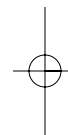
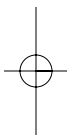




Solving Tough Problems

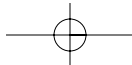
*AN OPEN WAY OF TALKING, LISTENING,
AND CREATING NEW REALITIES*

Adam Kahane



BK

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Contents

Foreword by Peter Senge	ix
Introduction: The Problem with Tough Problems	1
<i>PART I: TOUGH PROBLEMS</i>	5
“ <i>There Is Only One Right Answer</i> ”	7
Seeing the World	13
The Miraculous Option	19
<i>PART II: TALKING</i>	35
Being Stuck	39
Dictating	45
Talking Politely	53
Speaking Up	59
Only Talking	67
<i>PART III: LISTENING</i>	71
Openness	73
Reflectiveness	79
Empathy	87
<i>PART IV: CREATING NEW REALITIES</i>	93
Cracking Through the Egg Shell	95
Closed Fist, Open Palm	107
The Wound That Wants to Be Whole	113
Conclusion: An Open Way	129

Foreword by Peter Senge

*I*NCREASINGLY WE FACE ISSUES for which hierarchical authority is inadequate. No CEO can transform a company's ability to innovate, or single-handedly create a values-based culture. No country president can resolve intractable political stalemates that stand in the way of national development. It is painfully apparent that even the most powerful political leaders and global institutions are powerless in the face of issues like climate change or the growing gap between rich and poor that, if left unaddressed, will undermine the future we leave our children and grandchildren.

Faced with this reality, we see everywhere a growing sense of powerlessness and an increasing reliance on force. The former reflects awareness that the big issues are generally getting worse, not better; the latter, a desperate response to this awareness. Few of us do not shudder at the prospect of a continuation of today's escalating reliance on force. Adam Kahane's book poses a third option: a transformation in our ability to talk, think, and act together. I am convinced this is the only reliable path forward, not only for hierarchical leaders but for all of us—as parents, citizens, and people at all levels in organizations—seeking to contribute to meaningful change.

While this third option is commonly dismissed as idealistic and unrealistic, Adam's belief in this possibility has been forged in the fire of some of the world's most complex and conflicted situations. As a young scenario planner from Shell, he found him-

X SOLVING TOUGH PROBLEMS

self in 1991 helping formerly outlawed black political party leaders in South Africa develop strategies to guide their divided country. The problem was that they saw the world differently from one another and very differently from the white minority with whom they had to work. Remarkably, in little more than a year, this Mont Fleur scenario process resulted in a meaningful consensus on many of the country's core challenges and a way of talking and working together that united a broad cross section of the country. South Africa still faces immense challenges, but it is hard to imagine the country's transition to stable multiracial democracy without this process and others like it.

Since then, many similar experiences—some successful and some not—have illuminated a few simple principles around which Adam's story unfolds.

We are unable to talk productively about complex issues because we are unable to listen. Politics and politicians today epitomize virtually the opposite of the symbol from which their calling emerged—the Greek *polis*—where citizens came to *talk together* about the issues of their day. Things are little better in most corporate boardrooms, where the most difficult and politically threatening issues often never see the light of day. Indeed, we now have a new hero of corporate governance: the “whistle-blower” who risks it all to say what no one wants to hear.

Listening requires opening ourselves. Our typical patterns of listening in difficult situations are tactical, not relational. We listen for what we expect to hear. We sift through others' views for what we can use to make our own points. We measure success by how effective we have been in gaining advantage for our favored positions. Even when these motives are covered by a shield of politeness, it is rare for people with something at stake truly to open their minds to discover the limitations in their own ways of seeing and acting.

Opening our minds ultimately means opening our hearts. The heart has come to be associated with muddled thinking and personal weakness, hardly the attributes of effective decision makers.



But this was not always so. “Let us bring our hearts and minds together for the good of the whole” has been a common entreaty of wise leaders for millennia. Indigenous peoples around the world commence important dialogues with prayers for guidance, in order that they might suspend their prejudices and fears and act wisely in the service of their communities. The oldest Chinese symbol for “mind” is a picture of the heart.

When a true opening of the heart develops collectively, miracles are possible. This is perhaps the most difficult point of all to accept in today’s cynical world, and I will not try to argue abstractly for what Adam illustrates so poignantly. By miracles I do not mean that somehow everything turns out for the best with no effort or uncertainty. Hardly. If anything, the effort required greatly exceeds what is typical, and people learn to embrace a level of uncertainty from which most of us normally retreat. But this embrace arises from a collective strength that we have all but ceased to imagine, let alone develop: the strength of a creative human community grounded in a genuine sense of connectedness and possibility, rather than one based on fear and dogma.

