

Dear Friends,

January 22, 2023

The goal of this session is to help us understand how we both create and manage conflict in our lives. Especially, how our Quaker faith can help us define best practices for understanding ourselves and others and guiding our behavior in times of conflict. It is not the proper venue for trying to discuss or work through any specific conflicts that may exist in the meeting. That said. .

In his book, *Landscapes of the Mind*,* LeShan describes how we create unique *world pictures* for each of the domains of our lives. Domains such as home and family, work, faith community, etc. These world pictures are “. . . an organized set of beliefs about how-things-are-and work.” They are the words we use to define and describe reality and a whole host of “if-then” propositions from which we select behaviors often guided by values. These world pictures determine the way in which we define, interpret and interact with the world around us. They are unconscious and are applied automatically as needed. They are also rational and logical to us.

Because we live in an interactive and cooperative world, it is inevitable that our world pictures will interact with the world pictures of others. It is likely that we will hold some elements of our world pictures in common since we tend to be attracted to people like ourselves. At the same time, there will be elements that are different. We will use different words to describe the same situation and propose different solutions to a common problem than those proposed by one or more other people.

Ideally, those differences in world pictures will provoke curiosity, interest and the sharing of observations, beliefs, and the consideration of alternative solutions, resulting in the discovery of commonalities and eventually a mutually agreeable solution. Occasionally, accommodating the differences in world pictures is seen as a challenge. All too often, however, they clash. We may feel the need to resist what we see as attempts to get us to change how we define the world or to give up a much beloved solution to a problem. Especially, when we believe that our if-then solution is based on impeccable logic and rationality. Of course, the other person feels exactly the same way. We are in conflict.

All conflict originates within us. Differences in our thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, values and attributions, i.e., our world pictures, are the stuff of conflict. We manufacture and sustain conflict by our own blindness, intransigence, arrogance and certainty. All too often the focus shifts from the common problem to the character of the other person. We find it more important to call attention to their irrationality, blindness and intransigence and they to ours which stimulates strong emotions that now need to be dealt with in addition to finding some solution to the problem which is still there. In fact, the emotions will have to be dealt with first since, we will never negotiate in good faith with someone we believe has insulted or dismissed us. When our belief in the intransigence of others becomes solidified and generalized so that we see it as a permanent trait in their personality we are probably polarized.

The Quaker faith introduces another factor into this process. Namely, that of *truth* and the need, indeed the obligation, to share truth when we feel led to do so. Truth is a foundation element in many Quaker world pictures. Philosophers and theologians have been struggling with the notion

of truth for eons. How do I know that my world pictures are the true representation of reality? How do I know that my truth is true?

The question of the certainty of the accuracy of a world picture becomes of critical importance when the problem is not a concrete one (e.g., should we give money for solar panels to the Detroit meeting) but one that involves the behavior of another person. Another person says or does something that is experienced as hurtful or harmful to me, to others or the integrity of the community. We feel obliged to do something that would mitigate the harmful impact of the behavior or prevent its reoccurrence. We feel obliged to change some parts of the other person's world pictures. Our efforts will probably not be welcomed but likely met with resistance. When we seem to be involved with these kinds of exchanges with the same person with some regularity, we describe it as a personality conflict. So, how do I know that my truths about the other person are true?

Does our obligation to tell the truth as conveyed to us by the spirit include considering the potential impact of our truth telling on the individual or the meeting? Do we confuse "telling it like it is," with "telling it as I see it," or "telling it as I believe it," or "telling it as God sees it," or "telling it like I believe God sees it," or "telling it like God told me she (he) sees it?" How has your world picture been formed? Perhaps the answer to resolving conflict lies not in finding the right process but in learning to understand and better regulate our own emotions, rationalizations and, behaviors. That is, better understand and regulate our own "world pictures."

The reading this month consists of a series of short selections from three resources. They are designed to call your attention to some of the different aspects of conflict and truth in a Quaker meeting. The extracts from Ripley's "High Conflict" book also suggests some behaviors that can be helpful in managing conflict.

In preparation, here are some questions that you might ponder in your silence. As always, feel free to make up your own questions.

- First thought: is conflict an opportunity for growth or a dread to be avoided?
- What can/could you learn about yourself in a conflict situation?
- When enmeshed in a conflict, how has spirit been helpful?
- How has your Quaker faith shaped any of your world pictures?
- How do *you* determine that *your* "truth" is true?
- Does Quaker process lead to changes in world pictures making agreement more likely?

We will meet at 10:05 on Sunday, January 22, 2023 in the fellowship room of the Meeting House. All are welcome as we come together to share, discuss and learn.

Peace

Al Palmer & Kate Kelley

* LeShan, L. (2012), *Landscapes of the Mind*. Eirini Press.

Extracts from: Britain Yearly Meeting. (1995). *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Yearly Meeting.

From Living Faithfully Today.

