

Disagreeing Gracefully
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I heard a story last week.

The story came from a guy who, once upon a time, was the inmate chaplain for the Christian prisoner's ministry.

That is to say, while he was in prison, he had found religion, seriously, and risen to a level of authority and respect; was designated by his peers and the officials as a faithful Christian leader.

Here's the story:

one day, he was walking along in the yard next to the inmate chaplain for the Muslim prisoner's ministry.

They were talking together, heads leaned in, footsteps echoing on the concrete, chatting about whatever -their lives, their ministries, the weather that day.

And the other prisoners looked at them, and thought, what are they doing together?

The Christian chaplain —now out of prison and a minister to a congregation

- told us how important this was, to show that in a world where the message is: we hate each other,

the real message: We're all bound together, kin to each other

we can respect each other and connect across our differences,

that the content of our creeds matters nothing compared to the conduct of our lives.

Here's a another story.

The activist gets up early, and goes to the civic meeting. Most of the folks there are business people, small government conservatives.

They talk about lowering the tax burden and making the business climate better.

They also talk about how businesses can support effective social service agencies, and how they can reduce sprawl and improve the city, which is why the activist keeps going to these meetings and adding her voice. The folks don't always agree, but they are glad she shows up.

After that meeting, the activist goes to the union hall for a meeting on the minimum wage.

Someone suggests that they hang an effigy of a stuffed suit at the next protest, those greedy capitalists, and the activist says, no, we need to convince them, not shame them.

They argue about this, but listen to each other, and when the activist suggests that all the minimum wage workers come to the protest in suits, themselves, to make the point: we matter just as much as the owners, just as much as everyone else, the group agrees that this is the way to go.

Here's one more:

Last year, Roberta didn't go home for Thanksgiving. She said to her brother, who was the host for the gathering,

that there was too much politics at the table, and she felt beat up by all the bashing and the jokes. And she was missed.

And the family agreed: we'll be kind.

If it comes up, we can talk about it, but we'll agree to disagree,

and we will listen more than we talk, and we'll try to be nicer.

This November, she's planning to go:

though she's nervous about it,

but she wants to see her nieces,

and there's a new grand-nephew and she won't miss that for the world.

And she hopes it'll be better—

that they can be real with each other, but without the mocking tones of two years ago.

That they can share from their heart, rather than their talking points.

The chaplains.

The activist.

The aunt.

They are people of grace.

People who see life as a gift, and try to live accordingly.

Who try to be kind and inclusive to others.

They are graceful people, in the way they treat others, without compromising their most cherished values and beliefs.

And they do something remarkable in our culture:

they disagree gracefully.

They disagree gracefully.

They see disagreement as a gift, as a grace, an opportunity to learn and grow and discover more truth,

and they have the grace of both honesty and forgiveness, so they can be honest without burning their bridges.

They have, or at least, they are trying to have, the gift of love.

They may or may not speak with bravest fire,

but they are coming to see, to live, that they must be given by love within,

or that fire, meant to warm the hearts,

will burn out of control.

I think you can tell a lot about a person by how they disagree.

We all have our own strategies.

Some of us get more aggressive, more strident. How dare someone believe otherwise!

We shut down our ability to listen. We speak our own truth louder. Sometimes this is OK, actually, when justice or safety is clearly and unambiguously at stake, when you've historically been silenced, go ahead, shout it out - but usually this doesn't get anyone anywhere.

Others of us become passive: we withdraw, change the subject, say, "whatever" and don't engage. Sometimes, too, this is OK: safer, more polite, a temporary tactic to buy time and get your research together.

Some of us step back from the conflict and try to find common ground,
or to contextualize the issue into the bigger picture. This can be helpful sometimes, too,
for we often only think we're fighting, when, really, we agree on the fundamentals,
or, often, we're not really even talking about the same thing.

That's my most common strategy -let's step back. But I do the others, too:
gear up for the fight, or back down.
Engaging with people on-line, as many of you know, makes it awfully easy to do the "fight, shout, yell" strategy.

When you're not face-to-face, you can forget that it's a person there.

When I don't trust the other person to fight fair, I often use the "back-down" strategy. Go silent, change the subject.

And when I'm trying to get to a goal, or just get it over, without saying I agree when I don't, I use that contextualize strategy.

But sometimes, especially when I'm talking with friends, with colleagues,
with people I trust,
I do what I recommend to each of you:
stay in the disagreement, talk about it, feel it, and go deeper.
Go deeper. Try to understand each other,
not on the basis of ideas, of ideologies and systems,
but on the level of why? On the level of story.
On the level of feeling.

I heard that story from the prison chaplain at a minister's meeting earlier this week, our topic, actually, was the early 19th century German Theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher is the founder of liberal theology; he argued that religion wasn't, in the first place, about creeds or rituals or scripture, it wasn't about what we believed or even about our values and ethics. Religion begins, he said, with an intuition of the universe, with the feeling of dependence and connection with the infinite, the holy, the world-spirit, God, whatever you call it - feelings don't have words, so the words don't matter. What matters is that "taste for the infinite," that sense of wonder and awe that we each feel at certain times in our lives, if, at least, we are open to such experiences. Call it grace, freely offered to all. And so Schleiermacher paves the way for a liberal church like ours, where we welcome many different interpretations of that experience, different names and ideas, because we know that we can learn from each other, and because we know that each interpretation is just that: an interpretation. Experience connects when doctrine divides. At the feeling, affect, level, we are one. Go deeper. Get past the doctrine and the ideology and listen to the feeling. Years ago, when the Unitarian Universalist minister Thandeka, who some of you know, was a local television talk show producer, she was tasked to do a show on gun control.

