

CONFLICT AND CONVERGENCE

I grew up in a very small town in western Pennsylvania. The population was, and is, less than 300. In most places it would be called a village. For the six years of grade school, I walked to our town's one room school; there were roughly 25 students in the six grades, presided over by one teacher. It was---I want you to understand--a very provincial, not very sophisticated place--but in that fact like thousands of other towns not only in the United States but in the rest of the world. The concerns of most people in such places are primarily local--jobs, family, neighbors and gossip about neighbors, births and deaths, occasional accidents, and, of course, the weather.

But in spite of that restricted small town upbringing, I--and very many people like me--have always been interested in what in grade school we called "current events"--partly because every week we received a four-page handout under that title. That is, we have been aware of and interested in events happening all over the world--and concerned, too, to try to understand those events in some larger context--which is what I will try to do with you this morning.

As I look back on my grade school years, there were at least two things which sparked my interest in world affairs. In that one-room school room, the object which endlessly fascinated me was a large globe. It must have been at least 18 inches in diameter, and it stood on a stand and was arranged in such a way that you could tilt it and spin it around--just like the earth itself is tilted vis-à-vis the sun and spins on its axis. I can remember spending a lot of time running my hands over that shiny globe, spinning it around so I could see various continents and countries separated by the vast expanses of blue ocean, never in my wildest imagination ever dreaming that I would one day have the extraordinary good fortune to visit and even live in some of those faraway places with strange-sounding names. I liked geography class, and so I have always been interested to know about people and places all over the world.

That interest was abetted by the fact that my grade school years coincided with the Second World War, a great conflict which touched even the smallest town, because young men we knew "went off to war"--and some did not come back. In my town, as, I presume, in thousands of small towns across America, there was erected at the end of the war an "honor roll", listing the names of those who had done military service. Beside a few of those names was a gold star, indicating that that person had died during the war. I also, from age 9 on, had morning newspaper route, and that, along with the example of my father, stimulated in me a life long practice of reading a daily newspaper.

My interest in world affairs was further encouraged by my theological education, where I learned that religion and politics always mix, because both are expressions of what people feel is most important in their lives. It is true that there have been spiritual teachings which preach that this world of suffering and stress is but a passing phase which we have but to endure in order to go on to a more permanent, even eternal, life of perpetual bliss. But I, for one, have never been attracted to the monastery, which shuts out all that is "worldly" in an attempt to discover deeper insight. I do not dishonor those

efforts. But--different strokes for different folks--I rather like living in the world--I even rather like many "worldly" experiences--so my own preferences in the religious life must include a concern for what is happening to people all over the world here and now, not just in the "sweet by and by".

Now when we take a long look at what is happening in the world today, what do we see? The two words which, I suggest, most broadly characterize the events of the past century are "conflict" and "convergence". Most of the news stories we read and hear have to do with conflict, partly because conflict is dramatic--that is, it makes a good story--but also because conflict is part and parcel of the human experience. In one sense, indeed, conflict should not even be in the "news", because there is certainly nothing "new" about it! It's as old as Cain and Abel. But think of how our knowledge of world geography has been expanded by news about various conflicts in the world. Those of us who go back to World War II had to learn the whereabouts of places like Anzio and Dresden and Normandy in Europe, and Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima and Hiroshima in the ironically-named Pacific theater of the war.

During the past sixty years, hundreds of more "strange-sounding names have entered our consciousness. Korea and Vietnam. Haiti and Grenada. Eritrea and Ethiopia. Iran and Iraq (though many people still have trouble distinguishing between the two). Northern Ireland and South Africa. Nagorna-Karabakh and Chechnya. Israel and Palestine, and Jordan and Syria and Lebanon and Egypt--all tied together in a conflict which is the latest fruit of several thousand years of tension and interaction. India and Pakistan. Hindus and Muslims within India. Somalia and Nigeria. East Timor and the Falkland Islands. Chile and Columbia and Chiapas. Bosnia and Kosovo. The Kurds and the Turks. The list could go on and on--and probably will. (One wag suggested that wars are God's way of helping Americans learn geography!) In any event, these conflicts have been going on for a long time and show little sign of ending soon. Diplomats these days do not speak of "ending" conflicts; what they try to do is to "contain" them--which seems to be the best they can hope for. It is, frankly, a rather sad story, and the prospect for humanity may seem pretty gloomy indeed. At the beginning of the last century, many people held out promise that humanity had progressed to such a point that war would become a thing of the past. But at the end of that century, when we look back on it, we see a hundred years of unparalleled killing and bloodshed, a time of increasing savagery and vengeance, a period in which our technology and politics have given us not only the capability but the willingness to kill people we have never seen and do not really know much about. Such a survey of human conflict leaves little room for optimism.

