For most of his early years, John Marks was a fighter. He fought against those things he considered unjust, including the Vietnam War and the abuses he saw of the intelligence agencies. Amidst all that fighting, however, John suddenly had an epiphany. “I came to the realization that the work I was doing and the way I was proceeding in the world was being defined by what I was against,” he explains. “I decided I didn’t want to be against things; instead, I wanted to be for things. I wanted to focus on building a new system, rather than on tearing down the old one.”

So, in 1982, John founded and became President of Search for Common Ground, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization whose mission is to transform how the world deals with conflict – away from adversarial, win-lose approaches and toward non-adversarial, win-win solutions. This is John’s vision. It embodies a paradigm shift from a you-or-me world to a you-and-me one, and John has dedicated the last 30 years to making it a reality.

John started Search for Common Ground with one employee. Now, it has grown to 600 employees working out of 50 offices in 30 countries across the globe. “Our modus operandi is to understand the differences and act on the commonalities,” John notes. “Within that framework, we use such traditional conflict resolution techniques as mediation, facilitation, and training. In addition, we utilize less conventional methods, such as television and radio production, music videos, participatory theater, and community organizing. Thus, we employ a broad mix of tools, and we operate across whole societies. One of our specialties is producing ‘soap opera for social change,’ which we are now doing in 17 countries.”

John and his colleagues are convinced – and have hard data to prove it – that popular culture, containing convincing messages, can have an important impact on changing mass attitudes and behaviors. The challenge of resolving conflict between whole peoples and nations is certainly formidable, but John and his team believe that bringing key people together in a collaborative atmosphere is the best way to resolve conflict. He compares this process to what most people understand about resolving conflict on the personal level. “If you make non-negotiable demands of your spouse, divorce is a likely outcome,” he points out. “If you give your children direct orders, they probably will stop listening. Acting in an authoritarian, adversarial manner tends to be ineffective, whether you’re a spouse or a parent – or a government.

One of Search for Common Ground’s greatest successes involved the 1994 Peace Treaty between Israel and Jordan. In the months before the Treaty was signed, the organization brought together a group of former generals from both countries to unofficially consider possible security arrangements that would make both countries feel safe. Participants worked out a series of understandings that were taken back to the King of Jordan and the Prime Minister of Israel, most of which were included in the eventual Treaty. “The two governments probably would have gotten to the same place anyway, but we showed in advance that agreement was possible and would be mutually beneficial,” John explains. “We brought together important people who had the ear of their leaders and helped to create openings for the official process.”

Another significant event came in 1998, when Search for Common Ground worked in partnership with USA Wrestling to take the American national wrestling team to Iran. It was the first time Americans representing the United
States had openly traveled to Tehran since the seizure of the US Embassy in 1979. On returning to the United States, the wrestlers and John were welcomed by President Clinton to the Oval Office, and footage of the event was broadcast to Iran as a signal that the US hoped for better relations. “This was a good example of how we use innovative means to try to find constructive solutions to contentious problems,” says John. “Unfortunately, the two governments did not, in the end, take advantage of the opportunity.”

To a large extent, John’s life path was formed by entrepreneurial currents he picked up from his father—although father and son came of age amidst distinctly different backdrops. Growing up in a middle class family in northern New Jersey, I felt as if the world would always provide for me, which gave me the courage to seek new possibilities. I wanted to do something meaningful, and I was moved by Kennedy-era idealism—ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

Inspired by the heady atmosphere of the 60s and early 70s, John wasn’t afraid to risk everything for what he believed in. “It was a time of both alienation and new possibilities for people of my age,” he remembers. Rather than go into his father’s business, which his father was urging him to do, John passed the Foreign Service exam while still a senior at Cornell. In 1966, his first assignment was to spend 18 months in Vietnam. In 1970, much to the chagrin of his parents, he resigned in protest against the expansion of the war into Cambodia. Now 27, he went to work for Senator Case, an anti-war Republican Senator from New Jersey, and was responsible for managing the Senator’s Case-Church amendment, which eventually cut off funding for the War. “I didn’t have a sense of needing to be in a linear career path, particularly during those years,” he remembers.

Next, he became a bestselling, award-winning author of books that described abuses of the intelligence agencies. First, he co-authored with Victor Marchetti a book entitled, The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence. Then, on his own, he wrote The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate”. He directed a project at the Center for National Security Studies in Washington and then he spent 18 months at Harvard, first as a Fellow of the Institute of Politics and subsequently as a Visiting Scholar at Harvard Law School. “I wasn’t quite sure what I ultimately wanted to be doing,” he says. “But I did what I thought I needed to do, and did it the way that seemed logical to me. As Napoleon said, on s’engage; puis on voit—you become engaged, and then you see what opportunities come next. My experience has been that it doesn’t work to try to map out everything in advance.”

