trinity through its inclusion in the cosmic Christ, then it follows that the relationship between self and other is to be defined by this same kenotic self-giving and outpouring agapē love even as the distinction between self and other, like the distinction of each person of the Trinity, is upheld. The Trinity, alongside a Law of Three, also affirms the insights established in chapter 3 with regard to the emotional triangle dynamic. The addition of third energy— driven by the agapē love of the Trinity—breaks the binary dynamic of twofoldness, allowing the possibility of positive transformation to emerge.
In summary, contemplative spirituality creates an architecture of being that has the potential to profoundly transform both the self and the self-other divide. As the deeper self and descriptive self come into a both-and relationship with one another a shift in consciousness occurs that allows a similar both-and frame to emerge in the self-other relation. Disagreements, acts of injustice, reparations of harm, and efforts to transform conflict now occur on a landscape governed by a both-and frame, allowing for a quality of engagement driven by an honouring of mutual humanity even in the midst of difficult conversations and negotiations. Within the Christian contemplative tradition, this both-and frame rests on a similar both-and, is and is-not, unity between self and God. It also rests on the kenotic, outpouring waterwheel of love as seen among the three members of the Trinity—which through the cosmic understanding of the Christ, also includes self and other.

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2 Dorothee Sölle, *Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 45. (When Sölle’s work is translated into English, her name is usually spelled ‘Soelle;’ I will use the German spelling throughout, except in the Bibliography.)
3 Ibid., 1.
5 Early in his career, Buber saw himself as a mystic. Buber made a radical turn away from mysticism when one day, caught in his mystic reverie, he shooed away a young man who had come to talk with him. Later, Buber discovered that the young man took his own life after leaving Buber’s home. Troubled by what he saw as his own lack of compassion and as his preference for the ephemeral over the real, Buber left the mystic life to focus on relationships between people. One could argue that when the young man came to his door, Buber engaged him through the lens of an I-It frame. Upon hearing of the young man’s death and swearing off mysticism, Buber honoured the man’s memory by seeking to relate to the other, as consistently as possible, with the I-Thou frame. (See Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 161–165.)
6 Sölle’s voice on this matter is especially clear: see *Silent Cry*, 52–54.
8 In Eastern Christianity and early Western Christianity, the terms that match most closely with unitive consciousness are “deification” or “divinisation.” Over the centuries, Eastern Christianity has kept this concept much more alive than mainstream Western Christianity. In Western Christianity, this idea has been kept alive primarily by contemplatives, though key theological leaders have spoken to this as well. (See for example, Carl Mosser, “The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (2002). For the purposes of this thesis, these ideas will be explored primarily through the twentieth and twenty-first century Western Christian tradition.
9 Ibid.
10 Bourgeault, “Nondual Consciousness,” (Online presentation for the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation, Unit One, 2016).
13 In *Silent Cry*, Sölle provides an excellent summary of the history of contemplative experience in this regard.
14 With the exception of Sölle, each of the authors cited thus far are American. Unfortunately, we have seen relatively little written by Canadians with respect to contemplative spirituality, with the exception of J. Philip Newell, based for some years in Scotland and author of *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 1997) and the German-Canadian, Eckhart Tolle, who writes from a secular perspective. For more by Tolle, see his book *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999).
18 Ibid.
19 Bruteau, *Radical Optimism*, 22 (ego consciousness and true self), and 77–88 (descriptive self and transcendent self).
21 Ibid., 82.
22 Bruteau, *Radical Optimism*, 22.
24 Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 6. Finley goes on to say, “God wants us to have a healthy ego, because when our ego consciousness is not healthy we suffer and those around us suffer.”
25 Ibid.
28 Bourgeault, *Inner Awakening*, 103
29 Bruteau, *Radical Optimism*, 77–78.
31 Bruteau, “Prayer and Identity,” 93.
33 Ibid., 77. Bruteau’s italics. In her article “Prayer and Identity,” Bruteau writes: “A self that identifies itself as excluding and negating other beings—that defines itself by saying ‘I am I insofar as I am not you’—necessarily must defend its finite being against the competitive presence of all other finite beings. All other beings must be dealt with in some way so that they enhance, or at least protect, one’s own being and do not harm it. One must either destroy them, or convert them to one’s own use, or possibly arrange to live in a subordinate and dependent position relative to a stronger being. Very rarely one may work out a fairly equal symbiotic relation of interdependence. All relations are relations of ‘having,’ as distinguished from ‘being,’ beginning with ‘having’ existence, and these relations are important to the self for maintaining existence and making its life worthwhile” (93).
34 Bruteau, *Radical Optimism*, 78.
For example, Bourgeault writes in *Inner Awakening*, “Whether healthy or unhealthy, the ego is still the ego and as such is still inescapably tied to the domain of the lower, or provisional, selfhood” (104).

Bruteau, “Identity and Prayer,” 94.


Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 213.


Ibid., 137.

Bourgeault, *Inner Awakening*, 137.

Ibid.


James Finley, “The Middle Way,” (presentation for the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation, Unit 4, Session 1, 2017).

In this statement, we see a connection to the work of René Girard in his book, *The Scapegoat*. Girard also observes the tendency to *mimeses*—wanting what the other has—as a key driver of conflict. For more about Girard see Footnote 107 in chapter 3.

The term “thingify” is not commonly seen. Nonetheless, the act of thingification is a term used among Buber scholars to reflect the shift that allows one to regard the other as an “It.”


In *The Holy Thursday Revolution*, Bruteau states: “We study communication skills to learn how to avoid intruding on other people’s egos and how to keep them from intruding on ours. The unspoken, unquestioned assumption is that this ego-self level is a real and worthy level of being. There is no recognition in this whole affair that the assumptions of this level are themselves the root of the problem. The more we focus attention on this supposed ‘reality,’ even on trying to ‘do it right,’ the more we strengthen its presuppositions.” (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 40.

The well-known Sufi mystic Rumi famously wrote: “Why, when God’s world is so big, / did you fall asleep in a prison / of all places?” (quoted by Sölle, 29–30).


The term “naked” to refer to the true self is used by multiple authors. One of the earliest authors in this regard is from the Christian mystical classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Image Doubleday, 1973), 54.


The use of the term “infinite” to describe the love of God is borrowed from Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 28.


Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 16.


Finley, “The Middle Way”.

Bruteau writes about the same concept as Sölle, arguing similarly against a dominating God. See for example, *The Grand Option*, 37.
Cynthia Bourgeault, “Human Incarnation,” (presentation for the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation, Unit Two, 2016).

Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1989), 158. Sölle writes, “To remember God dissolves dependency on the ego because the ego is said to be a concretization of ‘God-forgetfulness’ and the human brain the organ of that forgetfulness...” (210)


Sölle echoes Merton’s perspective, again quoting Rumi as follows: “[I]t is really a presumptuous claim to say... ‘I am the slave of God’; The man who says ‘I am the slave of God’ affirms two existences: his own and God’s, but he that says... ‘I am God,’ has made himself non-existent and has given himself up and says, ‘I am God,’ i.e., “I am naught, He is all: there is no being but God’s” (*Silent Cry*, 14). Sölle continues: “Without mysticism, the image of the human being deteriorates into that of a consuming and producing machine that neither needs nor is capable of God. Mysticism differs from orthodoxy in that it heralds the capability of humans for God; it differs from our rationalistic orthodoxies of science in that it holds fast to the notion that we need God. The other, without whom we cannot picture ourselves, grounds us in dependency and reliance on the many others. Commonality with these others makes for and sustains life. The highest perfection of human beings remains that they are in need of God” (*Silent Cry*, 44).

See Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013). Delio writes, “God does not abandon us; we abandon God by abandoning ourselves from ourselves, running after little gods. God lives deep within us, as the center of love, but we are often blind to this inner center and drawn by the little gods of power, success, status, and wealth, everything we create for ourselves. Thus we abandon God within for the fleeting gods without. When things go wrong, we run from our little gods and invoke the God of revelation, but we have a difficult time finding this God. The theodicy question is not why God allows bad things to happen to good people but why we abandon God in the face of suffering. If God is love, then our only real hope is in God, because hope is the openness of love to infinite possibilities and new life” (83).

Richard Rohr describes the shift of the holy of holies (and the flame within it) from the temple in Jerusalem, to the person in the book of Acts, some years following the destruction of the temple. (Presentation at the February 2017 Intensive of the Living School, a program of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, NM).

Quoted by Sölle, Ibid., 42. Perhaps one can correlate Bunam’s two pockets to the deeper and descriptive selves. An earth-and-ashes view of self can be associated with the descriptive self. It is tangible, corporeal—and, as we have seen, easily deluded. The self for which the world was created can be associated with the deeper self—the self that in the words of Magdeburg, mingles with the Trinity.

Sölle, Silent Cry, 43.

Rohr has famously said that he prays for one humiliation every day. Finley has quipped that in the race between “getting there” and senility, one can be assured that senility will win.