However, hope can be found, I suggest, in the other fact of our age--convergence. If you look at the history of the world over the past several centuries, what you see is people coming together more and more. To be sure, that fact has often been the root cause, or at least incitement, to many contemporary conflicts. And diplomats frequently try to deal with those conflicts by, at least temporarily, separating warring factions from one another. But those efforts are just putting more fingers in more holes in the dike. The onrushing force of history must now be very obvious to all of us. More and more people are coming in contact with more and more people. A thousand years ago, most

people in Europe had only the vaguest awareness of the vastness of Asia and its peoples, and none at all of what would later be called the Americas. Five hundred years ago very few people on the planet ever saw a person who had not been born and raised in their own localities.

But look at the situation today. Every one of us here has met and talked with people from every continent on earth. When the history books are written several hundred years from now, I predict that the 20th century will be marked as the first time in human history during which most people on the earth came to a genuinely “world” consciousness--that is, not only do we know that there are several billion other people out there, but we also know, if rudimentarily, even unconsciously, that the actions of each of us has some effect on the lives of all the others. The marvels of modern communication and transportation have put us in touch with literally every corner of the world. We simply cannot avoid knowing about those places I listed earlier, which have been the site of conflict of one sort or another. And that because of the fact of convergence, or our ever more close relation to one another.

So where is the hope? you say. If the story of our time is a tale of increasing convergence and concomitant conflict, are we not headed for destruction? Not necessarily, I answer. And here, I must warn you, I shift from fact to faith, from what is to what may be--perhaps to what I hope will be, because everything I say from here on is subject to the “wishful thinking” criticism. But I think this faith has considerable warrant and is grounded in a broad and deep view of the course of life on this planet. It is a vision derived largely from the published insights of a French Jesuit paleontologist name Pierre Teilhard deChardin. It helps me, and I hope it will help you, to make sense of the facts of conflict and convergence we see in the world today.

Billions of years ago, there was nothing but heat and a lot of elements--you know, they are symbolized in that periodic chart that hung in your chemistry classroom. Actually, at the very beginning of the universe, as nearly as we can understand, there was only one element, hydrogen, with one electron circling one proton, but soon the almost 100 other elements were formed, each one adding one more electron to the number circling the atom's nucleus, and one more proton to the nucleus. Eventually, some of those elements started to come together and form molecules of various substances. Thus, for example, two hydrogen atoms joined up with one oxygen atom to form a molecule of water. And so on. Notice what was happening. Individual units were converging and, in effect, melding with one another in increasingly complex ways.

Speed ahead now to about 4 or 5 billion years ago, as planet Earth was cooling and waters were roiling all over. Somewhere in the depths, various elements--primarily carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen, came together to form the first protein molecules, and, by a mysterious process we still do not fully comprehend, those protein molecules became more and more complex until at some point they were able to replicate themselves by splitting in two--and Voila! the miracle of life had occurred! The first life forms were one-celled organisms, but after some hundreds of millions of years, further convergences occurred and multi-celled organisms appeared. They were, of course, more complicated

than the primitive amoebas and protozoa--more complex because they had more cells to relate to one another.

During the past billion years or so, by the process we have learned to call evolution, more and more living things came to exist on the earth. Some of them became extinct, but there still remain many hundreds of millions of different species--a literally awesome variety. All of these beings have some kind of nervous system, cells which help the organism to interact with its environment, and in due course, after many trials and errors, that nervous system came to have more and more cells in increasingly complex interrelationship and pretty soon you have a mammalian brain with enough cells and enough complexity to produce a startling new development--viz., self-consciousness--and Homo sapiens, the first humans, emerge.

Then what happened? Well, as the Bible says, those first humans, like all the life forms before them, became "fruitful and multiplied", so now there are over 6 billion of us on the planet in an enormous variety of shapes and sizes and colors and origins. But notice again that we are converging, coming together, in more and more different ways. The conflicts that often result from this convergence are, I submit, the "growing pains" which naturally accompany something so momentous, indications that we are still struggling to figure out how to live together without so much conflict. We have, after all, only been doing this for about 10,000 years--increasingly, as I've said, during the past couple centuries. Clearly, more time is required. It took much longer for those first hydrogen and oxygen atoms to figure out how to forego conflict and learn how to live together in that wonderfully harmonious interaction we call water. The major question before us, and an extraordinarily fateful one, is whether we humans will learn to do as well before our conflicts become suicidal.

