

The Gift of Conflict – based on a talk given to Ireland Yearly Meeting by Marisa Johnson, Secretary of Europe & Middle East Section of Friends World Committee for Consultation on 31st March 2016

The word most commonly associated with “conflict” in Quaker circles is “resolution”, not “gift”. That tells us something about our predominant attitude towards conflict, which is one of anxiety, or, at best, begrudging acceptance of its inevitability. It strikes me that, in spite of the undeniable discomfort and potential dangers that are inherent in conflict, this natural phenomenon is a necessary part of shared, community life, and brings with it the potential for deepening relationships, for learning, for transformation and spiritual development. Conflict may indeed be regarded as a gift, as revelation of the truth about our condition, as a turning point, an opportunity for “metanoia”, the changing of hearts and minds.

Avoidance and suppression are widespread responses to conflict. Desire for resolution, whilst more constructive and positive as a response, can be equally driven by the anxiety of getting rid of it, as quickly as possible. Anxiety, because the presence of conflict in our relationships, in our communities, seems to undermine our expectation that lives lived in alignment with God's spirit are bound to be blessed by the “fruit of the spirit”, namely love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, so eloquently described by Paul in Galatians 5: 22-23. Conflict, therefore, is seen as a judgement of our inadequacy, the wages of our sin, of our inability, individually and collectively, to live faithful lives, completely and permanently open to the guidance and work of the spirit in and through us. It can even undermine our very faith, as we live the disappointment of recurrent failure of our hoped-for state of shalom, peace-filled wholeness. We strive to design conflict out of our communities, by embracing careful processes of discernment, which have proved effective in the past in finding creative resolutions to complex and divisive issues. We put our faith and trust in these processes, and when they do not work we can quickly blame the fact that people are “not doing it properly”. Blame and scapegoating can quickly follow, with the damage that they bring in their wake.

Appeals to “authority” are a way of resolving conflicts. This route has particular difficulties within Quaker circles, as the location of “authority” itself can be disputed.

Conformity, chosen or imposed, is another strategy to manage conflict and reduce its impact. There is always a price for such a “resolution” - it is likely to be unequal treatment, manipulation, power imbalances, and loss of creativity.

But what is conflict in truth? It is the dissonance that arises from differences of interests, experience, opinions, beliefs. It is an entirely natural phenomenon, associated with the intrinsic diversity on the one hand, and mutual connection of humans and human communities on the other.

The word “conflict” itself, from its Latin root, means “clash”, literally “striking together”, and conveys the sense of a release of energy – think of the closely related word “conflagration”. Of course a sudden and uncontrolled release of energy can be very dangerous, but can you imagine a world without energy, without passion, without drive? Such a state has very little to do with “life” - it is indeed of state of lifelessness, of death. On the other hand, the release of creative energy is the stuff of Life – from the big bang onwards! And the prefix “con” is the “together” bit of the word – relationship is also a necessary component of conflict – no connection, no relationship, no conflict. We have to be close enough for conflict to arise.

If we welcome creativity, energy, connection and relationship as gifts, we need to welcome conflict also, as being intimately connected with all of these. Just as we welcome the gift of fire to keep us warm and cook our food. Yet we are always aware that, out of control, fire can and does destroy.

In order for a conflict to become apparent, it is necessary for someone to care very deeply about something – most people do not seek conflict lightly, so need or passion are necessary to provide the required motivation and energy for conflict to become active. Caring and passion are gifts too.

I sometimes ask myself whether any of the Gospel literature would have been written if there had been a uniformity of understanding of what had happened with/to Jesus, and what it meant for the earliest Christian communities? Most of the letters, especially Paul's, were pastoral addresses, responding to conflict emerging in these communities. Conflicts over practices, over theological understandings, over who was eligible to be part of the community. Sounds familiar?

