

Conflict Transformation
October 14, 2018
Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington

Prayer

from a poem by Marge Piercy

Every day we find a new sky and a new earth
With which we are trusted like a perfect toy.
We are given the salty river of our blood
Winding through us, to remember the sea and our
Kindred under the waves, the hot pulsing that knocks
In our throats to consider our cousins in the grass
And the trees, all bright scattered rivulets of life.

We stand in the midst of the burning world
Primed to burn with compassionate love and justice,
To turn inward and find holy fire at the core,
To turn outward and see the world that is all
Of one flesh with us, see under the trash, through
The smog, the furry bee in the apple blossom,
The trout leaping, the candles our ancestors lit for us.

Fill us as the tide rustles in to the reeds in the marsh.
Fill us as the rushing water overflows the pitcher,
Fill us as the light fills a room with its dancing.
Let the little quarrels of the bones and the snarling
Of the lesser appetites and the whining of the ego cease.
Let silence still us so you may show us your shining
And we can out of that stillness rise and praise.
Amen.

Sermon

When I was early into my ministerial training, one of the requirements I had to fulfill was to get a psychiatric evaluation. I had never undergone such a process before, but the psychiatrist put me through a battery of tests including the mysterious

Rorschach test. I never quite got how you can learn anything from that. All of them seemed to me to be bats or butterflies. But clearly, he thought it would help him get a deeper sense of who I was and my suitability for ministry. I'm sure it will relieve you to know I passed! I don't recall much of what he said except this: he said "You're remarkably equipped to deal with high levels of conflict." And in his view that made me ideal for ministry.

I told a classmate about this, feeling clearly delighted with myself, and my friend said, "You know not everyone would think that was a compliment!" And indeed, not everyone would. We all have different ways of responding to conflict, some of them are just about who we are, and some of them have been learned through either positive or negative experiences. My own family was a case in point. My father's favorite thing to do was to say provocative things just to get me riled up. My mother thought that any conversation that was the slightest bit heated was close to a sin and she was constantly trying to get us to "speak calmly." And my sister would just leave the room.

Many, if not most, people are frightened of conflict and try to avoid it at any cost. Particularly in congregations some people think that the last thing you should be doing in church is disagreeing with someone. I remember someone once saw on my resume that I was a trainer in conflict transformation and she asked where I had learned it. "I'm a minister," I said. "You mean there's conflicts in congregations?" She asked aghast. I responded: "You clearly haven't spent much time in congregations, have you?"

In fact, conflict in congregations is inevitable. In church we talk about our deepest values, and that is actually quite a vulnerable thing to do. When someone questions your values it can almost feel like an attack on our person, because values are at the heart of who we are. And of course there are going to be conflicts of this sort because of one simple fact: we are different from one another. We've had

different experiences, we bring different histories, we come from different cultures, we have different personalities. And that should be a good thing, right? And most of the time it is. No one wants to come to a Stepford church. But when these differences are incomprehensible, when they make us feel judged or misunderstood or not listened to it can be painful, hurtful or even fearful.

Part of what happens is that we bring different assumptions to the table. In fact we bring different assumptions about just about anything. We are meaning-making machines. None of us experiences the world in exactly the same way. We can all, mostly, agree this is a solid surface. Unless you're a physicist that would say nothing is solid. But beyond that there are a million different interpretations we can make about the nature of this surface. Is it brown because we celebrate nature and want things to look natural or is it brown because we don't want something colorful to distract us. Is it a pulpit that is signifying that the minister should be put above all others, or is it a high step because that makes it easier for people to see the minister?

We may have different assumptions about innocuous things like this pulpit and they probably won't lead to an argument. But once we start talking about things we are deeply attached to it can be very hard to see that we actually bring different assumptions to an issue. We call this the Ladder of Inference. It may start with a simple observation but it can quickly turn into a meaning, then an assumption, then a conclusion, and then a belief and then an action. And that action feels entirely justified because we don't realize how high up the ladder we have climbed.

I can give an example. When my college boyfriend and I decided to move in together, my parents, good tolerant UU parents that they were, didn't have a problem with it. But my boyfriend was raised Catholic and his mother was very devout and attached to rules of the church. He therefore took the obvious strategy of simply not telling her until after we had moved in together. When he finally plucked up the

courage to tell her he called her and the first thing she said was “But what about the baby?” A baby? What baby?

