

THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT & COMPASSIONATE LOVE

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First things first — the countless numbers of innocent *children*, from all sides, who are *suffering* emotionally, mentally, physically because of the policies and practices of “adults” in positions of power. Are you willing to be an active example, living and spreading the way of humble consistent compassion as the heart of any effort to deal with the Middle East?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....”

— *Jesus of Nazareth*

“If your enemy is hungry give your enemy food to eat.
If your enemy is thirsty, give water to drink.
By doing this, you’ll cause your enemy to self-examine,
and you’ll be rewarded with friendship.”

— *A Paraphrase of Proverbs 25:21 and Romans 12:20*

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

— *Prayer of Francis of Assisi 1219, who crossed “enemy” lines to build a bridge of peace*

Friends and acquaintances, for some *inexplicable* reason, have been asking my opinion regarding the ongoing conflict, the escalating hate, the violence, and the *suffering* in the Middle East. Maybe they’ve asked *me* simply because I’m old and retired, or maybe because they know I spent decades working as a counselor and a conflict *mediator*. Regardless their common questions include ...

What’s really *happening*? Why so much *suffering*? When did it *start*?

Can the it *ever* be *resolved*? And, is there a *BOOK* that’ll answer all their questions?

During my seven decades of life, I’ve had a number of friends who lived (and some still do) in Israel, the Gaza-Strip, and the West-Bank. Some are Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim, and others with backgrounds not connected to the biblical history of Abraham. One is an Arab Muslim who was a close friend, along with his wife and three children, during the time I was in graduate school at LSU. He was a *compassionate* social worker from the West-Bank and Gaza. After graduate school he returned to serve as a professor at an Arab university in the West-Bank. We continued corresponding *cautiously* by email, because all of our communication was “monitored” by *Hamas* overseers who kept a threatening watch over activities in the University.

* *I’ll share more about our relationship and discussions in the last part of this essay.*

Another friend was a Jewish woman in Israel, a caring family counselor who always sought to help anyone regardless of their ethnic background or religion.

So, understandably, I've kept a close personal eye on the Middle East for 40 years. Not by merely *watching* the news and social media (*which are always slanted*), but by *researching* and comparing the writings of numerous scholars who differ in their viewpoints. It *grieves* me that so many people fail to genuinely research as they try to form their opinions. Sadly, I regularly hear people today expounding on the Middle East, yet they seem ignorant (*lacking knowledge*) of the region's complex history over the past 4,000 years. Worse is that many are not only ignorant, but also *arrogant*, which is a very dangerous combination. In addition, many of these same folks seem unaware of the powerful, *psychosocial* dynamics that have driven not only the Middle East, but all of our naturally-*biased*, opinionated perspectives.

"History is a set of **lies** some people agree upon."

— Paraphrase attributed to Napoleon

All of *written* histories, and the current making of new written histories, are *interpretations* formulated mostly by people competing with others to gain position, profit, and power. Please beware, lest you get *played* by the power-players in their geopolitical, socioeconomic chess game. If you genuinely want to learn and discern the *truth* of history beneath and behind the many revisionist and redacted written histories, it requires an open mind and heart, plus lot of time and research.

GOOD NEWS & BAD NEWS

Bad News. Of the 100's of *books* written on the Middle East, no *single* book presents a perfectly balanced, fair, or accurate perspective. The geopolitical, cultural, religious (*spiritual*), and mind-*blinding* psychological issues are some of the most complex and therefore insidious that any of us will ever encounter. So, I won't be recommending any *single* book. At least not yet. What I do offer are some questions and conflict mediation *principles* which could help guide all of us in our mutual efforts to understand and respond in a way that produces genuine long-term peace.

Good News. There really is a "way" out of *any* conflict. That way is simple, but *not* easy. At first glance, it might sound like a trite cliché, but that doesn't stop this way from being *true*. Most of all, I think the majority of you, regardless of your *current* perspective, will largely agree with the heart and core of this way.

The Way Out of conflict, not only in the Middle East, but anywhere at any time, is the profoundly simple way of *consistently* humble, unselfish, courageously-strong *love*. As you read on, please keep in mind that — yes — I do realize there's a time and place for self-defense, when facing some people who insist on believing and *behaving* as a violent "enemy". Yet, even then, the *wisest* way of self-protection must be guided by the way of altruistic love, not the cycle of hate.



