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Fatal Misunderstandings

*... tragedy begins,
not when there is misunderstanding
about words, but when silence
is not understood. Then there can never be
an explanation. What avails it that another
loves you, if he does not understand you?*

- Henry David Thoreau -
A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

It is natural for us to want to share knowledge, experiences and emotions with each other; we are social creatures after all and not meant to be alone. However, the manner in which we communicate with each other reflects the nature of those relationships. What we share, what we do not, and the way we speak or write to one another indicates many things, such as; formality or familiarity, tension or comfort, trust or guardedness, and admiration or disapproval.

Whether in family, friend, school, work or sacred relationships, misunderstandings are bound to occur. Interpersonal conflict, after all, is based in interaction. Properly handled conflict can strengthen the relationship, inspire creativity and innovation and produce thoughtful solutions. When not handled properly, conflict can create a climate of uncertainty, criticism and frustration. If left undiscovered or unresolved, the consequences can be serious: A once loving person may turn angry and 'hard hearted'; siblings may no longer participate in family celebrations; a team meeting, neighborhood meeting or a parent / teacher conference may turn into a full-blown argument; a congregation may become divided and eventually split apart; a child may be a go-between in parent / parent conflicts, or worse, have to take sides.

Incompatibilities that interfere with our sense of self, of safety, of attainment of our needs, our goals, and even our purpose in life have the potential to halt growth, kill the spirit and ruin good health. When we are involved in such conflicts, we are usually keenly aware of the disunity; we suffer the emotions that accompany it and we have difficulty with the mechanics of communication. We may stop interacting on any meaningful level, so as to avoid conflict altogether. A never-ending argument or a stalemate may be the result; your very own Cold War, complete with your version of the 38th Parallel North, and a conference or dinner table DMZ. 'Safe topics' may be permitted, but come with an ever-present threat of escalation. You know it doesn't have to be that way, but what do you do about it?

In the 1956 book, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, sociologist Lewis Coser wrote that "realistic" conflicts are based either in disagreement over the means to an end, or over the ends themselves. He wrote that "nonrealistic" conflicts are expressions of aggression, their purpose being to show dominance or cause pain. It is a simple but helpful classification to keep in mind when you begin to observe how those around you engage each other and whether the result is constructive or destructive.

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A constructive conflict interaction is a sustained effort to reconcile incompatibilities between self and others. It is accompanied by a sense that progress is being made. It requires that everyone engage in dialogue honestly and thoughtfully. If successful, the incompatibility will be resolved by an outcome that is representative of everyone's interests. If a relationship already has an unproductive pattern set, everyone may need to learn new behaviors and new ways of thinking. When you try to change the conflict climate from a destructive to a constructive one, you may find yourself and others lapsing into bad habits: defensiveness, striking out, power moves, disrespect, attempts to humiliate or embarrass the other, deeming an issue 'nonnegotiable' or 'a waste of time' or 'calling for a vote' before the discussion has been completed. Those are dirty tricks – don't use them on people you like. If someone is using them on you – don't reciprocate, call it what it is, and move on.

Also remember that sometimes an incompatibility exists that is not perceived. For example, consider the patient who needed an emergency amputation of a leg. A surgeon marked the right leg with an "X" to indicate the surgery spot. However, an assistant prepared the left leg, understanding that "X" indicated 'not this one'. A different surgeon performed the procedure, discovering the error too late. Meaning is based on personal experience. If our experience does not prepare us for the possibility of alternative interpretations, then we may not realize that there is a disconnect. We are even more at risk if the handoff between those performing discrete tasks is not well executed. It is better to over-communicate the obvious and succeed together than to fail and have nothing left to do but allocate blame.

As another example, in late September 1999, a \$125 million dollar spacecraft was lost as it entered the atmosphere of Mars. In the investigation, NASA discovered the 'root cause' of the loss was that one team of navigation engineers was working in metric units, while another was working in English units; the course of the craft was 'off' by about 80 km / 50 miles. How could this happen? Official reports cited poor communication within teams and between teams. One report noted that there were no procedures in place to check each other's work; no orientation given to new team members, and both teams failed to consider the entire mission as one project. How could something so important be allowed to fail over something so simple? It's not rocket science! Wait, some of it is rocket science . . . but, that's not the point. Are we really so conflictually challenged? The answer is often, Yes!

Communication is not simply information getting from A to B. In our conversations, we are simultaneously, sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages; we are observing social customs; we are processing new information; we are laboring under perception problems and bias; we are formulating our response, and we are probably feeling some kind of emotion too. Add to that the ongoing inner dialogue about everything else that is going on in our lives at that moment, multiplied by 2 or more participants, and you can see why conflict is inevitable. As complicated as it is, it is amazing that we can ever understand each other at all! With a little work, it can get easier though, I promise. In the meanwhile, there may be an upside to miscommunication . . .

"I have suffered from being misunderstood, but I would have suffered a hell of a lot more if I had been understood."

Clarence Darrow (1857-1938)