Introduction

“Every conflict begins with thoughts of fear, animosity and aggression which pass through some people's minds and spread like wildfire. The only antidote to these aberrations is to take on fully the suffering of others.”

—Matthieu Ricard

When's the last time you had a client you couldn't wait to get rid of? Or muttered to yourself the equivalent of, “A pox on both their houses!” as the case in front of you spiraled into name-calling and bullying? Or felt the rightness of someone's position so powerfully you struggled to hear the other side?

Powerful emotional currents flow through us as professionals who work with conflict. We size up our clients and carry judgments, frustrations, and gut feelings about them in our bodies. Often, we do our best to use the tools of intellect and our desire to appear impartial to push aside these reactions, because we believe that anything else will prevent us from reaching a fair outcome.

Many of us have been trained to steer clear of anything but logic. Yet, powerfully transformative shifts are possible when we connect to our clients and ourselves with more than our rational minds.

In my years as a mediator, it has come as an extraordinary revelation to discover that understanding our personal reactions to people we are trying to help is indispensable to doing this work effectively. The frustration, exasperation, anger, and other difficult emotions that are part of daily life in this field hold the key to a deeper connection with the parties who come to us. And with connection comes new, more satisfying possibilities for resolving their conflicts. More than
any other technique or skill that I have learned as a mediator, investigating my inner self has proven to be the essential way to help others solve their problems.

This book describes the program I have developed with my colleagues Jack Himmelstein, a law professor and lawyer, and Norman Fischer, a Buddhist monk, for helping people who work with parties in conflict use their inner experiences for the benefit of their clients. It challenges many of the conventions conflict professionals bring to this field, replacing them with a full and deep commitment to bringing all of ourselves to serving those who need us. We think of this program, rooted in self-awareness, as working from the inside out.

This highly personal work draws on tools such as meditation, deep listening, and self-awareness, and it builds on the conflict-resolution model Jack Himmelstein and I have refined over four decades, a model that can best be summed up in the notion that the surest route to a resolution that satisfies all the parties is one that looks beneath the surface to address the fundamental—and often unexpressed—feelings and concerns.

Drawing heavily from my own cases, teaching scenarios, and the experiences of the conflict professionals we’ve known from our training programs who’ve worked to master this approach, the pages that follow will both show and explain our systematic, “inside-out” method for bringing our own and our clients’ long-avoided emotional reactions into the conflict-resolution process.

A case study: Whose side are you on?

Because this work is more experiential than intellectual, I’d like to give you a first taste as it unfolded in a recent training session. As you’ll see, the shifts that unfold from acknowledging, rather than suppressing, emotional reactions to clients and situations can be dramatic.

We were at a critical point in a mediation-training program in Germany when I sensed we’d hit a block. The 24 participants had just finished role-playing in small groups, and I asked if anyone would be willing to come into the middle of the room to work with problems they had experienced in the exercise. There was a good-humored silence, but no volunteers.
So I said, "I'm looking for trouble. Did anyone have any trouble?" Finally, a well-seasoned woman, a mediator and lawyer who had spent 25 years as a judge, raised her hand and started to explain her difficulty. Although she was speaking in German, which I could only understand with the help of the translator, I could feel her reluctance.

"Helena, why don't you and your group come show us the problem?" I suggested.

They all took seats in the center of the circle, with Helena playing the mediator, in a chair between people playing the parts of an employer and a fired employee. Each party was flanked by someone playing a lawyer.

"Start wherever you experienced the problem," I said.

As Helena addressed the employer, she seemed comfortable understanding his view. But when she engaged the employee, her body started to tense, betraying more than a hint of irritability if not skepticism about the woman's story, even though she appeared to be making an effort to understand it.

I stopped her to ask how she was feeling toward the employee.

"I think I understand her well," Helena responded.

"Is it possible that you feel somewhat irritated with her?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," Helena said. "Her position is quite irrational."

I asked her to move her chair from its central spot and sit next to the employer and his lawyer.

"I think this is where you really are now. You have decided that the employee is wrong, and now the employer has two lawyers, you being one of them. Does that seem true?"

"Yes. The employee has no realistic understanding of the situation, and is actually bordering on being incoherent."

"So we've moved your chair to the employer's side, where it seems to reflect your attitude more accurately. Does that seem true?"

"Yes."

"Is this where you want to be?" I asked.

She looked a little startled and then replied, "No. I want to get back to the middle."

"There's only one way to the middle," I said. "I want you to move into the chair where the employee is sitting and feel what it's like to be in her shoes."

Helena and the employee switched seats.
“What is this like?” I asked.

“She doesn’t even see that the employer was trying to work with her to help her,” Helena said in a disapproving tone, scrunching her face.

