

# *Fighting Well*

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**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

**February 10, 2002**

## **Reading**

*from V.R. Southern's This Piece of Eden:*

The piece I wrote for the April newsletter was a joke. It was an April Fools column. So, I didn't really mean that we would start having coffee hour at the nearby diner so we could evangelize, or that the women's group had any awakenings – at least not the kind that merit hanging our names to things like "Eagle Sour" and "Hear Me Roar." Yet, I found out that some folks took the observations at face value, and so I had some apologies to make.

The experience taught me a lot about the power of humor, and about humor's ability to strain the affections. Moreover, it left me wondering about something else: whether we need to talk more in our communities about how we handle the unintended hurts and slights that we, inevitably, deal one another. The truth is, each of us has things that hurt or annoy or embarrass us. With all of our different backgrounds and experiences, unique genetic and emotional makeups, moved as we are by our particular hopes and fears, it is inevitable that we will bump up against one another on occasion. Bumping up against one another, however, can be divine. It can shake us out of our self-centeredness, reminding us that we are not alone in this world. It can invite us into conversations that might not otherwise have taken place and that open up new worlds as a result. In this crazy, bumper-car world of community, there is order in the madness and God in the impact.

## **Sermon**

Last month we had a series of sermons on the arts and skills that are involved in living a ministry. It was something that seemed important to talk about in a tradition such as ours, in which we are all supposedly called to a ministry. So we talked about the prophetic call, and the discipline of community, and the need to be honest, and the art of listening, but I realized that never did we talk about what to do when things get conflicted. So this sermon was born – a sermon on how we fight well.

There are a few of life's lessons that are bittersweet (but the truth of which gets confirmed for me over and over). For instance, the lesson that you are destined to lose the folks you love – and yet still you love. The lesson learned with a broken heart that you can love someone with all your heart, and he/she can be a wonderful person and so are you, and still you can be wrong for each other.

There is another of these life lessons that is relevant to the subject of today's service. It is that we human beings, who care so deeply about each other, are doomed to hurt each

other. Moreover, rarely is it that we hurt each other intentionally – those are the obvious, horrible moments, and far, far more rare, thankfully. More often, so often, the hurts we deal each other are done accidentally, unawares, even despite ourselves. We get so caught up in our own lives, our own pain, that we fail to see another's need, adjust to another's feelings, or reach out in a time of hurt. We forget a birthday, miss a lunch date, go weeks without calling, speak too quickly, let the frustration from other things come through in the way we talk to each other. Through accident, through no intent, we will hurt each other again and again.

I hate that truth. It is such a sad reality of living together. It reminds me of the old theology of fallenness – that idea that, best intents aside, we will err. St. Augustine, about whom I wrote my master's thesis, was tortured by the fact that as a young boy, with no intent to sin, he had stolen from a neighbor's orchard. It was proof to him of this searing reality of human fallenness from which even he could not escape.

But I don't dwell on this truth the same way. For me it is just part of what we accept as being human. To be human is to do marvelous things (sometimes without trying) and less-than-wonderful things and sometimes to do hurtful things. Our job, then, as people in a community bound together in love, is to figure out how to make it through such times. How to take a hurt and bind it up and make the community or the relationship whole again.

And so the question of how we fight (or disagree) well is a crucial one. Anyone who has done couples counseling, for instance, knows that how a couple deals with conflict is much more indicative of their long-term chances of survival than their initial compatibility. Because, the fact is, long after their shared love of French movies or Indian food wears out, they will still need to be weathering conflict and disagreements, and doing that with grace and resolution will be their salvation.

Thinking about this subject reminded me of the first time I was taught how to fight. It happened shortly after we moved to New York City. I was 8 years old and going to be walking home from school alone, and my father, being a good father, wanted to make sure I could defend myself against the worst possibilities of city living. So he taught me some basic skills of fighting or self-defense.

