



## **THE BODHISATTVIA WARRIOR: The Way of Compassionate Confrontation**

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(Adapted from The Heart of Conflict)

We live in an aggressive world. Since the close of World War II--"the war to end all wars"--there have been hundreds of outbreaks of organized violence within and against nations, between ethnic groups, amongst competing religious believers. Drivers curse--or shoot--at one another on the highways, the courts are filled with lawsuits, and civility is on the decline in business and professional exchanges.

In what sense, then, can it be true that we need more confrontation?

To confront means to come face-to-face--literally, to "put our brows together." When we confront, we come to the end of our own territory and stand at the border that separates us. To confront is to find the existential frontier, to go nose to nose with the outside world. It is through such confrontation that the truth emerges and can be seen, like a diamond that is crystallized in heat and great pressure. Truth that has meaning, truth that is not mere words or pleasing ideals, is the truth that is revealed when principle is applied to circumstance.

There is a widespread tendency among many religiously-inclined people to avoid confrontation on the grounds that it is not "nice" and therefore inimical to the development of one's spirituality. Such people believe that the sole function of religious practice is to induce a state of inner tranquility which, to be maintained, requires the practitioner to insulate himself or herself from the world's incomprehensible suffering. Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand (Siam) says that the motto of such myopic peace-seekers is "I'm alright, Jack!" If I'm okay, then the world must be okay.

Catholic monk Father Thomas Keating describes the religious world as being divided among "peace lovers" and "peace makers." Those who are peace makers, he says, rarely enjoy the private luxury of peace. But only through them can the world come to peace. The peace maker must be willing to stand in the storm of human conflict and to confront the forces that corrupt and crush the flower of humanity. The force of truth must constantly be brought face to face with the darker tendencies, or evil, *dukkha*, will prevail.

Such confrontation requires courage. To take a stand puts us at risk of being knocked over. Perhaps, out of fear, we then become defensive, and then, increasingly aggressive. In the attempt to reduce our risks, it is not surprising that we should feel caught between avoidance and overreaction. Either we hope it goes away, or we resolve to annihilate the source of our pain "once and for all." There seems to be no room for a middle ground in a complex and stressful world. We become entangled in the duality of behaving either like victims or oppressors. This duality limits our options to suffering silently or enacting what Christian theologian Walter Wink calls the "myth of redemptive violence"--the belief that aggression by those who are "good" against those who are "bad" will restore divine order. And so the cycle continues.

One reason that there is so much aggressive and destructive confrontation in the world is that there is too little mature, solid and thoughtful confrontation. Parents scream at their children because they don't stop to consider how they might more constructively confront a rebellious child. Managers are often more willing to terminate an unproductive employee than to confront him with the facts of his performance and set a deadline for improvement. Civil war erupts because those in power refuse to sit down with their adversaries. We minimize or flee from our differences because the stress of facing our legitimate conflicts is so uncomfortable.

Perhaps it's a symptom of living in a nuclear age, when a misunderstanding or mistake might just result in total annihilation. In many cities, we're liable to get mugged for our shoes or our coat, so we avert our eyes and cross the street. There's often no sense of proportion in our responses to one another.

But the price for avoiding conflict is also high. Pretending that conflict doesn't exist doesn't make it so. Repressing conflict can make it even more damaging,

more insidious, less manageable. Hiding in the darkness, it retains and even builds its strength to distort our choices. As long as we submerge our conflicts, we remain powerless to resolve them.

### **Hot and Cold Conflict**

Conflict can be either *hot*, as in the case of outright warfare, or *cold*, when the antagonism is repressed or ignored. Typical of hot conflicts are battles between soldiers and citizens, civil war, domestic violence, crime and fights between motorists over parking spaces. When a conflict is hot, it is easy to identify the adversary. Cold conflicts, on the other hand, are characterized by prolonged periods of ostracization, silence, refusal to admit to or acknowledge a conflict. Cold conflict is like an iceberg in the ship channel. It is vague, insidious and does its damage before we know what happened. Hot conflicts can, over time, become cold conflicts, but they remain conflict nonetheless.

One of the primary ways that hot conflict becomes cold is when those in power institutionalize their victory over those they have vanquished. For example, apartheid turned cold when the racism of the South African white minority became the law of the land. It became difficult to combat because a legal labyrinth was erected that distorted individual responsibility and confounded individual efforts of reform. The system became the enemy, and the system is hard to fight.

