

**An Essay
Values-Based Conflict Resolution
Is A Call For
Understanding The Role Of Spiritual Formation**

Introduction

I begin this essay by first defining aspects of Christian spiritual formation for that is one of my areas of expertise. I believe, however, that the principles defined here generally transcend cultures and / or religious traditions and that a conversation around these principles can result in a smorgasbord that can feed us all. First of all, Christian spiritual formation is about being bound by the gospel, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit at work in the body of believers, confronted with the challenges of tradition that has shaped the life of the body, and that the body is always in need of direction. In other words, spiritual formation is concerned with *meaning, understanding deeply* in search for direction, *seeking truth* often found in human experience, and *finding definition* for self and community through the following of a rule that shapes one's life in the context of community.

Overview

Spiritual formation is both the work of the person as well as the community. Such work is fundamental to being human and living in the context with others regardless of religion or culture. Communities, tribes, organizations and families build their core values out of these building blocks and so too do nations. Believing then begins the formation process of the spirit of the person and group.

The core of my thesis in this essay is this: That we humans wrap our lives around systems of belief that shape the corporate story of the community in which we live. Such beliefs over time become the stories that give identity to the community and also brings shape or form to the inner life or soul of individual persons. Our living out these beliefs and story gives definition to the spirit of who we are. "We are not the sole authors of our own story and what does come out from us are the decisions we make in the face of the graces (gifts or blessings) we receive."¹ Some say grace and goodness comes from God; others say from family and / or society. The point is, we are shaped by someone, something – a context outside ourselves that has and continues to engage us in conversation through experience.

Most if not all formational processes begin with a system of beliefs that are fundamental to the identity of the group. These beliefs provide a lens through which to understand one's place in the group, standards for behavior, and location out of which to self-actualize. Many do not get past the first two. Self-actualization requires, at a minimum, a desire to wrestle with the inconsistencies of life lived in community. Why? Because a system of belief is inadequate to interpret life's experience by itself. The goal is for the

¹ Chittister, Joan, Rule of Benedict

process to take the initiate in society from a sense of certainty to a matter of faith whereby the person can live life with uncertainty, no longer relying on believing but reaching. This is how one grows. When persons are unwilling or are not permitted to differentiate the beliefs of the system with life experiences, they are likely to turn their systems of beliefs into their ultimate concern. When the process becomes the measure of goodness at the expense of the quality of living together in community the community begins to fizzle.

For example, religion (in whatever its form) can be considered a system of beliefs that result in practices. These practices are designed to tender a way to live life with questions that bombard our communities and shake up our lives. In this way religion provides a process of maturation both for the individual and community where believing can be shifted from embracing only concrete fundamentals to believing more in the meaning behind the ritual and use of symbols employed. Religion can take on many forms. Some believe in a religion of money and / or the market economic system. Some follow the belief that the world was created as a private place for the dominion of a certain ethnic group. These systems of belief provide authenticity and integrity to the groups. Shaking the core of a belief system results in conflict. When this happens, the best one can hope for is disillusionment (to break the false illusion of the story that formed the group). This must be a very gentle process involving long-term commitment to be in dialogue. Bottom line: What ever we believe at the deepest center of our life (deep in our gut) determines what we ourselves become. What the society believes deep in its gut determines its behavior as well. Much of this is the stuff at work in forming the spirit of the person and community.

Going Deeper

Law (rules or guidelines for behavior), study / education (learning), and practice (living the law) are the core principles and rudiments of a rule of life for the initial development of persons as well as societies. I include the individual person because without persons there can be no society, and persons must strive to live by the rules if society is to develop. This is not a chicken before the egg concept but very simply that personal life lived in society is an iterative and conflicting process.

For example, when I was born into my family I was born into an established order (family system). Not until I was older and demonstrated some personal ability for certain levels of obedience was I given greater responsibility for the care of the family unit. Growing up I followed the leading of parents and those of my older siblings learning the skills to successfully navigate the family life. I was taught right from wrong (law and policy) and given the opportunity to practice. In my successes and failures I learned to be a better follower of the law. Fortunately my family system was not too harsh and I was carefully nurtured in growing more fully into a responsible citizen of the family and community. For some this is "Sociology 101." This may seem intuitive but not fully considered is that we are born into a consciousness of the world that existed before we came into it. This world is filled with values and the practices for living out the values

making up the norms of life lived together whether in small towns or larger national landscapes.

