

T-Shirt Wisdom

There I sat. It was six o'clock on a Sunday morning, and O'Hare Airport was already a beehive of activity. Having survived the terrors of the security screening, people hustled to their departure gates, and only the temptation provided by the Starbucks could cause them to deviate from this trajectory. The passengers' wardrobes were as diverse as their destinations: on one extreme were the "clothes horses" who looked as though they had just stepped out of a fashion magazine; rubbing elbows with these were others whose clothing was informal in the extreme. The juxtaposition was sometimes comical; sometimes it led to sidelong glances, and even to discomfort.

Somewhat closer to the informal edge was a young man whose t-shirt boldly proclaimed the following message: "Let's hug it out!" Not knowing exactly what he meant by that, I let my imagination wander – which, as you know, is a dangerous thing for all concerned! I was reminded of the expression "Let's duke it out," which refers to putting up your "dukes" (i.e., your fists) to fight it out. The images brought to mind by these two expressions present a stark contrast: two very different methods of conflict resolution, which grow out of two very different ways of seeing the world. Perhaps it all boils down to the quip, "Everybody is different, and some are more different than others!"

Human nature teaches us to look with suspicion upon those who are different from us, to see them as a threat to us: by their very existence, they challenge our pre-conceived notions and the idea that "our" way is the only way. Conflict is the inevitable outcome of this myopia. "Put up your dukes!" And doesn't it give us a deep down satisfaction to "put them in their place" – in other words, to put them "down" so that we can see ourselves as "above" them? Low self-image is remedied: winners can feel good about themselves – at least until they get a taste of their own medicine. Even underdogs seemingly derive emotional satisfaction from conflict: the righteous indignation of the "martyr" provides a feeling of moral superiority. Harumpf!

Differences are inevitable, but some choose to see them as a source of enrichment rather than as a threat. I can't balance a checkbook to save my life, but I'm glad that there are accountants who not only can make sense of all those figures, but who even give evidence of enjoying it! When I take off my blinders, I see that the job will get done better, that life will be lived better, when I value those who are different from me. At the very least, tolerance leads to peaceful co-existence and even to mutually-beneficial collaboration.

But there is more to peace than merely an absence of conflict. If ill-will is merely swallowed, it will fester inside us until it can no longer be contained. Either it explodes later, or – perhaps even more damaging – it takes the form of treacherous "passive aggressive" behavior: instead of directly confronting our adversary, we pretend to be at peace, all the while resorting to all sorts of devious and indirect behaviors aimed at bringing about our adversary's demise. As my novice master used to say, "If it doesn't come out straight, it comes out crooked."

True peace requires trusting the other person enough to share the sometimes-inconvenient truth, and loving the other person and valuing the relationship enough to forgive. This is the way of the husband and wife who promise never to go to bed angry, who promise to kiss one another before bed – and not just a perfunctory kiss, but a heartfelt kiss full of the love which is the stuff of forgiveness.

"Let's hug it out!" We are Catholics. The word "catholic" can mean "universal"; it can also mean "all-embracing". Of all people, we should be the most adept at "hugging it out" – at embracing all people in the love of Christ which unites us as Church. When we succumb to divisiveness and partisan squabbles, when we seek to exclude others rather than embracing them in love, we are unfaithful to our vocation as Catholics, and we stand convicted by the very name which we use to identify ourselves. At such times; it is we ourselves who stand in need of forgiveness – and don't we all stand in need of forgiveness? As we repeat so often at our liturgies, "Lord, have mercy!"

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