The image of a shift in one’s basic operating system is borrowed from Cynthia Bourgeault. See especially The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2008), 35.

Finley states, “[W]e must learn to die to our illusions about being dualistically other than God. We must also die to any grandiose delusions that we are God” (Christian Meditation, 144).

Sölle, Silent Cry, 105.


Bruteau, Grand Option, 140–141.

Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 144.


Bourgeault, Heart of Centering Prayer, 44.

See Bruteau, Grand Option, 162ff.

Ibid., 165ff.

Ibid., 52ff.

Ibid.

Ibid., 7. Bruteau’s italics.

Ibid., 131ff.

Bruteau, God’s Ecstasy, 28. According to Kerrie Hide, for Bruteau, “to be a person is to be ‘an act of loving, a process, a flow of Agape.’” (“The Ecstasy of Agape,” in Personal Transformation and a New Creation: The Spiritual Revolution of Beatrice Bruteau, ed. Ilia Delio (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 95)

Bruteau, Grand Option, 53–54.

Ibid., 54. Bruteau states: “We cannot look at or talk about a subject. To do so is to convert it into an object” (Ibid., 51). Bruteau’s italics.

Ibid., 13.

Ibid., 6. “The very heart of you,” Bruteau states, “must lie deeper still than [all the categories in which the self can be placed] and must be able to make you be you.... It lies in the you that is able to initiate actions, in the you that is a free agent” (Ibid.). Bruteau’s italics.

Thomas Keating, The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 44. Keating offers the following in this regard: “The ultimate abandonment of one’s role is not to have a self as a fixed point of reference; it is the freedom to manifest God through one’s own uniqueness.”


Merton, Contemplative Prayer (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2009), 15.

Sölle, Silent Cry, 221.

Bruteau, Radical Optimism, 65–66.
It is for this reason that the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM includes the word “action” in its name. In *The Silent Cry*, Sölle critiques any mysticism that does not turn its face to the other, 52–54.

In *Christian Meditation*, 61, Finley describes how this occurs in the context of meditation.

Finley, “The Middle Way”.


Ibid., 109–110.

Ibid., 110. Bruteau’s italics.

See Bruteau, *God’s Ecstasy*, 162: “[Mystical consciousness] is the immediacy and irreducibility of a subjective experience of knowing by *being* instead of by *representing*. The object of consciousness is in this case the subject itself. When the subject is aware of the subject, not by reflection—that is, not be making a representation of the subject or the act of being conscious or the concept of ‘being the knower’—but the subject is aware of the subject by being aware as subject, aware as subject of subject by *being* subject, in a fully luminous (not unaware and or unconscious) way, that consciousness is ‘mystical.’” Bruteau’s italics.


Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 188.

Ibid., 93.

Finley, “The Middle Way.”


It is important to note here the writings of several contemplatives with regard to the cosmic beginnings and the cosmic implications of contemplative spirituality. While we do not have space in this thesis to explore those here, the following authors, among others, are of particular importance in this regard: Teilhard de Chardin, Ilia Delio, Raimon Panikkar, and Denis Edwards.

The proposal here is that when those in conflict begin with judgement, they often also end with judgement; when they begin with wonder, they more easily end with wonder. We already saw this principle in chapter 2, where, with different words, conflict theorist Morton Deutsch made the same proposition (Deutsch, “Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict,” 3–28).

Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 89.


Sölle writes, “Mysticism wants nothing else but to love life, even where analysis has run its course and all that is left is to count the victims. To love life also where it has long been condemned to death, even from this very beginning, is an old human ability to go beyond what is. That ability is called transcendence or faith or hope… It is the most important movement that human beings can learn in their lives” (282).

Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 89. Sölle states: “Without this overwhelming amazement in the face of what encounters us in nature and in history’s experiences of liberation, without beauty experienced even on a busy street… there is no mystical way that can lead to union.”

Ibid., 62.

Ibid., 90.
Sölle states: “We always think of something else and are unable to truly live even one minute of our life. Attentiveness is a way of putting down roots in the here and now; it is an ability to exist that is practiced by a conscious and particular way of breathing and by meditation. The mystical relationship to time is fundamental not only for the I that is becoming attentive, but also the purposes and goals that orient our activities. Being present to a beloved person who has fallen ill, or for a poisoned river [or, as per this thesis, to a conflicted relationship], must be borne by such attentiveness lest it wither away in activism” (Silent Cry, 177).

Sölle, Silent Cry, 85.

Ibid., 91.


Critiquing religion that wants to be like God without following Jesus to the cross, Sölle says, “A Christianity that is free of suffering leaves suffering to others” (87).

Sölle, Silent Cry, 138.

Ibid.

Finley, Palace of Nowhere, 65.

We are reminded of the words of caution given by Volf and Suchocki, noted in chapter 3: In conflict, there are no innocents including among third parties.

Bourkeault, Inner Awakening, 106.

Ibid., 106–7.


Ibid., 145.

James Finley, “There is a Peace” in Sanctuary Songbook: Exploring the Healing Path with James Finley and Alana Levandoski, 2016.

Delio, Unbearable Wholeness, 83.

Sölle, Silent Cry, 142.

Finley, (presentation, Living School Symposium, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, NM, August, 2016).

In Merton’s Palace of Nowhere, 51, Finley echoes this sentiment when he states: “Prayer is a death of every identity that does not come from God.”

Sölle, Silent Cry, 179.

Ibid., 145–6.

Ibid., 68.

Ibid., quoted by Sölle.


Quoted by Bourgeault, Inner Awakening, 51.

Sölle, Silent Cry, 139.


Bruteau, *Radical Optimism*, 35.


Quoted here by Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 140.

In *Christian Meditation*, Finley reflects on this insight as follows: “I realised... that my suffering did not belong to me but was in some mysterious way the suffering of the whole world, manifesting itself in and as my experience of suffering. I realised my suffering did not belong to me alone but in some mysterious way belonged to God...” (225).

Ibid., 102.


Ibid.

See for example, Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1–5.

Sölle quotes Dom Helder Camara: “If you had not given me the grace during my nightly vigils to drink the stillness and to submerge myself in it, letting it pervade me through and through, how could I guard that inner stillness without which one can hear neither human beings nor you, O Lord?” (*Silent Cry*, 290).

Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 177.

Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 96.


Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 108.

Ibid., 140–141.

Ibid., 45. Finley states: “Why do I spend so many of my waking hours trapped on the outer circumference of the inner richness of the life I am living?”


Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 61.

Ibid., 135ff.

Finley, “The Middle Way.”


Ibid., 219.

Ibid.

I refer here to my own experiences and those of colleagues.

Recall here the words of Folger and Bush quoted first in chapter 3: The focus on self allows for “an emerging, higher vision of self and society, one based on moral development and interpersonal relations rather than on satisfaction and individual autonomy” (3).

Finley, *Sanctuary*.


Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 293.


196 Finley, Christian Meditation, 195.

197 Bruteau, Grand Option, 71.

198 Ibid. Bruteau’s italics.

199 Ibid., 73.

200 Ibid. Bruteau’s italics.

201 Bourgeault, Inner Awakening, 139. Bourgeault points out that contemplatives have long seen this nanosecond as the moment of transformation. She states: “Evagrius, one of the great desert fathers... recognized there was a brief sliver of time before ‘thoughts’ (...) the first awareness of inner discomfort) turned into ‘passions,’ full-fledged identified emotions” (Ibid., 139–40).

202 Bruteau, Grand Option, 54.


204 Ibid., 125. Delio’s italics.

205 Ibid., commenting on Bruteau.

206 Bruteau, Grand Option, 54.

207 Bruteau, Radical Optimism, 23.

208 Finley, Christian Meditation, 59–60.

209 Ibid., 181.

210 The image of the waterwheel is borrowed from Cynthia Bourgeault.

211 Karl Rahner, The Trinity (New York: Crossroad, 2013), ix. Rahner states: “[Should] the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain unchanged.”


213 A thorough analysis of this shift is beyond the scope of this thesis. For more, see LaCugna’s God for Us.

214 LaCugna, 222.


216 Bruteau, Radical Optimism, 121.


219 Ibid., 74. There is a tension here, unexplained by the contemplatives referenced but worthy of note nonetheless: Is the Spirit one of the three entities of the Trinity or is the Spirit the love between Father and Son? While the authors referenced speak about the former, their description of the Spirit could just as easily be described as the latter. This remains an unresolved question.


221 Bruteau, Grand Option, 157, 165–168.


223 Ibid., 116.

224 Bruteau, Radical Optimism, 127.

216

Hide, “The Ecstasy of Agape,” 94. And see Bruteau, God’s Ecstasy, 27.

217


218

Ibid., 93. See also Bruteau’s The Easter Mysteries (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1995).

219

According to Rohr (Unpublished talk given to the Living School Symposium at the Center for Action and Contemplation, August, 2017), in this view, the second coming of Christ is the dawning awareness of the cosmic Christ. Said otherwise, given that the cosmic Christ is the awakened and true self of all of creation, then the second coming of Christ is the awakening of the self. The temple of God has moved from its association with one building in one place to being in all of creation at all times and in all places.

