On Mass and Movement

The Theory of the Critical Yeast

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses critical mass and social movements. It argues that critical mass is understood as a strategy for making things happen by mobilizing large numbers to effect a desired change. Driven by political, business, and military concepts, we seem to have an image that this kind of strategic thinking translates into maximizing output. Constructive social change requires a different image of strategy. Strategy in peacebuilding means thinking about what gives life and what keeps things alive. In the simplest terms, to be strategic requires that we create something beyond what exists from what is available but has exponential potential. In reference to social change, it means we must develop a capacity to recognize and build the locus of potential for change.

Keywords: social change, critical mass, webs, yeast, siphon, mediation, social movements

That which counts can rarely be counted.

—Albert Einstein

The lessons of the spider teach us about strategically approaching space and about the nature of building webs.[1] When applied to social processes, however, the web approach may fly in the face of one commonly accepted notion of what creates shifts and change in societies. Movements for social change often tend to conceptualize their challenge as a battlefield whose success is measured by the number of people who have joined "their side."

Side-taking, unfortunately, seems to accompany social battlefields and therefore accepts the premise that change is inherently a dualistic struggle. While many of us in the peace movement feel a deep sense of discomfort with politicians who frame our challenges in this manner, for example, as issues that force a choice between the "good guys" and "the evil empires," we have often fallen prey to the trap of replicating that which we abhor. We, and here I refer to our broad community under the title of *the peace movement*, tend to frame the processes of change we wish to promote as the challenge of gaining the upper hand of influence in the public sphere. Thus we conceptualize social change as linked primarily to raising public awareness of a greater truth and then measuring how many of our compatriots within the public sphere have moved toward the awareness of what we believe in and how many are willing to act on it. This yardstick of success boils down to a numbers game: how many voted for a certain idea or how many people came to the street in **(p.88)** protest against a particular issue or proposal. At a popular level, social change advocates often understand their goal as creating the numbers that count, what in everyday coinage has come to be called "arriving at the critical mass."

The age of the mass media has certainly added to this phenomenon. In less than a sound byte, the success of social change is measured in a single statistic. A protest march is reported and interpreted by friend and foe alike as if it were a ball game recounted by a sportscaster. If the numbers are high, it means the movement and issues are serious. If the numbers are low, it has not become a political concern worthy of attention. You will often hear reporters say, "There does not appear to be a critical mass of public opinion that will sway this administration from its proposed goal." In response, the

challenge is laid: Those who want the change must create the mass.

In this framing of the change process there is an important dynamic that is often overlooked: Social change that depends heavily on the magnetic attraction of shared opposition creates social energy that can generate large numbers in discrete time frames but has difficulty sustaining the longer-term change. Social movements rise and fall as visible *moments* rather than as *sustained processes*. This seems related to two important observations about how change happens.

First, social movements find that it is easier, and in many cases more popular, to articulate to what they are opposed rather than what they wish to build. Change is seen as linear: Raise awareness first, then promote action by increased numbers of people to stop something, and finally, once that thing is stopped, develop action to build something different. Awareness and action have at times gone together and created extraordinary moments of change—from local communities stopping a new proposed highway, to whole societies achieving the recognition of civil and human rights, to nations overthrowing oppressive regimes. It has rather consistently been during the third part of the theory—developing action to build something—where we run into difficulties and where the change processes seem to collapse.

Second, framing the process as one that must create like-minded communities produces a narrow view of change wherein little thought or work is given to the broader nature of who and what will need to change and how they will be engaged in such a process. In other words, the very way the issues and process are framed undermines the fundamental web of understanding that change must strategically build linkages and coordination with and across not-like-minded and not-like-situated relational spaces. Unlike a linear change theory, the web approach suggests that multiple processes at different levels and social spaces take place *at the same time*. The web approach does not think in terms of us versus them, but rather about the nature of the change sought and how multiple sets of interdependent processes will link people and places to move the whole of the system toward those changes.

In pragmatic terms the **(p.89)** web approach asks early and often: Who has to find a way to be connected to whom?