I draw much inspiration from Paul's letters, as these conflicts forced him to search his own understanding and develop ways of articulating and communicating the deeper truths he had come to grasp through his personal encounter with the risen Christ. I particularly treasure the letter to the Romans, a letter that presents many challenges to some Liberal Friends. In chapter 2 of the letter, Paul addresses his fellow Jews quite bluntly, warning them not to look down on Gentiles who have come to faith in Jesus, because of their ethnic and religious heritage, and not to rely on the Law and ritual to “save” them, but on faithfulness to their source and purpose, through behaviour that is present among Gentiles also. The chapter contains the beautiful image of “the circumcision of the heart” (verse 25) as the real test of discipleship. However, in Chapter 11 Paul addresses the Gentiles, telling them to refrain from discounting the importance of the Jewish heritage – after all, they are just “wild olive shoots, grafted in among other branches, and share in the nourishing sap from the olive root. Do not boast over those branches – you do not support the root, the root supports you” (verses 17 & 18). Paul's advice is not to split into homogeneous communities and worship God according to their different backgrounds and understandings, but to remain connected, to share the faith “of” Jesus, and to “be devoted to one another in brotherly love, honour one another above yourselves, never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.” (Chapter 12: 10-16)

Now, what better advice can be given to those among us who have taken each other to task in the past and still do now on programmed versus unprogrammed worship, pastoral appointments, recording of ministers, quiet-ism versus social activism, outreach or evangelism, Christo-centric versus Universalist tendencies, not to mention today's big dispute over theism and non-theism? Isaac Pennington understood Paul's message well when he drew from Chapter 14 of Romans, writing in 1660: “Even in the apostles' days Christians were too apt to strive after a wrong unity and uniformity in outward practices and observations, and to judge one another unrighteously in those things and mark, if not the different practice from one another that breaks the peace and unity, but the judging of one another because of different practices... And oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers... every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning and loving one

another in their several places...and not to quarrel with one another about their different practices. For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him, and that he walks in his rank, in his own order, in his proper way and place of subjection to that, and this is far more pleasing to me than if he walked just in that track wherein I walk.” (from Quaker Faith and Practice of Britain Yearly Meeting 27.13 & Quaker Life & Practice 9.1)

I believe that it is the peculiar ministry of FWCC among Friends to maintain this vision of unity and to be faithful to the sentiments expressed here. This we try to do by creating opportunities for Friends to come together – as in our recent gathering in Pisac, and offer each other the challenge of sometimes extreme diversity – a testing ground for our testimony of peace and equality. If we cannot live this out amongst ourselves, how can we presume to take this ministry out into the world?

So, what is a faith-based response to conflict? I suggest that rule no. 1 is: don't panic! You are not a bad person or a bad community because you may be experiencing conflict – conflict is a sign that you are alive, so start by giving thanks for that. Welcome the diversity that is bound to be behind the conflict in some way. Next, acknowledge the depth of care and passion that the conflict has revealed, and be thankful for that also. Look for the truth about the conditions that the conflict is exposing – these truths need to be acknowledged, appreciated, honoured. Stay with these truths and feelings: do not seek to sweep them under the carpet in the anxiety of finding a resolution to the conflict too quickly. Make time for exploration, articulation, communication of all facets, building mutual understanding, trust and respect. Challenge works best in the context of strong respectful relationships that create safe spaces in which to take risks. Encourage the emergence of many possible solutions, and try them on for size – do they meet the needs of all involved? Are they aligned to God's gracious generosity and loving compassion? Do they maintain integrity in the face of the truths that are being addressed?

Of course there are situations where conflict is fuelled by emotional distress and sometimes damaged personalities. When this is the case, it is of little purpose to pretend that the conflict is about issues, which can be no more than symptoms, and is amenable to resolution. In many such cases there are very difficult conversations and decisions that may have to be taken to protect the community from exploitation, contagion and

further damage. Compassion is always necessary, but so also is firmness, boundaries, and truthful speaking. Avail yourselves of any resources that may be available, within the community or beyond it.

Finally, we do not have to rely on our own strengths and skills alone – God's mercy and forgiveness are also available to us, if we have the humility to ask for it in prayer – for ourselves, for those who may be hurting others or being hurt, for our community as a whole. Of course this is difficult to say with integrity if we have lost the connection to a personal God that we can name and address through prayer. Perhaps if we articulate this as the setting aside of one's own self, having given it its due loving respectful hearing, in order to be open to listening with humility and imagination to emerging possibilities for the transformation of the conflict, we can connect with those for whom God-language has become a barrier, but who are equally open to the act of faith/trust necessary to participate in the life of our Religious Society. Such reframing is itself an act of love, a reaching out to connect with another, a setting aside of our own preferred mode of expression to understand and be understood.

HYPERLINK "http://livingwithconflict.net/"<http://livingwithconflict.net/> Susan Robson