It has been my privilege to work with Adam for the past decade, as part of a growing community of intrepid explorers around the world looking for alternative paths to catalyze and sustain profound, systemic change. This work is being done in corporate, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations, and in settings that involve all three sectors. It is a joy to see some of the initial articulations of its foundations now reaching publication.

Through this time I have come to appreciate Adam as a consummate craftsman, a deeply pragmatic person not given easily to hyperbole or naïve expectations. This book captures his spirit as well as his knowledge. The theory and method gradually emerging from this collective work sit quietly in the background of his story of challenges, accomplishments, failures, and discoveries.

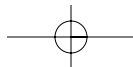
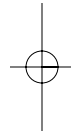
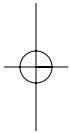
Although what Adam and others of us are learning is undoubtedly no more than first steps, I believe the direction is becoming clear. The path forward is about becoming more human, not just



XII SOLVING TOUGH PROBLEMS

more clever. It is about transcending our fears of vulnerability, not finding new ways of protecting ourselves. It is about discovering how to act in service of the whole, not just in service of our own interests. It is about rediscovering our courage—literally, *cuer age*, the rending of the heart—to pursue what Adam calls “an open way,” because the only progress possible regarding the deep problems we face will come from opening our minds, hearts, and wills.

Peter M. Senge
Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 2004



Introduction: The Problem with Tough Problems

*T*OUGH PROBLEMS usually don't get solved peacefully. They either don't get solved at all—they get stuck—or they get solved by force. These frustrating and frightening outcomes occur all the time. Families replay the same argument over and over, or a parent lays down the law. Organizations keep returning to a familiar crisis, or a boss decrees a new strategy. Communities split over a controversial issue, or a politician dictates the answer. Countries negotiate to a stalemate, or they go to war. Either the people involved in a problem can't agree on what the solution is, or the people with power—authority, money, guns—impose their solution on everyone else.

There is another way to solve tough problems. The people involved can talk and listen to each other and thereby work through a solution peacefully. But this way is often too difficult and too slow to produce results, and force therefore becomes the easier, default option. I have written this book to help those of us who are trying to solve tough problems get better at talking and listening—so that we can do so more successfully, and choose the peaceful way more often. I want talking and listening to become a reliable default option.

Problems are tough because they are complex in three ways. They are dynamically complex, which means that cause and effect are far apart in space and time, and so are hard to grasp from firsthand experience. They are generatively complex, which

2 INTRODUCTION

means that they are unfolding in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways. And they are socially complex, which means that the people involved see things very differently, and so the problems become polarized and stuck.

Our talking and listening often fails to solve complex problems because of the way that most of us talk and listen most of the time. Our most common way of talking is telling: asserting *the* truth about the way things are and must be, not allowing that there might be other truths and possibilities. And our most common way of listening is not listening: listening only to our own talking, not to others. This way of talking and listening works fine for solving simple problems, where an authority or expert can work through the problem piece by piece, applying solutions that have worked in the past. But a complex problem can only be solved peacefully if the people who are part of the problem work together creatively to understand their situation and to improve it.

Our common way of talking and listening therefore guarantees that our complex problems will either remain stuck or will get unstuck only by force. (There is no problem so complex that it does not have a simple solution . . . that is wrong.) We need to learn another, less common, more open way.

I have reached these conclusions after twenty-five years of working professionally on tough problems. I started off my career as someone who came up with solutions. First I was a university researcher in physics and economics, and then an expert analyst of government policy and corporate strategy. Then in 1991, inspired by an unexpected and extraordinary experience in South Africa, I began working as a neutral facilitator of problem-solving processes, helping other people come up with their own solutions. I have facilitated leadership teams of companies, governments, and civil society organizations in fifty countries, on every continent—from Royal Dutch/Shell, Intel, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Federal Express, to the Government of Canada and the European Commission, to the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Anglican Synod of Bishops—helping them

address their organizations' most difficult challenges. And I have also facilitated cross-organizational leadership teams—composed of businesspeople and politicians, generals and guerrillas, civil servants and trade unionists, community activists and United Nations officials, journalists and clergy, academics and artists—helping them address some of the most difficult challenges in the world: in South Africa during the struggle to replace apartheid; in Colombia in the midst of the civil war; in Guatemala in the aftermath of the genocide; in Argentina when the society collapsed; and in deeply divided Israel-Palestine, Cyprus, Paraguay, Canada-Quebec, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country.

