Divided We Fall
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I want to tell you some stories:

They are the stories that help me continue to have faith, in myself and in my fellow human beings, faith in the present and in the future. I feed myself with stories like the ones I'm going to tell you. I eat them for breakfast, and have another as a midnight snack. It keeps me strong.

I look for and come across these stories from lots of different sources, but they weave together in a kind of net that holds me what I am in danger of falling into the abyss created by bad news or failures.

My first story comes from Alisa Gravitz, the executive director of Coop America. Coop America is an organization that engages both consumers and businesses in harnessing economic power for positive social change and environmental health.

When she's leading workshops, she starts by asking people a couple of questions: "What do you value most? And: "What do you want the world to look like?" She passes out paper and crayons and asks people to draw their answers to these questions.

Whether she is working with high school kids in the inner city, business leaders in a fancy hotel, or any group in between, she says the pictures tend to come out amazingly similar.

But before I tell you what she often sees in the pictures, I would ask you to imagine in your mind's eye what your drawing might look like, if you were drawing a picture of what you value most and what you want the world to look like.

Most of the pictures show a house, a symbolic representation of people's need for safety, comfort, and economic security. The pictures often show people in community—family and friends, sharing food or playing outside in the sunshine. There is usually lots of green is the picture—grass, trees, and blue sky, and often the blue of water—a river, lake, or ocean. So, belonging, safety, beauty, and love factor into all of them.

Her colleagues who do similar work in other countries describe this same pattern showing up when people are asked, "What do you value, what do you want for your children, what do you want your world to look like?"

For example, in Sri Lanka, there was a self-determination and sustainability movement that began in the 1950's among some of the poorest communities on earth.

These communities could no longer wait for the government or someone else to help them, and so they began to work together to change their conditions. The movement was based on the principle of "Sarvodaya Shramadana" ("Awakening of all by sharing our gifts"). Part of their process was to create a vision of what they wanted and needed. The priorities they established were these:

- A clean, safe, beautiful environment
- Clean and adequate water

- Healthy and delicious food
- Enough clothing for everyone
- Good communication between people
- Education
- Health care
- Clean, safe energy for everyone
- Simple but comfortable housing
- Spiritual and cultural satisfaction

When I read about this it corresponded to something I have been pondering. I think about those members of my extended family who hold strong political, social, or religious views very different from my own. I'm sure we all know the experience—trying to socialize with folks who with whom we feel we cannot be authentic, lest anger erupt between us.

I think about the members of my family who embrace me with affection as long as I don't speak my mind (at least, that's my perception). Now, these are good salt of the earth folks, and so I fantasize that if somehow we could find a way to share with each other what we really, fundamentally value, and how we picture the world we want for our children, our pictures would be essentially the same

It was such thinking that led to the foundation of an organization called "Let's Talk America," which helps common folk come together in conversation across political differences.

In Seattle, a woman named Kay feels guarded in her hip neighborhood, afraid to reveal that she and her husband are evangelical Christians. During the presidential election she felt both unsafe and alarmed at how polarized the country seemed to be becoming, into us versus them. She felt it was wrong that common people were so divided against each other and prayed that she could find a way to help people talk to one another.

She got an email from her neighbor, who contacted everyone on their block, asking them to come to her living room for an inclusive conversation across political lines about where people wanted their country to go.

Kay jumped at the chance, as did several of her neighbors. Over several conversations they tackled several heavy topics and have disagreed over some things, but all have felt that talking across political differences was valuable and necessary in order to create a better situation for their children and future generations.

One of Kay's neighbors, Susan, commented that the most shocking thing to her was to realize how balkanized, how ghettoized her own mind had become by only keeping company with those who thought the same way she did.

Talking with Kay, a Republican evangelical, and others, she learned that people on the 'other side' could be brilliant, and that we all have a lot to learn from each other. None of us has the answer, but we all have difference pieces of the question, and different pieces of what needs to be considered.

So in offering these two sets of stories, they suggest something to me. One, that human needs are virtually universal: safety, connection, beauty, healthy bodies and healthy water, air, and land, cultural and spiritual meaning, and self-determination.

These stories also suggest that folks feel a great release of energy and possibility when they discover that they share these fundamental values with those they thought of as “the other” or as enemies.

Another story I came across recently told of the work of Aqeela Sherrills who helped two Los Angeles gangs, the Crips and the Bloods, negotiate a peace treaty to stop the escalating cycle of violence that had been tearing their communities apart for years. His approach, which tries to get to the deepest roots of violence, is now taught through the Community Self-Determination Institute, which he co-founded.

In the early 90’s Sherrills was working with the Crips and Bloods in an arduous process of teaching new ways of communicating that helped the gang members contact and express their own core humanity.

Through facilitation, they began to share their experiences and feeling about what makes people happy or sad, what we are afraid of, what could we do better, and what we love. Such communication inevitably revealed that people believe in and long for same things. They began to recognize themselves as brothers in the human experience.

In 1992, a peace agreement was reached, and the Crips and Bloods signed a historic treaty. The community burst open with celebration. People were greeting each other on the streets in a new way, grandmothers were crying, everyone was calling each other, folks were able to visit their friends and family members in neighborhoods they hadn’t been able to visit in years—just on the other side of the tracks.

After the truce, violence in Los Angeles sharply and steadily dropped, reaching its lowest levels in 1998 and remaining stable, even as the number of gang members has actually increased.

