

On Conflict, Caring, and Community
The Rev. Sue Spencer
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury
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Perhaps you're wondering about my sermon topic today. You may be thinking, "Hmmmmm - what am I missing? Is there a specific *reason* Sue has chosen to preach about conflict this Sunday? Did something happen to provoke this topic?"

So let me reassure you: The answer is no, I had nothing specific in mind. Certainly, in the eight months I've been in Danbury, I've seen *disagreements* come up and be dealt with. It all seems pretty normal and healthy, and I'm not even sure any of it rises to the level of "conflict." I also know that UUCD has had a few controversies arise in recent years – and has dealt with them very well.

Nevertheless, in my work with congregations over the years, the theme of conflict *always* comes up in some form. Thus it's worth addressing in the course of this interim ministry – and perhaps best to start the conversation when things are relatively calm.

It's inevitable – and normal - for disagreement to arise in congregational life. It's what happens when people have different convictions, or different interests. Sometimes, of course, the disagreement picks up steam, and becomes more intense. When this happens, some people get very nervous.

"What's happening to us?" they may ask. "Something's gone wrong. We're supposed to be a *caring community* – but here we are in *conflict*." They worry, and feel threatened. Some people even become disillusioned, and drift away. If a congregation is in conflict, they conclude, it's not really a caring community.

I've had some of those feelings myself, especially when I was a relatively new layperson, and then a new minister. But over the years, I've come to see things differently. For me, one of the turning points actually came from a workshop title! It was part of a weeklong seminar in clergy self-care, given by Roy Oswald, one of Alban Institute's veteran consultants. The title of one of Roy's sessions made my ears perk up, and it's stayed with me ever since: "The Necessity of Conflict in Your Church."

The *necessity* of conflict. Not its inevitability, and not how to deal with it, but its necessity! Roy, in fact, told the assembled colleagues, "If you don't have conflict in your congregations, you're not really doing your job."

What did he mean by that? Roy is actually a rather quiet, peaceful sort of person. I don't *think* he was telling us to go back to our congregations and deliberately stir things up! Rather, I think he was suggesting that congregations without conflict are not fully alive. The seeming lack of tension or conflict in an organization may not be a sign of peace. It may simply mean that people don't have the freedom to express their individuality, their thoughts, their concerns. It may mean that the organization is afraid of diversity. Or, it may mean that the congregation is hiding from issues in the wider community.

Conflict is a necessary part of growth and change. We don't grow unless we encounter someone "other" than ourselves – someone different from ourselves, someone who challenges our assumptions. Loren Mead, who founded Alban, puts it this way: "Real life involves a passionate dialogue, a dynamic interaction – a push and pull, a give and take..." If there's no conflict, it may mean we're staying on the surface. We're not being our true, authentic selves.

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Conflict, in itself, is not a problem. The problem comes when we don't know how to do it well. And in fact, most people haven't learned the art of doing conflict well. It *is* an art. It takes practice. And it's not taught in many places.

What are the unproductive ways of dealing with conflict? It seems to me that they fall into two basic categories. First, there are various means of unnecessary *escalation* – ways to fan a small flame into a conflagration. What might have been "creative tension," an occasion for problem solving, turns into something difficult or intractable.

Character assassination is one tactic of escalation. Others are blaming and scapegoating – projecting negative qualities onto another, while ignoring our own shadow. Another is ascribing sinister motives to people who disagree with us, or who do something of which we disapprove.

Yet another destructive tactic is "triangulation." This involves gossip, or complaining about a person to third parties – instead of going directly to the person with whom we're upset. Still another is insisting on our own way at all costs, instead of seeking the good of the whole.

Other unproductive approaches involve not escalation, but rather conflict *avoidance*, or conflict suppression. As it happens, I myself am a recovering conflict-phobe! Conflict-avoiders seek peace at any price. Sometimes they even try to stop conflict before it starts. They do this by ignoring their own needs – "de-selfing" in the lingo of family therapists. Or they suppress contrary thoughts before they rise to the surface. Or by rushing to placate a person who shows signs of anger. Conflict-avoiders pass over difference, or minimize it. And they do this even in UU congregations, which claim to celebrate diversity.

Not that conflict avoidance is always bad. Sometimes it's a very good tactic! In many situations, forbearance is the wisest course – especially when an issue is relatively minor.

But what if the issue *is* important? What if forbearance isn't a conscious decision, but instead a reflex based on fear? What works as an occasional tactic isn't always helpful as a long-term strategy. It doesn't lead to peace - only to what some have called "cheap peace."

When cheap peace reigns, so much is sacrificed on its altar: selfhood, individuality, necessary challenges – and even truth. Ultimately, cheap peace is not cheap at all – it's very expensive. It achieves seeming tranquility at the expense of vitality. It results in deadness and boredom.

It's also deadly to community. That's ironic, of course. Usually when we seek cheap peace, it's in the name of *preserving* community! We worry that difference and disagreement will pull the community apart, and so we find a way to put the lid on. But authentic community isn't

threatened by difference, or by thoughtful disagreement. The only community *actually* threatened by this what M. Scott Peck calls “pseudo-community.”

Peck makes this point in his book *A Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). This book is based on his experiences leading workshops, all over the country, in community building. Through his work, Peck has concluded that creating community is a journey, with several well-defined stages.