Cold conflict is a particular challenge because it pretends not to be conflict at all. "Don't upset the status quo; everyone is content, knowing their place." Once institutionalized, cold conflict provides a kind of stability by annexing the instruments of "hot" personal violence and converting them into impersonal laws, procedures, armies, prisons. Individuals become the means by which the impersonal forces of corruption fulfill themselves. What was objectionable at the personal level has now become sanctified in the institution. We may be repulsed by murder, but we allow capital punishment and "surgical strikes" at enemy targets. We may object to the hunting of large animals, but we will eat the processed products of the slaughterhouse. The moral consequences of our choices are diluted until we no longer hear the voice of conscience.

When conflicts are cooled off rather than resolved, when they have become merged into systems and institutions, we achieve a kind of comfortable distance from the suffering around us. Personal responsibility becomes a distant echo. "We were just following the regulations," everyone says. Once the forces of domination and exploitation have translated themselves into bureaucracies and governments and market systems, accountability becomes elusive. It is no longer just the individual, but the system, that bears responsibility. And who will hold the system accountable, when so many benefit from its services?

Confrontation is the way by which bring cold conflict to the surface and break it down into manageable pieces. As long as conflict can camouflage itself in a

bureaucracy or in a hierarchy, resolution is impossible. So it must be called out into the open, challenged, confronted. Ironically, doing so requires us to draw on what famed Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called the "warrior archetype." When applied to spiritual warfare, this archetype becomes the "Bodhisattva warrior."

### **The Warrior Archetype**

An archetype, Jung tells us, is a universal internal human pattern that exists in the realm of the unconscious and reveals itself in dreams, art and imagination. We can either resist or access these patterns, but we are constantly drawn towards them and shape our relationship with the world in accordance with their basic design. Once we step into the energy of an archetype, it acts as a creative force and inclines us to externalize its patterns in our daily lives. Thus, there are archetypes for the monk, the king, the warrior, the healer, the explorer, the victim and thousands of others.

The essential energy of the warrior is courage. The warrior represents and embodies the capacity to face what we most fear, especially in service to those who are weaker. When the warrior serves an authentic ideal or calling, he or she operates on the basis of honor and loyalty. When the warrior is not guided by such an ideal, the archetype is corrupted and one becomes a mercenary, in service only to his baser instincts.

When we fail to honor the warrior archetype in ourselves, we are governed by fear. To surrender to fear is always disastrous, as illustrated by a traditional story of the Masai of Africa, who are famed for their lion hunting skills.

The Masai say that when the antelope are scarce and the hunting is difficult, the old lions, whose jaws are weak and whose teeth are blunt, hide in the tall grass at the mouth of the valley. The young lions, with sharp teeth and strong jaws, place themselves at the other end of the valley. The old ones wait for the herds to come. When the antelope cross into the valley and begin to graze, the toothless old lions suddenly leap up and roar with all their might. The antelope, overpowered by fear, dash from the thundering voices of the old lions and flee into the valley. In their panic, they race into the waiting jaws of the strong, young lions.

To the young warriors the Masai elders said, "Go for the roar."

We often tell ourselves that confrontation is wrong, or selfish, or should be avoided in the interest of protecting others from our own needs or expectations. While it obviously is true that there are times when provocation would be destructive, confrontation should not be delayed indefinitely simply because we are unwilling to face the reality that underlies it. This is part of the meaning of one of Hinduism's great scriptures, the Bhagavada Gita. This was the scripture most beloved by the great apostle of active nonviolence, Mogandas K. Gandhi, who saw in it the sutra of the spiritual warrior.

The Lord Krishna, a divine power in human form, has failed in his efforts to establish a peace treaty between two contending branches of a great family, and the lines have been drawn for battle. When the story opens, one of Krishna's disciples, a formidable warrior named Arjuna, is struggling to determine the morality of the impending war as he looks across the valley and sees the faces of his family members--his teachers, his grandfather, his closest cousins. He considers the terrible consequences of fratricidal warfare and despairs:

“I do not see how any good can come from killing my own kinsmen in this battle, nor can I, dear Krishna, desire any subsequent victory, kingdom or happiness.”

Arjuna decides to lay down his arms so that he might be killed rather than commit the terrible sin of harming his own family. “It would be better to live in this world by begging than to live at the cost of the lives of great souls who are my teachers.”

Krishna, however, instructs Arjuna to stand up and fulfill his duty and nature as a warrior, without concern for how events play themselves out:

“O son of Kunti, either you will be killed on the battlefield and attain the heavenly planets, or you will conquer and enjoy the earthly kingdom. Therefore, get up with determination and fight. Do thou fight for the sake of fighting, without considering happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat--and by so doing you will never incur sin.”

