

Event Title: Leadership in Tough Times
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Key presentation by Bonnie Anderson, President
The House of Deputies, The Episcopal Church

Creative Conflict: Relationship building with people who disagree.

Good Evening. What a pleasure it is for me to be here at the University of the Pacific. The last time I was here was in 1964, on the day after the graduation ceremony. I jumped into my car, my BA degree propped up on the seat beside me, saw Pacific fading from sight in the rearview mirror and headed for Southern California – and, more importantly, THE BEACH!!

At that time I would never have imagined that I would be here tonight, in this capacity, talking with you about Creative Conflict and relationship building with people who disagree. All of this under the rubric of “Leadership in Tough Times”. But it is said that hindsight is 20/20 and as I think about it, being here makes all the sense in the world to me.

As a student here I met a guy who came through the campus recruiting students to ride the bus down to Alabama and join the “freedom train” there. I did not go with him, but I still recall the hours of conversations I had with him that gave me initial insights into debilitating racism.

As a student here I learned about the Old Testament from Rabbi Rosenberg. Old Testament was a required course. Even though I groused about taking it, after two of Rabbi Rosenberg’s lectures, I was hooked. I learned about marginalized people and their history wrought by faith and struggle. I learned about God acting in their lives.

As a student here, I learned from Professor Byron about the master minds of crime, Leopold and Lobe, who he practically lived with in prison, as he studied their crime and motivation and then passed his insights on to us, his students. I also learned from him what it meant to make it a personal discipline to visit prisoners at the Stockton Youth Prison regularly.

But the life lesson that I learned from Professor Byron and from Rabbi Rosenberg and from the guy who came to recruit students for the freedom train was this:

Not one of us is free, not one of us has dignity unless we all are free, unless we all have dignity. We are in relationship with each other. God has made it so. That is the moral truth that drives me and through my “hindsight glasses” I can see how my life experiences have been built, one upon the other, to equip me to do the work I am called to do.

So what do I do? What do you do? And how do tough times, leadership, conflict and relationships all play into that?

First let's talk about tough times. I bet if we were able to go back through history and interview people about the times in which they lived, EVERYONE would say they lived through tough times. Their lives would reflect tough times in the form of such things as the dustbowl, famine, war, natural disasters, holocausts, starvation, depression. Our time right now, is another TYPE of tough time marked by terrorism, and a declining economy – both making Americans get used to a knot of fear inside them. Ours is a tough time, but our forbearers would probably say that they had tough times too, and they did.

But in our tough time, there is one major but very subtle difference. The difference is this: – because of technology, available travel, communication, we have the capability to SEE, and, to some extent, to UNDERSTAND not only our own tough times, but we are well aware of the tough times other people across the globe are having. Instead of the farm down the road, or the houses in the subdivision where we live, or the apartment complex or even the shelter, the whole world is our neighborhood. And even though we can't go to our global neighbors next door to borrow a cup of sugar, through technology, we are just as aware of the lifestyles of our global neighbors as we are of the people who we know casually on the street where we live.

And just to put it into perspective, tough times in America look like a resort vacation to 2/3 of the rest of the world. And because we know about the tough times of others, even though we may push the knowledge into the back of our mind, it remains with us. We cannot “unknow it”.

So the toughest thing about these times for us is this:

As economist Jeffrey Sachs has said, for the first time in the history of the world, we really have the resources, the capability, the capacity to eradicate world poverty. The tough question is: will we do it?

The tough times we are really facing is the ownership of our soul. The tough times we are really facing is the threat to the freedom of humanity. Remember, not one of us is free, not one of us has dignity unless we all are free, unless we all have dignity. Our morality is under scrutiny. Our morality is at test.

And that brings us smack dab into CONFLICT: It brings us to internal conflict and it brings us into external conflict: the external conflict in relationships, conflict between societies of people and conflict between individuals.

We are all experts on this topic because conflict is a part of our daily lives. Put into the context of our “tough times”, makes the Rodney King quote, “Why can't we all just get along?” seem even more ludicrous.

Use of our resources, real change in priorities, living different lifestyles, those questions stir up conflict, because they point to the very core of our differences they point to the

very core of disagreement – and at the core of our differences and at the core of our conflicts is POWER.

Power: What is it, Who has it, who doesn't, how to get it and how to keep it. What we disagree about most, as a society and as individuals, is power – who has it and how it is used.

In a description of the Zen Master Tich Nhat Hanh's concepts of power this is said, "Every day, each of us exercises power in many ways, and our every act subtly affects the world we live in. This struggle for control and authority permeates every aspect of our private and public lives, preventing us from attaining true happiness. The me-first mentality in our culture seeps unnoticed into our decisions and choices."

What if in the quest to keep the integrity of our souls, we redefined power? What if, at the very core of the value of power, at our center of understanding of power, we embraced it in a circular model? Instead of conceptualizing and relating power as a "top-down" hierarchical pyramid, we conceive of power, we live with power as a circular concept. A circular model of power.

Let's take a quick look at that concept through the lens of leadership and relationship. These two are close sisters, who walk hand-in-hand, occasionally one will walk by herself for a while, but they cannot be apart for very long, they depend upon each other for their very existence. If one is lost, the other will soon wither away. They are so close, they share the same heart.

Leadership exists in relationship. Leadership in a circular power model is shared; it is intentional, careful and purpose-driven. It is leadership that takes into account the attributes and qualities of everyone in the circle so that they can contribute their best. Leadership is not for the sake of itself. Leadership is FOR something and so are relationships.

The most basic principle of relationship building is "finding unity of purpose". It is the basic tenet of empowerment, and social change. Even though we disagree on most everything else, we can agree that XXX..... fill in the blank. Building our relationships helps us to achieve our agreed upon purpose. And more importantly, building our relationships strengthens our capacity for freedom and dignity.

In his inaugural address, President Obama rehearsed the American crisis, but reinforced the strength of the community he is leading, the American community, by saying, "On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord".

"So what do I do? What do you do?"

I can tell you why I do what I do:

There is something inside me that relentlessly strives for wholeness. At its very foundation is the knowledge that I am intrinsically connected to this earth and to all the creatures of it. I know in my heart of hearts that my freedom and dignity, what I was created to be, is deeply connected to your freedom and dignity. It is connected to the freedom and dignity of people I will never know. Once I knew that, the seeds of this truth planted over the years by people like Professor Byron, and the freedom train guy, and Rabbi Rosenberg and the promises I made at my baptism, and countless others upon whose shoulders I stand, after all this, for me, the bell has been rung and there was no “unringing it”.

So how about you? What do you do and why?

I hope you know your story and are able to tell it. Telling your story and listening to the story of other people is at the core of relationship building.

I hope you know what you bring to the party – what makes you uniquely you?

Figure out what you are doing here – here on this fragile earth, why now,

Be clear about why you do what you do.

Will there be conflict? Absolutely. Sometimes you will have to walk away from it.

Sometimes you will determine that there is no unity of purpose. Shake the dust off and go toward building relationships where you can purposefully use your gifts to the end for which you have been called.

Finally, in these “tough times” when our very souls are at stake, we, all of us gathered here, are called upon to lead with confidence and humility, when we are not serving as a leader, we are called upon to follow with confidence and humility, we are always called upon to meet disagreement and conflict with generosity of spirit, but with singleness of heart and unity of purpose.