220

Bruteau, Radical Optimism, 99. Bruteau’s italics.

221

Philippians 2:6–11.

222

Bourgeault states, “You do not die on the cross in order to ‘set up’ the resurrection; you die on a cross because the willingness to give it all away is itself the original and ultimate creative act from which all being flows” (Inner Awakening, 49). Bourgeault’s italics.

223


224


225


226

Bourgeault, “Teilhard, the Trinity and Evolution,” 79.

227


228


229

Ilia Delio (presentation, Living School Symposium, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, NM, August, 2017). In this same talk she states: “God chooses to be completed through the creation of the universe.... The Godliness of God is to give Godself away.”

230

Bourgeault, “Teilhard, the Trinity, and Evolution,” 75.

231

Delio, Unbearable Wholeness of Being, 43.

232

Ibid., 43–44. In The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), Delio poses the question, “Can we understand the Trinity as an infinite emergent process?” (4) Delio answers her question with, “In this respect, change is not contrary to God; rather change is integral to God because God is love and love is constantly transcending itself toward greater union.” (Ibid.)

233


234

Delio, Unbearable Wholeness of Being, xxv.

235


236

Bruteau, Grand Option, 141.

237

Ibid. Bruteau’s italics.

238

Bourgeault, Law of Three.

239

Bourgeault writes, “[I]t is the nature of binary systems to be stable. They swing like a pendulum between the great cosmic polarities—light and darkness, yin and yang, male and female—but eventually come to equilibrium. Their stability lies in the symmetry of the paired opposites. Within such systems, time tends to take on a static quality characterized by cyclical patterns of [repetition] and recurrence, and completion is achieved by integrating the opposites” (Ibid., 65).
Ibid., 16.

251 Ibid., 22–23.

252 Bourgeault, “Teilhard, the Trinity and Evolution,” 81.

253 Ibid.

254 Bourgeault, Law of Three, 32ff.

255 Ibid.

256 Bourgeault, Law of Three, 29.


258 Bourgeault, Law of Three, 29.
Chapter 5

Contemplative Spirituality and Conflict Transformation in Dialogue

As we have observed, the divisions that separate self and other, us and them, challenge us at multiple levels: interpersonally, inter-culturally, nationally, globally, etc. While a divide between self and other is natural and even necessary for unity and oneness to occur, this divide also easily grows in times of conflict, becoming a chasm that is hard to cross. This thesis has explored the nature of the relational bridge between self and other and how such a bridge is meaningfully established, especially in the context of distrust, exclusion, and alienation. As we have seen, while both conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality seek to heal the rift between self and other, each goes about this healing work differently from the other. This difference is instructive, revealing insights each discipline has to offer the other, as well as blind spots in both disciplines. When the unique perspectives of each discipline are woven together, they deepen and enrich one another, providing a more fulsome answer to our key question than either discipline could achieve on its own. Together, these disciplines are stronger than either is alone, creating a stronger, more robust, and more sustainable bridge between self and other.

In chapter 1, using Buber as our guide, we established the nature of the self-other frame. In chapter 2, we explored how the self-other frame is established and reinforced in the context of conflict. In chapter 3, we considered specific conflict transformation models that seek to bridge the gap between self and other. And finally, in chapter 4 we explored how contemplative spirituality explains this divide and seeks to repair the divisions between self and other. The intention of this final chapter is to place key insights from chapters 2, 3, and 4 alongside one another in order to see what this comparison reveals and, by doing so, to propose a deepened and strengthened model for conflict transformation. To this end, we explore three key conclusions emerging from this research: (1) the meaning of identity; (2) the both-and frame and unitive consciousness; and (3) the image of the Trinity, emotional triangles, and the Law of Three.
5.a The Meaning of Identity and the Transformation of Conflict

As we have seen, conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality each engage themes of identity in their exploration of the self-other relation, though the two disciplines define identity differently from one another. This difference in definitions is one of the most important and exciting rub points between the disciplines. When these definitions are placed alongside one another, they push and challenge each other. The resolution of this dialogue between the disciplines influences everything from the questions mediators ask in the mediation room, to the teaching provided by contemplatives regarding the nature of the self-other divide. In short, when the two definitions of selfhood are brought into dialogue with one another, we observe a complementarity between the two, making a fully renovated bridge between self and other possible.

Conflict theory, we recall, proposes that when the layers that contribute to conflict are peeled away, when emotions, history, power dynamics, social forces, and extenuating circumstances are considered, a three-layered set of conflict building blocks remains: the substantive, rational perspectives behind the positions people take on an issue; the procedural expectations regarding how the issue should be or should have been addressed; and, most importantly, foundational human needs that drive conflict behaviour. While foundational human needs are defined variously, they can be summarized as needs for belonging, recognition, autonomy, meaning, and security. Foundational needs are so central to both selfhood and group identity they seem to be woven into the very fabric of the human condition. In the context of differences, when only substantive and procedural interests are awakened, it is likely that the differences between the parties will remain at the level of healthy disagreement. When foundational needs are awakened, whether consciously or unconsciously, identity or selfhood is perceived to be at risk and differences shift rapidly from healthy disagreement into conflict. Because needs are experienced vulnerably, to speak about them well can be difficult. As a result, the awakening of needs both reflects and drives conflict. Need-driven reactions, counter-reactions, and alliances emerge causing conflict to grow and entrench.

The analysis of how differences shift into conflict implies that an image of selfhood (or group identity) lies embedded in conflict theory upon which conflict transformation rests. According to this image, the self can be regarded as a series of concentric circles: The inner ring is the area of foundational human needs, the secondary ring is the area of substantive and procedural interests, and subsequent rings are populated by various factors that influence the inner two rings. While the outer rings are important, it is the inner ring that acts as the fulcrum upon which the shift from disagreement
into conflict rests. When foundational human needs are triggered or unmet, people easily regard their selfhood as being under threat, leading self and other to shift from disagreement into conflict.

**Figure 5.1**

Contemplative spirituality also proposes an image of selfhood. According to this image, there are two selves—the descriptive self and the deeper self—though as we shall see, a third false self also shows its face over time. Both the descriptive and deeper selves are given by God and both are beloved. The descriptive self is the self given to each person at birth; it is the self most commonly associated with selfhood. This self naturally differs from one person to the next as it includes each person’s unique characteristics, skill sets, and limitations. It is this self that allows a person to get up in the morning, choose what to eat, decide where to place their energies, etc. The descriptive self is also neutral—it is neither good nor bad—it is simply the unique “cloak” each has been given to wear. Unfortunately, in the eyes of many, the descriptors people carry are not regarded equally. Some descriptors are valued, while others are dismissed, disliked, or even loathed. As a result, a “second skin” grows over the descriptive self, covering characteristics, limitations, and skill sets with ego consciousness and shame. It is this second skin that is sometimes referred to as the “false self.”

The false self represents a third image of selfhood. When identity is placed with the false self, selfhood is driven by a relentless set of comparisons: Who is better? Who is worse? Who has more power? Who has less? Who belongs and who is cast out? According to this image of selfhood, life is defined by domination, alienation, and judgement of who does or does not have value. While shame casts down the self bound by this image of selfhood, ego props this self up, protecting a fragile selfhood with attachment to (often false) self-descriptions, possessions, social allegiances, and even violence.
Hidden within the cloak of the descriptive self is another self—the deeper self. Referred to by contemplative Thomas Merton as the “true self,” this is the point that is sometimes described as the place of perfect union with God or, as per Merton, as the point of “nothingness” within.\(^1\) At this place, the self is not its past nor its future, not its strengths nor its limitations, not its traumas nor its flights of glory. This self is simply the self, emptied of its descriptors and in unity with God. This self can be described as the image of God or the formlessness of God alive in each person. Those who have touched this form of selfhood—and as some contemplatives argue, most people have touched this selfhood, whether they are conscious of this or not\(^2\)—experience a kind of exhilaration or freedom. This feeling emerges from an experience of oneness with God; this feeling also emerges from being emptied of the burden associated with a false self. This latter point is significant: When the oft-ignored deeper self is awakened, it is allowed to flourish and its existential unity with the descriptive self is realised. This allows the descriptive self to be accepted as it is, without a need for cover by ego and shame and without a descent into the false self.

For Christian contemplatives, the archetype of Jesus reveals the fundamental indivisibility between form (the descriptive self) and formlessness (the deeper self). Jesus reveals the enfleshment of the formlessness of God. The unity of humanity and divinity reflected in Jesus mirrors the unity in each person of their humanity (the descriptive self) and their “divinity” (the deeper self). Said otherwise, as the formlessness of God takes form in the birth of each person, the indivisible dance between a descriptive and deeper self begins anew. Furthermore, it remains the Christian conviction that God is undivided, that God is one. Because of this, it follows that at the level of the deeper self, all people—being one with God—are also already one with one another (and with all of creation). A fundamental unity between all people is the foundation upon which all differences between self and other rest.

