

Love & Conflict: Insights from Africa on Transforming Self and Societies

By Philip M. Hellmich

*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.
Without them, humanity cannot survive.*

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

For nearly 25 years, Africa has been an integral part of my spiritual journey and an ongoing source for exploring and experiencing Love as a powerful, transformative force that is essential to personal, societal, and global evolution. I have made over 20 trips to African countries, including: Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, and my beloved Sierra Leone. Almost all of these countries have experienced violent conflict, so it is often hard for people in the United States to comprehend the level of sadness and, at the same time, incredible inspiration I have encountered on these visits. In this essay, I will share some of my insights in the hope that others may benefit from what I have learned from the people of Africa.

Africa: My Spiritual Journey Begins

After college, I left my family of 10 siblings and hometown in Indiana and joined the Peace Corps. I was assigned to Sierra Leone, where I worked for four years to overcome water shortages and prevent deadly diseases like diarrhea. I lived in mud huts in remote villages: the first two years in Kagbere and then two more years in Masongbo. There were maybe 30 houses in each village, which meant there were approximately 300 people in each community. There was no running water, no electricity and no telephones. While living in these bush villages, I grew to Love many people, such as the Conteh family of Masongbo. Like many Peace Corps volunteers, I found that what I learned from my friends far outweighed my contributions.

The Contehs welcomed me into their family. I often fished with the brothers at a nearby river and together learned how to make fishing lures from sticks and wires. We ate dinner collectively, usually from the same plate. And we would pass the nights telling stories or playing drums. They tried to teach me how to drum – a futile exercise that always ended in laughter.

For all its lack of Western conveniences, the Masongbo village was rich in social connections. There were frequently three or four generations of family members living together in the same huts. The elderly were respected for their wisdom and life experiences and helped take care of the younger ones. I often marveled at how each person seemed to know his or her place in their family and village. This was in part because of the education provided by the “secret spiritual societies,” traditions that were hundreds of years old and that existed right alongside Christianity and Islam.

There also was a deep sense of spirituality that came from a daily connection to nature. As subsistence farmers, the people followed the rhythms of “hungry season,” when previous

crop yields were low and it was time to plant, and harvest season, when there was abundance. There also were rainy seasons and dry seasons, and the cycles of the moon. On nights with a new moon in the rainy season, it was dark and people went to bed early. When the moon was full in the dry season, there was lots of light and the children laughed and played throughout the night.

And, ultimately, there was the cycle of life and death. When Pa Conteh, head of the Conteh family, died, people grieved openly, and for days family members arrived from around the country for the funeral. When I went to see Pa Conteh's body, he had been dead for three days. The hot, humid weather had turned his vibrant face and twinkling eyes into a skull wrapped in dry brown skin. The pungent odor was so strong it was difficult to breathe. Finally, Pa Coneth's body was wrapped in a white piece of cloth and placed directly in the ground.

As I pondered Pa Conteh's body being consumed by the Earth, the village began a huge celebration! This caught me completely off guard, as I was still grieving. The entire village danced, sang, ate, and drank... well into the next day. It was during this death celebration that I noticed the music contained rhythms from nature like the calls of birds in the bush, and the dancing reflected movements of daily life such as pounding rice or making love.

It would have been easy to romanticize village life if not for the fact that Sierra Leone was, and still is, one of the poorest countries in the world where one in every four children dies before the age of five. Decades of government corruption had all but destroyed the infrastructure. The country had vast natural resources of diamonds, gold, and rutile (a major ore of titanium), but these riches did not benefit the villagers. There was a huge contrast between rich and poor. Government officials and wealthy businessmen drove expensive vehicles while my friends were lucky to have sandals on their feet.

Meanwhile, signs of Westernization were ever present, and usually in bizarre ways. Throughout the country, even in the most remote villages, people wore t-shirts and other used clothing from the United States. When the fashion trends changed in the United States, Sierra Leone and other countries got the hand-me-downs. I frequently saw people wearing clothes that looked utterly comical from my perspective – such as an elderly man who wore a shirt that read “baby on board.” Nevertheless, the social tapestry of Sierra Leone appeared to be holding together under the strain of poverty, corruption, high infant mortality rate, and onslaught of Western influences.

