

Editorial

For Better or Worse: Our Marriage with Conflict

The current strife at home and around the world has conspired to limit the reasonableness of presenting conflict as a positive and invigorating experience in our lives. Conflict seems to be pressing on us from all potential sources: religious, regional, economic, political, ethnic, racial, class, family, workplace, and moral.

However, we must still view conflict as an essential experience of life, a precursor to change, and the most direct route to amelioration. All substantive decisions are imbedded in a context of conflict. After all, a decision is nothing more than a choice between two or more competing possibilities and competing possibilities confronting one another is just another way of saying “conflict.” Engaging in conflict is simply engaging in the fabric of life: making choices, determining the superiority of one course of action over another, and sorting the relative value of possibilities. All reason concludes that being able to experience conflict with something more than an encoded genetic response is one of the events that separates humanity from other social forms of life on this planet.

Take, for example, the life of the bee. Happily our bee scours the countryside for pollen palaces and, when discovered, returns to the hive to do an intriguing dance to let the others know of the discovery. Our little bee does not expect a celebration of its good luck and exploring prowess. It does not seek special recognition. It is not burdened by the choice between sharing or keeping the discovery a secret. It does the dance because it is a bee with a discovery to share. The bee simply acts: no choices, no decision, no conflict.

Science fiction has created fictional societies where human-like creatures operate devoid of the burden of thought, conflict, and decision. Followers of the television series *Star Trek: The*

Next Generation will readily identify this theme with the deadly Borg, a civilization of drone humanoids assimilated from various parts of the universe. With the Borg all decisions are a result of a collective consciousness controlled by an elusive queen. Only the queen experiences conflict, only the queen makes decisions, only the queen carries the burden of right and wrong. The Borg drones just “do.” They do not suffer from conflict because all choices are made for them. It is not without reason that science fiction writers pose this type of civilization as the darkest of our fears. That fear is a world where we are free of freedom and the conflicts that freedom of choice brings.

Finding a concise way of presenting the topic of conflict in an ameliorative light is an elusive goal. Our social norms have attempted to cast conflict as impolite and we have developed a system that promotes the sycophant, the flatterer, the go-along, the “team player”, the toad, the bee, the Borg. As much as we may choose to avoid conflict, a world without conflict doesn’t seem that attractive. Part of the difficulty in resolving our negative feeling about conflict is our tendency to enjoin “conflict” with aggression, hostility, and anger. While the latter are certainly outcomes of conflict, I would characterize those outcomes as ineffective and possibly inappropriate strategies for *dealing* with conflict.

Fortunately for us, there are scholars and practitioners who are working on developing strategies for resolving conflict. Invitational education has as its core a respect for the perception of others even if the perceptions are demonstrably inaccurate or hurtful. In those cases, we respect the individual, but engage in a series of activities that invite the individual to deal with the perceptions of others, to assist in understanding how others think and feel, and to appreciate how each of us have developed our personal beliefs and attitudes. These are fundamental building blocks to effective communication that leads to appropriate and helpful strategies for satisfying coexistence.

Let me complete this introduction to the current volume by establishing a few generalizations about conflict that will make reading this issue more profitable. First, we must keep in mind that conflict is foremost a difference of perception. The difference might arise from a difference in what is “real” or “really happened”. The difference may focus on a possible resolution or course of action. It may be a difference of values, of religious truth, of morality, or of a differentiation between right and wrong.

Conflict can be internal or external. Inner conflict is certainly problematic when a person has competing concepts of what to think, how to feel, and what to do. Resolving inner conflict is a life skill that can determine satisfaction or misery. External conflict involves competing perceptions among individuals. There may be conflict within conflict. Two groups may be in conflict but within a single group there may be many competing perceptions also. Conflict is rarely so simple as to be dichotomous.