In other words, don't think you're doing anyone a favor by avoiding a necessary confrontation. The balance of life requires that we take care of business--for our own sake as well as for others. What must be done cannot be avoided without adverse consequences.

### **What Do We Confront?**

There are at least four different objects of confrontation: *other people*, our own *circumstances*, *questions* raised by those circumstances, and *ourselves*. Many of the problems associated with confrontation are caused by aiming our arrows at the wrong target--say, engaging in a personal confrontation when we really needed to deal with a difficult fact of life. Knowing what or whom to face is just as important as having the courage to confront in the first place.

As a general matter, it is usually best not to get “personal” when confronting a conflict. Human beings invariably get defensive and unpleasant when we feel personally criticized or diminished. Gang wars and civil wars have been ignited by small acts of disrespect. Personal honor is primal turf. We threaten it at great risk.

Nevertheless, there are times when conflict becomes nothing more than a raw struggle for power between persons, groups and nations. There is no moral issue to be resolved, no factual dispute, no question of principle. It's you or me, us or them. Kill or be killed.

We therefore start with *personal confrontation*.

### **The Dark Mirror: Confronting the Adversary**

It is likely that each of us, at some time in our lives, will acquire an enemy. It may be a competitor, a former spouse, an employee who was terminated right before the holidays, someone who envies our success, someone we betrayed, an ideological opponent or the cranky guy next door. The closer the connection, the more intense the feelings.

Often, it comes as a shock that another human being actually hates us and wishes us ill will. This discovery can be a blow to our self-image. We may begin to doubt ourselves, and wonder: Who am I that I have inspired such animosity? We fear to confront because we don't want to say something that cannot be forgiven.

Obviously, not every opponent is an enemy. Lawyers and athletes know that a worthy opponent can become a good friend or a valued colleague. The enemy, on the other hand, threatens our survival, pushes our buttons, inflames our passions. The enemy inspires hatred. We may wish to defeat an opponent, but we dream of *annihilating* the enemy.

It is axiomatic in psychology that what we most detest in others we hate--and deny--in ourselves. The enemy is the inner demon made manifest. He carries our "shadow" side and forces us to confront what otherwise we would have rejected. The enemy is the dark mirror in which we behold depths that are too dangerous to acknowledge in ourselves.

Such soul-searching may provide little relief, however. Once the adversary has gone into action, we must respond. Self-doubt can cripple us just when we need every bit of confidence we can muster. Like the besieged psalmist, we devoutly wish for a little divine assistance:

Hear, O Lord, a just suit; attend to my outcry....My ravenous enemies beset me; they shut up their cruel hearts, their mouths speak proudly. Their steps now surround me; crouching to the ground, they fix their gaze, like lions hungry for prey, like young lions lurking in hiding. Rise, O Lord, confront them and cast them down; rescue me by your sword from the wicked, by your hand, O Lord, from mortal men. Psalms 17, 9-14

Psychological analysis alone will not solve the problem. How, then, are we to protect ourselves from the ravenous jaws of the enemy? There are two approaches: they might be called the *high road* and the *low road*.

### **The High Road**

There are times when we benefit enormously from the struggle against opposition. We become stronger and more distinctive as a result of the resistance provided by the adversary. Confrontation brings out the best in us. In the course of the contest, we discover and reveal our nascent character. Conflict is the crucible in which the soul is tried, tempered and transformed.

To travel the high road means that we acknowledge the strengths of our adversary and hold her accountable at that level. We both rise to the challenge. "Defeat me, if you can," we seem to say, "but in this place, by these rules, with these weapons."

The high road still brings us to confrontation, but it is an honorable one, premised on mutual respect for the capacity each brings to the battle.

Confrontation is important, not only for its ability to bring underlying issues to the surface or to change the dynamics of conflict, but because we ourselves may be transformed by the experience. The paradox of confrontation is that it unexpectedly empowers those who muster the courage to pull the sword from the stone.

When we confront what we would most prefer to avoid, we are changed. Who we have been up until that moment is annihilated, to be replaced by the person who emerges when the dust settles. The shift can be subtle or very dramatic. We might become just a bit more assertive or a whole lot less aggressive. Confrontation liberates us from whatever we once feared to face.

