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Resolution or Breakup

If you trust, you will be hurt,
but if you don't trust, you will never learn to love.

— *Gandhi*

The love of truth drives us from the human world to
God;
the truth of love sends us back to the human world.

— *William of Thierry, twelfth-century mystic*

The twentieth century, the most violent in human history, has ended. As we begin the twenty-first century, we need to remember that God calls us to be peacemakers. We don't have to be professionals to help others resolve conflicts and build bridges toward peace. Helping others resolve conflicts with themselves, their partners, children, parents, colleagues, or neighbours, requires patience, compassion, faith, and often "tough love." As we ourselves lay down our "swords" and turn anger, mistrust, and strife into the "ploughshares" [Micah 4:3; Isaiah 2:4] of mutual understanding and cooperation, we feel the potential of transformation and hope.

For many people, profound reconciliation becomes possible; for others, a mediated resolution provides a kind of truce. The day-to-day ways in which we help children be friends, reduce sibling rivalry, work cooperatively in our workplaces, and seek deeper understanding with partners and friends who have

wounded us, stretch us all to grow in our understanding of the psalmist's vision of a time in which "justice and peace shall embrace" [Psalm 85:10]. Although we cannot realize this vision completely (that is ultimately God's work), we can achieve substantial healing in ways that are compatible with it.

Why do conflicts occur?

In any relationship, community, or workplace, conflicts are an inevitable outcome of personal interaction. The family is a complex community consisting of people living together and relating over time, so it's hardly surprising that a variety of conflicts arise. The following are examples.

Misunderstandings. These occur when one person doesn't say explicitly what she or he thinks or feels, and the other draws conclusions or makes assumptions rather than asking questions and clarifying. With the stresses of life and the varied needs of people, it is easy to become so rushed that we fail to check out what someone really means.

Hurt feelings. It is natural to be hurt by comments that convey insult, blame, or fault-finding in a manner that is destructively critical. Being ignored can also be very hurtful. Learning how to give honest and constructive feedback that does not destroy another person is a skill we can all learn. It is part of the biblical injunction to "speak the truth in love" so that we can grow relationally and individually.

Defending turf. We naturally become defensive as a result of feeling "invaded" or when another's communication seems adversarial. Insensitivity to another's boundaries or time constraints can contribute to this kind of conflict. Instead of being oppositionally

competitive in our attitudes or behaviour, we need to learn how to build a bridge, moving toward a place of peace (for example, “Can we solve this together?”). The Christian life is not a “zero-sum game,” in which one person’s gain is another person’s loss; it is a life in which we all grow, individually and as groups.

Not feeling heard. Sometimes it appears that the other person is refusing to listen, or is responding from a “yes but” stance. Often that person can’t or won’t listen, or becomes unavailable to talk either now or later. It may be necessary either to set another time to resolve the issue, bring in a third party to mediate, try writing a letter, or simply accept that only limited communication is possible with the person — at least on that particular issue at this particular time.

Escalations. These occur in families when there are insufficient or unclear rules, or no structural framework or protocol, for resolving issues. For example, without a process for conflict resolution, disputes can escalate seriously. For this reason, it is helpful to develop “fair fighting rules,” which clarify and enable a creative process for resolving conflicts in the home. Such a process needs to be solution-focused and non-coercive. One helpful model of conflict resolution process is shown in the box. (Please see next page.)