After a long conversation where he tried to take her down the ladder of inference it looked something like this: Fact: we had moved in together. But moving in together meant that we were probably sharing a bed. And if we shared a bed we might end up having sex. And if we had sex it wouldn't be protected sex because he was a good Catholic. And if we had unprotected sex I would get pregnant. And if I got pregnant out of wedlock the baby would suffer. So hence: What about the baby?!

We walk up this ladder all the time without even being conscious of it, and when we're teetering about on that top rung and someone else is on their top rung with very different assumptions it can be confusing, or sometimes dangerous. Wars have been waged over disagreements about assumptions. When someone comes at us with a conclusion that is entirely different than ours, we hang onto our conclusions for dear life without questioning how we got there. Think about an argument you may have had because someone took a different position than you did. Did it help to just keep throwing your positions at each other? Not likely, but that's often what we do.

In situations of high conflict, our brains literally shut down. I've geeked out on you about this before, but I hope you'll indulge me a bit in my passion for brain science. When people feel physically or even emotionally threatened to a high degree, what gets stimulated in our brain is the amygdala, or the brain stem. It's the part of our brain that we share with every other living thing, so it's often called the lizard brain. The amygdala sees a threat and it has three basic responses: fight, flight or flee. The world looks very black and white to the amygdala because its trying to make very quick decisions. If you are confronted with an angry snake, you don't want to take the time to analyze what kind of snake it is, or what in its environment might be causing this reaction, you have to make a quick decision. And because of that, the amygdala has the power to literally shut down the rest of the brain. So if you're

expecting rationality from someone in this kind of state, it simply isn't physically possible.

Now let me be clear. Sometimes having the amygdala screaming at you is the right and rational thing. Whether it's because we encounter a snake, or because people are saying or doing racist or sexist things, our self-protective mechanisms serve an important purpose. That being said, being in this state does not allow for mutual learning.

If we manage to calm that amygdala then other parts of the brain can get engaged, particularly those that allow us to feel complex emotions. These parts of the brain are what we have in common with all other mammals, and they allow us to bond with one another, to create connections, to develop empathy; to feel, rather than just react or think. When we can feel connected with one another, then often we are more able to tolerate differences, though it's also possible our desire for connection makes us ignore conflicts or brush them under the rug.

Then there's the Neo-cortex, the part of the brain that allows to think complex thoughts, to consider many possible ideas, to hold conflicting notions without feeling like we have to resolve them. This allows us to feel curiosity, to be open to new learning. But that part of the brain simply can't be accessed if we feel threatened or fearful of losing our connection.

What if, instead of being protective or defensive, we asked the person we're disagreeing with what made them come to that conclusion? And not in a "why in the world would you think that" way, but an honest curiosity. What if, radical idea of radical ideas, we started questioning our own conclusions and positions? What if we came into a disagreement with the belief that disagreements exist because we have something to learn?

This is the heart of the theory of conflict transformation. This is different from conflict resolution because conflicts hardly ever get resolved in the neat and clean

way we think they should. It's different from conflict mediation because it's not about people on each side trying to simply compromise their way out of a problem. Both of these approaches have their place in different contexts. But if we want to work our way through a conflict and keep our relationship intact, it requires a different approach.

Conflict transformation has its roots in many traditions; in fact, every religious tradition has its own form of it. But as a well articulated theory it grows out of the work of John Paul Lederach who was a peace negotiator in highly conflicted places like Ireland and South Africa. The truth and reconciliation process which helped transform South Africa is an example of this process. And while South Africa is hardly a place of complete peace, still, the change of government from a white minority to a black majority happened without a total civil war.

Lederach defines it this way: "Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships." That's a complicated sentence, but let's break it down a little. "To envision" means that we have to set aside our stuck positions and imagine something different that each of us can learn from. "Constructive change" means that together we can build a new understanding and way of being together. "The ebb and flow of social conflict" means conflict will always be there, we will never get to a place of complete peace, but rather we can enter into a dynamic and adaptive way of exploring how we can be together differently.

