Chapter 2: Talking Cannot Replace Fighting

A "writing out loud" excerpt from the working draft of "Collaborating with the Enemy: An Open Way to Work with People You Don't Agree With or Like or Trust" by Adam Kahane, forthcoming in 2017 from Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Some of the most beautiful and uplifting experiences of my life have been in the midst of tough collaborations. Few events are as transcendent as enemies meeting and talking and discovering that they have some common ground and sense of connection or even oneness. These encounters can enable us to resolve our frustrating and frightening conflicts, and to get unstuck and move forward.

Twenty-five years ago I was delighted to find out that I could be helpful to such collaborations. I threw myself into doing this work in many complex contexts around the world. One thing I was certain of was that if we want to make progress on our toughest challenges then we must choose talking instead of fighting. I was wrong.

Choosing to talk

My formative experience with tough collaboration was in September 1991 at the Mont Fleur Conference Centre outside of Cape Town. South Africans were trying to find a way to end 43 years of apartheid racial discrimination (on top of 300 years of colonialism) and the ongoing violent confrontations between the white minority government and the black majority population that this produced.

In 1990, President F.W. de Klerk had released opposition leader Nelson Mandela from 27 years in prison, legalized Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) and the other black opposition parties, and begun formal political negotiations on a transition to democracy. These all-party negotiations were the first time that white and black political leaders had ever talked openly and officially, as equals, about the future of South Africa. Almost nobody, inside South Africa or internationally, had imagined that this conflict could be concluded peacefully, and now a grand effort to do this had begun.

In parallel with formal negotiations, many organizations initiated different kinds of informal collaborations to contribute to the transition. One of these was organized by Professors Pieter le Roux and Vincent Maphai of the ANC-leaning University of the Western Cape. They invited a team of 22 leaders from across all parts of South African society—politicians, businesspeople, trade unionists, community leaders, and academics; black and white; opposition and establishment; from the left and right—to think together about how the transition could unfold and what it would take for it to be successful.

Le Roux and Maphai wanted to undertake this thinking about the future using scenario planning, a structured methodology for team strategizing that had been developed by the

global energy company Shell. At that time I was head of Shell's global socio-political-economic scenarios in London, and so they invited me to come to Cape Town to facilitate the meetings of their team. I had never done anything like this before but was intrigued. This is how I came to be at Mont Fleur and to begin participating in high-conflict, high-stakes public collaborations.

What struck me most about this weekend workshop, and the two that followed over the next eight months, was how friendly and productive the conversations were. The team included people who had been locked in a bitter and bloody conflict for decades, and I expected them to be so angry and at odds that they would not be able to accomplish anything. But to my delight the team was energized to be together and was able to work together purposefully and productively.

The Afrikaans word apartheid means "separation," and most of the team had never had the opportunity to be together in such a stimulating and informal gathering. They talked together fluidly and creatively, around big tables in the conference room, in small working groups scattered throughout the building, on walks on the mountain, on benches in the flowered garden, and over good meals with local wine. They asked questions of each other and explained themselves and argued and made jokes. Over the course of their workshops, they succeeded in constructing a set of scenarios about possible futures for the country that subsequently helped South Africans to achieve, contrary to all expectations, a peaceful transition.

I had never worked with a team like the Mont Fleur one and I was impressed and inspired. Many of them had sacrificed a lot, in prison or exile or underground, to fight against apartheid. All of them were committed to creating a better future and politically astute about how to do this. They were willing to engage with others whom they didn't know or agree with or trust to help their country move forward.

Mandela was not a member of the Mont Fleur team but was aware of the project and participated in ANC meetings that discussed its outputs. I saw him as an exemplar of the open-hearted leadership I observed in the team. His willingness to engage and reconcile with his enemies, while he was in prison, during the transitional negotiations, and as South Africa's first black president, made him one of the most admired people in the world. I was thrilled to be involved, even in a small and peripheral way, in this historic process.

On my first trip to South Africa I had heard a joke that exemplified what I was witnessing. "Faced with our country's overwhelming problems," it went, "we have only two options: a practical option and a miraculous option. The practical option would be for all of us to get down on our knees and pray for a band of angels to come down from heaven and solve our problems for us. The miraculous option would be for us to talk and work together and to find a way forward together." I loved this joke and repeated it many times over the years that followed. My understanding was that, through talking, South Africans had succeeding in enacting the miraculous option.

