

The Practice of Understanding

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There are many directions the human mind can take; but the most exacting and rewarding is toward another human being. There is hazard in taking this direction, as there is hazard, for that matter, in all use of our human powers. Living itself has to be counted as an act of faith; and there is a faith appropriate to every venture life offers.

The faith appropriate to the drama of approach to one another is that where mind meets mind, the rewards of mutual discovery and the satisfactions of mutual confidence are worth all the risks.

However, while the willingness to venture and to run the risks that go with venturing is necessary, there is no reason why the manner of the mind's going forth to meet other minds -- even those that widely disagree -- should not be as expert as any other well-learned skill. In this greatest of our undertakings, there is no virtue in being clumsy.

To be skilled in our approach to other minds does justice to them and to ourselves. It lets us pay respect to what is subtle and unique in each human being. Man must live with man. He or she does well to make generous room for his or her fellow man or woman; and she or he may rightly hope that generous room will be made for him or her.

The voice of anger is louder than the voice of love; that of fear more strident than that of understanding. Mental and emotional values, however, are not measured in decibels of sound. Life is not more dramatic in noise than in silence, in conflict than in peace.

Most of us know this -- though we often seem to forget it. We know it from experience. The moments when we have most keenly felt the astonishment of life have not been those when someone was calling someone else a fool, or out-shouting him or her in argument, or knocking her or him down. They have been those in which we have met understanding in some unexpected place. It is in such moments that we have felt within ourselves the sudden upsurge of life's possibilities; and it is where understanding and shared purpose have been built into a going relationship that life feels good at each day's return.

Unless we are deeply disturbed in our emotional make-up, we know that destructive conflict is a poor substitute for the adventures of searching things out together. There may be a crescendo of noise and action when two people get going in argument and pass from angry words to angry blows. Yet far more is actually happening more human powers are at work when two people, finding themselves on the edge of angry argument, veer away from that edge and sit down to talk things over-until, finally, one of them gets up, takes a few turns back and forth, stops and looks down at the other, and says quietly, "Yes . . . I think I understand."

We recall here a cartoon. It shows two duelists standing back to back, poised for the signal that will make them pace off the fatal distance from which they must shoot to kill. All is in order for one of the traditional, formalized dramas of conflict. Their seconds, standing in the background now, have seen to the proper preliminaries. All is in order . . . except that one duelist has turned his head enough to say wistfully to the other, over his shoulder, "I don't feel very insulted this morning, do you?"

He does not feel very insulted. Yet in a few moments he may be dead. For the drama of conflict does not easily set free even those who start it, once it has taken over and cast them as its victims.

It would be impossible to estimate the number of human lives and relationships that have ended in ruin because individuals, groups, and nations that no longer feel "very insulted," but only tired and trapped, still see nothing to do except pace off, as it were, the final irrevocable steps to disaster.

However useful and stimulating, in brief, conflict may be as an emergency measure, it can never serve as the sustaining drama of life. It too easily brings all parties involved to a point where pride, fear, and an inability to see any choice except to "liquidate" or "be liquidated" make broad the way that leads to destruction.

In this day when we have new psychological insights to work with, we can perhaps take a fresh look at this oldest of problems. We can ask why we so frequently get ourselves into hostile situations from which we cannot then extricate ourselves.

One answer seems to lie in the way we set up our alternatives. Whenever our will is pitted against that of another person, we tend to move into the rigid pattern of winning or losing; of overcoming or submitting; of saving our pride or being humiliated; of proving ourselves right or being proved wrong. What this means, in effect, is that our sense of personal integrity is staked on how much fighting strength of one kind or another we can marshal, rather than on how close we can keep ourselves to the realities of a situation.

The importance of changing our mental image from that of winning or losing to that of understanding or misunderstanding can scarcely be overestimated. It may well be the very thing on which the survival of the race depends. Certainly it is that upon which a multitude of human relationships depend; for if we began to feel as embarrassed about misunderstanding another person as we now feel about having her or him prove us weak or mistaken, the whole focus of our pride would change. We could then no longer preen ourselves on our simple capacity to argue him or her down or knock him or her down: recourse to such methods would mean that we had gone off half-cocked or had somehow fallen short of a proper engagement with the allover facts and values that are at stake.

When people talk about man as a combative creature, much of what they say is beside the point. The real question is not whether conflict -- self-defensive, oppositional, competitive -- is ever "natural" and necessary, but how much of it is necessary and under what conditions. Our common trouble is that we tend to think of it as a first resort where there is disagreement or antagonism, instead of as a last resort. Thus, to a quite needless extent we let it take over our personalities and our practices.

