



PEACE – WHAT PREVENTS IT? Understanding the Conditioned Mind

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Exploring the Foundation of Conflict

There are three levels of conflict and how we manage it. Too often, understanding human conflict has been conventionally addressed in a remedial, reactive way, at what we call the secondary level of “resolution” — through therapeutic or moralistic means. For example, in the case of individual conflict, or diplomatic or political intervention as in the case of social conflict — we deal with conflict after it has occurred. Or we have addressed human conflict at the tertiary level of managing it, through judicial or military intervention. These remedial, reactive approaches attempt to *fix* something that’s already happened. They do not address conflict at the primary prevention level, which involves understanding and avoiding the fundamental factors that create conflict because of how we have been conditioned to act. The primary prevention level is effective because it can *prevent* conflict from happening in the first place.

**“It’s not who the enemy is, but how it is created – born in the brain.
Understanding this we cannot blame “the other” —
for “the other” is a conditioned image of who we have been taught is our enemy.
In reality “the enemy” emanates instinctively from the primary primitive brain in us all.”**

Realizing that what is necessary for the prevention of conflict at this level, one has to go beyond the surface of conditioned thinking to explore the foundation of the conflict created. This leads to the discovery that we humans are essentially hardwired for war — that we are, by design, rooted in the genetically programmed physical makeup of our brain, which gives rise to the fight-or-flight survival mechanism. In other words, when conflict arises, we believe we must either fight or run away.

What triggers this biological hardwired automatic survival reaction is the instinctive fear of who and what we think is a threat to “our” survival. In the case of war, it is the image of “the enemy,” that ethnocentric ideological nemesis – “them” – that is in competition with “us” for our survival. The conditioned image of “the enemy” is solidly in place due to the constant reinforcement it has received over time. This image creates what you could call a biological self-defense blueprint, like a computer database, that over time has created an inborn or inherited pattern in the brain’s physical structure. This pattern has been created in order for us to feel protected and to therefore ensure our survival. It acts automatically, on its own, without our consciously doing it. It acts like a robot, instinctively, to ensure its existence, so that we feel secure deep inside us. We have inherited this tendency at birth for what we mistakenly believe will help us survive.

**Our brain is a puppet that has someone else pulling the strings.
Rather than guaranteeing our continued existence, it actually threatens it.**

Our Primitive Brain

The information that has been put into our brain is like a software program full of information about the culture we live in, telling us what to do, how to act and who might be our so-called enemy. It is like a corrupt computer program that creates a deadly virus. It’s like a car telling its driver where to go and doesn’t see that it’s heading off a cliff. When confronted by a potential conflict due to what appears to be a threat, our primitive biological brain automatically prepares for combat. Off we go, on the same road to war we’ve been on since time immemorial — inherited from generations of people before us.

That computer program remains in control of our brain because we are used to it being there, even though it doesn’t work for our survival any longer. It is maladapted — not able to adjust to what is necessary, and being maladaptive it continues to inappropriately activate the old primitive brain to protect us when that protection is not necessary. This happens because it cannot tell the difference between a real threat and a supposed one. It reacts to the image of a threat that the program has been designed to say is real.

Knowing this then, we can see that conflict created by this biological genetic program is no one's fault – it is not a “personal moral shortcoming” – it's not my fault or your fault – it's the fault in the brain's system, its malfunctioning primitive biological makeup, that isn't working correctly. The human brain operates defectively, operating on an archaic program driven to survive, while not being aware that it's causing conflict. Thinking it's doing the right thing, this survival mechanism doesn't understand that it's not working to guarantee our survival. It is a collective virus, for it affects the whole human race because we are all born with this “fault” in our brains. Being so, it is our responsibility to look at it, to pay attention to it as it arises in the moment and to not react out of it. If we can do this, then it has no place to go, and our collective survival becomes more reachable.

We Are the World

What is of utmost importance is to see that conflict created by conditioned thinking emanating from the biological brain is the same in all human beings. It is essentially the same in everyone since the human brain is basically structurally identical in all of us. The content may be different in each one, but the brain is anatomically equal in all human beings; thus, what happens to me happens to you, happens to us all.