Nonetheless, there is a certain truth to the frame of reference that convincing large numbers of people to get on board with an idea is the key to social change. Awareness of information and the willingness to act on what one believes are indeed part and parcel of the larger challenge of how societies as a whole change and move toward new ways of relating and organizing their lives together. In settings of protracted conflict and violence, movement away from fear, division, and violence toward new modalities of interaction requires awareness, action, and broad processes of change. In this sense, numbers are important. However, it is equally important for us to look deeper at how we think this shift happens. Numbers count. But experience in settings of deep division suggests that what lies invisible behind the numbers counts more. In social change it is not necessarily the amount of participants that authenticates a social shift. It is the quality of the platform that sustains the shifting process that matters. Ironically, the focus on numbers has created a misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept of critical mass.

The Critical Mass

As a sociologist, I studied with professors who were interested in the emergence, dynamics, and impact of social movements. Prominent in our discussions was how a movement creates and then reaches the juncture that generates what is commonly referred to as the critical mass. Critical mass is a cross-over term that has moved from the physical sciences to sociology, political science, and communication theory. Its origins can be traced to nuclear physics and the study of chain reactions of fission. Criticality in fission, the origin of the critical mass, merits our attention.

For our purposes, the technical details are probably less important than the meaning and original formulation of a critical mass. Fission happens as a reaction. Scientists studying this phenomenon in order to harness its power were interested in knowing whether it would be possible for a reaction not just to run its course, but to create, inherent to its very nature, subsequent reactions. In other words they asked this question: Could a reaction create a multiplier effect capable of reproducing subsequent reactions exponentially greater in number but generated on their own, independent of the original reaction? If understood in social terms, these scientists were inquiring into the nature of sustainability.

In the nuclear physics of fission, critical mass can be articulated in the specificity of numeric equations. In layperson's terms, if one-third of the neutrons in a reaction sequence create fission, then the reaction dies out as a single **(p.90)** iteration. However, if roughly two-thirds of the neutrons cause the fission, then subsequent reactions are created that reproduce themselves. It was in this idea of "reproducing themselves" that the term *critical mass* was used. Nuclear physicists call this *criticality*. The key is the idea that a self-sustained process is generated, meaning that one reaction can reproduce itself exponentially, independent of the original cause.

The idea of the critical mass floated over into the social sciences given its natural applications to a wide variety of topics. People asked: How do social ideas make their way from inception to becoming widely accepted by society? The point at which enough people believe it and the social ethos changes is the point of a critical mass. The shift from neutrons to people, from atomic chambers to social contexts, raised

intriguing challenges. But in the process of applying the concept of the critical mass, we actually may have missed the original key insight. Creating self-sustained processes of social change is not just about numbers in a sequential formula. The critical mass in fact was asking what initial, even small, things made exponentially greater things possible. In nuclear physics, the focus was on the quality of the catalyst, not the numbers that followed.

A recent popular level application of this idea can be found in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*. He talks about the critical mass of creating a social epidemic, drawing most of his examples from the field of marketing and business. While he states that the tipping point is the critical mass, the key in social settings is not found in the image of a standardized notion of large numbers but as he states in his subtitle, "how little things make a difference" (Gladwell, 2002). In fact, in several of his examples he watches social epidemics rise from the standpoint of strategic relational connections. This conclusion paralleled an idea that had popped up for me years ago in peacebuilding.

While common in strategies of many peace movements attempting to change settings of protracted conflict from cycles of violence toward dialogue and nonviolence, the critical mass image left me feeling discouraged in many places where I was working. The attention always seemed to be on how to generate large impact and numbers in the society or, if you will, on how to get people to move into the streets. In the last few years there have been some extraordinary examples of this, notably the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and the recent parallel events that removed Eduard Shevardnadze from office in Georgia. However, in the vast majority of places we define as settings of protracted violence —like Northern Ireland, Somalia, Liberia, Colombia—there did not appear to be a critical mass on the horizon. The cycles of violence in most of these settings were decade-long if not generational. It was the forces of violence that seemed to have the critical mass. Even at times when moments of larger social participation emerged in reaction against violence, times when it felt as if a critical mass of change demanding a shift to end the violence might happen, these moments turned out to be ephemeral **(p.91)** and short-lived. In some cases they were even counterproductive, for in the aftermath, when little or nothing changed, people believed even less that change was

possible. The number of people in the streets captured the media's attention but were incapable of generating a sustained process of social change.

However, when I paid careful attention to the times when I believed significant change processes actually happened and were sustained in spite of the violence, I came to the conclusion that these did not happen with a strategy of focusing on counting the numbers and on whether they amounted to a critical mass. In fact the inverse was true. Focus on quantity distracted from focus on quality and on the space needed to generate and sustain change.

