

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
“Impasse”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 24, 2021

## Reading

Beginning of Chapter 9, [Brave Talk](#) by Melody Sanford Martin

There once was a woman named Ruth, who was appointed to the same job as Antonin. Ruth was a champion of liberal feminist ideals; Antonin was a champion of conservative traditionalism. Ruth was Jewish; Antonin was Catholic. They disagreed fiercely and were at an impasse on nearly every issue under the sun. A recipe for disaster, right?

“We were best buddies,” Ruth Bader Ginsburg remarked after the death of fellow Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. While on the bench on the Supreme Court, these two polar opposites went head to head on countless crucial disagreements. They wrote scathing dissenting opinions of each other's work. Outside the job, however, Ruth and Antonin were lifelong friends. They traveled together, ate meals together, and shopped together. Their families hung out on holidays, they went to shows together, and they shared joys and losses. From engaging each other articulately inside the courtroom to supporting each other loyally outside the courtroom, these powerful and highly opinionated people—who were literally paid to argue with each other for years over high stakes issues with immense consequences—managed to build a resilient relationship.

How in the world did they do it? When asked why she maintained a friendship with Antonin, Ruth explained that her ultimate goal was to protect and strengthen the institution of the court, and such a friendship made their work of arguing important matters stronger and more sustainable.

According to Antonin, “If you can't disagree ardently with your colleagues about some issues of law and yet personally still be friends, get another job, for Pete's sake.”

After Antonin died, the press asked Ruth for a statement. One can imagine opponents of Antonin licking their lips in anticipation of the greatest takedown of all time—something to the effect of “good riddance.” Instead, Ruth responded with one of the most profound testaments to friendship and democracy: she said the Supreme Court would be a “paler place” without him. Without Antonin constant opposition to her ideas? Without his scathing dissents? Without him making her life utterly difficult? Yes.

Without the contrast of impasse she knew something vitally important was lost: the court would be less colorful, less vibrant, less sharp. That's an incredible statement from someone like Ruth, who holds passionately strong convictions about the way the world ought to work.

It would be a mistake to think that in order to be friends, these two brilliant minds were checking their ideals at the door or compromising their beliefs when they left the courtroom. This couldn't be further from the truth: both of these people dedicated their lives to fight for what they believed was right and good. Looking at their friendship, it's apparent that Ruth and Antonin understood a profound reality: resilient relationships are created through impasse, not in spite of it.

## Sermon

It doesn't take much to put me immediately on the defensive. If I meet someone new and, in our conversation, they say, "Blue lives matter" or "the election was stolen" or "my body, my choice" in response to the topic of vaccines, my shields go up and I'm ready to arm the photon torpedoes. This person is likely to be someone I'd want to fight with or avoid. I'm very likely to clash with their social and political values.

This isn't a daily occurrence for me because the members of my immediate family are all liberal Democrats. It doesn't happen much in our congregation these days because of the increasing polarization in our society. Unitarian Universalism, in its increasing commitment to antiracism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism, is driving out those who do not align with those core values and beliefs. The interfaith community in Albany is also liberal. What I've realized is ... I live in a bit of a bubble.

And that is a problem.

My situation may not be the same as many here this morning who have close family or friends or co-workers who do not share the liberal values of our congregation nor our pluralistic approach to faith and belief. What is likely true for many of us is that the tensions have increased and conflicts in those relationships may have reached an "impasse" that is currently harming those relationships.

Of course, one of the culprits for that increasing polarization is our inflammatory social media climate. This level of toxicity is driving many of us to seal ourselves off from those who disagree with us by "unfriending" them. Where we can't do that is in the public sphere. Today, heated rhetoric gets directed toward public health and public schools. Vaccines, masks, and teaching race and history have become huge flash points for anger. The resulting conflict is threatening to weaken all of our public institutions. The line between us and them is getting sharper and less and less tolerant of difference.

