

# Threeing and Peace

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Privately circulated as gift during 2001 season of 'peace on earth'.  
Possession automatically authorizes making three copies for others.

Terrorism changes everything. Now anything can mark the passage from life to death. The air we breath can carry anthrax. The water we drink can carry cyanide. The buildings we inhabit can implode upon us. Friends and family can suffer horrible deaths. For U.S. citizens after September 11, 2001, fear of everything and fear for everyone is no longer paranoia but prudence.

Why? Because U.S. citizens, civilian and military alike, have been named the evil enemy in a religious war between good and evil by people willing to choose martyrdom. In response, President George W. Bush calls these people, Osama bin Laden and his networks, 'the evil doers'. The whole world is cleft in two. Once again, its us against them.

The dualistic assumptions that often result in war have also bedeviled philosophy. To resolve the problem of dualism on a philosophic level, the greatest philosopher yet produced by North America, Charles Peirce, gave us three irreducible categories that deal with everything. He called them firstness, secondness and thirdness. As we will see, these three categories are woven together in an inextricable way. Briefly, firstness has to do with the quality of a thing or the feeling that is part of an experience, secondness with fact and reaction, and thirdness with pattern and mediation. Mediation

means conflict resolution. Mediation means making peace. This essay is about using Peirce's three comprehensive categories to make peace in the Global Village.

As a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, I did my alternate service at Fordham University, working with the man Tom Wolfe and others anointed the 'Prophet of Electronic Communication', Marshall McLuhan. While at Fordham, Marshall had a benign tumor the size of an orange removed from his brain. Undaunted by a twenty-two hour operation, he was back on the job within two months. The first thing he did was complete a book about pain and war called *War and Peace in the Global Village*.

In the year 2001, global electronic communication has become virtually instantaneous. Suddenly, everybody has their nose in everybody else's business, as if we were living in a village. To describe this emerging condition during the 1960's, McLuhan coined the term 'Global Village'. In the global village, people with differences of nationality, race, religion, and culture rub up against each other, both live and electronically, without the time or means to find healthy ways of relating. Without healthy patterns of connection between people, situations easily degenerate. Relationships go awry.

As humans, we care immensely about our relationships to other human beings. Is this relationship trustworthy? Does this person care for me? Does this ethnic group respect my ethnicity? We understand our relationships by paying close attention to the feedback we get from others. What did she mean by that remark? Will he leave me for another? Why won't he talk to

me? Am I being dealt with as a stereotype? Failure to provide meaningful feedback to others leaves them without a way to navigate the shared relationship.

McLuhan saw violence as a response born out of a “lust for compensatory feedback”. When people don’t get the feedback necessary to adjust their relationships, he argued, they will lash out in order to teach others not to ignore them. The absence of feedback causes violence. In place of the missing feedback, necessary to adjust and navigate the challenges of a particular relationship, violence makes a public announcement of the failure to relate.

My guess is that McLuhan would have interpreted the violence of September 11, 2001 as generated by a lust for compensatory feedback. Unilateral behavior by the global superpower, perceived as unjust, leaves many others without the feedback necessary to adjust and maintain the integrity of their cultures in the emerging world. In this sense, the unappeased accumulation of desire for recognition and redress of grievances is what piloted the planes of destruction.

If the absence of feedback can create war and confusion, the fullness of feedback can create peace and tranquility. Creating feedback requires the proper circuitry. Based on Gregory Bateson’s understanding of circuitry and human relationships, I have created a circuit explicitly for human relationships. This ‘relational circuit’ uses Charles Peirce’s three categories to make possible a fullness of feedback among three or more people. The practice of using this circuit is called *Threeing*.

In its purest formal embodiment, *Threeing* is a kind of non-verbal yoga of relationships in which three people voluntarily take turns enacting three different roles based on firstness, secondness and thirdness. Performing these roles together provides constant mutual feedback.

The categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness defy easy definitions. You might see them, in part, as describing aspects of yourself. Facets of the self that correspond to firstness include feelings, intuitions, and sensitivity to immediate qualities in the surrounding world. Facets corresponding to secondness include responsiveness to specific facts, capacity for action and strength of will. Facets of self corresponding to thirdness include an ability to mediate between qualities and facts, awareness of broad patterns and an ability to think about the future. Participating in *Threeing* involves cultivating the range of sensibility and skills proper to these three aspects, sensibilities and skills which are invaluable for making peace.

