Managing the Natural Energy of Conflict

Mediators, Tricksters, and the Constructive Uses of Deception

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Conflict is first and foremost about people's passions, desires, and emotions in collision. The friction of conflict generates heat, which, like any form of natural energy, can be squandered or harnessed. The sources could be scarce resources, an inability to communicate or empathize, a moral clash over good or evil, or a power struggle of some variety. Typically, they are inextricably intertwined and sometimes disguised.

The Natural Energy of Conflict

Regardless of the sources, the trick is to separate the core elements of conflict from the less pure, residual, and unnecessary by-products. In especially difficult matters, what is required is the deft and subtle touch of a third party attuned to the rhythms of conflict, with the necessary feel and intuition to be effective. Those qualities are, however, difficult to find in the midst of a Western techno-rational culture that is dedicated to the belief that problems are predominantly solved by rational analysis and reasonable discourse. At least initially, disputes are not susceptible to logic; traditional notions of the dispassionate, above-the-fray, neutral, and objective expert can be not only ineffective but even counterproductive in managing heated, long-standing disputes. A disproportionate amount of attention has been given to rational problem solving. That
approach is essential but not sufficient in and of itself. The complexity, chaotic, and dynamic character of events and issues faced personally and as a society require conflict management approaches that meld rational and intuitive aspects.

Developing the requisite qualities is a twofold task. First, we must recognize the importance of moving outside the strict and narrow rational paradigm our culture has defined. We are increasingly coming to the awareness that the idea of rationality necessarily includes not just objective data but the subjective realm as well (Nozick, 1994). Second, we must find models of practice that offer support and give direction.

Interestingly, drawing from our past history and folklore offers up a figure that is uniquely suited and especially adept in traversing the intricacies of complex present-day conflicts. The folkloric “trickster” figure appears in virtually every culture, across the entire spectrum of time from prehistory to the present, and in every guise, with remarkable similarity of purpose and approach to that of the mediator, facilitator, or for that matter anyone who encounters and seeks to manage conflict. After all, the stuff of trickster stories and folklore is their insights, antics, and modus operandi—strategies, techniques, and skills—calculated to finesse and survive conflict. Note immediately that the purpose of both the trickster and the mediator is not to defeat or stop, but merely to survive and manage, conflict. Both face the ultimate challenge: to mediate between immovable objects and irresistible forces.

It is the premodern trickster figure that demonstrates, better than any professional expert could, the deft and subtle integration of all the requisite human talents and brings them to bear on the most serious and problematic matters that confront humankind. Tricksters will use both sacred and profane means, sometimes even pushing the limits of moral propriety in pursuit of the ultimate moral end of survival. They demonstrate an uncanny, resourceful, and pragmatic ability that gives glimpses of considerable intellect and wisdom. They strategically decide whether to be straightforward or circuitous and “crazy” in approach.

Although theory and rational analysis are not unimportant, the mediator and the trickster function predominantly by gut instinct (Benjamin, 2001a).

As the conflict management field has developed, and especially in recent years as it has become increasingly institutionalized, the traditional disciplines of law, mental health, or medicine, anchored in a techno-rational tradition and thinking frame, have predominated as a model of practice. Standards of practice, notions of competency, and other professional accoutrements have been imported and in many instances set the standards for conflict management practice. One glaring example is the use of the term and the concept of neutrality. The product of “scientistic” thinking, and culturally linked to a culture that emphasizes objectivity and rationality, the claim of neutrality is the expressed aspiration of most mediators without much reflection or critical examination of the risks. Practiced in the extreme, neutrality can straitjacket and constrain the use of strategies necessary to manage difficult conflicts. Neutrality is only one of many notions that have disqualified mediators, facilitators, and other conflict negotiators to sense and respond to the natural feel of conflict and to overrely on structured protocols and formulaic practice approaches (Benjamin, 1998d).

