Excerpts from Moving Your Church Through Conflict by Speed B. Leas. Alban Institute 1985

1. From the FOREWORD

By Loren B. Mead

"And they lived happily ever after."

Thus ends, I am convinced, one of the deepest longings and most impossible dreams of humanity. How many times we have heard or told stories that ended this way. How often we have been perplexed because nobody - and I mean *no body* - ever seems to experience what the stories seem to promise.

I wonder, for example, how Cinderella felt when the prince, now a 50- year-old paunchy king, fell in love with a slip of a serving girl and ran off with her. Or how the prodigal son felt after six months at home, plowing the back forty in the hot sun.

Living happily ever after seems to assume that life hits a lovely high and just stays there. It assumes that some-how, sometimes, things need a basic peaceful unity that has the power to continue through the ages.

Real life is so much more complex, and we know it in our bones. Perhaps that is why we love the stories, though; they preserve our dream.

In real life, however, we do not experience that lovely high that lasts forever; we do not reach a basic unity that continues on and on. Real life involves a passionate dialogue, a dynamic interaction, a push and pull, a give and take that our religious traditions tell us may not even be fully complete this side of the grave.

But the dream of harmony, the hope of that constant high continually haunts us, clouding our judgment and confusing us when we encounter the harsher faces of the passionate dialogue in which we are called to live.

The dream of unity makes husbands and wives choke down deep feelings of anger or distrust to keep the peace. It leads a friend to keep quiet about actions of another that seem insensitive or wrong - again, to keep the peace. It leads a partner to go along with another partner's acts of dubious morality, to keep the peace. It leads a government official to accept questionable actions of a superior to keep the peace.

Such a peace is no peace at all. It is what I have come to call "cheap peace." Nowhere is the dream of harmony more vigorously believed and hoped for than in religious groups. One of the highest values lived by in religious groups is the value of unity and togetherness. In service of that value, religious leaders will permit - without a spoken word - absolutely obnoxious behavior on the part of a parish leader or clergyperson. They will keep quiet for weeks or months while unacceptable actions are taken, beliefs are espoused, positions or programs are implemented. All the while there is outward peace and harmony, but inward turmoil of feelings of anger, betrayal, hurt. When at last the unexpressed bitterness boils over, the explosion of feelings can be both surprisingly powerful and almost unmanageable.

We have learned that the fullest life is the life that goes beyond cheap peace to a peace that indeed far surpasses our understanding and our dreams. It is a peace that includes the broadest varieties, the strongest differences. That kind of peace is like the richest of polyphonic harmonies, blending a rich diversity into a complex, tension-filled unity, far beyond uniformity. So long as groups focus on the dream of living happily ever after, they buy into cheap peace, a

peace that kills individuality. Only by opening up to the richness of diversity can we experience the rich peace of growing up into full humanity.

But the cost is conflict. To move from cheap peace to the peace of growth we move away from a dream of a long steady high to the reality of coping with our diverse individuality, making compromises, negotiating differences, arguing, opposing and supporting, challenging and rejecting, dealing with winning and losing, breaking up and finding reconciliation.

2. From Chapter 1, section on Fear

Fear

Built into the most primitive partes of our brains (most likely the medula oblongata) are survival systems that, when triggered, not only inject our blood stream with adrenalin, cause our hearts to pump blood more quickly through our veins and arteries, change our breathing rate, but also change our consciousness in a way that makes it difficult for us to think clearly or deeply about what is happening about and inside us. When we are frightened, our bodies (survival systems) don't want us musing on the ironies of our situation or other topics of esoteric interest. Our bodies (survival systems) want us to respond powerfully and decisively to any perceived threat to our survival. Therefore, our physiological response is often inappropriate to what is actually happening. We perceive the threat as overwhelming and respond (often below the level of consciousness) by getting our bodies ready to fight or flee and by shutting down our capacities to think through what is happening. Our first obligation, our survival system believes, is to be safe; only then can we think. You could say our bodies have a very primitive rheology: a survival theology. The survival theology sums up the world something like this:

The world is a very hostile place;
It is ultimately important that you stay alive;
Don't depend on anything or anybody to save you; your job is to save yourself- no matter what the cost; Force and might or swift flight are the most effective protections;
Death is ultimate; resurrection or a second chance are not possibilities.

This is not Christian theology. Christians do not see this world as hostile, but believe that in all things there is hope. Christians hope for life eternal and renewal and do not see defeat or death as ultimate. "That's awfully idealistic," you might say. Certainly, it's idealistic to the person operating out of the survival systems of the brain.