My experience working with the Mont Fleur team in 1991 and 1992 transformed my understanding of what I was supposed to be doing. I had seen the team doing something extraordinary that I had not even known was possible. I discovered that I had a structured and creative way of designing workshops and a calm and controlled way of facilitating them that enabled even the most heterogeneous teams to work together effectively. I was able to help people talk together where previously they had been unable to, and in this way to make progress on solving their toughest problems.

So Mont Fleur catapulted me into a new life. In 1993 I resigned from Shell to take up this new kind of work, emigrated from London to Cape Town, and married the organizer of the project, Dorothy Boesak. As South Africa's successful transition became known around the world, my work there also became known. I joined with a group of friends and colleagues to form several consulting businesses to support these multi-stakeholder collaboration projects.

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One of my most powerful experiences with talking came five years later, in 1998, when I was asked to facilitate a Mont Fleur-inspired project in Guatemala. The purpose of Visión Guatemala was to support the implementation of the peace accords that two years earlier had ended that country's genocidal 36-year civil war, in which 200,000 people had been killed and 1 million displaced. The project brought together leaders of many of the factions that had been caught up in this violent conflict: cabinet ministers, former army and guerrilla officers, businessmen, journalists, young people, and Indigenous people. Guatemala's social fabric had been violently torn and this team helped the society repair itself.

A pivotal event in the project occurred on the second evening of the first workshop. The team was sitting in a circle, telling stories about their experiences of the previous years. A man named Ronalth Ochaeta, a human rights worker for the Catholic Church, talked about the time he had gone to an Indigenous village to witness the exhumation of a mass grave from one of the war's many massacres. When the earth had been removed, he had noticed a number of small bones, and he asked the forensic scientist if people had had their bones broken during the massacre. The scientist replied that, no, the grave contained the corpses of pregnant women, and the small bones were those of their fetuses.

When Ochaeta finished telling his story, the team was completely silent. I had never experienced a silence like this and was struck dumb. The silence seemed to last five minutes. Then it ended and we continued with our work.

This episode made a deep impact on the team and on me. When team members were interviewed two years later for a history of the project, many of them traced their collective strength to the insight and connection manifested in those minutes of silence. One of them said, "After listening to Ochaeta's story, I understood and felt in my heart all that had happened. And there was a feeling that we must struggle to prevent this from happening again." Another said, "In giving his testimony, Ochaeta was sincere, calm, and serene, without a trace of hate in his voice. This gave way to the moment of silence that, I would say, lasted at least one minute. It was horrible! It was a very moving experience for all of us.

If you ask any of us, we would say that this moment was like a large communion."[7] In a Catholic country like Guatemala, to refer to a moment of team communion means a moment of a team being one body.

Lars Franklin, the United Nations' representative in Guatemala, said that the impact of Visión Guatemala could best be understood by looking at the many seeds that the project planted and nurtured. These included four presidential candidates and campaigns; contributions to the Commission for Historical Clarification, the Fiscal Agreement Commission, and the Peace Accords Monitoring Commission; work on municipal development strategies, a national antipoverty strategy, and a new university curriculum; and six spinoff national dialogue processes.

The story of the five minutes of silence in Visión Guatemala became the crowning chapter in my first book, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*. It epitomized my understanding of the centrality of connecting and becoming one to being able to address complex challenges. I was confident that the essence of collaborating was talking.

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I loved this work on tough collaborations. I thought that I was good at it, that it was exciting and challenging, and that I was making a worthwhile contribution. Moreover, it satisfied my personal longing to connect with others and also with something bigger than myself.

At the same time, however, I felt uneasy. I was doing well in helping other people with their public collaborations but at the same time was having problems in my own private ones. At home and at work, I had many experiences of difficulties getting along with people and of long, quiet, sad estrangements.