“So you’re still in the chair that you were sitting in before with the employer. Let yourself feel what it’s like to be in the employee’s position. Could you imagine being her and what it might be like to be fired from your job when you were doing everything you could to try to make it work?”

“Of course. She doesn’t like what’s happened to her. No one would.”

“Good,” I said. “So let yourself feel what that might be like if you were in that situation.”

“Well, I would never let myself be in that situation.”

“I know. But imagine you were. Just let yourself feel her predicament.”

Helena’s body seemed to sink a bit, and then almost imperceptibly, her eyes began to glisten behind her very thick glasses.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You seemed to be touched by something.”

She took off her glasses and put her head in her hands. “This is very hard,” she told me.

“What is hard?”

Helena paused and started breathing heavily, working hard to bring air into her lungs. “I feel so sad for her, but I don’t know what to do with this.”

“Right. That is exactly the point. You are now not a judge. You have let yourself be in her shoes. Now you’ve earned the right to move back into the mediator’s chair. So switch seats with her again, but make sure you let yourself continue to feel what that was like.”

I moved the mediator’s chair back into its original spot, and Helena got up to sit there.

“Now that you’re here, what is this like?”

“Now, I don’t know who’s right.”

“And what is that like?”

“It’s very strange. You have no idea what my life has been like. For 25-five years, all I did was make decisions about other people’s lives. I know how to make rational decisions. That is the world that I have lived in. That is how I think. I feel like I need to relearn how to think. I have so many regrets.”

“And right now, what is it like to be here in this other way, not knowing who’s right?”
“It feels right, because I know that this is how I want to be in relation to these two people, not to be deciding, but to help both of them.”

“Why?”

“Because I really do believe that I can be more helpful to them if I can help them make the decision.”

“So, from this position, what do you want to say to the employee?”

She faced the employee and said, “I get it. I want to be able to help you, and I know that you did not feel that you were well treated, that you were doing the best you could, and found it frustrating not to be able to communicate to your boss in a way that he could be responsive to.”

“Great. Now turn to the employer and tell him what you understand about being in his position.”

“You felt you had no choice but to do what you did to protect the company.”

“And can you feel what it was like for him to be in that position?”

“Yes,” Helena said. “He was afraid too. But now I don’t know what the solution is anymore.”

“So now, you are in the mediator’s shoes,” I told her. “You’ve connected to both people, and you don’t know what the answer is. That’s your job.”

She looked at me, fighting to hold back tears. “Now I am so embarrassed.”

“Are you willing to hear what this has been like for all of the people who have been watching?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess so.”

The whole room burst into applause.

Will the work Helena does as a mediator for her clients be different now, as she approaches it from this new place; the one that begins with, “I don’t know what the solution is anymore?” Yes. Yes, it will.

Why reach into the internal world in conflict resolution? Because the solutions are there

For almost 40 years I have been mediating and teaching others to mediate. Much of what people want to learn is focused on techniques: What intervention should I make here? How do I deal with people who fight with
each other, interrupt each other? How can I help people understand each other when they don’t want to?

And then there are all the situational problems: How do you deal with scarce resources? How about when people are stuck and there seems to be no good solution? How do you get people to an agreement when they disagree so strongly? These are the sorts of questions that typically drive people to want mediation training, and all of them focus primarily on the external reality of a situation, as if that is the only thing that matters. This is even more true for people who come to mediation as parties than for people who come to training programs. We assume that because the problems surrounding the conflict developed in the external world, their solutions will naturally come from there. Bringing in the internal world—with all its fears, animosities, judgments, difficult histories, and confusion—can seem counterproductive, a needless distraction from the real work at hand.

So we keep our focus on what’s happening outside. In the often contentious and difficult process of negotiating spousal support, for example, both mediator and the parties might confine themselves to the facts of budgets, employment and other income, child care and use of assets, each person applying what pressure he or she can to shape and speed the outcome.

Most people find conflict unpleasant at best—they want it to be over. They typically hope that they can persuade the other person to agree with them, and fueled by the belief that they are right and the other is wrong, they turn to coercion—blame, accusations, and threats—to get their way. This is often counterproductive if both parties operate out of the same mindset, leading, at best, to a standoff.

Conflict professionals may apply another sort of pressure to get the parties to agree, including appealing to their fear of what will happen to them if they don’t move off their polarized positions to reach some kind of resolution.

This often seems central to getting the job done. We want to be compassionate, but also expedient, not getting distracted or bogged down in the parties’ intense emotions or our own. Yet pressuring others to change their position often triggers backlash, even if it seems to get results in the short run. As we see so often in everyday life and in global politics, the cost of coercion can be high. It may “move things forward,” but it’s likely to satisfy
no one. Many lawyers are fond of saying that the test of a fair agreement is that both parties feel equally dissatisfied.