Reverse Culture Shock: Going Inward

It was when I returned to America that I realized how much I had changed while in Africa. Suddenly, I was aware of the wealth, material abundance, and incredible waste in my home country. Electricity was accessible 24 hours a day with the flip of a switch, so that the cycles of the moon went unnoticed. Safe drinking water was readily available without having to carry buckets of water. Stores were filled with everything a person could ever want. I remember pausing at the pet section of my local grocery store and counting over 50 varieties of cat food. I found myself translating the cost of everything into cups of rice and calculating how many members of the Conteh family it could feed and for how long.

American abundance literally bombarded me. Everywhere I looked, I saw a culture obsessed with youth, beauty, sex, and various products designed to enhance these goals. There

also was unbelievable violence on TV and at the cinema. I remember the first time I saw a person killed in a movie – I flinched – and then was disturbed to see that the people with me did not seem to notice anything wrong. Even now, I am sensitive to seeing people killed in the movies.

After returning home, it didn't take long for me to experience a deep crisis – a void. People seemed too busy to connect as deeply as my African friends and I felt alone. This void jolted me and then sparked me to pursue a conscious spiritual journey through a daily meditation practice. My inward exploration intensified as I watched Sierra Leone succumb to a terrible war. All I wanted to do was help. My body was in America but my heart and soul were in Africa.

So in 1997, I joined Search for Common Ground, an international conflict transformation organization. Since then, Common Ground has sent me on numerous African missions. Each of my trips would begin on a Sunday morning, when I would go to my favorite meditation center. I enjoy meditating with others, as I have found that it is easy for me to experience deep states of peace, bliss, and Love when with a group. After service, I would go home to Arlington, Virginia, finish packing, and then fly out from Washington Dulles International airport. Within 24 to 30 hours, I would land in Monrovia, Freetown, Kinshasa, or some other war-torn city in Africa.

The contrast between the peacefulness of a meditation hall and the impact of deadly conflict is shocking, to say the least. My meditation practice trained me to be present, open, and in many ways vulnerable. This was both a blessing and a challenge, as it meant I would be more open to the depth of suffering of people around me, especially of my friends in Sierra Leone.

My first trip back to Sierra Leone was in April 1998, as part of an assessment team for Search for Common Ground. There was a lull in the on-going civil war, so I was able to reach my friends in Masongbo. I had mixed emotions about returning to the village – while I desperately wanted to know if my friends were okay, I was nervous about seeing the impact of war on people I loved. Needless to say, when I saw the Conteh brothers I had a deep sense of relief! They, too, were astounded to see me suddenly appear. We hugged, looked into each other's eyes, and smiled.

The entire village gathered around, hugging me, laughing, showing me the babies named after me, children conceived during the war. I could not help but notice how emaciated my friends looked – people I remembered being lean and strong from farm work. Now, their hair had a reddish tint from malnutrition and the children were more frail and vulnerable than before. Moses Conteh and his cousin Sanpha told stories of how they almost starved, surviving at times by fishing, using the methods we learned together when I was a Peace Corps volunteer. While telling these stories, the Contehs offered me a live chicken and palm wine, traditional gifts for a special guest. Children handed me mangos and coconuts, while the



The Contehs' love and generosity was overwhelming, especially when they had so little. Here Sanpha, the Conteh's cousin, offers a 30 pound fish and home-made fishing lures.

village chief gave me kola nuts, a customary greeting which means: “He who gives kola, gives life.” Later, the Contehs went fishing and caught a 30-pound Nile perch using a lure they made themselves – enough fish to feed their families for days. They were so happy to offer the fish as a gift.

The Love I shared with the Contehs and their village opened my heart. Their generosity, when having so little and surviving so much, still moves me beyond words.