One day, by my recollection during an extended conversation with Somalis around an afternoon tea in the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel in Djibouti in 1991, an alternative popped out. We were perplexed with what would make possible a shift to overcome the paralysis people felt when faced with the power of the warlords. Some commented that what was needed was a critical mass of opposition. Some argued for a force greater than the warlords, an outside intervention of military might that would set it all straight. On the spur of the moment I made the comment, "It seems to me that the key to changing this thing is getting a small set of the right people involved at the right places. What's missing is not the critical mass. The missing ingredient is the *critical yeast*."

Tongue-in-cheek, the metaphor stuck. Just like spiders, I have ever since been intrigued with the idea of finding and building social yeast. I use the concept extensively in training. I find it compelling. The critical or what I sometimes call the strategic yeast is built from a bread-baking image rather than one of nuclear physics. It is a metaphor that asks the "who" rather than the "how many" question: Who, though not like-minded or like-situated in this context of conflict, would have a capacity, if they were mixed and held together, to make other things grow exponentially, beyond their numbers?

Whenever I present the idea in the format of a seminar or workshop I always ask who in the group bakes bread and then I ask them to describe what they do. While the process and secrets vary, there is a commonsense understanding to bread baking that cuts across almost any cultural setting. The elements of the process are, as I indicate in the classroom, suggestive of how we can think about social change. From

more than nearly a decade of working with the metaphor, here are the common observations about yeast, bread baking, and social change. Remember, we are looking into the "who" question as a social strategy. I have garnered five principles.[2]

1. The most common ingredients for baking bread are flour, salt, water, yeast, and sugar. Of all of the ingredients, flour is the largest, the mass. Among the smallest is yeast. There is only one that makes the rest grow: yeast. Smallness has nothing to do with the size of poten **(p.92)** tial change. What you look for is the quality of what happens if certain sets of people get mixed. The principle of yeast is this: A few strategically connected people have greater potential for creating the social growth of an idea or process than large numbers of people who think alike. When social change fails, look first to the nature of who was engaged and what gaps exist in the connections among different sets of people.

2. Yeast, to do its thing, must first move from the jar or the foil packet and into a process, initially of its own growth, and then into the wider mass. Sitting on a shelf or never being removed from the package, yeast has only potential but no real capacity to affect any kind of growth. Mixed directly and quickly into the mass, yeast dies and does not work. This leads to our third principle.

3. Initially, yeast needs a small amount of moisture and warmth to grow. In early or preparatory growth, yeast will be stronger and more resilient if it has a dash of sugar and if it is not placed in glaring sunlight, that is, if it is located a bit out of the way and covered. The core steps for building initial growth are mixing the dry ingredient of yeast with water, sweetening it a bit, and placing it in a somewhat warm environment. Following the same principles, social change requires careful attention to the way people in their environment mix in relational spaces that provide a warm, initially somewhat separate, and therefore safe space to bring together what has not usually been brought

together with enough sweetness to make the space conducive for the growth of those merged.

4. The yeast must then be thoroughly mixed into the mass. This is no minor process. In bread baking, it is called kneading. It is intentional and requires a good bit of muscle. Further, bread bakers rarely accept the first signs of growth as legitimate. To be authentic, growth must find a source that rises, again and again, in spite of everything that pushes it down. Yeast is defined principally by this capacity to be resilient. In social change, the critical yeast must find a way to sustain the purpose of whom they are as yeast yet be mixed back into the full mass such that in spite of ups and downs, they are characterized as displaying the capacity to generate growth.

5. Don't forget to preheat the oven. Bread baking and critical yeast are multitasking par excellence. While one set of things is set in motion in one place, attention is always given to the horizon of what is coming and will be needed in another. What is being done now simultaneously must connect with other things that will need to be attended to and kept present, not as a linear sequence of first A and then B, but as a simultaneous understanding of interdependent though different processes. In this sense social change requires a keen sense of **(p. 93)** relational spaces even when those are not in direct physical proximity. Based on relational spaces, critical yeast constantly moves across a range of different processes and connections.

In this image the largest ingredient, flour, is an analogy for the critical mass. However, the smallest ingredient, yeast, is the only one with a capacity to help the other ingredients grow. If we follow the analogy, yeast needs moisture, warmth, and to be mixed in order to make the other ingredients grow. The place where the critical mass and the critical yeast meet in reference to social change is not in the number of people involved but rather in creating the quality of the platform that makes exponential growth strong and possible, and then in finding ways to sustain that platform.