Confrontation frees us from fear precisely by bringing us into an encounter with the source of our fear. The essence of all ancient forms of male initiation is the young boy's experience of his own terror--when he faces his fear in a ritual setting, it awakens his slumbering masculine nature. In the course of the encounter, he discovers his manhood. Now the tribe can count on him to confront external danger without being defeated by self-doubt. The process of giving birth endows women with a similar kind of fearlessness.

When victims of crime are given a safe way to confront those who have harmed them, they are given some measure of freedom from their victimhood. When we confront our own past, our own mistakes or malice, whether in therapy or confession or in a prison cell, we are changed. This is true catharsis. The shame is that so few victims have the opportunity to face those who have harmed them.

Most of us fear confrontation. Like an actor in the wings, we get butterflies in anticipation of being so exposed. Once done, however, most of the anxiety disappears. Legal processes that drag on for months and years require us to carry an unhealthy level of confrontation anxiety. Until the confrontation has been completed, we carry that stress in our system. Like an infected appendix, it could cause serious damage if it bursts at the wrong time.

Not everyone has the capacity to withstand a confrontation, no matter how moderate or well-intentioned. To disagree directly can sometimes feel like an affront to our dignity, or even an invasion of our personhood.

Confronting an enemy can play a vital role in the development of our psyche. Perhaps there is something with which we ourselves will be confronted. Friends may be too polite to draw our attention to it, and strangers are simply indifferent. But we can count on the enemy to reveal our weaknesses and show us hidden parts of ourselves.

Carlos Casteneda, whose accounts of the mystical Yaqui Indian "way of knowing" achieved great popularity in the Seventies and Eighties, reports that his shaman-teacher Don Juan spoke glowingly of the benefits of patiently enduring the endless demands of a tyrannical personality. Through the torments of a self-absorbed enemy, we can actually learn to abandon many of our most objectionable traits. "The more petty the tyrant, the better. This will make you a man of power."

So we must approach the encounter with awareness of the paradox that the enemy somehow is serving us by his opposition, much as Jacob's biblical angel fought him in order to strengthen him. Even in the heat of the struggle, we must stubbornly honor our enemies, for they are carrying what we tried to cast off.

### **The Low Road**

We don't always have the opportunity to meet the adversary on the high road, however. He may already be committed to another route, and cannot easily be induced to change altitude. We may have to confront him where he is to be found, whether we like the neighborhood or not. When we take the low road, we employ *coercion* to force the adversary's hand. When we embark on the low road, we carefully determine the weakness of our adversary and turn it against him.

The low road may be the only route available to us if the other side refuses to be accountable for its behavior, won't negotiate, won't comply with court orders, defies official sanctions, breaks agreements or exploits a truce. The low road is the path we follow when there is no honor or code to contain the adversary.

The adversary signals his choice to travel the low road by initiating coercive or deceptive acts. We respond to this tactic by discerning the enemy's vulnerability

and defeating or redirecting him with it. Rather than appealing to his higher instincts and elevating the exchange, we meet the enemy at his darkest place and expose him to the consequences of his choices. We do not fight him with our own darkness, but neither do we pretend that his conduct is better than it really is.

Walking the low road requires balance. When we are hurt or humiliated by a ruthless adversary, it is easy to become trapped by an insatiable desire for revenge. At some point, if we become obsessed with destroying the enemy, we may forget why we are engaged or what we hoped to accomplish. Even a total victory may feel empty.

While there is a tendency among persons of high moral standards to prefer martyrdom to conquest, like Arjuna in the Bhagavada Gita, some battles simply must be fought.

### **The Code of Confrontation**

Ethics and common sense must inform our recourse to the low road, because coercion always involves some degree of invasion of another. If we are to follow this route, it is important to know that we have tried to adhere to the high road, but have found the way obstructed. We should take the low road only if the adversary refuses our repeated invitation to go to higher ground. Remain open to shifting back to the high road if and when an opening appears. Remember yourself.

Following the low road requires a kind of discipline to keep ourselves in balance. This discipline consists of the following three elements:

1. Respect. Despite our passions and opinions, if we treat the enemy with respect, we will avoid becoming ensnared in a web of reaction or vengeance. This allows us to maintain an awareness of the better side of the other person, even when the enemy forgets his own dignity. Respect for the adversary is made possible by practical humility--the recognition that we may not see the full picture.

2. Courage. Fear is the principal cause of self-destructive behavior in the world. When we act out of fear, we abandon reason. When we engage in fearless confrontation, we deny power to the enemy. Courage is the willingness to risk, without which defeat is certain. Be confident, and let the chips fall where they must.

