

In January 2014, seven Emotional Imprint™ high school interns from Harlem, NYC led a forum: “Why Do We Have War and What Can Our Generation Do About It?”

They interviewed Dr. Vamik D. Volkan, a four-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee who has led mediation efforts on the world stage. He is globally renowned for his work on the dynamics of prejudice, ethnic conflict and the forces that lead to war.

Dr. Alice Maher: So they're here because they have the opportunity to meet someone who's worked on the world stage, mediating between groups of people that go to war and trying to understand why that happens. I tell them all the time that their generation is going to be the one that has to solve this problem because our generations, no matter how hard we try to teach our children to be good people, to understand, to not fight, we can't help it, we just go to war.

Uli: I wanted to know, why do you believe that people go to war?

Dr. Volkan: Wow. (laugh) First of all I'm so happy to be here with young people. I love young people. I think that's our future. A new civilization is coming and I'll be long gone, and hopefully they will pay attention to human psychology because nowadays you've got all these little things where you push buttons and there's globalization and everything is so fast, but human nature doesn't change much. So allow me to answer your question. I don't have one sentence to answer you. When a lion gets hungry, who does she kill, or he kill? Do you know who they kill? Do they kill another lion? They go and kill a deer or something like that. Only chimpanzees do like human beings' kind of wars. So the idea is that something happened during the evolution of our minds that... I'm old but not as old as the beginning of human development... I think we developed like little neighbors, and we fought for women, food and so on, and as our minds got better we put emotions in it, our honor, our prestige, and so on and so on. And during this time we also learned how to kill the other in order to keep our group fed, or later on more powerful, more honorable, more exceptional.

Trevor: So are you saying it's human nature to fight and go to war?

Dr. Volkan: It is part of human nature, yes. But the idea is that we human beings have fought... You read history books, don't you? Was there any time that they did not have wars?

Students: No

Dr. Volkan: Always we had wars. So I'm not suggesting to make it pessimistic but... the whole idea is... somewhere I wrote in another setting to one of you... If you talk, you don't kill. See, if I'm talking to you and I, never mind if I'm talking to you with love or with hate, but excitedly I'm talking to you, I don't want to lose you. I'll be lonely! But if I don't talk then worse things can happen.

Kiran: If you think about it, you kill, and then you don't talk, but then you talk and then you don't kill.

Psychology of Borders

Trevor: So are you saying that if humans would talk to each other or be more close with each other,

then war would be less likely to start?

Dr. Volkan: I didn't say be close to each other; I said talk to each other. Let's say that your large group and my large group have been fighting for years, and so on. So representatives of your large group and my large group get together. I'm talking about the only type that I know of, there's a third party, a neutral party, that's helping them to talk. Now what happened in the world since we started paying attention to this, they have conflict resolution centers everywhere. You finish psychological graduation and you open conflict resolutions center. In our days it was forbidden to say we resolve conflicts. You don't resolve conflicts. Conflicts are part of human nature. So why might you never do conflict resolution? We never gave advice to these people; we only helped them to talk. And the other mistake is this, coming to your "being close" business. In order to stop wars, don't force fighting people to be close and be lovey-dovey. That's crazy. If you and lets say you are fighting for so long and I come and say to you oh, be lovey-dovey, that doesn't work. So we learn a great deal about the psychology of borders. You have to keep the border. There are two principles that you don't change if you're going to make peace. One, thou shalt not be exactly the same as your enemy; then you lose your identity. And have a psychological border between the two of you so you can talk, but you keep your identity and you keep your identity. But you don't have to like each other all the way and be lovey-dovey. So thank you for saying that so I can tell you this... You are laughing. I think something came to your mind.

Caleb: I think war happens because people want power; they want to change something. So they try to take over to change it in their way; so that's what I think.

Dr. Volkan: OK, what you say in a general way is correct, obviously. Let me just make an analogy so that it may be easier for us to play with it, okay? Let's say that there's the A group and B group, and they are neighbors. You see the psychology of war is the psychology of neighbors, and now with globalization everybody is a neighbor. You imagine two huge tents and under each tent different ethnic groups or racial groups or ideological groups live. Each tent has different symbols of their large group. Can you imagine that? You paint on it, like if something horrible happened to your ancestors, you don't forget that because it's hard to mourn when somebody does something to you real bad for years and years, and even if they stop doing it that is your ancestors' history, that belongs to you, you paint that, mostly historical things, cultural things, religious things, and the other guys have different things that they paint. So two tents stand side by side, and what keeps the tents straight up?

Students: People?