Similarly, outside the purely rational box of traditional thinking, a mediator, not unlike a trickster figure, is not infrequently called on to use techniques and methods that are frowned upon in polite professional practice settings. Specifically, pursuing the management of conflict sometimes requires resorting to such profane means as constructive use of deception. In difficult conflicts, where rational discussion and logic are insufficient to dislodge disputing parties from their entrenched positions, unorthodox strategies and techniques that do not easily fit within published
standards of practice are necessary, although they raise practical, professional, and ethical questions.

What is often dismissed or outright denied in Western cultures, where scientific inquiry and the quest for the truth is held sacred, is the necessary place of deception in our human functioning. Deception is not only a normal activity but an essential one for the survival and propagation of all life-forms, including human beings. Nonetheless, although a factor in every communication, there remains a deeply ingrained antipathy to the use of deception, and it continues to carry a pejorative connotation (Berlin, 1991; Rue, 1994). Highlighting and analogizing the work of a third party in a conflict to the age-old trickster figure is not intended to encourage or justify the abdication of responsible practice standards, but it is a necessary part of conflict management practice that must be addressed and accepted.

Of far greater importance is the trickster figure as a model for the effective management of the natural energy generated by conflict, rather than being merely another expert technocrat trying to solve other people’s problems. The trickster motif is a frame for emphasizing and appreciating the full range of strategies available for managing conflict. Importantly, it offers a practice model that can seamlessly incorporate both objective and subjective ways of knowing and the complete spectrum of rationality (Benjamin, 1995b). It escapes the often facile and oversimplified dichotomies drawn between truth and deception, good and evil, and right and wrong (Benjamin, 2002).

**Tricksters and Mediators**

The trickster figure thrives on change and conflict, alternately causing or resolving it. He serves as a mediator, seeking to reconcile immovable objects and irresistible forces. The trickster of folklore and mythology helps humans cope with the insurmountable and uncontrollable forces in their lives and contain the chaos that always looms and threatens to disintegrate their social fabric. Tricksters in folklore, just as is true of present-day mediators, can never gain full control of the dilemmas presented and can seldom wholly resolve problems. Often the means used by tricksters or mediators to settle conflict are less than noble. But the fundamental purpose of the trickster and the mediator is the same: to help the characters or parties survive (Niditch, 1987).

The trickster figure, as must a sophisticated mediator, might appear to be “crazy like a fox” (Nisker, 2001). The trickster figure is a beguiling contradiction in terms, simultaneously using both natural wit and calculated, practiced skill. Observing the manner of the trickster figure offers a clear view of the necessarily elusive and difficult role of the present-day mediator. Both seek to transform disputing parties’ construction of reality and to transform the context of the dispute to allow other perspectives to be considered. This often requires the use of manipulative techniques to unsettle or tweak parties entrenched in set positions not admitting of settlement. However, just as the trickster sometimes resorts to unorthodox, and even profane, methods, so on occasion must a mediator. This goes against the grain of the values of most professional disciplines, not to mention our culture and morality. Paradoxically, the trickster figure, a reassuring motif that is well ingrained and evident throughout human history, directly challenges strongly held beliefs about truth and honesty that are the cornerstone of our modern-day belief system.

**The Natural Mediator and the Trickster**

Conventional wisdom—encapsulated half-truths, based in equal parts on our own limited experience and conditioned by personal bias—would suggest a mediator should be a humanistic, compassionate, patient, and empathetic sort; slow to anger and frustration; and eternally optimistic that all issues can be resolved with reason. It is, of course, useful to exhibit some of those traits sometimes. For
the most part, however, despite the suggestions of career counselors, who, armed with psychological tests, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, presume only the most genuinely caring among us have the potential to be good mediators, there is some reason to be skeptical.

The personality traits that best serve mediators may not be the most obvious or commonly presented: (1) confused, (2) voyeuristic, (3) compulsive, and (4) marginal. Although some people are born naturals, others can acquire the traits with disciplined effort (Benjamin, 1998c).

Confused

For the mediator and the trickster, the truth, clear rules, and simple answers are troubling. Even though the clarity of predictable results and ultimate final theories offers an allure in a world filled with ambiguity, too often their application leads to greater confusion and unintended consequences (Berlin, 1953). Many have properly been drawn to the work of mediation just because they have found themselves sitting on the fence, seeing the validity of all sides in a dispute, and there are few places for fence-sitters in a culture dedicated to finding the right answer. Western cultures have substituted the quest for the truth for the search for the Holy Grail. In negotiated processes such as mediation or facilitation, the truth of the matter is not and cannot be the primary focus, if for no other reason than there is no machinery available to discover and determine the truth (Benjamin, 1999). The object is a practical and workable agreement. The mediator is relieved of any responsibility to determine who is right or wrong and what is the right answer. In fact, being naturally of a confused state of mind is useful as a third party helping others to manage conflict (Benjamin, 1998c).

Ironically, even though many people caught in the grip of conflict present themselves as certain of their rightness and position, a good measure of conflict can be attributed to their being confused and overwhelmed. Their entrenched positions are seldom more than defensive postures, statements of their fear of being played for a fool. The mediator’s confusion about which position is most or least valid can help undermine some of their presumed certainty and inject a measure of doubt and ambiguity into the atmosphere. Those who are most adept at taking on the confused persona are those who have always been ill at ease with presumed clarity or certainty. This confusion serves a mediator well; it allows him or her to naturally understand there are no easy answers and to help confuse parties who presume otherwise. The confused mediator more readily sees the validity of each person’s perspective and more naturally resists aligning with a particular side. Experience generally breeds a reluctance to be sure one is right and less willing to venture a guess, let alone presume to give an objective evaluation. Confused mediators recognize the dual nature of all things human—that heroes can be scoundrels and scoundrels heroes, victims can be bullies and bullies victims, and terrorists might be freedom fighters and freedom fighters might be terrorists.

A mediator is not allowed the comfort of certainty in thinking about the right outcome. Such rationalized clarity carries with it the risk of being perceived to be aligned with a particular position or cause. Amidst all the “certainty mongers” and within the strict rules of law, custom, and ritual set down by the righteous, the trickster offers a measure of relief. By cleverness, humor, and reframing, shifting, and reorganizing of issues, tricksters and mediators shake up the situation and cause a certain amount of confusion so that the disputants might have an opportunity to gain a different perspective.

Voyeuristic

Being voyeuristic can be a troubling attribute; in some contexts, voyeurism is viewed as a form of perversion. In managing conflict, however, it is an invaluable attribute, for what is required of a negotiator or mediator is an endless fascination with how other human beings engage each other and construct their realities. As a voyeur, the mediator can more ably resist being judgmental, knowing that “there but for the grace of God go I.” A mediator does not so much
do disputing parties a favor by helping them settle conflict but is instead honored by being invited to aid in managing some of the most intimate matters of their lives.

Compulsive

The mediator must have a penchant to bring order out of chaos because a good measure of conflict arises from confusion—misinformation or no information that feeds the parties' fear of being played for a fool. Compulsive organization, just short of descent into outright neuroticism—the use of charts, maps, and a clear structure—can fend off a good measure of unnecessary conflict. The mediator is the wilderness tour guide and must be well prepared. The mediator can't just wander along with them but must instead sense and anticipate the parties' fears before they become overwhelmed.