Recipe for fulfilling marriages

For an intimate partnership to be truly fulfilling and long-lasting, at least four ingredients are necessary:

- a clear personal *identity* for each partner (for example, each partner, as much as possible, needs to be comfortable in his or her own skin);
- a clear *vision* for the relationship, setting goals that include the possibility of growth and change in the various stages of the marital life cycle;

Ten steps to resolving conflict

1. Set aside a time and place for discussion.
 - Allow at least thirty minutes.
 - Choose a time when all parties can be relaxed and not interrupted.
 - Establish a process for assuring that one person doesn't dominate or interrupt (for example, a "talking stick" held by each person as they speak in turn).
2. Define the problem or issue of disagreement.
 - Deal with only one issue at a time.
3. Be honest about how each of you contributes to the problem.
 - Without blaming, separately list the things you and the other person do that contribute to the problem.
4. List past attempts to resolve the issue that were or were not successful.
 - Resist the temptation to dwell on past failures and cast blame.
5. Brainstorm — list all possible solutions.
 - Pool new ideas and try to find several alternative solutions to the problem.
 - Include solutions that may have worked in the past in other areas.
 - Do not judge or criticize any of the suggestions at this point.
6. Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions.
 - Be as objective as you can.
 - Use reflective listening (telling the other what you've heard), and discuss how useful and appropriate each suggestion might be for resolving the disagreement.

- Be sure to listen to each other's feelings around each proposed solution, because the feelings behind the words are as important (or more important) than the words themselves.
 - Clarify that solutions do not require lopsided sacrifices from one or more members of the group.
7. Agree on one solution to try.
- Select one solution that everyone agrees to use on a trial basis.
8. Agree on how each person will work toward that solution.
- Be as specific as possible, and refer to concrete behaviours, not generalities (for example, "Joe will vacuum the house every week by Saturday at 7:00 p.m." or "Sarah will wipe the kitchen counters every day after each meal," not "We will keep the house clean").
9. Set up another meeting to discuss your progress.
- Set a time and date within the next week.
 - Don't be too legalistic; if circumstances occasionally interfere with one person's getting a job done, be understanding and help them get back on track and on schedule as soon as possible.
10. Reward each other (through recognition) as you contribute to the solution.
- Show appreciation and praise efforts made when you see that the other person is making a contribution toward the solution.

- a *mutual commitment* to love and fidelity; and
- a *willingness* to work together to achieve personal and relational peace.

A mutual decision to seek understanding, and willingness to learn the skills needed to face challenges together, are necessary ingredients for growth and healing within an intimate relationship. The commitment to one another must be firm as a couple seeks to work things through. But other ingredients may include the presence of a competent therapist to work with them at one or more periods of their marital journey, and the support of a community (family, church, friends) to encourage growth and resolution. At such times, God's grace is often mediated through the love of others, as well as through the regular practices of worship, prayer, meditation, and study.

The role of faith in healing a marriage

Until the mid-twentieth century, the church allowed members to divorce, or divorce and then remarry, only under very exceptional circumstances. Now, in an age of divorce, the church must work to strengthen marriages in the ways noted above, while also embodying the good news of forgiveness and restoration, of new beginnings and renewed hope for those who experience shame and failure after a broken marriage. Some faith communities are more successful at this than others. Many have grief groups, or programs in recovery from divorce, that include separated and divorced members of the congregation. It is important that the grief of children be acknowledged, as well as that of their parents, when intimate partnerships are incapable of reconciliation.

But if reconciliation is to occur, certain conditions are crucial. Many people of faith report the following to be important as they seek to heal their relationship:

- the *courage* to face their problems openly, without denial or avoidance;
- the *strength* to face their need to change, and the *grace* to learn how;
- the *love* to sustain them even in the darkest times, such as family crises, death, job loss, illness; and
- the *commitment* to God's calling to their vocation of marriage.

Many couples have had little or no experience of Bible study or prayer in their relationship, and many say that when a marriage is in crisis they have no spiritual nurture. One partner may engage in spiritual practice, such as joining a prayer group, while the other offers passive resistance amounting to sabotage. Many couples, although they worship together, are really out of fellowship in a spiritual and emotional sense with one another, and this exacerbates the difficulties they face in the course of their shared life.

Many Christian counsellors try to encourage couples to find a way to pray together and to have their life informed by regular scripture reading so that their emotional and family life is nourished by their faith. As partners learn to listen to one another, to truly hear the deepest needs and longings of the heart of their spouse, a window often opens for deeper communion, and fresh air enters to revitalize the marriage. As new skills and healthier relational patterns are developed, counselling may be needed less frequently.

