



Storming:

working through our
conflicts

a notebook for Pagan Clergy

by Judy Harrow

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*May these words, and the manner of their sharing, bring
good to many, harm to none, and glory to the Ancient
Gods!*

Introduction

About these notes

These notes are intended for use by Pagan Elders and by those who are in active training to become Elders. They present some of what I have learned up until now, but they are hardly the final word on the subject. They are not intended to become the basis for the next Pagan fad, nor do they replace what you learn from your own Tradition, your Elders, and your Circle.

As usual with this series, this is a work in progress. I hope to receive advice, corrections, inspirations, great ideas, criticisms and manifestos concerning this book from its readers. Please [email me](#) to let me know what you think should be different in the next version. I appreciate your feedback.

I dedicate these notes to all those who seek to learn how to better serve their Gods, their People, and their Earth.

About the author

I am High Priestess of Proteus Coven, a liberal Gardnerian Wiccan coven in the suburbs of New York City, and proud Grandmother of several covens in that lineage. As a retired civil servant in the best Gardnerian tradition, I am now a full-time writer, teacher and priestess, also maintaining a small private counseling practice. I hold an M.S. degree in counseling from City University of New York. I am chair-emerita of the Pastoral Counseling Program at [Cherry Hill Seminary](#).

As you might expect from a Wiccan High Priestess, my primary religious vocabulary is Wiccan. But these notes are intended for Pagans of all Paths, and for anybody else who may find them useful. I hope that my Druid, Heathen, and Reconstructionist (and anybody else I may have missed) will not feel left out, and will make any translation that is necessary to suit their own Paths.

I have a long-term passion for sharing skills and information I learned in my secular training as a counselor with Elders and Elders-in-training of every Pagan path. Since I consider this a major part of my calling as a priestess, I do not charge fees for these workshops, but do ask for carfare and crash space.

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Storming: working through our conflicts

Most people just dread conflict. The word itself has many bad associations: international conflict, marital conflict -- scary phrases associated with turmoil, stress and grief. And yet, conflict seems to be normal, inevitable, part of all human relationships, both interpersonal and intergroup – and sometimes ultimately beneficial. So it behooves us to understand better what conflict does to us, and what conflict does for us, and to learn how to navigate through the storms of conflict to reach the best possible outcomes for the good of all.

As you read through these notes, please think about conflicts you've been part of, in any and all areas of your life. Do you feel they worked out well or poorly? How much of what you wanted did you get? What do you feel you gave up? How was your relationship with the "other side" afterwards? What was your own emotional state? Please weigh the ideas presented here against your own experiences of conflict.

To emphasize process more than outcomes, this discussion will use the term "conflict management" instead of the more common term "conflict resolution." Which outcome is "best" is subjective. At the start of a conflict, most of us believe that the "best" outcome means getting exactly what we want. The "other side" will define "best" very differently. But perhaps we can develop a shared understanding about good ways to manage conflicts as they arise. Well-managed conflicts do the least harm and the most good to all concerned.

This emphasis on process also reminds us that not every conflict can be fully "resolved." People do not always reach agreement. So part of what we seek is the wisdom to know the difference between those conflicts that can be resolved and those that really cannot; those areas where we can continue together even with disagreements and those where we do best to part ways. Pagan realism, the sure knowledge that endings are as much part of life, as Sacred, as beginnings, allows us to approach conflict with some equanimity, even though we are never certain of the outcome.

A caution: every bit of information in these notes can be used manipulatively or exploitively. It can and should be used to defend yourself against manipulation. Or it can be used collaboratively to work toward solutions which honor the needs and desires of all participants and nurture the health of a relationship or a group, or to end that relationship or group with as much grace as possible. All I can do is give you conscious control of these tools; their use is up to you.

Conflict: both blessing and bane

Although we dread conflict, it's important to realize that the same conflict can be both blessing and bane. And that does not mean it's a blessing to the "winner" and a bane to the "loser." Conflict, managed well, helps maintain the health of any relationship, any group. Poorly managed conflict creates mixed and unstable results. Conflict entirely

denied or stifled eventually and inevitably turns toxic.

One of the ways that conflict can be beneficial is that it indirectly reveals problems in a relationship or within a group that we were not ready to face head on. Consider: some conflicts are, or seem, trivial. It's just ridiculous to spend your whole lunch break arguing over where to go for lunch or to make a big fight over who will wash tonight's dishes. Getting enmeshed in that kind of trivia can distract us from far more important projects and goals, right? So you should just quit wasting our time and energy and do whatever I want.

But these apparently trivial conflicts can sometimes arise from much deeper power issues in a relationship. It can feel safer to argue over trivia than to confront the underlying problems. Watch out for situations in a group or team where one person always seems to get their way in all the seemingly trivial conflicts! This is an unhealthy and unsustainable pattern.