I've been drawn to speak on the topic of dealing constructively with conflict because of the work initiated in our congregation to create a Conflict Transformation Working Group. Dismantling White Supremacy Culture in our congregation, in Albany and society at large is likely to generate significant conflict. Dig into much of the red / blue divide and what gets exposed is a white Christian, heterosexist, ableist set of beliefs that marginalizes everyone else. What is insidious is that kind of thinking isn't just on "the other side." It is subliminally implanted in all our minds on a daily basis by the status quo of American society. Exposing it and changing unconscious attitudes and patterns of thought usually means confrontation and conflict.

Almost always, it means being willing to be uncomfortable.

This is challenging work. Thankfully, there are tools to use and skills to develop that facilitate this process of growth and transformation. Jan McCracken, a leader of the Conflict Transformation Working Group, has been suggesting books to us to develop those tools and skills. One source was the book I quoted for the reading. It's a good resource that I found quite helpful, so I thought I'd bring you some of what I learned this morning.

I expect most, if not all of us, know how to resolve conflict with rational argument and logic. We look at the facts and expected consequences then use our powers of reason to come to a resolution. When we share a common set of beliefs and assumptions with someone, this is an easy way to resolve a conflict. I am not going to focus on this kind of conflict.

I am going to focus on the kind of conflict that stimulates strong negative emotions. When this happens, I can feel my eyes narrowing and my heart beating faster as I get angry and frustrated. I catch myself saying to myself:

“Are they hearing me? Can't they just listen to what I'm saying? Their arguments are obviously wrong on so many levels. How can they possibly think that Internet troll they just quoted is a credible source? Do they have any shred of evidence or personal experience to back up these outlandish claims? What planet do they live on? Maybe some virtual reality that has no grounding in actual reality?”

It doesn't take long for the discussion to get stuck and the emotional temperature to continue to escalate. The result is generally the urge to fight, to run away, or the urge to freeze and hide. None of these base emotional reactions to threat will help me deal effectively with this kind of impasse. It certainly will not allow me to rise to the stature of Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

What might help me do that? Martin has some good guidance for all of us.

No matter what manner of insanity comes out of another person's mouth, they are still human. They need air, water and food just as much as I do. They need to stay warm at night and keep cool on hot days. They likely enjoy laughing as much as I do. They care about those that they love just like I do. We all bleed red, pee yellow, and release the bi-product of digestion in a brownish form. We share so much of the same DNA, it seems silly to focus on the tiny genetic variations that affect the color and texture of our hair, the color of our eyes, and the pigment of our skin. Even the variation of culture and religion began to serve the purpose of the wellbeing of human society. Remembering this wholeness of our humanity softens the rough edges of argumentation.

Marshall Rosenberg's insights found in his system of nonviolent communication have been extremely valuable to me when I encounter an impasse with someone. So much friction is driven by the perception of irresolvable conflicts of needs and desires. The pie is a fixed size and if you get more, I get less. If your needs get fulfilled mine will not.

In Rosenberg's understanding, humans are always driven by [satisfying their needs](#). At the physiological level, this is obvious. At the emotional and meaning level it may not be obvious. That's because our feelings do not map directly to our needs. Any emotion might be the expression of the need for safety, for autonomy, for connection, for play, for comfort, for appreciation. What is critical to understand about human needs is they are universals, we all have every one of them, and they are all good, wholesome aspects of being human. Generally, when our needs are satisfied, we're happy and when they are unfulfilled, we're unhappy.

So after encountering an impasse, and remembering the humanity of the person I'm in conflict with, I want to know what needs are driving their arguments and attitudes. Because their emotional expression will not tell me what those needs are, I'll need to engage them in a different kind of conversation. Rather than attacking their arguments, I'll need to ask probing questions, respond and maybe reveal what needs are driving their concerns. If I can name and show appreciation for the beauty of the needs that are driving the other person, we can create a sense of appreciation and connection even if we currently can't agree about anything but our impasse.