Over these years, among the toughest experiences I had were the three times that I had a drawn-out conflict with a different one of my business partners. In each case we had disagreements which over time become more harsh and sour, and which we were not able to resolve. Either they or I ended up leaving our partnership, and our relationship was severed. These splits had all been painful and upsetting, but I was relieved that at least they had been civilized—no fistfights or lawsuits.

I could explain away each of these ruptures as having been a partnership that had run its course and that it had made sense for us to go our separate ways. But notwithstanding these comforting explanations, the experiences left me puzzled and embarrassed. I was worried that my inability to work out my ordinary conflicts might mean that I was a fraud in guiding others in working out their extraordinary ones.

I can now see a pattern in my behavior during these three episodes. First I would employ what the Thais called the adapting approach: trying to find a way to do what I wanted to do while fitting into the status quo of the partnership—going along to get along.

When this didn't work, I would try to employ the collaborating approach, but often this also didn't work. I was afraid of conflict—worried that I would get hurt or lose face—and so I shrank from it and attempted to keep things polite and under control. I was unable to resolve these conflicts in a way that allowed my opponents and me to continue to work together. Because I found the conflict so uncomfortable, I thought that if we couldn't agree then we could not continue work together. Something in the way I was approaching these collaborations was off.

In the end I would employ the fighting approach: trying to get things to be the way I wanted them to be, even if my partner didn't. Sometimes I won and my opponent was forced out of the partnership, and sometimes the contrary.

Over these years I was able to keep these failed collaborations in the background and to carry on with my work. Meanwhile I felt the tension between what I was doing and what I was advising others to do. Some people learn from teachers and books, but I learn by living with a tension or doubt. I lived with this one for 20 years.

The need to fight

In 2008 I went back to Guatemala for the tenth anniversary of our project. I was happy to see my colleagues again, but also concerned by what was happening there: a deepening economic crisis; increasingly serious security threats from organized crime and elements of the military; and disappointment in the new government, led by our Visión Guatemala teammate, now president, Álvaro Colom. And I was interested in what people thought of the work that we had all done together and which I had written about so enthusiastically in *Solving Tough Problems*.

I had lunch with one of my friends on the team, a leftist researcher and activist named Clara Arenas. She knew how significant I had found the dialogue in our team, and so she pointedly told me that recently she and her colleagues had become so frustrated with the nondelivery of the many Guatemalan dialogues that they had taken out a full-page newspaper advertisement saying they would no longer participate in these processes. They did this because the government expected that the organizations participating in dialogues would meanwhile desist from organizing strikes and marches and other forms of popular resistance. Arenas and her colleagues were not willing to demobilize—to abandon the primary means through which they could pressure the government. And if they couldn't fight, then they weren't willing to talk. I admired Arenas and knew that she was telling me something important. But I couldn't fit it into the way I understood my work and so it stayed with me as an unresolved doubt.

In late 2013 and early 2014, I had a series of experiences that showed me a way to resolve the tension and doubt I had been sitting with.

In October 2013, I had a challenging interaction with David Suzuki at a meeting of the board of his eponymous foundation in Vancouver. Suzuki is a Canadian geneticist who has

presented popular radio and television shows on science for more than 40 years. He is an outspoken environmentalist and is among the country's most respected public figures. At that time he was in the middle of a big battle among environmentalists, fossil fuel companies, and the federal government over how Canada should deal with climate change and especially the high carbon dioxide emissions from its oil sands projects.

Before the meeting, I had read one of Suzuki's speeches in which he had said that he would be willing to talk with the CEO of a consortium of oil sands companies only if the CEO would "agree on certain basic things," for example that "we are all animals, and as animals our most fundamental need, before anything else, is clean air, clean water, clean soil, clean energy and biodiversity." I thought that Suzuki's insistence that he would only engage in talking if the principles he believed in were agreed to in advance was unreasonable and unproductive, and at the meeting I challenged him about this. His position was that given the absence of agreement on such fundamental matters, it was better for him to fight than to talk, and so he was going to focus his energies on mobilizing public and political opinion in support of the principles he believed in.