20.71. Conflict happens, and will continue to happen, even in the most peaceful of worlds. And that's good — a world where we all agreed with one another would be incredibly boring. Our differences help us to learn. Through conflict handled creatively we can change and grow; and I am not sure real change — either political or personal — can happen without it. We'll each handle conflict differently and find healing and reconciliation by different paths. I want nonetheless to offer three keys, three skills or qualities which I've found helpful from my own experience.

The first skill is naming: being clear and honest about the problem as I see it, stating what I see and how I feel about it. What is important about these statements is that I own them: 'I see,' 'I feel,' (not 'surely it is obvious that...' 'any right thinking person should...'). This ability to name what seems to be going on is crucial to getting the conflict out into the open, where we can begin to understand and try to deal with it.

Such a skill is dangerous. It can feel — indeed, it can be — confrontational. It feels like stirring up trouble where there wasn't any problem. It needs to be done carefully, caringly, with love, in language we hope others can hear. We need to seek tactfully the best time to do it. But it needs to be done.

The second skill is the skill of listening: listening not just to the words, but to the feelings and needs behind the words. It takes a great deal of time and energy to listen well. It's a kind of weaving, reflecting back, asking for clarification, asking for time in turn to be listened to, being truly open to what we're hearing (even if it hurts), being open to the possibility that we might ourselves be changed in what we hear.

The third skill is the skill of letting go: I don't mean that in the sense of giving up, lying down and inviting people to walk all over us, but acknowledging the possibility that there maybe other solutions to this conflict than the ones we've thought of yet; letting the imagination in — making room for the Spirit. We need to let go of our own will — not so as to surrender to another's, but so as to look together for God's solution. It's a question of finding ways to let go of our commitment to opposition and separation, of letting ourselves be opened to our connectedness as human beings.

If we are to do any of these things well — naming, listening, letting go — we need to have learned to trust that of God in ourselves and that of God in those trapped on all sides of the conflict with us. And to do that well, I find I need to be centered, rooted, practiced in waiting on God. That rootedness is both a gift and a discipline, something we can cultivate and build on by acknowledging it every day.

---Mary Lou Leavitt, 1986

For reflection: What are the personal challenges for me in each of these steps? When do I need to pause and slow things down?

<https://www.renofriends.org/integrity-to-oneself/>
Quaker Testimonies: Integrity to Oneself
By renofriends March 31, 2018

A central tenet of Quakerism is the Integrity Testimony, which encourages Quakers to tell the truth, say what they really mean, and stand up for what they believe, even in the face of condemnation or conflict. Frankly, the Integrity Testimony can sometimes feel like a stern taskmaster. Truth can be slippery, or not even clear at the moment we need it to be. Having the courage to speak one's truth can feel like a nearly impossible requirement. Sometimes circumstances are clouded by love or concern for others or embarrassment or weakness. How do we proceed and carry ourselves forthrightly in this complex world?

The Integrity Testimony of Pacific Yearly Meeting says: "The testimony of integrity calls us to wholeness; it is the whole of life open to truth. When lives are centered in the spirit, beliefs and actions are congruent and words are dependable. As we achieve wholeness in ourselves, we are better able to heal the conflict and fragmentation in our community and world."

Wholeness seems to be the key. Quakers often interpret the Integrity Testimony as guidance for how to operate in the larger world, yet it also is central to helping us discern what we are thinking and feeling in our hearts. What strikes me about this language is the call to achieve wholeness in ourselves first. If we hope to work effectively to alleviate some of the world's problems or pain, we must spend time examining our own motivations.

Are we driven to action out of a sense of self-abnegation or self-aggrandizement? Are we motivated by fear? Are we listening to what the world would tell us, or are we arrogantly pushing our personal agendas and beliefs? The Integrity Testimony doesn't just prohibit lying to others; it also cautions not to lie to ourselves.

But how do we come to know and understand ourselves, to find the wholeness that will lead in the right direction? Many Quakers experience the phenomenon of leadings — a strong conviction that they are being led to take on a problem or follow a course of action that will address a societal issue. But this can be tricky terrain. How do we know we are doing what God would have us do, rather than taking on a mission with more dubious motivations?

This is where the Quaker practice of discernment can be useful. Quakers have discovered several useful tests for discerning whether a leading is valid. The first test is that of patiently waiting. If you can wait to see how your leading or conviction is tempered by time, you can gain insight into how important it really is. You should also try testing your leading for moral consistency, and asking whether it is larded with self-interest or heroic ambitions. Another important test is whether the group, or Meeting, can support your leading in a spirit of unity. Quakers often bring their leadings to their Meetings for more thorough discernment.

Quaker Rufus Jones said: "Experience is the Quaker's starting-point. This light must be my light, this truth must be my truth, this faith must be my very own faith. The key that unlocks the door to the spiritual life belongs not to Peter, or some other person, as an official. It belongs to the individual soul, that finds the light, that discovers the truth, that sees the revelation of God and goes on living in the demonstration and power of it."

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The opinions expressed above are not necessarily those of Reno Friends Meeting

Extracts from: Ripley, Amanda. (2022). *High Conflict*. Simon & Shuster.

Good conflict is not the same thing as forgiveness. It has nothing to do with surrender.