And then there is the work of Marshall Rosenberg, who developed a process called “non-violent communication,” or “compassionate communication,” which he has brought to many different conflicted situations, from American schools to tribal wars in several African countries.

One story that especially touched me was about a breakthrough that occurred between warring Nigerian tribes. When Rosenberg first began his work with the chiefs of these tribes, he tried to get them to discuss their needs. He said, “We’ll begin be sharing our needs, and then making sure that everyone has heard everyone else’s needs. Then we will try to find solutions to meet those needs.”

But the process of getting them to express their needs was repeatedly derailed. He would ask one chief to express the needs of his tribe, and he would say, “You people are murderers! You’ve been trying to dominate us. We’re not going to take it any more!!” And then an uproar would break out that would take some time to settle down.

He would try again and again to get them to express their needs, rather than verbally attack their enemy. Finally, he got the first chief to acknowledge that they had a need for safety, and that they wanted to be able to resolve conflicts in some way other than through violence.

But then one of the other chiefs said, “Well, then why did you kill my son?!” and the whole thing exploded again.

Rosenberg turned to the chief who said, “Why did you kill my son?” and asked him to say what he heard the other chief’s needs to be. He couldn’t do it. Rosenberg repeated what the first chief had said, and asked the second chief to say back what he heard. He couldn’t do it. This was repeated several times, until finally the second chief was able and willing to accurately repeat what he heard the first chief’s needs to be.

Then Rosenberg started the process again, asking the second chief what his tribe’s needs were. “They’re trying to dominate us. They are a dominating group. They think they’re better than everybody!” And the whole thing fell apart again. Gradually, Rosenberg got the second chief to identify that they have a need for equality. With much repetition and coaching, he got the first chief to repeat that back.

This work went on for hours, not made any easier by the necessity of using a translator. But gradually, the conversation began to change, the tone to shift.

At one point, one of the other chiefs who hadn’t spoken before jumped up, and looked very intensely, very fiercely, at Rosenberg, and said something to him in his native language. The translator told Rosenberg, “The chief says we cannot learn this way of communicating in one day. But if we can learn this way of communicating, we wouldn’t have to kill each other.”

By the end of that day, the various chiefs and other members of their tribes had all agreed to continue to learn the new way of communicating. The war between these tribes ended on that day.

There are so many good teachers out there working on helping people in conflict find new ground for peaceful, positive resolution, but I’ll offer you Rosenberg’s basic recipe for non-violent communication:

- Learn to make concrete observations rather than moralizing evaluations
- Learn to accurately identify feelings and express them in a responsible way
- Learn to accurately identify our needs, and listen for others’ feelings and needs
- Learn to make a request for that which would heal and enrich life.

A Nigerian poet, Ben Okri, wrote these words about standing on a cusp between what has been and what is possible:

What will we choose?
Will we allow ourselves to descend
Into universal chaos and darkness?
A world without hope, without wholeness,
Without moorings, without light?
A world breeding mass murderers, energy vampires,
With minds pining in anomie and amorality
With murder, rape, genocide as normality?

Or will we allow ourselves to merely drift
Into an era of more of the same
An era drained of significance, without shame,
Without wonder or excitement,
Just the same low-grade entertainment,
An era boring and predictable
Flat, stale, weary, unprofitable?

In which we drift along
Too bored and too passive to care
About what strange realities rear
Their heads in our days and nights,
Till we awake too late to the death of our rights
Too late to do anything
Too late for thinking
About what we have allowed to take over our lives
While we cruised along in casual flight,
Mildly indifferent to both storm and sunlight?

Or might we choose to make this time
A waking-up event
A moment of world empowerment?
To pledge to be more aware
More playful, more tolerant, more fair,
More responsible, more wild, more loving.
Awake to our unsuspected powers, more amazing.

We rise or fall by the choices we make
It all depends on the road we take
And the choice and road each depend
On the light we have, the light we bend,
On the light we use
Or refuse
On the lies we live by,
And from which we die.

I share Ben Okri's message, that "we rise and fall by the choices we make." Learning new ways of communicating is all about choices, first recognizing that we have them, then expanding our repertoire of choices with learning and practice.

We are conditioned from the moment we're born to communicate in certain ways, using the verbal constructions we hear around us, relating to our own and other people's feelings and actions in the manner we have been taught, tending to categorize people and situations in polarized ways—right and wrong, good or bad, red-blue, always and never, us and them.

All of these various methods for peaceful communication—and there are many, many individuals and organizations working in this field—all these various methods essentially aim for the same thing: to strip away those habits of thought and communication that keep blame and polarization intact, and to reveal the common humanity we share at the foundation of our beings.

As Abe Lincoln said in the build up to the American Civil war, quoting scripture, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I fear that the polarization of our country, our decreasing ability to communicate, is perhaps the most serious, fundamental problem we face, because it limits our creativity and corrodes our ability to constructively solve problems together. How can we help create peace anywhere if we can't even talk civilly to each other?

Perhaps it is naiveté, or perhaps it is Spirit-given faith, but I believe that all we human beings essentially long for the same things, need the same things, fear the same things, love the same things. I believe that we would draw very similar pictures of the world we want if given the chance.

And I pray, on this Memorial Weekend, that we, the human race, will strive and strive, with all our heart, to learn ways to resolve problems without the waste of violence and war. Today, we mourn and remember those who have died, not only in the distant past but those dying and suffering today, and every day, because we still have not yet learned this.

I close with the words of Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field.
I'll meet you there.