In the actual practice, these three aspects of yourself support three roles for relating. The first role, the initiator, invites you to express your sensibilities and feelings spontaneously, to be such as you are regardless of any other. In the second role, the reactor, you maintain your own sensibilities, but you express yourself in response, even reaction, to the person in the first role. The third role, the mediator, is the most complex. You attend to both the spontaneity in the first role and the responsiveness in the second role and mediate between them without losing touch with your own sensibilities.

The practice of *Threeing* includes peacemaking as a normal part of relating. Three people working together in peace can grow to nine, nine to twenty-seven. Exponentially, small groups can create networks of people practicing peace among themselves and working for peace in the world. When the practice of *Threeing* is explicitly adapted for peace negotiations, the first role includes inventing options, the second role includes focusing on interests and the third role includes insisting on objective criteria.

We need not leave the question of peace totally in the hands of government. We can create peace cells to counteract terrorist cells. Like land mines, terrorism is a tactic humans must remove from the world stage. Just as terrorism is a tactic for unmaking the world, *Threeing* is a tactic for remaking the world, in peace.

Peace making is an ongoing process of conflict resolution. We must be proactive. We must do more than give peace a chance, we must make peace. Rather than waiting to respond to terrorism or endure interpersonal relationships without feedback, *Threeing* seeks to construct stable human relationships rich with feedback. In *Threeing*, the process of resolving conflicts is grounded in a formal solution to a recurring problem in human relationships. Accordingly, this essay will focus on the three person solution. At the end of this essay, I will suggest ways in which *Threeing* can be used to address actual conflicts.

## The Three-Party Solution

War takes place between two sides. My argument is that maintaining healthy ongoing relationships among three or more parties keeps relationships from breaking down into a two sided battle between us and them. While the parties can be ethnic groups, religious groups, national groups or other types of groups, for the sake of clarity, I will explain the three party solution primarily in terms of three people.

Why three people? Why not two? Or five? To understand why three people form the fundamental unit for resolving relational problems for two, three, four, five or more people we must deepen our understanding of the word "relationships."

Examining the source of a word sometimes enables us to make important connections. The word "relate" is taken from a Latin verb that has four parts:

**fero**—I carry

**ferre**—to carry

**tuli**—I carried

**latus**—to be carried

The verb 'relate' was originally used to mean *to bear* or *to carry* a child. Interestingly, as indicated on our list, the word *difference* comes from the first and second part of the same verb. Using this shared verbal root to help

us understand actual human relationships, *difference* and *relate* can be reconnected in an English sentence.

We *differentiate* ourselves from our *relatives*  
by referencing the experience of childbearing.

For example, your cousin on your mother's side was carried by a woman (your aunt) who was carried by the woman (your grandmother) who also carried your mother. So the very word *relate* suggests that the question of how we relate is really a question of how we organize the differences among us.

In traditional families, differences are organized in fixed roles. The father plays his role. The mother plays her role. The children have their roles. When you play your role, you play your part in the whole. The whole family depends on each person playing his or her part. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins also have roles, and there are rules for maintaining these roles. For example, a Korean student once explained to me that although his uncle is younger than he is, and a boyhood friend, he must nonetheless address his uncle by a formal family term that indicates the respect required in that relationship. Such rules of address keep the overall organization of differences in the family system clear and balanced.

Outside the family system, people attempt to "relate" one-to-one. With just one other person, you can develop a deep mutual understanding. He understands you. You understand him. Understanding each other, however, is not the same as understanding and navigating the differences between

you. Differences are themselves relational. They do not reside in either you or him. The differences within a two-person relationship cannot really be understood as differences, unless there is another relationship available for comparison. This explains the popular notion that love is blind. The two lovers may see each other, but neither sees the relationship they are in as a relationship. Without a third person, the exhilarating play of differences between two lovers can easily go to extremes. In truth, courting lovers may not want to see the relationship, only each other. They may be jealous of any third person precisely because the very presence of a third person invites scrutiny of their relationship as well as questions about how their isolated two-party relationship fits with other relationships in their community. On a social scale, the Cold War between 'Capitalists' and 'Communists' was all consuming, allowing for no significant third party. For a 'leader' like Osama bin Laden the world is divided into the faithful and the infidels. For Bush, you are either with him or against him. This difference cannot be mediated by a third party.

