

The Beloved Conversation

So, there is a koi pond in my back yard at home. Actually it's just a small goldfish pond. But it has a tiny, calming waterfall amid a serene garden, and the little fishies swim around looking very Zen in their flowing saffron and white robes. The pond lends quite a bit of *Om* to this city of sirens. The waterfall as I said, is tiny, but it keeps the water aerated so the goldfish don't gasp their ways into their next incarnations.

Well, one morning last summer, I went out to offer my little masters some food for their begging bowls, when I noticed the waterfall had slowed to a thin, sad trickle. And, before my eyes, the thin trickle slowed to an even sadder drip. And before I could even begin to panic, the drips stopped all together. A whole aquatic temple of monks were about to expire, on my watch, and soon, if I didn't do something!

I jiggled hoses and checked the pump. I made sure the water was running, and even uttered a few petitional prayers to no avail. The waterfall was dry and the

surface of the pond glassy. No air was getting to the fishies. So, I did the only thing left to do.

I called in the expert, the one with “know how,” the person who can fix anything. I called out in distress, “My pond is broken. Please, make it better!” And Kirsten showed up with her steely, red tool box.

Kirsten looked thoughtfully at the parched waterfall and the placid pond. She examined the pump with the keen senses of a doctor holding a still-thumping heart. And then she opened the filter. The filter was fully clogged with leaf bits, silt, and a lot of goldfish poop; it was disgusting and smelled *awful*. I hung my head in shame. “This could be your problem, Joan,” she said.

So we held our noses, rinsed out the filter, put it back together, hooked up the hose, turned on the water, and the waterfall gushed out a glorious, clean, oxygenated cascade. I breathed a huge sigh of relief and gratitude. And I suspect the little Buddhist fishies did likewise. Problem solved.

I tell you this story because it’s a story about a technical problem with a technical fix. The problem was clear, the solution was known by someone somewhere, and there was an expert with a toolbox who could help.

But some problems and some challenges in life aren’t like that, are they?

Sometimes the problem is quite unclear, the solution is completely unknown, and there is no expert anywhere who has even a vague idea of the answer. These more

difficult challenges, the bigger problems of our time, require us to shift from thinking about the impossible to thinking about possibilities for hope.

When we wander down this road, the road of trying to solve problems no one has ever solved before – that no one has even thought possible to solve – we find ourselves on an adventure. We don't know the answer. We don't even know what the world will look like when the problem is solved. Nobody has ever been there before.

Solving these big, seemingly impossible problems is an adventure because we are stepping forth into a completely unknown world. We are searching for hope. And trust me – before we get to hope – there be dragons on the way.

On this Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday I reflect upon racism and oppression as impossible problems for which we have found no solutions. I also reflect on Dr. King's other concerns: poverty and war. How will we ever find solutions to these monumental problems? These problems that seem impossible to solve?

Let's be frank. So far, all our technical fixes, while winning battles here or there, have failed to solve the problem – ever! Time to try something new.

If we are to ever find solutions and live in the blessed community of which we dream – a community of peace, equality, compassion and justice – we must enter

into a beloved conversation. And in that conversation we will need to hold ourselves to four agreements:

1. Speak your truth
2. Stay engaged
3. Experience discomfort; and,
4. Expect and accept an unending conversation.

As I mentioned before, the difficulty with the big challenges of our time are that the problem is unclear, the solution is unknown, and there is no expert. You can't just phone up the one with the know-how and ask them to make it better. There is no individual with steely, red toolbox who can come and save the day. Rather, somewhere within the whole struggling, passionate, devoted community the expertise exists. The community who wants to solve the problem holds enough knowledge to find a solution. But the answer must be unwrapped slowly, discovered bit by bit, and exposed sometimes painfully.

We learn together in a beloved conversation; sharing our stories, speaking our truths; honoring one another's experience until a new, shared understanding emerges. As Lau Tzu wrote: "when the task is done, the people will say we did it ourselves." Just like this morning, when we sang "Down by the Bay." The song is finished only when group members contribute in new and unexpected ways: everyone learning from one another, everyone straining to hear what the other says, everyone learning more about the problem and the possible world of

solutions, everyone willing to change their perspective in order for a solution to emerge.