Often couples divorce who otherwise could have restored their relationships, had the appropriate help been available. As a result, many children are torn between two separated parents and could be helped if their parents had a clearly defined parenting plan that outlines a process for resolution of difficulties and does not put the children in the middle. Parents who divorce need to realize that children have the need and right to love

both their parents, and (unless prohibited by court order due to violations such as physical or sexual abuse) they need to feel connected to each of their parents. If and when remarriage or new partnerships occur, old loyalties must be preserved along with new ties.

Sadly, some family relationships cannot be restored or healed. Irreconcilable situations may be robbing the relationship of God's call to life. Sometimes it is because of hardness of heart, an unforgiving spirit, a refusal to walk the path of reconciliation. Sometimes it is because physical or emotional abuse cannot and should not be tolerated any longer, and the relationship needs to end.

Sometimes there are events external to ourselves or destructive to family life that undermine a marriage. These include war, natural disasters, physical or psychiatric illness, substance abuse, pornography and other addictions — all of which can thwart reconciliation from occurring. At such times we need to depend on God's grace to move forward, and to rebuild our lives and the lives of our children. In order to do so without being bound by guilt or shame, we may need to seek spiritual, as well as psychological, counselling.

Marriage counselling

Couples enter into family or marital therapy with a wide array of issues. There may be conflicts with parents or grandparents from a family of origin. There may be conflicts with children or between the couple themselves, or conflicts related to the employment that one or the other engages in. No couple exists as an isolated unit, and a trained marriage and family therapist will seek to explore the relationships and connections that form the landscape of the couple's life.

Many couples seek help because one or both are in emotional distress. This can have any number of causes — a vocational transition or job loss, a health crisis (for example, diagnosis of cancer or infertility), problems with aging parents or the death of a parent, persistent rage and violence, alcohol or drug abuse, an affair (sexual and/or emotional), or problems with children from a former marriage.

Sometimes couples experience positive life changes that are also stressful, such as a geographical or vocational move, the birth of a child (with the resulting sleep deprivation and other adjustments), children leaving home (or returning), or the marriage of an adult child. Occasionally couples have to face life events that are traumatic because they are unexpected, such as the disappearance or death of a child, the birth of a seriously disabled child, a car accident, bankruptcy, or the diagnosis of chronic disease (for example, diabetes or multiple sclerosis).

Many churches provide a real sense of community at times like these. However, a crisis in the couple's normal support system (for example, a schism in their church or the divorce of close friends) may also be a source of distress that can send couples into therapy.

No single life-cycle event may require the help of a therapist, but if, in combination with other events, there is cumulative stress, then the couple's relationship may be helped by professional support. For example, if one partner is diagnosed with cancer at the same time as children begin to leave home, and the person's aging parents need help to face moving into a retirement residence, that person may be overwhelmed and depressed. A therapist could advise the other partner how to show more empathy and practical support at such a time, and could provide additional emotional support and communication skills training for both members of the couple.

Many couples seek counselling because of infidelity of one or both partners. Infidelity breaks a sacred bond based on an exclusive commitment to another to love and care for the other. Marriage relies on a culture of fidelity. But because we live in a consumer culture that exalts personal choice and pleasure seeking, a marriage covenant is often seen as a contract that easily can be cancelled. Whether straight or gay, couples who make a sacred bond often need help and support to maintain their covenant, and to develop courage and forgiveness to rebuild the relationship if that covenant has been broken by infidelity.

Many couples seem to manage life just fine until there is a buildup of stressors that trigger withdrawal or abusive or acting-out behaviours, and then the couple loses touch with each other. Other couples, plagued by responsibilities or issues they brought into the marriage (for example, a history of childhood abuse, children from a previous marriage, poor anger management skills, patterns of chronic workaholism, etc.) may never learn the skills necessary to cope with managing stress or money or conflict, or to make cooperative decisions.