According to contemplatives, self and other fall into conflict whenever the centre of identity is placed exclusively with the descriptive self, that is, without acknowledging the deeper self. In this case, the self becomes defined by the descriptive self alone. When this occurs, the unity between the descriptive and deeper selves cannot be sustained and the self falls into the ego consciousness-shame, false self trap. Exclusive alliance with the descriptive self generates conflict because without a relationship with the deeper self, the descriptive self loses its neutrality, that is, the descriptive self is now regarded through the lens of separation, domination, and alienation. Said otherwise, the descriptive self is now united with the false self rather than the deeper self. Furthermore, when the centre of identity is placed with a descriptor and when that descriptor is regarded poorly by another,
one’s identity is naturally at risk. Ego and shame are now awakened, plunging the self into the false self and into defensiveness, launching self and other into conflict.

The image of identity proposed by contemplatives and described here can also be regarded as a series of concentric circles: The inner ring is the area of the deeper self; the secondary ring is the area of the descriptive self; a third ring is reserved for the false self that seeks to cover the descriptive self with ego consciousness and shame.

Figure 5.2

Although we concluded in chapter 4 that the deeper and descriptive selves must be regarded as a both-and on the polarities model, contemplatives themselves tend to place the deeper self at the centre of the self. According to contemplatives, the descriptive self—while vitally important—is nonetheless secondary to the deeper self. While we will return to a conversation about the both-and nature of the two selves later, for now the contemplative model of selfhood stands in order to highlight a key comparison between contemplative spirituality and conflict theory.

As the two models of selfhood reveal, contemplative spirituality and conflict theory (upon which conflict transformation rests), describe the self differently from one another. If the two images of selfhood are layered on top of one another, can a defensible singular image of selfhood emerge? To answer this question, three further questions present themselves: Is the deeper self more core to selfhood than the foundational human needs described in conflict theory? If yes, do foundational human needs, together with the factors that influence these needs, constitute the descriptive self? And finally, how does the outcome of this comparison influence the transformation of the self-other dynamic?
Is the deeper self more core to selfhood than the foundational human needs described in conflict theory? To answer this question, it is important to acknowledge that it would be false to assume that conflict theorists disagree with contemplatives regarding the centre of selfhood. For example, leaning on terms such as the “higher self” and tapping into the “inner wisdom” of those in conflict, mediator Lois Gold points in the same direction as the conclusions regarding selfhood being drawn by contemplatives. Bush and Folger, whom we encountered at the start of chapter 3, argue similarly that for transformation to occur, one must address those in conflict at a deeper level rather than simply allowing for a transactional exchange of wants and needs. And Lederach, in his book *The Moral Imagination*, casts a vision for transformation that draws from the space of the soul and the spiritual disciplines that ground it. In other words, many conflict transformation theorists and practitioners agree that one’s selfhood is more than one’s foundational human needs, even if the discipline has not made this assertion uniformly or built its more commonly known models upon it. While there is no empirical measure to determine whether the centre of selfhood is found in a deeper self or one’s foundational human needs, in keeping with the testimony of contemplatives and multiple conflict practitioners, it is the proposal of this thesis that if such a deeper self is assumed, its presence within the self transforms the expression and experience of one’s foundational human needs.

Our second question is less straightforward to answer: Do foundational human needs, together with the factors that influence these needs, constitute the descriptive self? At face value, it appears that contemplatives generally associate human needs with the false self. We recall Merton in this regard, who delighted in discovering nothingness—a place beyond needs, and Keating, who described foundational needs as “emotional [and unhealthy] programs for happiness.” Other contemplatives argue that human needs are necessary, though prone to being covered by ego and shame. Bruteau, from whom the term “descriptive self” is borrowed, clearly associates human needs with the neutral descriptive self, though elsewhere she also correlates the descriptive self with the false self. Where, then, do contemplatives land? The answer to this conundrum lies in the fact that contemplatives do not generally differentiate between the descriptive self and the false self. Instead, these two images of selfhood are conflated. Contemplatives call this self, by whatever title they give it, both necessary (as per the descriptive self) and inadequate (as per the false self). In other words, given that most contemplatives do not differentiate between these two selves, they technically associate needs with both the descriptive and false selves.

The lack of differentiation between the descriptive and false selves creates a problem for contemplatives. While they defend the necessity of the descriptive self (and the needs it creates), they
criticise this self (and its ego-driven needs) as false and inadequate for personhood. Contemplatives struggle to explain the two dimensions of this self, tending in their teaching toward the latter of these two definitions of selfhood, resulting in a somewhat insufficient and unconvincing defense of the necessary descriptive self while opening themselves to the accusation that they do not value the descriptive self. This thesis follows a different approach than most contemplatives, dividing the descriptive self from the false self. This manner of modelling the selves upholds the goodness found in the neutrality, neither good nor bad nature, of the descriptive self and the gift found in the embodiment of selfhood, while allowing the false self to represent a distortion of the descriptive self. It also allows for an easier defense of the existential unity between form and formlessness, the deeper and descriptive selves. By identifying the descriptive self and false self as separate expressions of selfhood, the deeper and descriptive selves are more easily held together—something that is difficult to do when the false self is one with the descriptive self.

With this conundrum considered, where do foundational human needs reside? According to conflict theorists, foundational human needs are so central to identity, they are instinctive. If this is so, needs must live at the level of the descriptive self—the self that is created prior to falling into the false self. However, according to these same theorists and according to contemplatives such as Keating, foundational human needs also drive the self into conflict, ego consciousness, and shame. If this is so, needs must also reside at the level of the false self. This puzzle is resolved by recalling that needs, like the descriptive self, can be regarded neutrally. It is when foundational human needs, alongside the descriptive self, are divorced from the deeper self and when these needs are covered by ego consciousness and shame, that the location of needs journeys from the descriptive self to the false self. This same formulation also holds true for the substantive and procedural interests that influence the expression of foundational human needs. When substantive and procedural interests are regarded neutrally, they are simply an expression of the descriptive self. The shift into conflict and false self occurs when these too become laden with ego consciousness and shame.

Before we can lay our two models on top of one another, we must ask one more question: Where do emotions, history, power dynamics, social forces, and extenuating circumstances lie in this model? Each of these forces is described by conflict theorists as influencing interests and needs. When we consider the definitions of each of these forces, as seen in chapter 2, we observe that each, while connected to foundational human needs in one way or another, nonetheless also act as an expression of ego consciousness and shame, or memory-driven attachments to past or future. As a result, these are associated with the false self.
With these arguments in mind, a singular image of selfhood, drawn from both contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation theories, might be drawn as follows:

![Figure 5.3](image)

According to this model, a deeper self resides at the foundational level for each person. A second self, the descriptive self, is also the self that bears witness to the self’s foundational needs and the interests associated with these needs. A third and false self emerges when the unity between the first two selves is broken, and when the centre of identity is placed exclusively in the second ring. Because exclusive identity at the level of the second ring is unstable, a third false self is awakened. Selfhood now becomes a dance between the descriptive self and the false self. In this tenuous and fraught space, multiple factors influence the self in conflict, including history, emotions, power dynamics, and so on.

We turn now to our third question: How does the outcome of this comparison influence the transformation of the self-other dynamic? Significant implications for both of our disciplines of study follow from the question regarding the centre of one’s identity. We discuss four of these implications here. (1) As we have seen, according to contemplatives, a deeper self exists in each person. At the point of the deeper self, self and other are each already one with God. If this is true, self and other must also be somehow “one” with one another. This suggests that conflict transformation conversations between self and other begin on a landscape of pre-existent oneness. By contrast, at the level of foundational needs, especially if the false self is invoked, self and other are naturally in competition with one another—one person’s needs may not be able to co-exist with another’s need.

For those in conflict and for conflict practitioners in particular, this insight can be experienced as changing everything. While conversations regarding competing needs are critical, the tenor of such a
conversation is positively influenced when parties and practitioners bring an assumption of pre-existing oneness to the table. The differences between self and other, even if they are experienced as irreconcilable, cannot remove either person from pre-existing oneness with one another or pre-existing oneness with God, conferring a great dignity and humility upon each person involved.