A few weeks after this visit to Sierra Leone, the civil war surged and the village of Masongbo was once again sacked by rebels, known as the RUF. During this horrific period, I had no way to contact the Conteh family or my other friends. I watched in dismay as the news from Sierra Leone became increasingly bleak. The reports about the number of people killed or mutilated were not like other bad news stories. No, these were people and communities I loved deeply and who loved me. I would later learn that the RUF unit that raided Masongbo was headed by a teenage boy named Colonel Rambo. For nearly two years, Rambo and his “men” held the Contehs and others hostage, taking whatever they wanted from the villagers who lived on less than a dollar a day. The RUF even took young children from the village as new recruits. And a dear friend, Adama Conteh, who had daughters named Peggy and Patience, died giving birth to her third child, having been denied medical care by the RUF.

My meditation practice became a life raft as I struggled with frustration, rage, and sadness. I desperately wanted to know how to bridge the refuge of inner peace I experienced in meditation with the outer world of conflict and peace building. Often, I would look to His Holiness the Dalai Lama as a source of inspiration. He dealt with enormous international problems with China annexing Tibet. His people suffered tremendously and, yet, His Holiness constantly came from a place of compassion and Love, using meditation as a source of strength. His example helped me to keep my faith and to persevere.



Members of the Conteh Family & the author during a return visit. During the war, their village had been sacked by a teenage boy named Colonel Rambo.

A Breakthrough in Love

A breakthrough came in May 2000. The United Nations had peacekeeping troops in Sierra Leone and Search for Common Ground had just received the funding needed to start a program there. Meanwhile, my supervisor and two other colleagues had just left the organization for a start-up dot.com company. I was suddenly promoted to oversee our West African programs, including the new one in Sierra Leone.

I was in Monrovia, having just left Freetown in Sierra Leone, where I had hired some staff members and a contractor to set up our office. I was scheduled to fly back to Freetown, but

a friend called hours before the flight. He strongly encouraged me to stay in Monrovia, because Foday Sanko, head of the RUF, was planning a coup in Freetown. Sure enough, the coup attempt did happen and the house where I would have stayed was caught in the crossfire.

As a result, I stayed in Monrovia, which had survived numerous attacks during its own civil war and was a bombed-out city with no running water or electricity. After making the decision not to go to Sierra Leone, I remember going back to a bare apartment and meditating. This time, I entered a meditative state besieged by new responsibilities, wanting to help people in Sierra Leone, but not knowing what to do.

Generally, I do not talk about my meditations; however, they were evolving dramatically. On that afternoon, a wave of ecstasy came shooting through my body. I was overcome by an intoxicating amount of Love in which I experienced a profound connection with everything in all directions at the same time. In that state of Love, I felt at home and trusting. The Love went on and on, lasting for hours, until I finally passed out.

The timing of this blissful event was incredibly powerful. Just as I was feeling helpless and distraught, an invisible presence enveloped me with a deep level of comfort. I was confused at first, wondering how so much Love could exist next to so much pain and suffering. Love was leading me somewhere... I just did not know where yet.

I needed help navigating these inner terrains and the range of emotional reactions I was having to the deadly conflicts in Africa. I had a meditation practice and a larger meditation community as a foundation. Still, I wanted a mentor. After creating this intention, I met Dr. Rick Levy, who later published *Miraculous Health: How to Heal Your Body by Unleashing the Hidden Power of Your Mind*.

Over a seven-year period, while going back and forth to Africa, I went to Rick for advice. Having studied spiritual practices from around the world, Rick accompanied me on a trip to West Africa, where he assessed what role indigenous spiritual healers might play in the Sierra Leone peace process. Moreover, through our one-on-one sessions, Rick helped me release the negative emotional reactions I was having to the atrocities in Africa. We would go into meditation together, then shift the focus of my consciousness to the inner realms of my being – to my soul. This took me into even deeper states of peace and Love that rejuvenated me and enabled me to continue working in difficult situations without getting “burnt out.”

The work with Rick and my daily meditation practice became means of “purifying my consciousness,” helping me realize from an experiential perspective that my true inner state was peace and that I am connected to and part of a larger source of Love. I started to envision the negative thoughts and emotions as waves – natural reactions to a troubling world – that would rise and pass away if I allowed them, not part of my identity.