Some couples become shipwrecked on the shoals of different philosophies of relationship fidelity or the meaning of commitment. Whatever the origins, dysfunctional patterns can develop and, in spite of a couple's faith, their emotional and relational "dance" lacks the necessary choreography to meet the challenges of life together.

Family mediation

A couple called my colleague, who is a family mediator, asking for help to end their marriage and protect their children. Both people of faith, they had three children, ages four, six, and eight. Each partner had sought personal counselling, but the husband's

chronic workaholic patterns and heavy drinking continued to create much distress in the couple's relationship, and in his parenting of their children. In spite of efforts to change these patterns, the husband finally realized that he didn't want to give the time needed to repair the marriage. However, he was determined to be as good a parent as possible. After speaking with his priest, he was persuaded to seek a less adversarial approach to his wife in terminating the marriage, and he phoned and made arrangements for both of them to see a family mediator.

Adversarial legal justice may be useful in some situations, but not when dealing with failed intimate relationships. When children are involved, the adversarial approach encourages everyone to think in terms of "good" and "bad" people — heroes and villains — not useful categories for either parents or children who, like all of us, represent a complex mix of motives and behaviours, both positive and negative, conscious and unconscious. Successful mediation saves time and money, and makes it easier for separated couples to co-parent and to talk with each other civilly.

Family mediation is a constructive, non-adversarial way to resolve family and parenting issues that inevitably accompany separation or divorce. It can help to reduce the pain, the time, and the expense of finding solutions. A professionally trained, impartial mediator assists the couple and other involved family members to define new relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

While family mediation is not itself therapy, it is a therapeutic means of resolving contentious family issues. It provides couples the opportunity to face each other with less risk and vulnerability and to identify and address unresolved conflicts that can get in the way of negotiating a successful post-marriage agreement. When there is not a gross imbalance of power (for example, financially) or a history of violence and serious abuse of a spouse or children, then mediation is often a useful process for resolving and ending a marriage conflict.

For example, family mediation can help to determine

- how and when to separate;
- how to let go of the past and to develop an effective parenting plan for the children;
- how to address and resolve difficult financial issues;
- how to make appropriate personal decisions;
- how to reduce stress, conflict, and the threat associated with litigation; and
- how to ensure private and confidential resolution of contentious issues.

Mediators can also help to create a written Memorandum of Understanding outlining an agreement that can then be legally finalized by lawyers.

Lawyers, clergy, social workers, psychologists, and marriage and family therapists who refer their clients to a trained mediator can help people in crisis deal with the overwhelming transition that separation and divorce can represent. During the mediator's temporary intervention, people benefit from the continued involvement of their primary helping professional. The overall goal is to help divorcing couples move out of the role of partners while continuing to focus on their enduring relationship as parents for their children.

Mediation is a process, but it is not the same as therapy. It is also not suitable for everyone. A mediator must assess such factors as

- the parties' consent to the mediation process;
- whether or not the parties can talk to each other (with the mediator's assistance) in a safe environment;
- the level of commitment of both parties to settle the issues;
- the level of clarity and understanding of these issues possessed by both parties;

- the parties' ability to state their needs and interests;
- the parties' understanding of their basic rights and responsibilities under the law; and
- whether there are any factors (such as domestic violence) that would make the mediation process difficult or impossible.

How does mediation work?

In mediation two or more people work with a more objective third party, a mediator, to resolve the issues between them by consensus. Similar principles govern both family and small business mediation, although the process may be somewhat less formal in family situations.

Much (though not all) family mediation deals with the aftermath of marital breakdown. When partners, married or not, decide to separate and live apart, conflicts often arise concerning financial support, the nurturing of children, and the division of property. Traditionally such issues were worked out through the legal system, which pits former partners against each other as adversaries. This approach can make things worse rather than better. Mediation is a rapidly growing alternative to litigation, and its popularity is easy to understand.