This brief exchange struck me. I had heard similar arguments many times from other actors in other contexts: that their principles were right and needed to be accepted as the starting point for any collaboration. I had always confidently dismissed these arguments on the grounds that such disagreements over principles were usually the reason collaborations didn't occur, and that agreement could only be reached *through*—not prior to—collaboration. But Suzuki's provocation stayed with me, both because the principles he was arguing for seemed correct to me, and because I held him in such high esteem that I could not easily dismiss his argument.

I could now see that talking and fighting were complementary rather than opposing ways to make progress on complex challenges, and that both were legitimate and necessary. Different kinds of fighting—debates, campaigns, rivalries, marches, boycotts, lawsuits, sometimes violent confrontations—are part of every story of systemic change. Conflict is ubiquitous and inevitable and so cannot for long be ignored or denied. But I thought that perhaps some people and organizations could do the fighting while others did the talking; I had heard activists refer to "outside the room" and "inside the room" roles in efforts to change the status quo. I hoped that this complementarity meant that others could focus on fighting and that I could maintain my comfortable focus on talking.

At the beginning of December I got home to South Africa, and a few days later Nelson Mandela died after a long illness. For weeks local and international newspapers were filled with obituaries and reflections on his life and legacy. I also reflected on my understanding of his biography, with which my own had become intertwined. By 2013, social and political relations among South Africans were becoming more fractious and less forgiving, and many were re-evaluating the success of the "miraculous" 1994 transition that Mandela had led.

Now, coming right after my exchange with Suzuki, I could see that in focusing so much on Mandela's efforts to achieve his objectives through talking with his opponents, I had

downplayed his efforts to achieve these same objectives through fighting. Before Mandela went into prison, he had led illegal marches and other campaigns against the apartheid government, gone underground and made clandestine trips abroad, and served as the first commander of the armed guerilla wing of the African National Congress (as late as 2007, ANC leaders were still being denied visas to enter the United States on the grounds that they had been members of a terrorist organization). After Mandela was released, both during the negotiations leading up the 1994 elections and then during his presidential term, he often pushed hard and imperiously against his opponents to advance his positions.

A more complete picture of Mandela's leadership, I could now see, showed that he knew both how and when to talk, and how and when to fight. The extraordinary transition in South Africa had been effected through Mandela and others employing both talking and fighting as the situation had required. And in thinking about my own work, I realized that I had been focusing only on the part of the picture in which I had been present: although I usually met the actors I worked with in workshops designed to enable them to talk with one another, most of them spent a lot of their time outside the workshops fighting, often against one another. In fact this fighting was what made the conversations in the workshops so remarkable and useful. So I thought that perhaps the talking and fighting roles could not, as I had been hoping, be kept separate.

Then in Thailand in May 2014, after months of violent "We Fight" confrontations, the army finally staged a coup d'état. Some of my Thai colleagues were outraged at these anti-democratic actions. Others were relieved that a further increase in violent conflict had been halted and hopeful that a strict military government could establish a new set of rules that would enable an orderly and peaceful construction of a "We Collaborate" scenario.

I wasn't sure which of these positions I agreed with. I understood the limitations and dangers of a military government. And I also felt sympathy for the junta's impulse to impose orderly and peaceful collaboration: they were suppressing fighting to enable talking.

This extreme event gave me the last piece of the puzzle I had been sitting with. I was surprised by what I could now see: that a coup d'état is the logical extreme outcome of the particular way of collaborating that I had been focused on since Mont Fleur. If we only embrace talking—if we reject fighting—then we will end suffocating other actors and the social system of which we are part. This is what Arenas had been trying to tell me six years earlier in Guatemala.

This parallel between what the junta was doing and what I had been doing took me aback. If we want to collaborate effectively, then we cannot choose only to talk ands not to fight. We need to find a way both to do both.

Alternating between talking and fighting

In 2010, I published the book *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change.* It built on theologian Paul Tillich's definitions of love as "the drive towards the unity of the separated"

and power as "the drive of everything living to realize itself." I used these definitions because they enabled me to make sense of some of the crucial phenomena I was working with.

My thesis was that every person and group possesses both of these drives and that it is always a mistake to employ only one. Love and power are not options that we can choose between; they are complementary poles and we must choose both. Here I was elaborating on the point that Martin Luther King Jr., a student of Tillich, made when he said, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic." I cited many examples in both small and large social systems of these twin degeneracies which occur when one of these drives is exercised without the other, and of the generative synthesis which occurs when they are exercised together.

