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BRIDGING POLARISED COMMUNITIES WITH LEWIS DEEP DEMOCRACY

MYRNA LEWIS*

Abstract

Lewis Deep Democracy (LDD) is a practical and inclusive methodology designed to facilitate decision-making and conflict resolution by ensuring all voices are heard. Recognising that differences of opinion are inevitable, LDD provides tools to address underlying tensions and potential conflicts. Developed over 30 years ago in South Africa, LDD was initially applied to resolve racial tensions during the country's transition from Apartheid. Since then, it has expanded globally, with over 100 instructors applying the methodology across diverse settings, from corporate boardrooms to educational institutions.

This paper investigates the application of LDD through two case studies: one in South Africa, addressing racial and ethnic tensions within a school environment, and another in Germany, promoting dialogue on Jewish-German relations. The discussion also explores the psychological foundations of the method, drawing from quantum physics and highlighting the significance of emotional intelligence in conflict transformation. LDD provides a structured approach to nurturing dialogue, inclusivity, and social healing.

I INTRODUCTION

A *Background*

Lewis Deep Democracy (LDD) is a practical and pragmatic method for enabling all voices to be heard in processes of decision-making and conflict resolution. Differences of opinion are inevitable, and LDD provides tools to resolve the tension that results from differences of opinion, as well as the conflict that may arise from unresolved tension.

I developed the method along with my late husband Greg Lewis more than 30 years ago when we were invited to work with one of South Africa's largest employers to help resolve racial tensions as South Africa transitioned from

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Apartheid to its new dispensation. Knowledge and use of the LDD method has grown and developed. It is now taught and used on every continent. More than 100 instructors teach the methodology, and people from all walks of life, from boardrooms to classrooms, are being exposed to it (Nutton et al., 2024; Erfan, 2009; see also Lewis Deep Democracy, n.d.).¹ The method will be described through two cases that have been chosen out of many to demonstrate how it can be used when there is very tense conflict between the participants. The remainder of the paper will describe the psychological underpinnings of the method.

B *The LDD Conflict Resolution Method in Action*

1 *Case Study 1*

1. Participants and Setting

This case study took place in 2014. The African National Congress was in power, and there was a strong affirmative action policy to promote Black (African) people. I was approached by the newly elected headmaster of a school to intervene in a tense situation his school was facing.

South Africa lives up to its name of being a Rainbow Nation. There are many people of colour, and unlike other countries in the world, South Africa tends to distinguish the many different races by naming the person by colour: natural-born Africans in the country are called Black. People of mixed race are called Coloured, Caucasian people are called White, and so forth. Following the labelling by colour, there are varied ethnic groups; the predominant ethnic groups are the Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho. These ethnic groups are regionally located in the country, and there are political divides between them. The Cape region is predominantly Xhosa.

The affirmative action policy at the time tended to undermine the people of colour, people from mixed marriages and people who had immigrated to the country in the early 20th century. The Coloured population is large and dominant in the Western Cape, where this case study took place. The affirmative action policy tended to add to the general difficult challenges and tensions that South Africa faced. The underlying issues of ethnicity, South Africa's major challenge, began surfacing.

The school was facing significant challenges due to internal tensions. A newly appointed Black headmaster struggled to foster unity among the diverse staff. The majority of the staff were Coloured, and under the previous Coloured headmaster, there had been strong expectations that a senior Coloured staff member would be appointed as his successor. However, due to the affirmative action policy, a Black headmaster was chosen instead. This decision exacerbated existing racial and ethnic divisions among the staff, intensifying tensions to the point where the school's future was at risk. The conflict threatened the closure of the school, a vital resource for the

¹ See also: <https://www.lewisdeepdemocracy.com/case-studies-articles>

community. This institution served as a safe house school, catering to delinquent children by providing both education and hostel facilities. Unlike the standard staff-to-student ratio of 1:50, this school maintained a significantly lower ratio of 1:5.

I agreed to facilitate a session alongside a male colleague. I am a white South African woman, and my colleague is a white South African man. We were the only white people in the room, and I was the only female. At that time, being a woman in South Africa's male-dominated environment, particularly in this setting, was not an advantage. Additionally, both of us, as white facilitators, symbolised the apartheid-era oppressors, which heightened the tension in the room. However, the acceptance of our presence was a testament to the methodology, the desperate need of the headmaster, and the failure of other approaches.

All staff members were present, including the principal, teachers, hostel managers, administrative staff, and cleaning personnel. While there were differences in rank, the methodology ensured that hierarchy did not significantly affect the process. The staff had been instructed to attend and were clearly briefed. A day during the holiday period had been specifically chosen for this session. The facilitation took place in the school hall—a large space that easily accommodated everyone, with an entrance vestibule providing a designated waiting area.

Following a brief introduction by the headmaster, I explained the facilitation process. I used the well-known Freudian iceberg analogy to illustrate human consciousness. I explained that, according to Freud, the area of consciousness above the waterline is far smaller than the unconscious area below. Most of our behaviour is driven by unconscious processes. The same concept applies to groups: what is visible and acknowledged above the waterline represents the conscious aspects, whereas the submerged portion signifies underlying tensions, unspoken issues, and exclusion from decision-making.

In autocratic environments, the waterline remains high, as fewer people participate in decision-making, and their perspectives and wisdom are ignored. Below the waterline, resentment builds. Our role as facilitators was to help lower the waterline, increasing awareness and inclusion, allowing the group to make better-informed, collective decisions.

I clarified that we would be using unconventional techniques but would remain transparent about each method's purpose and obtain consent before proceeding. This approach fostered trust and ensured a safe discussion environment.

2. Check-In: Soft Shoe Shuffle and Amplification

We began with a check-in using a Soft Shoe Shuffle (Dynamic Dialogue) technique, combined with Amplification. Check-ins are vital in LDD as they allow everyone to be seen and heard. Given the large group size, we structured the check-in around three key questions:

- How were they arriving today?

- Did they truly want to be there? (Inviting the “No” voice upfront fosters safety for honest expression.)
- What were the key issues as they saw them?

We explained the Dynamic Dialogue/Soft Shoe Shuffle process and then introduced Amplification.

Dynamic Dialogue/Soft Shoe Shuffle is an LDD tool designed to foster open expression by allowing participants to physically position themselves in agreement or disagreement with different viewpoints. The method enables people who are usually silent to have a “voice” by virtue of them moving to stand alongside the positions or opinions that they agree with and to move away when they don’t agree. This method is very useful when the group is large as it allows all to be involved. It is a valuable method in communities that have been silenced and/or are fearful of having a voice.

With Amplification, the facilitator stands beside the speaker and rephrases their statement to remove politeness, making it more direct and exaggerated. This approach ensures clarity and encourages participants to correct any misrepresentations, facilitating a more open group dialogue. Most participants appreciate the Amplification process as they feel heard and recognised in situations where often they are negated and not seen.

After an initial feeling of adaptation and a little discomfort, the participants relaxed and began to participate fully in the Soft Shoe Shuffle. Resentment regarding the principal’s appointment surfaced and was openly addressed.

3. Cycling and Edge Behaviour

Early in the session, we observed the phenomenon of Cycling—where a group repeats issues without resolution. Cycling indicates that unconscious material is surfacing. We paused and asked participants how they felt, inviting a show of hands for those experiencing tiredness, boredom, frustration, irritation, physical discomfort, or emotional distress. Most people related to at least one of these reactions.

Cycling and Edge Behaviour indicate underlying tensions between different viewpoints. LDD leans into these tensions, uncovering the wisdom beneath conflicting perspectives. At this point, we introduced the next step, engaging in conflict resolution using LDD’s four-step process:

1. Establishing safety rules.
2. Expressing both sides.
3. Identifying what “hit home”.
4. Reaching a decision.

Step 1: Establishing Safety Rules

Creating safety rules turned out to be the biggest challenge. The men in the room, many of whom were physically imposing and accustomed to resolving conflicts through violence, were armed. It took over two hours to agree on the safety rules.

Each safety rule was voted on individually. If there were dissenting voices, we asked what they needed to feel comfortable proceeding. If a rule failed to gain sufficient support, we worked collaboratively to adjust it. A key tenet of LDD is acknowledging that individuals perceive the world differently, and while each person's perspective is valid, no one holds a monopoly on the truth.

To create a secure space, the men disarmed in the vestibule, placing knives, knobkerries, and other weapons on a table outside. Nearly all had been carrying weapons. They also agreed not to trip, knock, or physically harm one another while moving across the room.

Once the safety rules were established, each participant signed the document in blood, pricking their fingers as a symbolic commitment—an extraordinary achievement in itself.

Step 2: Expressing Both Sides

The main issue that had surfaced was lack of fairness and lack of safety. We set up two polarities: "The space is safe" and "The space is unsafe." Participants stood on the side they identified with most.

I encouraged them to notice how standing on one side strengthened their identification with that perspective. To facilitate transformation, they needed to lessen this attachment and speak from both sides. They agreed, and we proceeded with Step 2.

Participants first expressed their views and emotions while standing on their chosen side. Then, they switched to the opposite side and did the same from that perspective. This process allowed them to experience both sides within themselves.

For this step to be effective, it was crucial to maintain the structure and the safety rules that had been agreed to. Participants were not allowed to interrupt one another and had to listen to both sides. The facilitator used Amplification when reflecting participants' statements to enhance clarity and engagement.

Step 3: What Hit Home

After expressing frustration and anger, the men entered a calmer state. At this point, they reflected on what "hit home"—a statement or realisation that evoked a strong emotional response or new awareness. This introspection is critical for personal and group transformation.

Step 4: The Decision

By the end of the process, the group reached key agreements:

- They would work together in the future.
- Cooperation would improve.
- Issues would be addressed directly, with inclusive decision-making.
- Instead of sabotaging or threatening the new headmaster, they would collaborate as a group.

They expressed a desire to learn and use the LDD method, particularly the conflict resolution approach, in their meetings.

4. Reflections

Facilitating this session was a profound experience, highlighting the power of LDD in transforming deeply entrenched conflicts. By creating a safe space, engaging in structured dialogue, and addressing tensions head-on, the group was able to shift from hostility to cooperation—an outcome that had previously seemed unattainable.

2 Case Study 2

1. Participants and Setting

On June 9, 2024, I led a significant and sensitive workshop in Hamburg, Germany, addressing the complexities of Jewish-German relationships in the post-Holocaust era. For years, during my travels to Germany, there had been a recurring request for a deeper exploration of this topic—one often considered taboo. The decision to hold the workshop was made months before October 7, 2023 but as geopolitical events unfolded and Germany's political response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict intensified, we revisited whether it was safe and appropriate to proceed. Applying the principles of LDD we debated the risks and ultimately agreed that if this methodology could facilitate meaningful discussions, then the workshop should go ahead.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, participation was by invitation only, with each individual personally screened for suitability. It was made clear from the outset that the workshop would not focus on contemporary geopolitical issues but rather on the nuanced and often unspoken dynamics between Jewish and German identities in present-day Germany.

Nine people attended, including two facilitators. One, a German resident of Hamburg, hosted the event in her home—a location with its own layered history. I, as a Jewish facilitator, do not reside in Germany, which brought another perspective to the space. The seven participants comprised three Jewish individuals who had lived in Germany for many years and four Germans. They spanned diverse age groups, from a participant in their early 20s to others in their 40s and several in their 70s.

2. Opening and Check-In

The workshop commenced with a guided meditation, helping participants center themselves and reflect on their motivations for attending. This was followed by an extended LDD-style check-in, where each person had uninterrupted space to share their thoughts and feelings. The check-in alone proved to be profoundly revealing and healing.

Jewish Participants' Reflections

- One participant, born in post-war Germany to Hungarian Jewish survivors, spoke of his family's belief that, in the wake of Germany's wartime defeat and expressed remorse, the country would be a more accepting place for Jews. However, he had spent his life feeling

uncomfortable identifying as Jewish, often encountering awkward silences when the topic arose.

- Another shared that his father, a champion gymnast, had been removed from his team due to being Jewish. He survived the war by hiding in rural areas and later urged his son to conceal his Jewish identity. The participant described a lifelong struggle with this imposed invisibility.
- The third Jewish participant, an Israeli-born academic, was a grandchild of Holocaust survivors. He left Israel as a young adult, disillusioned by what he saw as an overemphasis on victimhood, and settled in Germany. His presence in the workshop was part of his effort to navigate this complex identity.

German Participants' Reflections

- One man described his father as a Nazi and shared his enduring struggle with guilt and shame over his father's role in the war.
- All German participants had been extensively educated on the Holocaust, many having visited concentration camps as schoolchildren. One journalist recounted how, during such a visit, some of her classmates had laughed, a reaction she found deeply disturbing.
- Another participant, inspired by *The Diary of Anne Frank*, had spent her adolescence yearning to embody Anne's resilience and morality.
- A common theme among the Germans was the difficulty in responding to Jewish identity in everyday conversations—acknowledging that they often felt guilt-ridden, uncertain, and awkward, leading to uncomfortable silences.

3. Dynamic Dialogue and Emotional Breakthroughs

Following the check-in, the group engaged in a Dynamic Dialogue. Amplification was used and this enabled clarity and the group to explore issues in more detail. The initial discussion centered around semantics of identity and nationality—a common safe zone before deeper issues emerged.

Tensions heightened when a German woman suddenly cried out that the entire discussion felt irrelevant compared to the immense pain she was experiencing. She broke down sobbing. The group instinctively withdrew from her, creating distance. A young Israeli participant questioned her reaction, appearing dismissive and even scornful. His response triggered an angry response from the older Jewish man, who demanded that the young man be more respectful, apologise to the woman and lessen his rude and dismissive tone. The young man in turn became angry and refused. Tensions in the room heightened and people tended to be stuck, withdrawn, silenced, and confused.

Recognising the participants' shock, I suggested a moment for self-reflection—encouraging them to tune into their bodily sensations and explore their emotional responses. The group agreed, and we moved outside to

engage in an individual exercise of introspection. The insights gained were profound. A few examples included:

- A Jewish participant realised that his instinctive reaction was to reach for his phone—a lifelong habit of distraction from painful emotions. He recognised the need for deeper, intentional healing.
- The son of a Nazi officer, overwhelmed by exhaustion, fell asleep briefly and had a deeply symbolic and healing dream, which resonated with other participants.
- The woman who had broken down continued to experience intense physical pain, likening it to a knife in her heart. Through breathing and mindfulness, she began to process this pain rather than resist it.

4. Resolution and Closing

The sharing of their personal reflections led to a renewed sense of connection within the group. We then revisited the earlier conflict between the older Jewish participant and the young Israeli. The latter, while initially resistant, agreed to engage in further discussion, provided the group was willing to continue exploring the difficult emotions that had surfaced. The group consented, demonstrating their collective commitment to the process.

Through the LDD four-step conflict method (described in Case 1), the two participants were able to acknowledge their deeper awareness. The older man acknowledged that he was jealous of the young Israeli's life of being able to openly live his Jewish identity. The young man admitted to being rude and dismissive. He recognised that his lack of compassion towards the woman stemmed from his own lack of compassion for himself and his family of Holocaust survivors.

Based on these realisations, they agreed that both would try to have more compassion for their own trauma and that they would, in the future, own and openly address their Jewish identity. Their fellow Germans' discomfort would no longer hinder them, and it was an issue for the Germans themselves to address, not their issue to resolve. The understandings and decisions were shared with the group, and everyone agreed with the outcome.

Though time was limited, the workshop concluded with a palpable sense of healing and transformation. Participants left with deeper awareness, not just of historical trauma, but of the ways it manifests in present-day relationships and conversations.

It is interesting to note that the resolution of this deep racial conflict is similar to the resolutions found in racial conflicts in North America, where Indigenous people and people of colour have worked on their own issues amongst themselves. The healing and improved way forward comes from within that group, while the white folk, similar to the Germans in this small group, are asked to address their own issues of guilt independently. They should not expect Indigenous people or people of colour to limit or deny themselves due to the guilt, pain, and failure of white persons to acknowledge their racist roles and deal with and resolve their own sense of guilt.

II THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The LDD method is based on Arnold Mindell's Process-Oriented Psychology (Mindell, 2014/1995, 2019/1989; see also Lewis, 2008). Mindell, a physicist and Jungian analyst, has laid the groundwork for a new psychology that is influenced by the quantum/Einsteinian worldview, which is different from most contemporary psychology, which is still dominated by the Newtonian worldview. In the following sections I outline three key ways that the quantum/Einsteinian lens informs LDD understandings of human behaviour.

A *All of Life is Made up of Energy and is Connected Through an Energetic Field.*

Although we as human beings look like we are separate and seem to operate very independently, we are at an unconscious level affected by the energetic field. We may not always be aware of it, but we can sense the energetic field. For example, when you go to a funeral, even if you did not know the person, you will feel sad; when you go to a wedding, you, alongside everyone there, will feel a sense of joy. When you attend a rugby, soccer, football or tennis match, the energy field will affect you even if you don't know much about the sport.

Today, we are living in the energy of wars close to home: the Israeli-Palestinian war and the war in Ukraine. No matter where we live, all of us are aware of and in some way affected by the wars.

You can sense the energy field more personally when you or people close to you stop talking to one another. Most of us have at least one person in our family, friendship group or workplace with whom we have stopped speaking. Think for a moment about the person you have stopped speaking to. What has happened due to the breakdown of this relationship? What has been the amount of pain, hurt, frustration, and upset created in your life through the breakdown of that relationship? And how have other people been affected? These feelings don't suddenly disappear but rather become like a form of pollution affecting your personal field.