3. Patience. Impulse is not the best guide to determining when confrontation is most likely to be effective. Rather, we must wait for circumstances to deliver the occasion when intervention will have the greatest effect. Patience counsels us to watch, to learn the enemy's rhythm, and to act only when the best outcome is possible. Patience gives us distance. It creates

an emptiness in which the process itself can assert itself without too much interference from the players.

Gandhi was the pioneer in using civil disobedience, a dignified low road strategy, as a means of confronting his British adversaries with the logical consequences of their repressive policies. The object of his disruptive maneuvers was always to bring the other side to the table, where matters could be resolved through negotiation. Gandhi believed in confrontation. The essence of satyagraha, the use of nonviolent resistance, was to fight in such a way that the truth would be revealed. Avoiding a necessary confrontation was a betrayal of the truth.

There are conflicts that never rise above the low road, as when an opponent will not or cannot come to terms except through the power of the courts or a superior military force. Wishing it were otherwise is simply naive and can be dangerous to those we must protect. In such cases, nothing short of victory will suffice.

There are times when the low road is not a calculated strategy intended to influence the behavior of another, but an instinctive response to injustice. The time for resolving the matter has passed. We want revenge, to even the score. We want justice. How can this be reconciled with a desire to evolve beyond animal aggression? Through a commitment to accountability.

### **Accountability**

The animating dynamic of aggression is blame. The goal of confrontation, on the other hand, is accountability. When someone is seeking to make us morally culpable for our actions, we resist more vehemently than when the moral charge is absent from the discussion. This is because moralism, as described in the first chapter, is an assault on our character or even our being. We are more likely to accept responsibility for our conduct if to do so does not imply condemnation of who we are. In other words, I am more willing to say that "what I did was wrong" than acknowledge that "who I am is wrong." Psychologists sometimes refer to this as the distinction between guilt and shame.

To be accountable is much easier than to accept blame. Blame implies a loss of "face." Accountability actually restores our sense of integrity. As a result, if accountability is established without the additional burden of moralism, we are often relieved to have the opportunity to come to terms with our mistakes.

Most errant politicians in recent years have underestimated the strength of the public's need for accountability, or have confused it with a desire for blame. As long as a public figure refuses to be accountable, he or she will be instinctively become the target of adversaries, the media and a mistrusting populace. A little bit of accountability can deflate the self-righteous moralism that so often motivates adversaries to expose each other's hypocrisy.

To be accountable means to set the accounts straight. It's more a question of math than morality.

As a mediator, I am often asked to work with couples who are going through a divorce. I remember being asked to mediate a case several years ago involving two Chicago police officers who already had been divorced for several years. Their decree had been entered, but they couldn't seem to work out the day-to-day disputes involved in raising their daughter. The father objected to the haircut her mother had given the child, and the mother objected when the father had the little girl's ears pierced. This was clearly a matter of an unresolved conflict that would continue to generate disputes until confronted.

After some probing, it turned out that he had been having an affair during his wife's pregnancy. She was still depressed and felt worthless. In private, I asked the tough-looking cop if he had ever apologized for hurting her so deeply.

"Of course I did. Many times. But that was long ago, and I can't help it if she's still holding a grudge against me."

"But she'll make your life difficult until she feels like the score is even."

He nodded. "But what can I do?"

Accountability is not just a matter of words. Sometimes the psyche demands a tangible demonstration of sincerity.

"Is there anything you could give her that, if coupled with an apology, would make her feel that you really meant it?" I asked. He needed a few days to think about it.

I met with his ex-wife. She was still beautiful, but the years and the sorrow had taken their toll.

"Are you ever going to let him off the hook?"

She smiled weakly. "I'd like to, but I just can't seem to forget what he did to me. We would never have had that child if I had known he was with someone else."

"But if he ever found a way to take full responsibility for his conduct, do you think you might be able to let go of the blame?"

"Yes. If he really meant it. And I don't just mean words."

So she went home to think about what she could give to her ex-husband to show that she was burying the hatchet.

They came back the next week. Both were nervous.

He turned to her and told her the whole story. About how he hadn't told her about the other woman because he was going to try to stay, and about how he thought having a child would bring them back together.

"I know I've told you this before, but I'm sorry. From the bottom of my heart. You're a good woman, and a good cop. I admire you. I couldn't want a better mom for that little girl."

Then he looked at me. His ex-wife was crying. The weight of the hurt was coming out in sobs. She was starting to let go.

