

Conflict as Our Friend
By Rev. Doug McCusker

I grew up in a family that fought a lot. We could take any difference of opinion and escalate it to shouting as fast as a Ferrari goes from 0 to 60 miles an hour. Thank goodness we didn't live in an apartment, but I think our neighbors could hear us anyway. I remember one time when the argument spilled out of the house. I don't remember what I did, but my father had that "you're going to get a whooping" look on his face and he was holding a belt in his hand. He didn't usually resort to physical punishment; he was more of a yeller. He was 5'1" and barely a hundred pounds. So it whatever I did, it must have been serious. He said "Come over here!" I ran instead, which made him even more angry. He chased after me as I sprinted out the back door. The storm door swung back with tremendous force and the glass shattered. A big shard caught my father in the head. He was bleeding all over the place.

The site of the blood and my guilt for not standing and taking my punishment has blocked out all the fine details of this story. I guess he went to the emergency room and got stitches and I probably wound up being grounded for a long time. But the real issue here was not what I did but how everyone reacted. Conflict was a pretty regular thing for me growing up. As the middle child, I was usually the referee between my dad and my older brother whenever they would get into it. I learned to raise my voice in order to be heard, and I'm quick to explain myself when I hear criticism. As our reading tells us, "How we react to conflict is influenced by personal history, family patterns, cultural norms, and the group's practices."

But there was another side to our conflicts. We would cool down relatively quickly and get back to normal conversation without holding grudges. We were passionate and loud even when we were having fun. When I was 17 years old, my cousin Sonya, who lived in Colombia came to live with us for a year. She was my same age, but in Colombia they graduated from high school after the 11th grade. So her parents sent her to live with us as her year abroad before going to college.

We were so used to fighting that we didn't realize what it looked like to other people. Sonya was our mirror. She was horrified after watching us shout and scream at each other. Just seeing the look on her face, had a profound impact on how we treated each other. That year was the most peaceful and calm of any while growing up. We actually learned to argue and settle our differences without blowing up. It was a tremendous gift she gave us. I'm sure that it influenced my choice of partners as well.

My wife's family was the complete opposite. They avoided conflict and kept everything civil and quiet. The television was always turned down low, there was hardly any music in the house and no one argued. There was an atmosphere of sameness. The furniture was never rearranged and there were lots of things that weren't discussed. It was blessed relief for me, but also a little boring. And conflict avoidance comes with its own set of traps. Avoiders sometimes keep their feelings bottled up and then aren't able to meet their own needs. This can result in a frustrating buildup of emotions.

Conflict, not fighting, but differences of opinions is inevitable and important in human relations. There is nothing intrinsically bad about conflict. It's a natural process of human interchange. Gil Rendle defines conflict as "two or more ideas in the same place at the same time." This is a good thing especially in times of rapid change. If there

is only one idea, “the way we always did it”, it can be deadly when adaptation and experimentation are called for. Challenge and encounter, even when accompanied by significant loss, can leave an individual and an organization stronger. Out of the conflict of more than one idea comes energy, motivation, clarity and direction. Distorted assumptions can be tested; injustice disrupted, wrongs redressed and power rebalanced. Think of that old saying, “you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs.”

So with all the good things that can arise from working through conflict, why is it so difficult and dreaded? Well, because it’s risky and unpredictable. You never know who someone else will react. There is always the danger that anxiety can overtake the system. The challengers can lose perspective of the issue at hand, or devalue each other and turn it into a battle of wills. Then the conflict becomes a royal mess. The one who prevails by force, becomes the savior, at least for a while.

That’s of course the worst case scenario, but inaction has its own issues. If we start from the premise that conflict arises from differences, then it is part and parcel of the creative process. The nature of creation is diversity, bringing something new and different into existence. No two people are completely alike. No one sees the world the exact same way as someone else. We are all originals with inherent worth and dignity.

We are all indispensable and full of great potential. Thomas Aquinas defined humility as the patient pursuit of one’s own excellence. We are called to be who we already are and to claim our sacred place in the cosmic puzzle. And not just stand in our place but to act and be involved in the collective, creative process of life.

The paradox is that every other person in the world is also indispensable and called to claim their sacred ground. We are bound tightly together by virtue of our own differences: the Chinese worker, the African baby, the American industrialist, the Cambodian monk and all the children of the world. Like our encounter with my cousin Sonya, we cannot know who we truly are without others holding the mirror of their perceptions in front of us.

Therefore, we are not only obliged to accept, but to encourage the differences in those we encounter along the way. This is the nature of leadership and the work of peace; to set free every other person to be who he or she is intended to be; different than who we are, with unique perspectives and knowledge. Occasionally that means we won’t agree, but anything short of that is destructive and suppressive.

Every relationship, no matter if it is one on one, in a group, or as a society is an opportunity for growth and revelation. Back in the fall, I talked about Theologian Henry Nelson Wieman’s concept of *creative interchange*.

Creative interchange is an ongoing process that all of us are engaged in from our infancy till the day we die. As humans we are existentially creative beings. We interact with our environment in order to create meaning that establishes our emotional, intellectual and spiritual grounding. But we can’t do this alone. In order to expand our consciousness, we must absorb the values of others.