Marginal

Finally, a mediator necessarily must dwell alone in the middle; he or she is and must remain marginal. The mediator cannot be aligned or associated with any cause or purpose other than to help the parties make decisions for themselves. Groucho Marx said it best: "Any group that would have me as a member isn't worth joining." It means letting go of attachments to what life should be in a perfect world—one good for children, women, men, minorities, and other people of every stripe and kind. The mediator has to be on the fringe, an outsider, less concerned about what is right than with what will work to settle a dispute in the present circumstance. Mediation is not about social justice, and the mediator cannot be an advocate for a cause and effectively manage a conflict at the same time. Mediators, like tricksters, hold a marginal social status in the cultures they inhabit. They may garner some measure of respect, but that fund of goodwill is only as valuable as the last dispute and means little in the next one. Credibility must be earned in each dispute separately. The mediator has no authority except that conferred on him or her by disputants who have chosen to invite the mediator into their dispute. In pure form, regardless of social status or prestige, the mediator and the trickster succeed only through cleverness, not by force or external authority. Many mediators who work for courts or in in-house mediation programs have discovered that their presumed authority was, as often as not, unhelpful (Benjamin, 1998b).

Like the folkloric trickster figure, the present-day mediator must be willing to some extent to assume a marginal status (not be the authority), if disputing parties are to be allowed to self-determine the resolution of their own dispute (Niditch, 1987). The mediator operates in the shadow of the law, encouraging disputing parties to adopt a personal standard of fairness that may as likely depart from any perceived or preformulated or normative standard of fairness, legal or otherwise (Mookin and Kornhauser, 1979). The mediator may even encourage the consideration of options for settlement of disputes that are outside the norms of social convention or the law.

At the same time, this marginality or nonalignment should not be confused with neutrality. The mediator needs to be free to engage or challenge any party in a conflict. Neutrality is a holdover concept from the technical-rational thinking frame of traditional professionals. It carries with it an implicit, if not explicit, responsibility to be objective, distanced, dispassionate, and above the fray. Mediators and tricksters cannot afford that luxury; they are participant-observers to the conflict and must be actively engaged. At best, they strive to be balanced, not neutral (Benjamin, 1995a, 1998d).

The trickster figure is a mentor of sorts for the difficult role of being a conflict mediator working in a culture that has a decided preference for swift action, bold advocacy, and heroes. The slow, careful work of conflict management does not often produce the climactic moments that are the stuff of legends. The trickster figure, if nothing else, exhibits how to harness our basic noble (and sometimes ignoble) attributes as human beings to the management of conflict. Many more of us are naturally confused, voyeuristic,
compulsive, and marginal than we are rational, patient, and understanding in the path of conflict. The difference is that a sophisticated natural mediator has learned not to deny his or her basic nature, but rather to harness and use those amply provided attributes or vulnerabilities to our advantage. In other words, we try to be saints when what may serve us best is the recognition that we all are potential or real "sinners."

The Trickster Versus the Hero

The folkloric trickster figure is never a hero; he or she is typically a marginal personage either by reason of social status or force of circumstance. A heroic figure in mythology and literature is a character who develops, symbolizes, or reinforces the cultural norms of the established order of society. Thus King Solomon stood for wisdom and justice, and George Washington stood for honesty. A hero is, by definition, bound up in or associated with a particular cause, position, or purpose. Heroes must remain resolute and passionate in their cause, "the perfect line that never wavers." The trickster figure, by contrast, must be free to flaunt authority and remains forever outside the norm and socially marginal. Thus the trickster figure in most of folklore, whether coyote, leprechaun, court jester, clown, or fool, is a paradoxical character, a spirit of disorder and hater of boundaries who tests the central beliefs and values of the predominant culture (Niditch, 1987).

Not only is a negotiator or mediator not a hero, but he or she runs the risk of being viewed as a pariah merely for suggesting the idea of settlement. For many, negotiation is aligned with evil or immorality (Benjamin, 1998). Take negotiating with terrorists, for example. Those Jews who negotiated with the Third Reich for the release of Jews from Germany in the years just before the Second World War continue to be hated to this day by many other Jewish people (Bauer, 1994).