If we are to solve our greatest challenges of racism, poverty and war, we must enter into a beloved conversation and each speak our truth. Clearly this is not the way we usually get things done – which may explain why the ills of the world are persistently with us. But why not try something new when the costs to society and our souls are so high? Why do we avoid or fail at ending the thorny issues that plague us?

Perhaps it's because finding solutions through a beloved conversation is too slow and difficult. And in all areas of life we are rewarded for finding quick, technical solutions to problems and challenges. Think about it – bonus checks for sales quotas, getting an A on a math test, using a faucet to turn on the water. But those aren't the kind of problems we are talking about, are they? Rarely do we invest time and energy in transforming our communities into bubbling, boiling, steaming learning environments capable of examining the beliefs and behaviors that hold real change captive.

If we are ever to realize Martin Luther King's dream, we have to commit to the dream and commit to the process. We know it wasn't easy for the civil rights workers. I am sure at times they wanted to give up on the conversation, sleep in, start infighting and bickering. Remember, they kept telling each other, "Keep

Your Eyes on the Prize.” Our task is to get engaged in the beloved conversation, and stay engaged.

So, if we are to solve these impossible problems of our day, we need to enter into a beloved conversation, because there is no expert to hand us the answer. We have to stay engaged and ignore distractions and laziness. And, we need to get ready for some discomfort.

The conversation is going to be hard. Get ready to experience discomfort. The kind of learning we are talking about isn't like learning your multiplication tables. The kind of learning that brings us into a new way of being happens only when we shake up the current system a bit. Courageously admit our truths, not just to others, but to ourselves. Strive to build bridges. Ask real questions born from genuine innocence, humility and curiosity. Listen harder, much harder than we really want to.

The beloved conversation is hard, because we are asking for real change and transformation of ourselves and of our community. It's a passionate conversation – leaving complacency at the door, while never abandoning Love, even in moments of deepest frustration.

Learning in a beloved conversation makes you want to push back on what you are learning. It gets us all defensive because what we hear and feel challenges our

habits, beliefs, and values. We're asked to sacrifice, doubt certainties, and even express disloyalty to our people and culture.

We hear the defensiveness all the time, don't we? "But I never owned slaves!" "Socialism is a failed system." "Don't you love your country?" No wonder people prefer to take the path of least resistance, and skip the deeper, more constructive conversation all together. Most people prefer the straightforward to the complex, especially when it comes to conversations about race, poverty and war.

Our conversation must become a beloved conversation – an open hearted conversation. Learning with an open heart means you could be at your lowest point, abandoned by your usual allies and entirely powerless, yet remaining receptive to the full range of human emotions, without plugging your ears or striking back.

We have to get vulnerable with one another. Be willing to feel everything, to hold it all without letting go of our work. Then, oh then, the deeper truth can emerge. The status quo of incarceration injustice, police getting away with murder, food insecurity in this rich land, wage disparity, education segregation, a class-based

health care system, and sending our young people far away to be killed in a war that, frankly, I doubt many of us even understand anymore.

The status quo is so unacceptable that our sacrifice of engaging in, and remaining fully engaged in an uncomfortable beloved conversation, seems a small price to pay in the hope of discovering some new answers together.

If we are to solve the impossible problems of our day we must enter into a beloved learning conversation in which we speak our truths, and stay engaged in spite of the inevitable discomfort. And finally, we need to expect and accept that the conversation will go on forever. A problem that has never been solved before is not one day going to be tied up in a pretty bow and converted forever and finally by a newly discovered technical solution.

Making the impossible possible is an adventure. Nobody has ever done it before. We don't even know how we are changing the world. Perhaps we may never live in a post-racial, post-poverty, post-violence world, but we have to try something.

So, build the beloved conversation. Speak your truth. Stay engaged. Experience discomfort. And, expect and accept that the conversation will go on forever. If we have any hope of transforming the world and changing ourselves, we must be bold enough to step into our discomfort, brave enough to be clumsy there, and loving

enough to forgive ourselves and others. May we, as a people of faith, be granted the strength to be so bold, so brave, and so loving.

For further Study:

Peggy MacIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”

<https://www.deanza.edu/faculty/lewisjulie/White%20Priviledge%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>

Adaptive Leadership: A Model for Meeting the Most Difficult Challenges

<https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=adaptive+leadership+a+model+for+leading+the+most+difficult+challenges>

YouTube: “What kind of Asian are You?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ>