Beyond Blame

The Positive Functions of Conflict

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From *Beyond Blame* by Jeffrey A. Kottler

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You are fuming with indignation. Earlier in the day you spent the better part of an hour arguing with someone who absolutely insists that he is right and you are wrong. You, of course, are equally convinced that he is the one who is misinformed and misguided. Furthermore, you have devoted several more hours to reliving the experience, reviewing exactly what was said and how thoroughly you were misunderstood. The more you think about the matter, the more upset you become.

You feel awful about the way your interaction proceeded. You have some minor regrets about the manner in which you conducted yourself, but most of your disgust and disappointment is directed toward your adversary: he had no right to speak to you that way, nor was he very fair in the style with which he dealt with you. Now that you think about the matter further, you are convinced that there was little you could have done to circumvent this struggle. Yet you feel angry, frustrated, and completely at a loss as to where things went wrong.

Given the intensity of your lingering emotions, the gut- wrenching anguish you feel that makes you want to scream out in rage, what possible value could there be in such an exchange? What good is conflict if it only leads to mutual antagonism?

From the preceding discussions throughout this book you might easily get the impression that conflict is a bad thing, a situation to be not only dreaded but avoided at all costs. While I am not suggesting that you go looking for arguments or that you should rejoice when you find one, I would like to point out that conflict can have some important positive functions. There is a big difference between chronic, destructive conflict, about which you feel you can do nothing, and productive conflicts that serve some greater purpose.

The familiar encounter I just described does not *only* lead to greater frustration and animosity. These types of experiences also encourage us to reflect on our conduct, as well as on the behavior of others. Conflict is an intense, intimate kind of engagement between people. It signifies that you and another person both feel quite strongly about your positions. More than that, it means that you are both willing to risk fighting for what you believe by exposing yourselves, intellectually and emotionally.

Conflicts can help you test out your most cherished ideas by bouncing them off others who feel equally strongly about their perceptions. It is through

disagreement with others that you are most easily able to determine what it is that you care about the most. These dialogues might not be very pretty to listen to; they certainly are not pleasant to experience. They are, however, instrumental in promoting growth and stimulation, reducing tension, and getting you what you want.

Before we move on to applications of the book's process to specific situations in love (Chapter Eight) and at work (Chapter Nine), let us take a look at the positive side of conflict. Once you learn to conceive of it as a relatively normal, predictable, even helpful part of human relationships, you will find it much easier to respond to conflict situations as temporary problems to be solved rather than as crises that will destroy your life.

When Conflict Helps

Most often, conflict is viewed as a breakdown in communication, a failure to relate to one another in a civilized, constructive manner. The term has become associated with such concepts as *hostility, provocative action, war,* and *impasse.* It is certainly true that certain types of conflict—most notably those in which weapons and/or physical or verbal abuse are employed—are indeed destructive enterprises that leave casualties in their wake.

Yet without conflict, without disagreements of any kind, imagine how boring, predictable, and conventional your life would be. If you were to get

everyone to agree with you all of the time, no one would ever challenge your thinking and actions. You alone would be responsible for all decisions without having your reasoning examined.

You may have often wondered why people do not get along better, why we often resort to such forceful, disagreeable ways to impose our will on others. Why can't we just avoid conflict altogether and instead use negotiation to arrange compromises between opposing points of view? Even if this were possible, it might not be desirable. When people abide by fair rules of engagement, demonstrate a degree of flexibility, and show a reasonable concern for finding solutions rather than simply enjoying a good fight, conflict can be highly useful and instructive as a means to advance the development of individuals, as well as that of our society.

For example, conflict with skeptics forces scientists to test and retest their ideas and make more cogent and convincing arguments in favor of change. Social psychologists Dean Pruitt and Jeffrey Rubin have made the interesting observation that three of the most influential thinkers of the past century have all viewed conflict as not only helpful but crucial for human survival. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is based on the notion that intraspecies struggle leads to survival of the fittest, whose genes then strengthen the stock of future generations. Sigmund Freud based his theory of the human mind on intra-psychic conflict between instincts and conscience; a whole generation of

developmental psychologists then followed his lead and created models explaining human growth in terms of progressive stages that are driven by internal conflict. And Karl Marx created a sociopolitical philosophy based on the idea that inevitable conflict between human agendas moves us to a higher level of functioning.