In other words, for two parties to understand the differences between them, to understand the relationship they are in *as a relationship*, there needs to be a third party available for comparison. Relating to one person with no comparison available, you might say, "You're not trustworthy." With a comparison available, you could say "I trust him more than I trust you." Of course, such a comparison can be cruel because it implies that you will soon make a choice and leave the one person and pair up with the third person. Here we have the fundamental relational dilemma. On one hand, it takes three to understand and balance relationships as relationships; on the other hand, each person within a three-person relationship is constantly faced with

a choice between the other two. *Acts of choice cut us off from relationships as relationships.* The choice of one person tends to break off the relationship with the other person. Yet choices that exclude a third person leave the two remaining people without a way to balance their relationship as a relationship.

To further understand the relational dilemma, let us consider this simulation of the problem, conducted at a research center in California. Three people are seated at a round table divided by partitions so they cannot see each other. In front of each of them is a device with a timer in the middle, a button for the left index finger, and a button for their right index finger. Only one button can work at a time. Touching either button closes an electric circuit that includes getting time on the timer,-- if another participant is also closing the same circuit,--and turning on a light for the participant to indicate she is in touch with one other participant. The objective for each participant is to be in contact with someone else for more time than either of the other two parties is in contact. A choice must be made between the other two in order to score. Only one two-person combination can be scoring at any one time. Relationships are subordinated to choice.

As individuals, we make choices between incompatible acts. One cannot both sleep and not sleep. One cannot both stay and leave. Such acts of choice are in the realm of individual control. Yet in a relational nexus, one make choices that involve other individuals. The choice of one individual can exclude another individual-- I will make love with this one and not that one— fight with this one and not that one. Choices must exclude other choices.

The dilemma about choice and relationships generates a cluster of partial solutions to relational balance for two parties, among them risking periodic interaction with outsiders that allows the two parties in the partnership to renew their mutual choice of each other. A committed couple with problems may flirt with the possibility of having affairs, but not do so. In effect by rejecting third parties, the couple is agreeing that despite whatever ambiguity or second thoughts about the mutual commitment have arisen within the relationship, it is at least clear that we prefer each other to any outsider. Accordingly, the United States' 'war against terrorism' will test many relationships. How will alliances shift between Russia, China, and the United States? Relational dilemmas will multiply, resulting in complex, conditional alliances.

Two party relationships are incomplete, but it is difficult to complete three party relationships because of the problem of choice. For relationships to thrive, they require a commitment, a clear choice. Yet a clear choice of one relationship can leave another relationship out. Often, without the relationship not chosen, the chosen relationship cannot be balanced as a relationship. To say it another way, a relationship subordinated to the choice of one party can cut that relationship off from the play of differences with another party which could balance and enrich the chosen relationship. Relationships get subordinated to choice.

One reason for this relational dilemma in interpersonal relationships is basic biology. We cannot look in two pairs of eyes at once. If you are facing Ariel Sharon, you cannot face Yasir Arafat at the same time. You must make a

choice between Sharon and Arafat. The practice of *Threeing* solves the relational dilemma by neutralizing the excluding effect of choice on relationships. In *Threeing*, you can make choices that balance your relationship with two other people simultaneously. You are never forced to make a choice that would exclude one of the two.

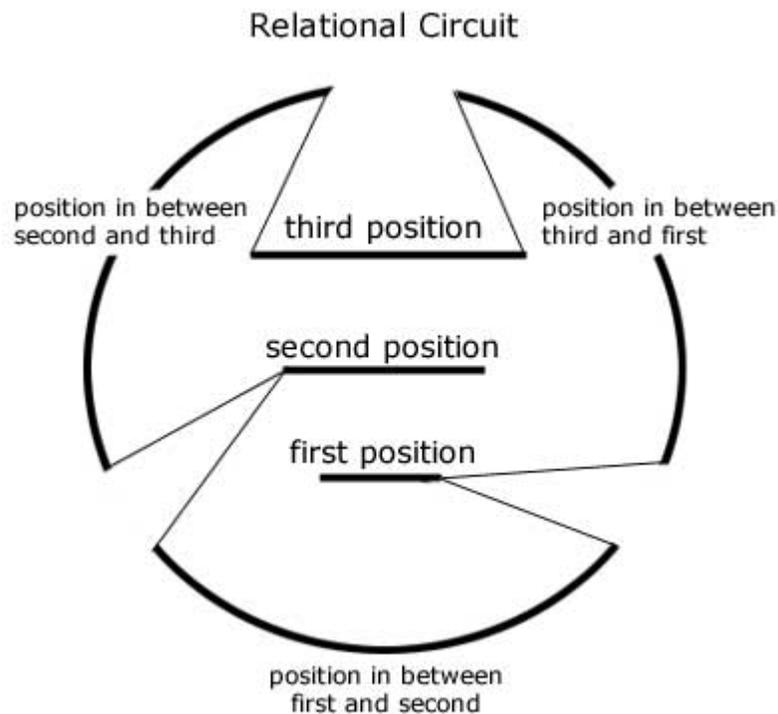
The way *Threeing* allows for non-excluding choices in a relationship with two other people is quite simple once you understand it, yet it is hard to explain in words alone. The basic two-part structure of a sentence, the subject/predicate dyad, tends to reduce all three-part relations to dyadic statements. You can understand the dyadic statements and fool yourself into thinking you understand the triadic relations. To avoid this confusion, I will ground my explanation of the three-person solution in a diagram and a device. The diagram is one and the same 'relational circuit' mentioned above. The diagram will appeal to your ability to think in icons or pictures that show relationships. The device, the tricolor talking stick, will appeal to your ability to learn by doing. Admittedly, both explanations will perform be dry, like explaining the floor plan of a basketball court and the rules for playing, rather than playing. The explanation is dry, but the practice is not. *Threeing* itself is like the game of basketball; the action occurs when you're playing.