Even as we’re consumed by the extraordinary pull and power of the external world, however, we realize that there is more to the conflict—and its solution—than what appears on the surface.

This knowledge usually remains implicit because external concerns demand our full attention. Yet we often sense that understanding the subjective dimension of our clients’ problems suggests the solution they need. These elements color both the style and the substance of a conflict. For instance, the parties may communicate with each other in a way that fuels their conflict, one mocking or attacking and the other taking a defensive tone. Once we unearth and understand this dynamic, it is possible for the parties to change it and have a more constructive conversation that will allow them to be better able to agree.

By paying attention to emotional clues, we can also unearth unacknowledged feelings, concerns, and priorities that can be central to resolving the conflict if we understand and communicate them. Underneath the content of the external problem, there are almost always deeper layers of emotional context. A couple’s battle over the particulars of spousal support can’t help but be shaped by their feelings about giving financial support and being financially supported, as well as old hopes and resentments and their feelings about their divorce.

If we can understand the internal world of the parties—their attitudes about the problem, their relationship with each other, the places where they connect and disconnect emotionally—we can use that wealth of information to unlock stable solutions for them. Limiting the conversation to the external dimensions of the problem severely limits the possibilities for solving it.

Perhaps harder to see is that our inner realities as conflict professionals are a catalyst for the mediation process, and a force that can’t help but shape it. If we can bring our understanding of the depth of ourselves to bear on the problem—if we can be honest and human as we work with our clients, not shying away from our reactions, and even our fears—we can support our clients to do the same for themselves, and thus find their way to their best outcome.

This is much easier to say than to do.
Helping clients resolve conflicts from the inside out

Moving easily between inner and outer realities isn’t natural for many of the people we’re trying to help. Some have great access to their internal worlds but are ineffective in dealing with external realities. Others are tilted in the other direction, unaware of what is happening inside but extremely facile in dealing with the outside. Our challenge as professionals is to help them do both: understand the emotional and practical dimensions of the situation and see the relationship between the two. When the internal and external worlds line up, we can find a way of working together that leads to a solution grounded in what is most important to people—and that also reflects results that will be practicable and workable.

The conflict professionals we meet in our workshops often tell us that they feel ill equipped to guide parties through such a process. They feel the same natural pull toward either the inner or outer world that everyone does. Many are lawyers or financial professionals who have a thorough training in the externals with little or no attention paid to their own internal processes. We also see people from the psychological professions who have been steeped in understanding the internal dimensions of the people they are used to helping, but have little background in creating external solutions. It’s common for those who come to our programs to have a sense that their professional training to date lacks some essential element that would help them thrive as mediators or conflict professionals.

The missing piece, we have realized, involves learning to see what is happening inside ourselves as we work with people in conflict, and using that self-awareness to connect with and help them.

The journey toward the center

This understanding about the importance of inner work evolved over many years of experimentation and observation, much of it rooted in my own dissatisfaction, curiosities, and discoveries. The methods we’ve developed for doing conflict work from the inside out came slowly, each component
shaped by experiments, experience, and collaboration, and eventually incorporated into the program we teach today.

Perhaps the best introduction I can give you to the elements of this work is my own story, in which you’ll see our techniques and understandings emerge and take shape. With that context in place, we’ll then step into the body of the book, which details the approach my colleagues and I teach for bringing self-awareness into the daily life and work of conflict professionals.
Discovering the Power of Self-Reflection in Conflict

I was born into a family of lawyers and set out to practice in the family firm. But by the time I was 30, I was fairly certain that law wasn’t for me. The longer I practiced, the more I felt as though I wasn’t helping people in the way I’d hoped to as a litigator. Even when I won a case, I’d notice that my clients weren’t as happy as I thought they should be. Participating in a trial had scarred them and damaged the relationships they had with the other side. Working as an advocate, I had the gnawing feeling that I was always presenting a distortion of the truth, which seemed to lie somewhere between my position and the opposing party’s. I had to divide the complex world into oversimplified camps labeled “right” and “wrong” and cultivate an aggressiveness that seeped into my personal relationships.

I didn’t like it. The short-lived high I experienced after winning dissipated very quickly thereafter. I decided to quit.