I began to fall in Love with Love itself, to write ecstatic poetry, to study the mystics. Paramahansa Yogananda once described Love as “the divine power of attraction in creation that harmonizes, unites, binds together.” With this lens, I started to see Love permeating everything: the Love I felt for my parents and siblings; the Love they expressed for me; the Love felt with friends; the Love between my cats and me – it was all Love expressing itself. I listened to a radio

station that played Love songs. I substituted “the Love” for the object of Love in the songs and the songs took on a whole new level of meaning.

On a practical level, I could not maintain this state of intoxicated Love indefinitely, but I found I could cultivate Love in my daily life by removing barriers that held me back from connecting with other people and nature. For example, I practiced being fully present and focused on a person when greeting him or her. Could I see the other person as a soul whose essence is Love? Could I listen to his or her every word, I mean *really* listen? Sure enough, my familial, personal, and office relationships all began to shift through this simple exercise. The question became: *How much Love could I handle?*

Ultimately, I concluded that the amount of Love we experience is based on our openness to connect. Invariably, ever deepening connections bring old fears to the surface that need to be released. In this way, I discovered that openness to Love is an integral part of the purification process and the inner transformation necessary to create harmonious and loving environments.

Separation: Root Cause of Conflict

A human being is a part of a whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

My personal exploration of Love as a transformative and unifying force provided me with a new perspective on how to contend with deadly conflicts and peace-building efforts in Africa. For instance, the very idea of Love presupposes duality, as there is an exchange between two entities. As described by many spiritual teachers and implied by Albert Einstein above, it is the illusion of separation that is the root cause of conflict, including a sense of separation from God, Spirit, or Universe (whichever word works for you).

Michael Singer, author of *The Untethered Soul*, describes this idea by saying each of us has within us a soul that is part of the larger Spirit, filled with bliss, peace, and Love. Intuitively, we know that these exalted states exist, but instead of looking inward to experience them, we look externally in an attempt to create peak moments.

Tara Brach, a psychologist and meditation instructor in the Washington, DC area, explains this phenomenon by saying we identify with our thoughts and emotions and then believe they are real. This starts a process whereby we separate from others and everything around us. With separation comes fear, which in turn gives rise to the “wanting self” (e.g.: I want to be happy and avoid suffering). Everyone on the planet has this basic operating software

package running – we are all trying to rearrange a constantly changing world to avoid suffering and get what we want.

Conflict is inevitable, as a result. It also is a natural part of the human experience, as we bump into other people trying to avoid suffering and create happiness. A child wants a toy to be happy and will fight with another child to get it, adolescents struggle over identity and romantic relationships, and adults continue the drama with even more involved conflicts. In a warped way, we can see that the people who sold AK-47s and RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) to the RUF were doing so to make money so they could be happy.

Meanwhile, humans are governed by three basic spiritual laws: the first one is choice or free will; the second is cause and effect or *karma*; and the third and most subtle law is evolution. Often, free will is usurped by emotions, societal expectations, or cultural norms. Still, we slowly learn by trial and error and by reaping the fruits of our actions how to choose behaviors that benefit us and those we Love. In this way, we evolve.

Eventually, we learn to look inward, to reconnect with our souls to find the bliss, peace, and Love we long for. Once in touch with our soul, we sense our oneness with others and all of nature. This connection gives rise to the highest qualities of the human spirit, such as tolerance, compassion, forgiveness, and Love. Then, our outward actions are qualitatively different – they express our unique gifts without the need to get anything in return.

Accelerated Pursuit of Happiness: Creating Complex Problems

Unfortunately, the Western model for happiness is based on individual consumption, which I find terribly disturbing after living in Africa. To me, it is clear that the Western pursuit of material satisfaction has created a global spiritual crisis that now threatens human survival. There literally are billions of people striving to avoid suffering and be happy through massive consumption, all of which is being accelerated by technological advances. Yet somehow, we do not see the cause and effect impact of our collective individual actions on the environment, people who live thousands of miles away, or geo-political struggles for resources.