## **The Relational Circuit**

A circuit is a closed pathway that organizes differences. The standard example of a circuit is the heating system in your house. A difference in the

room temperature (the air gets hotter or cooler) makes a difference in the thermostat (it switches off or on), which makes a difference in the fuel supplied to the furnace (it decreases or increases), which in turn makes a difference in the room temperature (the air gets cooler or hotter). Just as the closed path of differences regulates the heat in your house so the relational circuit that underlies the practice of *Threeing* regulates the relationships among practitioners. Taking turns in three different roles means the practitioners follow the path laid out in the relational circuit. A separate email includes a diagram of the complete relational circuit with all the positions named.

(More graphics will be available on *Earthscore* web site, due online 04/01/02.)



Notice within the circuit that the shortest line indicates the first position. The second and third positions have respectively longer lines. The longer lines

indicate which roles “contain” or correct other roles. The reactor in the second position contains the initiator. The mediator in the third position contains both the reactor and the initiator.

Imagine this circuit outlined on the floor within an eight-foot diameter. Imagine yourself walking along the path of the circuit. In any position, you always have the option of moving to two other positions. You always have a choice. The complete flow pattern for making these choices in concert with two other people is presented in *Video Mind, Earth Mind* (Ryan, 1993, see also Earthscore web site). Examining the circuit, it is evident that if you make a choice to change your position, you change your relationship to all the other positions in the circuit. Choosing a different position makes a difference in your relationship with the other two people. Yet all choices take place within a circuit that always includes all three people. No one is ever excluded. The whole pattern of relationships established by the circuit stays the same, but you change your role in relation to the other people when you change your position.

In some respects, the roles in *Threeing* are like the roles in the child’s game of paper-rock-scissors. You may recall the game offered an alternative to the normal bullying that goes on among children. In the normal pattern, the biggest child pushes the next biggest child, the next biggest shoves the littlest and the littlest goes out and kicks a rock-- he dare not push the biggest child. By contrast, in paper-rock-scissors the relationships are organized in a closed pathway, similar to how the relational circuit organizes *Threeing*.

In the game of paper-rock-scissors, each child simultaneously throws out one hand. The hand is either flat (paper), fisted (rock), or split fingered (scissors). The children then give each other playful slaps on the wrists according to the formula of paper-covers-rock, rock-breaks-scissors and scissors-cuts-paper.

In paper-rock-scissors the three children are never forced to choose between their two other playmates. They choose one of three roles: paper, rock or scissors. The choice of a role does not exclude anyone. With *Threeing*, the same pattern of choice operates. Choices are not between people. Rather choices are made between different positions in the circuit of relationships. The different positions indicate different roles to be played within the whole circuit of relationships. These are not choices that exclude one person for the sake of another. Participants learn to play all three roles and make choices of roles that balance three-person interaction.

The emotional experience of the nonverbal practice of *Threeing* is intense and complete. One participant reported that, unlike a cartoon he saw in which in the first panel two people pass each other on the street and say 'Hello' and then in the next panel each wonders what the other meant, after *Threeing* "you have a satisfying emotional clarity about what happened". Another participant said that *Threeing* brought him back to a recurring dream he had. In the dream, one half of him went down a tunnel and the other half went up a staircase. Never in the dream did the two halves meet. In *Threeing*, the tunnel and the stairs did meet. The practice of *Threeing* invites the fragmented parts of our "selves" into a new coherence.

