

THOUGHTS ON RECONCILIATION

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The Adversary Mode permeates Western society, and through it, affects the globe. By "Adversary Mode" we mean to point to those relations and patterns of response that assume opposition among differing parties or viewpoints. This mode has been the dominant form of relations, at least in the West, since humankind moved into agricultural society from nomadic existence. The struggle against the elements, against the soil, against the animals and against intruding or attacking peoples placed one in a position of fighting for survival, and victory came to the strongest. With the industrial age came a new set of opponents; instead of the elements, it was the forces of the market; instead of the soil, it was the labor/management; instead of literal attackers, it was the competition. Still victory belongs to the strongest, although strength is more often cleverness rather than brute force.

But something has happened in the last 20 years that makes the adversary mode strangely out of place, indeed, a perversity impeding civilization's march into the future. We have been thrust into a global civilization, a situation of interdependence, a state of affairs in which wiping out an opponent harms the victor as much as the victim. And more than that, we have been heir to a time of the most radical and rapid change that history has ever known. In this situation, the era of the Earthrise, adversariality is an anachronism. Further, it is a diversion from the task at hand and so an impediment to building the future. Nevertheless, it is ingrained in Western society as a presupposition to virtually every aspect of knowing and doing and being. In the learning enterprise, images of criticism and debate are dominant. Theories are set in opposition to theories as if some prize were to be won by what comes out on top. In this mode, the search for truth is hampered. In the fields of action, competition and conflict are dominant, whether it be in business, industry, politics or even the human services. It's my business or process or ideology or agency over against yours with the prize being the funds to continue the opposition. In the arena of being or style, aggressiveness of defensiveness are the predominant categories and some superior self-hood, the supposed prize.

In attempting to move beyond this Adversary Mode into a style of Reconciliation, it is advisable to examine more closely what is being rejected and what advocated.

The problem with the Adversary Mode is its systematic exclusion of the dissimilar. And this is problematic only because in a time of innovation, there is no RIGHT way with sufficient status to justify exclusion. The time of new creation is a time of inclusiveness, of forging novel syntheses, "unholy coalitions," unexpected relations. In a time of radical change, old paradigms collapse and all things shimmer with potential. Enemies, competitors, allies, opponents and colleagues all merge into an otherness that, together with my self-ness, have the potential of exceeding traditional conundrums and forging a future with mutual benefit. Adversariality, on the other hand, is concerned exclusively with the self, protecting and insuring it against possible harm. Ours is a time, however, when that cannot happen in isolation from the other, when the self is radically dependent on the other. It is a time when the adversary mode is outmoded.

But adversariality has generated the passion and commitment that brought civilization from the caves to the moon. It has performed exceedingly well, and it will not easily give way. Nor should it. For to move beyond the adversary mode is not to exclude its legitimacy, only to de-throne its pre-eminence.

One of the more romantic illusions afflicting the dis-establishment is that of tension-free existence, be it within the self (when I get my act together), within the family and community ("conflict mediation") or among nations (disarmament). Perhaps one of the more dramatic expressions of this illusion appears in homosexuality wherein participants shun contact with the radically other and seek relations less tensional. The curious depth of the adversarial mode is both that we cannot get away from it and that we cannot get along with it. For the one thing people today cannot seem to bear is IRREDUCIBLE DIFFERENCES. We run. We hide. We pretend. We capitulate. We compromise. We dominate. We tyrannize. We exclude. But we simply do not know how to carry on a sustained relation in which the dominant note is difference.

That which is called for is Reconciliation, a relationship in which two or more parties are 100% unified and at the same time totally and radically differentiated.

It starts, often as not, with a person. First there is the attraction of the other. This attraction, which includes both the similarities and the differences, allows one to overcome antipathy and to form a relation. It is the reconciliation of Romeo and Juliette, overcoming the antagonisms of the Montagues and the Capulets and creating a new relationship that found in the other a complementary aspect. For the sake of the person, I am able to move beyond stereotypes and establish relations with what otherwise would be an enemy. This, however, is only the first level. Persons are notoriously prone to shun our trust, to show up unworthy of our regard and to fail to reciprocate in kind. In short, the attraction does not last. It will initiate the most astounding diversity of relationships, but it will invariably disappear. The phenomenon of the "second marriage" occurs after the attraction has gone from a relationship and one decides whether to continue or not. The decision, if it be to continue is based on something entirely different, something that acknowledges the predominance of difference, of tension and struggle in the relationship and yet decides to continue. This is a further step in the direction of Reconciliation.