All three of these conflict theorists recognized that progress and evolution do not come without some cost—whether in the form of inconvenience, discomfort, pain, or even fatalities. Change is not a pretty sight, even if we do enjoy the end result. The most magnificent building was engulfed in scaffolding and covered with construction scars during its transformation. Any work of art can appear singularly unappealing until it is finished. Even a beautiful baby was just a blob of cells before it completed its growth. Similarly, conflict may be viewed as an ugly event, a period of temporary instability, before consensus is reached and change takes place.

The Constructive Functions of Conflict

In addition to its role in facilitating change, conflict serves a number of other constructive functions—as a releaser of tension, a promoter of growth, a regulator of distance between people, a path to intimacy and to personal gain, and a preventer of stagnation. The intention here is not to convince you to go looking for opportunities to argue at every turn, but rather to help you realize

that what makes fighting so intolerable is the belief that it serves no useful purpose. It is extremely important when you find yourself embroiled in controversy to ask yourself what functions the conflict is serving.

- How is this disagreement helping me focus my attention on issues that I have been neglecting?
- What cues leading up to this eruption did I miss that signaled impending escalation of feelings?
- What can I learn from this encounter that will be helpful to me the next time I am in a similar predicament?
- What is this conflict doing for me, however annoying its side effects, that I might accomplish in other ways?
- What are the underlying issues that we are both really upset about?

When you can articulate even a few of the functions that conflict may be serving in your life, you will find it much easier to stop blaming yourself and others for the predicament. On some level, you can feel grateful for the path you are headed down, even if the journey is uncomfortable. This is not unlike the feeling you have when you undertake any adventure: things are unpredictable, frightening, stressful, uncomfortable, and exciting- all at once. You want the journey to end: if only you could be back home where it is warm and safe! Yet you also revel in the exhilaration of facing the unknown. Look to these functions of conflict as reminders that this process is really an adventure.

Conflict as a Releaser of Tension

What determines whether conflict is likely to lead to constructive gains or dangerous escalation are the intentions of the parties involved. If the implicit goal is aggression, coercion, or the submission of others, ultimately somebody is going to end up worse than before he or she started.

When all parties are working toward mutually satisfying goals, when they demonstrate flexibility in their methods of problem solving, and, most of all, when they show respect for one another, conflicts can help air grievances, resolve resentments and frustration, and release tension. Children, for example, learn at a very early age the values of conflict in building coalitions and social structures. The games they learn to play (marbles, Monopoly, fantasy) and the activities they engage in (athletics, coloring at tables, group work) are designed to teach them the skills of settling disputes constructively. They learn how to let off steam in socially appropriate ways. Rather than lashing out in frustration, throwing tantrums, or subverting others' goals, children learn through these games how to negotiate for what they want. This behavior is an integral part of the social responsibilities and roles in which we must function as adults.

Katrina and Marna, two sisters who live together, have developed ways to let off steam when one sister becomes frustrated with the other's annoying behavior.

"Marna drives me crazy," Katrina explains, "especially when she leaves dishes in the sink when she could so easily just put them in the dishwasher. I think she does it on purpose just to aggravate me."

Marna quickly retorts, "I do *not* do it on purpose, and don't tell me that leaving dishes in the sink is any worse than your disgusting habit of not flushing the toilet at night."

"I am just trying to be considerate and not wake you up during the night. Every time *you* flush it always disturbs me."

They are now off and running, bickering about the behaviors that bother them. Yet when pressed on the matter, both Katrina and Marna acknowledge that their conflicts over little things seem to prevent them from fighting over other, more explosive issues that might jeopardize their relationship and their living arrangement. As with so many people who live together, controlled conflicts act as safety valves in which normal frustrations and tension may be expressed safely.