It's the "way" that *worked*, when Francis of Assisi (*the famous "saint" known as a protector of animals*) — in 1219 AD — crossed the frontlines of battle between Christian "Crusaders" and Muslim Saracen Armies. Francis' act of self-risking love was motivated by a commitment to *listen* and build a *bridge* of compassion with the Muslim commander on the other side — the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. Please consider the heart *motive* driving Francis' way of *humility* seeking peace, as described below by historian, Dr. Jan Hoerberichts of the Netherlands.

"On the basis of his view of God, Francis reached a radically different reading of the gospel than the church authorities. ... There thus existed an undeniable conflict between Francis and .. the dominant culture in church and society. ... Francis' approach, which made him ... move among people of different cultures and beliefs in a spirit of humble service and without any feeling of superiority, was therefore first a learning process, a journey of discovery.

Gradually, Francis ... learned to discern the presence and workings of God among the Saracens [*Muslims*], and to appreciate the good that God had worked in and through their lives and history.

.... Francis' rejection of all arguments and disputes was not so much a matter of tactics or strategy, but a matter of principle. It originated in the profound awareness that God is humility. Hence God wished people to follow this humility by not acting as if they are the lords and possessors of the truth, but by opening themselves to the truth as it becomes manifest in the lives of people where they are."

FRANCIS AND ISLAM, by ***Dr. Jan Hoerberichts***. He resides in the Netherlands, where he is a teacher and scholar. For many years he taught theology at a Christian Seminary in Karachi, Pakistan, where he experienced the difficulties of dialog between Christianity and Islam. Dr. Hoerberichts is meticulous in his research regarding Francis and the Sultan, personally examining original source documents, and *not* simply relying on the biographies or histories by others.

Consistent, truly humble and compassionate love will *risk* the vulnerability of an open heart, expressed by open arms, hoping and offering to *embrace* even those who act like "enemies". This reality reminds me of when one of my son-in-laws was confronted in a bar by a big, bitter, violently drunk guy trying to start a fight. Instead of reacting with insult for insult, my son-in-law quickly offered a friendly smile, opened his arms, stepped forward and hugged him! That unnatural shocking act of compassionate love was like cool water tossed over the man's smoldering hot bitterness. It diffused his angry desire to fight. Yes, I realize that such a positive result will *not always* be the immediate outcome. But, such a strong courageous love is the only way to transform an enemy into a *friend*.

Strong love is the polar *opposite* of the "natural" way which dominates the world-system and its power-players. The world's "way" is survival of the fittest — and too often the *cruellest*. In contrast, the Way of Love is *un-natural*. It's uncommonly *supra-natural*, because it rises above the way of the world. It transcends our natural, prideful, self-serving, self-protecting, and heart-*hardening* tendencies. The living and giving of genuine love, when practiced consistently and long-term, diffuses reactive tendencies of others, eventually stopping the revolving circle of

mutual *vengeful* rejection. Please listen to the words of Dr. Martin Luther-King about the *powerful* potential of this kind of *consistent*, courageous love.

“Now there is a final **reason** I think that Jesus says, “**Love your enemies.**”

It is this: that love has within it a redemptive **power**. And there is a power there that eventually **transforms individuals**. That’s why Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” Because **if you hate** your enemies, you have **no way** to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very **root of love is the power** of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they’re mistreating you. Here’s the person who is a neighbor, and this person is doing something wrong to you and all of that. Just keep being friendly to that person. Keep loving them. **Don’t do anything to embarrass them**. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, **they react** in many ways in the beginning. They react with **bitterness** because they’re **mad** because you love them like that. They **react** with **guilt feelings**, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And **by the power of your love they will break down** under the load. ... It is redemptive, and **this is why Jesus says love**. There’s something about love that **builds up and is creative**. There is something about **hate** that **tears down** and is destructive. “**Love your enemies.**” **[bold added]**

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

Neither Jesus, nor St. Francis, nor Martin Luther-King lived long enough to see the full fruit of the efforts that transformed many enemies into friends. Yet their strong, consistent commitment to the way of love toward peace has spread throughout time to transform millions of violent hardened hearts into compassionate souls willing to walk in the way.

BUT, WHAT ABOUT . . . ?

As soon as the subject of the Middle East, or Israel, or Palestine *come-up* in conversation, immediately perceptual-conceptual filters *pop-up* in the hearts and minds of most listeners. I’m talking about mental filters that raise questions of doubt about the way of compassionate love to solve conflicts as complex and violent as those in the Middle East.

What are these “filters”, where do they come from, and what do they do?

