CHAPTER 4

OVERCOMING OUR FEAR OF CONFLICT

We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.

—MAYA ANGELOU

Remember the exercise where I asked you to come up with a metaphor for conflict? The one that introduced the idea that conflict is like smog? Well, the exercise doesn't *always* go the smog way.

Inevitably, every couple of years, one of my students will see the word *conflict* completely differently. He or she will say something like Bella, a young woman from the tiny island of Palau, said one semester:

> Conflict is like a cocoon. We think life is just great as a caterpillar—walking around, eating leaves. It's what every caterpillar does. And then suddenly we get trapped in this confining, claustrophobic space—a chrysalis—for weeks or even months or years. We want to run away, go back to just eating leaves, but we can't. The process is terrifying. The caterpillar has to die so that it can become something else. When

> we emerge from the chrysalis, we see ourselves and the people around us differently. Not only are we free, but we're a butterfly now. Life becomes so much more than walking around eating leaves. Now we can fly!

Bella saw conflict not only as scary (though a cocoon is painful and scary) but also as an opportunity, something that pushes you to grow and expand. Most students in the class seemed quite perplexed when she shared her cocoon metaphor.

"Sure, you say that now," someone said with a laugh. "But that's not how I feel when I'm in the middle of it!"

True enough. But I think Bella's story rings truer than we may give her credit for. She acknowledges that conflict feels confining and threatening in the moment. It is dangerous for the caterpillar. That caterpillar is going to die. However, she also acknowledges that conflict contains the possibility of being transformational.

Embedded in her story is the idea that people can change—change the way they see and interact with the world. Conflict can be a major catalyst for that kind of change.

Miriam's view of conflict changed from smog to cocoon in Mahmoud's house the evening she went over for dinner. Once she saw Mahmoud as a struggling father, she went from feeling hopeless to seeing a real opportunity to connect in a way that met her needs as well as his.

Seeing Mahmoud as a struggling father helped Miriam see a path out of the conflict. She let go of her fear of conflict and her fear of Mahmoud, which gave her the courage to be the first to turn.

When we choose to view conflict as both scary and potentially positive, and even helpful, we can create lasting bonds. This perspective can bring us closer. It creates resilience.

I know Bella faces many of the same day-to-day challenges you and I face. She, too, has difficult relationships in her life. She, too, experiences frustration and hardship. Yet Bella, unlike so many of us, perceives and processes those challenges and hardships differently.

Most importantly, from a conflict perspective, she doesn't see people as problems that need to be changed or fixed. She sees conflict as something natural that will, if perceived correctly, provide her with opportunities to make things better and help herself grow.

That shift in perspective lies at the very core of what it means to be happy. Social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi spent more than twenty years researching what brings people happiness. His answer was pretty shocking: the way we perceive the world has more to do with our happiness than the things, jobs, money, power, beauty, or comfort that we do or don't have. Whether living in a slum or a mansion, we can choose to be happy or sad by gaining some control over how we see the world, Csikszentmihalyi writes:

> What I "discovered" was that happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.[1]

Bella seems to have acquired this control over how she perceives the world. Her cocoon metaphor foretells the possibility that conflict doesn't have to be destructive. And her image of conflict as being transformative is also not just

about changing behavior. A caterpillar doesn't just behave differently when it emerges from the cocoon. It becomes something different—inviting everything around it to interact with it differently.

In Bella's metaphor, conflict transforms when the caterpillar changes into a butterfly. The source of that change is internal, not external.

Bella's perspective is so different from the conflict stories we read a few pages ago. The conflict narratives that embrace the smog metaphor reflect the belief that conflict changes when others change. And since others never change, conflict never ends.

The cocoon view is empowering. It involves choice, as well as the ability to shape how we see others and the world. The smog view is discouraging. It questions our free will and sees the world and others as shapers of us.