I moved to California, leaving personal and professional shock waves in my wake, and began an inner search, immersing myself in self-exploration groups that thrived in the 1970s. In the course of that search, I realized that what I’d always thought of as my strength was my heart, and I needed to find some expression for that in whatever new work I chose. Six months in, I also realized that I hadn’t lost my passion for the law. I wondered if it would be possible to be a lawyer working from the heart as well as the mind. I could hardly imagine what it would be like to do that, but I had an impulse to see if I could somehow change the legal profession, pushing it to make room for me to practice law in a way that could connect to what
was deep inside me, not unlike others who found their way into this field at this time of turbulence and change.

Around that time I met Jack Himmelstein, a Columbia Law School professor, in a psychological training program. He, too, wanted to change the way law was practiced, and he believed the way to do it was through legal education that would break down the barriers between the personal and the professional, bringing heart, and humanity, into the system. We began working with law professors through the Project for the Application of Humanistic Education to Law, based at Columbia Law School and sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health. The program aimed to reconnect those professors with their original aspirations as professionals and their personal values—including the sort of psychological exploration we were interested in—and encouraged them to bring this sensibility into law school classrooms.

The experiment

We knew that the seeds we were planting could change the practice of law, but we didn’t know quite how. Jack and I decided that I would open my own practice in California, and we would use it as an experiment to find out what would happen if I applied what we’d been teaching about reimagining the legal profession. I made a commitment to use my own values as the basis for professional decisions and be open to questioning all the assumptions I’d made about being a traditional lawyer.

I was particularly interested in challenging traditional ideas about handling conflict. I had a sense that many clients who came to lawyers felt disempowered. “Client control” was considered a hallmark of good lawyering by much of the profession, and coercion was the coin of the realm. Lawyers used it with each other, and they believed that the only way to get conflict resolved was by turning up the heat on the clients. Most cases were resolved through negotiation by lawyers using this approach, often on the courthouse steps before the ultimate coercion: the intervention of an outsider, a judge, who would make the decision for the parties, with the power of the state to back it up.
The first discovery: You don't have to take sides

Several months into this experiment, a couple of friends came to me for help getting a divorce. I had had almost no experience in family law, but I told them I could represent one of them and the other could be his own lawyer. The wife turned to me and said, “You sound like all the rest of them. Can’t you just help us make our own deal and not have to be on one side or another?”

I was stunned. Hadn’t I said to myself that I’d be willing to question all of my assumptions about being a traditional lawyer? Why couldn’t I be in the middle, not on one side or the other, and help them find an agreement? I said I’d try.

It more or less worked, with numerous false starts and stops, and I noticed that it felt much more congruent for me to be in the middle, not deciding who was right or wrong, but helping them go through their conflict.

Doing this raised many questions for me, but it felt liberating to know that I was trying to empower the clients, not to manipulate them, as I worked to bring whatever understanding I could to help them make decisions together.

I felt my way through this new way of working, relying heavily on my intuition to figure out how to deal with the many difficulties that arose in my practice. I also talked almost daily with Jack about my cases, sharing my predicaments, stresses, successes, disappointments, and challenges. He would often help me recognize my personal blind spots, and through our conversations we developed theories about what I was doing, which I used to guide me in the future.

The current of feelings becomes visible

Because Jack and I were interested in psychology and personal exploration, our talks and observations often circled back to the strong current of emotion that runs through mediation work. Jack had been a student of Anna Freud, and both of us had worked with a teacher named Harry Sloan, who helped people find deeper meaning in their lives using a discipline called psychosynthesis. One of Harry’s favorite lines was, “You can’t
solve a problem at the level at which people experience conflict," and as we talked about my cases, Jack and I began trying to look for other levels at which we could approach solutions.

Parties generally walked into my office with a position and a solution in mind:

One side's position might be: "You owe me $50,000, and I want it now."

The solution: "Give me my money."

The other side might respond with the position: "I don't owe you a thing," and the accompanying solution: "Maybe I'll give you something to get rid of you, but you're crazy to think I'd pay you $50,000. I'll be generous and let you have $1,500, but that's it."

But below a polarized surface, we saw again and again, there was much more going on. The stories that my clients brought into the room were filled not just with hostility but also with a complicated mix of pain, frustration, anger, and hope and a desire for peace.

The conflict was never really only about what the parties thought it was about. It was rooted in all those feelings and perceptions below the surface.

While traditional conflict strategies might have everyone trying to bulldoze a straight path from position to solution, we noticed that it was far more effective to look underneath the parties' positions to determine what they really cared about the most and to help them find options based on that. We began developing a model we called the V, which diagrammed a process for digging beneath the surface of the conflict to unearth both parties' genuine desires and to reveal the feelings and patterns that stood in the way of a solution. The left side of the V led the parties into the inner world, where they could reach a clearer understanding of their own deepest concerns and each other's. The right side of the V took us back to a world of solutions that better reflected the true concerns of both.