I often follow this with another metaphor for social change. I tell the story of my first encounter with a siphon. During the period our family lived in Costa Rica, I was involved in a community initiative in the Pacific port town of Puntarenas. Once a week I would travel over the mountain passes from San Jose to the coast for our meetings. They usually ended in the late evening and I would make the trek back, usually arriving home about midnight. One evening, my fuel gauge was not functioning properly, and I ran out of gas on a remote mountain pass. There was little traffic at that hour of night and so I waited by the car, hoping against hope that whoever came by might stop and that whoever stopped might be a good person with creative ideas. Such a person did stop and our challenge was how to get a little gas from his vehicle to mine without a pump. It was the first time I needed to make a siphon really work.

I tell this little story in workshops and then say, "We are going to look at the physics of a siphon and apply those to social change." I frame the challenge of the siphon as this: How can we move liquid from one place to another with what is naturally available, that is, without electricity or a motor? And then we walk through almost everyone's commonsense knowledge of a siphon.

The end of a tube or hose is introduced into one container of liquid. Light pressure by inhaling at the opposite end of the tube is applied, but not too much, and this end of the tube is held lower than the other. When the liquid reaches the halfway point and begins its descent, the tube is introduced to the other container. The liquid flows on its own, due to the forces of gravity, independent of the originating pressure or influence. The principles have commonality with the yeast metaphor and raise a similar range of intriguing applicable questions.

First, with a siphon, you do not concentrate on moving all of the liquid. You focus on getting a small portion to move against gravity until momentum and then the power of gravity brings the rest. In social change application, it raises this question: Who, in a setting of conflict or related to a process of change, if they were able to move *together* against gravity, would as their momentum built, bring a much wider set of people with them? The key, once **(p.94)** again, is in the little things, not in

large numbers. The key is the capacity to locate the strategic set of people that who could create such momentum. Who they are *in relationship* creates the capacity to pull.

Gravity is both an obstacle and a resource. Careful attention must be given to how this small set of people moves against the gravity, but they are also chosen for their capacity, for who they are and how they are connected in the setting, to create an exponential use of setting-based forces.

The role of outside influence and pressure, as can be seen in the metaphor, is that of astute support. The key to sustaining the movement or the change is having a deep setting-based capacity, for the ability to sustain the movement lies with the existing resources, not with the introduction of artificial influence. Catalysts and support can come from outside, but the sustenance of change is built by keen observation of available and existing resources, space, and connections.

Webs, Yeast, Siphons, and Mediation

One way to characterize the moral imagination found in the stories of the Wajir women and the Colombian peasants was their capacity to see, understand, and mobilize relational spaces. They were masters of web making for social change, spiderlike in their capacity to imagine the contours of the space and to imagine themselves in relationship with challenging sets of people who were not like-minded and - situated and were extremely dangerous and antithetical to their desires for change. As agents of social change, their imagination took advantage of the existing context in order to transcend it. An intriguing curiosity was the nature of their role. They were simultaneously advocates and conciliators. They did not engage in mediation per se, yet their imagination of relationship and space created a mediative quality that affected the setting without a mediator. This supports the growing awareness, as proposed most recently by Bernard Mayer (2004), that the professional field of conflict resolution has too narrowly defined the nature of our role as we think about building constructive social change.

Though I have worked at international peacebuilding and conflict transformation for more than twenty years, I continuously find myself faced with an intriguing challenge: how to explain to people what I do. I sometimes have nurse, accountant, and bricklayer envy. When somebody at a

construction site says, "I am a bricklayer," nobody asks for more information. It is enough. But when I say, "I work in support of conciliation processes," it is rarely sufficient to give people a sense of what I do. If I say, "I am a mediator," then there is an immediate connection and image. But what follows is a second typical question: "Which conflicts have you mediated?" And once again I find myself in a quandary. Truth be known, though I have been involved in supporting **(p.95)** dozens of initiatives, I have only served as a mediator in several specific international conflicts at the highest level of the political process, and even in those I was part of a team where I had a secondary, supporting role. Yet, if I endeavor to explain the actual heart of the experience of what I do, people soon have a lost and perplexed look on their faces. The image of "a mediator" and the work that a mediator must do in international conflicts is specific and clear in many minds, but it does not match my experience nor my understanding of what is most needed in settings of protracted conflict. I believe the image—the metaphor of a mediator—is actually misleading and misguided, and it has a lot to do with the nature of change and our discussion about space, webs, yeast, and siphons. Serious understanding of space and webs suggests that we should reconsider the nature, purpose, and construction of mediation in protracted conflict.