Pseudo-Community is the initial stage. If you’ve ever been to an intense workshop or retreat, you’re sure to recognize it. It’s that first rush we get in certain groups: “WOW!! Isn’t it great that we’re all here together as like-minded people.” These are perfect strangers we’re with – but it’s as though we’ve known them forever.

It doesn’t take long to learn that this is an illusion. Scott Peck suggests that, if we’re at that place, it simply means “we’re being extremely pleasant with one another, and avoiding all disagreement.” We’re on our best behavior, and not saying anything that might rub someone else the wrong way. The result? Communication that is “polite, inauthentic, boring, sterile, and unproductive.”

Sophisticated people are extremely skillful at creating pseudo-community. Peck describes a workshop he conducted in Greenwich Village, made up entirely of psychologically astute people. All of them had done the rounds of psychotherapy and encounter groups. “Within minutes,” Peck says, “they were sharing deep, intimate details of their lives. And during the very first break, they were already hugging. POOF – Instant Community.”

But, Peck remembers, “Something was missing. At first, I was delighted, and I thought, ‘Boy, this is a piece of cake.’ But by the middle of the day, I began to grow uneasy, and it was impossible to put my finger on the problem. I didn’t have the wonderful, joyful, excited feeling I always have in community. I was, in fact, slightly bored.”

To move the group along, Peck had to become the *provocateur*. He had to find a way to instigate conflict, to bring differences to the surface. This catapulted the group out of pseudo-community, into the next stage, *Chaos*.

Pseudo-community and Chaos manifest two different strategies for dealing with difference. People in pseudo-community try to ignore difference, or to gloss over it. In contrast, people in chaos try to obliterate it.

A group descends into chaos when people are forced to confront difference. They begin to see, “This community stuff isn’t as easy as I had thought. We’re not as alike as we thought we were.” When this happens, people tend to get anxious. In turn, their anxiety leads them to try to fix things – or to fix other members of the group, to “heal and convert” them.

Hallmarks of the chaos stage are phrases like these: “The trouble with this group is...” Or, “if you would only see things my way, we wouldn’t be having these problems.” Soon the dynamic generates into “an irritable and irritating, thoughtless, rapid-fire, and often noisy win/lose type of process that gets nowhere.”

This stage of community can go on for quite a long time. People aren't likely to snap out of it, either - until a certain realization dawns: All of those attempts to change other people, to heal or convert them to our point of view, *aren't working*. When we realize this, what do we do? There are basically three options: Everyone may leave the room – game's over. They may retreat into pseudo-community, feeling bored but safe. Or, if grace is at work, they may decide to hang in there with each other, despite the differences.

If we take that third path, we enter a new place. Scott Peck calls it *Emptiness*. This is an extremely uncomfortable place to be. When we're there, we realize that we don't have all the answers – or if we do have answers, they're good only for ourselves, not for the whole group. We also discover that we can't fix anyone else – the only person we have any hope of changing is ourselves. We surrender to the reality that we're in community with other people - and that these others *insist* on being themselves!

If we can stay in this uncomfortable place, then we open the door to something new. We begin to let go. We let go of “prejudices, snap judgments, fixed expectations. We let go of the desire to convert, heal, or fix. We let go of the urge to win, the fear of looking like a fool, the need to control.” We also do something else. We begin to risk bringing our tender, broken selves to the table.

This emptiness is the springboard for *True Community*. How does it happen? Peck describes it as a kind of miracle:

“[One] member will speak of something particularly poignant and authentic. Instead of retreating from it, the group now sits in silence, absorbing it.

“Then a second member will quietly say something equally authentic. She may not even respond to the first member, but one does not get the feeling he has been ignored; rather, it feels as if the second member has gone up and laid herself on the altar alongside the first.

“The silence returns, and out of it, a third member will speak with eloquent appropriateness. Community has been born.” That is, *genuine* community has been born, where people are safe to speak and act from the deepest levels of being.

Conflict doesn't disappear from true community. Rather, true community is a place where both “caring” and “conflict” are embraced. True community is alive and intense, because everyone brings his or her full self to the conversation. But true community is also safe – because the atmosphere is one of deep respect.

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As a congregation, we hold up the ideal of loving community. And indeed, love is an enduring community's heart and soul. But love isn't always what we make it out to be.

There's a widespread tendency to equate being “loving” with being “nice.” But compulsive niceness, as distinct from true kindness, is lethal to love. Niceness breeds dishonesty, while love requires, in Peck's words, “a strict and accurate regard for the truth.”

Love means “honoring genuine feelings, and hard-won convictions.” The poet T.S. Eliot calls love “the intolerable shirt of flame.” Anne Sexton calls it “the wild card.”

When we settle for something less than love – for niceness, or cheap peace – then we may think we’re creating community. But all we’re really doing is sacrificing “pity, joy, grief and passion” – to quote spiritual writer Alan Jones.

Disagreement and conflict – if conducted in an atmosphere of caring and respect – can be a sign of hope in community. If we don’t let it frighten us, if we hang in there with one another – it can be a sign that we’re moving to a new level of being together. If we conduct it respectfully, regarding the inherent worth and dignity of the other, then conflict may make us stronger and more creative.

As our Universalist forebear Hosea Ballou reminds us, “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury. But if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.”