Political and social leaders, to obtain their positions, must present themselves as heroic figures. Hero types, or those who aspire to be so viewed, conform to a relatively common mold. Their public relations material will indicate they came from deprived or limited means and have encountered and overcome adversity because of their exceptional virtue. As heroes, they are necessarily constrained by their role to be clear and unambiguous about the righteousness and justness of their partisan cause. If they were to change their mind on an issue, that would likely be viewed as weak—or worse, duplicitous and opportunistic. They are visionaries, certain of their mission and the justness of it. For them, good and evil and right and wrong are clearly delineated (Niditch, 1987).

For trickster figures and mediators, good and evil are not opposites or mutually exclusive; they are overlapping and inseparable qualities of the same whole. Behaviors and events are seen by mediators and trickster figures as confused mixtures of both right and wrong, making available multiple opportunities or possibilities that have both positive and negative ramifications. Tricksters and mediators, unlike heroes, must have a high level of tolerance for ambiguity.

Heroes and leaders must provide the clarified message their followers need to hear to mobilize them. They cannot risk confusing their message with subtlety and nuance; they seek action, not discussion. Mediators, on the other hand, are the house skeptics, obligated to challenge the reigning wisdom and poke holes in the utopian vision.

The Limits of Rationality

A brief rendering of the traditional technical-rational model of thinking and practice that has evolved over the last 150 years is a useful backdrop and offers a good figure-ground perspective as a means of comparison with the trickster model (Schön, 1983). Law, medicine, and counseling are disciplines anchored in a linear, analytical thinking frame. Those disciplines are informed by the universal laws of classical physics first articulated by Newton and incorporated into the scientific method postulated by Francis Bacon in the Age of Enlightenment; ultimately they resulted in the logical
positivism of the Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth century. The operating premises of the Western world are first that there is a truth, second that truth can be known and determined with predictability and certainty, and third that there is only one truth (Berlin, 1991). The notion of "come let us reason together" is rooted in those premises and continues to be practiced by many traditional professionals—and not a few mediators.

The scientific method was quickly imported to the traditional professionals and very soon became their underpinning. The theory, practice, and education in medicine and law changed unalterably. The professionals became technical experts and scientists of sorts. Doctors moved away from the art of healing and adopted an analytical protocol that appeared infallible: diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, cure. Subsequently, psychologists and other mental health professionals would borrow that approach. Nor was law immune from the attraction of becoming, or at least appearing, more scientific. Christopher Columbus Langdell, the founder of the first law school, at Harvard in the late nineteenth century, set as his operating premise that "law is science," and lawyers would do well to study "black letter" universal legal principles that can be deciphered with careful analysis (Schön, 1983). Lawyers, like doctors, need only approximate the scientific method: fact assessment, legal/case analysis, strategy, and predictable outcome.

Traditional professionals have become the high priests of a techno-rational belief system; they presume and are assumed to be experts in their particular disciplines, and deference is given to them accordingly (Lewontin, 1991). Yet in most disputes, the last thing needed is another technical expert. As a result, difficult and complex conflicts such as divorce, business, or environmental disputes are often fragmented or pieced into separate parts by the technical experts. Each discipline approaches the matter from a carefully prescribed and conditioned practice focus in accordance with settled principles. Lawyers have a legal dispute resolution paradigm and tend to view disputes as strictly legal matters (Menkel-Meadow, 1985). Mental health professionals view disputes as intrapersonal or interpersonal conflicts, and business professionals view disputes as purely a function of economics. In short, depending on the professional to whom an issue is presented, the problem runs the risk of being overly "legalized," "therapized," or "economized."

Traditional professionals approach a complex conflict as if the matter were an elephant and each of them—the lawyer, counselor, financial analyst, or doctor—is standing one foot away from the beast, each in a particular location, front, back, or side. Each describes a different part—the trunk, the tail, the flank—and each believes he or she knows the whole truth of the beast from the part seen. Many professionals and consumers have gravitated to mediation because the constraints of traditional profession practices have not sufficiently allowed effective problem solving. Professionals do not enjoy practicing within the narrow strictures of their discipline, which often seems as much a hindrance as a help to managing a client's issues; they are given all of the responsibility to solve the problem and little or no authority—a high-stress situation. Clients, likewise, often feel they are running between pillar and post—from counselor to lawyer to accountant—obtaining different advice, with no clear overall sense of how to organize that information.

