Do No Harm: Compassionate Actions Supporting the Common Good

By Wendy Wood, PhD

'If you've come here to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.'
Lilla Watson

ABSTRACT

To take good care of ourselves and our world is a universal obligation of fundamental importance. As conflict practitioners and peacebuilders, engaging in ways that do not harm others or the planet requires that we are mindful and compassionate; that we use our words wisely and listen deeply; that we are authentic while embracing the ideals of equity and working for the common good; and that all are actions are accompanied with love and joy for the work we do. Based on social science research, these qualities of mindful engagement are essential tools if we are to meet the unique social, political, environmental and community challenges of our time.

Do No Harm

Most of us are familiar with that phrase, 'do no harm,' which comes from the Hippocratic oath, *primum non nocere*, or "first, do no harm." This fundamental global ideal requires that we minimize the harm that is inadvertently caused by our actions. It asks that we be aware of how the consequences of those actions may contribute to wide-ranging and complex repercussions which may be immediate or long term. Mahatma Gandhi rooted his philosophy in *ahimsa*, the overflowing love that arises when all ill will, anger, and hate have subsided from the heart. *Ahimsa* is accomplished by following the precepts of causing no injury through right action, including deeds, thoughts, and words. Gandhi believed *ahimsa* to be a creative force that could lead to one's divine truth and applied this principle and moral imperative of 'do no harm' to all living things.

We are living in a world of increasing violence, pandemic level threats to our health, systemic racial injustice, devastation of our planet, disconnection from our families and communities, and serious threats to democracies across the globe. Our hearts are breaking. There is a palpable climate of disconnect violence, divisiveness, and neglect. There are wars on many fronts. We are at war with each other, with our neighbors, with our communities, with other nations. Global pandemics are taking lives and livelihoods from millions of people around the globe, while leaders wrestle how to effectively respond. The earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past forty years. Rapid climate change is contributing to devastating natural disasters. Children are killing children. It is difficult to envision any real alternative and so we may become both complicit and avoidant. We are becoming, quite rightly, overwhelmed with legitimate cause for fear and unrest that demands we take action as global environmental and social injustice threaten our very existence. Yet in the midst of all of this polarization, violence, and dis-ease, human beings have an innate desire to rectify wrong-doing and protect what we hold dear, with equanimity — equal consideration for all people and the world in which we live.

The world needs a new kind of diplomacy and social sensibility, equipped with the motivation and tools to transform our heartfelt intentions into altruism—compassionate actions which support the common good. This is not just about the individual—we are in this together. Now is the time to cultivate our benevolent virtues, recognize our interconnectedness, and appeal to the best instincts of the human spirit. For our social world to exist with some degree of harmony, we cannot rely on others to make things better. Each one of us needs to step up in the best way possible and contribute to the changes we wish to see happen. A single interaction that is mindful and compassionate has the potential to bring a sense of hope and provide motivation to find solutions that may not otherwise have been discovered. If we can maintain an attitude of doing our best amidst the flux and confusion of daily life as well as the perilous times we're in today, we can come to realize that this is what many others are also trying to do.

There is a social and universal responsibility to act, for both enlightened self-interest as well as for the benefit of all. Society has within it both value and practice which are central to ideals of justice and human rights. Transcending gender, class, race, religion, and culture, compassion in action is focused on all humanity, giving us possibilities for global civility while upholding the virtues of human dignity. We must include regulating and rewarding interactions so that people do not feel marginalized, stressed, or become disengaged. When we neglect these responsibilities, harm occurs—harm that is potentially devastating if we fail to pay attention. We cannot go in and rip out parts of people's lives and expect them to remain whole.

So, what are we to do? How might we reimagine the ways in which we engage as human beings on this precious planet? How can we best contribute to the health, safety and happiness of our friends and family, and all humanity? What is required of us to live and work in ways that do not harm others or the planet? Answering this question can be a challenging, if not daunting, task, especially as more complex and difficult circumstances plague us.

Where do we begin? We can begin with examining our role and responsibility for what's happening in our world. We can decide to become involved in making changes, whether it's at work, in our family, our neighborhood or some social or political action that can positively impact the challenges we face. We may decide to do something radically different, learn new ways of engaging and tools for forgiveness and reconciliation. And we are not alone in this journey. There are plenty of examples of people who we can turn to for inspiration.