The conflicts I saw were inevitably about money, but going down the V led us to matters that touched people's lives at a core level. Faced with a crisis in an important relationship or situation, people who might never have been motivated toward self-examination would find themselves confronting basic questions about who they were in the world as family members, spouses, friends, businesspeople, "good" people or "bad." And when they were able to engage with those questions and bring their insecurities, hopes,
and fears into the conversation about their conflict, the possibilities for mediation expanded exponentially.

Over time, we began to think of our approach to mediation as “understanding-based,” reflecting the central place of understanding in our work.

A mediator isn’t an objectively neutral container

As Jack and I talked about the emotional side of my cases, I realized how powerfully I was being affected by my clients’ stories. They reminded me of my own life, sometimes in an unpleasant way, and I might like clients or dislike them or be upset with them depending on which buttons they pushed in my own memories and experiences. I did my best to push away negative feelings and memories—they seemed irrelevant, painful, and counterproductive. If I let them get in the way of my “neutral” mediator stance, I believed the clients would sense that I wasn’t neutral, and worse, I would feel that I’d lost my neutrality. I’d remind myself that my job wasn’t about me but about the clients, so my own stories didn’t have any place in my work, and any feeling I had about the parties just seemed unprofessional.

The problem was that these feelings weren’t as controllable as I thought. When I was alone, sometimes in the middle of the night, I would think about particularly bothersome clients, worrying about them, angry with them, afraid of them, dreading our next encounter.

I had learned to meditate from the Buddhists at the Green Gulch Farm, a Zen center down the street from where I lived, and in meditation, I noticed that my work was always on my mind. I’d close my eyes and begin following my breath, counting my exhales from one through ten, then starting again. But I’d rarely reach ten before drifting off into a kind of stupor, or getting caught up in thoughts of clients. I’d find myself brooding about them or my relationship with them, and then, as part of the meditation instruction, I’d let those thoughts and feelings go (when I could remember to do that) and return my focus to my body and breath, only to have the thoughts come back, sometimes with a vengeance.

I wasn’t a tortured soul. I loved my work as a mediator, and most of the time, I found it very satisfying to be able to help people find their way to an agreement and to a better relationship than they had before. At times, I
would find myself deeply moved by my encounters with the clients, sometimes to the verge of tears, aware of just how much the work meant to me. But the troubling reactions kept returning, and because they seemed inconsistent with how I wanted to be, I continued to try to repress them or pretend they weren’t there. At work, I learned to keep my personal reactions to others hidden, even from myself, so that if anyone bothered to ask about my internal experience, I could honestly deny that I was having any personal reaction at all.

At mediation conferences, I’d hear my colleagues talk about being non-judgmental people, and I would come home determined to try to reach a higher plane where I wouldn’t experience bad feelings about my clients or myself. But it didn’t work too well. My negative reactions to clients would somehow leak into my conversations with them, and I could feel that something had gone awry. I dealt with that by blaming the clients. It was always easy to get my colleagues to agree with me about how terrible clients were. In fact, I noticed that when professionals got together, we often categorized the clients we had trouble with and objectified them, and in the moment, we’d feel a little better about ourselves.

It became clear as I talked to Jack that all of these feelings and reactions, whether negative or positive, weren’t just a personal concern. They played an enormous role in my effectiveness with clients.

**Into the fishbowl**

By 1981, some five years after I opened my practice, our theories were beginning to coalesce into a fairly coherent model of mediation, which had the goals of draining coercion from the process, treating the parties and the mediator as equals, and digging beneath the surface of a conflict to shape more satisfying solutions for clients.

We began offering training programs based on my cases, in which participants could learn mediation by playing the roles of parties and mediator as others watched and we offered feedback—a process we called “fishbowls,” which we borrowed from our psychological training.
To begin, I’d step into scenarios as the mediator, and Jack would point out where I had gone wrong, either in pressuring the parties, or in missing what was actually going on with them that would have affected the outcome of the mediation. We helped participants see such moments as they worked with practice clients and helped them recognize how they would lose their sense of compassion for the clients, then run into trouble because of it. We coached them to connect what was happening inside themselves to their challenges in working with the parties.

All of us experienced the way clients would push our buttons, and how we’d lose our connection with them and then need to find a way to reconnect so we could move forward. Initially, it was all I could do to notice when something I’d done had pushed a client away or when someone had touched a nerve in me that made me pull back. Over time, though, I was able to shorten the time between recognizing what had happened and reconnecting. In a particularly memorable case, I listened to a heated conversation between a divorcing husband and wife who were trying to decide whether they needed to sell their home. The wife was acting as if her life depended on staying in the house, and frustrated, I jumped in to ask her: “What if the house burned down?”

