

## CONFLICT IN GROUPS

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If you take a moment to think about particular times of conflict you have had, you will probably agree that humans have many different ways of dealing with difficulty, and that these methods lead to varying degrees of successful and enduring resolution.

Most bookstores today will have several shelves of books that address conflict. I will not recount their proposals here, except to mention one very effective solution that is widely used in anthroposophical groups: avoidance.

Given its prevalence, I suspect that nearly every reader has employed this solution at some point in his or her life. We all use it because it works. It works in the sense that we no longer have to deal with the issue. If the problem or the people we don't get along with have been around for a long enough time, and we're convinced that the situation is never going to change, then giving up, or not allowing them in the house ever again, or refusing to go to a meeting where they might be present (or any number of other examples) gives us a huge sense of relief. "I'll never have to suffer through another evening with that turkey again."

What this solution omits is the myriad other paths not taken, the possibilities for growth (preferably their growth) that do not occur, that a small faint voice may whisper to us, asking us to consider. (Well maybe I'll work on some other choice later, when I'm more developed...)

Can anthroposophy add anything to this conversation? If we are all interested in the work of Rudolf Steiner, shouldn't we be able to get along better?

When people come to an anthroposophical group, they come as they are. The social skills of the members of the Society generally match the social skills of the culture around them. There seems to be no basis for any other assumption. Over a period of time, if the exercises and practices offered by anthroposophy are attended to, then maybe there will be some reflection in that person's interactions with others. Maybe.

But, it is not reasonable to expect heroic virtue from everyone. It is especially not reasonable to be disappointed when we don't find it.

One set of images that we can use that are time-tested are the differences between people mirrored by the seven planetary types. In traditional terms, the Sun, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars and Venus, represent seven distinct personality types. We could call them numbers One through Seven if the names seem foreign, though the real human differences would be unchanged. 1) Strength, 2) feelings, 3) discipline, 4) abundance, 5) communication, 6) activity, and 7) harmony. In a functional group, each of these types is likely to be present. If some types are missing, then even more consciousness is required by the group to maintain social balance. Each community probably has members familiar with these categories. You might talk to them about sharing their experiences with the group. The next approach springs from our human nature. This is something everyone shares, yet it generally fails to receive the attention it deserves.

When any two people have a problem getting along, or doing some task together, the first step they usually take to resolve it is talking to each other. Each one presents a point of view; hopes that the other will consider it as important, and looks for some compromise that allows each to feel heard by the other, followed by an agreed-upon solution. Few difficulties can be fully resolved when a social imbalance limits open and honest conversation. When all the cards are on the table, any solution is more likely to be sustainable over time.

Learning to negotiate more effectively is part of our task as humans. We actually owe the person standing before us truthful feedback. When we withhold it, despite the convincing reasons we have, we prevent them from learning what the situation could teach them. Imagine both poles of this experience. In one group, everyone freely shares their feelings, everyone adjusts, and life goes on. In another, no one does this. Instead, they harbor resentments and criticisms of actual or perceived hurts, or tell their stories to others not directly involved. Eventually, they simply stay home and the life of the group drains away.

Mediation with a third party is another option. The mediator does not act as judge. The role of the mediator is to allow both parties to adequately present their point of view, to learn that a solution that maintains a power imbalance is likely to lead to further

problems, and to inspire both parties to negotiate as equals. Teaching people to negotiate may be a bit of an overstatement. Helping them to communicate more effectively in a given situation is probably more realistic. Again, every community will likely have members who are either trained mediators, or possess this skill by temperament.

Expanding the number of choices we feel are available in times of conflict can help us find lasting solutions.

The final suggestion is more uniquely anthroposophical. Some of us have had the experience of meeting someone who seemed like she or he was from another planet. Everything about his or her world view seemed surprising to us. One reasonable explanation for this is that the cosmic stream, the karmic group that we are part of is not the same one that the other is part of. In fact, we could be meeting someone for the first time in an evolutionary sense. Groups that have never tried to work together before are now beginning to do so. (There are twelve major groups to choose from.) It is possible that we know someone that we have never tried to work with before. Because of this, some level of disharmony is likely. Disharmony is not irrevocable. It is an opportunity for growth.

Conflict is not the end of the world. It is another opportunity for growth.

If you and your friends have truly tried every solution you can imagine, and you feel that local anthroposophical work is suffering, the national office in Ann Arbor can put you in touch with an acting negotiator for your area.