The added tension in the energetic field makes it fertile ground for polarisation. Our unresolved tensions, in part, lead us easily to being persuaded by strong voices in politics, media and social media, to take sides and join polarities. Joining these "sides" makes us feel part of a group and justifies our behaviour. Once caught in strong polarities, we stop listening to other people's views. Eventually, the polarisation escalates and becomes conflictual, and often, violence and war result.

B *Tension and Conflict are Doorways to Transformation*

We recognise how our observations affect the energetic field through this quantum lens. However, we can look at relationship patterns. One important relationship pattern is between transformation and chaos. Chaos in most human behaviour occurs when we do not know what is happening and feel

out of control and insecure. Tension and conflict lead and add to our feelings of being out of control. The feelings are chaotic. Therefore, we can redefine tension and conflict as a doorway to transformation. I know this may sound strange, especially when you are in an argument with your partner. You don't feel like turning around and saying, "Thank you, honey, for this opportunity to transform". Instead, we respond to feelings of anger, and rage and shout back. However, if we can slow down at this stage and utilise tension and conflict resolution methodologies, we will uncover that conflict is a growth path.

A key challenge many of us face as today's adults is that we have never been taught how to manage tension or conflict. Like most of life's essential lessons, this lesson is left to those involved in socialising us—our parents, significant others and the school system. Most of these role models were not good at resolving tension themselves, and in some cases, their lack of ability led to violence, resulting in trauma for many of us. The predominant coping mechanism when faced with tension is for people to withdraw.

We urgently need to change our attitude towards tension and conflict, thereby releasing the transformation potential which is inherent in the tension. The way is to teach people, particularly children and adults of tomorrow, how to have a voice, how to recognise that different opinions can lead to tension, and how to resolve the tension. Successful resolutions allow us to stay in a relationship and discover innovative and creative solutions. They also deepen our understanding of ourselves and others and improve collaboration.

C *We Are Part of Fractal Patterns*

A photograph is a symbolic representation of Newtonian thinking. A photograph is made up of many independent pixels close together. If you were to cut a piece of the photograph, you would only have that piece. The quantum/Einsteinian view of the picture would be made up of refracted light patterns. If we were to look at a picture made up of refracted light patterns, it would form a holographic picture, which is three-dimensional. If you were to cut a piece of the picture, you would get a fractal pattern of the whole picture. The fractal pattern would not be exactly the same but would reflect textures of the whole image. Viewing the world from this lens of fractal patterns has many consequences for human behaviour and substantiates that transformation can occur when there is tension and conflict.

Taking Freud's analogy of the human psyche being like icebergs and then drawing several people using the icebergs to represent each person, we can see that below the waterline, they are connected through frozen water and, at a deeper level, just water. The fractal pattern suggests that each of us, at an unconscious level, has all parts in us. Christ's quote, "You are part of the world, and the world is in you," illustrates this view. This means that if there is racism in the world, there will be a racist part in each one of us. The part may not be exactly the same as that in the person that we identify as racist, but we will have a texture or resemblance to this part. For example, many

people on the left in Europe today don't want to talk or communicate with people on the far right. By not wanting to communicate with these people, they are, in texture, being “racist” themselves. If we do not acknowledge the parts because we don't like them in ourselves or are frightened of them or, more often are not even aware that they are there, we will project them onto others.

What is needed is a resolution method that enables us to lower the water line, own the part that we are projecting onto others, discover more about our true nature, and mature. This will allow us at the same time to stay in relationship with the other(s) and find new and innovative solutions to conflict. In lowering the water line, transformation is taking place at all levels. The individual is gaining awareness and owning their projected parts. Plus, people are empowered through moving beyond their own rigid roles. The relationship between people is saved, bonds are strengthened and they can gain greater respect and understanding for the other. The group becomes increasingly functional and innovative beyond the rigid roles that existed in the group and limited people. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how raising the waterline reveals those parts that we project onto others.

