

Healing the hardened heart and mind...

Though conflict transformation has become a field of knowledge involving teaching, study, skills-training and research, at its heart it involves truth-telling in the midst of painful human conflicts, moving people to mutual understanding, forgiveness, and the healing of broken relationships. We often witness this powerful process of transformation in our work with churches, government agencies, community groups and many more.

In mediating relationships plagued by systemic problems such as racism and other forms of injustice we often peel away layers and layers of misunderstanding, misperception, hurt, anger and distrust accumulated over time, sometimes very complex in nature. Complexity arises for instance, from lack of trust, the difficulties of truth-telling, obstacles posed by different perceptions, different needs, interests, value systems, power imbalances, and so forth. In these situations, conflict transformation offers parties the opportunity to listen and acknowledge their pain and anger, to reach out to one another, and move the conflict beyond stalemate and bitterness.

Addressing such systemic injustices requires even more, a process of gradual truth telling. For parties to hear the story (ies) from the other side requires openness for another's perspective. In this way one's own story gets shaped and clarified by the other's story, the sharing of their experiences and perception of their "truth". The power of this conversation is revealed when parties recognize their limited understanding of the truth... "Oh, I didn't know about this or that..." or "Listening to you helps me understand better what happened... why you made those decisions and why you did what you did..." or "I didn't realize how my actions have impacted your life..."

Such truth-telling and mutual understanding provide a wonderful opportunity for yielding the hardened heart and mind, coming to compassion and forgiveness, starting a new relationship where justice and integrity become the values and building blocks for a new journey.

More opportunities are needed to engage one another in this way, in the telling of one's truth: the horror of the injustice, the intentional or unintentional participation in, and benefiting from injustice and the painful results of injustice. More opportunities are needed to take the risk and reach out to the other, the one to whom one feels estranged.

Perhaps then, in time, we might develop a culture with the ability to pause and listen for understanding before we judge and alienate each other, a culture with empathy to engage in real conversations as oppressor and oppressed, a culture that moves beyond the impossible, beyond feelings of anger or resentment. Perhaps then, we might find it possible to address injustice and acknowledge when we have wronged others, find the willingness and courage to make things right and sees what is possible and human in them.

Change, however, does not occur because one or two individuals have emerged to do all this. It requires collective action and giving birth to many such moments of truth-telling, forgiveness and healing...

Peace

Margaret Keyser