

Roots of Conflict

by Sophia Morrissette

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of living in a society. We all have different values, beliefs and experiences that lead to different ideas of how to structure our lives and communities. With the access to global stories via Internet and television, we are aware of so many ongoing and seemingly unavoidable and demanding conflicts. Yet there are ways to contain conflict, once the root cause is identified.

I believe there are four primary causes of conflict.

Differences in Perspective

It can be difficult to understand someone else's point of view if you haven't been exposed to those beliefs in your own life. Because of this, we have a lot of religious, political and gender conflicts, leading to a lack of tolerance for other viewpoints or lifestyle choices.

For example, the LGBTQ+ community has had decades of struggle. Some are victims of violence and bullying, especially now in the transgender population. Politically, Republicans, Democrats and Tea Party/Libertarian views seem permanently locked against each other, determined to maintain pressure and weaken the other political parties. Globally, the fight between Israel and Palestine is one example of religious and border conflict that has gone on for decades.

Arrogance

Most of us, in some way, think our beliefs or choices are superior to others. We can spend a lot of time trying to prove our way is the right way or the ONLY way it can be done. Many capitalist countries like the U.S., for example, have a bias against Communist and Socialist countries, and have historically resisted relationships with each other. Fundamentalist religions, whether Muslim or Christian, can look down on others as sinners.

In the U.S. Congress, the decision of Republican John Boehner to step down as Speaker of the House is most likely because it's a thankless, frustrating job. Half of Congress seems unable to compromise with the other, and have resented his attempts to do so. The conflict seems so rooted that Reps. Kevin McCarthy and Paul Ryan turned down the job as well. *[Ryan was convinced to take it after the essay submission deadline.]*

Until World War II, the United States practiced isolationism -- a policy of remaining apart from the political affairs of other countries. Prompted partly by not wanting Communist regimes to claim world domination, the U.S. became an imperialist country. Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan are other examples of how the U.S. went into war in other territories because we wanted them to adapt and work within our democratic capitalist government, believing we were sparing them from the conflict of a different system of government.

Feeling Like a Victim

Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker indicates that a root of conflict is when one side believes it is being taken advantage of, and honestly believes it needs to fight back in self-defense.

He wrote, "it's not just that there are two sides to every dispute, it's that each side

sincerely believes its version of the story, namely that it is an innocent and long-suffering victim and the other side a malevolent and treacherous sadist. And each side has assembled a historical narrative and database of facts consistent with its sincere belief.”

The Treaty of Versailles was a legal document stating that Germany alone was responsible for the death and destruction that was World War I. This gave rise to the Nazis, who were angry and felt they had been victimized. They wanted payback from all countries involved, which led to World War II.

Fear

Xenophobia is an intense fear of people from other countries or cultures. Locally, police brutality and racism towards African Americans is largely caused by a sense of being threatened, even when there is no justification. Recently, a teenage boy was pushed to the ground and violently detained by a group of policeman; he had held a door open for a woman who felt scared of him simply because he was African-American. This is one of a long history of injustices in the U.S.

As another example, after 9/11 many have considered all Muslims to be terrorists, leading to stereotypical discrimination. In contrast, a terroristic threat by a white person is more likely to be labeled by Americans as a mental health issue.

Solutions to Conflict

First, we must learn that compromise does not equal weakness. We need to be trained to accept each other's differences -- not to feel the need to win everyone over with our viewpoint.

We've become so focused on winning that we've lost sight of what is important: creating a better, stronger society together. We have to get rid of the idea that to compromise is to lose. We need heroes who reach a consensus, rather than beating another side into submission.

Second, studies have shown that after women entered the workforce, cases of domestic abuse went down. This is an indication that when people are exposed to other groups, they are less likely to bully them.

Thirdly, the media focuses too much attention on meaningless drama and made-up conflict: “Why did Hillary Clinton send emails from a home address” rather than current events and issues that truly matter to how we work together as a community. Only two general questions on racial tensions were asked in the first three Presidential debates.

Today we use Donald Trump as an easy out, for example, rather than offering details and deeper information about the conflicts that divide us.

With a stronger understanding of other viewpoints and an effort to applaud compromise we might actually bridge more of the vast gaps of conflict that separate us.