

Reconciliation As a Spiritual Practice

"The concern for reconciliation finds expression in the simple human desire to understand others and to be understood by others....Every man wants to be cared for, to be sustained by the assurance that he shares in the watchful and thoughtful attention of others—not merely or necessarily others in general but others in particular. He wants to know that—however vast and impersonal all life about him may seem, however hard may be the stretch of road on which he is journeying—he is not alone, but the object of another's concern and caring; he wants to know this in an awareness sufficient to hold him against ultimate fear and panic. It is precisely at this point of awareness that life becomes personal and the individual a person...and the way is cleared for him to experience his own spirit."

Howard Thurman

The Practice of Reconciliation

When we engage in reconciliation, we invite change that will transform a relationship.

Reconciliation is a word that evokes different meanings and images. It is important that we make a distinction between apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The following definitions are from Webster's Dictionary. "Apology is a formal justification, defense, excuse; an admission of error accompanied by an expression of regret. It implies an attempt to avoid or remove blame or censure. To forgive is to cease to feel resentment against. To reconcile is to restore friendship or harmony or to settle or resolve differences." Another word that helps us to understand what it is to reconcile is transform. "To transform is to change the composition or structure of, to change in character or condition."

Apology alone is not enough. At the General Assembly in Cleveland, Ohio Rev. Danielle DiBona gave a thought-provoking presentation where she asked, who is apology really for? What does it do for the injured party? Is it to relieve the burden of the person who caused the injury? Does apology sometimes shift the burden from the person who has extended a hand to the injured party in that they now hold the responsibility of accepting the apology with no commitment to changing the conditions that caused the problem? With apology, the person who caused the injury may never know the impact of their actions.

A new beginning can result from reconciliation where the parties, through their encounter and commitment to change, create a better future. Apology followed by forgiveness can be an act of generosity, but still may not lead to change. It does not mean that the other person understands the problem and it may not complete the work of establishing a sense of trust and confidence. Reconciliation transforms the individuals and the present by bringing the parties to a new consciousness about the way they see, treat, and represent each other.

We constantly have a choice to either avoid or claim the chance to build trusting, long lasting, and productive relationships.

Avoiding	
Avoidance	Silence, denying the problem
Negative Projection	Buttons easily pushed, preoccupation with the problem, complaining about other person, justifying own actions
Claiming	
Encounter	Communicating with the person, shift from judging and defending to listening and sharing
Apology, Forgiveness	Empathizing with the other person
Personal Resolve	Moving from focus on the issue to focus on learning and growth
Mutual Resolve	You trust that the other has resolved and moved from focus on the issue to focus on learning and growth
Right Relations	Hold each other in esteem and are accountable for communication and new behavior

Reconciliation is a competency that takes work to develop, and it requires commitment. As you contemplate a practice of reconciliation, with another person or with a group, here are some questions to ask yourself:

What am I to do?

- Know when you are not in right relationship with a person.
- Have the humility and courage to care.
- Take steps to heal the relationship.

Why am I doing it?

- To heal fractures that reduce our ability to live and work effectively together.
- To hold the other person in esteem and stop reacting from a negative point of view.
- To learn the other person's perspective so that we can find mutual solutions.
- To end preoccupation with troubled relationships that rob us of vitality and valuable time or end in indifference that hardens our feelings.
- To be congruent with the belief that we can create the Beloved Community.
- To replace the ripple effect of resentment with the ripple effect of reconciliation, which has benefits that go beyond the current relationship.

When do I do it?

- Most often in a private moment between you and the other person. Trust that you'll know when the opportunity is present.
- Or plan the conversation and take initiative with a call or email.
- Reconciliation efforts almost always begin after considerable personal struggle.

Where do I do it?

- On the telephone.
- In a combination of telephone and writing (letter or email)
- In person
- Usually over several conversations or correspondences.

Who will it impact?

- The person with whom you've had the conflict.
- The group you belong to, whether family, friends, or community.