Every decision is an attempt at resolving conflict. To be sure, come conflict may be trivial (e.g. choosing a school mascot) but may involve great emotional energy and contain a tremendous investment of dignity and worth by the individuals involved. While most conflict is resolved amicably, one never really knows what the effects of a single decision are nor what the cumulative effects of a series of decisions will be.

Conflict can be ameliorative (making things better) or pejorative (making things worse). Whether a solution makes things better or worse is primarily determined by the view of the individual in conflict. A resolution can be effective, that is, it obtains the stated outcome, yet result in increased conflict among parties particularly when the emotional perceptions of events are subject to internal swings within and among participants. To wit, “I may have wanted it then, but now I want something else.” Conflict is resolved amicably so frequently that we generally do not attend to those incidences with the same intensity as conflict that is mishandled. Thus, we tend to think of conflict in pejorative terms. We

also lose the opportunity to generalize from the successful conflict resolution strategies we employ daily.

Some conflict neither makes things better or worse and can't be resolved. This type of conflict must be managed. That is, the conflict will continue but negative outcomes are mitigated and some positive outcomes remain a possibility. A rather good example is the National Council of Churches where many competing theologies are set aside for an agreement on the common good contained in the shared beliefs. The conflict in theology remains, hence the many denominations. However, points of agreement are singled out and are used to promote the common welfare and achieve ideals impossible to obtain singly. Managing conflict is often overlooked yet it remains a critical strategy. Managed conflict is found in most families as parents and children seek out co-existence in an uncommon worldview.

We have been taught how to avoid conflict when, in many cases, we should engage the conflict to build understanding and friendships. We have "polite society" and hierarchical power structures that govern many of our social relationships.

However, by emphasizing avoidance of conflict by compliance, silence, and capitulation, conflict is avoided, but it tends to grow, thus making the handling of major conflict more difficult. Preferably, we handle conflict incrementally by engaging a sequence of many small resolvable conflict situations so that way the "stakes" are minimized in any one situation. Also when we are finally confronted with conflict after avoiding it for a substantial part of our lives, we haven't developed the appropriate skills to employ in those situations. Also, our emotions can become "undisciplined" and run counter to reason and our best interests.

Finally, we need to constantly remember that conflict is not aggression, is not the sole purview of the curmudgeon, and is absolutely essential for growth. While aggression can be a response to conflict; so is forgiveness, assistance, compromise, and friendship.

Our first article deals directly with conflict within the context of social work counseling employing invitational education's "5 C's" Lynn Linville demonstrates how the use of a sequence of strategies can permit those who may have made poor choices can be invited to re-examine previous decisions and be assisted in asserting more helpful actions and attitudes. It is interesting to note that invitational theory continues to develop and a sixth "C" has been added. Conciliation is the ultimate invitation to heal emotional wounds by establishing new bonds of mutual concern.

Frank Howe provides an analysis of conflict within the marriage framework. He analyzes the results of destructive habits and provides inviting alternatives.

Elaine Tung establishes the need for life skills in her homeland of Hong Kong. With the repatriation of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China, the educational system has instigated a renewed focus on successful living and social skills in a rapidly changing world. Ms. Tung demonstrates how successfully invitational education has been integrated into the life skills program at her institution.

Finally, Giovanni Valiante and Frank Pajares provide a reflective analysis of the influence of grade level, gender, and gender orientation toward children's inviting thoughts and behaviors. They reveal interesting effects of gender and gender orientation toward caring and social responsibility.

Certainly this volume of JITP demonstrates the universality of inviting behaviors and the benefits that inviting behaviors can bring. However, inviting stances need to be valued, taught, and practiced if those benefits are to revitalize a world that has in the past been dominated by aggression. We have much to do before our dreams of an inviting world are realized.

Phil Riner

Editor

Special Note: The Board of Trustees of the International Alliance for Invitational Education has authorized a change in the publication of this journal. Starting with this issue, *JITP* will be published once a year in August/September. The scope of each issue will attempt to address invitational education issues through empirical investigations, practitioner reports, theoretical analyses, and case studies.