After I published this book, I learned that psychologist Barry Johnson had developed a way to map the relationship between such poles. Johnson suggests that we must differentiate between problems that can be solved and polarities that cannot be solved but only managed. He explains that in a polarity the relationship between two poles is analogous to the relationship between inhaling and exhaling. We cannot choose between inhaling and exhaling: if we only inhaled we would die of too much carbon dioxide, and if we only exhaled we would die of too little oxygen. Instead we must both inhale and exhale, not at the same time but alternately. First we inhale to get oxygen into our blood; then when our cells convert oxygen to carbon dioxide and the carbon dioxide builds up in our blood, we exhale to let it out; then when the oxygen in our blood falls too low, we inhale; and so on. If we are healthy, this involuntary physiological feedback system maintains the necessary alternation between inhaling and exhaling and enables us to live and grow.

If love and power are drives that all of us possess, then talking and fighting are the derivative ways of relating with others that all of us can employ. What I now understood from my experiences in 2013 and 2014 was that, like with love and power, it is always a mistake to choose only talking or only fighting. My previous understanding of collaboration—that it meant embracing talking and rejecting fighting—therefore limited its applicability and effectiveness. And when I tried to employ this kind of collaboration in private, high-conflict contexts (where all I was doing was talking), I often failed and so fell back, defensively, to fighting, unwillingly and unskillfully.

Figure 3: The Polarity of Talking and Fighting

	Talking	Fighting
The generative aspect of this pole	Engaging, dialoguing, embracing	Asserting, mobilizing, pushing
The reaction that signals the boundary between the two aspects	Compromising, capitulating, fusing	Resisting, fighting back, blocking
The degenerative aspect of this pole	Manipulating, disempowering, suffocating	Imposing, defeating, crushing

The Johnson model gave me a way to map the relationship between talking and fighting. Here I am using the word "talking" in its most general sense, to mean working with others to achieve common objectives. Just like love has both a generative side (building-up love) and a degenerative side (falling-down love), so talking has both a generative side (talking with or engaging) and a degenerative side (talking down to or manipulating).

I am using the word "fighting" also in its most general sense, to mean working separately from others—in competition with or opposition to them—to achieve one's own objectives. Just like power has both a generative side (power to) and a degenerative side (power over), so fighting also has both a generative side (fighting for or asserting or defending one's own needs) and a degenerative side (fighting to defeat another meeting their needs, or to impose one's own). Here I am enriching the description of fighting I gave in the Introduction.

Talking and fighting are related as follows. When I talk with another person, I engage with them. As our engaging continues and intensifies, eventually it will usually produce in me or them an uncomfortable feeling of fusing: of having to subordinate or compromise what matters to us to be able to maintain the engagement. This reaction or feeling of discomfort is feedback that one or both of us needs to fight, in other words to begin asserting or pushing for what matters to us. But then as our pushing continues and intensifies, eventually it will usually produce in one or both of us an impulse to block or push back or resist. This reaction or feeling is feedback that we need to return to talking. (This healthy, generative cycle is shown by the solid line.)

We can understand the imperative to alternate between talking and fighting if we consider what happens if either of these two reactions or boundaries of discomfort are ignored and overstepped. (This unhealthy, degenerative cycle is shown by the dotted line.) If I keep fighting and pushing past your attempts to resist, then the result will be me imposing what matters to me onto you, and thereby defeating or crushing you. In the extreme case, then, employing only fighting produces war and death (this was the possibility of a civil war that some Thais feared during the violent clashes of 2013-14). This risk, which is widely recognized, is why it is important to notice the feeling of resistance that signals that fighting is going too far and that talking is required. Talking when it is needed prevents fighting from becoming degenerative.

On the other hand, if I keep talking, and keep engaging you beyond the point where you feel you are being compromised, then the result will be me manipulating or disempowering you. In the extreme case, then, employing only talking produces suffocation: the kind of lifelessness that is produced through imposed peace or pacification (this was the possibility of deadening that some Thais feared would be the outcome of the 2014 coup d'état). This risk, which is less recognized, is why it is important to notice the feeling of being compromised that signals that talking is going too far and that fighting is required. Fighting when it is needed prevents talking from becoming degenerative.