"So I tried to think about what I've got that I could give you to let you know that I'm serious about this. It's been too many years, and we need to get on with our lives. So I brought this--you know what it means to me."

He pulled out a large picture frame. It was a lithographic print of a painting by American artist Norman Rockwell. One with the Chicago Cubs baseball team in it. He had always loved it, and he was fighting to hold back the tears as he put it on the conference table.

The flood gates opened. She put her head on the table and just cried and cried. I asked him to leave the room so that she and I could talk in private.

When the door closed, she wiped the tears away. "I don't know what to say. That picture is the most important thing in the world to him, next to our daughter. I spent all week trying to think what I could give back, and I couldn't come up with anything. I don't own much, just pots and pans and a video camcorder that doesn't work."

Now she really felt terrible. He had finally settled his account, and she was the one who was in the hole. After a few minutes, she lifted her head and smiled.

"Bring him in. I just thought of something."

He sat down, arms folded across his chest.

"Honey," she said, softer than I had ever seen her, "I don't have much. But there's one thing I own that I know you would love. I forgive you, and I want you to have this."

She pushed the Rockwell across the table.

The account was even.

### **Truth As Medicine: Facing Facts**

There are times when it is not a person that we need to confront, but unpleasant facts or circumstances. We find ourselves in conflict because we are having trouble acknowledging that our business is engaging in environmentally destructive actions, that the funding for an important project isn't going through, that the marriage isn't working, that our health is declining, or that we made an irredeemable mistake somewhere along the line.

When we resist facts, we often resent anyone who points them out. There is a tendency to "kill the messenger" when the news is bad. As a result, it is easy to become engaged in a personal conflict when we don't want to confront the darker side of our human condition.

Facts do not inherently require a response. They just are. Facts demand acceptance, understanding. They compel us to reorganize our thinking to reflect the new knowledge. But they don't necessarily bring us into contact with an adversary. Even if the fact of the adversary's existence is what we have been resisting, the process is an internal one. The feeling of conflict is resolved when we fully integrate the painful facts into our perspective of the world.

The process is usually poignant. The key to confronting life's difficult realities seems to lie in recognizing the price we have paid for avoiding the truth. Instead of finding protection in our self-deception, we may find that we have suffered unnecessarily. The prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous is to "accept the things I can't change." When you fight reality it's not hard to know who will win. There is a sense of relief in giving up a losing battle. The realization that we hold the key to our own suffering, and to our own release, can be bittersweet.

An essential turning point in most conflict comes when we come to terms with facts or insights that we have resisted or that have been hidden from us. When we fully face the reality that a job or a lifestyle or a relationship has been lost, or understand the truth of our own complicity in harm to ourselves or others, or discover the true genesis of our suffering, the irrepressible human urge to "get to the bottom of things" can finally be laid to rest.

When I taught at a law school, I started each semester by writing the words "truth" and "justice" on the blackboard. By the time I turned to face the class, the level of snickering and outright laughter was usually so high that it took a few minutes to get the class back under control. It had taken only a few months of intense "training" for these bright young minds to become cynical about the basic principles that sustain the social order they soon would be sworn to protect. When I asked whether they believed that the legal system was based on these two ideals, the students would answer, "You can't be serious!"

As law students quickly learn, the law is premised on something called "legal truth"--that is, what can be proved to be true. Any advocate knows that a

falsehood that can be proved to be true often serves just as well--or better--than the real truth. This is exactly the kind of sophistry against which Socrates railed and that continues to infuriate innocent litigants every day. People hold lawyers in contempt, not because lawyers are malicious, but because the law is so promiscuous. It seems willing to entertain even the most absurd versions of reality and has no inherent regard for the truth. This violates our basic sense of decency and reduces our most passionate conflicts to a game of chance or blackmail.

Psychotherapy--and even common sense--recognizes that truth is essential to resolving life's difficulties. We insist that our children tell the truth, and warn them about the consequences of lying. The therapy for which we pay millions of dollars each year is essentially a process of discovering the truth about the past or present--or at least, a part of it--so that it loses its unconscious hold on us. However painful, we trust in the power of truth to heal, to restore our sanity, to help us find solid ground. Truth is the only reliable antidote in a world of betrayal, deception and wishful thinking.

