

On Conflict

My oldest child turned 13 this week. And so, as parents so often do, I have been scrolling back through years of photos, “remembering when.” Remembering the sweet, snuggly moments; the brilliant insights into life that can only be offered by preschoolers; the years of playful imagination and uninhibited creativity. And these memories brought up sweet sighs of nostalgic longing – for the years before adolescent hormones made every single interaction become infinitely more complicated; the days when mom was still pretty smart and fun to be around; the days when simple conversations weren’t yet ticking bombs of emotion ready to explode.

I have been having to remind myself a lot lately – amidst the shouts of “you don’t understand!” and “you’re just plain WRONG!” that not only is conflict normal – when managed in a healthy way, it is a pathway to intimacy. But in the midst of our current political and religious discourse, that wisdom is at times hard to hear. Conflict too often devolves into entrenchment, assumptions of malicious intent, and “othering.”

In her book *Church of the Wild*, Victoria Loorz references the work of quantum physicist and neuropsychologist David Bohm, who offers the theory that deep, relationship-building conversation begins not with shared interests or ideological alignment, but with the very moment we first realize that we are misunderstood.

ZITS/ by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman



“ We often assume other people understand exactly what we are trying to say, but they never do. They can’t. They are not you. This misunderstanding is actually essential to true conversation. It is the moment when you really start listening and allowing your own perspective to shift in response to the other. The back-and-forth, misunderstanding, clarifying, including what the other has said, and then adding to it – all this continues until a totally new understanding emerges for you both. Rather than disconnecting when we feel we aren’t immediately understood, we can learn to see this moment of misunderstanding as the invitation into the experience of the other, which is a defining action of love. And something amazing happens: you both evolve.”¹

I will be completely honest. I hate conflict. *Hate. It.* It is probably one of my biggest fears, and one of my most underdeveloped skills. And yet, I also long for depth, honesty, vulnerability, and authenticity—all

of which are traits that require some degree of working through disagreement and conflict to arrive at a place of mutual joy and understanding.

So in this season of political turmoil, denominational anxiety, and general cultural unrest, may we find ways to disagree well—to enter into conflict with the intent to deepen rather than divide, that we may grow together in our capacity for love.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is your degree of comfort with conflict? When conflict arises, “how is it with your soul?”
2. In your most significant relationships, how has conflict shaped the quality and depth of those relationships?
3. Where do you feel the deepest need to be better understood? And where do you find the deepest struggle to understand?

¹Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), p. 99.