Once we establish respect for each other's humanity and feelings and needs, the door can open wider to get to the hard stuff, the gap between our beliefs and assumptions. Again, this may not be obvious until the Impasse is carefully examined with this framework in mind.

Martin separates beliefs and assumptions in a useful way. Beliefs generally are not amenable to rational discussion. If I don't believe in God, reading me passages from the Bible are not likely to influence me. Listing the miracles Jesus performed, or those by the saints, supernatural stories like Jesus walking on water are not likely to move me. The same going the other direction. A discussion of the Big Bang theory or particle physics or Newtonian mechanics aren't going to phase the true believer. Generally, beliefs are commitments people make that don't respond to rational or irrational argumentation.

Martin discriminates assumptions from beliefs. In her view, assumptions do have a basis in reality that can be questioned and argued. While beliefs are not based in reason, assumptions can be challenged about their reasonableness. So many of our assumptions come from culture and repeated experiences of the senses. I don't think about whether someone will stop at a stop light or a crosswalk. I am not threatened when someone reaches out to shake my hand. I don't anticipate my food might be poisoned when I eat in a restaurant. Those are not universal assumptions, as I found out in Thailand and Sri Lanka attempting to cross the street. Now with COVID, I'm surprised when people offer me their hand to shake. And people with a severe case of Celiac disease, frequently don't trust anyone to prepare their food for fear of gluten contamination. Evidence for assumptions can be considered rationally. Arguments against beliefs can be deeply disrespectful. Separating the two is very important when dealing with an Impasse.

Martin has a nice five step formula for dealing with impasse she calls, the "awesome if":

1. **Learn your conversation partner's backstory.** Understand how their experiences have shaped their views. By humanizing their perspective, you show them you care about them as a person, not that you just want to win.
2. **Excavate their structure of meaning.** By studying how their beliefs, assumptions, values and opinions interconnect, you show you want to understand them, not judge them.
3. **Use the Awesome If.** Try to imagine what it would be like if you were in their situation and had their experiences. By expressing empathy, you show that you really [recognize] them.
4. **Identify what is valid.** Give credit when they make a solid point, and try naming the things you both agree on. You show that you are reasonable.
5. **Dig into nuance.** Discuss specific points of disagreement and invite courageous dialogue (respectful sharing of hard truths) (page 189)

Note that you can't get to step 5 without doing steps 1 through 4 that establish your credibility as a conversational partner. As Martin puts it, a productive conversation only happens after building trust, respect and cooperation. The Awesome If is one way to do that, deeply grounded in empathy.

We can have loving relationships with people we experience deep impasse. We are not going to agree on everything with the people we care about. I'm sure every married couple here can probably identify several impasses in their relationships. Yet if the relationship is good, it hasn't diminished the other person's humanity nor harmed the love you share together.

And it is hard sometimes to believe, in the heat of the moment, that this is possible. There is one former President I can think of who will do everything in his power to resist the humanization of his opponents, people he would categorize as "losers."

And he is not alone in that kind of thinking. When I read that Ginsberg and Scalia had a loving friendship it shocked me. I want them to be mortal enemies. Yet my more enlightened and compassionate tendencies are moved with appreciation for their capacity to respect and appreciate each other as human beings.

I'll conclude with Martin's paragraph that follows the text I quoted as the reading this morning:

Let this be a lesson to us in our present moment. If we don't actively create healthy and loving ways of relating to each other within the presence of impasse, here is what happens: impasse becomes corrosive, fracturing our connections and compromising our broader work in the world. When our relationships become brittle, those ties are less and less able to hold the weight of conflict. We hunker down in our fear bunkers, avoid each other, and even go to war with each other. Our [tribe] becomes more important than love, more important than the well-being of our neighbors. Without healthy criticism and feedback our ideas get inflated and even distorted. Fragile channels of communication compromise important processes of disagreement that families, communities, and societies need in order to be healthy.