

"The Blessings of Conflict"
The Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley
Unity Church, Unitarian St. Paul
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Sermon

I am so happy to be with you this morning. I esteem and admire your ministers, both past and present. And I also appreciate all the ways in which this congregation has been a vital witness for how to structure congregational work as a spiritual practice. Many congregations have learned from the ways in which you forge connections both within and beyond these walls.

Quite a number of you showed up yesterday to engage in a deep conversation about how conflict may actually be another one of those kinds of spiritual practice. I appreciated all that you brought to those conversations. And I hope you're still here this morning!

It's especially impressive given that I know you have experienced some deeply painful conflicts in this congregation in the past few years. And I know that you wouldn't still be here if you didn't believe this community and its people are worth it.

I have, for better or for worse, become known as one of the experts in matters of congregational conflicts. An expertise that has come at a great cost at times, as I have had to witness the tragic conflagrations that have severed friendships of decades and made devoted congregational members determined never to set foot in the door again. And, I would also say, that I have witnessed congregational conflicts that have stood out for me as the greatest examples of spiritual growth I could ever imagine. I imagine that there are some among you who are doubtful of this last assertion. I'm hopeful that if I cannot completely convince you that conflict may be a blessing, that you will at least seriously entertain the possibility that conflict may not be all bad.

Let me start with a story of the first kind, a buried conflict which turned toxic. I was just beginning my time as a district executive serving the 56 congregations in the Boston area. I received a call from a minister who was completely panicked. He told me his choir director had suddenly gone rogue and was organizing not just the choir, but other folks in the church, against him. He told me that these people were greeting people at that door by saying, "Welcome to our church. We hate our minister."

Being new to that job I thought I was supposed to come in and interview everyone and bring them all to the table with my recommendations and observations. Then, of course, we could proceed in a reasonable way toward a solution. As you might imagine, that didn't happen. Even before I was ten minutes into my report people started protesting loudly and other people responded just as loudly, and I felt lucky to get away with my limbs intact.

Given all that I now know, and should have known then, about conflict, I should have recognized that people who are in an anxious, angry and defensive state would never be able to take in anything 'reasonable' because their brains were shut down. There was no way this kind of gathering could turn into anything other than a painful and damaging mess.

A more recent example: last spring I came out to the midwest to conduct a workshop on conflict for a minister's gathering. It began in rather typical fashion: everyone went around the circle and gave their check-in, and within 30 minutes I knew that my colleagues were in dire need of finding tools to work with conflict. Fully two thirds of them were experiencing difficult conflicts in the churches they serve, and were at their wits end. Many of the conflicts were about people in their

churches reacting to the proposed revisions to Article 2, our UU statement of purpose. You may remember that this was something presented last June at General Assembly that presents a way of thinking about our purpose that revolves around certain core values, love being at the center of these values.

One minister said that a congregant came to him absolutely furious. The UUA is just trying to force us to do things we don't want to do, and we won't stand for it, he proclaimed. My colleague innocently asked, where do you see that in the report? It's right here where it says "we," he replied. "We" didn't ask for anything like this. And what about having Love at the center of this circle. What's love got to do with religion, anyway?

In both of these instances, these conflicts arose out of real and painful differences. But neither of them could possibly be "fixed" by determining who was right or by making reasonable assertions, What was happening was that these differences were so threatening that they were activating the part of our brain that responds when it feels under threat: the amygdala. I'll say more about this in a moment.

I know that sometimes people can be bewildered that conflicts in churches happen at all. Aren't these supposed to be

places of peace and harmony? Most people who think this aren't the slightest bit familiar with congregations. Conflicts happen because we are different from one another. That should be obvious, and most of the time it isn't a big problem. But the difficulty arises when we feel misunderstood or judged in our differences, and when we can't see a way to reconcile them. Conflicts such as these are never about 'facts.' These kinds of conflicts are about values.

We come to church to explore our deepest values – what do we care about, how can we make meaning of loss and grief, what can we do to bring about change in the world - these are not factual questions; they are values questions, and engaging with them actually makes us pretty vulnerable to one another. When someone questions our values it can almost feel like an attack on our person, because values are at the heart of who we are. Our values are formed by our different personalities and what they make us predisposed to; by how we were raised and taught what was most important to do; the cultures of our families and neighborhoods and professions that subtly form what we think about our lives. But rarely do we actually surface or question our values. They are implicit in how we live and how we interpret the world.