The less-recognized risk of unconstrained talking is what I had been missing in my post-Mont Fleur embrace of talking and rejection of fighting. Johnson points out that if you are focused above all on the risk of unconstrained fighting (as I was in my efforts at peacemaking), then you will mistakenly understand talking to be an ideal rather than only a pole, and thereby produce this opposite pitfall. The mistake I was making in my collaborations was to reject fighting as uncivilized and dangerous, and therefore to push it into the shadows. This didn't make the fighting disappear; it just drove it underground, where it would be exercised less consciously and cleanly.

Psychologist James Hillman points out that many people who, like me, work in helping professions, make this mistake of rejecting fighting and power. He writes: "Why are the conflicts about power so ruthless—less so in business and politics, where they are an everyday matter, than in the idealistic professions of clergy, medicine, the arts, teaching and nursing? In business and politics, it seems, there is less idealism and more sense of shadow. Power is not repressed but lived with as a daily companion; moreover, it is not declared to be the enemy of love. So long as the notion of power is itself corrupted by a romantic opposition with love, power will indeed corrupt. The corruption begins not in power, but in the ignorance about it." Blocking fighting perverts it and makes it more dangerous.

Collaboration that does not make room for fighting is rigid and brittle and gets stuck, and has a limited potential to address complex challenges. By contrast, collaboration that cycles generatively between talking and fighting enables a social system—a family, an organization, a country—to evolve to higher levels. We cannot make progress without employing both talking and fighting.

How to talk and fight

In collaborating with colleagues and friends, this alternation will often be harmonious or even unnoticed. But in collaborating with opponents and enemies, it will often be jarring or even alarming.

The key to alternating between talking and fighting is to know when to employ which, so as to keep the cycle generative rather than degenerative. David Culver, the CEO of Alcan, the Canadian aluminum company, had a reputation as an outstanding manager. When he retired, social innovation researcher Frances Westley asked him about his approach to management, and he answered: "When I feel myself wanting to be compassionate, I try to be tough, and

when I feel myself wanting to be tough, I try to be compassionate." Moving between talking and fighting analogously requires paying attention to the feedback that signals imbalance (crossing the boundary into degeneracy) and then making the corresponding rebalancing move. When your talking is producing capitulating and therefore at risk of manipulating, it is time to begin asserting. When your fighting is producing resisting and therefore at risk of imposing, it time to begin engaging. The key is not to maintain a position of static balance but to notice and correct dynamic imbalance.

The skill to employing both talking and fighting, then, is to be alert and courageous enough to be able to make a countervailing move as and when it is required. In a situation or system that is dominated by talking, if you begin to fight then you may be seen as impolite or aggressive. In a situation or system dominated by fighting, if you begin to talk then you may be seen as weak or disloyal. Going against the tide therefore takes patience: to be able to wait and listen for the moment when the dominant movement is producing frustration, doubt, or fear, and then to make the countervailing move.

When I have given lectures about *Power and Love*, I have observed that most people are more comfortable either with love and talking or with power and fighting. They may be able, when they are in low-stress contexts (such as with friends), to fluidly employ both of these poles, but when they are in high-stress contexts (such as with enemies), they default to and get stuck in their comfort zone. Often they recognize the danger of over-utilizing their stronger drive and so they hold back. Some people (often men) said to me, "At work, I feel more comfortable exercising power—I see love as something for home—but as a result I am often accused of pushing people around, as so I try to rein in my power." Other people (often women) said, "I feel more comfortable exercising love—I see power as dangerous—but as a result I often get hurt, and so I try to limit my love." Moreover, often people choose to focus on employing their stronger drive and they let someone else—their spouse, their business partner, another part of their organization—employ the other one.

If we want to be able to employ both talking and fighting, then both of these strategies of contracting—of weakening our stronger pole or outsourcing our weaker pole—are inadequate. We need to do the opposite: to practice employing our weaker pole and thereby strengthening it. We need to stretch.