While the oneness proposed by this model exists at the level of the deeper self—and while this is already a significant contribution of this model—the foundational unity that also exists between the descriptive and deeper selves suggests that the experience of oneness can be extended, at least to a degree, to the descriptive self as well. Here, Bruteau’s I-I formulation pushes those in conflict to allow one another to bring their full selves to the table. In this approach, it is not enough to simply believe that self and other are one at a deeper though perhaps ephemeral and hard-to-grasp level. Instead, by “backing into the other,” Bruteau encourages her readers to see with the other’s eyes and to hear with the other’s ears, recognising that a deeper unity of experience exists even in the concrete of conflict experiences. Mathematically we might phrase this as follows: If one’s deeper self (A) is one with one’s descriptive self (B); and if at the level of the deeper self (A) one is one with all others at this level (other As), then it follows that deep connection or even unity is also possible between all B’s (all people’s descriptive selves). If A equals B and A also equals all other As, then A must also equal all other Bs. Contemplatives describe this as the unity of experience—where the contemplative suffers with each person who suffers and even sees that suffering as their own just as the contemplative also celebrates with each who celebrates. The conclusion of interpersonal oneness alongside unity with God affirms the inalienable dignity of each person—in the vast and complex fullness of their being. Perhaps the best, albeit shocking, description of this exhortation is found in the poem, Please Call Me by My True Names, by the Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hahn, an excerpt of which is provided here.⁹

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving....

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.
Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

While the conclusion of a type of oneness at the descriptive self level is interesting philosophically, it is
also significant for the resolution of conflict. This means that even on the landscape of difference, self
and other, by “backing into one another,” can allow themselves to deeply understand one another,
increasing the possibility that transformation will occur.

(2) A second implication of the unified image of selfhood proposes that attention to the deeper
self limits the shift from disagreement into conflict, and moderates behaviour when conflict occurs. In
part, this is because when grounded in the deeper self, selfhood is never at risk, limiting the number of
issues that shift from healthy disagreement into conflict in the first place. The import of this implication
cannot be underestimated. It is the experience of selfhood being at risk, after all, that drives the shift
from disagreement into conflict. It is also true that when deeper and descriptive selves are united, and
when selfhood is located in this realm, the inclination to judge, dominate, and devalue another’s
descriptors decreases. Descriptors can now be regarded neutrally, opening the space for healthier and
more equitable relationships to form, further limiting the fall into conflict.

When selfhood is not at risk, understanding what one is experiencing and how to respond to this
experience becomes more readily possible. When conflict does occur—as it naturally will—a united
deeper and descriptive self allows for a more effective discernment regarding how to respond. It is, after
all, difficult to assess how best to address conflict when it occurs. What part is owned by the self? What
portion belongs to the other? What portion is actually associated with a back-story that belongs to
another situation altogether? And what part might be driven by biases and systemic injustices inherited
from the world at large but that exist primarily at an unconscious level? Discerning truthful answers to
these questions is difficult at best. Responding well is similarly difficult. Herein lies a rub: When the
centre of one’s identity is placed at the same location as one’s pain, it is difficult to discern well. In other
words, if the centre of one’s identity is at the third ring of selfhood—the false self—and conflict similarly
resides at the level of this ring, it is as though a conflict of interest is established within the self, allowing
self to justify its own actions while the other’s actions are declared to be bad or wrong. In contrast, by
placing the centre of one’s identity with the deeper self, space is created between the centre of
selfhood and one’s pain, allowing one to regard both one’s own pain and the pain of the other with just
enough distance to enhance the possibility of healthy discernment regarding how to understand and respond to the situation of conflict.

(3) According to contemplative spirituality, godly qualities such as generosity, grace, and goodness emerge from the deeper self. When conflict practitioners guide conversations to the place of needs only, yet expect those in conflict to behave with one another in a manner that is generous and kind, they create a frustrating dilemma. Conflicting parties are guided to the area of needs and descriptors yet are expected to rise to the qualities that emerge from the deeper self. In fact, Bruteau argues that it is unfair to expect people to express these qualities when only acknowledging the descriptive self. Gold echoes this sentiment, urging conflict practitioners to help clients draw from their “higher intelligence and inner wisdom” where healing, transformation, and a genuine meeting between self and other can occur. For conflict transformation to truly transform the relationship between self and other—whether at the individual or societal level—engagement with each individual or group’s deeper self opens space for goodness, generosity, and grace, raising the potential for genuine healing to occur. In summary, if conflict transformation only negotiates between the needs of the descriptors of self and other, it misses the opportunity for deeper healing between the parties to occur.

In her work, Gold offers practitioners concrete examples of how a simple change in the phrasing of a question or statement shifts a conversation from needs-based only to allow participants to draw from their deeper selves as well. Examples of such word changes include shifting from solve to mend, outcome to harmony, recognize to honour, want to seek, anger to wound, issue to heart of the matter. In addition, Gold invites practitioners to allow for silence, to speak in a manner that plants seeds of hope, to invite truthfulness without defensiveness, and to communicate belief in the parties’ “higher potential.” In a sense, Gold’s work acts as a frontrunner in the intersection between contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation. Gold acknowledges the deeper self while also offering concrete tools from her work as a practitioner that draws from both of these disciplines. A similar concrete expression of this implication can be inferred from Buber’s exploration of the I-Thou relation. Buber, we recall, spoke of the use of the third person grammatical form as thingifying another person. We can associate this grammatical form with an exclusive alignment with the descriptive self—a choice that quickly casts self and other into the false self space. Instead, to engage another at a deeper and more genuine level, one is encouraged to regard self and other through the second-person I-Thou (or you) lens, or—even more intensely in the words of Bruteau—through the mutual first person I-I lens. At a very concrete level, we see this question of grammar played out in the mediation room. Conflict mediators regularly paraphrase what has been said and redirect the
conversation from one party to another. It is tempting for new mediators to turn to Party B and while speaking with B, to paraphrase what A has said followed by a question to B to redirect the conversation. To do this, however, the mediator is forced to speak to B about A in the third person. Party A now becomes a “he,” “she,” or “they” rather than a “you.” Instead, mediators are encouraged to always paraphrase A to A and B to B before redirecting the conversation. While this may appear to be a small thing, in the lived experience of conflict participants, to be referred to as “you” rather than “he,” “she,” or “they,” communicates dignity. No mediation participant becomes an observer to others’ conversations about oneself, a perhaps small but nonetheless significant form of being disregarded. Further, by modelling the I-Thou or I-I relation, the mediator models for conflict participants that an I-Thou encounter between those in conflict may also be possible.

(4) As we have seen, differences between self and other exist at the level of the descriptive self rather than at the level of the deeper self where self and other are already one. As we have also seen, contemplatives tend to spend a greater portion of their time with explorations of the deeper self. While contemplatives promote the positive implications of their work for the descriptive self and for the relationship between self and other, few put “legs” under what this means practically. As a result, contemplatives are sometimes accused of negating the other in favour of the self and of negating the practical in favour of the ephemeral. While this claim represents a misunderstanding of contemplative spirituality, it is also true that a heavy focus on the deeper self has left the concrete technical skills associated with actually relating to the other and transforming the self-other divide under-addressed within this discipline. In this regard, conflict transformation has much to offer contemplative spirituality. As we have already seen, conflict transformation offers models that help to understand the divide between self and other in very concrete terms, while also offering tangible strategies for transforming the divide once it has emerged. While a focus on the deeper self expands and strengthens conflict transformation—challenging conflict practitioners to use strategies that tap into this rich resource—it is just as true that a focus on the descriptive-level needs of self and other, and the conflict transformation strategies associated with attending to these needs, provides concrete tools that allow transformation between self and other to become possible.

This thesis proposes that contemplatives need the tools conflict transformation practitioners have to offer. These tools concretise the contemplative vision for a healthy self-other relation. In a sense, the tools backfill the vision cast by contemplatives for what is possible between self and other. In so doing, they offer the building blocks that allow the bridge between self and other not only to be imagined but also to be built. As we observed in chapters 2 and 3, the concrete tools provided by
conflict theorists also test both their thinking and the thinking of contemplatives regarding the self-other frame. By being concrete, models of conflict theory and transformation demand a type of accountability from both disciplines. There is no escaping into grand visions and dreams. Instead, like a crucible or winnowing tool, the application of conflict models not only transforms the day-to-day relations between self and other, it also tests, refines, and strengthens the visions of each of these disciplines.

5.b The Both-And Frame and Unitive Consciousness

Both contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation theory speak about both-and thinking, although their manner of engaging the term differs significantly from one another. As we have seen, conflict theorists propose a model that reveals the potential of both-and thinking and the risks of either-or thinking. The latter form of thinking divides self and other into right and wrong, good and bad, allowing for “diagonal” arguments which posit the strengths of one’s own perspectives and the weaknesses of the other’s, while at the same time ignoring the weaknesses in one’s own perspectives and the strengths of the other’s. Beyond this definition, both-and thinking within conflict transformation theory encourages self and other to understand the foundational perspectives that undergird concrete differences, perspectives that are often both-and in nature and cannot be answered in an either-or, yes-no fashion. Both-and thinking is not typically a compromise between two extremes. Instead, both-and thinking reaches for a space beyond the two extremes of self and other to find a resolution that draws from the strengths of each, self and other. The process of recognising the weaknesses of each perspective while drawing from and honouring the strengths of each “side” in a dispute becomes a transforming act, building a bridge between self and other, and allowing the engagement of conflict to shift from merely resolution to transformation.

