

Ken Cloke on Conflict at the General Assembly 2011

My experiences with conflict fall under two categories. The first is when I went as a young man into the Southern United States to work against prejudice and discrimination in Southern Alabama and Georgia. I was arrested, tear-gassed, beaten. I experienced all the elements of conflict that came out of that immense struggle.

For the second half of my life over the last 30 years I have been a mediator and I work with people who are in conflict and I have resolved thousands of disputes in that period of time.

So what have I learned from both these experiences?

They seem completely contradictory and yet there are fundamental lessons we can take from all of those experiences – from our own experiences of conflict and from those amazing experiences of resolution.

In the first place I have learned that there is no ‘them’, only ‘us’.

Second, I’ve learned that by separating ourselves from others we become internally divided, blinded, angry, separated from our own true essence and less capable of love.

Third, I’ve learned that every effort to close our hearts to others only makes us more heartless.

Fourth: that by opening our hearts and minds as completely as we are capable of doing unites us not only with others who are outside of ourselves but it also unites us with internal parts of ourselves that have been divided.

Finally, that every conflict represents a crossroads; every conflict is a spiritual crisis that points us directly at what we most need to learn. Every conflict is therefore a gift, a source of connection, an opportunity to open our hearts, to become larger than we were before and to discover that there is something greater that emerges, that we understand when we hear that the whole is greater than the sum of our parts.

So how exactly do we do this? I think the first answer is by the golden rule which every one of us knows – do unto others what we would have done unto us, except that we need to go further and recognise that what we do to others we do to ourselves and what we do to ourselves we eventually do to others.

There is a French poet, his name is Apollinaire. He writes, “People’s hearts are poorly smothered fires. They open and shut them like doors. But I believe that people are capable of opening their hearts, keeping them open and leaving them open as best they can. How do we do this? I believe the answer is kindness. So here’s a poem by a woman whose name is Naomi Shehubni, a Jewish poet who writes:

“Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things;
feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand, which you counted and carefully saved,
All this must go so you can know how desolate the landscape can be between the
regions of kindness.
Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake with sorrow,
you must speak to it til your voice catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense any more,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world
to say it is I you have been looking for
and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.”

Isn't it beautiful?

So how do we do this in the presence of conflict?

I think what we do is that we discover that conflict is a question that is asking itself of us. What it is asking us to do fundamentally is to become a hero in our own lives and I would like to end with another beautiful statement by a poet whose name is Maise Harper who said, “Sometimes it is necessary to be a hero just in order to be an ordinary, decent human being.”

Every conflict asks us to become a hero, to rise above those difficult ways that are so easy for us to follow and pursue what I believe is the path of the spirit, that is the same as the path of the heart.

So I wish you wonderful and constructive conflicts.