Although the global economy may be weaving together humanity, without the unifying power of Love greater and greater global conflicts will arise. Also, the individual pursuit of happiness through consumerism usually results in less human connection, less connection with nature, and, ultimately, less experience of Love. This in turn creates isolation, suffering, and an inner hunger that leads to more craving and consumption. It is no surprise that many of the top-selling prescription drugs sold in America deal with depression and anxiety. Material progress without Love and compassion leads to suffering.

With all this said, my colleagues at Search for Common Ground often remind me that most conflicts in the world are handled peacefully or at least non-violently, a fact easily forgotten when traveling to war-torn countries or watching the evening news. They also point out that conflict is an engine of growth and transformation when handled constructively (or, as I now believe, with Love). I see this in my own life – close friendships deepen after an argument if we are able to communicate openly. And my own spiritual journey has been enriched as a result of the inner conflict I felt after returning to the United States from Sierra Leone.

However, when conflicts are handled destructively, fear becomes the driving force. People become polarized and their extreme positions drive the agenda. The people with the loudest voices often use fear as a tactic to unify their group against “the others.” As fear increases, people narrow their multiple identities (such as father, mother, musician, artist, sports fan, farmer, teacher), down to just one – whether an ethnic group (I’m a Hutu and you’re a Tutsi), a religious sect (I’m a Muslim and you’re a Jew), or a political party (I’m a Republican and you’re a Democrat). Instead of seeing what they have in common or what connects them, they see only how they are different and what separates them.

In Rwanda, this dynamic played out to an extreme level. In the early 1990s, radio programs amplified the fear and mistrust by fueling ethnic tension. As fear increased, people became more polarized, thinking in terms of “us and them.” Tutsis and Hutu moderates were identified as the problem. To get rid of the problem, the radical Hutus believed it was necessary to get rid of the Tutsis and even the moderate Hutus. As in all destructive conflicts, the aggressors created an atmosphere where it was possible to strike out and kill – first stereotype and then dehumanize “the others.” Thus, Tutsis were called dogs, since it is easier to kick a dog than a human. Then, they were called cockroaches, as it is easy to kill a cockroach.

The Common Ground Approach: Transforming Societies

My colleagues at Search for Common Ground did just the opposite in neighboring Burundi, a country populated largely by people with Hutu and Tutsi ethnicity. Burundi was teetering on the brink of all-out violence immediately after the genocide in Rwanda. Quickly, my colleagues assessed the situation and then established a radio studio where Hutu and Tutsi journalists worked side by side. They produced programs that provided balanced information and which rehumanized both groups.

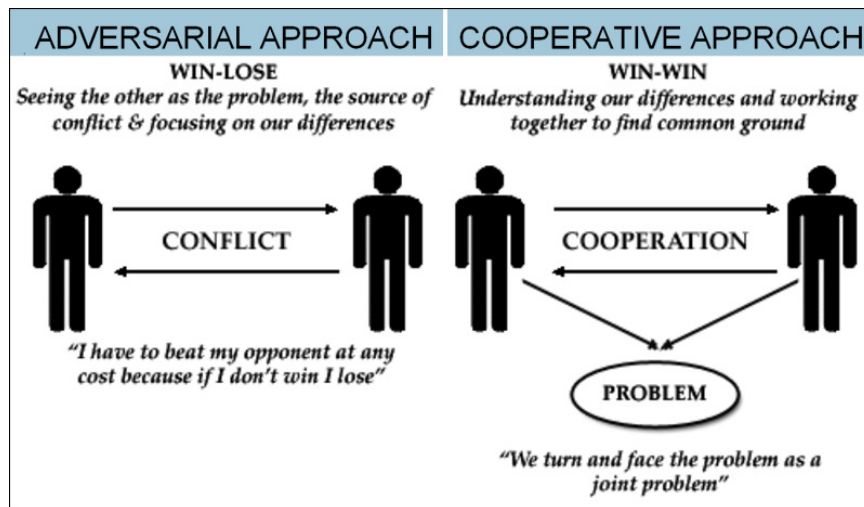
I remember the first time I went to Burundi. I was nervous because the Rwanda genocide was such a hallmark of horror. But I was amazed to walk into the Common Ground office and see a large team of people busily producing radio programs, all committed to working together. One of them was Adrien, a tall, soft-spoken man with deep compassionate eyes. He was a Hutu and in his youth Adrien missed school one day – the day his entire class was massacred by Tutsis. In the office next to Adrien was Agnes, a powerful robust Tutsi woman who had lost 79 members of her family to the ethnic violence. Indeed, everyone on the staff had a story of personal loss, yet each was willing to take a stand, together, for a new way of resolving conflict.