Creative interchange involves getting the viewpoint of the other person and integrating it into our own personality so that we understand them sympathetically even when we don’t agree with them. The result is a deepening of community. The supreme good or what Wieman called God, is a deepening of community rooted in love, mutual

support and understanding. That which saves us and transforms us is not faith in a belief system, but the love and concern that we have for one another.

Creative transformation comes through teaching, debating, learning, healing, giving, welcoming, remembering, and tuning into the spirit of the community. None of these things can occur in isolation. Transformation requires relationship. But newness cannot come without some degree of conflict. It is not a price to be paid and endured, but a condition to be sought, welcomed and nurtured.

Church consultant, Caroline Westerhoff says “To manage conflict is to allow it, not suppress it; to open the doors and windows to fresh wind. Following this line of thought to its ultimate conclusion, violence and war becomes not conflict run amuck, but the final outcome of conflict suppressed. They result when we will not allow the other to be different, when we deny our life-giving dependence on the different one with all our might and means.”

Conflict avoided or squashed for too long becomes a time bomb. Conflict with no concern for the other also spins out of control. We were created to be unique and we were also created to live in community. This is the paradox of our existence: we are single, yet united; solitary, yet communal.

Communities, like human beings, live between the polarities of order and freedom. This is the stage in which the drama of humanity has been played out. The tension between order and freedom has birthed the stories in all the sacred texts of the world’s religions, and all the real histories of mankind.

Tension is one of those words that carries negative connotations, as if it is bad for good relations. In fact, it is necessary for healthy conflict to emerge. Tension keeps the excesses of either order and freedom to dominate. It enables an atmosphere which different voices and approaches are honored. “The tension becomes something life giving, creative, and renewing, as the internal variety encourages the benefits of both order and freedom.”

In the biosphere in Arizona, a three-acre greenhouse in the desert, people noticed that fruit was falling off the first trees prematurely. It turns out that inside this encapsulated environment, wind, a force that challenges the tree’s branches and strengthens them, was absent. Without wind the branches could not gain sufficient strength to hold the fruit to the time of maturation.

Just like in nature, tension is what gives people and communities strength and cohesion. In family systems we call this tension “integration-differentiation”. In a healthy family, one must be both integrated into the whole, but able to differentiate and maintain individual boundaries for maturity and growth. At different times in our development, we may swing from one side of the continuum or the other, but it is the tension between the two that keeps us fully human.

Believe it or not, a healthy congregation like any community, needs to create tension, like the wind in the biosphere, to maintain variety and stay flexible and open to renewal. I’m not talking about balance, in which one tries to remain right in the middle. That can lead to stagnation. Instead, the idea is to enable movement back and forth along the continuum of order and freedom as situations arise without succumbing to either extreme. This involves leveraging voices from many sides within a structure of deep listening, acknowledgement of needs and loving care.

When I was a congregational President about 10 years ago, the Board entertained a proposal from a cell phone carrier to erect a cell tower on our church property. We stood to gain \$18,000 a year in rent. There was a lot of legaleeze to navigate to make sure we didn't give up the farm for glass of milk. And there was a small, but very vocal faction in the congregation that was adamantly against it. One of the objectors even had a website about the dangers of cell tower frequency emanations.

As we got closer to the annual meeting things got real tense. A whole bunch of old anxieties from when the building was built came out. It was my job as President to make sure that everyone could be heard, that we uncovered every stone and that we maintained our values and covenant throughout the process. At the meeting, I used a pro microphone and a con microphone and gave everyone a chance to speak for 2 minutes, but they could only come up once. I borrowed those rules from General Assembly. They really work. It took a while, but eventually the congregation felt that they had heard enough comments and voted to call to question, which means no more discussion. And then we voted on the issue. The cell tower was approved by a huge majority.

But that wasn't the end of it. Some people were very upset and threatened to leave. The minister and pastoral care team visited them and listened to their feelings. A few people did leave. Some of the new members were shocked that our community could have such a degree of conflict, but it never got personal or turned into a fight. A lot of growth resulted from that experience. The scrutiny from the objectors helped us to establish favorable terms on our side of the contract. We gained confidence that we could disagree and still be in loving covenant. Personally, I developed leadership skills that I didn't even know I had.

The key to success in a conflict is what Jesus called turning the other cheek. I interpret that to mean that when the conflict begins, do not leave and do not attack. Stay in range of getting hit again, metaphorically of course, not literally, but stay there. Take the risk of not destroying the other person or leaving the scene. As Lao Tzu says, "in conflict be fair and generous. It is better to be receptive than aggressive." That means keeping our egos in check and staying true to the ties that bind us. These are the common goals, history and values that keep a community together. Find that common ground and be willing to give something in order to obtain the greater good of creative interchange.

Conflict is hard, but necessary for vitality. It doesn't need to turn into a fight. At that point everyone loses. Peaceful tension keeps us strong and interconnected with each other. We honor our differences, by speaking up and listening, by showing up and staying in relationship. We live into our role as creative beings when we struggle together as brothers, sisters, friend and foe. That is the true mark of success. Shalom, Amen and Blessed Be.