Here's what he taught me: First and foremost, the goal in all attacks is to get away, *far away* from your attacker. Therefore, should someone approach you and attack or threaten you, your first instinct should be to run.

If you cannot run, your second defense is to scream. Scream as loud as you can and don't stop until you either attract attention or your attacker releases you, in which case you go back to the first rule and run.

Finally, if you cannot run, and you cannot scream, or screaming is not working, then use a couple of brutal techniques designed to seriously injure your attacker: knee to the groin,

or heel of the hand to the nose, or a hard kick to the kneecap. Then when your attacker flinches, get free and run.

It was pretty serious stuff for an 8-year-old, but to be fair, it kept me free from trouble in New York, and years later, when I was in my late 20s, it was what ran through my head when I was being mugged in D.C. – and it served me well there, too.

What is interesting to me is that it describes what many of us often do when we feel attacked or hurt emotionally. For instance, how many of us, when we feel attacked, tend to run? We avoid the conflict. We begin to check out of the relationship emotionally. Maybe we literally threaten to leave.

And how many of us, when we feel attacked, yell – literally? We huff and puff until our opponent backs down, refusing to hear what has hurt or upset them, not owning our part in the events, just wanting to shut them up.

And how many of us, when we feel attacked, go for the jugular? How many of us go for the weak spots, the vulnerabilities, defending ourselves by intentionally wounding those we love?

Surely we have all done these things at one time or another. It is a natural human response to attack – run, yell, fight. But these are rules for fending off attackers we hope never to see again. They are not the rules for weathering conflict with folks with whom we hope to have a lasting relationship. For that we need a different approach.

In her book *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris reflects on this question of how to weather conflict. She writes about a town she visits, a town where she sometimes goes to church, a town called Hope:

The people of Hope live far apart from each other on the land: paradoxically, I suspect this is one reason they seem better at creating community than people in town, better at being together while leaving each other alone, as I once heard the monastic ideal defined. How are we to get along with our neighbor in hard times and good? How can we make relationships that last? Those who live in small rural communities, who come to know their neighbors all too well over the years, know the truth of the words of a sixth-century monk, Dorotheus of Gaza: "The root of all disturbance, if one will go to its source, is that no one will blame himself." When I read those words in a sermon at Hope Church, one old farmer forgot himself; he nodded and said aloud, "That's right." He was assenting to a hard truth, one confirmed by a lifetime of experience.

Sometimes, of course, we are just the poor, unlucky chap who was at the wrong place at the wrong time, like the schlemazel who walks beneath the window as the schlemiel dumps the garbage out of it. But more often, we too had a part in the chain of events that led to our own hurt. Indeed, how often have we gone to a friend or member of the family and shared with them how they hurt us, only to hear about how, from their side of things,

we had done our own share of hurting? Yet when we are reeling from our own hurt, this is almost always impossible for us to imagine.

What Norris reminds us of is the need to cultivate a knee-jerk reaction of humble reflection, asking ourselves: Do we share some of the blame for what happened? Of course, at best we find out we were blameless and can sit back and enjoy our righteous indignation, but so often that is not the case. What is that old expression: We judge others by their actions and ourselves by our intentions. Well, sometimes our intentions are good but our actions are less than kind, and so it is never a bad idea, in the face of conflict and hurt feelings, to ask what part of the blame might be ours.

I have another suggestion, one that is about establishing from the onset the foundation on which you and the person with whom you disagree stand. It is about making clear what is so important that you both are trying to preserve or strengthen that undergirds the conversation you are having.

The reason for this is that it is easy, when we disagree or argue, to feel threatened. It is easy to feel judged, at risk of abandonment, defensive. And yet all of those feelings can get in the way of our being able to hear each other in the ways that work toward the best, most loving resolutions.

If you are arguing with someone, there must be something that you both honor and cherish that you are trying to preserve. Name it! Say: "I'm hurt and I want to talk about why, but before I begin, I want to tell you how much I value your friendship. It has been important to me for 10 years, and I want to keep it, but to do so I need to have a conversation with you about something that happened."