Conflict as a Promoter of Growth

A number of developmental psychologists have pointed out that most human growth occurs as the result of conflict. Disputes with others challenge us to reflect on our beliefs, eventually moving beyond our current cognitive

capacities to more sophisticated methods of reasoning. Unless you experience conflicts and challenges, there is very little likelihood that you will be motivated to search for higher-level ways to solve problems. For instance, if I were to challenge your political beliefs in such a way that you began to question the validity of some of your assumptions, you would then have to search for a more complex, highly evolved set of beliefs that more accurately reflect reality.

Conflict may be helpful not only in facilitating your personal growth but also in promoting improvements in your relationships. Learning to resolve disputes effectively is a major life skill that we should have learned as early as preschool. Even at an early age, children have the capacity to master myriad social skills useful in resolving conflicts—social sensitivity, problem solving, communication methods, ways to get needs met without alienating others in the process.

I recall one representative incident from teaching preschool. Nickie, a rambunctious four-year-old boy, grabbed a truck away from Jennifer in the sandbox and then threw sand in her face. Jennifer promptly took a truck (fortunately rubber) and plunked Nickie on the head with it. He then burst into tears and ran to me for help. I escorted Nickie back to the battleground and instructed Jennifer and him to settle the matter between themselves without resorting to violence.

My attention was momentarily diverted by another child who refused to come out from under a picnic table. By the time I returned to the scene of the dispute Nickie and Jennifer were in the throes of serious negotiations not unlike those of politicians, attorneys, or diplomats.

"I'll let you have my cookie during snack if I can have my truck back," Jennifer suggested as her first offer.

"You don't even like those cookies," Nickie responded. "Besides, it's not *your* truck," he was quick to point out.

The whole interaction did not last more than two minutes, but I was stunned by their degree of sophistication in applying some fairly complex negotiating skills. They ended up playing with the truck together. Since they had never been friends before this conflicted exchange, I could only conclude that their disagreement helped each of them grow a bit in their interpersonal skills.

Conflict as a Regulator of Distance Between People

Certain relationships, especially those between family members, tend to become enmeshed. The boundaries between spouses, or between parents and children, become so fused that it is difficult to determine where one person ends and the other begins. They become like the sea slug and jellyfish of the Bay of Naples that attach themselves to one another so that they may both survive;

each needs the other's contribution in order to digest food. During this process, biologist Lewis Thomas muses, each individual organism loses its sense of self —the two become one being.

This metaphor of two fused selves has some interesting implications for relationships that, in contemporary vernacular, are described as "codependent." Such connections, originally designed to offer protection, mutate to the point where one person cannot function independently without the other suffering as a result. The child cannot separate from his parents. One spouse cannot go anywhere or do anything without the other in tow. Two friends use each other as crutches that, at the same time they provide support, also keep them crippled. When one of them attempts to assert some independence and socialize with someone else, the other will sabotage that relationship using guilt or manipulation: "I haven't been feeling very well lately. I called you for help last night, but I guess you were out with what's-his-name." The distance between them subsequently closes to previous levels of dependency. The boundaries between them fuse together, each identity subsumed by the other.

A similar phenomenon occurs with parents and children. When the child attempts to assert herself, to establish her own life, the parent(s) may be unable to let her go. They need the child "triangulated" between them in order to keep their own relationship stable. When she was away at college, they fought more often. At the prospect of her graduating and moving out on her own, they are

moving toward divorce. But if they could only keep her around…

Novelist Len Deighton once remarked that if children and parents did not fight, they would never leave home. Then the world would end. Conflict acts as a distancer between people who are overly close and need to create space between themselves—for both their sakes. As a case in point, two co-workers began their jobs at the same time. Lonely and overwhelmed, they gravitated toward one another for mutual support. They ate their lunches at the same table, confided their frustrations to each other, and hung out together at every opportunity. While initially this support was invaluable, their relationship became a liability, insulating them from networking with others. They both knew they needed to let go and expand their connections, but they were reluctant to do so. It felt like letting go of a life preserver in the midst of a stormy ocean.