Positively, our personal filters are our individual *mental* managers. They *can* help us make sense of the world around us, especially new and challenging things. Our personal filters are always present inside each of us, and were formed over the years by our experiences, exposures, and efforts to comprehend the world around us. It’s similar to the socially contagious “yawning effect” that *unconsciously* causes yawning to spread through a crowd. It’s not just literal *physical* yawns, but even *ideas* and *beliefs* which can spread *unconsciously*. Our filters are our personal *biases*. Sometimes biases can serve good purposes. *Collectively*, for example, shared biases help form *cohesive* cultures and *supportive* societies centered around common ideas, beliefs, and practices.

Negatively, however, our perceptual-conceptual filters can become psychological *blind*ers. They can cloud our ability to see the world clearly and accurately — *they fog up reality*. And, they can metastasize into cancerous mental memes that eat away at truth. Nobody is immune to this tendency. All of us, *psychologically*, are influenced by this mental phenomena, which includes “confirmation-bias”, “social-mirroring”, “acrophily”, and other mechanisms that *distort* our perceptions and conclusions.

Confirmation-bias is the tendency to only look for evidence that supports our prior beliefs.
<https://www.britannica.com/science/confirmation-bias>

Social-mirroring is the tendency to absorb ideas, attitudes, and emotions from others.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877050918322877>

Acrophily is the tendency to slide toward extreme views, because they’re more exciting.
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01474-9>

While acknowledging and considering these tendencies, we all need to be humbly *cautious* about our opinions, and tread carefully into such controversial waters. The only way to counter the negative effects of those tendencies is to constantly, intentionally, and critically re-examine our *own* biased filters. Sadly, when we, along with others in our “*in-group*”, *refuse* to self-critique, then our collective sub-“cultures” become sub-“cults”. They degenerate toward *extremes*, producing extremists leaders and radicalized mind-*blind* followers. So what’s the solution?

Please consider the profoundly simple statements below:

“Fulfillment comes from serving others, not just hustling to serve yourself”
Denzel Washington, actor

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”
Mahatma Gandhi of India

“It is more fulfilling to give than to receive.”
“Love as I have loved and by this others will know that you follow my way.”
“You will know them by their fruit [*of love*].”
Jesus of Nazareth (paraphrased)

QUESTIONS FOR HUMBLY EXAMINING OUR “MIND-FILTERS”

Please humbly shine the spotlight down into your own inner filter and watch what happens in your mind and heart as you read a few questions below about the Middle East. Examine what feelings, ideas, and images pop-up in your mind. Be aware, *beware*, of quick assumptions that might arise as you’re tempted to *guess* what *my* answers to these questions might be. Keep in mind, please, that you cannot accurately know what *my* answers are, unless you have taken the time to personally discuss them with me, listen attentively, and then ask me for clarifications.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO TEST YOUR FILTER:

How long has the Middle East been in conflict?
Whose *fault* is it that the Middle East has been such a *mess*?
Whose *land* is the land at the *heart* of the Middle East conflict?
Where have all the *billions* of dollars gone that were given to *both* Israel and the Palestinians over the past decades, supposedly to create peace?
Who should have its own land and state? Israelis? Palestinians? Both?
Should there be a two state, combined state, or no state solution?
Why does *religion* play such a big role in the conflict? And the role of *money*?
What influence have Russia, China, Iran, US, UK, EU had on the Middle East? Why?
Which countries in the Middle East have free elections, freedom of religion, etc.?
Which countries have totalitarian regimes that oppress women, LGBTQ+ people, etc?
Are the Israeli vs. Palestinian/Arab wars actually unique among world conflicts?
What about WWI, WWII, Vietnam, the killing fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia, the countless people killed in the *civil* wars of Rwanda, Sudan, Yemen, and so many other regions?
What about *innocent* civilians (including children) killed & wounded in these conflicts?
Is innocent "*collateral damage*" ever acceptable in order to stop an aggressive attacker?
If your answer is yes, then how much innocent "*collateral damage*" is OK?
If your answer is no, then what's your specific plan to deal with aggressive attackers?

NOW FOR THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS OF ALL -

How did you *arrive* at your *opinions* for each of the above questions?
Was it by comprehensive *research* of scholars from *all* sides, or mostly through the news, social media, friends, or family?
What's your solution or plan to bring peace to the people of the Middle East?
Are you willing to cooperate toward *compassionate* solutions for the countless *innocent* children who are suffering at the hands of adults who hate each other?

CONFLICT MEDIATION PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE OPINIONS & RESPONSES TO THE MIDDLE EAST SUFFERING

Yes, I know some of you are still wanting and waiting to hear what my *personal* opinions are about *specific* details involved in the Middle East issues. I haven't shared them, and won't, primarily because the deeper I've researched, the more I've discovered good, bad, *ugly*, and worse among all sides of every issue, and within all opposing groups. Another reason is because I no longer have the arrogant, less than humble, attitude of my youth back when I thought I had the answers to all the complex specifics involved. As the old saying goes, "It's complicated". Yet, the heart and foundation for the ultimate solution is simple and clear.