The web approach requires what I would call an *imaginative mediative capacity*. I note that my computer program spell-check does not like the use of the word *mediative*. Apparently this is not an accepted adjective in the English language. But I use it intentionally, having bumped across the term with colleagues in Northern Ireland who were trying to find ways to describe the kind of social responses they hoped to infuse in the groups that were conducting a wide variety of tasks in cross-community work, from housing to health. These people saw much of their work not as mediators in the classic sense but as helping particular institutions within the wider society build "mediative" behavior (Lederach, 2002). Hence, the birth of a term I find useful and descriptive.

Mediative capacity requires us to think about social spaces for constructive change processes that have intermediary impact. Mediation on the other hand typically is more narrowly defined as a task conducted by a person or team at the level of political negotiation, which is aimed at finalizing an agreement. Honeyman (1990) and Mitchell (2003) argued

some years back that we would be wise to think about mediation as a process requiring multiple roles and activities rather than as an activity conducted by a single person. This points us in the direction of understanding the conflict setting as a system, a web of relationships and processes. When applied to mediation, the web approach proposes we broaden the concept to include the development of social capacity to constructively affect the strategic points of relationship within the weblike system. But what does "mediative capacity in social spaces that promote and build constructive change processes that have intermediary impact" mean? Let me offer a definition that in many regards represents the significant shift in view that accompanies a web approach.

Mediative suggests a quality of relational interaction rather than the specificity of a role. The term underscores attitudes, skills, and disciplines that include engagement of the diverse perspectives about a conflict and a capacity to watch for and build opportunities that increase creative and responsive pro **(p.96)** cesses and solutions around conflicts. Common to this kind of interaction is a capacity to build relationships and to address specific issues. In Northern Ireland mediative attitudes and behavior were aimed not at introducing a mediator, but rather at finding spaces of natural and necessary cross-community interaction, for example, in public housing or health, that could increase a constructive capacity in interpersonal and social skills.

Capacity is understanding, ability, and discipline. It suggests skill and will, and involves both practice and attitude. For our purposes here, *capacity* is empowerment at its most primordial essence: "I am able and committed."

Social spaces suggests that in settings where conflict has created sharp and historic divisions—more often than not along lines of collective identities—every set of social relationships has a connection to and is defined by these divisions. This means conflict at a social level has a wide impact. However in these settings we also find that in the social life of communities besieged by violence, people still create places of interaction for purely functional reasons. In other words, people from different sides of the divide interact on a daily basis out of necessity for one reason or another. From schools to hospitals, from markets to housing and transportation, the web of life in conflict settings creates

spaces of interaction wherein there are, by necessity, points of relationship across the lines of conflict. These points of relationship are what we could call *social spaces*.

Ironically, however, in its typical application, mediation is conceived as a socially narrow process of action carried out by a person (or small team) who moves or facilitates direct dialogue between well-defined actors representing particular interests and groups. This is especially true of the highest level of political and military leadership. Here those in the role of mediator seek a common definition of the issues, propose processes for addressing those issues, and most important as the measure of success, nurture agreements between leaders on ways to move forward on those issues. A space is created through the relationship with the mediator for new, different, and hopefully more constructive interaction between these political adversaries. While this represents a transformative space that nudges adversaries toward change, the process is by definition exclusionary. It is based on the words, exchanges, perceptions, and dialogue of those who are connected to and through the intermediary space (Gopin, 2001). This mediation process can be communicated and connected to a wider affected population, but it remains an exclusionary space by its very nature.

Social spaces broaden and deepen the purpose of transformative intermediary design and action. By *broader* I mean the many sectors and points of interdependent interaction between social collectives affected by the division, which go well beyond what is usually included in a political negotiation. *Deeper* proposes that there are many people, relationships, and actions that need constructive, transformed, and sustained interaction well beyond a handful of key **(p.97)** leaders who sit at the highest level of visibility and political or military responsibility. I am not suggesting that political negotiation is not necessary. A web approach, however, does argue that political negotiation is not the primary nor the exclusive measure of the mediative capacity of a conflict-ridden society to promote the broader change processes that must take place. Sustained change, this approach posits, lies with the capacity to mobilize the web.