We need healthy conflict in order to defend ourselves, to understand each other and to improve.

These days, we need much more of it, not less.

High conflict, by contrast, is what happens when conflict clarifies into a good-versus-evil kind of feud, the kind with an us and a them. (Pg. 3)

. . . main difference between high conflict and good conflict. . . Not usually a function of the subject of the conflict. Nor is it about the yelling or the emotion. It's about the stagnation. In healthy conflict, there is movement. Questions get asked. Curiosity exists. There can be yelling, too. But healthy conflict leads somewhere. . . . in high conflict, the conflict is the destination.

There's nowhere else to go.

It is impossible to feel curious while also feeling outraged.

High conflict degrades a full life in exchange for moments of fleeting satisfaction, and the implications are physical, measurable, and punishing.

. . . people who do not actively participate in the high conflict. . . . bystanders. . . they are so distressed by the fight that they tune out altogether. . . and this category includes most people. . . (Pg. 15).

This is the illusion of communication. We consistently overestimate our ability to communicate. First, we think we have conveyed our intentions and desires clearly when we haven't. And second, we don't really know what our intentions and desires are. In many conflicts, we have only the flimsiest grasp of the understory, both our own understory and the one belonging to the other side. (Pg. 65)

One way to prevent high conflict is to learn to recognize the conflict entrepreneurs in your orbit. Notice who delights in each new plot twist of a feud.. Who is quick to validate every lament and to articulate wrongs no one else has even thought of. We all know people like this, and it's important to keep them at a safe distance.

. . . can be hard to do, especially for people trapped in the conflict themselves. Because conflict entrepreneurs are often very important in people's lives. They can be loving, persuasive, and charismatic. The best ones make themselves essential. They become central to a group's identity, and without them, it's harder to feel like there's an us.

Conflict can explode when social pain becomes unbearable. When it becomes something worse than exclusion, when it becomes humiliation. . . . humiliation is the nuclear bomb of the emotions. . . That's why it's the third fire starter, following group identity and conflict entrepreneurs. . . . humiliation poses an existential threat that jeopardizes the deepest part of ourselves, our sense that we matter, that we are worth something.

People need to matter. It's a fundamental requirement for life, like oxygen. Our need to matter lies underneath all kinds of group conflict. (Pg. 114)

. . . feelings of humiliation drive acts of humiliation, and on and on the cycle goes. . . . to ignore humiliation is to miss a powerful understory driving all manner of conflict. (Pg. 123)

What constitutes humiliation?. . . whether it felt humiliating depended on a person's identity and concept of the world. . . Humiliation is not an objective matter. . . it is an emotion, our culture and values shape how we interpret our emotions. . . But one of the most startling revelations of

modern science is that emotions and thoughts cannot be separated. They are intertwined. . . . to be brought low, we have to first see ourselves as belonging up high. . . The greatest humiliations are the ones that feel public. (Pg. 124)

If humiliation is the nuclear bomb of conflict, the humiliation is subjective, then it can be manipulated. It can be incited on purpose. This is a radical idea. . . not been able to identify a universal physical pathway for emotion. There is no identifiable, consistent, and objective measure of anger. . . In this way, crushing humiliation is not like a loss of oxygen. It is partly a product of our mind and our experiences. Emotions are real in the same way that national identities are real. But they are not objective facts.

It's hard to resist high conflict. But there are ways to boost our ability to hold onto complexity, even in us-versus them conflict. The most well-studied strategy is through something known as contact theory, which is a way to help people recategorize one another by spending time together, under certain conditions. These encounters can interrupt the cascading assumptions we make about each other, essentially slowing down conflict and making space. Once people have met and kind of liked each other, they have a harder time caricaturing one another. . . . Relationships change us, way more readily than facts. . . . relationships seem to complicate the stories we tell ourselves. When we get to know people, we can't reduce them to just one thing. . . Knowing people as three-dimensional humans keeps us out of the Tar Pits. We might still believe a negative story about our opponent, and we will continue to disagree about many things. But usually, relationships make it harder to dismiss and dehumanize other people. (Pg. 125)

Managing (one's) own ego. . . ask self three questions. . .

Does it need to be said?

If answer (is) yes, then ask self

Does it need to be said by me?

And if still yes:

Does it need to be said by me right now? (Pg. 202)

Appendix III

How to prevent high conflict.

1. Investigate the understory [What lies beneath each person's "world pictures."]
 2. Reduce the binary [The us vs. them mentality]
 3. Marginalize the fire starters [People who thrive on starting and maintaining conflict]
 4. Buy time and make space
 5. Complicate the narrative [Emphasize the complexity of competing needs and feelings]
- (Pg. 295)

Favorite questions.

1. What is oversimplified about this conflict?
2. What do you want to understand about the other side?
3. What do you want the other side to understand about you?
4. What would it feel like if you woke up and this problem was solved?
5. What's the question nobody's asking
6. What do you want to know about this controversy that you don't already know"
7. Where to you feel torn"
8. Tell me more. (Pg. 296)