**Self-understanding is understanding the whole human race,
for we are the world, and the world is us.**

This fundamental maladaptive drive to survive has been going on since humans started their journey on planet Earth, trying to stay alive in a harsh and threatening world. Humans have always been at war with ourselves in this way, having biologically inherited a brain with an inborn hard drive that is driving the human race to its destruction. As an old saying goes, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” Technologically and scientifically, we have advanced at great lengths, but psychologically we are still in the cave of ignorance.

Is it possible that a genetically generated, misplaced biological drive for survival incites people to conflict? Is it possible that survival is a faulty instinctual compulsion? Are we being controlled by this genetically generated, misplaced biological drive for survival, to the extent that no amount of knowledge can free us from it? In fact, is knowledge the cause of the conflict rather than the cure?

If so, what are the factors that create and sustain this conflict? If we are basing each action on instincts that created the original conflict, in trying thereby to bring about peace, do we only continue to escalate conflict? Have we created opposing ethnocentric ideologies based on the conditioned notion that we have to psychologically identify with a group in order to have peace and security? Although at one time in our evolutionally history this may have worked, is it now preventing physical security due to the extensive divisiveness of these tribal ideologies?

- ❖ Does this mean that we can't have culture — the arts, music, and literature of a civilization that can demonstrate the wonderful diversity of the human race — which we so appreciate for its differences?
- ❖ Or is it only when it becomes what we call “ethnocentric” that we have trouble?
- ❖ If so, how does human relationship become ethnocentric and what can be done about it?
- ❖ Where does this deep-seated need to identify come from? What's holding it in place?
- ❖ Can we come upon this fundamental source of human conflict by creating a questioning environment — an active dialogue that brings a nonjudgmental awareness of this deep-seated conditioning to our attention as it happens in the moment?
- ❖ Understanding that at the core of instinctual survival, we have a need to identify, can we put this demand into a temporary state of abeyance?
- ❖ Can our primary pattern for survival feel safe in this holding place, free of the usual provocations that keep the former, ethnocentric, conditioned patterns from repeating themselves?

A Threat: Is It Real or Perceived as Real?

The old brain's need for security is based on the freeze, fight or flight mechanism to protect itself from a perceived threat. If someone points a gun at us, then the threat is real and needs immediate attention. If, however, someone is only holding up an image of a threat or happens to look like someone of another ideological group that triggers a threatening feeling, then the threat is false and needs to be recognized and acknowledged as only an image. The image cannot hurt us as a gun can.

**Under certain image-threatening situations,
the old brain cannot tell the difference between real or supposed threats.
It reacts to both fact and fantasy in the same way: fight or flee.**

Hopefully, one is rational enough to be aware of this difference and will not react to a supposed threat without examining the reality of it. Unfortunately, many people have been conditioned for so long that they cannot be “rational,” cannot differentiate between the imagined versus the actual threat. Their conditioning is a reflexive response, something akin to a doctor tapping our knee to see how quickly it jerks. The conditioned image of “the enemy” is usually firmly in place due to the constant reinforcement it has received over time.

How can an environment of self-understanding potentially change that deep-seated conditioning programmed into our brains? We need first to see that this conditioning is not just

behavioral and psychological, but also biological and physical — that it is genetic, ingrained in the physiology of the human brain for millennia. What we are proposing is this:

This genetic structure for conflict, our being hardwired for war, can be transformed by creating the right educational environment for intelligence to develop.

In order to free ourselves from our divisive conditioned state of mind, we need to realize one very important piece of the puzzle: at the primary level, knowledge has no place.

Conditioned thinking has fragmented and hence separated the human race into opposing ideologies, but this is not a problem to be solved. Over and over, we have been trying ineffectively to solve the “problem” of conflict by finding a “solution.” In science and technology this problem-solving process has a place. This is where knowledge has meaning for our physical survival. But in understanding what prevents peace, we are talking about what place it has in the psychological realm in changing behavior, in this case from one of violent actions and reactions to one of peaceful conduct. Knowledge has a place at the secondary level in learning “conflict resolution skills,” and at the tertiary level in managing conflict when it has escalated beyond prevention or resolution.