Collective Social Responsibility

Inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr., Congressman John Lewis left his home in rural Alabama, starting what would become a lifetime of social and political activism. Despite continued threats, intimidation, and brutal physical attacks, he maintained his commitment to nonviolence and equality for all people. As an astute observer with a fearless mission to end racial segregation in the South, John Lewis' journey was long and difficult, yet he persevered. He spoke to the values of faith, patience, study, truth, peace, love, and reconciliation. "Real leaders are not appointed," Lewis said. "They emerge out of the masses of the people and rise to the forefront through the circumstances of their lives. Either their inner journey or their human experience prepares them to take that role. They do not nominate themselves. They are called into service by a spirit moving through a people that points to them as the embodiment of the cause they serve."

The idea of collective social responsibility is at the root of a healthy society. Traditional teachings of many indigenous peoples refer to responsibility as much more than taking matters into one's own hands. When solving a problem or settling a dispute, for example, they focus on much more than a single aspect of someone's existence. Attention is paid, with respect, to all things that influence a person's life—community, family, the environment, ancestors, and spirit.
For native Hawai'ians, *kuleana* is a deeply held notion that there is value in responsibility that transcends rights, interests, privileges, and ownership. There is honor and gratitude when one takes responsibility. Kuleana is something one possesses and extends far beyond our personal and professional lives, reaching deep into the physical, spiritual, and ancestral worlds. There is no ignoring your kuleana and the clarity and honesty it brings. It is to be shared. And when practiced, kuleana brings about transformation and one becomes *ho'ohiki*—keeping the promises you make to yourself and others. Once you have kept those promises, you can stand behind your convictions, your ways of knowing, your belief systems, and be accountable in all respects—not simply for the task at hand, but the entire world in which you live.

Ubuntu is an African word for human kindness. It is the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all of humanity. The virtue of ubuntu asserts that being part of "the tribe," or society, gives humans their humanity. We can't exist in isolation, and when you possess ubuntu, you are warm and generous. "We are because you are," and "I am" because "you are." Ubuntu is both a deep appreciation of individual uniqueness and collective social responsibility. For South Africans, they owe this quality of interconnectedness to each other. Aboriginal Australians share a deeply held belief of *kanyini*, or responsibility—a responsibility that applies to one's belief systems, spirituality, family, and land. There is no separating them. If you take a piece out of one, the others will falter. They are intricately linked in this web of responsibility.

So, it is when we are doing our work as conflict engagement practitioners and peacebuilders. We must be mindful of our kanyini, our ubuntu, our kuleana, and our responsibility that is carried from our past into our present if we are to engage in ways that do not harm. Doing our part in a community that intentionally encourages collective responsibility and a genuine sense of belonging can be a source of strength and purpose. For meaningful change to happen we must take on the tasks together. When we do this, our authentic self emerges, giving us the freedom to act mindfully and compassionately with the hope that anything is possible. We are being asked to come together, not for self-interest, but for the benefits we gain through cooperation and a willingness to contribute to the well-being of humanity. The awakening of an open, kind, and good heart helps us find the way toward right actions with the purest of motivations for the good of others and ourselves.

It takes courage to step out of what feels comfortable, what we think is true, and give ourselves permission to make choices which better align with our values and altruistic nature. We can think of and act in new ways to work with communities that constrain us and within systems that bind us. "If we are a drop of water and we try to get to the ocean as only an individual drop, we will surely evaporate along the way," says Thich Nhat Hanh. "To arrive at the ocean, you must go as a river. The sangha (community) is your river. Allow your community to hold you, to transport you," he says. "When you do, you will feel more solid and stable and will not risk drowning in your suffering. As a river, all the individual drops of water arrive together at the ocean."

The capacity to reach out and find ways of transforming our knowledge into action, is one of the keys to guiding us toward possible solutions. We must find ways to develop equanimity and engage mindfully and do so without causing harm in a way that unifies rather than creates polarization. This type of engagement is not a formula or structured way of doing work — one that compartmentalizes our thinking, establishes protocols, creates models, and introduces methodologies. Nor is this way of engaging asking us to abide by some kind of plan or approved way of acting, or to fixate on some ideal of how we are supposed to be. Rather, cultivating and utilizing 'mindful engagement', and living our lives in ways that translate into meaningful, effective, and rewarding experiences for ourselves and others is essential. Living and working in this way has the potential of making situations better, while deepening our understanding of others'— and our own — perspectives and experiences.

Note: Adapted from Wendy Wood and Thais Mazur, *Do No Harm: Mindful Engagement for a World in Crisis* (2021), RioKai Press, Mendocino, CA.

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