Peacemaking closer to home

Addressing the daily conflicts of life and faith

Betty Pries

I have long been curious about why Anabaptist peace theology is largely silent on what to do when small harms occur, even as Anabaptist theologians have written extensively on the theology of peace in the context of war. Understanding pacifism in the context of war is critically important. Still, there is something missing.

Several years ago, I was talking to the director of a peace studies program and remarked that, as far as I could tell, all of the program's professors focused on peace studies in the context of international conflicts and war. I asked the director why the program had no specialists on building peace closer to home—at work, with family, in the congregation, or among people in our local communities. The director replied: "No one is interested in that, Betty."

I think the director was wrong. But he was also right. It is easier to think theologically or strategically about conflicts that are far away or, if closer to home, far from our own experience. Stories about conflicts that lead to war and death are compelling, in part because they are dramatic and in part because of their significant consequences. But they are also compelling because they are far outside the experience of most people, making them the source of some curiosity. The problem with this focus, however, is that theologies of conflicts outside our experience do not ask anything of us. They do not demand of us a reckoning with our own conflict behaviors, nor do they give us resources for how to deal with the irksome relationships in our lives.

The absence of theological work on conflicts closer to home is surprising given that the biblical witness seems especially focused on these types of conflicts. While stories of war abound in the Bible, and while it is true that Jesus said "all who take the sword will die by the sword" (Matt 26:52, NRSVue), it is also true that Jesus said "take the log out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matt 7:5, NRSVue), and "let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone" (John 8:7, NRSVue). Throughout his ministry, Jesus settled disputes among disciples, among siblings, and among people in the crowd who followed him. Looking beyond the Gospels, the Bible

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contains many stories of conflicts among family members, friends, and community members. Indeed, most, if not all, of Paul's letters to the early church—Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians—speak directly to conflicts closer to home. Memorably, in 1 Cor 13—the famous love poem that was actually written for people in conflict in the church rather than people at the altar—Paul writes in verse 12: "For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12, NRSVue).

I have spent my entire career helping people sort out conflicts closer to home. While the title of this issue refers to "small harms," it is important to note that the word "small" should not be read to mean "easy." Small harms can be disorienting and deeply painful, leaving us, at best, at a loss for words, and, at worst, deeply wounded. Consider the following examples of "small" harms that have crossed my desk over the years: (a) a woman tells me that putdowns by her relative, while sometimes subtle, are nonetheless frequent enough that she has lost her ability to be kind to her relative, and this bothers her; (b) congregants are divided over how to heal following an uncomfortable parting with their former pastor; (c) the transition of a business from one generation to another is not happening easily—no one is overtly angry, but the dynamics are complex and the parties are becoming testy with one another; (d) a man tells me about the struggles he and his children have talking with one another—everyone seems to become defensive, and well-intentioned conversations quickly become conflictual; and (e) a woman leaves her job because of interpersonal conflicts at work but now feels unable to apply for work again. None of these conflicts makes the news, but every one of them is impacting the people involved in these stories, eroding the participants' ability to be well in the world.

I would like to offer several ideas for addressing the day-to-day harms that show up in our lives, matching each with a theological or spiritual proposition.

1. Put your differences in a mug

One of the big mistakes we make during conflict is that we identify with our thoughts and our feelings, believing we *are* our thoughts and our feelings—and that the other person *is* their thoughts and their feelings. As a result,

when people disagree with us, we feel compelled to take it personally, and we make it personal about them, too. But each of us is much more interesting than our thoughts and our feelings. We are meant to *have* thoughts and feelings; thoughts and feelings are not meant to *have* us. *Putting our differences in a mug* is a metaphor reminding us to hold our thoughts and feelings at arm's length, so that when we are discussing our differences with one another, we are always only discussing the mug and not identifying our differences with one another's personhoods.

Several years ago, I shared this metaphor during a workshop I was leading for leaders at a faith-based institution. In response, one of the participants said, "Betty, if I'm not my thoughts and my feelings, what am I?" I replied, "You are . . . a spark of the divine." There was a moment of silence, and then he quipped, "I think you need to tell my wife." We laughed, but I had not intended to be silly with my response. The deeper truth is that we are all made in the image of God, and the breath of God is alive in each person—even when that breath is hard to see.

In all the research I have done, and in all the conflicts I have mediated, I have observed that one of the primary drivers of conflict is that the conflict puts our sense of selfhood, our sense of who we think we are, at risk, whether individually or collectively. In large or small ways, we believe we are being threatened, that our belief system, our self-image, or our sense of security or belonging are on the table. The problem is that when we experience our selfhood as being at risk, we tend to take things personally. In contrast, when we place the center of our identity in the breath of God alive within us, we allow our thoughts and feelings to be something we have rather than something we are. Putting distance between our sense of self and our thoughts and feelings allows us to respond more thoughtfully and meaningfully to the challenges in front of us.

2. Go to the gym for your soul

Many people go to the gym to build muscle that will help carry them through the course of their day. It is harder to remember that we also need to go to the gym for our souls, taking time for quiet, rest, prayer, and renewal so our spiritual muscles can also carry us through the course of our day. It is hard to navigate the hurts in our lives if we are not taking regular time to become grounded in the deeper truth that we are beloved of God—and so are they, the people with whom we are in conflict.