Coming from a large family myself and having seen the impact of war on the Conteh family, it was both mind and heart boggling to imagine working side-by-side with people from an ethnic group that committed atrocities against loved ones. Adrien, Agnes and others across Africa became my teachers on the practical ways to embody compassion and Love, and how to promote those values across multi-cultured societies.

Their techniques were similar to what I learned in meditation. For example, my meditation training taught me to look at and accept the realities of a situation, no matter how difficult. I did not have to like the situation; just accept it. This could be an outward state of affairs, such as the war in Sierra Leone, or it could be the anger and sadness that arose as a response. Tara Brach calls this approach “radical acceptance.”

All of Search for Common Ground’s programs face harsh realities head-on, accepting that such situations exist. There is nothing “Pollyannaish” about our work. The idea is to shift the focus from what separates people from their perceived enemies to what they have in common – their common humanity.

The Common Ground approach is based on an implicit trust in the human spirit. When there is recognition of common humanity, innate spiritual qualities of tolerance, compassion, forgiveness, and Love can be awakened. With these positive human qualities present, it is easier for people to shift their mindset. A new consciousness arises, one where they can face problems together instead of attacking each other. In essence, our approach is similar to a meditation practice: We help a person move beyond fear, expand their identity or consciousness, and experience a sense of oneness or connection with other people and nature. This process opens people to their innate spiritual potential and allows them to create win-win solutions.



This may sound simple, but it is profound. Meditation teaches that wherever you place your focus, that is where your energy and consciousness goes. Scientists now theorize that the physical world arises out of consciousness, something yogis and sages have taught for centuries. Many motivational speakers and spiritual teachers talk about the power of positive thinking and positive affirmations. One teacher says if you want to reduce the power of negative influences, do not battle the negative; rather, increase the positive. Yogananda once said, “If you want to change your circumstance in life, change your thinking.” This may sound idealistic when a society is facing potential genocide, but this is exactly what our staff employed in Burundi – we helped an entire society change its consciousness.

One of the Common Ground radio programs produced in Burundi was a radio soap opera called *Our Neighbors, Ourselves*. It told the story of a Hutu family living next to a Tutsi family. Like all good soap operas, it was filled with laughter, tragedies, drama, and Love affairs. Through more than 1,000 episodes, the program helped rehumanize Hutu and Tutsis to each other by highlighting what they have in common. Nearly 90% of the population listened to the show. It became so popular that during a break in programming, a General in the army came to our office and demanded a copy of the next episode! He said his men were anxiously waiting to hear what happened next.

The core message of *Our Neighbors, Ourselves* was pretty close to: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Adrien, Agnes and other staff were modeling behaviors taught by the great spiritual traditions and they helped reweave the social tapestry of their society with compassion and Love.

Steady Bongo and the Cultural Heroes

During my travels in Africa, I met hundreds of people like Adrien and Agnes, people who bravely risk their lives to promote the search for common ground or common humanity. While their stories and situations may differ in detail, they possess a distinctly similar focus – a commitment to bridging the walls of separation that divide them, their communities, and their countries. In this sense, and without relying on any religious affiliation, they promote the universal expression of Love, drawing together and healing fragmented parts of the whole.

Sometimes, this search for common humanity can take unexpected twists and turns that lead to joyous celebrations, even in the direst situations. An example of a surprising outcome involved a Sierra Leonean pop musician named Steady Bongo. A year after our program started, there was a tenuous peace agreement between the government and RUF rebels. The RUF held most of the Northern and Eastern regions of the country while United Nations and British peacekeepers controlled the rest.