At the primary prevention level, knowledge has no place.

Identification & Ethnocentrism

At the moment when the image of “the other” comes up in the brain, knowledge cannot solve it. As a matter of fact, it can only postpone properly addressing it, for when it is approached as a “problem,” then this means that sometime in the future it will be solved — through time. But psychologically there is no future. Chronologically yes — psychologically no. In other words, the conditioned image is always within one’s frame of reference, ready to react to any stimulus that evokes it, such as the image of one’s “enemy.” Any method or system of knowledge only postpones bringing the immediate sustained awareness that is necessary to “deactivate” this genetic database, this hardwired biologically programmed pattern that is at the root of human conflict.

Think of this biologically hardwired “primary program” as a hard drive in the primitive brain. One could also use the analogy of a car without a driver. It has the capacity to go forward, but without a driver, the car can’t move at all. Now the software, the disk, is the driver. It represents the cultural ethnocentric conditioning. When “inserted” or “instilled” into the brain, it activates the hard drive or car and off it goes along the same road that it has traveled for eons. By continuing to depend on *identifying* with the particular group or community that our old software has been “written” or conditioned into, it is basing our psychological survival needs on a really outdated program. In other words, the disk or software is corrupt. It’s maladapted, for it has not adapted to the present and correct situation, one that will really ensure survival.

At one time in our evolution, this old program could guarantee our physical survival, but now it is obsolete and threatening our physical security. Originally, it was limited by the circumstances it needed to ensure survival. With fewer people, it did not present a significant problem as it adapted and was confined by those particular sociological times. But as the human race grew, it became a problem trying to ensure the survival of all the groups that were now confronting each other, competing for the limited resources available. Each group was driven to have its own group survive over others. This can lead to what is called “ethnocentrism.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines ethnocentrism as “regarding one's own race or ethnic group as of supreme importance” and “belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group.”

While trying to “bring about peace,” we continue to recreate conflict, simply because we are unaware of the deep-seated program that keeps fight and flight in place.

As questioned before, how have we conventionally tried to “solve the problems” of human conflict? Most of the attention and resources to this end are at the tertiary level in managing conflict. Very little is given to the secondary level of resolving the conflicts we have, therefore the violence continues to happen. This is because we have not paid attention to the primary prevention level in this genetically and hence biologically based primary program and the ethnocentric software that continues to reactivate it in this maladaptive way. We rarely, if ever, have given attention to the foundation of it in the physiological makeup of the brain. So, we go on trying to “solve the problem” of conflict through knowledge.

**We continue to dwell in this mindset —
that if we just had more knowledge about why we fight, we could stop fighting.
But behavior can only be changed now, in the present moment.**

Learning to Think “In the Moment”

This proposal affirms that conventional academic approaches to peace only confuse and intimidate us and therefore postpone real insight into the causes as they are happening in the moment. For it is only in the moment that we can free ourselves of this conditioned ethnocentric mindset. In other words, we will never be able to end war and find perpetual peace at some time in the future, for psychologically — there is no future. It is an illusion. We need to understand – not “how” to bring it about – but what prevents peace now. The “how to bring about peace” is based on conventional illogic that got us into the conflict in the first place.

We are addressing the primary prevention level of conflict, understanding what *prevents* peace. At the secondary or tertiary level of conflict resolution or management, certain academic disciplines can bring clarity, but they do not, nor have they ever, stopped conflict that is knowledge-based at the primary prevention level. Since knowledge is comparative by nature, and comparisons create conflict through judgment and ideals, this approach has no place in the prevention of conflict.

It is this automatic, built-in, genetically hardwired instinct for survival that comes into play when our existence, real or supposed, is threatened. There is also the image we have of ourselves, the sense of self, of our identity, our conditioned view we have gained over time through the cultural and societal inculcation that occurs as we are being taught to belong to whatever tribe, clan or ethnic group we were born into. This image of self is the source of conflict when it comes up against those who are not of that same self-image. We seem to live in a house of mirrors of contradicting and opposing self-images that fragment the human race into opposing ideologies, hence creating conflict.