Now, as a long-time counselor and conflict *mediator*, I can't help but see the need for, and have a deep desire to seek, *balance* between the many extremes that cause people to see "others" in grossly distorted, inaccurate, *dehumanizing* ways. Along with this vital need for balance, here are a number of practical conflict mediation *principles* that have proven invaluable over the decades for resolving conflict. These compassion *peace*-principles are *universally* understood and accepted, by both common sense and academic studies, even though they are rarely applied *consistently* or long enough to produce truly lasting results. Even science through research in the emerging field of interpersonal neurobiology verifies the effective power of compassionate love to transform individuals, families, communities, nations, and the world.

"But in the meantime those of different denominations and different macroreligious backgrounds must be more mindful of our narratives and how they may be enabling or limiting our capacity to create peace where open warfare or clandestine subversion exists. Jesus leaves no doubt that war as a way of life, whether between family members, factions within a congregation, denominations, worldview representatives, nations, or humans and the earth, leads to mindless dis-integration of the environment, individuals, families, and communities.

An active commitment to identifying who our enemies are and deliberately seeking to make peace with them using the prayerful principles of interpersonal neurobiology is a way by which God enables us to live out the beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Curt Thompson M.D., psychiatrist. *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (p. 264).

1 - RECOGNITION - First and foremost compassionate *peace*-principle is acknowledging that "others" who act like "enemies" are equal, *fellow* human beings just like you and me. If your mind and heart just *reacted* to this statement with negative thoughts and emotions, I understand, because that's natural. But those negative reactions are one of the symptoms revealing the root cause of conflict. Please consider that those you consider "enemies" are personal human souls, who just like all of us, way back when they were innocent little children, learned less-than-best (*destructive*) survival patterns of attitude and behavior in response to this imperfect hurtful world.

All children *need* love and acceptance from a consistently *pure* and perfect love. Instead, each of us as children faced emotionally hurtful and confusing experiences that fell far short of receiving pure love. Children feel those moments as painful rejection. And, many of those instances are perceived by them as deeply *traumatic* emotional *wounds* in their childlike hearts and minds. Those little children are now the adults you and I are tempted to think of as "bad people" or *evil* enemies. Therefore, when considering any conflict situation, especially the Middle East, it's important to humbly and compassionately *remember* that the *remnants* of wounded childhoods drive a lot of the destructive, even violent adult survival attitudes and behaviors.

No, recognizing a person's past childhood survival history does *not* justify violent acts or inner hate. But, such recognition is a key to keep us from becoming like those who act like "enemies". In contrast sadly, when we fail to embrace and apply this principle, it then becomes *dangerously* easy for us to dehumanize and even *demonize* "others". So, in order to practice this vital principle, each of us needs to consciously choose and strive to maintain an attitude that compassionately seeks to rescue the wounded heart, the wounded child remnants driving those who act like "enemies".

2 - UNDERSTANDING - The second compassionate peace-principle involves seeking to genuinely "know", to truly *understand*, the real heart of the "others" in a conflict situation. It simply means taking the time and making the effort to go beyond superficial "knowledge" that's merely *about* those "others". Hopefully, you're already realizing that to truly understand the hearts of others involves mutual conversation, dialogue, especially listening to their stories and asking questions to clarify. This is essential in order to uncover in our own hearts our *inaccurate* assumptions, unintentional misunderstandings. Keep in mind that reaching accurate understanding of others' hearts does *not* necessarily mean you agree with them. And don't forget, you cannot fairly or even *intelligently* agree or disagree until you accurately know them.

3 - FORGIVENESS - The third compassionate peace-principle involves the hardest thing of all, *forgiveness*. After conflict has already occurred, especially if it resulted in violent harm to yourself, your family, or your "people", the *natural* human reaction is a desire for vengeance, for revenge. But remember that "natural" means the world-systems way of survival of the fittest, selfish competition at the expense of others. History proves that responding with revengeful vengeance always escalates and perpetuates a vicious cycle of evil for evil.

In contrast, the way of compassion toward peace requires an active choice to *rise above*, to transcend the *natural* way of this violent world. It requires a *supra*-natural way. It requires individual and collective self-*denial*. It's the willingness to say no to our natural animalistic instincts. Forgiveness doesn't erase what's been done in the past. The principle of forgiveness willingly lets go of hate and vengeance and chooses to live consistent love — even for an enemy.