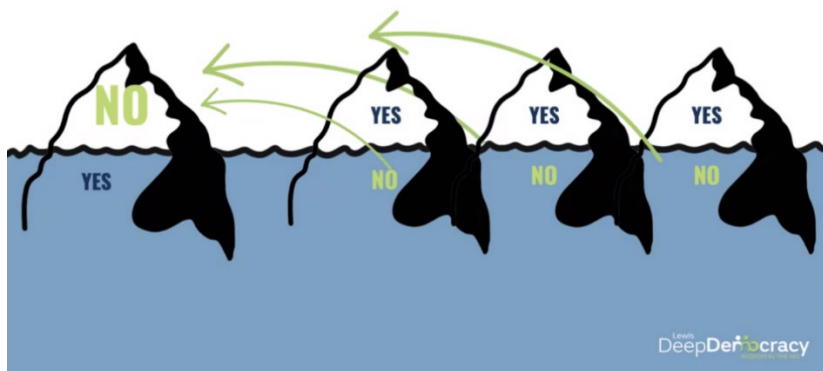


Figure 1: Projecting hidden and unacknowledged parts onto others

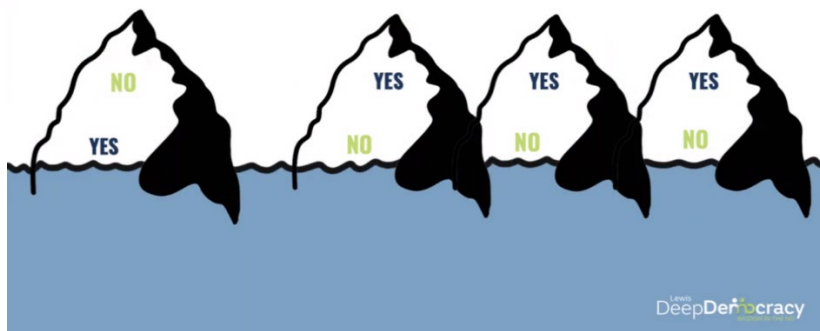


Figure 2: Lowering the water line increases awareness and ownership of hidden and projected parts

In LDD, we recognise that tension and conflict are emotionally based and are often irrational and, as such, cannot be approached with a rational tool set or with the lack of emotion which many other conflict resolution methods suggest. For example, consider the awareness that the older Israeli person gained in Case Study 2. Due to his sensitivity to the German people's reaction to him being Jewish, he tended not to own or easily talk about his Jewish identity. Through the LDD process, he became aware of his “stuckness” and clearly chose to no longer limit his acknowledgement of his identity, letting the German people cope with their own sense of guilt. Only through the emotional experience can the participants truly own their projections and resolve the tension. If the chaotic and strong emotions are not heard and allowed to be voiced, the method used will tend to plaster over the conflict. Under the plaster, the conflict will, like an undetected cancer, continue to grow and rot the system. The LDD tools are all designed to enable the lowering of the waterline.

D Skill Training

Learning the basic LDD toolkit is easily achieved through online training. One does not need any previous training to gain this tool kit. In particular, the debate, which is a lighter form of the argument or conflict resolution steps, can be easily learned to enable one to lean into tension, resolve and deepen relationships, as opposed to withdrawing and inevitably losing relationships.

Being able to hold one's neutrality and face deeper, more intense conflicts requires advanced training, which LDD offers. This training includes an understanding of self and being able to cope with the demands of the conflict situation, plus the use of more advanced tools like Amplification.

III CONCLUSION

LDD is in no way a panacea for all the world's conflicts. When war or strong polarities mean people are fixed in their views, this method may not work. But it can be used in situations where there are enough people involved who are willing to listen and build the necessary bridges, gaining more of a middle ground. In today's world, where polarisation is almost becoming the new norm, the need for increasing the middle ground is becoming vital, and LDD is a valuable method to ensure this.

Even in very tough and violent threatening situations, as shown in Case Study 1, where there were people entrenched in their views, the method worked to resolve a situation. If the process had not taken place this would have inevitably resulted in violence.

Case Study 2 showed how generational and intergenerational tension and conflict, which seemingly have been resolved by post-war treaties and relationship building, still simmer away below the day-to-day lives of people. This simmering, in today's society, very quickly explodes into present-day violence and wars. The resolution between people needs to take place at the ground level and is even more critical given the trauma that so many people are experiencing as a result of today's wars.

My dream is to spread this method to as many people as possible and, in my small way, limit tension, conflict and wars in the future. I know I will not witness my entire dream coming to fruition, as this will only happen in years to come, and I am already an old person. However, in doing this work, I feel I am doing something and not standing by. This is my answer to the message and question written at the entrance of a small holocaust Centre in Cape Town, South Africa²: "They stood by? – Do you stand by?"

²

The Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre. See <https://ctholocaust.co.za/>

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