It took a conflict, albeit a manufactured one, to drive a wedge between them that would motivate more independent action. They found a reason to take opposite sides on a department policy debate that became pretty ferocious. After this public disagreement, it became clear that they were not clones; it was as if they searching for a way to highlight their individual differences so that they could assert more independence. They were able to remain friendly, but the closeness between them was reduced considerably, to the benefit of both. The conflict acted as an impetus to adjust the distance between them to a more

functional level so that they could expand their base of friends.

Conflict also maintains stability in relationships by permitting people to express themselves when close proximity and prolonged contact inevitably spark friction and irritation. The alternatives to conflict are avoidance and withdrawal, solutions that initially prevent clashes but ultimately lead to irreconcilable differences.

Conflict as a Path to Intimacy

Good communication does not take place only when two people are calmly, rationally, and politely taking turns presenting their points of view. Granted, this is the time when people are most likely to hear one another, as well as respond sensitively to what is being said. Most assuredly, this type of relating promotes greater closeness and intimacy between friends, lovers, co-workers, and parents and their children. But it is not the only way this outcome may be achieved.

The things we feel most passionately about, the ideas we hold most dear, are not necessarily those we can convey in the most controlled manner. For example, I know that I will stay perfectly calm in a conversation only if we stick to safe, relatively superficial subjects in whose outcomes I feel I have little at stake. If, however, you really want to *know* me, in the deepest sense of that word, if you want to know my innermost thoughts and feelings, my manner will

not remain calm and dispassionate. In order to get closer to me, you must risk contact that is potentially more explosive. By getting into the realm of basic values and beliefs, by sharing our most honest reactions and feelings, we both risk driving each other away as much as coming closer together.

Conflict is a kind of passionate, committed communication in which both people are expressing points of view that are important to them. When the interaction is carried through to its successful conclusion, conflict can become a turning point in creating a new level of intimacy in a relationship.

Two adult brothers had maintained a cordial but distant relationship ever since they both left home. They sent cards to one another on appropriate holidays, called on each other's birthdays, visited during annual family reunions. There existed an uneasy, carefully controlled truce between them, not unlike many male friendships in which the content is limited to safe, superficial areas—their jobs, sports, reports on their respective achievements. These men had hardly ever had a disagreement between them because they were both so careful to stay away from any subject that was possibly controversial.

Inevitably, during one routine phone conversation one of the brothers mentioned an opinion that was unusually personal, to which the other brother responded in kind. Before either was aware of what was happening, they were screaming at one another for the first time since they were children. Their

carefully negotiated agreement not to be personal with one another quickly evaporated. They both slammed down the phone and vowed never to speak again.

Yet this conflict opened a crack that needed to be addressed if they were ever to have an intimate relationship. Once they were able to calm down and resume their discussion at a heated but not intolerable level, they found they could talk about a number of subjects they had always wanted to broach. It was not unusual at this new level of intimacy for one or both of them to feel upset. Sometimes they would break off for a while in anger. But once they both had a taste for how much more satisfying a deeper relationship could be, conflict became the path for them to become more intimate.

Conflict and Winning Valuable Gains

There are things you want that you could never have without conflict. Some battles are worth fighting, especially when what you hope to gain outweighs what you might lose if you were to avoid the skirmish. You are thus inclined to risk escalating a conflict by aggravating someone when you feel that the issue is important enough to press your point of view. There are times when the potential prize is so valuable, or the potential loss of something is so crippling, that you may even be willing to go to war. In fact, only a few societies have ever been discovered that do not seek to shed the blood of their neighbors

in their efforts to fight for a principle or territory that is considered dear to heart.