Or, "We are both committed to this religious community and all it stands for, and so I want to make sure you and I can stay in relationship in a way that speaks for all we believe and cherish. And that is the reason I am coming to you to talk about something that happened that hurt me badly." To do this sets the right tone, reminding you and the other person of what the foundation of your relationship is and that your goal is its preservation.

I have one last thought about the rules for fighting well. Interestingly enough, these reflections also came out of a self-defense class, one my roommates took our senior year in college. The course was offered by the women's center. It was a rape self-defense class, and each week after class, my roommates would come home and share and practice what they had learned. Well, in the first bunch of classes, the techniques they learned followed the same basic strategy my father had taught me so those many years ago. So they came home after one class and talked about how important it was to scream, and how you had to give up wanting to be lady-like, and they practiced these blood-curdling yells. (What the neighbors thought I don't know, but they never called the police.) And the next week they came home and showed off a few horrifyingly brutal disfiguring moves they'd learned. One of my roommates had a football player for a boyfriend who,

strangely enough, agreed to be practiced upon – that's how much he loved her. Well, he survived with most of his limbs intact.

Then came the last class, and I was wondering what could be left, after the previous week's class on dismemberment. Well, on the last day of the class they brought home something that, at the time, was a radical new self-defense technique that had had remarkable success. It was something that only recently had been talked about in such circles – less violent, but surprisingly successful in warding off rapists. This technique involved communicating such a strong sense of self that the rapists tended to leave (for other, less intimidating victims) rather than continue their attack. And the wild thing is that all this technique involved was talking. But it involved speaking in clear declarative statements of this format: "I think ... I feel ... I want." It had this incredible power if you could master it.

"I think you are in my space. I feel threatened. I want you to back off." Or: "I think you are drunk. I feel uncomfortable. I want to get out of the car." And so on.

This technique is also valuable for us. This technique is one that can be powerful in modeling how we can approach each other when we are in conflict. If we are able to speak clearly about what we *think* has happened, what we *feel* in the moment and what we *want*, we invite others to understand us and respond.

Now, let's put a couple of caveats here. I'm not talking about "I think you are a jerk. I feel disgusted by you. I want you to jump off the bridge." That would be an abuse of the technique. I'm talking about using that framework to communicate what is at the heart of our being angry or hurt.

Moreover, I once heard a counselor say that the more specific you can keep the "want" statements, the better, so that others can see *clear* options to respond in ways that are conciliatory and healing. In other words, saying "I want you to be more loving" is too general. It almost sets the other person up for failing. It asks them to read your mind about what you consider more loving behavior. But if you say, "I think we've been drifting apart. I feel unloved. I want you to hold me more and tell me how much I mean to you and make time for one night out together a week." – now that is a request someone can live into to show you that they love you.

The good news here also is that if we communicate this way, we help the person to understand us better in ways that deepen our relationship – making the relationship stronger than it was before we began.

I am always amazed how often resolution can come from the hardest of hurt, if the tone is set, and the words are honest and personal, and the stated and tangible goal is healing. Just yesterday a member called, deeply hurt by an oversight we had made in the office. She modeled courageous conflict resolution. She spoke clearly about why she was hurt and what she thought about what had happened and leaving us to meet her halfway to

healing. She modeled all of the things I had been thinking and writing about, and lived them better than I myself could have.

And she reminded me of the bittersweet truth with which we began this sermon – the truth that in this life, we are destined (or doomed) to hurt each other all the time. We do it without meaning to, even despite ourselves. So we need to be good at weathering conflict with grace and expertise and love. The fact is our lives, our relationships, the health of our communities depend upon us being able to do so.

So go forth, good men and women, and fight well. Lay the foundations in care. Heal with "I statements," preserving what is good. Make lemonade. Amen.