Commuting back and forth between these different worlds has allowed me to see how tough problems can and cannot be solved. I have been privileged to work with many extraordinary people in many extraordinary processes. From these experiences I have drawn conclusions that apply not only in extraordinary but also in ordinary settings. In the harsh light of life-and-death conflicts, the dynamics of how people create new realities are painted in bright colors. Having seen the dynamics there, I can now recognize them in circumstances where they are painted in muted colors. I have learned what kinds of talking and listening condemn us to stuckness and force, and what kinds enable us to solve peacefully even our most difficult problems.

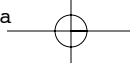
My favorite movie about getting unstuck is the comedy *Groundhog Day*. Bill Murray plays Phil Connors, a cynical, self-centered television journalist who is filming a story about Groundhog Day, February 2, in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. He despises the assignment and the town. The next morning, he wakes up to discover, with horror, that it is still February 2, and that he has to live through these events again. This happens every morning: he is stuck in reliving the same day over and over. He explains this to his producer Rita, but she laughs it off. He tries everything he can in order to break this pattern—getting angry, being nice, killing himself—but nothing works. Eventually he relaxes into appreciating the present, and opens himself

4 INTRODUCTION

up to the town and to Rita. Only then does he wake up to a new day and a better future.

Many of us are like Phil Connors. We get stuck by holding on tightly to our opinions and plans and identities and truths. But when we relax and are present and open up our minds and hearts and wills, we get unstuck and we unstick the world around us. I have learned that the more open I am—the more attentive I am to the way things are and could be, around me and inside me; the less attached I am to the way things ought to be—the more effective I am in helping to bring forth new realities. And the more I work in this way, the more present and alive I feel. As I have learned to lower my defenses and open myself up, I have become increasingly able to help better futures be born.

The way we talk and listen expresses our relationship with the world. When we fall into the trap of telling and of not listening, we close ourselves off from being changed by the world and we limit ourselves to being able to change the world only by force. But when we talk and listen with an open mind and an open heart and an open spirit, we bring forth our better selves and a better world.



Praise for *Solving Tough Problems*

“Many people have written about the healing power of dialogue. None, however, has put that power to the test under more extreme conditions with greater success than Adam Kahane. Informative, inspiring, and beautifully written. Highly recommended.”

—David Korten, President of the People-Centered Development Forum, and author of *When Corporations Rule the World*

“This generative dialogue approach offers real opportunities for governments to engage with stakeholders to build trust and create exciting new resolutions to multi-faceted social and governance challenges.”

—Clare Beckton, Assistant Deputy Attorney General of Canada

“Adam Kahane’s book invites us to dare to move back into that sacred space of silence: a space where we listen and hear with our hearts, and not only with our heads. The stories he tells celebrate the amazing transformation that takes place when we have the courage to be vulnerable and speak openly and honestly—where passion is not used to defend an ideology or position, but is directed at enhancing a shared commitment for a common purpose. This is a book that needs to be read now.”

—Njongonkulu Ndungane, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town

“Adam Kahane presents a very strong case for how authentic dialogue can change the world. A fascinating mix of both large ideas and practical details, winnowed from decades of experiences in many countries and institutions around the world. A definitive work on a transformational social innovation.”

—Nicanor Perlas, recipient of the Right Livelihood Award (Alternative Nobel Prize), and author of *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power, and Threefolding*

“A brave and powerful book.”

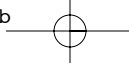
—Len Lindegren, former Global Strategy Leader, PricewaterhouseCoopers

“This fascinating book paints both seemingly unsolvable problems and a path towards sustainable solutions. A ‘must read’ for those who want to be part of creating such new realities.”

Jeroen Bordewijk, Senior Vice President, Unilever

“Being successful in business today means being able to solve complex challenges in a dynamic global environment, while building teams that can handle change creatively. This book shows us how to unlock the creativity of diverse teams to find solutions that work.”

—Katherine Taylor, Director General, General Electric Medical Systems Mexico



“This book makes a strong case, from fascinating inside stories about the really tough problems in the world, that success depends on leaders learning to listen. Recommended reading for all decision takers dealing with tough problems.”

—Arie de Geus, former Group Planning Coordinator, Royal Dutch/Shell, and author of *The Living Company*

“A book that needs to be read everywhere people have differences—in politics, the church, labor, the academy, and business. Kahane’s message is wise, honest, and above all realistic. A gift for our time.”

—W. Brian Arthur, Citibank Professor, Santa Fe Institute

“This is a profound and important book. It is special in both the simplicity and authenticity of the writing, and the value and far reaching impact of its message. It offers a ways of thinking and acting that can heal the woundedness of our organizations and our communities. I recommend it wholeheartedly.”

—Peter Block, author of *Flawless Consulting*, *Stewardship*, *The Empowered Manager*, *The Answer to How Is Yes*, and *Freedom and Accountability at Work*

“Adam Kahane has written a useful and powerful book. It turns out that the rational, structured approach is just the beginning. Success occurs only when people deeply listen and talk with each other.”