This second level, often as not, is related to a cause. There is something to which I and the other are devoted, and in relation to it, we will set aside our differences and cooperate on a higher plane. In Western families, this is often regarded as "the children" for whose sake we will continue to live out the vows of marriage. Crises are often seen when the kids grow up and no base is left for the family. Yet there are other causes or visions which are more lasting, and one of the weaknesses of Western family life is the failure to identify those common directions which will permit a couple to continue in marriage when the romance is gone. But the fraternities of mis-sional collegiality go beyond the family. They include the workplace, the community, and the nation. The difficulty here comes when that cause is an opponent to be defeated or a threat to be avoided. In a time of global inter-dependence, many of the old causes are gone, and new ones are less opponents than visions. And we find them less compelling than a threat to our lives and property. Nevertheless, learning to live creatively without a threat is one of today's challenges.

Even the cause, however, requires a "second marriage." As Tagore put it, "The cause which seemed so glorious when seen from the lofty heights seems so muddy from the bottom." Each cause brings its own form of disillusionment. Perhaps it's that the glory of village development really means licking stamps on a mailing to hopeful supporters. Or that being the religious essentially gets down to doing the dishes for lots of people. Or that the innocent suffering you are out to alleviate will continue undiminished long after you are dead. At this point, something else is required. It often happens, just as in personal relationships, that people think something is wrong, that the journey has gone askew. And often people sever the relationship, become cynical or go off looking for another cause that will permit significant relations to go on. Some, however, do persist. But they do it without the luxury of the glorious affinity for the task. They know it for what it is yet they persist. The persistence in an ultimately unworthy cause is based on something entirely other than convictions of the cause's value or its benefits to me. It is based on another level of Reconciliation.

This third level is related to the Final Reality, that Otherness that has seen to the demise of my attraction to particular people and of my affinity for glorious causes. That reality has exposed the depth of my antagonisms and of the adversariality in life: life is NOT friendly to my dispositions, and, indeed, will see to their frustration and to my demise. The paranoid is right--final reality is gonna getcha! And in the depth of struggling with that relationship, THERE Reconciliation occurs. When the mysterious transformation occurs, as it does, making hell into heaven and enemy into Father, then reconciliation occurs with humankind. For all are likewise related to this final reality, and all are struggling the same struggle as I with coming to terms with That One's absolute sovereignty.

This reconciliation has something of the feel of hugging a porcupine; yet it is that alone which brings creative and lasting relationships in life. Once one not only perceives that life is dominated by the Final Reality but goes through the journey of Enmity, Flight, Acknowledgement, and Confidence in this One, all other relationships take on a level of meaning and significance not before available. That person and that cause with which I am involved is not an isolated entity, but the vehicle through which I and the Final Reality are related. But like the others, this level of reconciliation also involves the "Second Marriage." This time it is at the point of discovering God to be more my humiliator than my advocate. Better, discovering that acknowledgement of the Final Reality wins no brownie points, that fidelity to this One has no rewards and certainly guarantees no successes. At this point, the classics named it The Dark Night of the Soul; we have identified another aspect and termed it The Long March of Care. People experiencing these dynamics are in the struggle of reconciliation with Being-Itself.

When it occurs, there is the phenomenon of Adoration. And then every other relationship shimmers with potential. Knowing moves from criticism to syntheses; doing shifts from competition to cooperation; being switches from aggressiveness to appreciation. And all of this includes as very much a part of itself the differences and tensions that "normally" would justify ending the relation. But here nothing is "normal." All is new and in creation. One is privileged to be present to the processes of history. And in light of the ultimate struggle, differences are of little consequence. One is freed to take them seriously without taking them ultimately.