All animals, including humans, have a hardwired survival instinct genetically built into our DNA. But the difference between humans and other animals is that humans can think, we can create images of “the enemy,” the adversary, leading to the destruction of billions of us — by us — in our mistaken drive to survive. But the tragic irony is that these images are illusions, not real — figments of our imagination. They were made up at some point. Any nationality, religion or culture was created by thought, propelled by the biological brain in its drive to survive, its need to find security in a particular group, tribe or clan.

There is no real security in thought, in images. We are deceived by them, misled into believing that they are real and that they will protect us. All they do is divide the human race into opposing ethnocentric arrogances, each competing for dominance, power and control. These images are extremely dangerous for, when it comes to defending them, they are the basis of war.

I remember a young friend years ago who escaped from Bosnia just as the war started. The night before the war broke out, she was having a party with her friends who were all different ethnic representations of the groups there at the time. The next day when the war broke out, she was perceived as “the enemy,” being of that minority that was conceived as a threat, and was attacked by the very friends who, the night before, she had been partying with. She barely escaped with her life. These images caused this separation, this division and violence.

**If we were not conditioned into these images —
of who we think we are and who we think others are —
could we create an enemy and hence create war?**

We need to ask: *“Does this happen to everyone? Is this what drives people to kill those they think are a threat to their lives?”* By asking these questions, we realize that the primitive biological brain was the source of the supposed conflict, instantaneously preceded in a domino effect by the image triggering fear then triggering the fight or flight system. There was no room for thought to enter here to remedy this situation, to find a solution, an answer to this “problem.”

Image → Fear → Fight or Flight → Conflict → War

Thought is necessary to convey this reaction through words, but it is not the process that corrects the conditioned state of mind reacting in that moment. The words come from the experiencing, from the actual fact of the immediate awareness of the conditioned reaction. But the words are not the thing, the description is not the described, the explanation or examples are only words, abstractions that too often create a lofty reality that can appeal to our intellect, to our need to have another answer or solution to solve the problem of human conflict.

The Influence of Ancient Instincts

I also understood in that moment that this freedom from conditioned thinking is what we are all looking for. Ironically, we hadn't been able to "find it" because we were too busy stepping outside the moment, looking for it elsewhere, seeking solutions to the problems of conflict in knowledge, in methods, in ways, in definitions, in explanations.

**The essential question is:
Can we bring insight to this maladaptive means of survival
and therefore be free of this self- destructive genetic inheritance,
or will we succumb to instincts we can't transcend?**

This is really quite simple when we think of children. They are free of most social conditioning that creates these psychological barriers. But they do have a potential for this conditioning in what can be called a "primary program," established genetically in the brain for the assurance of having one's physical survival needs met. It has been called "social stratification." A child is biologically conditioned to identify with one group over another to be assured of having his or her physical needs safely met. Over tens of thousands of years, this identity program has been built up in us through the reinforcement of our need to survive, thus creating a genetic or inherited basis for it. To ensure this primary program's survival, it is attached to the primitive instinct of the fight or flight mechanism in the limbic system of the brain. Because it is based on instinct, this primitive program holds a strong natural impulse, an automatic and involuntary reflex when aroused or challenged.

In contemporary studies of the influence of genetics and hereditary on behavior, psychologists include Instinct Theory, which asserts that all our behavior and motivation stem from biological, genetic programming. As each species is hardwired with the same motivations — the strongest program being survival — our actions all stem from our ancient instincts. Via natural selection, individuals with even a slight tendency to adapt their social behaviors were the "fittest," usually surviving longer and being more successful in passing their genes along to future generations. Even though these tendencies may not enhance our fitness in today's world, eons spent in harsher environments have left us genetically predisposed to perform certain social behaviors when situational cues call forth ancient instincts.

- ❖ What are these "social behaviors" that call forth ancient instincts?
- ❖ Aren't they a process of "natural selection" that ensures our survival?

- ❖ And how is our survival ensured?
- ❖ Is it a “primary” biological or genetic program that says it will provide safety in the group, provide physical security if we identify and conform to certain tribal ideologies?