A diagram of the relational circuit on the floor makes possible the nonverbal practice of *Threeing*. Participants keep track of the roles they are playing by referencing the positions in the circuit. A verbal version of *Threeing* is also possible using a device called a Tricolor Talking Stick.

## **The Tricolor Talking Stick**

A tricolor talking stick is a round, fifteen-inch length of wood with a diameter between one and three inches. The stick is painted with three five-inch bands of solid color: yellow, red, and blue. The red band is in the middle of the stick.

The person who holds the stick speaks while others listen. By holding a particular color on the stick, the speaker indicates that he is speaking in a particular role. By painting the stick with three colors, we can keep the three roles clear and keep the relationships from getting tangled up. Just as training wheels help one learn to ride a bicycle, so the tricolor talking stick helps three people to learn *Threeing*. Once people learn to change roles without confusion, the training wheels can come off, the stick discarded. I recall one program I conducted for retraining workers displaced from the defense industry. After a few days, three of the workers became so adept at relating to each other in the three roles that they put the stick on a table between them and each used a pencil to touch a color on the stick, thereby indicating the role he was playing. The pencils jumped from one color to another in constant improvisation. The participants created for themselves a fullness of feedback.

To learn verbal *Threeing*, three people take turns in the different roles by passing the stick around and holding the color that indicates their roles. Holding the yellow band indicates that one is playing the first role (initiator). Holding the red band indicates that one is playing the second role (reactor). Holding blue indicates the third role (mediator). I remember the connection between role and color by association. Yellow is associated with the rising sun in the morning, (initiation) red with the reactivity of "seeing red" (responding) and blue with the overarching sky above (mediating).

This process can work for simple as well as complex decision making. In using the talking stick, sometimes the emphasis is on the role the person is playing: initiator (yellow), respondent (red), or mediator (blue). Example: yellow throws out an idea, red reacts and blue mediates. Let's say that Maria, Stacey and Lynn are trying to decide which movie to get from the video store. Lynn (holding yellow) suggests *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, a movie that both portrays and critiques violence. Maria (holding red) responds, concerned about the images of violence in the suggested movie. Stacey (holding blue) mediates between the two, respecting Lynn's desire to reflect on violence and Maria's sensibilities as well as her own concerns. If all are not agreed, they can change roles and try another round, and another, until they settle on a movie. Procedures for more complex decision making with four or more people are available.

In discussing the movie they decide on and view, Maria, Stacey and Lynn could share their opinions in a similar way by using the roles to recall different aspects of what they have seen. The first role (yellow) deals with

the emotional qualities of the movie, the second role (red) deals with specific facts and details in the movie, the third role (blue) deals with the overall plot of the movie as well as what it means in a larger context. By taking turns in each of these roles, the three friends can discuss their different interpretations of the movie without anyone's views being pushed aside.

Note that the three roles of initiator, reactor and mediator invite non-confrontational discussions. The tricolor talking stick can also be used to regulate conflict and confrontation. As the word "con *front*" suggests, confrontation means facing off with an opponent. Boxers standing toe-to-toe in the ring are confronting each other. Their actions mirror one another. One hits. The other hits back. There is symmetry to what they do.

The roles of initiator, respondent and mediator do not mirror one another. They fit together, but they are not similar. In this, they are like a grandmother, mother and child. The grandmother observes and advises, the mother nurses and the child suckles. Similarly, The United Nations might oversee the aid that an advanced industrial country provides to a 'client' state. The behaviors fit together but they are not the same. The interaction is without symmetry. They are asymmetric or complimentary.

While the main roles in *Threeing* are non-competitive and asymmetric, within *Threeing* there is the opportunity for competition and symmetric interaction. Making peace does not mean avoiding conflict or confrontation, only violent confrontation. Confrontation can be very productive in the context provided by *Threeing*.

Using the talking stick, participants can combine the three non-confrontational asymmetric roles, as indicated by the yellow, red and blue bands, with symmetric or confrontational roles. The difference between confrontation and non-confrontation is indicated by the way that a person holds the stick. To indicate confrontation, the stick is held horizontally with the ends pointing at the two people in confrontation. In the non-confrontational roles of yellow, red and blue, the stick is held vertically.

In *Threeing*, the non-confrontational roles themselves rely on using certain types of phrases to make sure the inquiry is not mistaken for confrontation.