Biologists, anthropologists, and other scientists have demonstrated that human beings are endowed with certain aggressive propensities that help us survive in a hostile world. Throughout human history, the tiniest of insults or slights perceived by one monarch or another has led to retribution on a scale that kills millions.

Lest we resort to blaming our genes or human nature for our inclination to engage in conflict, it is also important to realize that many instinctual responses that once served us well but are now obsolete have been brought under control. Whereas it is true that the vast majority of cultures do engage in regular warfare, there are some peoples that eschew all violence, such as the !Kung San of Botswana and the Semai of Malaysia.

Even if our biological instincts have programmed us to be aggressive, through our will and cognitive capacities we can channel that energy toward creative pursuits. It is thus entirely possible that conflict can help us win gains we consider important without having to resort to aggression.

Earlier in this book I described the case of Nat, a young man who continually got into brawls with people he believed had offended him. This is a risky, expensive method to resolve conflict, one with serious consequences for

both parties. Nat eventually learned that he could be just as persuasive and effective battling for principles he considered important without resorting to physical violence. This more "civilized" method does not, of course, prevent adversaries from operating under a different set of rules, but that is something that you cannot control.

The important point to remember is that in order to get something you really consider valuable, you are likely going to have to work for it. Conflict with others, who also covet the prize, is the price you pay.

Conflict as a Preventer of Stagnation

Throughout human history new discoveries; innovations in thought; and creative contributions to literature, science, and art have often met with resistance. Being branded as a heretic for spouting radical ideas, imprisonment for introducing novel concepts, exile, burning at the stake, crucifixion, ridicule, and humiliation by one's peers—these are the fates that the Galileos, the Freuds, the Walter Raleighs, the Joans of Arc, the movers and shakers of our society have met.

Ideas that conflict with the status quo make us feel uneasy; they undermine our notions of reality. Take, for instance, this rule enforced by our parents when we were young: don't swim after you eat because you will get stomach cramps, and then you will suffer a hideous death curled up on the

bottom of the pool. I recall many hot summer days spent sitting on the edge of the pool, dangling my feet in the water, watching the other kids, waiting for my lunch to digest.

“Hey, Ma, when can I go in the water?”

“What did you eat for lunch?” she would ask with the skill of an interrogator who could see through any attempt to lie.

“Just a hamburger and french fries. But I didn’t eat my pickles.”

“An hour," she would say with the assurance of an actuary who had all the data at her fingertips. And then I would sit impatiently watching the clock, trying to negotiate for an early release.

Many years later I sat in a scuba diving class listening to the instructor’s last-minute instructions before our first open water dive.

“Now remember,” he continued, “be sure to eat a big breakfast before the dive or you will get hypothermia from the cold water.”

“Ah, excuse me,” I quickly inserted, “but won’t we get stomach cramps and die if we eat before we go in the water?”

He must have seen the panic in my face, the flash of all those hot summer

days I had spent waiting on the edge of the pool, for he very gently pointed out that that myth had been debunked years earlier. Why hadn't anyone told my mother, I wondered.

The point is that even if someone had told her, I doubt she would have paid any attention. I could have argued with my mother all I wanted, brought in a team of experts to substantiate my claims, and I doubt it would have done any good. We just don't give up dearly held ideas very easily. It takes conflict to challenge our assumptions and stimulate a change in our beliefs. Arguing with others and defending our cherished principles are what drive us to develop them further, or abandon them in favor of others that have a closer approximation to reality. Conflicts can take a number of forms beyond what we ordinarily think of as arguments.

Conflicts in human relationships are inevitable. In many ways, they are even necessary if we are ever to advance our knowledge and live with each other's differences. There is no sense in blaming ourselves, or anyone else, for getting us into arguments or disagreements; that is the logical consequence of taking a stand on issues that are important to us, of not compromising our standards in the face of pressure. In Chapter Eight we look more closely at the value that conflict has in our lives as individuals and as members of an evolving society. Nowhere is this value more evident than in our most intimate relationships.

About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

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Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

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On Being a Teacher (1993, with Stan Zehm)

Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

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