### **Facing Responsibility: Uncertainty and the Unknown**

Life's circumstances sometimes raise challenging questions that call for a response. Once we have accepted reality, it may present us with *issues* that must be confronted. Now that I see the consequences of moving my business to a market where working conditions are inhumane, what must I do to achieve justice for all concerned? Knowing that I can't pay my loan, how should I deal with the bank? Now that it is clear that the recipient of our economic foreign aid intends to disclose military secrets to a local drug lord, how should we respond?

Confronting these issues requires that we respond effectively to the outside world. The best response may not involve confronting, but rather, circumventing an adversary. Personal confrontation may distract us from formulating or instituting a meaningful response.

Conflicts about life's questions are best resolved through *principle*. In a legitimate legal dispute--for example, whether the Constitution prohibits the regulation of abortion or permits school prayer--it does little good to confront the *person* of one's adversary. In fact, the judicial system is intended to be an impersonal and equitable forum, and judges frequently condemn the *ad hominum* arguments increasingly made by lawyers in court proceedings.

Law, philosophy and theology strive to elucidate impersonal and universal principles to guide us in making wise decisions. At their best, they aspire to elevate our thinking above the level of reactive, aggressive behavior. Too often, we instinctively pursue vengeance rather than examine our assumptions or investigate the truth. Operating on the basis of principle forces us to replace our powerful passions with dispassionate logic. The elements of what is known as "principled negotiation" are elegantly described in Fisher & Ury's best-selling

book, *Getting To Yes*, which single-handedly has changed the way conflict is managed around the world.

It is often the case that nurturing personal animosity distracts us from having to make difficult choices that we would rather avoid. When we displace our attention and energies by personalizing the conflict, it usually survives--and is even stronger than before. A humiliated adversary often develops an excellent long-term memory. "What goes around, comes around," is his mantra of vengeance.

Even litigation, which is often described as the classic form of confrontation, is more typically an expensive form of conflict avoidance. It shifts responsibility for decision making away from those who are directly involved in the matter to those who could care less.

But, properly framed, confrontation can provide an excellent vehicle for changing a raw struggle for power between adversaries into a rational process in which the merits of each position are fairly weighed. Absent such a confrontation, in the privacy of our own thoughts and in the comfort of our own office, we can convince ourselves that the matter is black or white. When we confront the other side, however, something interesting occurs within our own internal process. This strange phenomenon is called *equity*.

### **The Balance Of Equity**

Social psychologists have recently undertaken the study of how people who disagree with one another are able to reach decisions that they both regard as "fair." This inquiry is based in what is known as "equity theory." What equity theory tells us is that each of us has an internal moral gyroscope that keeps us in balance with the outside world. It becomes distorted when we feel that others are benefiting at our expense or when we are unfairly benefiting at someone else's expense. We can maintain our sense of balance either by equalizing the costs and benefits to both sides--or by refusing to consider the costs or benefits to others. In this sense, ignorance can indeed be bliss.

Naturally, it is more convenient for us to see only how others are exploiting *us* without noticing how our behavior impacts on *them*. As long as we are the victims, equity can be restored only by getting more of what we have been denied. We are not quite so eager to measure things the other way around. Why? Because the internal gyroscope will create discomfort, guilt and awkwardness until equity has been restored, whether our "rational self-interest" likes it or not. Even Charles Dickens' character Ebenezer Scrooge was incredibly relieved when he made things right with poor Bob Cratchit.

It is precisely to avoid having to "make things right" that we often keep ourselves uninformed about the conflict *as the other person experiences it*. We don't want to hear about her pain ("After all, it was *her* fault to begin with!") or notice that we may not be the only victim in the room. Knowing all the facts, seeing the matter

from both sides of the table, means that our own sense of fairness will override our desire to claim all the equity for ourselves. We can't argue so passionately once we see the larger picture. The clarity of black and white starts to retreat as we begin to distinguish various--complicating--shades of grey.

Equity theory is not based on how others would decide a case after they have heard both sides. That approach at least allows us to cling to our own extreme position. Rather, it explains an internal mechanism that adjusts our own evaluation of fairness and inevitably brings adversaries closer together. As we learn more about the suffering of the *other* person, we reexamine the depth of our own losses. We become open to a resolution that includes both of us.

This, indeed, is the purpose of mediation--to acquaint each side with the suffering of the other. There is a wonderful film of a mediation conducted, almost wordlessly, by the great therapist Carl Rogers. A group of perhaps fifteen Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland each relate stories of their own pain as Rogers listens intently. One by one, they speak of the sister who died in a bombing, the brother who was imprisoned for years without trial, the father who disappeared one night and never returned. By the end of an hour, they are literally embracing one another--they who had been mortal enemies.