#### Yellow

How do you yourself feel about the suggestion you've made?

Did you have any expectations about how the rest of us would feel?

#### Red

What are the facts behind your suggestion?

What events have we shared as a group, or gone through as individuals that would support your suggestion?

#### Blue

If I understand you correctly, you are saying that if we do \_\_\_\_\_, then things will work out, am I right?

Can you show me how you got from the "if" to the "then"? I did not follow you.

Just as playing the roles of yellow, red and blue suggests a certain style of speaking, so confrontation suggests a certain style of speaking. Certain introductory statements can go a long way toward making the confrontation formal and clear enough to be productive.

"I don't agree with you. Here is why..."

"While I can see your argument, I disagree because..."

"Here is how I understand the context in which I am stating my argument..."

"Here is how I would define these terms."

"I am assuming..."

"Here's what I think, here's how I came to think this way..."

"I came to this conclusion because..."

"Here are the facts I 'm basing my argument on".

At any point in the exchange among three, the member of the group who has the stick can directly challenge another member of the group by laying the talking stick on a horizontal line between the two of them. He or she then addresses the other group member using the type of adversarial or confrontational statement described immediately above. The person addressed directly can then turn the stick around and respond. The third person can also enter into this exchange if one of the two in confrontation points the stick at the third person. Three times back and forth between two people is a reasonable limit. Then the stick must be pointed at the third person or pointed upward by one of the people arguing. Pointing the stick at the third person is asking that person to enter into the confrontational behavior. Pointing the stick upward is to offer a fresh proposal for non-

confrontational consideration. The triad then works through the fresh proposition in the three roles. If there is no consensus among the three, then the decision-making procedure presented elsewhere comes into effect.

Holding the stick in a vertical position is equivalent to standing on the yellow, red or blue line. Holding the stick horizontally is equivalent to standing on the outside arcs. Imagine yourself as one of three people standing on the outside arcs of choice. The process of symmetric interaction, or confrontation, would consist of one person oscillating from one end of her arc to another. At each end of the arc, one of the other two people would stand and face the oscillator. Standing face-to-face, they would mirror each other's behavior in sound and movement. This pattern is like playing monkey-in-the-middle without the ball. Each person takes a turn being the monkey.

Once participants become familiar with the roles indicated by the tricolor talking stick, they can learn how to confront each other without the confrontation escalating into a vicious cycle. They can then talk to each other with real frankness. In one worker training program I conducted with the Talking Stick, after the participants-- mostly strangers to each other-- got comfortable with the protocols, their frankness was very impressive. We had a series of all-for-one sessions. One worker would present his plans for getting a job and three other workers gave him feedback based on the three roles. The normal politeness that glossed over faults yielded to strong and accurate truth telling based on the security everybody felt playing the three roles. The feedback was both merciless and good natured. "You'll never get

a job if you don't sit up straight." "Stop with the doughnut shop fantasy, you're not a businessman."

Of course, worker training is not peace mediation. Traditionally, peace mediation means conflict resolution. For serious peace mediation the process of *Threeing* must be supplemented with procedures for choosing peace partners, fair division of tasks, and decision making. All of these procedures have been worked out in detail during the course of using *Threeing* in art, activism, education and worker training. (See *Earthscore* web site for related writings. Due online in April of 2002) Moreover, Charles Peirce developed a system for classifying signs based on his three categories that is comparable to Mendeleev's periodic table of elements or Linnaeus's classifications in natural history. The roles in *Threeing* can be linked to this sign system to produce working interpretations of any conflict.

Let me end this essay with a brief scenario of how *Threeing* might be used in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An Israeli invites a Palestinian to join her in a peace practice, the Palestinian accepts and identifies a third person,- say a Korean, acceptable to the Israeli,- to join them. The Palestinian, Israeli and Korean use the process of *Threeing* to come up with suggestions about peace strategies. The process would preclude the Korean from being forced into choosing between the Palestinian and the Israeli. It would also preclude either the Israeli or the Palestinian from excluded the other. Within the relational circuit, fresh suggestions could be generated. When the three peacemakers ran the course of what they could do together, each could invite another citizen from his or her own ethnic group to join the process. With six people there are twenty different possible combinations of three.

Each person can be a member of ten of the twenty combinations. Using the non-verbal yoga of relationship, the Talking Stick and the sign system, the group of six could cycle through these various combinations searching for sustainable strategies of peacemaking.