And she got women on both sides of the issue to come.
But she wanted to go deeper. So she asked, why? Why?
Why do you want a gun?
Why don't you want people to have them?

And found that beneath the differences,
there was a common experience:
fear, fear and also love for one's family.
The tactics were different, but the core feeling was the
same.
Our feelings —especially our fears —are particularly
powerful.
Our reptilian brain easily overpowers our frontal cortex,
and it's fear that gets us to open our wallets for our
favorite candidates:
or, rather, our most feared candidate's opponent.
What if we said "no"?
What if we refused to give into fear as a way for powerful
forces to divide us?
What if we didn't attack, didn't withdraw, didn't
contextualize and make it abstract,
but stayed present, and went to the level of feeling?
Not the feeling of fear, but the feeling of connection?
What if we said, I see you feel strongly about this.
Tell me how that connects with your personal story? Your
lived experience?
What if we refused to see an ideological position and
saw, instead, a person, before us:
a real person in a real body with a real life?
What if we took each disagreement as a visitor to our
emotional and intellectual guest house?
As a gift given unto us, as a blessing, as a grace?
As a chance to learn a new story, to test our own ideas?
What if we sat in the dark and heard each other into
being,
said, "this is so" and stopped dancing solos on the ceiling,
but held each other by the hand and listened with an
open mind and heart?
How might our lives and our world be different if we did
this?

If we strove, as best we could, to disagree with a sense of grace?

Well, for starters, our country would be a lot better off. The fear-mongering for money-raising —on both sides — is not helpful. The division means that we don't even understand each other -

I'm sure a lot of you can't even fathom why some people voted differently than you did

earlier this week, it's a total mystery, right?

That's a problem, because when we can't even understand where the other side is coming from we will never build a strong, multi-racial, multi-party movement for change -

which is what we need if we want to do something about inequality or climate change, or anything else.

We don't have to agree on everything, but we need to understand where they're coming from.

This is particularly important when it comes to race and racism;

I feel like we just don't understand each other at all, it's a willful blindness that is tearing us apart, as it has for centuries, and it must be overcome.

If we listen to each other's stories with open hearts, we can change the way we talk about race, and politics, and everything, for the better, for everyone.

But how else might our lives be different if we welcomed disagreement with grace?

We'd have stronger relationships -families, friendships, and congregations.

Our fear of conflict keeps us from going deep, it keeps us at a distance.

We're so concerned about being polite that we're never real.

We get stuck, because we don't want to offend anyone.

We don't learn from each other.

And we don't make hard choices -we just circle around the issue.

If we talk about it directly, yes, someone might lose, but we can decide, and then do something.

Any expert will tell you, couples, families, friends,
churches that can disagree with grace,
stay at the table, discuss then decide and live with the
decision,
they are healthy and strong.
But the greatest benefit to learning to disagree with grace
isn't how it will change our politics or our relationships -
though those are good -it's how it will change our soul.
When we go deeper, and don't get caught in our
ideologies,
when we welcome the divergent view to our guest house,
when we make harmony, not just melody,
we remind ourselves that the intuition of the universe
can't be put into words,
we teach our own heart to transcend the limits of
convention,
we learn to be open, curious, and hopeful.
When we disagree gracefully, our search for truth and
meaning is more free,
and our love becomes more real.
We don't just go deeper into the stories of others,
to find the common experience that comes before words,
we go deeper into our own story,
and get in touch with our own experience.
We don't try to figure out what it all means right away.
We just live, and let it be, and see the gifts of life which
are offered at all times -the grace of life -
and we don't rush to explain it, or to claim it for our side,
or make it go away -
we just accept the grace of the world, as it comes.
We learn to be human beings, not TV pundits.
So, in this post election season -whether you were elated,
dejected, or indifferent -
and in this holiday season to come, where you might be
at a table where not everyone agrees about everything,

and in our life together as a congregation, in your families and friendships,
I urge you, I pray that we all, will practice graceful disagreement.
Ask for the story behind the opinion -including your own.
Listen for the heart, not the talking points.
See how we are connected, and be loving of others -and yourself.
Live so that the other inmates will look at you and think: "if they can get along with someone they disagree with, maybe I can too."
Find common ground, and when you can't find that, be creative.
Put human dignity ahead of scoring points.
Be filled with the gift of love from within, so that your bravest fire is holy fire.
Sing in harmony, so that we might show a new community to the world, so in need of a better way.
And come back to the table: clear about how you expect to be treated and to treat others,
but come back to the welcome table, for you are welcome,
sit with your kin -every human being, all kinds of people, and break bread together;
open your guest house, open your heart and your mind, keep learning, growing, discovering, tear down walls, build bridges,
and be filled with the grace of love.
So may it be, and may it be so.
Amen.