

Inner Work Makes Our Outer Work Massively More Effective – Kosmos Journal

By Scilla Elworthy, PhD

From half a century working with people at the very top of the decision-making tree on nuclear weapons, as well as those at grassroots levels risking their lives so that other people don't get killed, I have come to understand that those who use a regular practice of self-reflection or self-awareness are more effective than anyone else in changing the world.

It happened like this. In 1982, I was incensed by the fact that decisions on nuclear weapons were being made without parliamentary scrutiny. Working at the UN Second Special Session on Disarmament, I observed how the United Nations had no power to stop the acceleration of the nuclear arms race. So, I came home to Oxford and set up a research group to find out who actually makes decisions on nuclear weapons—physicists designing warheads, intelligence experts supplying rationale for new weapons, arms producers supplying those weapons, defense officials paying for them, military deploying them, and so on, in all the [then] nuclear weapons states.

Four years and a lot of hard work later, we were in a position to start trying to open a dialogue with these individuals. We got nowhere, all our invitations refused. At about this time I began to meditate, and with the help of a skilled Jungian, to try to answer the question that had been sitting in my consciousness for years: "Who am I? Why am I here?" In that process I learned to self reflect, to discover and examine my shadow sides, my anger, my fear....

Gradually, I realised that as long as I was projecting these emotions out onto those I wanted to talk with, they could feel my animosity. So I had to do the hard work, the work to face and address and transform the roots of those emotions, as best I could. I became a Quaker and was fortunate to be mentored by Adam Curle, one of the greatest peace mediators the world has known.

Bit by bit, we in the [Oxford Research Group](#) were able to convene face-to-face meetings between the top decision-makers in the US, the (then) Soviet Union, Britain, France, and even China. These meetings were below the radar, no press allowed, no communiques, and all based on steadily developing trust. We exchanged eight delegations with China, held meetings in London, Beijing, Oxford, Geneva, Moscow, and even set up meetings between Indian and Pakistani military in New Delhi. These discussions laid the basis of eventual formal agreements, and earned us the three nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize.

From 2002 on, we built up an organisation called [Peace Direct](#) to support those working at the sharp end of conflict—the locally-led groups working nonviolently to defuse armed violence before it erupted into war. Peace Direct now works with partners in 44 countries, assisting those who risk their lives to build peace.



Gulalai Ismail

Daily, we are amazed and humbled by those facing terror, who nevertheless *walk toward what they fear*. Gulalai Ismail is one of them. She comes from northwest Pakistan, one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman. At age 15, she started an organization called *Aware Girls* to enable females to go to school; Malala Yousefzai was shot in the head for doing just this. Gulalai, undeterred, has now trained 20 teams of young men and women in Pakistan and Afghanistan to prevent other young people joining extremist groups. Using the tools of listening and dialogue, they have reached and dissuaded more than 500 teenagers ‘at risk’ of becoming extremist.

This demonstrates the impact that ordinary people can have to prevent and resolve conflict, and help make a peaceful world possible. Theirs are skills of self-knowledge that we can all develop, that enable us to prevent conflict in the workplace, in the community, and in the family, too.

Every one of us has a shadow, which can consist of things that happened when we were young —deep hurts and past experiences that may be largely unconscious. If they remain unconscious, they can trigger unexpected behavior. When we are willing to look at our own shadow, we develop a capacity for internal enquiry that enables us to meet and even develop a dialogue with our inner critic, the nagging voice that wants to criticize us most of the time.

If you are already on the path of your own inner work, you will know how a regular practice of self-reflection can be incredibly useful—not just to you, but to the communities around you, as well as to the wider world.

When you’re suddenly faced with a crisis, maybe a family crisis or a knife fight in the street, presence is required, which means being able to be calm in the face of turbulence, upheaval, fear, and anger. While it’s comparatively easy to learn the skills to do that, these skills have to be practiced to become second nature. They require deep breathing as an automatic reaction, going into one’s heart instead of one’s head, because the head tends to panic but the heart knows how to understand what’s happening in terms of the psyche of the other people involved. Once you can be present to what’s happening in the person who is causing the violence, you have a much greater chance of meeting them rather than fighting them.

Einstein warned us that we cannot solve a problem using the consciousness that created it. Humanity now has the chance to evolve our consciousness and develop a different understanding of power, namely *power with* others. That means rebalancing feminine

intelligence with masculine. It means upgrading the value we ascribe to qualities like compassion, inclusivity, caring for the planet, outlawing armed violence, and replacing the use of force with mediation. It means insisting that women sit at all decision-making tables, at all levels, equally with men.

The age we are living through desperately needs people with these skills. To develop them requires that we wake up. Waking up means more than sitting quietly in meditation. It means going deeper into self-knowledge, into the value of integrating the wounded parts of yourself, and discovering how to take a stand for what you believe in.



Author chairing a meeting in Oxford, with a delegation of Chinese nuclear weapons decision-makers in 1997.

Learn More

The Business Plan for Peace Online Course teaches the skills, outlined above, that are essential to effective work in the world. During that online course, you can understand the roots of contemporary conflict in the world; observe how others prevent, contain, and end violent conflict; and learn to transform conflict with your colleagues and community. You can identify opportunities where you can best serve, using your particular skills and consciousness, modelling and teaching what you will have learned, and build a powerful and supportive network of like-minded leaders-of-change. <https://thebusinessplanforpeace.org/latest-news-the-12-part-online-course-is-about-to-start/>