For contemplatives, both-and thinking commonly goes by the name of nondualism or unitive consciousness. This not only allows for both-and thinking with respect to concrete differences, it goes beyond these differences to inhabit the is and is-not nature of the self in God, the self with the other, and the self with self. In this view, the self is and is-not one with God, just as the self is and is-not one with the other. Similarly, the self is and is-not one at the level of its deeper and descriptive selves. While moments of unitive consciousness occur for most people whether they are religious or not, contemplatives propose that with the regular practice of spiritual disciplines, the self can nurture the stance that allows a shift in consciousness to emerge. What may, at one time, have been fleeting moments of unitive consciousness, now becomes stabilized within the self.
Rather than being a self-serving exercise, the realization of unitive consciousness carries with it significant implications for self and other. According to Bruteau, when the world is ordered exclusively according to the descriptive self (without recognition of the deeper self) a metaphysics develops that places one above the other, and that preferences one person’s needs over the other, maintaining the “isms” that drive people apart. This system of domination, alienation, and separation blinds the self to the needs of the other, naturally placing the needs of the self ahead of, or in some cases, behind, the other. Unitive consciousness promises a shift in one’s metaphysics, in how one orders the world. By virtue of the multiple levels of is and is-not that it inhabits, unitive consciousness embraces the characteristics, skill sets, and limitations of self and other without falling into separation, alienation, and domination. It accepts the mutual goodness and brokenness of self and other; and it also allows for unconditional love for self and other, even as one takes actions to heal harmful divisions and transform injustice.

As the two definitions of both-and thinking reveal, while the two disciplines use similar language, their use of this phrase naturally differs from one another. The differences between the two disciplines can be charted according to Figure 5.4.

**Figure 5.4**

A primary difference between the two disciplines rests on the ultimate goal of each discipline. For conflict theorists, the goal is the transformation of conflict, alongside a transformation of the various
layers associated with conflict. For this discipline, both-and thinking is a valuable and important vehicle engaged to accomplish this goal. Contemplatives, in contrast, identify both-and thinking as their goal, with the ultimate expression of this goal being a shift in the self’s “operating system,” opening within the self a somewhat more stable nondual frame through which to engage the world. While this shift naturally transforms the self’s engagement with conflict, one can argue that for contemplatives, the transformation of conflict is a byproduct or a result of both-and thinking rather than the first goal.

We draw several insights from the modelling of the differences between our two disciplines of study. (1) With regard to results, both conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality generate the same outcome: Both see a transformation of conflict and the self-other relation. While this may not appear remarkable, it makes the connection between the disciplines transparent.

(2) Whereas for conflict theorists, the path to the ultimate goal is both-and thinking, for contemplatives the path to the goal is found in a variety of spiritual disciplines. This difference is significant. Contemplatives propose that both-and thinking is first a destination before it is a tool, though both-and thinking also becomes a tool, especially as the destination of unitive consciousness is neared. Contemplatives argue further that one cannot “achieve” unitive consciousness or sustain both-and thinking without a regular practice of spiritual disciplines. As we have seen, spiritual disciplines are intended to reawaken the person to the presence of the deeper self within. By loosening the chains of the false self over the self and regrounding identity to include the deeper self within. By loosening the chains of the false self over the self and regrounding identity to include the deeper self within. When this occurs, the self accesses the space within from which generosity, goodness, and grace flow, allowing for a deepened transformation of conflict to take place. Moreover, by loosening the chains of the false self, the practice of spiritual disciplines also promises a transformation at the subconscious level of the self, something conflict transformation has struggled to achieve.

(3) As we have seen, the ultimate goal of the two disciplines also differs from one another. What endures as the ultimate goal for contemplatives (both-and thinking) is used by conflict theorists as a means to an end; and what is seen as a by-product of contemplative spirituality is the ultimate goal for conflict theorists. Herein lies a conundrum that is instructive for our thesis: Is both-and thinking a grand, albeit hard-to-grasp, vision or is it a concrete tool that functions as a workhorse, slowly helping self and other inch toward one another? In the spirit of both-and thinking, this thesis proposes that both are true. Both-and thinking is both a grand vision and a conflict practitioner’s workhorse. In fact, by allowing this form of thinking to exist at both of these places, an understanding of both-and thinking emerges that is, at once, richer and more concrete. The vision for both-and thinking proposed by contemplatives
is motivating. To imagine a stable, changed consciousness that allows the self to live in a semi-permanent state of both-and thinking is, after all, desirable to many. This form of selfhood allows the self to live in fidelity to the deeper self and oneness with God—and oneness with all people—while also living with a deep acceptance of the descriptive self it has been given. As we have seen, this form of consciousness minimizes unhealthy conflict, allows for effective discernment when challenges do occur, and increases the self’s capacity for healthy self-other relations, allowing the self to practice positive regard for both self and other.

While conflict theory undoubtedly benefits from the grander vision for both-and thinking proposed by contemplatives, the concrete model provided by conflict theory regarding how to understand both-and thinking is profoundly helpful for the transformation of conflict. As seen in chapter 3, the polarities model upon which conflict theory maps either-or and both-and thinking (see Figure 5.5), establishes a foundation upon which the bridge between self and other can confidently rest. While this model does not map out the how-to of the conversation between self and other, it nonetheless establishes a framework that undergirds and supports this conversation, inviting both humility regarding the weaknesses of one’s own perspectives and curiosity regarding the strengths of the other’s perspectives. Moreover, when paired with the emotional triangles model, the two models together cast a concrete vision for what it means to inhabit the both-and space.

**FIGURE 5.5**

As we have also seen, the both-and polarities model demands accountability from thinkers in both of our disciplines of study. As we saw in chapters 3 and 4, by mapping various theories onto the polarities model, blind spots for thinkers in both disciplines are revealed. Indeed, foundational principles
in both of our disciplines are tested when mapped onto this model. Some, we discover, are incomplete; others are engaged in a “diagonal” (and therefore, unfair) argument. While any model is naturally limiting, and while multiple models are required to explain the nature of conflict and its transformation, the polarities model creates a concrete undergirding philosophical frame that (a) makes both-and thinking easier to explain; and (b) functions as a filter that allows contemplatives, conflict theorists, and self and other to determine whether they are genuinely engaging in both-and forms of thinking.

For our purposes, one of the more important concrete applications of the polarities both-and model is the question of how the descriptive and deeper selves relate to one another. As we have seen, contemplative spirituality is vulnerable to the accusation that it preferences the deeper self to the exclusion of the descriptive self. Buber, after all, rejected mysticism for this very reason. While contemplatives argue that they value the descriptive self, they nonetheless maintain an ordering of the deeper self ahead of the descriptive self. As we saw in chapter 4, however, when the deeper and descriptive self are placed on the polarity grid, new perspectives regarding these two selves emerge (see Figure 5.6). For example, by ordering the deeper self ahead of the descriptive self, contemplatives can be accused of engaging in a diagonal argument, comparing the strengths of the deeper self with the weaknesses of the descriptive self, that is, the false self, in this way missing the strengths of the descriptive self (the positive valuation of human needs) and the weaknesses associated with an over-focus on the deeper self (attachment to deeper experience to the exclusion of descriptors).

FIGURE 5.6

If our mapping of contemplative spirituality onto the polarities model is accurate, then the concern that contemplative spirituality might be missing a blind spot is valid. By placing the deeper self ahead of the descriptive self, contemplative spirituality weakens the both-and frame made possible when both selves are held together. While, with Bruteau, Finley, Merton, and others, we can affirm the
concerns associated with placing the descriptive self at the core of one’s identity, in keeping with the polarities model, this thesis proposes that the struggle with which contemplatives are engaging is not with the descriptive self, per se, but rather with the risk associated with exclusive attention to the descriptive self, an attention that causes the slide into the negative expression of this self, the false self.

When contemplatives allow for a diagonal argument, speaking to the strengths of the deeper self and the weaknesses of the descriptive self, they risk being misunderstood. Specifically, they risk being seen as resistant to the real and human needs of self and other, whether in conflict or not—even as each protests that this is not the case. Given that conflict happens in the landscape of the descriptive self, when contemplatives focus on the deeper self to the exclusion of the descriptive self they can also be understood as disregarding the legitimate needs emerging in the descriptive self’s relationship between self and other. Said conversely, fear of an over-focus on the descriptive self leads to a negation of the value of the descriptive self and by extension, a disregard for the hard work associated with the descriptive nature of the self-other relationship. In contrast, when our two disciplines of study mutually inform one another, the descriptive self is valued and this risk is avoided, opening space for a stronger bridge between self and other.