Frankly, the odds that we will learn to resolve our conflicts peacefully are perhaps no better than even, but I prefer to be hopeful. Indeed, I suggest that that preference may even influence the outcome. That is, if enough of us take the all-too-easy pessimistic and cynical view that humans are rotten at heart and will inevitably and always find some reason to fight with one another, there is probably no force on earth that will prevent that result. We cannot, it seems to me, depend on some supernatural force to descend from the empyrean and save us from ourselves! But, on the other hand, if more of us refuse to be totally discouraged by our sorry history of strife and enmity, if we can learn to see in our convergence not just the problems but also the opportunities, if we can tap those deep well springs of love and compassion and harmony to which great spiritual sages like Jesus and the Buddha and Confucius bore such eloquent witness, then we may defeat the forces of pessimism and there may begin to evolve and emerge among us a whole new paradigm for how humans live and relate with one another--just as when those first molecules came together to form an utterly new, unexpected, and amazing reality called life. Again, not that this will happen in our lifetimes, nor that of our children or grandchildren. But part of the greatness of humanity is that we are not limited in our temporal view to years or decades or even centuries, but that we can, if we will, see our lives sub specie eternitatis, as the medieval theologians used to say, "under the aspect of eternity". In other words, to sum it all up in four words, faith can create fact.

Still, we would like some evidence. Let me suggest a couple pieces. The first I have already mentioned--technology. Whether we or our political leaders were ready for it or not, the inventions of modern communication and transportation have brought us humans together in unprecedented ways. The results have already been revolutionary. Repression, which always depends on ignorance, is increasingly difficult for dictators to sustain, because liberating knowledge is more and more available to everyone. In the age of satellites and cell phones, traditional political structures simply cannot control the flow of information across national boundaries. As one observer has noted, "Sovereignties and frontiers are evaporating before our eyes . . ." (Max Frankel)

The second bit of evidence is the "global economy" we have heard so much about in recent years. I am well aware that globalization has had both bad and good effects. American jobs have been lost because people in Malaysia and Mexico are willing and able to work for much lower wages. But the effect of international economic activity is that no one nation can any longer live in isolation from the rest of the world. If you bought only what was "made in the U. S. A.", you would severely restrict your purchases. Business and commerce have brought us humans together whether we wanted to or not. Convergence is a fact.

We have been used to thinking of ourselves and other peoples in terms of nation states. What I am suggesting is that in the world to come, national or even ethnic identification is going to matter less and less. Now again, you may justifiably point out that I am guilty of thinking this is going to happen because it is what I want to happen. And I will respond, again, by saying that this goal is eminently desirable but that it will not happen unless enough of us think it can happen.

Which brings us back to why we are here, this Sunday, or any Sunday. In the association of this fellowship, we are a kind of model, a test case if your will, for the whole human race. We have come together with our varied interests and temperaments and expectations, and the question is whether we can learn to get along harmoniously, whether we can get beyond the petty conflicts that often bedevil a group of quite different people who meet together for any period of time. Ultimately, what we are testing is whether there really is any future for humankind. I hope you understand by now that what I am trying to say today is not just a lesson in biology and politics. This search for human concord in which we are engaged is an intensely spiritual one. The only way we can learn to live together peacefully and constructively is if we discover, or even create, that reality which transcends our individual, and necessarily limited, points of view. The distinctive thing about us Unitarian Universalists is that unlike most other religious organizations, we do not depend on some dogma or external authority to provide that uniting reality. We associate in a fellowship like this because we share the dream, the dream that despite our differences, we humans really can bring our varied and different concerns together, like so many different chemical elements, and create out of them that new reality toward which our convergence points. It has been said that "If we cannot learn to love, we don't deserve to live, and probably won't".

Will you allow me to conclude (you're probably wondering if I ever will!) by becoming again that curious, mostly innocent, bright-eyed boy who loved to run his hands over that shiny large globe in that one-room school in a small town in western Pennsylvania. I am still that boy. I will most likely be buried in that same small town, beside my father and grandfather and great-grandfather. But I will die with the dream of world-consciousness and human harmony that was born in that small town. And I really do expect that my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren will live out, even more than I have, the reality of the fact that we humans have more in common than in difference. The earth is round, a sphere, which allows for the wonderful paradox that the further you go away from any one point, the nearer you get to it--literally! Convergence is not just a dream or a faith; it is a fact.

As usual, the poet says it much more succinctly and richly than the preacher:

“Far too long, by fear divided,
we have settled with the sword
quarrels which should be decided
by the reconciling word.

“Now the nations are united,
though as yet in name alone,
and the distant goal is sighted
which the prophet souls have shown.

“May, at last, we cease from warring,
barriers of hate remove,
and earth's riches freely sharing,
found the dynasty of love.”

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