

A Recipe for Peace

by Douglas Noll
January 2006

Here is a recipe for peace I learned from a book by Marc Ian Barasch:

1. Cut pride into bite-sized pieces;
2. Chew;
3. Swallow.

Pride is one of the great causes of conflict. It is not just the usual over-exaggerated sense of self, but also involves strong identification with a group. Recently, I was working on a particularly hostile conflict involving a split within an evangelical organization. In the pre-mediation meetings, I would hear things like “They are liars.” “That person is evil.” “They are not Christians!” Then I would go into the other meeting and hear exactly the same thing. They can’t both be right. What’s going on here?

“An enemy,” wrote psychologist Karen Horney, “is an economical way to form an identity.” Back the 1950s, social psychologists in the now-famous Robber Cave experiments, demonstrated the power of group identity. Twelve year old campers who were best friends were separated into different groups. The groups were led through a series of encounters and situations contrived by the experimenters. Within a day, the former best friends were now bitter enemies. Later research established that hating someone else is a down and dirty psychological way to create meaning and identity within one’s self. Once caught up in this emotion, with its strong feedback mechanisms, a person becomes enmeshed in conflict. Escaping to peace is very difficult.

A second related influence also involves groups. One’s self-esteem is based largely upon the esteem given to the group of which one is a member. If you are a member of a privileged group, your self-esteem rises. Remember the clothing line with the label Members Only? Even clothes are sold on the basis of affiliation with an elite group or image. Our personal identities are strongly tied to our groups.

In conflict between groups, members will seek esteem for their group. This will frequently take the form of stereotyping, disrespecting, or putting down other groups. If one group has more power than the other, the conflict will intensify into oppression of rights and perhaps violence. This is one of the root causes of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination. Genocide is an extreme example of the same principle.

All of this goes back to pride. If I think I or my group is morally, physically, mentally, or spiritually superior to you and we are in conflict with you, my pride will prevent me from seeking peace. I will unconsciously resist any effort or argument, logical or not, that attacks my sense of self. In fact, I will probably become stubborn and resistant as more pressure is put on me to find peace.

If you look around, you will see this phenomenon everywhere. Take football as a common example. Fans take great pride in their teams and emotionally go through the roller coaster of wins and losses. They will dress in team colors, get on game faces, and build their week on the

upcoming game. This is a benign and usually happy experience, but points out the danger of strong group identification. Over-identification may result in a loss of discernment between self and the group. Normally law-abiding and respectful people will throw rocks and turn to violence against fans of or members of the other team as a result of group over-identification.

The phenomenon is found in workplaces when cliques form to include some and exclude others. Street gangs demonstrate the power of group identification to a fault. When schisms occur within faith communities, group identification is underneath the ideology, supporting and escalating the conflict.

I have only found one way to transform conflicts based on pride and group identification: Get the parties into one room, slow them down, control the conversation, and start them talking. If you have prideful people in conflict in your office or workplace, get them together in a room. Separating them is the worst thing you can do. Take away their cell phones, Blackberries, PDA's and pagers. Have one person speak at a time without interruption. Have each speak about the injustices, offenses, injuries and betrayals experienced in the conflict. Allow space for everyone else to listen as respectfully as possible. Recognize and prepare for hostile, reactive outbursts by those who are listening. Allow emotions to be expressed, but not used to blame or project anger outward. Let everyone speak, one at a time. Amazingly, when the talking is over, the conflict will be greatly de-escalated.

Finally, to find peace in your personal conflicts, use the pride recipe. Bon appetit.