Mediation allows the parties themselves to determine what issues need to be addressed and in what order. It fosters a sense of cooperation between the parties rather than conflict, an obvious virtue when children are involved. A trained mediator assists the parties to work out agreements that are imaginative yet practical, and that meet the unique needs of the people and relationships involved. Moreover, mediation is time effective and comparatively inexpensive.

Virtually any issue is appropriate for mediation, as long as all parties agree to discuss it in the context of a clearly defined and consistent process. A common issue in family breakup is the development of a “parenting plan” for children. This may include custody, access, support for children and/or spouses, disposition or handling of property, care of the elderly, parent-child conflicts, and also how to navigate the practical effects of different values.

My colleague Joan Sinclair says,

The details may vary, but the basic structure of the process is pretty consistent. The parties and I will meet together in my office, usually five or six times for ninety minutes each time. Ideally the parties work together, face to face, to negotiate an agreement. Sometimes I meet individually with each party. Where face-to-face meetings are inappropriate, I can do “shuttle diplomacy” back and forth between the parties, who may never be in the same room.

Where children’s needs are at issue, and if they and their parents agree, I may meet with them individually, without the adult parties being present. In a conflict between a parent and an older child, the child is a party and needs to be present at joint mediation sessions.

What does the mediation process focus on?

Mediation focuses on the needs and interests of the parties and their children. People often begin a mediation with a fixed, firm, “bottom line” position. After discussing with the mediator and with the other party why that particular position is so important to them — that is, what needs that bottom line meets — they may discover that there are alternative ways of meeting those needs, while also meeting the needs of the other party. No one is coerced into anything; all decisions are reached by consensus. “I don’t

make any decisions for my clients," says Joan Sinclair. "They make the decisions together, and they craft the agreement between them. I facilitate the process, and I counsel them to consult with others, such as their respective lawyers, accountants, therapists, and family members."

This may be the way that living at peace with one another is achieved for those who are painfully ending a marriage. Mediation may be a kind of peacemaking, and its fruit may be the flourishing of the children or others in the family who feel at least temporarily dismembered at the finality of family breakdown and divorce.

The role of the faith community

The church can play a supportive and healing role in the lives of family members who are going through the often excruciating pain of divorce. By resisting making judgements or taking sides, except in situations when one or more members are in need of safety, the church community can be a stabilizing help to children, a kind of extended family during a time of upheaval. It is important for churches to have fellowship groups that are not couple-centred, so that someone going through marital breakdown can have a place of support and acceptance.

The church is called to offer marriage, couple, and family education programs, so that the risk of breakup is reduced. Yet at the same time, the church needs to work to minimize damage and maximize healing in those cases where reconciliation is not possible. Encouraging a mediated process would be one such peacemaking effort.

Resources

For Children

Emily Menendez-Aponte. Illustrated by R. W. Alley. 1999. *When Mom & Dad Divorce: A Kid's Resource*. Indiana: Abbey Press.

About Children

Wallerstein, Judith S., Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee. 2000. *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*. New York: Hyperion.

About Child Support Guidelines

Federal Child Support Guidelines: call 1-888-373-2222.

Web site: <<http://canada.justice.gc.ca>>.

Provincial Child Support Guidelines Ontario web site:

<<http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca>>.

Choose "How May We Help You?"

Information on Divorce Law

Write Department of Justice Canada, 284 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H8, or visit the Department of Justice web site: <<http://canada.justice.gc.ca>>.

Information for Women

A Snapshot of Family Law Proceedings; Custody and Access Issues When You Have Experienced Abuse; Getting Your Possessions Back. Pamphlets available from National Association of Women and the Law, 1 Nicholas Street, Suite 604, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7.
Telephone 613-241-7570. E-mail: nawl@ftn.net

Emergency Resources for Children

For information and/or help for children who may have been abused, your local Child Welfare authorities will help you. Consult the emergency numbers at the front of the telephone directory, or call the operator for assistance.