—Harrison Owen, author of *Expanding Our Now*, *Tales from Open Space*, and *Open Space Technology*

“Adam Kahane is one of those all too rare ‘warriors for peace’ who is willing to immerse himself totally into our world’s most intractable conflicts. In story after story, we witness the remarkable transformation of isolated individuals—separate, hostile, closed to one another, with fixed positions—into a single, complex, organism with a common goal, fresh thinking, and, most of all, hope. Kahane makes it crystal clear that deep talking and listening do not come easily, but when they do, the world moves.”

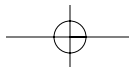
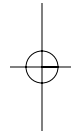
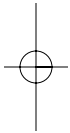
—Barry Oshry, author of *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life* and *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*

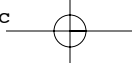
“Kahane puts into words wisdom glimpsed from the cauldron of real world experience. He renews our hope that it is possible to map a better future and sustains our faith that the heart can be a guide.”

—Alan Briskin, author of *The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace*

“This book is a gem—in a class of its own. It explains simply and eloquently the essence of the process of non-violent, voluntary transformational change in social systems that seem stuck in hopelessness.”

—Arun Maira, Chairman, The Boston Consulting Group India





“This book is a victory for those of us who believe that even the most intractable of our societal problems can be successfully addressed through the efforts of people of good will. It inspires us with real stories of unlikely groups of people separated by gulfs of fear, history, rage and violence, sitting down and bridging chasms of mistrust through the simple human acts of speaking and listening from the heart. I recommend it highly.”

—Robert Gass, Rockwood Leadership Program;
former President, ARC International

“This book includes the story of the Visión Guatemala team, in which a group of us, who in the ordinary course of events would never have met or worked together, had an unprecedented experience that opened up new horizons for us and for our country. Adam helped us cultivate our dreams and ideals, and gave us the energy and hope to act to renew our society.”

—Raquel Zelaya, former Secretary of Peace, Guatemala

“I have facilitated dialogue and problem-solving in many of today’s ‘intractable’ conflicts—Cyprus, the Caucasus, Kosovo, and Colombia, among others. This book offers valuable new approaches for working in these situations. It goes beyond dialogue, and offers ways of building on dialogue to create new realities.”

Diana Chigas, Conflict Management Group and
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

“Tough problems is an understatement. This book provides a road map for solving the intractable and the tragic. Companies facing extinction, communities on the brink, and countries in crisis—Kahane has used his tools in all these contexts, and serves them up admirably in this volume.”

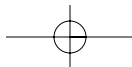
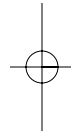
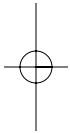
—Michel Gelobter, Executive Director, Redefining Progress

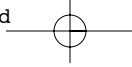
“This book offers us stories of profound transformation—and with a refreshing directness teaches us ways of talking and listening that can embrace the toughest problems. The packing of so much practical wisdom into such a small space creates a jewel of inspiration.”

Betty Sue Flowers, Director, Lyndon Baines
Johnson Presidential Library

“Adam Kahane is one of those rare action-intellectuals who combines a deep theoretical understanding of social change and group process with actual experience in situations of conflict and turmoil, where people are desperate for solutions but unable to secure what they need. Adam brings the catalyst for change.”

—James Garrison, President of State of the World Forum
and author of *America as Empire*





“At the heart of many of our most intractable problems lies the belief that reflection and action are somehow separate. *Solving Tough Problems* goes a long way in healing this rift. In doing so it elegantly sets out a direction for us to follow if we are to shift radically our current destructive patterns of behavior.”

—Zaid Hassan, Cultivation Unit, Pioneers of Change

“This is a book about miracles, not the kind of miracles produced by angels but the kind produced by people listening and talking to one another. When faced with tough, complex problems such conversations are likely to be more helpful than yet more ‘objective’ analyses.”

—David Brooks, Founding President, Friends of the Earth Canada

“Adam Kahane pens his mind and heart in prose reminiscent of personal letters to an intelligent friend. His theme is simple and admirable: how to replace the power of violence with the power of listening-and-talking, of regenerative dialogue. His stories move me, unveiling, as no other book, how the informed and reflective heart is the essential compliment to rational, strategic thought.”

—Peter Warshall, editor, *Whole Earth*,
the magazine of the *Whole Earth Catalog*

“The world we live in requires that we all take responsibility for the good of the whole; our collective future depends on it. Adam Kahane has given us a lovely treatise on how that can happen individually and collectively through open minds and open hearts.”

—Carolyn Lukensmeyer, President and Founder, *AmericaSpeaks*