Dr. Vokan: Pole. Who's the pole in the United States right now?

Students: The president?

Dr. Volkan: Of course. We also have leaders and so on, and so leader holds this tent, and of course in America we are more democratic than maybe a dictator and so on, and so with he or she, personality plays a role, whatever propoganda comes from there, makes these paintings change and so on, or you want people under one tent they feel like they want to feel superior or something or angry for something, they take mud and throw it at the other one. So there are all kinds of processes, especially when tents shake, meaning in plain English a situation occurs and they say, who are we now? Who are we now? When the tent shakes, and then you want to throw unwanted things onto the other one and you shake your tent and then wars occur.

Group Identity

Kiran: What's the difference between having a group identity where you have your own ethnic group, and then you have your own different cultures, you have your own different beliefs, but then where's your own identity, what's the difference?

Dr. Volkan: Hah, wonderful! Under certain circumstances you function under large group psychology. For example, terrorists. As an individual psychology it may be impossible for you to be a terrorist, okay? But let's say you are humiliated, your parents killed in front of you, or because of your own development you had certain kind of cracks in your individual identity. I take you, I go around and I say hah, that's a good candidate. I come and, in the past what they used to do, put you to school. I tell you you should not have any sexual thoughts. I tell you read this thing, again and again these religious passages. I tell you that when you die you will meet mates after you die, and I make pictures of you like football heroes or basketball heroes, and in fact when you commit suicide and blow up something there's a wedding ceremony, see? So then I make you an object of your large group though you act individually, and as the tent shakes I don't even need to teach you these things, because some people for their own reasons who have cracks in their own identity, they pull down the canvas of this ethnic tent and they wear it, so they function under large group psychology. Under large group psychology the #1 thing is you do whatever you want to do to bring attention to your large group identity and protect it and maintain it, see? It is not individual identity. So there are many people who pull down large group identity. Not all of them become terrorists. So the issue is when you bring any representatives together, even big shots like generals and all that stuff, they become right away under the influence of their large group psychology. So in official getting together they have rules and regulations and they are assigned to their large groups. Unofficially we would bring them together and give them individual identities so they could have much realistic discussions. So we are using psychology to make more realistic discussions.

Blind Trust

Cheyenne: In your opinion, what's the basic difference between blind trust and basic trust?

Dr. Volkan: Let me explain to you basic trust. Imagine yourself as a two year old kid, and your father puts you on the mantle and stands in front of you and says to you my little girl, jump, I'll hold you. And you trust your father and you jump and he holds you and you develop basic trust. You trust your daddy so you know how to trust yourself. But your daddy says to you "jump," and you jump and you fall, and he says, "Ah hah, see, don't trust everybody. I have taught you something," you don't learn basic trust. As you trust people who care for you, then you know you love yourself and you trust yourself. In large groups and nations too, leaders if they explain and are honest then you trust them and you say I'll go along with my group and so on. But some of the leaders do like the daddy who doesn't hold you, then basic trust gets lost in the country and the country becomes very, very fragmented. And this happened. Sept 11th is a symbol of the turning point that basic trust has been lost in the whole world. For example if I am going to fly to Washington I have to go through all this security. I mean, when I was your age my friend would come all the way with me to the airplane and then say goodbye to me at the airplane and leave me at the airplane. See? Basic trust has been lost, and that is also new civilization. Does that answer your question?

Trevor: As we are like the new generation, how could we prevent future wars?

Dr. Volkan: Yes. We are entering into... whether you are not aware of it, but I am aware of it... you are entering into a brand new civilization – a brand new civilization which I will not really know. What

is it? It has two aspects of it. One is the incredible technology, incredible technology. Everything is a push button. I heard the other day that if I order a book a little plane will come and drop the book. I will be dead by the time that happens but it may happen. I cannot even imagine the technology, that's one thing, so it's changing human nature, communication, that's one thing. The other one is called globalization. Economically, who runs the world now? Of course still we have nations and presidents and so on, and ambassadors... Come on, who needs an ambassador? Let's say I am the president and you are the president and I pick up the phone, push a button and talk to you, we are two leaders, who needs ambassadors, you know what I mean? But we have not caught up with the human nature, because human nature cannot be push button, and that has been the biggest problem we are facing. So if you are going to be useful, tell people hey, technology changed us, globalization changed us, but we are still human beings, we have all these emotions, we have , whatever you did, let's pay attention to it. Diplomacy will change. Sometimes in certain places, especially after terrorism, official diplomacy is useless. When two countries are combined economically with big giant economic power, who is controlling the relationship? So what I'm telling you young people while you are getting into this new civilization, don't forget human nature.