Even where there is an unfair power imbalance, continuing the status quo might be necessary, for example when a crisis or a deadline looms. Other times, bickering over small issues might even be a sort of safely valve, releasing pressure temporarily. But under the surface, the deep problems can simmer on, constantly building up more steam. The real quandary is to discern whether a quick solution or deep exploration is most appropriate in the moment. And that depends on everything else that is going on at the time, much more than on the immediate disagreement.

Permanent stagnation is neither healthy nor even possible. Eventually, these deep conflicts will erupt. Conflict defines the crone zone, the realm of "She who breaks the dams when the waters have become stagnant." This painful chaos can bring the blessing of renewal. Here are some of the beneficial aspects of well-managed conflict:

- Conflict releases pent-up emotion, anxiety, and hidden stress among people. Long standing problems surface during conflict and can be openly dealt with
- Conflict honors diversity of opinion, reminding us that we are not all of one mind.
- Conflict challenges complacency, stretches comfort zones.
- Conflict makes people think, forces us to consider new approaches.
- Conflict serves as a catalyst for change and progress; it can right wrongs and help redress legitimate grievances, especially unfair power imbalances in a relationship or group.
- Clearing the air through conflict can bring people closer.
- People in conflict are forced to clarify their views.
- Better ideas can emerge.
- Inclusiveness builds cohesiveness. Those who feel respected and included will participate more wholeheartedly in carrying out the decision that was reached.
- Conflict offers us opportunities for honesty and growth.
- Conflict shows that people care about what they are doing together.
- Conflict works best when there is good faith and good will.

Like fire, conflict can energize, but it can also burn and destroy. Here are some of the risks of ill-managed conflict:

- Conflict can bring stress, chaos and pain to a relationship or a group.
- Conflict diverts energy from shared central goals and projects.
- Factions may form, destroying a group's cohesiveness.
- People or groups may defend their egos and their narrow interests.
- Power struggles evoke aggressive behavior and erode trust.
- Conflict can destroy morale and/or reinforce poor self-concepts in the perceived "losers," or arrogance in the "winners."
- Conflict can breed distrust and suspicion, driving people or groups apart.
- Conflict can intensify differences in values.
- Conflict can bring out the worst in people. They can become defensive, irrational and irritable, and may not fight fair.
- In extreme cases, conflict can lead to verbal or even physical abuse.
- Conflict can alienate people or groups from each other or from the project.
- If conflict cannot be resolved, groups or relationships may disintegrate. If this happens, people will feel hurt and grief.
- Resistance (active or passive) may replace teamwork. Losers may sabotage the decision and become winners by default
- Conflict can lead to burnout and turnover

Conflict has the potential to be blessing or bane, depending on how it is managed. Ill-managed conflict destroys trust in a relationship or a group; well-managed conflict drives the creative and constructive change that is essential to any group's life and health. What constitutes good management of conflict?

Who plays and who wins?

One really useful idea is the notion of the "[stakeholder](#)." This concept originated in the corporate world, but applies even more strongly to the realm of community organization, which is what mostly concerns us here. *Stakeholders* are people who affect, or are affected by, the issue in conflict, whether or not they are legally "owners." So, for example, in a labor/management dispute, the consumers are not normally represented at the negotiation table, but they will very likely be affected by the outcome. They are stakeholders.

Lucy's job moved, increasing her commuting time by an hour each way every day. Nobody asked her for input or considered her needs. She was forced to drop out of the evening classes she had been taking towards a college degree. Can you recall times like that, when decisions were made that adversely affected you, but in which you had no input at all? How did you feel?

A conflict is well-managed, and is most likely to lead to healthy and durable outcomes,

if as many of the stakeholders as possible are taken into account in crafting a solution. This is best done by actually asking them, rather than by doing things "for their own good."

The "***win/win solution***" is the grand ideal, the goal towards which we all (at least in theory) strive. When this is reached, all stakeholders feel content with the conflict's outcome. But this very rarely means that everybody "wins" in the sense of getting exactly what they wanted at first. Some sort of compromise is far more likely.

So each stakeholder should identify their ***BATNA***, which means their "best alternative to a negotiated agreement." This is each one's best individual course of action if the process totally fails. The range of possible outcomes for each participant in any conflict lies somewhere between their initial position and their BATNA. It's wise to compare the final outcome with both ends of that range before either rejecting it or committing to it.

While a win/win solution does not mean that everybody gets everything they originally wanted, it means they get something sufficiently better than their BATNA that they can be content. It also normally means that what they get is fair, equitable, proportionate to their needs and their contributions. If not, whatever the issue was, it won't stay settled for long -- and its eventual failure may rupture the relationship.

Understand this: *if you wish to continue in a healthy relationship with your opponent, you need to make sure that they also are content with the outcome of any conflict.*

Be Prepared

In any conflict, all you can bring to the table is yourself, but you do bring all of yourself, including your energy and issues which are not obviously related to the situation at hand, and even some deep old problems about which you are not conscious. This is inevitable. It's a waste of time and energy to suppress or ignore any of it. Instead, be as self-aware as you can. Introspection and meditation will help. This is ancient and profound wisdom: know yourself!