Years ago, I shared this principle of compassionate *forgiving* love in one of my emails to my Muslim professor friend in the Gaza/West-Bank community, who I mentioned at the beginning of the essay. As I drafted the email, I knew that the Hamas overseers who monitored our email correspondence would read it before passing it on to my friend. The heart of my email focused on the stark contrast between the way of a hate-filled terrorist willing to die to kill an "enemy", and even an enemy's innocent family, to Jesus' way of compassionate love that will risk death to save an enemy. To my surprise, the email overseers wrote me back, told me they appreciated my message, and said they were going to send it to other staff in the Arab University. Their positive response revealed the universal recognition of the way of love, when its presented with humility and respect.

4 - SERVICE - The fourth compassionate peace-principle is necessary to make long-term peace possible. It's the practical principle of *service*, or as Jesus described it, humble *service-love* to all others, even enemies. Remember the verse at the start of the essay, "If your enemy is hungry, give food". Sincere, overwhelming acts of service that helps meet the real needs of apparent enemies can both prevent conflict and deescalate it if it's already been happening. It's the key to transforming a hateful enemy into a faithful friend. After the devastation of WWII, America did this for its "enemy" Japan, by sending not only money, but people to help that country rebuild and thrive. The fruit produced by America's compassionate service has been a deep decades long friendship with the people and country of Japan.

5 - SUFFERING - The fifth compassionate peace-principle is the willingness to suffer in order to rescue and encourage the transformation of enemies into friends. Compassion literally means to "suffer-with". As Dr. King said in the earlier quote, choosing to give love instead of hate the willingness to risk rejection, hurt, harm, and loss. Again, this is not the natural way of survival of the fittest. It's the supra-natural way that transcends our self-protective, self-protective natures.

6 - HOPE - The sixth compassionate peace-principle (maybe it should be the first), is the principle of *hope*. Not the common type of "hope" that fearfully says "Oh my, I hope so". Instead, I'm talking about *hope* that is a confident assurance in the power of compassionate love, universally recognized as the highest valued human virtue. This kind of hope is rooted and grounded in trust (in faith) on the reality and power of humble compassionate love to work in the minds and hearts of "others", when it's consistently and unselfishly lived for them.

7 - DEPENDENCE - This seventh compassionate peace-principle is the principle of humble *dependence*. It refers to who or what you, we, depend on as the ultimate *Source* for the compassionate love necessary for transforming conflict into peace. The number one reason that conflict continues in couples, families, nations, and the world is because people are trusting in themselves and others, finite, imperfectly natural, physical *humans* as their *Source* for compassionate love. *Personal* love is real. It's not just some biochemical reaction of the physical brain. And real *personal* love not just some evolutionary self survival mechanism to pass on our genes. Personal love deeply transcends the physical universe and originates from a real Person — the Mind behind the Cosmos.

".... Love's hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love. [bold added]

.... Just as the quiet lake invites you to contemplate it but the reflected image of darkness prevents you from seeing through it, so also the mysterious origin of love in God's love prevents you from seeing its source."

Renowned Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XVI, Volume 16 (pp. 9-10). Princeton University Press.

A crucial element of this dependent trust principle involves a word the modern world dislikes because it's so often been misused and abused. It's the word "submission". Every person submits to something in the process of making decisions and acting. We either submit to our own natural selfish, competitive survival natures, or we submit to a Source higher than ourselves. Trust in our human selves as our hope for the love that can transform conflict into peace, always falls short, miserably so. The good news is that whenever and wherever people have submitted to the true Source of Love, yes God - not religion, then lives, families, and communities have been transformed. The question for each of us is clear and simple, but not easy. Will we, will you, commit our lives to the Way of Love, compassionate love for all others — and grow in it through humble dependent trust, faith, in God who exists as pure, perfect love?

"Even in such situations the vision of obtaining God's political agenda of justice and mercy can be realized. In these macro settings, paying attention to the mind leads us ultimately to the way of love that is shared, not only between individuals, but between groups torn asunder as well.

I am acutely aware that to suggest we apply the tenets of this book to the above settings may seem overly simplistic or naive. Certainly, life is so complicated that even getting individuals to work toward repairing ruptures and engaging in healing dialogue feels overwhelming. Imagining these occurring in the context of a community may seem completely out of the question. But remember that although at one level we admit to the presence of large problems in our world, at another level there is no such thing as large problems, merely collections of interchanges between individuals who with every relational interaction choose to become either more or less mindful. More or less known. More or less loved and loving."

Curt Thompson M.D., psychiatrist. ***Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships*** (p. 254).