I learned about this approach from a class I took while doing my doctoral work. But when I became a District Executive I promptly forgot all about it. When I started as DE in the Massachusetts Bay District there were six congregations in high and dangerous degrees of conflict. In one of them I heard that people would greet visitors

at the door and say, “welcome to our church, we hate our minister!” I assumed, that most dangerous of all things to do, that it was my job to go into these situations and help them resolve their issues and mediate their differences. And guess what: it didn’t work. Sometimes I could help take the worst heat out of the system but nothing got really fixed.

Finally, I remembered my training in conflict transformation. So instead of engaging in the well-meaning but essentially egotistical strategy of intervention, I tried a different approach. I started training the congregational leadership in processes of healthy engagement with conflict. Then it became *their* work to do. They owned it. After a few years, there were very few congregations in high levels of destructive conflict. I can’t take full credit for that, of course, but I do know that the congregations that embraced this approach became far healthier and dynamic.

None of this means that I have always been able to adopt these strategies for myself. I wish that were the case! But I have to say the moments of greatest growth in my life have happened when I have set my convictions and positions aside. I think of another particular experience when I was District Executive. The district to the west of Mass Bay was then called the Clara Barton District, and this district had been struggling for years with a lack of financial stability, and a history of dysfunctional leadership. They came to crisis when the UUA had to fire their DE because of financial mismanagement and a lack of confidence in her leadership from many quarters. The then Director of Congregational Life and I decided to approach them to talk about a way of sharing staff and resources to help make things more sustainable.

I walked into their Board meeting prepared with all kinds of assumptions and conclusions and highly rational reasons for why this was the best idea. As the meeting began, however, I looked around at the stubborn and angry faces and realized that this was not the moment to offer rational solutions. For once I was able to set those aside and instead spend a lot of time and energy just listening. When it became clear

to them that we were not going to push them into something they didn't want, they started to process what had happened differently and to start generating some creative ways to work with their situation. What they came to, *on their own*, was something pretty similar to what I was going to propose, but they owned their decision entirely differently because they had developed it themselves. And, I have to say, I even learned some new things about how we could work together that I couldn't have come to on my own.

I would actually describe this as a faith building process, not just a learning one. Because I was able to see and affirm that people have the capacity to grow and change when a community of respect and caring surrounds them.

I could go on about this topic, and I will go on about it if you come to the workshop I'm leading next Saturday. But I want to leave it for now asking us to think about how conflicts here, in this congregation, can actually make us a healthier community, and, in the process, help us become better people.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, the fantastically cool Lutheran minister who created a thriving church called the House for all Sinners and Saints, felt called to minister to people who felt cast away by society because of sexual orientation or gender identity, or addiction or mental illness, people who rarely felt welcome in other churches. She attracted attention by building a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font, or holding rituals like "the blessing of the bikes," knowing that people who have felt left out would not be brought back in by the same old traditions. But as more attention started coming their way, the oddest thing happened: more and more people came and not just the down and out. And Nadia started to get worried and even angry. She said, "We were excited because we were really struggling to grow, but what happened was that it was the wrong kind of people. I mean it was the wrong kind of different for us, right? Like some churches might freak out if the drag queens show up, but these were like bankers wearing Dockers."

She called a friend who gently called her to task for her anger and resistance. He said, "You guys are really good at welcoming the stranger when its a young transgender kid, but sometimes the stranger looks like your mom and dad." And one of her members said, "Look, as the young transgender kid who was welcomed into this community, I just want to go on record saying I'm glad there's people who look like my mom and dad here because they love me in a way my mom and dad can't." All of this set in place what she calls a divine heart transplant. When instead of letting her heart grow cold and stony with conviction, she let it open up to the moments of grace and learning that can happen when we let go.

It's not always possible to approach conflict with this kind of zen-like peace. In fact it often isn't the case. But when we allow ourselves to let this community into our hearts, to open ourselves to new possibilities, to relax our convictions and open our minds, we are on our way to building what can truly be called a faith community.

May it be so.

Benediction

We have great depths within us which we have never plumbed,
Great insight and intuition, great reservoirs of love.
The path to them leads through places of emptiness and fear.
Let us pray for courage and perseverance
 as we seek the treasure of our own hidden places,
 of the faith and trust and hope that lie there.
May we learn the wisdom that begins within ourselves.