Word came to Frances, our director in Sierra Leone, that the RUF were harassing UN workers who were trying to get humanitarian aid to the region. Steady Bongo was visiting Frances at the time, and Frances had a hunch that Steady should go with her to the front lines. Keep in mind, the RUF had committed terrible atrocities – people were terrified of them and rightly so.

Frances and Steady drove more than 12 hours across the country. When they arrived at an RUF checkpoint, teenage boys wielding AK-47s started harassing Frances. She calmly asked if they liked Steady Bongo’s music, to which they replied, “Yeah sure – he’s our man.” Then, she pointed to the back seat. When they saw Steady Bongo, the combatants went from being thugs to young boys. They danced and sang, “The war is over, Steady Bongo has come!” Then, the gruff, hardened commanders met Steady; they went from being terrorizing combatants to starry-eyed fans in seconds. The RUF commanders asked Steady to play some music and Frances jumped in, sensing an opportunity.

Ultimately, the RUF commanders agreed to give safe passage to Steady Bongo and his band, provide security, pay for half the expenses, and allow Search for Common Ground staff to interview people for radio programs, which we broadcast across the country. In



Steady Bongo & the Cultural Heroes during a peace concert tour in RUF area.

return, Steady Bongo and his band the Cultural Heroes did a peace concert tour across the RUF area, helping to open the lines to humanitarian aid. They were greeted by enthusiastic combatants and civilians alike, and our national radio program broadcast voices of young RUF combatants, who said they were tired of fighting and wanted to end the conflict. Our interviews started to rehumanize the RUF rebels, allowing the slow process of reconciliation to begin.

After supporting Sierra Leone through the tenuous peace process, disarming combatants, reintegrating refugees, and holding national elections, we now are addressing the root cause of the war – poverty and corruption. We also are giving a national voice to those who have been marginalized, like women and children. Sierra Leone, like Burundi, still faces incredible social and political problems, such as a lack of opportunities for a generation of youth who grew up with violence. These countries are evolving, slowly growing out of difficult periods. The ongoing challenge is to reweave the social tapestries and integrate the best of traditional African cultures with the positive aspects of globalization. The new social fabric will need tolerance, compassion, and Love to withstand all these pressures so that people can explore creative solutions without resorting to violence.

Universal Lessons – Global Challenges

In a sense, the lessons from Africa are universal to the human experience. Humanity is facing complex problems, such as global warming, that require us to look beyond our individual and national identities. If we start to view all of humanity and nature as being interconnected and interdependent, we will be able to move beyond behaviors that are fueled by a sense of separation and fear. Then, cooperative solutions will come at an unprecedented rate and scale. But first, we must reevaluate how we individually and collectively pursue happiness. As Einstein prescribed, we must widen “our circle of compassion.”

In Africa, the human spirit has proven to be incredibly resilient. From direct experience, I know it is possible to cultivate Love on an individual level through spiritual practices such as meditation, and on a societal level by applying emerging methodologies of conflict resolution such as the Search for Common Ground approach. The next step will be an evolutionary leap: *To weave a new global tapestry based on the universal principle of Love.*

While this global challenge may seem overwhelming, I have found that if I focus on my immediate environment, I am empowered. In meditation, the idea is to “be present.” I believe that my contribution to world peace starts right now, with every breath, choosing to be present in my own humanity and honoring the humanity in whoever is in front of me. This simple exercise allows me to connect spiritually with people all around the world. And it enables me to be open to the unifying and transformative power of Love.

When I look back on my many journeys to Africa, one of the most important lessons I have learned is simple: slow down and “keep time” – a Sierra Leonean expression for being together and connecting with others. Surely, our collective future depends less on science and technology and more on the art of cultivating compassion and Love.

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This essay will appear in The Oracle Institute’s upcoming book *The Love: Of the Fourth Spiritual Paradigm* and an edited version will be in *Kosmos Journal*.