Change processes create a different horizon as the lens and goal of action. Whereas, typically, political mediation is considered in reference to specific agreements between

leaders, change processes engage the challenge of how societies, communities as a whole, initiate and sustain a journey of relationship-oriented transformation. As such, they suggest that the measure of success pertains less to the specifics of content and substantive outcome than to the quality of platforms and relational capacities that sustain processes over time, through the thick and thin, the ebb and flow of how societies move from interactions defined primarily by division and violence toward coexistence, cooperation, and constructive interdependence.

Intermediary impact has traditionally been understood as the level of success that the mediator's action has had on people's perceptions and understandings of each other in the conflict, the specific results produced by the process measured by the agreements reached. Mediative capacity uses a different lens, one that brings into focus change processes in strategically chosen relational and social spaces wherein increased capacity to interact constructively across the lines of conflict in those spaces creates and sustains movement in the society as a whole. The emphasis of the impact is on the strategic component, wherein the web is constructively affected because significant change happens in a specific set of social spaces and relationships, which brings about a broader transformation in the whole.

In summary, the perspective of mediative capacity focuses attention on introducing a quality of interaction into a strategic set of social spaces within the web of systemic relationships in order to promote constructive change processes in the conflict-affected setting as a whole.

Returning to our stories, this was precisely the role of the women in Wajir. Not mediators per se, they were more akin to social change strategists using strategic mediative behavior with a keen sense of relational space. With spider-like creativity and instinctive imagination, the women engaged their environment, locating connections among strategic groups and finding imaginative ways to get people moving within and between among those spaces, people who were not like them in their initial thinking nor situated in similar gender, status, economic, or political positions. In many instances, they recognized and then rebuilt the spaces, linking elders with district commissioners, women with police, youth with widows, markets with cattle rustlers. The forces that

perpetuated the war, that is, the forces of gravity against which they had to get people to move, were in many instances turned toward constructive momen **(p.98)** tum. Former fighters engaged elders to stop promoting clan fighting. Smaller clan elders appealed to the moral imperative of change in discussions with larger clan elders. Women created the space for men to meet, and some women even became elders. The Wajir Peace and Development Committee imbued each interaction and social space with this mediative attitude, from the markets where they created a network of people who assured access and respect, to how they engaged the traditional role of clan elders to move both individuals and the institution of eldership from one that incited war to one that nudged toward peace.

This was also the role of the peasants' movement in Rio Carare. They understood and envisioned themselves in a web of destructive patterns and relationships. They made the web clear and then imagined the spaces and steps necessary to redefine the setting. They approached the key individuals and groups whom they considered to be the connectors and decision makers. Their process of advocacy was permeated with a capacity for dialogue to create a mediative impact. They sought a change in the attitude and structures that promoted the war and formulated their strategy by finding where they had points of access, creating in the process new spaces, including one that even came to be called a *zone of respect and mutuality*. This was not the elimination of relationship. It was the redefinition of relationship, context, and the web of connections.

The results described in these settings of deep-rooted conflict suggest that people who come from different sides and locations within the space of the conflict transformed it by infusing the relational spaces with a new quality of interaction. It was the relational web that provided the point of access and the platform of change. These approaches created a different quality of interaction, significantly moving the cycle of conflict from one defined by blame, reactivity, division, and violence toward one of constructive dialogue. But rarely was it a negotiation of the type we have in mind when we speak of a mediation effort. The focus was not on producing agreements and solutions as the primary goal, though along the way agreements, informal and formal, emerged. The focus promoted relational spaces through which constructive,

nonviolent change processes were initiated and sustained. In short, the web approach, as articulated in these radically different settings, captured the full essence of the four disciplines that build the moral imagination: the capacity to imagine relationship, the insusal to fall into dualistic polarities, the creative act, and the willingness to risk. In each instance, at the level affecting a whole group, a community, even a region, our stories describe actions that transcended historical patterns of violence while still living in them.

When I reflect back on my peacebuilding experience, the most significant components that shaped processes, made a difference, and held up over longer periods of time consistently were those where a small but strategically connected set of people worked for change with an instinctive knack for web think **(p.99)** ing. The conciliation work in Nicaragua that helped shape the end of the war between the East Coast and the Sandinistas was a relational, web-based understanding of process. The work in Northern Ireland among former paramilitaries and cross-community groups, the infrastructure that helped to keep the process alive when all else seemed doomed, was built on hundreds of invisible, unmentioned sets of contacts, conversations, and coordinated processes, which understood and strategically built relational spaces. In both cases fewer than a dozen people made the key links and held the mostly informal processes of relational space-building together.