I make a point of letting others know that we have resolved our differences. Especially if the conflict is something that happened in the group setting, then we should come back to let them know that we have resolved our relationship. This is modeling for others what it means to be in right relationship. It also prevents our old anxiety from being spread or taken out of context by other people.

How do I do it?

1. Create Lists: One has names of people with whom you need to reconcile. The other list has names of people with whom you have at least begun reconciling differences. The lists keep your commitment tangible and help you decide when the time is right to reconcile with specific people. And, as you begin reconciling a relationship draw a line through the name on the first list and add it to the other list. This provides a sense of growth in that positive relationships are resulting from deliberately healing our differences.

- If your list is long, start by focusing on only five or seven names.
- Resolve to review your lists at set periods.
- As names come off, add new ones.

2. Understand Your Motivation: For this to be a spiritual practice you have to be genuine. If you find yourself preoccupied with a difficult relationship, try to do an honest assessment to understand the feelings that underlie your concerns.

3. Shift Your Attention: Ask yourself what you need to let go of so you can shift your attention from your sense of hurt, betrayal, or frustration to a commitment to be in conversation. Finding an answer to this question should enable you to feel more at ease. Then you can think about what effect you and the other person are having on people around you – there is likely to be an impact whether it is a personal, professional, or faith community relationship.

4. Decide How to Raise the Issue: How to raise the issue is not always clear. Remember that this is an exchange with someone who is likely to have negative feelings too. You can have no idea how they will react. This is the part that feels risky and can prevent you from the needed encounter. I use the word *encounter* because raising the issue is not a matter of going in with a solution but of facing the other person with an openness to understand his or her experience and find solutions together—we experience the same things differently.

It is not unusual to have a conversation with someone else about the frustration we feel before reconciling with a person. This can help you gather the courage to resolve issues. This is also where you practice being aware of your intentions. Is the purpose of the third-party conversation to justify your actions? Or is it to gain insight and understanding of how to face the person and restore the relationship?

5. Encounter the Person: Sometimes I just take a deep breath and let the current moment be the moment to put the issue on the table.

6. Make a New Commitment: After the issues are heard, with healing comes a personal commitment to change. Possible commitments:

- A promise that the other person can trust you to not speak negatively of her or him.
- That you will come directly to him or her when you feel a need to address other issues or go deeper.
- A joint agreement around more specific changes.

7. Bring Closure on the Past: A more recent step for me is writing a closing statement that gives me the words to say that the conflict is over and that we are moving forward.

Reconciliation is truly give and take. Seldom is a strained relationship something I can resolve for myself without directly addressing the cause of why the relationship went sour, or why trust or respect was lost between us. But on the occasions when I do, I can resolve to let go of the negatives, complete the old story, and test for a level of relationship that is functional. This is what seems best at the time, and we are able to move forward and not let our baggage enter our conversations with other people.

8. If your efforts fall short: Go to the list of Avoiding and Claiming behaviors to see where the process is stuck. Re-examine your own role first. Then begin working from that point. You must be honest with yourself along the way.

- Journaling can help you tap into feelings and assumptions that are not clear to you.
- Talking with someone you trust – your minister perhaps – may provide insight to the situation.
- If your communication with the other person fails, you can decide to resolve the issue for yourself, without an expectation that the other person is ready to work through the issues.

Reconciliation will help us to isolate issues, harness our energy to solve problems, and maintain relationships as we grow to new levels of understanding.

---End---

FOUR ARENAS FOR RECONCILIATION WORK

		<i>WITHIN</i>	<i>BETWEEN</i>
		INTRAPERSONAL	INTERPERSONAL
<i>INDIVIDUAL</i>			
<i>GROUP</i>		INTRAGROUP	INTERGROUP

Name of Workgroup:

Date:

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Intragroup or Intergroup Worksheet

What is the Issue?

What group(s) should be involved?

What are we to do?

Why are we doing it?

Who will it impact?

When will we do it?

Where will we do it?

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