

By Mary Runser

(Mediation is an alternative method of dispute resolution that involves a third party, who negotiates a settlement or another form of resolution to a situation, to which both parties can agree. Ann Arborite Zena Zumeta has a national reputation both as a mediator and a trainer of mediators, and she sat down with staff writer, Mary Runser, to talk about the spiritual aspects of mediation, and its relationship to her long-time meditation practice.)

“While I was in law school in Ann Arbor, my mother was dying of cancer. So I was under a lot of pressure,” Zena explained. “I took a yoga class and, during one of the classes when I was in the corpse pose, I must have transcended. I came home glowing, and feeling very light and energetic.” But she could never replicate that feeling again in yoga class.

“I went to my friends to ask whether that was what meditation did, and they said ‘yes.’ So I signed up immediately.” Zena began studying Transcendental Meditation, which is the form she still practices today. “Meditating gave me energy, inner peace, and expansion,” Zena said.

“When I came out of law school in 1975, I was a labor negotiator and also did some community organizing. Both of those things made me pretty competitive and aggressive.” She admits that, for awhile, being embroiled in that competitive and argumentative environment was enjoyable, but she learned that it was not a very productive approach for the people she represented.

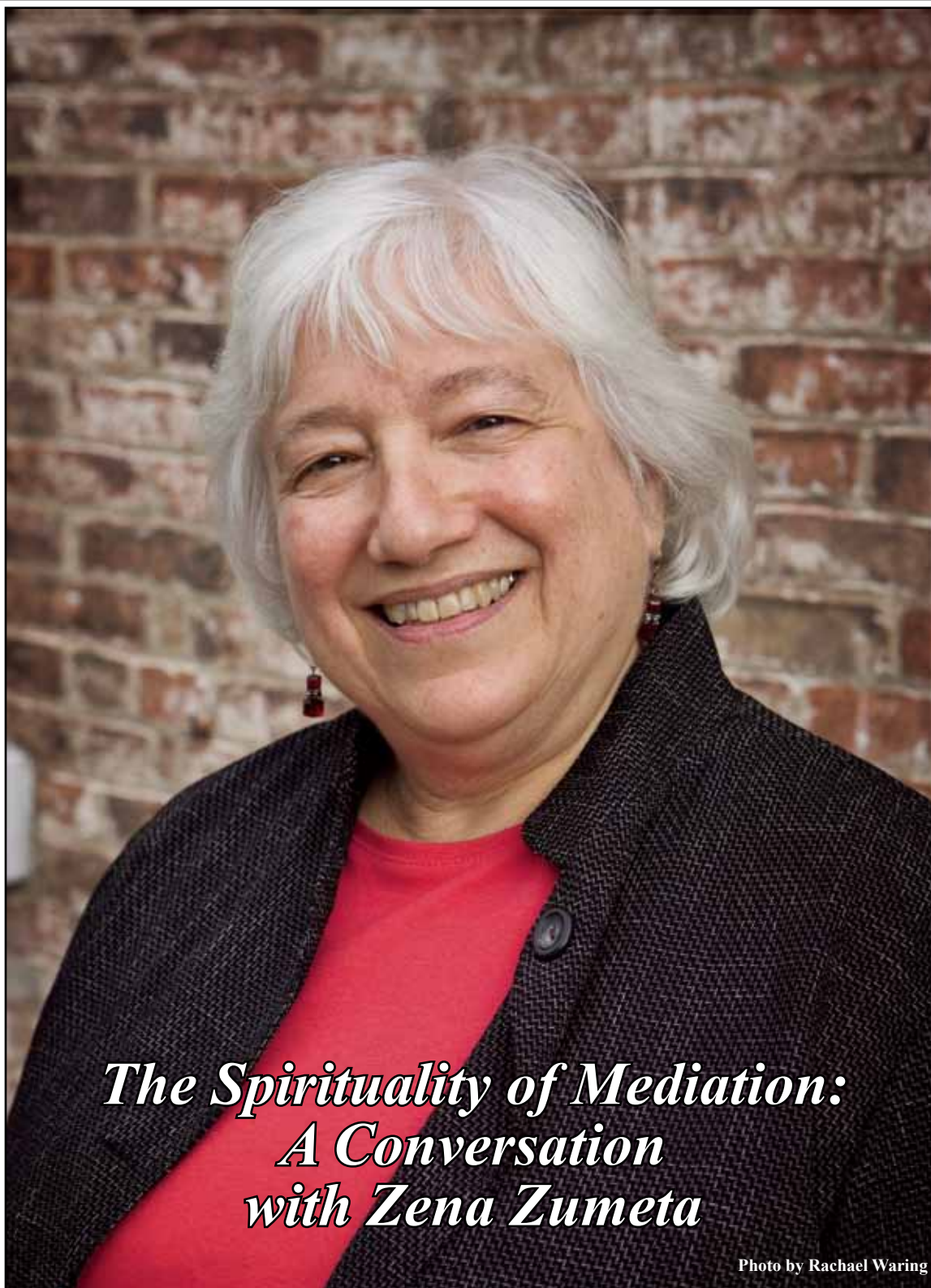
That approach was also not natural for her personality, though she didn’t realize it right away. “In fact, it was my husband who suggested that it might be helpful to have some integration with what I was trying to do internally — with meditating — and my work. It felt to him like I was schizophrenic.”