"Systematic Intuition"

In contrast to the fragmented and often linear approach of most professional disciplines, mediators, not unlike tricksters, rely less on specific protocols and develop a Gestalt, or whole-picture, approach. They look less at the specific parts and concentrate more on the systemic and holistic dimensions. The mediator must be free to borrow information and problem-solving approaches eclectically from a variety of professional disciplines (Schön, 1983). Although some basic protocols are initially helpful, they are no substitute for the need to sense and intuit how to move and manage the conflict. This is much the same as a surfer who feels her balance riding a wave, or a rider who must feel the movements of a horse and respond.
Lawyers, counselors, business advisers, and other professionals all serve a necessary purpose and function. Most complex disputes require consultation with such experts if there is to be substantially informed decision making. But even though there is some overlap, those professionals are not and cannot be the same as the mediator. In the best trickster tradition, the mediator must be free to roam the terrain of the dispute unfettered by prescribed professional protocols. The purposes and functions of mediation are more subtle. How and what a mediator does to resolve a dispute is not easily amenable to prescriptive rules and analysis. Mediation between or among disputing parties, almost by definition, is done in the shadow not only of the law but of other professional disciplines as well (Mnookin and Kornhauser, 1979). The mediated resolution to an issue often does not square with determinations that might be applied by a lawyer, doctor, or therapist. In mediation the right answer to a problem, if there is one, becomes secondary to obtaining some measure of resolution of the dispute by the parties themselves. A mediator, by definition, must have a high tolerance for ambiguity and be capable of operating less formally and often in the middle of great confusion. The typical terrain of a mediator is in the realm of “fuzzy logic,” between the extremes of the clearly right or clearly wrong answer (Kosko, 1993). Rational-logical thinking alone is seldom sufficient or effective in resolving difficult conflicts.

The mediator practices by “systematic intuition,” an intentional oxymoron designed to convey the ability and necessity of working with subjective and objective information simultaneously (Benjamin, 2001a). Most intractable and protracted conflicts defy simple rational analysis and conceal multiple variables and factors in play, only some of which are expressly stated but all of which must be addressed and managed in some measure. This requires both analytical skill and intuitive ability. In contrast to the linear thinking frame of traditional professionals, mediators of necessity must operate from a systemic or holistic thinking frame.

The folkloric trickster figure dynamically mixes the character traits of wit and reason. Like the mediator, the purpose of the trickster is the management of conflict. This is not to suggest that mediators should operate by wits and intuition alone, but that the mediator requires both intuitive sensibilities as well as analytical skills—systematic intuition.

The Thinking Frame of Tricksters and Mediators

Traditional professionals typically work from a logical positivist operating premise; problems symbolize a state of disorder or disequilibrium. For them, all problems can be solved, and they can be solved so that order or stasis is reestablished. Problems are aberrations to be fixed, remedied, or cured. This is the core of the technical-rational belief system of most traditional professionals (Schön, 1983). Mediators and tricksters have a wholly different thinking frame. For them, problems are an expected and normal part of the real world (Diamond, 1972). They recognize that no matter how necessary, well intended, or well conceived a social order may be, none is foolproof or perfect, and there are always choices. There is no question that rules, laws, and regulations are essential for an ordered society to progress, but at the same time all that rational ordering can easily become oppressive and stultifying. The same rules that afford uniformity, safety, and protection of the norms often constitute the major source of an individual’s or community’s sense of powerlessness. Some individuals and groups, especially minorities, often feel constrained or locked in by the rules, which ostensibly protect the majority. We often become “prisoners of good government.” To the trickster and the mediator, peace and order are not an end in themselves.

