



THE DARING DREAM OF DEEP DEMOCRACY

US-based coach **Martha Freyemann Miser** describes the Lewis Method of deep democracy: an approach to conflict resolution that ensures all voices are heard, as the pathway to greater wisdom and creativity for all.

In early 2017, two colleagues – one American, the other Dutch – described ‘deep democracy’ to me. I was immediately drawn to the idea, and, by late September, found myself on a plane to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to learn more about this unique and powerful set of tools. In the months since, I’ve been studying, experimenting and sharing those tools with others.

THE LEWIS METHOD OF DEEP DEMOCRACY EXPLAINED

The term *deep democracy* comes from psychologist and physicist Arnold Mindell. He defines it as a ‘belief in the inherent importance of all parts of ourselves and all viewpoints of the world around us.’¹

In the late 1990s psychologists Greg and Myrna Lewis developed a set of tools to support South Africa’s transition from apartheid. They based those tools on Mindell’s work. Since Greg’s death in 2003, Myrna has continued to expand the Lewis Method, now being taught in more than twenty countries. Surprisingly, little is known about this method in

the United States. In fact, there are only three teachers of the method in North America, all of them Canadian. (That’s why I got on the plane to Halifax).



The Lewis Method is a pragmatic and flexible set of tools for resolving differences of opinion, ranging from minor disagreement to outright conflict. The basic premise is that the collective wisdom and potential of any team can be fully realised only when all voices are heard, particularly those in the minority. From this perspective, conflict isn't an obstacle to be avoided but a pathway to new energy and creativity.

Whereas most conflict-resolution methods assume that people are rational, deep democracy recognises that humans are emotional, meaning-making beings. One metaphor the Lewis Method uses to illustrate this dynamic is an iceberg:

- Above the water line is our collective **conscious**. In the conscious, all parties are present, discussions are rational, and participants feel free to speak openly.
- Just below the waterline lies the mysterious collective **unconscious**. This is the non-rational realm of emotions, thoughts and ideas that aren't shared with the larger group.
- The untapped **wisdom and potential** of the minority is released by lowering the water line, making it safe to discuss alternative views with the whole group.

The purpose of the Lewis Method, then, is to offer skills and tools that lower the water line so as to enable open productive conversations. What an elegant idea!

A BEGINNER'S MIND: LISTENING FOR THE 'NO'

It's the first day of the Halifax workshop, and we've chosen a contentious topic for our practice round: the removal of municipal statues honouring controversial historical figures. No lightweights in this group. As our facilitator, Sera, guides us through the process, I'm aware that she is listening in a way I haven't experienced before. I can't put my finger on it, but I know there's something here I want to learn.

Since Halifax, I've had opportunities to experiment with my new skill set at an international conference, in a university workshop, and with my corporate clients. Some of the tools are easy to incorporate into my daily practice; for example, asking a simple question like, 'Who else feels that way?' makes it safer to bring up different points of view.

Although I'm no stranger to difficult conversations, some of the techniques are more challenging, requiring a 'beginner's mind.' I'm struck by the fact that the method doesn't work towards compromise or consensus. Indeed, this is a radically democratic, non-judgemental approach that doesn't set out to change anyone's point of view.

As Myrna Lewis says, 'The problem with the democratic minority is not its opposition to the majority view. The problem is that its position has been forced underground, where it's out of sight and can't be addressed.'² As I observed in Halifax, the most difficult skills are learning to listen for this unsaid 'no' and then identifying the opposing values, perspectives and viewpoints left unspoken.

To that end, the Lewis Method helps participants separate their ideas from themselves. It gives them *fluidity* – the ability to move back and forth between different perspectives with less attachment and more curiosity. And in the process of 'saying it all,' they achieve new insights that translate into buy-in and better decisions.

At this point, I can't claim to have mastered these skills, but even if my initial attempts have felt a bit awkward, the experience has begun to shift the way in which I understand and work with conflict.

FROM RIGHT-WRONG TO A VIBRANT FIELD OF ENERGY

Back in Boston, I've organised a deep democracy workshop that has attracted an extraordinary group of people from across the United States. When I ask why they've come, I'm struck by how many use the phrase 'since the election.' They talk about polarisation, how it's spreading in their families, workplaces and communities. And they're concerned that their skills need honing to be effective in this environment. Of course, the tensions aren't new, but they're growing, fast becoming bigger than this city or this country. It feels like a conversation we could be having anywhere on the planet.

For many years I've been exploring the nature of democracy in our political systems as well as our organisations. In recent years this inquiry has taken on more urgency as democratic institutions struggle with the demands of a chaotic world, opening the door to those who question the very idea of democracy.

Clearly some fresh thinking is in order, and, once again, Mindell's theories help shed new light on these gnarly problems. In my mind, Mindell's most important contribution is the way in which he applies his knowledge of quantum physics to human relationships. Consider classic Newtonian theory: in a Newtonian world, conflict occurs when individuals or factions have become adversaries, staking out rigid and opposing views, driven by an inherent belief that one side is right and the other wrong. It's exactly this unexamined notion of *right* and *wrong*, this illusion of two sides, that keeps us stuck in unresolved cycles of conflict.

In contrast, the quantum worldview sees human systems (e.g. organisations and societies) as continuous vibrating *fields of energy*, not discrete and separate individuals. If, as Mindell asserts, humans are all inherently connected in a field of energy, then there are no real factions, no place for my beliefs, emotions or behaviours to be right and yours wrong.

As I write this, I realise that this is the true power of the Lewis Method – and what Sera was listening for back in Halifax: not individual opinions, but the full array of possibilities. Perhaps the great thirteenth-century poet Rumi captured it best: 'Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.'³

The Lewis Method, with its practical tools, is clearly a powerful means for peace-building, conflict resolution and social change. And both Mindell and Lewis call all of us – practitioners, coaches, and consultants – to carry out this work. ‘The world situation is everyone’s task. We cannot afford to leave it to others,’ says Mindell. In this spirit, I ask you too to take on the challenge of creating organisations and institutions that will make deep democracy a reality.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martha Freymann Miser is founder and president of Aduro Consulting, a Boston consulting and coaching firm specialising in leadership and change for purpose-driven companies. Prior to this, Martha held leadership positions in both public and private sector organisations. Her fourteen years in the financial services sector include four years living and working in the Netherlands where she was Global Head of Leadership and Change for ING. Martha has an MPA in Public Administration and a PhD in Leadership & Change.

1. Mindell, A. 2014. *The Leader as Martial Artist: An Introduction to Deep Democracy*, p. 13. Florence, OR: Deep Democracy Exchange.
2. Lewis, M., with Woodhul, J. 2008. *Inside the No: Five Steps to Decisions That Last*, p. 19.
3. Barks, Coleman, trans. 2004. *The Essential Rumi* (new exp. ed.). New York: HarperOne.
4. *The Leader as Martial Artist*, p. 14.



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