Dancing With the Energy of Conflict & Trauma:

Letting Go and Finding Peace

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On a beautiful summer day, a county fair was bustling in an average Midwestern town in the United States, but in the late afternoon, dark clouds began to hover over the fair, and within minutes, rain came pouring down. Peter, a local police officer and a single father of a four-year-old girl, had spent the day drinking beer at the firemen’s tent with his buddies. But when the rain came, he rushed for his full-sized, Ford pick-up in the parking lot, along with many other, wet fair-goers. In a drunken fog, Peter became frustrated with the long line of cars and pushed the accelerator down as he swerved to the left in order to shoot past the other automobiles.

Karen and her husband of fourteen years, Rick, were walking on the right side of the road and in the direct path of Peter’s two-ton truck. In his intoxicated rush, the off-duty police officer hit the couple, who up until this moment had lived an ordinary middle-class life. Without ever seeing them, Peter injured Karen and killed Rick. He didn’t stop; didn’t even realize what he had done. Only later, when he heard the call across his police radio, did he understand the gravity of his actions.

Peter confessed, and in due course, the former police officer would be convicted of negligent homicide and sentenced to three years of incarceration.
Conflict and traumatic events are inevitable. The conflict may simply be a nuisance, an inconvenience, or a mildly stressful event that is not likely to disturb us for long. Yet many of the conflicts we have encountered or will face in our life’s journey are far more severe, often leading to a certain degree of trauma and grief, like seen in the above story of Karen, Rick, and Peter. Such intense conflict and trauma within ourselves, with others, and even within communities and nations can become highly toxic, harmful to our health, and at times lead to violence and bloodshed. We begin to question the meaning of life and our purpose for living.

As we live with the highly toxic residue of conflict, we yearn for freedom from its claws, its emotional and physical consequences. The anger, vulnerability, and fear seem ever present. The constant stress, anxiety, and loss of sleep haunt us. In the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, “Holding onto unresolved intense anger is like taking a daily dose of rat poison and expecting the rat to die.” Anger is a valid emotion that can be useful in many ways and can motivate people to take action that has a positive impact on their lives and the lives of others, but it can also be harmful. The inability to, at some point, let go of deep felt anger toward the people with whom conflicts or traumatic events occur, results in dis-ease in our lives, like a cancer metastasizing in our souls, with endless “cell” growth spreading throughout many dimensions of our lives. At best, this can lead to constant moderate stress and unhappiness. At worst, it can lead to severe stress, significant health problems, broken relationships, ever-increasing bitterness and cynicism, and a loss of meaning and direction in one’s life, as Karen experienced after the death of her husband, Rick.
Nine months after the fairgrounds incident, I agreed to a request from the local Victim Services Agency to work with Karen. The widow had a desire to talk with the man who had killed her husband, and she contacted me. For more than three decades I have facilitated these kinds of victim/offender dialogues and have trained many hundreds of others in the process. Because Karen had moved after her loss, much of our work together was over the telephone.

As a practitioner and scholar of Qigong, an ancient Chinese healing practice of aligning breath, movement, and awareness, I am quite sensitive to the energy or spirit of others, something that can often even be felt over the telephone. From the start I sensed the energy of anger and impatience from Karen. I listened for a while, then began slowly introducing the process of restorative dialogue in the context of victim-offender trauma, talking about how there would need to be a good deal of separate preparation. I would have to connect with Peter in prison, as well. It could be many months before a meeting could occur, and the meeting might not ever occur. It’s very possible that either Peter or Karen would get to a point in the process at which they change their mind about meeting with the other, and for the process to move forward, both parties need to agree to meet.

“This is a voluntary process, not something you force a prisoner to do.”

Karen’s impatience was urgent and clear, “I want to meet with this guy. NOW. I don’t need any preparation. I’ve lost my husband. My life is in turmoil. I have to meet this PUNK. I don’t know why I have to meet him, but I just know I’ve got to meet with him to free myself.”

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But there’s another side to conflict and trauma. It can become the engine that drives growth and healing within our lives—something that Karen unknowingly hinted at in our first conversation when she said she wanted to “free” herself.

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The initial conversation with Karen set in motion many months of groundwork, including several face-to-face preparation meetings with her.

In the midst of all my work with Karen, the widow, I also had to negotiate with three levels of corrections within the criminal justice system, because Peter, as a former police officer, had been transferred from a state prison, where there were inmates he had helped convict, to a federal institution in an adjoining state. I arranged phone conferences with Peter in prison, which, like with Karen, lasted several hours spread out over several months. Ultimately, he agreed to talk with Karen as long as the meeting occurred in the county jail where he previously worked. I met Peter for the first time in person only two days prior to the actual dialogue session in that very county facility.

Before their meeting, Karen never clearly articulated what her expectations were, or why she wanted to talk with this man who had changed her life so tragically and whom she seemed to hate. Earlier in my career, I would have wanted to control the situation more and might have been hesitant to go forward with the case because of this. But over the past thirty-five years I’ve witnessed the powerful phenomenon of releasing emotional energy and the healing effect it can have. I trusted my gut. I could sense that Karen’s healing was very much related to letting go of this toxic energy, talking to Peter and getting answers to her questions.

