

A New Way of Communicating

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It has often been said that we Americans are "doers" . . . that we tend to be uncomfortable with inaction. It is true, I think, that we prefer to avoid the gray and grainy "in between" in favor of a more decisive "either-or" approach to life. This is, in part, why the September 11th tragedy has been so hard for us a nation. We want to take action and get on with our lives.

Spending months dwelling on the tragedy, painstakingly pondering all the questions that this crisis evokes, fills many of us with impatience. And yet psychologists and spiritual teachers tell us that times of suffering and darkness can lead to growth and moral deepening, provided we pay attention to what is happening inside us and learn from it. One way to do this, I think, is to talk--really talk--in open and respectful ways--about our personal responses to the unfolding global crisis.

This can be very hard to do especially when we have strong and divergent views and feelings. Often our attempts to have conversations on tender issues end in failure. Imagine, for example, that you are sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner and you decide to put a big juicy question on the table right along side the cranberries and mashed potatoes. Several questions come to you:

--Would Jesus bomb Afghanistan?

--Is disagreeing with our government's bombing of Afghanistan unpatriotic?

--Who is "winning" the present war? What does it mean to "win?"

--Is it possible to build a bomb that will extinguish hatred?

You hesitate. Which question? Your stomach is knotted. Finally, you clear your throat and ask: "Is anyone concerned about the erosion of our civil liberties that is now occurring as a result the Afghan war?" There is a pause and then your father says that your question is absurd--this war is about fighting for our civil liberties, not losing them. Your uncle then chides you for being naive. Your brother-in-law says this is not a time for doubt; we all need to line up behind the President. Your sister leaves the room. The conversation returns to sports. You have been silenced.

At a time when our nation has been violently assaulted and our leaders are responding with their own brand of violence, it is sobering to realize that the very words that we use in conversation can lead to hurt and pain and, in their own way, are a subtle form of violence.

But our attempts to have meaningful conversations about the things that really matter need not end in failure. Edward de Bono in his recent book, Parallel Thinking, notes: "Instead of [our typical] conversations which are really arguments where opinions clash. . . and the "best man" wins, a GOOD conversation employs a kind of parallel thinking where ideas are laid down alongside each other, without any interaction between the contributions. There is no clash, no dispute, no true/false judgment. There is instead a genuine exploration of the subject from which conclusions and decisions may then be derived."

This type of authentic conversation requires both radical honesty, as we speak from the heart, and genuine humility, as we attend to others with respect and empathy. It works when we are able to acknowledge that we only have our personal experience to draw from and that this experience allows us to see and understand only a small part of what is happening.

I recently had the opportunity to experiment with this method of caring communication. I sat with seven others in a circle. We were ethnically diverse and we had only just met. Our host posed the question: "How might you become the peace that you wish for the world?" We sat in silence thinking. Eventually our host picked up the "talking stone" that was in the center of our circle and offered her personal reflections. She then repeated the question and handed the stone to the man next to her. He spoke slowly, knowing that no one would interrupt. Indeed, we all knew that we would have a turn to speak (or pass) and that now was the time to listen to each other's words and to attend to what these words stirred in us (e.g., anger, judgment, frustration?). The stone went from person to person, each of us speaking and then repeating the question as we relinquished the stone. With each round the sharing became richer and

deeper. Suspending our need to "win" the conversation or to "solve" the problem, we were able to go deeply down into the heart of the question.

This was a very different experience for me. I felt listened to and when others spoke I was able to hear things that normally I would have blocked out. It was exhilarating to fully sense that the truth did not lie with any one of us, but between and among the perspectives of all of us gathered. Indeed, it was as if we were all listening to each other and thinking: You are my brain, my heart, my soul; to know myself, I have to know you.

Many are asking what they can do as the tragedy of September 11th continues to unfold. My suggestion: Pass the "talking stone" and have heartfelt, caring conversations about the things that really matter in our lives.