Let's look more closely at one specific context. In the early 1990s, I worked in support of the Life and Peace Institute's (Uppsala, Sweden) efforts to support peace initiatives in Somalia (Lederach, 1997; Heinrich, 1997; Paffenholz, 2003). Among the tracks contemplated in support of local and international peace efforts was one focused on the role of women and their mostly market-based associations. Many casual observers and more than a few professionals in international relations tended to consider this effort to be interesting, but peripheral to the actual forging of political peace agreements among faction leaders. It was, at best, seen as politically correct in order to create some kind of gender representation, but was largely considered as irrelevant in an otherwise patriarchal, nomadic society. Missed by these lenses however was the capacity to understand the potential of social webs, the anthropology of mediative capacity in the society, a capacity that requires us to look at resources that are natural,

in place, and effective but often overlooked because they do not enter the scope of what is seen typically by professional, mostly Western expectations. In this case, given women's location in the society through cross-clan marriages and their responsibilities for their families, women's association had unique characteristics providing extraordinary resources.

> 1. In terms of the cross-clan fighting, women through marriage experienced the war differently than men: Their fathers and brothers were often fighting their husbands and sons. In the long Somali tradition, women could travel from their clan of marriage to their clan of origin with greater safety and often were the informal diplomats opening the process of ceasefires and elders' conferences (Farah, 1993).
> 2. Women's responsibility for assuring the day-to-day survival of their families meant they were often located in the marketplaces, where they interacted with women of other clans. Markets became a de facto point of communication, exchange, and contact. Many conflicts started in markets, and many of the peace initiatives were ultimately related to the people, often women, who pursued ending the violence in order to get on with life as located in the market.
> 3. In markets, women often carried the money. In a country where central governance and central banking collapsed, the economy was **(p.100)** driven to informal mechanisms, and by default into the hands of those who worked extensively in the markets.

While not appearing in the chapter outlines of textbooks that are studied in formal diplomacy, in Somalia women were anthropologically resourceful for initiating ceasefires, sociologically located in the social boundary frontiers between fighting groups in the markets, and economically central in the ebb and flow of substantive resources. A web approach looks precisely for that kind of social space, one that has natural potential for mediative capacity and impact. In my opinion, while much of it has gone unnoticed in the long history of the Somali conflict, women have played a far more innovative, constructive, and transformative role in peacebuilding than the sum total of the formal peace conferences of militia

leaders. If we look at a country beset by more than a decade of violence and still unable to reconstitute a central government, many would legitimately ask, "But what good did it do?" My sense is the opposite. The miracle is that Somali society has not descended into worse chaos given the conditions that have had to be faced, particularly in Mogadishu and much of the south. While difficult to document fully, the prevention of even greater chaos and the processes that have reconstituted some order have been accomplished by the work of those who needed to survive and found a way to do so in spite of the odds.

Conclusion

In its everyday application, critical mass is understood as a strategy of making things happen by mobilizing large numbers to effect a desired change. Driven by political, business, and military concepts, we seem to have an image that this kind of strategic thinking translates into maximizing output. Success is measured in numbers and wins.

Constructive social change requires a different image of strategy. We need to generate a greater quality of process with the available, often few, resources. In peacebuilding, when we think strategy, we should think about what gives life and what keeps things alive. In the simplest terms, to be *strategic* requires that we create something beyond what exists from what is available but has exponential potential. In reference to social change, it means we must develop a capacity to recognize and build the locus of potential for change.

In sustaining peace, the critical yeast suggests that the measuring stick is not a question of quantity, as in the number of people. It is a question of the quality of relational spaces, intersections, and interactions that affect a social process beyond the numbers involved. To think quality requires that we think about the spaces, connections, and platforms that hold potential for affecting the whole.

Notes:

(1.) Portions of this chapter were first published in "Building Mediative Capacity in Deep-Rooted Conflict," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26(1) (Winter–Spring 2002): 91–101.

(2.) While these emerged over a number of conversations, I am indebted to a small handwritten note from Deborah Overholt after one of these lectures, which was very helpful in identifying several factors specific to yeast.

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