Before we conclude this section, we must acknowledge one further point of difference between conflict transformation theory and contemplative spirituality. Contemplatives propose that unitive consciousness depends on an ability to live in the present rather than being defined and confined by a focus on past and future. With regard to transforming conflict, this seems counter-intuitive. After all, much of conflict transformation focuses on healing the wounds of yesterday to make a different tomorrow possible. Indeed, significant attention is given by conflict practitioners to both past and future, and much of the dialogue in conflict conversations remains at this level. Contemplatives challenge this assumption, proposing that living in the now is pivotal for the transformation of the self-other frame, allowing for a type of newness to insert itself into the relationship between self and other. In the now and from the place of the deeper self, the self is able to surrender its attachment to who the other and the self are assumed to be (images of self and other defined by the past) or who the other needed the self to be when the division between them occurred. For contemplatives, the intent is not to remove the self from past or future, nor is their intent to disregard the genuine pains associated with the past; instead, focus rests on releasing attachments to past and future, allowing something genuinely new to become possible in the now and, in so doing, making a transformed future possible. While conflict theorists would not disagree with this contemplative understanding, it is the contemplative articulation of how attachments function with regard to past and future, alongside the promotion of
spiritual disciplines that invite a release of these attachments, that supports a meaningful engagement between self and other in the now—a place where new bridges between self and other become genuinely possible.

In summary, when brought into dialogue with one another, the models of both-and thinking found in each of our disciplines of study 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 transformation practitioners to reach beyond both-and thinking toward a more stable and enduring both-and consciousness. For contemplatives, both-and thinking is not a strategy; it is a lifestyle. While both conflict theory and contemplative spirituality invite transformed self-other relations, and while both allow for both-and thinking, their differences in this regard are instructive, allowing each of the two disciplines to be enriched and strengthened.

5.c Trinity, Triangles, and Threefoldness

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 concept of the Law of Three to undergird their explanations. When these two concepts, emotional triangles and the Law of Three, are brought together with the Trinity, a picture of reality emerges that informs, deepens, and strengthens both the image of selfhood and both-and consciousness.

According to conflict theorists, when a conflict occurs between two parties that is not readily resolved, an emotional triangle ensues. While the three points of the emotional triangle could be one person and two issues, two people and one issue, or three people, it is the insertion of the third point of the triangle—often, but not necessarily, an additional person—that can either entrench or transform the conflict between the original parties. If the third point of the triangle aligns with either of the first two points, (a) the conflict is entrenched, (b) the tension between the first two points is deepened, and (c) additional points of tension are created. If, however, the third party regards the first two parties with unconditional positive regard, coming alongside each but aligning with neither, the third party is freed to play a transforming role in the conflict between the first two players. Said otherwise, while triangulation is often seen as a vehicle for entrenching and escalating conflict, in this view, triangulation is also a gift. When third party players are able to play their role in a manner that inhabits the both-and
frame, they invite change between the primary conflict players (although to force this change limits the quality of the third party role). The concept of emotional triangles makes concrete what both-and thinking looks like in practice while revealing just how difficult it is to inhabit this frame in situations of tension and conflict. Specifically, to hold the transformative third party space while engaging in both-and thinking demands that third party players practice unconditional positive regard for both primary players, as they also practice humility, self-awareness, patience, vulnerability, and self-compassion.

According to the contemplative concept of the Law of Three, for transformation to occur, whether at the interpersonal, societal, or evolutionary level, a third energy must insert itself into the stabilising and destabilising forces of the first and second energies. While stabilising and destabilising forces of first and second energies can become locked in place, the insertion of any third energy opens the possibility for transformation to occur. The Law of Three proposes that, while people frequently experience the tension between first and second energies as divisive and painful, there is something about “the counterstroke of life” that is necessary for change to occur. Seen from a larger evolutionary view, this understanding suggests that both conflict and its transformation participate in a much larger story as small fractals in an ongoing and greater seismic turning.

The similarities between the concept of the Law of Three and emotional triangles are readily apparent. Both propose a concept of threefoldness: Third party players or third forces are critical for transformation to occur. Both agree that third party players must inhabit a both-and stance. Both also agree that a tension between the first and second players or forces exists that seeks to be resolved in some fashion. Where the two models differ, in part, is with respect to scope. It is also in the question of scope where their benefit to one another is seen. The concept of emotional triangles is designed to explain how conflict develops and is addressed. Worked out by those who enter the deep chasms between self and other, the concept of emotional triangles offers clear strategies for inhabiting the both-and space and clear markers for noting when the shift into either-or thinking has taken root. This is especially true when the emotional triangles model is paired with the polarities grid. Together, these models hold would-be third parties accountable to the both-and frame they support. In contrast, the concept of the Law of Three describes an underlying threefold mechanism of how the world works and, in particular, how change and evolution develop over time. In so doing, this model opens the possibility for a conversation between the wisdom of conflict transformation theorists with a larger vision for social or evolutionary transformation.

The insertion of the Trinity into the threefoldness dialogue changes the conversation between the models of emotional triangles and Law of Three. Acting as an extended metaphor, the model of the
Trinity casts a vision of reality that is, at once, both grand and gritty, both cosmic and earth-bound. The cosmic Christ, one of the three persons of the Trinity, is defined by kenotic, self-emptying *agapē* love. The Christ pours self into the Spirit, who pours self into God, who pours self into the Christ once more. As those who follow this path take on the mind of Christ, they co-participate in the Trinity, offering the same kenotic, self-emptying *agapē* love to those they encounter, including those bound by the self-other divide. While, as we have seen, the concept of emotional triangles already casts a vision for the qualities associated with third party players, the model of the Trinity casts a much grander vision with respect to the nature of these qualities. Translating the concept of the Trinity for the three-pointed bridge between self and other, this means that third force energy pours itself into the primary parties in a waterwheel of compassionate love until those primary parties can do the same for one another themselves, birthing a new relational frame between them. While this may appear to be a small act, when applied to transforming conflict between two individuals or two groups, the concept of the Trinity promises that this act is nonetheless great insofar as it mirrors and participates in the larger waterwheel of transformation already in motion in the larger evolutionary turning of the world—a turning that is ongoing and in which creation participates. When married together, contemplative conflict transformation has both its feet on the ground and its eyes to the evolutionary turning of creation.

To be clear, it is not only would-be third parties who are encouraged to pour themselves out to a divided self and other; the Trinity also makes a moral claim on those directly engaged in the self-other divide: Just as the three energies of the Trinity self-empty themselves into the other and just as each receives from and is filled by the other, so also are self and other invited to do the same for each other. This assertion paints a provocative image—one that is not easy for those in conflict. According to a Trinitarian understanding of reality, however, it is precisely this that is required for the waterwheel of transformation to turn. The model of the Trinity proposes further that self-emptying into the other and receiving the self-emptying of the other into oneself is not only how transformation occurs, it is also how selfhood is realised. The three persons of the Trinity do not properly exist without the other, just as self and other also do not properly exist without one another. Here, we hear echoes of Buber’s affirmation that all being is relationship. If the three persons of the Trinity *sound* through one another, even as the three persons of the Trinity are boundaryed, distinct, and free, so also do self and other *sound* through one another, just as self and other are also boundaryed, distinct, and free.

If true selfhood, as we have described it, depends on the unity between the deeper and descriptive selves, then, according to the Trinitarian model, it must follow that the unity *within* the self can only be realised by reaching *outside* of the self, that is, in relationship with another. This seems
counter-intuitive. Surely, the self must be allowed to dispossess itself from others in order to nurture an interior condition that allows the unity between the deeper and descriptive self to emerge. After all, it is often in the presence of others that the pull to locate one’s identity exclusively with the descriptive self and the fall into the false self occurs. The proposition, however, is that the hard work of establishing the location of one’s identity (and by extension, finding one’s personhood) cannot happen in isolation. While the image of Trinity allows that persons are distinct and separate beings, it nonetheless enshrines that personhood is found in relationship.

If the image of the Trinity holds as a model for transforming the self-other divide, then the hard news for those in conflict is that the self cannot properly exist without the other—even if the other is a person with whom the self is in conflict. There is no casting the other aside, no freedom found in simply walking away. By the same token, there is also no freedom found in merging with the other to the degree that the other (or the self) can no longer properly exist. In the difficult both-and construction of contemplative conflict transformation, self and other cannot properly escape one another even as they also cannot merge with one another. While it appears that this conundrum is solved by inhabiting a both-and frame with respect to self and other, the image of Trinity goes even further: Selfhood, itself, only comes into being in relationship with the other.

Woven throughout the Trinitarian formulation, through the themes of unitive consciousness and through the contemplative understanding of selfhood, is an undergirding affirmation: The foundational energy that holds self and other together is the ultimate Other, God. Defined by contemplatives quite simply as the energy of love, this energy is the air self and other breathe, it is the spirit that holds descriptive and deeper selves together, it is the heartbeat of the deeper self, it is the wisdom that creates form to express the formlessness of love, and it is the word that expresses the fulfillment of the both-and I-Thou frame. The energy of this love is intimate, kenotic, and earth-bound even as it transcends time and space.

