

One in a series of articles by

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Connecting with others:

SAYING YES

TO THE GIFT OF CONFLICT

Is conflict a need? Is it an essential requirement for the species?

This is a question that often arises in workshop discussions within the context of human interactions. I place conflict in the same category as I place the notions of change and time. Neither change nor time are requirements . . . they are simply givens. Change naturally occurs whether or not we desire it and time is always present no matter how we use it. Conflict is likewise also a given . . . where there is life, there is diversity and where there is diversity, there is always the potential for conflict.

Yet conflict need not be a negative influence as it is often perceived. In the dictionary, conflict is defined as a state of opposition, disagreement, an incompatibility between two or more people or groups of people. It might be helpful for us to expand upon this definition in order to experience a greater realm of possibilities. When approached with openness and curiosity, conflict represents a valuable opportunity for growth and expansion. As an energetic force, we can welcome it without resistance or we can apply resistance and defenses which might play out as avoidance or forceful confrontation. Neither avoidance nor confrontation is damaging per se . . . however the

why and how of our choices and actions either leads to productive or unproductive outcomes down the road. Ideally I would like to be very clear about my intentions in any potential conflict situation. I would like to understand the dynamics at hand as it relates to human nature and develop the communication skills that will help me address differing viewpoints and experiences in ways that are positive and life affirming.

One of the primary elements of conflict is diversity. Two or more differing perspectives come together for some grand dance. I use the word "differing" perspectives instead of "opposing" perspectives because it allows greater spaciousness and steers me into a different place than the word "opposing" does. In and of itself, differing perspectives are not enough to generate a dialogue that ends in frustration and bitterness. What we think and say however will determine whether this meeting of differing perspectives becomes generative or toxic. Thinking thoughts like: "This person is wrong. They don't have the big picture. They have limited information. They can't see or hear the real truth." These are the main ingredients of a bitter dispute. On the other hand, thoughts like: "This is interesting; we have differing perspectives. I'd like to better understand how this person sees things. I'd like to learn and grow from this exchange" . . . these are the makings of a powerfully enriching dialogue, the kind that just may spur things in an entirely new and refreshing direction.

Instead of having "difficult" conversations, let's have "courageous" conversations, "learning" conversations, "growth" conversations, and "exploring" conversations. This is not to deny that conversations involving conflict are often experienced as difficult and challenging. It's important to be



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aware however of how our naming and describing of things can narrow our range of perception and experience placing us on a course that leads to the very outcomes we're most wanting to avoid and/or stopping us all together from experiencing something new. By focusing on one facet, we can easily lose awareness of other facets.

And so, in what fresh ways can we approach conflict that will offer a greater sense of choice and possibility and ultimately an enhanced sense of well-being and connection with others? We might ask: are we arguing or are we exploring? Are we trying to convince another of our viewpoint or are we trying to understand a viewpoint that differs from our own? Are we trying to hold onto our world as it is or are we willing to expand our worldview to include things we would not have considered before?

Author and poet Mark Nepo describes listening as a very deep act. In his words, "To listen is to lean in softly with a willingness to be changed by what we hear." What a gift this is! This is alchemy at its transformational best. In exploratory conversations, if we

release the hold on our stance and see where the current takes us, the truth is we can never be quite sure where we will end up. And this uncertainty can be experienced as disquieting, especially if we are more comfortable with control, security and predictability. It's a real challenge to open to this new way. I encourage people to ride the sensation out however, to relax and lean into their resistance and tune into the sense of aliveness and adventure that is also to be found there. My own personal experience is that the more willing I am to enter this zone, the richer life becomes and the more I experience life as a force that is primarily interested in goodness . . . a force that manifests itself in limitless textures, colours and beauty.

Life has its own wisdom and all we need to do is say yes to the invitation. We live in a world of opposites and yet we also paradoxically live in a world of "wholeness". It is our prerogative to recognize that all opposites emerge from oneness and that the very centre of this still point of emergence is where we want to keep returning if we are committed to our evolution. Oneness includes all and says yes to all. As Joseph Campbell said, "Love informs the while universe, right down into the abyss of hell. . . . Joyfully participate in the sorrows of the world and everything changes." In saying a resounding YES, we grow, we become more inclusive, more still, more whole and compassionate . . . the very things needed to help our beautiful planet and all its inhabitants on the journey towards balance.

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