

Rev. John Thexton Ph.D.

March 5, 2020

(all rights reserved)

Leadership:

Bridging Difference

“If you think you are leading and turn around to see no one is following then you are just talking a walk.”

Obviously, this leadership maxim doesn't apply to anyone here. We are honoring people for their transformational leadership in this community.

If you will allow—at the risk of no one following, I'd like to reflect together about what it might look like to lead in the midst of difference. That is to say, what kind of leadership invites people to connect across difference rather than widening the gap between us.

I've spent more than a few years thinking about difference and the ways that people and societies organize themselves. Difference is the means by which groups identify who belongs and who does not. How we walk, talk, eat, what we wear, where we live, how we spend our free time varies according to which group we belong. We don't notice our particular way of living in the world until we are confronted with persons who walk, talk, eat, dress...differently. We recognize then that those people don't belong. They are not a part of our group—of our way of being and acting in the world.

You don't have to think very hard about how groups establish themselves through difference. Every high school has groups that are identified by their interests, their dress, the table at which they eat...the 1985 movie 'Breakfast Club' typifies high school groupings. Groups continue to distinguish themselves through difference in college beyond.

Difference in and of itself is not a bad thing. The fact that you prefer wine and I beer. Or, that you prefer the Bronco's and I the Chiefs. That I prefer barbecue and you prefer vegetables...Difference in these cases is incidental—except for Football. These differences as a rule, do not get in the way of us living well together.

However, it seems to me that our society is becoming less and less skilled with bridging significant difference. Intolerance, disrespectful and dehumanizing rhetoric, simply dismissing the other as irrelevant, ignorant, or evil seem to mark the trajectory of our interaction. I think we can all agree that this trajectory will not lead to the well-being of our society.

I recently read a study revealing that of those polled, 20% of one party and 15% of the other, wished death upon their political opponents. This troublesome trajectory, along with other incidents of violence in America, led the Carnegie foundation for international peace to convene a workshop scholars, leaders, and government officials to discern how ‘at Risk’ America is for significant political violence on September 19,2019. In mountain terms “The fire danger is high”.<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/16/should-america-be-worried-about-political-violence-and-what-can-we-do-to-prevent-it-pub-80401>)

What can we do as leaders? I found one of the 10 takeaways from the workshop particularly relevant for tonight: Interventions work best from the local level upward, not the top-down. Change starts with you and me.

Which presents the question: How do we bridge difference? How do we as leaders walk in such a way—that others will be inclined to follow our example?

I think we all need to become skilled at practicing deliberate empathy. Let me say that again, we need to become skilled practitioners of deliberate empathy. Let me define what I mean by deliberate empathy.

Empathy is the capacity to both intellectually and emotionally imagine what it is like to walk in another person’s shoes. Empathy requires us to suspend our perspective, for a period of time, in order to get to know another person’s perspective.

I use the term deliberate, in front of empathy, to indicate that empathy is work. It requires intentionality. It is on purpose. And, it is not our natural inclination. Our natural (sociologically and psychologically preferred) inclination is to see the world and others through our own lens—through our own culture, assumptions, worldview, judgments and biases. Empathy requires that we create mental space to understand difference.

Let me give a few examples from counseling, community development work, and medicine. Hopefully, if you are still walking with me you will begin to appreciate the power of deliberate empathy

Case 1. Relationships.

How many of you are in an intimate relationship with another person? How many of you realize that they are different than you? Gary Chapman wrote a book about the way we tend to give and receive love. The 5 love languages include: words of affirmation, acts of service, time, touch, and gifts.

Relational conflicts often occur when one partner tries to express love through their preferred language, when the other partner's preferred language is different. Woe to the person who tries to touch when the partner's love language is time!

The successful relationship excels at deliberate empathy. Because I love and value my partner, I will work to express my love in my partner's preferred language. And, hopefully my partner expresses love toward me in my preferred language. It takes effort. But the effort is worth it.

Case 2. Community Development

The church had been discussing issues related to poverty in their context and had learned about how lack of access to quality foods caused a cascade of problems—childhood obesity, diabetes, poor performance in schools...

The church started cooking classes, diet education and experienced high participation from the community. A few leaders in the church learned that a family in the church did not have a working refrigerator—which obviously complicated how they could incorporate what they were learning from the educational classes. The leaders discreetly pulled money together to purchase and gift a refrigerator for the family. The family promptly sold the refrigerator and used the funds to purchase tickets to the local amusement park.

The leaders were furious. They had what I call a 'visceral reaction' to the family's response! Thankfully, one of them had learned to practice deliberate empathy. They knew that when they experienced a 'visceral reaction'—that was a clue to lean in, get curious, and ask questions.

Why did the family sell the refrigerator? The leader learned that the family did not have secure housing, and have had to move without adequate notice, often times having to leave furniture and household goods. The family appreciated the 'gift' of the refrigerator but saw the immediate value of selling it—since they would likely lose it in a couple of weeks anyway. Further, the mother disclosed how bad she felt about herself and her ability to provide for her children. The children had been asking to go to the amusement park—like their friends at school,

but between the cost of entry along with food was completely out of reach for them. The \$300 she received for the fridge allowed her to feel ‘normal’ and provide a memory for the kids that invited them to forget their hardship for a while.

Imagine what might have happened if the leaders had done the work of deliberate empathy prior to purchasing the refrigerator!

Case 3. Medicine

A patient walked into the emergency room to have a flu test. The patient was already diagnosed with the flu (by a previous provider), was prescribed the appropriate treatment, and had not filled the prescription or initiated treatment. From a medical perspective the patient was wasting resources and unnecessarily exposing the community by not self-quarantining.

I had a visceral reaction! But by employing deliberate empathy—I learned that the patient had experienced a family tragedy and was needed in a public role (a role which could expose people to the flu). Further, she had been presumptively dx with the flu (not confirmed by a nasal swab). The patient was trying to determine whether or not to fulfill her duties and needed more information to make an informed choice.

Each of these cases illustrate difference, the visceral (gut) reactions we experience, and how deliberate empathy can be used to appreciate another person’s perspective. Each case illustrates how our preferred way of being and seeing the world has to be suspended for a moment in order to imaginatively walk in another person’s shoes. Further, each case demonstrates that people generally have a logic that informs their way of perceiving and acting in the world—people (as a rule) are not ignorant, illogical, or just plain stupid.

At the risk of sounding cliché—As, leaders we really must first seek to understand.

Let me end with these recommendations for bridging difference:

1. Expect difference—difference is normal
2. Be self-aware—notice when you are having a visceral reaction to difference. The reaction is an invitation to get curious and to seek to understand. Ask respectful questions.

3. Self-monitor. Know that bridging difference takes work. There are times when you will not have the energy to engage with significant difference. It is okay to pass for the moment—knowing that you are committed to a lifestyle of bridging difference.

I think we all realize that our culture is following a dangerous trajectory. We have not exercised the skills, the intellectual and emotional ‘muscle’, required to appreciate significant differences. We do not need a panel of experts to tell us ‘the fire danger is high’—we sense it at work, at play, in our politics and in our homes. The good news is we can choose to employ and hone the skills of deliberate empathy, we can exercise our imaginations, we can seek to understand. And as we do so we will find ways to build bridges with persons who see the world very differently.

Interventions work best from the local level upward, not the top-down. Change starts with you and me. Join me in building a bridge. Thank you.