In society, mechanisms must be available to allow some wiggle room. Allowing discretion to be exercised is the most potent antidote for the sense of constraint caused by the “myth of rationality.” This myth is the operative belief held by many, especially in Western cultures, that all problems or issues have rational solutions and that those issues can be solved by logical thinking and rules (Benjamin, 1990). Governments are premised on the myth of rationality.
A myth is not a lie, nor it is the whole truth. At best, it is a noble lie, a concoction of what people need to believe rather than a provable proposition (Rue, 1994). There are limits to rationality, a point at which being rational alone is, in fact, irrational and where the rote application of a rule or policy becomes absurd and exacerbates the problem (Elster, 1989; Saul, 1992). For societal systems to work, the formal operation of law must be tempered by the exercise of discretion. Negotiation and mediation are the primary modes of "private ordering" that allow parties to retain control over their own lives and avoid the imposition of often unexpected and unwanted determinations by the formal system of law (Mnookin and Kornhauser, 1979).

Traditional professionals are the ministers of the established order (Saul, 1992). Their underlying thinking frame is essentially bivalent: one is either right or wrong, sick or healthy, within the law or not within the law. Most complex issues, however, occur within the ambiguous center, the fuzzy middle, where matters are mostly a question of degree. The variables of a dispute are in most real-life circumstances multivalent, ambiguous, and continuously shifting (Kosko, 1993). Most complex disputes require risk assessment and management. There are seldom clear choices and certainly no guarantees. Mediators, by definition, work in this terrain of ambiguity, which requires a multivalent thinking frame.

The purely rational and ordered society first suggested and envisioned by Aristotle, which serves as a foundation for the thinking of our Western society, is an artifice imposed on reality (McKeon, 1947). Subsequently, much of our history has been taken up with the attempt to find the balance between an ordered society and individual freedom. Trickster figures have been among those personalities who have been institutionalized to make day-to-day life more tolerable, perhaps even survivable, in the meantime. They were privileged to explore the nonrational or irrational consequences that resulted from too much rational thinking. Present-day mediators, like trickster figures, continue in that tradition.

**Trickster and Mediators as Conflict Analysts and Managers**

Conflict is the natural soil of the trickster figure, as it is of the mediator. Conflict is endemic to human development. Change, by definition, engenders stress and conflict, whether intrapersonally, interpersonally, or both. Whereas for traditional professionals conflict is negative and to be avoided, the trickster-mediator understands that conflict has the potential to be the source of both risk and opportunity. Cholesterol can be of a molecular structure that aids the metabolism of the body chemistry or it can be in a form that constricts arteries and blocks bodily functioning and ultimately causes death. Similarly, conflict can stimulate and alert individuals undergoing change or it can immobilize and block the problem-solving process. Thus some conflict is very real and substantive, as with disputes involving scarce resources (land use or the future financial security of a divorcing couple). Other conflicts are essentially avoidable or peripheral, as with relationship or communication disputes (misunderstandings, accumulated slights, both real and perceived). Tricksters and mediators need to understand conflict in all of its forms in order to manage it effectively.

Human beings, especially in Western cultures, tend to think in a linear chain of thought, even though the nature of things is decidedly more complex (Bateson, 1972). Thus conflicts are often presented in dichotomous and dualistic terms, such as good versus evil, life versus death, rational versus irrational, right versus wrong, love versus hate, enemy versus friend, health versus sickness, objective versus subjective knowledge, mind versus body. Problems so framed are essentially irresolvable. To cope with or manage the conflict, the trickster-mediator works to develop a third perspective that shares traits of both sides of the dichotomy, thereby transforming a conflicted dyad into a more harmonious triad (Levi-Strauss, 1963). For the trickster-mediator, conflicts are never resolved; there is seldom a final or ultimate right answer, but the conflict can often