But, what happens when we are constantly “dashed” against the law? It may be the law is too harsh (not realistic) or that human obedience is the main concern. Somewhere between these two extremes is the truth. One can learn through failures (as well as successes) in following the rules of the household. It should be obvious that it is not always possible to obey all the rules all the time. Competing interpretations and overriding self-interests tend to get in the way. For example, consider the Ten Commandments of the Holy Scriptures of the Jewish and Christian texts: do not kill, do not covet, honor your parents, etc. These values of the highest order stand for the sanctity of life, respect for personal property and relations, and respect for the authority that gives birth to such as these. The question then, is: How does one repair the social fabric if someone is accidentally killed or intentionally murdered, or a violation of another value is committed? In what way can justice be served that will result in a restoration (nexus of peace) of the total social order?

I have attempted to paint the basic context of an initial formation process of an individual into a social fabric. I believe that this process is also how a society realizes itself when a group of individuals first come together with the intent of living together. Somehow, they must find a common understanding of behavior that begins to define who they are as collective body. It is this idea of “who-ness” that becomes the spirit (ethos) of the person as well as the community.

Recently, a group of people protested that the out going governor and governor-elect failed to demonstrate proper respect for the flag of the United States because they did not place their right hand over their hearts during the playing of the national anthem. It would seem that such protestors place greater emphasis in the ritual (form of legalism) that in what the flag symbolizes. The flag and / or the ritual of honoring the flag has become a God.

When value systems clash and result in the injury of another, often it is because of the other has in some way broken the law either deliberately or out of ignorance. “Hurt people” hurt people because the law, learn, practice “do-loop” breaks down. Our humanity is perfectly imperfect. Reconciliation is initiated when the injured and injuring parties speak the truth to one another. This truth telling is a listening and speaking process whereby together the parties begin to find compassion for one another and so forgive. Each has given ground to the other. When a stand is taken for one’s value system, one can expect to suffer.

Consider a group of people. The overarching core value of the majority of this group is relationship whereas a smaller number in the group hold the core value of excellence. Should the group as a whole fall short in the eyes of those who place excellence above all, the others will likely engage in conflict avoidance to preserve relationships in the group even if this necessitates losing those in the group who place a higher value of excellence. The whole group suffers and is in need of healing.

Conclusion

Consider a few core values that has shaped the fabric of the United States of America:²

- Preserve the peace for ourselves and for other people
- Promote economic and social justice
- Champion freedom and human rights
- Protect the environment as a legacy to future generations
- Alleviate human suffering
- Enhance the rule of law
- Cooperate with other peoples or nations to reach these and other common goals

These core values, when acted upon by the collective population begin to define the spirit of the nation and the people begin to identify with these values. They invest their hearts and souls into them and they become of ultimate concern. To take these values away is to create a great crisis of who-ness – a crisis of the spirit. For values such as these come from deep within the human soul. And so, when the values of one come into conflict with the values of another, the result is spiritual conflict in need of spiritual reconciliation, healing and direction.

The spirit of a nation matures when it can begin to live in the tension of conflicting values and not lose a hold on its identity. Otherwise, and it will become in need of healing:

Healing.
The Word whispers fear before it speaks peace;
it stirs anxiety before it spreads calm;
for who but the ill ever pray to be made well?
Only what is broken needs mending;
only the injured seek wholeness and health.
We will not embrace One who comes
“with healing in his wings”
without also facing our wounded condition.

Nation lifts up sword against nation;
suspicion prowls in every shadowed place;
new hopes have shortened lives,
while old guilts and griefs seem never to die...³

When values clash, people are injured and result in the need to heal the community (nations). This is a spiritual work as well as material.

² Carter, Jimmy, *Our Endangered Values*.

³ W. Bruce Benson