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I began the session, as always, with a gentle opening statement inviting Karen to share with Peter her story of the impact of this crime on her life, without any interruptions, and then he would have the same chance to share his perspective. Later, if they wanted, they could discuss any thoughts about repairing the harm, in whatever way, perhaps even symbolic.

Again, the spirit of impatience arose.

Karen interrupted, “Look, I’m not here to tell stories or listen to stories. I’ve got questions of this punk.” She stood up from her chair, breathing heavily, “I just want to talk with this guy.”

I looked at Peter, “Are you OK with just jumping into this and getting going?”

Karen was a large woman and even when both were standing she was taller than Peter, an average-sized, working-class, white male.

“Yeah, that’s ok. I’m here to help her out in whatever way I can,” he replied.

Still looming, with the tone and posture of an aggressive prosecutor, Karen would point at Peter and repeatedly ask, “Why the hell did you do this? Didn’t you give any thought to this? You’re a cop. Of all people you should know you don’t drink the way you were and then drive and then leave the scene of an accident. How the hell could you have done this?”

She asked all kinds of other questions, too.

Peter responded as best he could. He talked about what led up to the tragedy, how he’d never had any issue with drinking and driving before. He said he couldn’t believe what he did and that he ran from the scene. He talked about how ashamed he was, how he had thoughts of killing himself, how he held a gun to his head the night it happened.

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The words of conflict and trauma are certainly important to address at various points, through deep listening, clarification, greater understanding, and finding common ground. Quick and shallow listening, in the rush of our life, is the ever-present reality in modern life with all of its technology and social networking. Being mindful of our energy and ego, breathing slowly and deep, connecting with the energy of our heart, and saying little prepares us well to listen deeply. Not feeling the need to come up with the perfect response or to remember every word spoken frees us to genuinely connect and be present in the moment with the speaker. Finding serenity in the midst of what may be turbulent emotions through following our breath as it flows deeply within our body is an added benefit of this listening technique.

Learning to work with the emotional energy, our own and others, that fuels conflict is even more important to finding peace within.

Karen and Peter continued talking for over an hour. And then I sensed Karen needed a break. Before leaving the room, she surprised me with a request, “I really want to talk directly with Peter. I’m a cop wannabe. I want to become a law enforcement officer and he’s a cop, you know? I just, I want to talk to him; just the two of us.”

I looked to Peter and reassured him that he did not have to do this, but he wanted to do it, too. And so when we reconvened, I stayed in a separate, adjoining room, chatting with a friend of Karen’s who drove her to the meeting. Through the thin door I could hear the occasional noise. After another hour and a half, the door opened, and Karen walked in.

Her energy was entirely different. She slowly shuffled into the room, with her head down, breathing slowly, offering no comments. Karen slouched in a chair near us.
“He’s not a punk. He killed my Rick, but he’s not a punk.” And after a few more moments of silence she looked up at me again and said, “I can’t believe what I just did before coming in here.”

And I’m thinking, oh my God, what did she do?

And she looked at me and said, “Peter and I had talked about everything…and there’s this moment of silence…and I looked up at Peter and I said—I can’t believe I did this—I said, ‘Do you need a hug?’… And he said, ‘Yeah,’ with tears in his eyes.”

And she went over and hugged this man, who up to then was a punk, the monster who killed her husband.

We went on and debriefed a bit more, most of which was not verbal; it was just being present with Karen, with her totally relaxed energy, just as I had been present with her angry, impatient energy. Her body posture, her tone of voice, and her breathing pattern, were powerful indicators that something energetically had shifted in a big way. Before she had twitched and gasped—now she was relaxed, calm, and spoke with a soft tone of voice.

I then went in and sat down next to Peter, who was still in his chair, almost in a meditative mood, saying nothing, very relaxed, very peaceful. I asked him if he had any regrets about being left alone with Karen.

“No, we needed to talk with each other. You guys have been helpful, but frankly, even before the break we forgot you were there. She needed to let me know the pain I caused in her life, and it was not easy hearing it. I’ve never felt more powerful feelings of shame within myself in my life.” And then he said to me, “Mark, I can’t believe what we did at the end.”

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It’s important for the restorative dialogue process to allow time for the turbulence of conflicted feelings, from intense anger and vulnerability to moments of strength and wisdom. It can even result in serenity for some, like Karen and Peter after genuinely “being” with each other and hugging at the end. The time is needed to strongly assert one’s needs, to speak one’s truth of injustice; time to look within and allow these difficult moments to be our greatest teachers. The process may seem like an endless circle of allowing our emotional energy to flow as it needs to in our quest for healing, taking the lead at times, and at other times just following and accepting the natural course of these difficult conversations with no illusions that we can control the outcome. In other words, we’re dancing with the energy of conflict and traumatic events that we will encounter in our life’s journey.

Finding peace is not about some blissful state of mind that is far removed from conflicts within our lives or with others. Nor does it have to be dependent upon the actions of others with whom we are in conflict or a dramatic change in circumstances with which we are faced, such as a severe illness, new diagnosis, or chronic disease. Finding peace is about facing the reality of those conflicts and traumatic events; leaning into them with gentleness, befriending them as part of who we are at this moment, reducing their power and toxicity.