The look on her face told me I’d created a huge gulf between us. It wasn’t just my question that stung her. It was also my tone of voice, paternalistic and impatient. I was able to reconnect quickly by apologizing and explaining to her that I had failed to appreciate the depth of the pain that she was experiencing in suffering the loss of her marriage, as well as all the underpinnings of her life. But first I had to notice and decode the unspoken messages that had passed between us.

The fishbowl showed us how constantly all of us judged our clients, creating barriers between us. Seeing and dealing with those judgments was the most challenging part of mediation for almost everyone. The trick was to stay conscious of what we—and the parties—were doing and feeling in the midst of a volatile, contentious situation.

Jack and I began to think of conflict work as a process of helping the parties understand themselves and each other, face-to-face, with solutions flowing from there.
The meditation connection: Awareness is a muscle

Our ideas about mediation were colored, at first imperceptibly and then quite directly, by my experiences with meditation. As mentioned, I'd begun attending meditation sessions and lectures at Green Gulch Farm in the 1970s, and even at the beginning, I knew the practices were helping me in my work—I just couldn't articulate how.

Jack and I held our early mediation trainings at Green Gulch, where the atmosphere of self-reflection seemed to offer a perfect backdrop for what we were doing, and we offered participants the opportunity to have mediation instruction outside of our programs. Most found it useful, and they, too, could feel, if not define, the connection between what they learned to do in meditation and the skills they needed for mediation.

Mediation and meditation. Those two words, so close that they were a joke in the meditation community because they were so regularly confused by printers, seemed intertwined by more than spelling.

Gradually, I noticed how my meditation practice was changing me. The instructions, repeated every time, told us to start with an awareness of the body, feeling its weight and how it was connected to and supported by the earth. At the same time, we were to feel our spirit, our life energy, lifting us up and straightening the body. Then we'd become aware of our breath, flowing in and out.

The task was simply to pay attention to what it feels like to be alive, right now. From that grounding in the body, we'd become aware of the space around us, and what was arising inside us—thoughts, feelings, sensations. We were guided to notice these things without analyzing or judging what we saw and to use the fact of noticing a thought or feeling as a cue to come back to paying attention to the body and breath.

The big idea was to be awake to whatever we were experiencing, listening to the body and heart and mind. Just listening and noticing.

There was no straight-line progression in my efforts to do that and my attempts to unlearn the habit of pushing uncomfortable feelings away. I had days when I was hardly able to notice my breath, others when I could follow it for minutes at a time. Over the years, I had unexpected awarenesses about my life, most likely to come when I wasn't trying to think. Meditation
wasn't about any usual way of thinking at all. It was really about getting myself out of the way in order to create a little more room inside me than my daily self-preoccupation.

Meditation gave me regular practice with noticing—even if just to notice I'd drifted off—and I knew that translated into my work, sometimes rather dramatically, other times in subtle ways. I was struck by how, when I remembered to pay attention to my own body and reactions, I was different as the emotions in the room intensified. Rather than shy away, I found myself more engaged. I became curious about what was going on with the parties and in myself. When I was afraid, I would often notice that I was afraid. When I didn't know what to do, I often noticed that, as well, and on occasion, I would voice it. Being vulnerable instead of “all-knowing” changed the chemistry in the room for the better. I became much more confident that I didn't need to control what happened to be effective, and more important, when things became heated, I was able to notice myself and not get so caught up in the swirl of upset, including my own.

My Green Gulch training emphasized paying attention to information coming from bodily sensations, and I started to recognize my own body signaling to me that I was feeling alienated from a party, or sometimes both people. A tightening of my stomach muscles, a tensing of my hands, and the urge to cross my arms and legs were all indications that I was protecting myself and disconnecting from my clients.

My ability to observe myself was growing stronger through my conversations with Jack, my meditation practice, and my family life, and I started to develop the ability to look back on my interactions with the clients and see more clearly what had happened between us. Bit by bit, I could sometimes even tap that awareness during a mediation session.

In learning to note what was happening inside, I was building a muscle, a skill. But it took a while for Jack and me to see it that way.

Self-reflection comes to mediation training in SCPI

People in our training programs, which we conducted on both coasts and in Europe, experienced what it was like to notice what was happening inside
themselves during mediation as they participated in our fishbowl sessions. And sometimes, they would report to us that when they went home, they were able to call upon what they referred to as their “inner Jack and Gary” to help them through difficult situations.

But people began to critique our understanding—and our awareness-based mediation model—by saying that while it had much to commend, very few people had the talent to be able to do it as well as Jack and I. And even many of those who were good at it seemed to drift from the approach a few months after the program. It was difficult work.