Zena didn’t like herself as an aggressive advocate. “I did eventually come to realize that, as I was changing on the inside [through meditating], I really did want that change on the outside as well.”

“I realized that...any lessons I wanted to learn, any growth that I wanted to experience, I could do through mediation as well as meditation. It’s actually humorous to realize that there’s only a one-letter difference between the two words, and they really are that closely related.”

As often is the case with many of the best things in life, Zena found mediation by accident. In 198, she was working with the Institute of Gerontology, training others to advocate for elders and elder organizations. “While I was there, I was asked to mediate between two faculty members. Because of my experience and background in labor organizing, they knew that I was familiar with negotiation. So I did it, and we were able to reach a settlement.”

While she was very comfortable being in the middle of conflict, Zena realized that she was *more* comfortable helping people to resolve their conflicts, rather than



The Spirituality of Mediation: A Conversation with Zena Zumeta

Photo by Rachael Waring

Resolving Conflicts, Creating Peace

Zena Zumeta, co-founder of the Ann Arbor Mediation Center, mediates disputes between neighbors, family members, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, businesses and consumers, and schools and parents. She is also well-known in the field of mediation training through her company, the Mediation Training and Consultation Institute.

where they understand that getting what they need is more important, that’s a great win for the process.”

The idea in any mediation situation is to be an instrument of peace. “That’s really the holiest of outcomes to be had in mediation,” Zena said.

With all its parallel lessons, mediation became like a mirror to Zena that reflected her own spiritual growth. “I realized that anything I wanted to do as a person, any lessons I wanted to learn, any growth that I wanted to experience, I could do through mediation as well as meditating. And when I figured that out, it left me with a feeling of such freedom. [My work] really has become a reflection of where I am spiritually.”

Zena said that there are many commonalities between mediation and meditation. “It’s actually humorous to realize that there’s only a one-letter difference between the two words, and they really are that closely related.” “Mediation” even sounds like a more comfortable situation than “conflict resolution” or “dispute resolution,” more like allowing oneself to slip into a comfortable and warm sweater, rather than putting on a jacket that feels like steel wool.

Another thing that Zena has learned through her work in mediation is that when all else fails, prayer works. “There are many times when the parties might be at impasse and I don’t have any ideas about where to go with the situation. I am always amazed by the things that can happen when, after trying everything I know, I finally hand a situation to God and allow Him to work it out.”

helping them to fight, or fighting for them. “I came upon the realization that mediation was, in fact, the way to integrate the internal and the external, my spiritual growth and my work,” Zena said.

Ever since then, Zena has been mediating disputes between neighbors, family members, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, businesses and consumers, and schools and parents. She is a co-founder and past director of the *Ann Arbor Mediation Center*, and current president of *Zena Zumeta Mediation Services*. She also continues her work with labor-management cooperation as president of *The Collaborative Workplace*.

Working with mediation has been spiritually enlightening for Zena. It’s taught her many spiritual lessons and paralleled the things she was learning through meditating. “One of the primary lessons that I learned through meditating and mediation is that you cannot be too attached to the outcome; it really is about the journey. In mediation we say, ‘Trust the process,’ and it’s an exact parallel of [the saying], ‘It’s about the journey, rather than the destination.’”

Zena’s goal is to elicit what the parties want out of the process. If they want an agreement, she’ll help them achieve that goal. If their goal is to vent, or to just be heard, then she’ll help them do that. “Often they will change their minds along the way, and what they thought they wanted in the beginning may be very different from what they want in the end, or what they can achieve. It’s necessary to be open to a change in direction as we go along.”

Zena has been in situations in which an involved party is adamant about what they want and is thoroughly unwilling to change their mind. The first question she asks in this situation is: Can they get what they want? “Often, getting what you want only masks getting what you need. If people can get to a point

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“The honor, the privilege and the blessing of being able to do the work that I do,” Zena said, “is that it does support my soul and it supports the souls of the people with whom I work.” She continued with tear-filled eyes, “It’s just amazing to be able to do this work.”

Zena is renowned in the field of mediation training. She teaches mediation and conflict resolution to lawyers, mental health professionals, managers and employees, and community members through her company, the *Mediation Training & Consultation Institute*. She and her staff travel throughout the country to offer mediation training programs. She especially enjoys introducing the mediation process to lawyers “whose souls are so starved, and I see them open up. I still can’t believe I get to do this!”

While she was very comfortable being in the middle of conflict, Zena realized that she was more comfortable helping people to resolve their conflicts with mediation, rather than helping them to fight, or fighting for them.

Along the way, Zena has been a leader in state, regional, and national mediation organizations. Her work has been recognized with numerous state and national professional awards, including the Lifetime Achievement in Mediation Award from the Family Mediation Council-Michigan.

In a time when we are so often forced to ignore our souls, or to fight for things that simply aren’t right, Zena gets the opportunity to help others rediscover and revive their souls. “There are a lot of seekers who find through mediation a way to bring back the universal, the whole and the soul,” she said. “And to be able to make a living by helping people accomplish this has been a gift. Really, it was a gift to even find it.”

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Debbie Zivan
Life Coach
734.239.3508



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