Mediators see similar transformations every day. I remember working with a teacher who had sued her principal and the school board for sexual harrasment. The school was located in a small Illinois farming town, and the "good old boys" had no compunction about relating dirty jokes to her, despite her complaints, and spreading rumors around town about her alleged sexual activities. In the course of the lawsuit, which dragged on for nearly a decade, both the teacher and the principal became outcasts in the town--the teacher, for suing and nearly bankrupting the town, and the principal, for causing the problems in the first place.

In the course of mediation, the principal finally apologized for his comments, bringing the teacher to tears. "I've waited ten years to hear those words," she said. "Now, I feel like I can move back to Florida and get away from all this."

But then the principal added, quietly, "But you're not the only one who's been hurt by this thing. My wife nearly divorced me and nobody in town will talk to me any more. I feel ostracized and alone. They'll probably fire me when this thing is over. At least, you've got somewhere to go. I've got nothing."

The teacher looked at the man. She was speechless. She had hated him for so long she couldn't even imagine caring about the price he had had to pay. For a moment, they just looked at each other. The truth hung in the air, and the room suddenly seemed too small to contain us.

I talked to the teacher later, as she lighted up a cigarette. "That was just an act," she said. "I don't believe he's suffered a single bit--at least, not any more than he deserved." But she couldn't look me in the eye, and I knew she knew.

Ignorance is bliss because it allows us the extravagance of our own illusions. Confrontation takes away those illusions. It helps us to see things as they are, not as we want them to be. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says:

"During any conflict, we need people who can understand the suffering of all sides....When you see that your enemy is suffering, that is the beginning of insight. When you see in yourself the wish that the other person stop suffering, that is a sign of real love. But be careful. Sometimes you may think you are stronger than you really are."

Confrontation with the adversary takes courage, because we know we will be changed.

Jungian analyst Robert Johnson in *Owning Your Own Shadow* invokes a medieval image called a mandorla to depict the confrontation of one adversary with another. The mandorla is quite simple--two circles that intersect, forming an almond-shaped common ground. The area of intersection is that which each shares with the other. The deeper the confrontation, the greater the shared space.

Johnson says:

"[O]ur own healing proceeds from that overlap of what we call good and evil, light and dark. It is not that the light element alone does the healing; the place where light and dark begin to touch is where miracles arise. The middle place is a mandorla."

### **Conflict Addiction**

There are those who are extreme in their willingness to be confrontational, who seem to feed on the shadows that are raised by the process of facing the adversary, and who seem to regard everyone as an adversary. There is a dark attraction to confrontation that can best be described as an addiction.

This may come from the fact that confrontation is an assertion of power. When we face that which we fear, we are supported by a rush of adrenaline and an afterglow of self confidence. We may find ourselves roaming the landscape of our own lives like mercenaries, looking for an engagement, longing for the inflation that an encounter will bring.

The need to "prove ourselves" can become quite destructive, as evidenced by the growing presence of gangs and the apparent inevitability of warfare. When we are unsure or untested, confrontation may appear to answer the inner doubts.

Addictive behavior manifests in more subtle and sophisticated forms in many of our social institutions that are set up to solve problems. We have a tendency to maintain organizations long after they have accomplished their stated goals. Solutions are hazardous to the health of problem-solving organizations. Such groups may look for ways to create conflict to continue their own existence. Confrontation, rather than collaboration, keeps them in business. It can be hard to go back to gardening once the war has ended.

An environmental activist described this dilemma for me as we toured an area of the South that had been the scene of prolonged struggle between chemical manufacturers and local residents. "I keep telling them that [environmentalists] have to find another way to stay in the game. All these industries are in compliance now. So what do we do? We don't know where the battle field is any more. Either we find one, or we're out of business."

Without endless conflict and confrontation, lawyers and mediators also are out of business. So are lobbyists and most community organizers. Our media are dominated by practitioners of "combat journalism." We live in a world where society encourages us to "do good," which often depends on the continued viability of someone whom we believe to be doing wrong. There's an old saying that, "When there's only one lawyer in town, he'll starve. But when there's two lawyers, both will prosper."

We know how to wage war. The armaments business--what President Dwight Eisenhower called the "military-industrial complex"--is perhaps the biggest economic player in the world today. The addiction to conflict has crossed all borders and has spared no nation. Overcoming that addiction, by institutionalizing healthy forms of managing conflict, is one of the great challenges of the next century. We may not succeed. But our children must.