All of us initially had the misimpression that self-awareness was a gift—you had it or you didn’t. We’d long noticed a wide variation in our participants’ self-awareness. When we asked people what they were feeling, some would instantly know. Others had much more trouble identifying what was going on inside them. This seemed to mark an important dividing line in our programs—those who had easy access to themselves were more drawn to our model of mediation and better able to apply it than those who weren’t.

But Jack and I hadn’t always had easy access to ourselves and our feelings, and our attempts to strengthen it, as you’ve seen, had gone on for decades. We just hadn’t fully connected the intrapersonal work we’d done with what we were teaching.

It wasn’t until the 1990s that the pieces came together for us. The catalyst was Norman Fischer, a Zen priest who became the abbot of Green Gulch. Norman wore the obligatory robes of the monks at Green Gulch and was a fully committed Buddhist, but he seemed to be very much like us, and he didn’t seem to think that he was more evolved than we were or had a deeper understanding of life. He also seemed unconcerned with how others saw him. When people were dazzled by his considerable intelligence, Norman didn’t seem affected, and if they were critical of him, he seemed more interested than upset. Although Norman held a position at Green Gulch atop the hierarchy, he wasn’t interested in having power over others. And he was as fascinated as we were by trying to understand and work with the deepest part of people’s experiences.

As teachers and mediators, we felt that we had a lot to learn from him, so we asked him to observe one of our advanced programs and tell us what
he saw. By then we had been teaching mediation for more than 20 years, and many of our veteran participants had been coming to our courses and mediating for decades as well.

Norman’s insights into our programs felt profound to us. He told us, “You and the people you teach must be very special people, because this work is extraordinarily difficult. To be able to sit in the middle of the kinds of conflicts you work with requires many qualities of heart and mind. You must be courageous, strong, and compassionate to be able to do this.”

We agreed—and we saw those qualities in him. So in the middle of one of our programs, with a couple of participants playing the roles of a divorcing husband and wife in the center of the room, we asked Norman if he would be willing to take the mediator’s seat and talk with the parties. He said he had no idea how to do that, but he would try.

What followed was startling. Norman moved into the mediator’s position, and turned to one party, and then the other, describing what he imagined was going on with them at a very deep level—what it meant for them to be married, to be experiencing the pain of going through a divorce. The emotional connection he made with both of them was palpable to everyone and immediately shifted the terms of the conflict. That moment confirmed for us that he had an important contribution to make to our training. What he understood about human experience in conflict resonated with what we understood our work to be.

So we talked, and kept talking, about the connection between mediation and mediation, and it occurred to me that there might be an answer to the central dilemma of our mediation training. What if we decided that the central skill of mediation, the ability to access our inner world and work within ourselves, was something that could be taught?

How we might do this sort of teaching was not at all clear to Norman and me, but we knew a few things: This would have to be an experiment designed to weave self-awareness practices into the daily life of conflict professionals over a period long enough to let them take root and change the work from the inside out. We would watch carefully what was happening with the participants and make adjustments to take account of the surprises and unexpected turns.
Our “lab” would be a yearlong program, the Self-Reflection for Conflict Professionals Intensive, which we call SCPI, pronounced like the name of my dog Skippy. From the West Coast came 16 Bay Area mediators, lawyers, and therapists willing to try it.

Practicing self-reflection

We defined self-reflection in SCPI as an intentional effort to be receptive to ourselves, which means paying attention, moment by moment, to feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations as they move through us. Self-reflection is not daydreaming or musing about ourselves. It is not self-analysis. It is not even just thinking. Instead, it’s an effort to stay open to what comes.

In practicing self-reflection, we told the first SCPIs, we begin to find an anchor within that keeps us from drifting from the present, and as our practices strengthen, we can hold more and more in our awareness over a longer period of time. SCPI’s goal was to help people bring this awareness into the mediation room, in the heat of conflict.

We knew, from my experience and Norman’s, that we couldn’t offer anyone a map of how they’d progress. In fact, we realized that the very idea of progression is a barrier to self-reflection. Conceptions of enlightenment, nirvana, even just getting better, all miss the point—which is to experience each moment of our lives as best we can and, if we’re lucky, to find a little ease.

So there was no hierarchy of self-awareness in SCPI, no thought that some of us were more evolved than others. Norman and I could describe how much our lives had been affected by our daily commitment to becoming more aware of ourselves and the others in our lives, and we knew that some SCPIs had been drawn to the program because of the self-awareness work they’d done. But we understood that while we were all in the soup together, our individual self-reflection efforts would all follow the unique scheme of the ups and downs of each of our lives, and while interesting, they’d also be unpredictable.

