

Graceful Conflict

Opening words and Chalice lighting:

Let this light be the light of understanding, the model of balance, the beacon of justice. Let it shine equally on all of us revealing the shadows of difference as another truth.

Welcome and check-in (A time to share what is on your mind in order to clear it and be in the present.)

Reading for discussion

I love those who are angry with me because they care deeply about something they feel I may have hurt.

I love those who criticize me because they need something they think I can give.

I love “whifty” people because their minds are usually in a nicer place than where we think they really are.

I love shy people because they are more like me, really, than the blustery and self-assured people that I love because I know how they feel.

I love the know-it-alls because they know they don’t know what is really important.

I love those who talk too much because I know how much they fear the silence.

And I love the quiet ones because they are usually listening.

I love those who love me – in spite of what they know.

~ Edward A. Frost

Three Lessons (an excerpt from “Graceful Conflict, when you care enough, use the principles of effective fighting”)

1. Conflict is just energy in the system. It is nothing more, nothing less. It is neither good nor bad. It just is. People bring meaning to conflict. How we react to conflict is influenced by personal history, family patterns, cultural norms, and the group’s practices (Crum, 1987).
2. Part of our difficulty with conflict is how we talk about it. We tend to talk about "conflict" as if it is a thing. That means we treat it as if it is static, without regard to gradation, intensity, or process. This is known as nominalization. With conflict – as with love, enjoyment, sadness or any of the emotions we tend to nominalize – there is a starting point, levels of intensity, a cooling off and a transition into another emotional state. In each case, the language which labels these processes as things, freezes these dynamic, activities into static, conceptual abstractions. When groups act on the abstraction, instead of the real stuff, they experience failure and frustration.

Conversely, the more groups use the language of logic, emotion, and process, the greater their awareness and ability to direct and control conflicting energies. Some examples include:

- "We have two opposing views; let’s distinguish between the data and inferences supporting each."

- "I am feeling some despair over our progress."

- "You’ve said the relationship lacks trust. What would we be seeing and hearing if we were trusting one another?"

3. Certain dynamics create energy traps that limit possibilities and contain energy in increasingly destructive loops. Energy traps can establish counterproductive recursive patterns throughout systems. Microphone feedback, grumpiness, and raised voices are examples of reactions that stimulate negative responses. In classrooms, when the teacher's voice intervenes as the volume of the class rises, the class will get louder. If the teacher's voice intervenes as the volume dips, the class quiets.

A common energy trap is fixing what shows, not what is broken. Ours is a quick-fix culture. Mysteries are solved in 30 minutes minus time for commercials. Daily newspaper headlines focus on new solutions for schools, poverty, and crime. Legislative bodies adopt simple solutions for complex problems, often with solutions that have nothing to do with the problem. Fixing what is broken requires a deep understanding of the interacting energies that create undesirable conditions. Expertise in any field is marked by a pattern of spending more time in problem understanding and less in problem solving.

~ *Robert J. Garmston*

Questions for discussion

1. Where or when do we most often need to deal with conflict?
2. What are the tools we need to resolve conflict gracefully?
3. How do we stand up for our beliefs while respecting ourselves and others?
4. What is the value of anger?
5. If there are things we are helpless to change, does it help to recognize them?
6. How can we work to avoid the "energy traps" that Garmston refers to?

Check-out (A time to share likes and wishes, such as "I like how we..." "I wish we would...", or express how you felt about the group.)

Closing words and extinguishing the Chalice: (*You may want to choose only one of the following*)

Return, return to the deep sources, nothing less will teach the stiff hands new ways to serve, to carve into our lives the forms of tenderness and still that ancient necessary pain preserve.
We must go down into the dungeons of the heart, to the dark places where modern mind imprisons all that is not defined and thought apart. We must let out the terrible creative visions.
Return to the most human, nothing less will teach the angry spirit, the bewildered heart, the torn mind, to accept the whole of its duress, and pierced with anguish, at last act for love.

May Sarton

There was a time I would reject those
who were not of my faith.
But now, my heart has grown capable
of taking on all forms.
It is a pasture for gazelles,
An abbey for monks,
A table for the Torah,
Kaaba for the pilgrim.
My religion is love.
Whichever the route love's caravan shall take,
That shall be the path of my faith.

~ *Ibn Arabi*

Thanks to everyone for their participation and commitment to our group!