Deep in conflict, self and other do not typically use the language of love to describe their interactions with one another—nor, for that matter, do conflict theorists. Nor do self and other hook their conflicts onto a larger cosmic landscape defined by a kenotic waterwheel of love. Indeed, for those experiencing self-other stress even the nearer goal of transformed conflict can feel far away and unattainable—or even undesirable. And yet, there is something about the contemplative promise that love is at the foundation of all that is that provides hope in moments of deep pain. With this promise, self and other are assured that they are never alone, even in the realized ache of their divide. True to
this love, there is no grasping, no pushing self and other toward each other; there is only a loving drumbeat of hope that, in time, this too shall be healed.

In summary, this thesis proposes that when contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation are brought together, a somewhat new discipline emerges, that of contemplative conflict transformation. Together, the two disciplines can do what neither can do alone, each strengthening and completing the other. Drawing from the principles of each of the originating disciplines, contemplative conflict transformation proposes an expanded image of selfhood, a broadened understanding of both-and thinking and, by leaning on the Trinitarian view of reality, an enhanced understanding of threefoldness. Brought together, the proposals emerging from contemplative conflict transformation cast a grand vision for healing the conflicts between self and other, just as they also offer concrete tools for building a strong and robust bridge over the self-other divide.

1 Merton, Conjectures, 158.
2 See Sölle, Silent Cry, 9–16.
8 See, for example, Rohr in Falling Upward, 25–51.
10 Bruteau, The Grand Option, 36.
11 Gold, “Mediation and the Culture of Healing,” 188.
12 Ibid., 198–212.
13 Ibid.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: Contemplative Conflict Transformation

We began this thesis with a key guiding question: “How is a relational bridge between self and other both understood and meaningfully established, especially in the context of distrust, exclusion, and alienation?” To answer this question, we explored the self-other frame from a range of perspectives. In chapter 1, we reviewed Martin Buber’s work, allowing his I-Thou / I-It construction to define the nature of the self-other divide and to provide us with a beacon, setting a direction for how a bridge over this divide can be built. In chapter 2, we explored the self-other divide through the lens of conflict theory, noting how the shift from disagreement into conflict rests on a struggle for identity when differences are personalized, first creating and then, over time, deepening this divide. We also observed how communication, and the back-stories it hides, complicates the self-other divide. In chapter 3, we looked at two primary models for bridging this divide, first through the lens of polarities and the both-and frame that it demands, and secondly through the emotional triangles model and the third party stance it defines and enshrines. In chapter 4, we looked at several core principles associated with contemplative spirituality, including the differentiation between the deeper and descriptive selves, the import of spiritual disciplines, unitive consciousness, and the possibilities associated with an understanding of the Trinity and the Law of Three. In chapter 5, we drew several comparisons between the two disciplines we studied, allowing them to mutually influence, challenge, and strengthen one another. In view of the comparison of our two disciplines of study and the manner in which they strengthen one another, this thesis has proposed a new term to describe the bridge building effort between self and other: contemplative conflict transformation.

At this juncture, we return to Buber: How would he regard the place at which we have arrived? Would he accept our emerging model of contemplative conflict transformation? Would he allow that our conclusion honours his work and the foundation the I-Thou relation has laid? As we have noted, Buber was suspicious of mysticism given his own experiences with this discipline. Buber’s suspicion, however, was grounded in the accusation that mysticism, as he understood it, did not regard one’s neighbour or the person at the door, preferring the ephemeral over the present. While
contemplatives argue that Buber’s understanding of their discipline is not accurate, we have nonetheless observed blind spots within the mystical framework that affirm Buber’s critique. By bringing contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation together, however, something new emerges. Contemplative conflict transformation provides concrete strategies for engaging one’s neighbour, just as it allows a grander, contemplative vision to act as the motivator and the beacon to drive this engagement. With Buber, contemplative conflict transformation affirms that selfhood comes into being in relation with the other. Also with Buber, both contemplatives and conflict theorists seek ways to nurture an I-Thou encounter, even as they allow for necessary and neutral I-It encounters to occur. Theories of contemplative spirituality do not disagree with Buber but take his arguments further, proposing images of selfhood and disciplines of practice that deeply transform the self and allow the both-and frame upon which the I-Thou relation depends to become stabilized in the self. When this occurs, self and other now fall more naturally into I-Thou encounters, even as space is left open for necessary technical dialogue.

As we have seen, the understanding of selfhood that emerges when conflict transformation and contemplative spirituality are brought together deeply influences the bridge building effort between self and other. For example, contemplative conflict transformation adds an important interpretative layer regarding why the divide between self and other occurs and how this influences self and other. Specifically, self and other experience conflict with one another not only because they have miscommunicated or because the conversation has triggered a sense of selfhood being at risk; instead, self and other experience conflict with one another because each, in their own way, has placed the centre of their selfhood in the wrong location. Rather than allowing selfhood to emerge from the both-and dance between their descriptive and deeper selves, selfhood has now become lodged exclusively with the descriptive self, causing the fall into the false self, ego consciousness and shame. When this occurs, self and other govern themselves according to a metaphysics of alienation, domination, and separation, limiting the possibility of transformation.

In contrast, when selfhood is oriented (or reoriented) in the location of the deeper-descriptive self, selfhood is never at risk, limiting the fall into conflict, enhancing the quality of discernment when conflicts do occur, and providing inner strength when conflicts must be addressed. Said otherwise, when identity is placed in the deeper-descriptive self, the bridge between self and other is more readily built. Embedded in this understanding is the affirmation that the deeper and descriptive selves are neither good nor bad, they simply are. Further, this view of selfhood allows for a type of pre-existing unity at the level of the deeper self between self and God and between self and other. Critically, if this view of
selfhood is assumed, conflict conversations—despite the very real differences between self and other—begin on a landscape of pre-existing oneness. Conflict transformation does not need to achieve oneness between self and other, this is already assured. This affirmation changes the nature of the conversation between self and other, from the phrasing of questions asked to the underlying energy with which self and other engage one another. Just as importantly, as oneness between self and other rests most fully in the area of the deeper self, this affirmation also allows self and other to draw more readily from the energy of the deeper self in their engagement with one another, the location from which goodness, generosity, and grace are drawn.

The understanding of selfhood proposed by contemplatives allows a new metaphysics to emerge—one based not on comparisons, domination, and alienation but rather one based on a deep mutual honouring of self and other. When comparisons and value judgements fall away, self and other meet each other on level ground. This does not suggest that conflicts will not occur or that various boundaries will not need to be upheld. Instead, the new metaphysics casts a vision that allows self and other to be held with unconditionally positive regard even as difficult conversations occur.

To uphold this vision of mutuality, contemplatives encourage spiritual disciplines that nurture the development of unitive consciousness, the stabilized form of both-and thinking that represents a shift in consciousness itself and that nurtures a healthy self-other relation. In contrast, conflict theorists offer concrete tools and strategies for the practice of both-and thinking, practices that place the feet of self and other firmly on the ground where the real life differences between self and other are navigated. Brought together, contemplative conflict transformation offers a more fulsome understanding of the both-and frame than either discipline can offer on its own, allowing both concrete strategies for the transformation of conflict and a stabilized both-and consciousness to take root in both self and other.

To strengthen and deepen the both-and frame, contemplative conflict transformation borrows from the concepts of emotional triangles and the Law of Three. Together, these models offer additional insights with respect to how would be third-party players hold primary conflicting parties in a both-and frame, a strategy that allows transformation between self and other to occur. While these models are valuable in themselves, and while each affirms the necessity of threefoldness for transformation to occur, when they are brought into dialogue with insights from another model of three, the Trinity, the vision for contemplative conflict transformation becomes especially interesting. Specifically, seen through the image of the Trinity, a grander and more profound vision of the bridge between self and other appears. As an extended metaphor, the Trinity lays a core foundation upon which contemplative conflict transformation finds its footing. Resting on an image of the three “persons” of the Trinity who
remain distinct yet one as they self-empty themselves into one another in a kenotic waterwheel of love, the image of Trinity suggests itself as the underlying structure of creation, the cosmic nature of ongoing evolution and more humbly, as the metaphor that drives the self-other relation. Self and other, after all, are not removed from the Trinity. Instead, as co-participants in the cosmic Christ, self and other are thrust into the same waterwheel dynamic. By implication, co-participation in the Trinity proposes that the bridge between self and other is built when those who participate in that relation take on the qualities revealed by the Trinitarian structure of reality: profound self-emptying love even as unique distinctions are upheld. When this occurs, a relational bridge between self and other begins to emerge.

In conclusion, this thesis proposes that a coming together of contemplative spirituality and conflict transformation not only expands our understanding of the nature of the self-other divide, it also establishes a stronger relational bridge between self and other than either can provide on its own. This bridge allows self and other to place their feet on the ground where the hard work of conflict transformation occurs, even as they draw from a broader and grander vision that defines the nature of their selfhoods and allows for a stabilized both-and consciousness to emerge. Working together, our two disciplines of study establish a contemplative vision of conflict transformation, one that is fulsome, healing the divisions within the self that lead to conflict, healing the self-other divide, and healing the division between the self and the “ultimate Other,” God.
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