We emphasized that all of us in SCPI, whatever our backgrounds, had seen ourselves revealed to ourselves as we experienced both joy and
sadness—the deaths of people we had been close to, relationships that had come together or fallen apart, career disappointments, health challenges, great successes. The self-knowledge that had come from all of this was an inner resource that would help us greatly as we learned to tap it and began to make the link between this understanding of ourselves and our work.

Realizing that no single self-reflection practice would resonate with everyone, we developed nine, some quite small. Some could be used outside the office, while others were designed to be used in the heat of conflict with the parties present. We took to heart the idea that self-reflection is a muscle, and looked for opportunities to strengthen it with repetition.

The three core practices—meditation (and meditative activity), journal writing, and learning to observe the Observer, the part of us that can see what we’re doing—are described in detail in the appendix, and you’ll see the others throughout the book.

We asked SCPI participants to commit to working with those core practices daily as well as participating in:

- Structured weekly conversations with a “buddy,” whose primary responsibility was to listen to the partner’s experience and keep the other person focused on what was happening inside him or her, rather than giving advice.
- Monthly evening meetings of the whole group with Norman and me, in which we would reinforce the learnings of the past month and chart the direction for the next.
- Quarterly daylong meetings in which we could deepen the learning.

The meetings were our structure for teaching, and they allowed us to focus on the progress, challenges, difficulties, and successes that people experienced during this first year. This let us work with participants directly and created a sense of community that was vital to the success of the program. Because what we were doing ran so counter to the cultures that we were operating in, those group sessions were indispensable to sustaining the individual efforts that we were all making.
Bringing inner experience into the heat of conflict: The four themes of the program

Over the course of the year, we led the SCPIs through a progression of themes, four overlapping categories that relate directly to using our inner experiences to help the clients:

1. Becoming present—the challenging art of being aware, in the moment, of the emotional currents and subtexts that are shaping a conflict.
2. Dealing with our strong emotional reactions: The inner V—a process for turning emotions that once pushed us away from clients into a vehicle for understanding and empathy.
3. Connecting our inner experience to solving the outside problem—shaping the understanding we've cultivated of ourselves and our clients into an underlying framework on which satisfying solutions can be built.
4. Tapping and deepening our motivations—tools for staying connected with reasons to keep returning to the difficult epicenter of conflict without becoming burned out, getting overwhelmed, or trying to control the outcome.

We'll take these themes one by one in the following chapters, which will introduce the basic principles and practices of the program. You'll see the self-awareness model that Jack, Norman, and I have developed as it plays out in a variety of settings and cases, and you'll hear the voices of participants describing their experience with this new way of working.

The SCPI experiment has profoundly changed the practice of mediation for its participants, and it continues to evolve. Our hope is that this model will provide conflict professionals of every stripe—including lawyers, mediators, and other collaborative professionals practicing in all areas of conflict resolution—with a systematic and sustainable support for bringing self-awareness into their conflict work. Any references I make to mediators throughout the rest of this book should be understood to include everyone in this group.
Summary

The adversary system frequently reduces complex conflicts to simplistic black-and-white arguments and produces legally based solutions that don't respond to the individuality of human experience. Built on coercion and aggression, battles in the court system take a toll on both clients and litigators.

That was the impression of the law that first drove me from it and then made me, like many frustrated lawyers, want to reform it. Decades later, after a search that led through not only the world of mediation but also the realms of psychology and Zen Buddhism, my colleagues and I have refined an approach to conflict resolution that reflects five central premises:

1. You don't have to take sides to help clients through a conflict.
2. The solutions to conflict lie in the feelings and perceptions hidden below the surface.
3. There's no such thing as an objectively neutral mediator.
4. The fundamental goal of conflict work is to help the parties better understand themselves, each other, and the realities they face.
5. Learning to listen to the self makes it possible to listen usefully to others—and help them.

Our work recognizes the primary place of the mediator's emotions and self-awareness in helping clients find their own solutions, an approach that rejects the traditional "neutrality" of the conflict professional and replaces it with a three-dimensional, emotionally intelligent humanity that has long been missing.

Using our approach requires not just setting aside professional directives to "keep your opinion out of it." It also demands an interconnected set of skills that allows mediators to recognize feelings as they arise, and to use those feelings to better understand and connect with clients. Counterintuitive as it may sound, this approach has yielded powerful, practical results in every arena, enabling conflict professionals to help
deadlocked parties in business, labor, professional, environmental, personal, and family disputes find their way to solutions that satisfy their most pressing concerns.

To use emotions effectively, you first have to learn to recognize them as they arise rather than push them away. This skill, Presence, is the first one we emphasize. You can see how it works and how we access it in the next chapter.