Men and women operating out of the more evolved (less survival fixated) cerebral cortex are able to assess the world with more complex understandings and can engage in a deeper analysis of what is happening around them: they are not limited to assessing, " ls this situation threatening or not?" They can explore manifold opportunities and choose to overcome the survival mentality which moves persons away from fight/flight behavior.

Thus, one's rheology shapes profoundly the way one approaches conflict. If one believes that there is hope for the next world, if one believes that death is not ultimate, if one believes that out of failure can come new life, new opportunity, new growth and hope, then one is not so prone to move in to the body's program of flight or fight responses.

Thus, your theology is one of the tools you use to assess the world. Your assessment of

the world will affect your level of fright, and this will affect your ability to cope well in a conflict situation.

Conflict Goals

Because of the inability of human beings at this stage of evolutionary development to create or force reconciliation, it does not seem realistic to make that our number one goal in a conflict. Surely reconciliation will be our ultimate goal, or our meta-goal; but it cannot be our operational goal. An operational goal too far removed from probability is not a meaningful guide or target. If our hopes are fixed on unattainable goals, our behavior, rather than being purposeful, is more likely to be random and futile. Certainly, we hope for that day when reconciliation will come, but we cannot create it or force it; we can only create the conditions, the environment, which may enhance the probabilities that reconciliation can occur and that those who have been antagonists will become friends.

To work toward our meta-goal of reconciliation, we must set more realistic and achievable goals (or subgoals) for conflicted relationships or organizations. These are the goals I would recommend:

Fear Reduction

Because of the tendency of human beings to lose reason when threatened, it is incumbent on anyone wishing to manage conflict to do everything possible to reduce one's own fear as well as the fear of those to whom one is opposed. Fear is a powerful motivator. If you want a teenager to mow the lawn, threaten to withhold her allowance; if you want the attention of a church board, threaten to withhold your pledge. The problem with this kind of stimulus is that you can never be sure of the response. If the responder perceives that her or his survival is threatened, the ensuing behavior may not be what was expected.

Fearful people are likely to:
Disappear;
Fight;
Act crazy;
Become apathetic;
Call in outside assistance;
Avoid anything that reminds them of "the problem. "

Fearful people are not likely to:
Be committed to agreements they make;
Be rational;
Fully invest themselves in a task;
Care about the organization.

Persons in conflict should do as much as possible to reduce not only their own fear, but also that of those to whom they are opposed. Unless you take steps to reduce your own fear, your mind will be clouded, if not immobilized in fright. It will be very difficult for you to sort rationally through the alternatives open to you. If the fear on the part of your opposition is great, any decision (assuming you can get one) is likely to be short-lived, perhaps lasting only until the

end of the meeting. Further, your frightened counterpart may use force, subterfuge, manipulation and/or other tactics which are likely to hurt you. These may be perceived by the other as necessary for self-protection, but they may be harmful to you or the church. The more frightened your opponent is, the more likely he or she is to frighten you!

Another way to describe this need to reduce fear in a conflict is as a need to increase your own and others' tolerance for difference. Many times, the affective difficulty of conflict is fear of what might happen or fear of conflict or difference itself.

There is nothing in evitable about the outcome of conflict. Minor conflict doesn't necessarily lead to uncontrollable difficulty. There is ample evidence from behavioral science research and case material that shows quite the opposite: small amounts of conflict can generate organizational enthusiasm, function as a stimulant to positive change, motivate healthy participation, indeed, improve decisions by breaking the mediocrity of group-think.

A well-managed conflict helps the parties appreciate the fact that conflict can be dealt with, that there are skills, rules, and techniques that can be used to help people grow and learn from the experience rather than be devastated by it. If it is a person's expectation before conflict begins that the experience will be devastating, it is quite likely that the final evaluation will be that it was truly awful. Even if a conflict has developed to a stage where individuals are frightened and upset, it is still the aim of conflict management to help them get control of themselves and their organization so that decisions can be made, and the organization is enhanced through recognizing and working with differences rather than suppressing or denying them.

3. Levels of conflict. A greatly detailed way to think about the different intensities and difficulties encountered as the conflict becomes more severe.

4. Chapters 4 -11 give a detailed methodology for addressing conflict in the church, beginning with analyzing the problem, investigating the problem, training the actors and the congregation in conflict resolution skills, and then steps towards resolving the conflict. It is a great collection of “how – to”

5. Chapter 12 talks about a few key factors that impact how conflict is handled. The first is the size of the congregation because it impacts the way in which the institution functions and therefore how it impacts how conflict resolution would occur. He talks about Social Action and New Buildings are often issues that stimulate conflict, and then talks about issues related to clergy and staff that are not particularly relevant in our unprogrammed meetings.