Now the essential question arises: Is it pure instinct that motivates us to survive in this way — meaning it’s no one’s fault when conflict results from this biological program?

If so, it’s therefore not a moral concern, for in this biological, genetic view, there is no good or bad behavior — just conditioned behavior that is instinctually programmed into us for our survival. If this is true, are we condemned to be controlled by this obsolete program and hence be at war with each other endlessly? Some call this “social Darwinism,” meaning that we are biologically caught in an evolutionary time warp that will take millions of years to bring to an end. Or can this dilemma be ended instantaneously?

Proprioception — A Form of Awareness

To summarize this paradox: conditioned, ethnocentric, divisive thinking is genetically in place to ensure our physical survival — yet ironically, it seems now to be the very thing that is threatening our survival. So, should our current task be to address this underlying, old-brain, genetic disposition to survive that is now threatening the survival of the human race? Must we — and can we — get to that “primary program” and free ourselves from its effect?

Firstly, what is sustaining that primary program? Let’s use again the analogy that this primary program is a hard drive, like a car, but without a driver to tell it what to do. The driver, or the disk or software that drives the car, tells it where to go and what to do. It reinforces the “ethnocentric attitudes” that have for thousands of years mistakenly tried to “ensure” our survival. Is it possible to be free of this biologically programmed behavior?

**If we approach this condition with the correct perspective –
sustained awareness of how thought has created and sustained this conflict
emanating from the primitive biological brain –
what’s being suggested is that it can end in a nanosecond, without time.**

We have rarely questioned our ongoing notion that thought created this and that through knowledge we can free ourselves from its destructive effects. We have for millennia approached ending conflict through knowledge, hence through time psychologically. Unwittingly yet obligingly, time has marched on, through war after war, conflict after conflict.

Now as it has been said before, we are challenging this notion that knowledge — at the primary prevention level — can alleviate the suffering caused by human conflict. We are asking for thought to be “proprioceptive,” which means that thought needs to be aware of itself, since it’s

not aware of its own background or participation. And that's the dilemma. Generally thought makes understanding conflict a "problem" and then thought says the answer or solution to it is "out there." In this manner, thought thus projects away from us the responsibility for understanding conflict created by this conditioned thinking. As it is instinctual, we are truly unaware of this process.

How inappropriate, that in the process of using thought to try to solve our social problems, we actually cause continual conflict due to the paradox of our maladjusted, biologically based program trying to ensure our survival in this erroneous, illogical way!

It doesn't want to see what it is doing because that would upset eons of conditioning. Since this primary program has been in operation for so long and seemingly has guaranteed our survival, then it would naturally ask, "Why should that be changed?" So, it defends against seeing what it's doing, creating an apparent "comfort zone" from the assumed security emanating from the conformity to the community. Any challenge to this is seen as a threat to security. We have great resistance, for example, to questioning our community's knowledge. It also feels uncomfortable with looking at itself, since thought, and the seeming security it creates, has established an endorphin comfort zone, protecting us from feeling insecure. We certainly don't want to feel uncomfortable.

What this maladjusted genetic instinct drives us to do is to acquire what it thinks is necessary for our own independent need to survive — the unrelenting acquisition and expansion of worldwide territories and profitable possessions from others who themselves are also ironically tenaciously seeking what they deem is necessary for their own survival. What has been created in this distorted "drive to survive" is an extremely abnormal craving for anything valued that would allow for the continuous expansion of the individual ethnic group over all else, to compete obsessively to gain these necessities to sustain the continued existence of one's group over others. Thus, we see nations invading each other in this reactionary and primitive determination, the strongest martial force of any nation state dominating others to get what it deems necessary for its continued existence. This enviably creates a financially feasible war in the name of "economic prosperity".

This obsessively driven primitive survival for the individual group over all others is destroying us all, paradoxically in the name of survival.

So, what do we do? Surprisingly, it is not "doing" as we know it — it is an "undoing." Undoing means understanding what *prevents* peace, and by a process of elimination, freeing ourselves from the confines of this unnecessary conditioned thinking and all the ideological belief systems that keep us bound to it. It's as though we had each been stuffed into a glass jar with the lid screwed on tight, so that as we grew, we suffocated. As we approached adulthood, our lids were screwed on even more tightly, preventing our own lives from flourishing. When this happened, we died because there was no air, no nourishment and, like dying plants, we had nothing to help us grow and thrive.