The reason why conflict in any of its destructive forms should be regarded as last resort is that it has at most a limited utility. If it gets out of hand, it loses even that. It then becomes not life preserving but life-inhibiting and even life-destroying. On the other hand, the utility of understanding is unlimited. It opens up further and yet further vistas of aliveness.

When a personality or group is strongly slanted toward understanding and good will -- as in a sound family -- it can accommodate its share of conflicts without letting them get out of bounds in either their intensity or their spread. Such conflicts rarely do the sort of harm that cannot be undone. They do not get wholly out of hand; nor do they spill over to permeate with open or latent ferocity all relationships and undertakings. They remain conflicts limited.

Where, on the other hand, a personality or group is strongly slanted toward conflict -- so that attention and energy are more often focused by fear and hostility than by confidence and good will; and where the maintenance of pride and security is made to depend upon winning and dominating -- disaster lies ahead. Such a personality or group will more and more insistently start what it cannot finish, and will tear down what it cannot rebuild; and as the tensions of conflict become the very condition of its being, it will progressively deny itself the types of growth by which it might save itself.

What do we mean, in psychological terms, when we say that conflict has only a limited utility and, if not kept well within bounds, loses even that?

Take a family quarrel, for example. This particular quarrel began, perhaps, as many do, in a disagreement too small to matter -- or so it would seem. It has taken on size, however, from the hurt pride of each party and the growing determination of each to prove his point and have his own way. Now husband and wife, tense with rage, spit out bitter reproaches; call each other names; drag up past mistakes; generalize each other's faults: "You never ..." and "You always ..."

With tempers and prides thus at fever pitch, what can happen? Or, to start with, what cannot happen? The latter question is easily answered: the quarrel cannot continue for long at its present level of intensity. It has to stop being what it is and become something else.

It may become a thing of the past -- with anger swallowed up in affection, mutual respect, and a shared sense of the stupidity of the whole thing. That is to say, the drama of conflict may be superseded by the drama of understanding.

Or it may become a thing of the future, developing through stages of bickering, nagging, stiff silence, and recurrent rage to the point where the home becomes a perpetual battlefield or is broken up by divorce.

We may well agree that differences of opinion -- even occasional angers -- are a normal part of family life. Within the close confines of the home, someone is sure, at times, to get on someone else's nerves. Prides are sure to be ruffled. Desires bred of mood and preoccupation are certain, many times, to pull individuals in opposite directions: no one will always want to lay down his book or his tools at the precise moment when someone else says it is time to be up and going somewhere. Things that seem important to one person who has been privately thinking about them for days --

may be brushed aside as unimportant by another person who is told about them for the first time. Some things that are said are sure to sound sharp and unperceptive.

The utility of such disagreements, however, is certainly limited. They may seem now and then to clear the air. But they do so only if they are infrequent, and if they end when they end -- with no destructive aftermath of sulks, broodings, hurts, and resentful daydreams about getting even. They invite disaster when they become either chronic or extreme in violence: whether because no one knows how to put an end to them, or because one party or the other is neurotically incapable of feeling stimulated by the drama of peace and wants quarrels and reconciliations to punctuate what he would otherwise experience as a boring dead level of life.

Or we can turn from private conflict to public. Politically, we believe in a two-party system. We believe that there are always enough legitimate differences of viewpoint and enough truth on both sides of most issues to make a one-party system a coercive monstrosity. We believe that periodic campaigns conducted along party lines, and the steady division of legislative bodies into majority and minority groups, make for soundness. They keep those in power and those out of power on their mental toes, and prevent any one group from having exclusive command of the public ear and mind. Here, within limits, the drama of conflict appears normal and healthy. This is organized conflict, with rules of order.

But again if conflict limited becomes conflict unlimited, disaster is the outcome. We say that one person's freedom leaves off at another person's nose. There is a similar point at which partisanship must leave off -- if it is not to destroy the frame of its own existence. It has to leave off where the common welfare begins. Also, it has to stop short of those extremes of partisan self-eulogy and denunciation of opponents that move outside the frame of reality: excesses that treat politics as exempt from ethical standards; that make rancor and distrust the order of the day; that call black white and white black if party loyalty dictates; that exploit national problems for partisan ends; that cynically revise history for the sake of making campaign capital; and that foster in a weary public the readiness to say, "A plague on both your houses." It has been remarked that every political party dies in the end of swallowing its own lies. We can be fairly sure that where such suicide occurs, healthy partisanship has already been replaced by conflict unlimited.

Excerpted from ***The Mind Goes Forth: The Drama of Understanding***, Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, W. W. Norton & Company, 1956.