Without really being conscious of it, we make the assumption that everyone sees the world the same way we do. The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, minister of Middle Collegiate Church in New York, said “We are all wired by what we’ve experienced to be in search of a story with an ending . . . that feels like it has a completion. And the stories that we gravitate to are the ones that make sense to us, stories that fit, stories that feel like they have continuity, connection to the past, where we’ve been. . . . Those stories that we will follow are the ones that feel true, feel like they have continuity to our past and that resonate with the trajectory of our lives. So, we’re looking for the story that doesn’t necessarily change our minds; we’re actually looking for the story that confirms what’s in our minds.” So we pay attention to the stories around us that fit our own narrative of meaning, and find ourselves bewildered when other people have a different story that makes sense to them.

We constantly make assumptions about what surrounds us, without even being aware of what we are doing, and those assumptions are necessarily different from one another. Or, as George Saunders said, “I think, therefore I am wrong, after which I speak, and my wrongness falls on someone also thinking wrongly, and then there are two of us thinking wrongly, and,

being human, we can't bear to think without taking action, which, having been taken, makes things worse." When we suddenly are confronted with the fact that others don't see the world the way we do, it can cause a kind of panic that makes us confused, defensive and sometimes angry.

What was happening in those conversations about Article 2 that I mentioned before, was that each person traveled up a different ladder of assumptions to conclusions that were radically different from one another. It was like they weren't even speaking the same language. And offering rational observations were like gasoline on the fire.

Because in situations of high conflict, our brains literally shut down. I'll take a bit of a dive into my favorite subject of brain science for a moment. 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 freeze. The amygdala's purpose is to help you make quick decisions in a crisis, so it offers you only binary choices. If you are confronted with an angry snake, you don't want to take the time to analyze

what kind of snake it is, how beautiful its markings are, 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 begin to 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 help 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 we are often more able to tolerate differences. Interestingly, some of the very behaviors that help us sooth our amygdalas are things we do in church: listening to music, engaging in rhythm, having time for quiet

reflection - all these are actually strategies for helping us recover from traumatic experiences.

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 are 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. Conflict transformation is about trying to let go of our assumptions to get to a place where we can imagine something different, together. It's about recognizing that conflict will always be present but that we can find dynamic and adaptive ways to *respond* to it, rather than dysfunctional ways of *reacting*. I learned about this theory and approach when I was doing my

doctoral work at Hartford Seminary, but it took me several more years beyond that before I started to apply it. After that wonderful meeting with the congregation that “hated their minister” I began to remember this work. Instead of going in and trying to “fix” the conflict I began to teach congregations the skills they needed to work with the conflicts that were always going to be with them. Gradually there were fewer and fewer congregational explosions, and more and more congregations that still had conflicts, but they weren’t destructive and dire.

I remember working with a Board who had the terrible duty to inform the congregation that their beloved minister emeritus had committed sexual misconduct. They were terrified. But they did it in a way that used the many tools of healthy engagement, and afterward, one board member said to me, I feel more spiritually connected to this church than I ever have before, because of the wonderful ways we have been able to show up for one another, even in our anger and grief.

And that congregation that used to hate their minister? The minister did leave. They spent several years working on their relationships with one another. And then called a new minister that is (almost) universally loved and who is still there 20 years later. Things do get better.

I wish all this work in this arena has helped *me* to behave perfectly all the time! Alas, that is not 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 and opened myself to truly listening and learning from others. I have had to learn the hard way that the point is not to be *right* all the time. The point is how to be *effective* in building relationships and solutions together.

It's not always possible to approach conflict with hope and expectation. In fact it often isn't the case. Especially now when our partisan anxieties are completely ablaze. It's hard for me to imagine really being in a learning space right now with someone from the "opposite side." But when I start to despair about that I try to wind myself back down to the place I live *now*. The community I work within *here*. If we can start to learn a different way of being starting with ourselves, 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 to one another, we are on our way to building what can truly be called a faith community. And we can then be on our way to building a better world.

May it be so.

Benediction

Alicia Forde

When we pause to remember who we are:
companions on this grand experiment called life,
when we take a moment to shed the ways we have been
carefully taught: to lead from fear . . .

. . . to believe that we are separate . . .

When we take a moment to shed all of that and hear our stories,
...when we take a moment to embrace . . . to practice a different
way of being . . . then we are living into the promise of building
the world we dream about.. . . seeking to be transformed, even
as we transform. Becoming explorers and learners in this world
around us, humbled by what we do not yet know, fulfilling the
promise of healing a fragmented world, laboring not just in
hope . . . but also in Love. In this spirit, we commit. In this spirit,
... we pray.