If conflict is something that we create, in large part via our perception, perhaps we have the capacity to transform it into something more constructive that shifts us from our blind, weak, self-absorbed narratives that are consumed with our own needs, challenges, and concerns to stories that show strength, accountability, and an openness to and concern for the needs, challenges, fears, hopes, and concerns of others.

Our perception of conflict changes when we change. The question is whether we have the ability to change the way we see conflict and whether that change can alter the conflict dynamics at home, in our communities, and in the world.

LETTING GO OF FEAR IN THE FACE OF CONFLICT

For a brief moment on January 13, 2018, I, like almost everyone else in Hawaii, thought my world might end.

My phone sounded the alert around eight o'clock in the morning: "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

Panic set in throughout the island. People leaped into survival mode and began barricading their homes. Others packed up their most precious belongings and fled to who knows where.

My thoughts immediately went to the people I love—especially my partner and beautiful children. All my youngest children were asleep. I contemplated waking them. But the idea of their going peacefully, in their sleep, gave me some comfort.

My phone was ringing. My partner was on the other side of the island and in tears. She knew she couldn't make it back home in time. Panicked friends and students texted and called, asking what to do. I didn't have much to say other than, "Hold this moment. Do not run from it. Do not cling too tight. It's okay."

And then I went outside. I lay down in the grass and looked at the sky. And I waited.

Forty-plus years of life experience had helped me see that I experienced the worst types of pain when I was in conflict with reality—when I refused to see myself, others, and even the world for what they really were. When I tried to hold on tightly to the false idea that I could change others without changing me, disappointment, hopelessness, and eventually fear always followed.[2]

Here, in this moment, there was only one choice. The world was going to be the way it was. I couldn't stop a missile.

So I did what I've been trying to do for much of my life: I overcame my fear in the face of conflict. I started practicing

dangerous love. As my life flashed through my mind, I didn't see my imminent destruction. I saw the beautifully flawed people who had impacted my life. I saw relationships thriving and broken. I saw a life filled with huge mistakes and small acts of redemption.

Whatever was coming, no matter how scary it was, it wasn't bigger than the love I felt at that moment. For one of the few moments in my life, I felt completely at peace in the face of the scariest thing imaginable.

Thirty-eight minutes later (it felt like hours) reports began to trickle in that the text alert was a false alarm. No missile was heading to Hawaii.

Often the thing we fear the most in conflict is fear itself. The first step in being able to practice dangerous love is to open up our hands that are gripping our fear of conflict, to let go of that which we cannot control and to hold on to that which we can. To do that, we have to first understand how we are viewing a conflict and how we might be able to see it differently.

EXERCISE

FROM SMOG TO COCOON

Think about the metaphors that you wrote down at the start of the previous chapter. Are they smog metaphors or cocoon metaphors?

Now think about the stories we hear and tell in conflict. Do these phrases sound familiar?

- "Help me!"
- "I can't take it anymore!"
- "They just won't change!"

- "She won't listen to me!"
- "Why is he hurting me?"

If they do, you're probably thinking about something a friend or coworker was complaining about to you. That's what smog thinkers say!

Here's the hard part. Can we hear those narratives in our own conflict stories—the ones we tell about family members, friends, our supervisors, or people with different social or political beliefs from our own?

Try it for a minute. Think of someone you've been in a conflict with recently. Can you hear any of those phrases in your own story? If you can, what does it suggest about how you are seeing the conflict?

Don't be discouraged. If you can recognize those narratives, you just took a major step toward transforming the conflict. Knowing you're thinking from a smog perspective is the first step in becoming a cocoon thinker. We can never change something that we can't already see.

Now you are ready for the next step. Try imagining that you are tightly gripping your fear in your hand. Now open up your hand. Let the fear stay as long as it needs to, and let it leave when it is ready.

Becoming a cocoon thinker instead of a smog thinker requires more than just a recognition that we are afraid of conflict. It also demands that we ask fundamentally different questions about ourselves and others.

Cocoon thinking ignites the process of becoming open to dangerous love. It opens up a whole new tool chest of resources to transform conflict that aren't there when we are engaged in smog thinking.

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