But how do we hold onto the sense of our—and their—belovedness during difficult conversations? How do we find our center when our best skills escape us and we find ourselves falling off the cliff of our own good intentions? In addition to taking regular time for prayer and contemplation, I have come to believe strongly in the power of *breath prayers*, short mantras

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that help us to find our way back to God and back to center, even and especially when tough conversations are causing us to become unmoored and flooded with emotion. Consider the following examples of breath prayers: *"I can do this. My selfhood is not at risk." "I am beautiful. I am worthy. I am beloved." "I release to God and to the universe all the pain and sorrow from every cell in my body." "God, help me to love this person with unconditional positive regard." "God, please embrace this person with your arms of loving kindness."* Breath prayers can be simple, poetic, or profound. Most importantly, they gently turn our bodies back to God's love for the other person and for us, helping us to stay grounded before, during, and after difficult conversations.

3. Remember that the feelings we resist are the feelings we entrench

We often want to resist the feelings that emerge for us during the hurts we are experiencing—our turning stomach, our constricted breath, our wounded heart. Or we may go so deep into our wounded heart that we lose our way and do not know how to find our way to our center again. Healing includes remembering that before we have a thought, we have a feeling; before we have a feeling, we have a physical sensation; and before we have a physical sensation, we have an *association*. Practically, this means that the conflict in front of us has awakened an old wound or an old narrative; within moments, our body, heart, and brain respond, driving our conflict behaviors.

So often, people tell me that they want to let go of the large and small conflicts in their lives, but they do not know where to start. Or they tell me that they have tried letting go, but versions of the same conflict keep cropping up again and again. In my experience, it is hard to let go of conflict when we have not accepted the feelings underlying it.

One of the most important first steps out of our hurts is allowing ourselves, without judgement, to feel the sensation the conflict creates *in our bodies*. Most of us do not take time to be tender with the sensations of pain in our bodies during or following conflict—our turning stomach, our constricted breath, our wounded heart. This step of healing takes time and is so important that we dare not rush past the invitation to be tender with our wounded self. When we allow ourselves to sense the pain in our bodies, we come closer to the deeper feelings that emerge from it. And

when this occurs, we can accept rather than resist the complex feelings the conflict has generated within us, the stories we have told ourselves, the half-truths we have clung to, and the ways we, too, have contributed to the conflict.

Once we can own the sensations and feelings we hold in our bodies and hearts, we can shift to the second step of healing—releasing all we are holding into God's care and resting in God's love for us. Releasing our hurts into God's care is so much more powerful than simply "letting go," because when we do so, something very powerful happens: Rather than being erased, our wounds are held tenderly, giving us time and space to learn how to be tender with ourselves, to heal, and to turn our emerging self-compassion into a more expansive compassion that, over time, can come to include the person with whom we have struggled.

While some hurts require an immediate response, often there is time before we must respond. After we have allowed ourselves to sense how our body is reacting to the situation, accepted our feelings, released our wounds into God's care, and rested in God's love, we are now ready to consider our next steps. We may need to take action in response to the hurt we have experienced. We may need to have a difficult conversation with ourselves or with the person who has caused us harm. When we take time to allow, accept, release, and rest, we come to the question of what our next step should be, less "hooked" by what occurred, and more capable of making wise and thoughtful decisions about how to engage what we have experienced. Now we can respond rather than react to what occurred, raising the possibility that our response will heal rather than deepen the challenges between us and the other person.

4. Remember that you are beloved as you are—and there is room for improvement

Both principles—your belovedness and your brokenness—are true at the same time. We all fall down. None of us gets it right all the time. While we may know this truth deep in our bones, both during and following difficult conversations we can be tempted to solve our pain by blaming the other person for what has happened between us. In these moments, we are vulnerable to focusing on what the other has done wrong while minimizing our own contribution to the tension between us. As noted by the apostle Paul, however, we all see in a mirror dimly. Remembering our—and their—belovedness and brokenness allows us to come to our conversations with one another with more humility, more honesty about our own contributions, more grace for the ways we have each fallen down. With this stance, we increase our capacity to effectively say the hard things we need to say, to hold boundaries appropriately, and, ultimately, to find our way forward.

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In Luke 10, we read: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27, NRSVue). The secular version of this same commandment is to regard our neighbor with *unconditional positive regard.* The American psychologist Carl Rogers, who popularized this phrase in 1956, famously stated that when he regarded his clients with judgement, they responded with resistance. But if he regarded his clients with unconditional positive regard, change was possible. The same holds true for the conflicts and small harms in our own lives. When we start with unconditional positive regard—even as we hold boundaries and speak about our differences—change is possible.

More than one person has told me that the idea of unconditional positive regard is harder to practice than loving their neighbors as themselves, for the simple reason that because the word "love" is used so frequently, it no longer demands hard things of them. Unconditional positive regard and truly loving our neighbors as ourselves are not easy commandments, but they are transformative.

Conclusion

Small harms are real harms. It is important for us to learn the skills to engage the day-to-day harms that, at some point, come for all of us. Just as importantly, we must nurture an understanding of what it means to be a child of God—not only as a theological proposition, but also as a self-understanding, a stance, a way of being that influences how we lean into the world, how we regard the other people in our lives, and how we transform small harms.

If Anabaptist peace theology has taught us to imagine a world beyond violence, it must also teach us how to repair the small harms that shape our daily lives. The work of peace is not only found in opposing war or naming injustice at a distance; it is also found in the ordinary courage of pausing before we react, tending honestly to our wounds, remembering our own belovedness and brokenness, and extending that same grace to others. These practices will not make conflict easy, nor will they remove the need for boundaries, accountability, or hard conversations. But they can help us become people who meet harm with greater wisdom, humility, and compassion. The repair of small harms is not a lesser expression of peacemaking—it is one of its most demanding forms.

About the author

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