Can basic trust be regained in our post- 9/11 society?

Trevor: Earlier you stated that all basic trust in the world was lost after Sept 11. But do you think that trust could be regained?

Dr. Volkan: Yes. We need a leader, and sometimes we do have a leader, but we need to supply environment enough support for leaders to support that for us. We have different kinds of world perceptions, but politics are very difficult, because politics means we have to do all kinds of things to stay in power, and big things happen, the so called Arab Spring and revolutions and so on. However, after revolutions there are two kinds of revolutions. One is you do a revolution and you go to new things. What happened in fact that even though there were people like that in the Arab spring when revolutions occurred, they wanted to go to familiar things. Familiar things, they regressed when they went back they picked up what was from in the past, and look at what happened for example in Egypt. It became one who went back and one who wanted to go forward, but both sides are aggressive. There was an article in the New York Times the other day saying Morsi was elected as a democratic person and then the military came but they lost democracy. Is it true? It is one sided. Revolution also brought regression and army trying to make progression but they cannot do it without aggression so both sides are in a mess. So we also need to understand what happens after revolutions. Not each revolution is good. Some brings more problems.

Trevor: So you saying get them talking, as like getting different people that have issues with each other, get them talking?

Dr. Volkan: Are you saying individual or worldwide?

Trevor: Worldwide. Wouldn't you think that would be a bad idea? What happens if you get violent, and won't things be said that can't be taken back? So wouldn't you think that would be a bad idea?

Dr. Volkan: I say nasty things about you and I don't ask for your forgiveness?

Trevor: Yeah, stuff like that.

Dr. Volkan: Yes, of course it will happen. All those complications will happen. But still you will find

some people in those large groups that will be able to talk.

Trevor: So you think there will always be a resolution if you do that?

Dr. Volkan: Taming. Resolution takes place as a process. When you tame it, and then new leaders come, new things happen.

Following their interview with Dr. Volkan, the Emotional Imprint™ interns reflected on the conversation.

Uli: I hope the world to be or the new generation to be more peaceful than it is now, because everything is changing and there's a lot more violence I believe.

Cheyenne: Like when we were growing up we always would play outside, we would actually communicate with each other, but now everybody is on their phones, they don't really want to talk any more.

Kiran: The thing about technology is, how do I put this in perspective? It's a very complicated relationship, okay? Technology can benefit us in terms of being connected, but if we're talking about someone behind their back it can kind of take things out of context that we didn't really mean and that leads to more problems happening. So it can go either way, it can be positive or it can be negative, it depends on how you deal with it. It's better honestly for me, technology is good but it's better for you to talk to your friends about your feelings about certain situations because otherwise they might take things out of context and, you know, it's not good, it spreads a lot of rumors.

Cheyenne: I agree with Kiran on one hand, but on the other hand I don't because like you said if you don't like the person and you talk face to face a lot of stuff might happen that shouldn't happen. So it's like you should talk to them face to face to get your feelings out, but then you should also watch what you say while you're talking to them.

Trevor: I have to agree with Cheyenne with that statement, but one thing I'd like to add onto it that like if you're talking to them and one of you says you don't like them or they don't like you or whatever, then one of you has to be the mature person and be like I get it, you don't like me, whatever, but I don't want to have issues or problems, and try to find resolution.

Uli: But I don't think that would happen because no one is going to be mature enough to try to stop the conflict if they feel wronged by that person or they're both on opposite sides; they're just going to keep fighting.

Trevor: And that's how wars happen and that's how fights, things can break out.

Uli: Because people don't know how to communicate.

Trevor: And that's a problem.

Samia: I think that we can vocally speak out about these issues and campaign things and stuff like that.

Caleb: I think we can spread it around and make it so like people know about it more.

Samia: Like Caleb was saying to speak out, and we can also bring it to Squash and have everybody try to get along even if you don't really like each other, like try to be cordial and not have any conflicts at Squash.

Cheyenne: You can try to be the mediator of stuff, try to make everybody speak and get their problems out.

Trevor: What I take out of this is that if I have an issue or a problem with someone I'll try to speak verbally with them and I will try to like tell people that it's better to talk about your problem before reacting because stuff like that cause real problems and people wind up getting hurt.

Kiran: What I'm thinking is that why don't we take, instead of arguing with each other why can't we actually understand people... Why don't we take empathy? Why don't we put ourselves in people's shoes before we stop arguing? That's basically the point of this, right?, basically to find other people's perspectives. So why don't we start doing that first, and then later that can be the first initial steps for peace. That's what I think.