So where do we start? We start with young people, because children are fresh and have not yet been encapsulated in the prisons of their thinking. Not just thinking, but also feeling dies inside those jars whose lids are screwed tight. Hence life cannot flower. For most adults it's too late because we intellectualize all this, creating elaborate and complicated explanations — but there's always hope. We cannot see through the miasma of this confinement of our thinking about thinking incessantly. Like a Chinese Finger Puzzle, adults are too often caught in this no-win dilemma.

How do we present the importance of understanding conditioned thinking? In what context can it be openly explored? And in what setting can it be observed? The keys to these questions are the context of bullying — from the playground to the battlefield. Bullying is a behavior everyone can relate to. Discussing it can be a practical, relevant, hands-on way to explore conditioned thinking that is at the root of human conflict.

Some people may think that bullying is just a process of growing up, like the notion of when we were young that “boys will be boys,” and that you should just learn how to fight the bully. But exploring bullying can provide a more profound means to explore the entire underlying structure of conflict — the nature and structure of conditioned thinking. The entire curriculum of the Atrium Society — *Youth Peace Literacy* — was produced to address this critical situation. What it takes to rectify this maladaptive process is the right education to look anew at the old program. We need to see that it creates conflict by mistakenly trying to protect us from what seems to be a real threat to our survival when it is only an imagined one. In this fresh awareness, free of intellectual suppositions, one can see what is, without prejudice — without trying to correct or solve it. Conflict is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be observed.

In today's world there is prejudice that creates bullying everywhere — at home, at school, in offices, within and among nations. There are ongoing attempts to stop the bullying that prejudice creates, yet it still goes on.

**The question we need to ask is what creates this prejudice?
Is the cause outside myself — with “the other” —
or does it begin in my brain?”**

Once we understand how prejudice begins, where it starts — we can stop acting out of it. If we see that we're the source of this prejudice, we won't put the responsibility to understand it on other people. The truth is that the only way to prevent bullying from happening is to begin inside ourselves — to actually see the cause of it in our brain in the way we've been conditioned to think. Due to the divisively destructive nature of ethnocentric superiority, prejudicial conditioned images of “the enemy” are what create war. Surprisingly the source of this conditioning comes from our primitive brain's reaction to feeling a threat to its survival.

The compulsion to bully is a biologically and genetically based instinct built into us for survival — to protect us from a person or group we believe is a threat to us. We therefore see this prejudicial bullying as paradoxically necessary for our survival — survival of the fittest. Also,

anyone within the group who seems weak becomes a threat to the survival of the group and is perceived as someone who needs to be eliminated or bullied out of the group. We shun, intimidate, bully – all in the misguided name of survival. What will free us from this destructive compulsion of survival of the fittest?

It's not knowledge that will free us, but rather seeing the actual movement of this compulsion *within ourselves* in the way we've been conditioned to think in this divisive prejudicial way. Knowledge, motivated by the primitive biological brain, is prejudice.

**The prejudicial image I have been conditioned to think about you
and the prejudicial image you have been conditioned to think about me
is what separates us and creates conflict.**

It's not who the enemy is, but how it is created – born in the brain. Understanding this we cannot blame "the other" — for "the other" is a conditioned image of who we have been taught is our enemy, when in reality the "enemy" emanates instinctively from the primary primitive brain in us all.

Conflict created by this biological genetic program is no one's fault – it is not a "moral shortcoming" – it's not my fault or your fault – it's the fault in the brain's defective system, its malfunctioning primitive biological makeup that is not working correctly. It can be called a systemic issue in that the human brain is defective, operating on an archaic program, driven to survive, that is unaware it's causing conflict. It affects the whole human race because we are born with this primitive, defective "fault" in our brains that is misguided. This survival mechanism thinks it's doing the right thing. It doesn't understand that it is malfunctioning, that it's not working to guarantee our survival in this way.

So, where should we start? Where do you think you can start?