When John started out, he had no idea that his career path would undergo a paradigm shift from advocate to peace-builder. But such a shift occurred, and it led him to found Search for Common Ground in 1982. Those first years were not easy. John was recently divorced with a five-year old son. “It was difficult—I used to stand up in living rooms and share my vision, and people would donate money,” he recalls. “That was our main source of revenue, and one thing you learn when you start a new organization is that you are the float and the only one who will work without pay. But I was able to put the organization together, one project at a time. The image that I like is of that of a child’s toy truck that moves forward until it hits a piece of furniture, bounces back, and then finds an alternative path forward. I am the same way. Once I have my sights set on something, I tend to keep going towards it, no matter how circuitous the path.”

For the first eight years of its existence, John’s new organization focused on finding common ground between the US and the USSR. Its most successful project involved forming the US-Soviet Task Force to Prevent Terrorism. Participants included a former Director and Deputy Director of the CIA, along with the KGB’s former head of counter-intelligence. Together, they established modalities for how their former employers could cooperate to prevent terrorism. “They agreed there could be no political or ideological justification for blowing up a civilian airplane or a bus full of kids,” says John. “Many of the measures our Task Force on Terrorism proposed were adopted by the two governments.
“US-Soviet cooperation of this sort would not have been possible at the height of the Cold War, and many other profound changes were also taking place in the early 1990s,” John continues. “For example, ideological differences between East and West were generally thought to be the prime driver of conflict around the world, and the notion of ethnic warfare was not given prominence. But after the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 ethnic conflict became widely recognized as a principal cause of violence around the world. Under these new circumstances, Search for Common Ground was generally recognized as having expertise in conflict prevention.”

With that shift in perception, the organization started to grow at the rate of 20 to 25 percent a year, expanding into the Middle East, former Yugoslavia, and Africa. “We became respectable and credible not so much because we had changed, but because the world around us changed,” John remarks.

Unlike his father, who was a business entrepreneur, John is a social entrepreneur who wants to change the world, and he has kept his work ethic very focused on that goal as his organization has grown. His efforts are carried out with and supported by his wife, Susan Collin Marks, whom he met in 1993 in her native South Africa while working on a television series. The pair clicked almost immediately, but she insisted on waiting nine months before moving to the US to marry John. First, she wanted to complete her work in helping assure a peaceful transition for South Africa from apartheid to democracy. Susan now serves as the senior Vice President of Search for Common Ground, and she and John complement each other very well. “She’s much more intuitive than I am, and much better at understanding and working with people,” John points out. “My strong suit, on the other hand, is finding creative ways to rearrange reality. Susan calls me a ‘master builder.’ She’s a partner I can completely trust, and I talk through with her the major problems I face. Working and living with Susan has very much improved my ability to make good decisions.”

John finds his toughest challenge to be determining the right mix between effectively managing the organization and maintaining its entrepreneurial edge. Personally, he’s more drawn to the entrepreneurial side of the work, but he recognizes that the administrative aspects are equally important and that the right balance must be struck. “If you spend your time only thinking about what you want, you’re not going to be successful,” he points out. “You have to factor in what others want, and create a win-win in which both their needs and yours are satisfied.”

With this management style, John has built Search for Common Ground into an organization with a budget of around $35 million. Funds come from the European Union, the governments of the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Scandinavia, as well as from various UN agencies, US foundations, corporations, and individual donors. “I believe we do good work that merits recognition, and our funders are willing to pay for that,” John affirms. “We’re now raising more money than we’ve ever raised before. Will that continue? I think the quality of our work speaks for itself, and I think we’re well positioned for what the future holds.”

Search for Common Ground usually has around a dozen or so interns, and to them and other young people entering the working world today, John stresses the importance of following a career path that has inherent meaning. “Do something that makes your heart sing if you possibly can,” he says. “I’m 69 years old, and I have a wonderful life doing exactly what I want to be doing. I love going to work in the morning, and I have no regrets. For more than 40 years, I have been committed to making the world a better place. I’ve found different ways of doing it, but that impulse has stayed the same, and I believe that I’ve remained true to it.”

John attributes much of this success to his intense concentration on the work of his organization. He has remained highly selective about what he gets involved with, and he refrains from spreading himself so thin that his goals become diluted.

With these considerations in mind, John employs a style of management modeled after the Japanese martial art of aikido. “It’s the opposite of boxing, where you hit an attacker and try to reverse his energy flow by 180 degrees,” he explains. “In aikido, you accept the energy of the other person and blend with him, diverting his energy by 5 or 10 degrees and finding a way to make both of you safe. This means that, as a manager, I accept people as they are and look for ways to reframe situations and perspectives so that conflict is defused, allowing people to work
toward common goals.”

And more than anything, John’s story details the importance of being open. Only with true openness can major shifts occur, and only in the wake of such shifts can we hope to develop the new systems that free us from old problems.

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