First: be ready to work with other stakeholders on the issues.

In general, it's best not to really plunge into a conflict when you or anyone else is

Hungry,
Angry,
Lonely, or
Tired.

So, if at all possible, remember to HALT and be sure that all concerned are calm, grounded, and physically comfortable.

Second: be very clear about what you want.

What do you really want? What is your personal BATNA? And is there a core of irreducible principle involved in this particular conflict for you?

It's important to know what you think about the situation at hand, but it's equally important to know and to honor what you feel. Pay attention to your intuitive and emotional responses. If a decision seems to make sense, but leaves you with deeper discomforts that you can't quite find words for, you may not be able to participate wholeheartedly or keep it up for long.

Remember this – it applies to you and to all other parties to a conflict:

“A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still.”

Third: know your limits.

Compromise is usually, but not always, possible. It's not even always good. Some issues will be so rooted in your deepest values and principles that you could not compromise in any way and still keep your self-respect. These awful moments come rarely, but sometimes they do come.

David (not his real name, of course), a computer programmer, was ordered to insert a “silent” calculation in a cash register program increasing each patron's bill by 5%. The reasoning was that few patrons would bother to check the math on a neatly printed, computer-generated bill. If they did, the “stupid computer” would be blamed and the money cheerfully refunded of course, but most of the time the profit margin would be boosted by 5%. He refused, and was immediately fired. The power was all on one side, and the BATNA was unemployment ... and personal integrity.

What are your personal core values? What is so important to you that you would walk away from a job, a group, even a marriage, rather than give it up? For what would you really go to the wall, if it came to that?

Those are the first questions to ask yourself. But self-knowledge never stops there.

Finally: explore your feelings in more depth and complexity.

- **Is it a need, or simply a preference?** Clarifying the difference between wanting and needing shouldn't mean you never get anything more than what you strictly speaking need, but it shows you where there is room for healthy give and take.
- **Is it practical, psychological, or both?** For example, if you're producing a newsletter or coordinating a gathering, a budget is a practical necessity, but it also is a token of the sponsoring organization's respect for your competence.
- **Is it a position or an interest?** Essentially, a *position* is what you are asking for; while an *interest* is the reason you want it. To help understand this distinction, consider this story, first told by [Mary Follett](#), one of the founding mothers of the

social work profession. There were once two sisters. They each wanted an orange, but there was only one orange in the house. So they carefully cut it in half. That seemed like the fair thing to do. Their positions were identical: wanting an orange. But their interests – why they wanted the orange – were very different. One wanted to drink some juice; the other wanted to bake a cake, and the recipe called for grated orange peel. Had they talked about their interests, this particular time, each one really could have had 100% of what she wanted. When probing for the interests that underlie the positions, very useful questions are “and what will that do for you?” and “and what is worrying you about that?”

- **What’s the back story?** Maybe the immediate issue is not all that important, but you’re really just plain tired of Peter always getting his way. Maybe this whole situation just reminds you of what things were like at home, when your brother got the best of everything and you got the hand-me-downs and leftovers. Could the energy you bring to this conflict seem disproportionate because it is really displaced from some other time or place? Transferred reactions are normal, but they cloud the issues at hand. Insight and awareness put you in control. (hint: it helps to approach conflict situations in a calm and centered state. Use the techniques you were taught to get there.)
- **What’s your personal conflict style**, and how does it compare with the styles of the other parties involved? Our ways of approaching conflict are shaped by many factors: class, culture, region, and specific [family styles](#), are just a few. (For more on family styles, see Appendix A,) So, for example, what seems forthright to a New Yorker may seem abrasive, even “pushy,” to somebody from the Heartland. Again, everybody has these habitual behaviors and reactions, but awareness gives us control, and more tolerance for ways of interaction that differ from our own. The [Adult Personal Conflict Style Inventory](#) is a useful tool for understanding your personal conflict style.
- **What [influence strategies](#) do you (and the other stakeholders) typically employ?** In human relationships, conflictual or otherwise, the means we use deeply influence the ends we will reach. Is what you’re doing conducive to what you really want? If you feel another stakeholder is using unfair tactics, how can you defend against them?
- And finally, **do you have any hidden agendas or ulterior motives** in this situation? Be honest. Are you resisting healthy change because you are the “top dog,” comfortable with your privilege? Are you more concerned with ego, power, and prestige than the situation at hand? Are your suggestions coming from an honest assessment of what is best for all involved, or are you trying to impress somebody, build a resume, create an opportunity to learn a particular skill? These things are not necessarily bad, but they may distort your view of what is really needed right now. And do you suspect your counterparts of working from hidden agendas?

Think about power

Conflict always involves the power relationships between the conflicting parties. But many of us find it distasteful to think or talk about interpersonal power. So the interplay of power functions where we cannot monitor it or keep it fair, and power imbalances can fester underground.

If it's important to know why you want something, it's even more important to know how much you want it. When do you really need to dig in, and when can you comfortably yield? Don't overplay the intensity of your desire. That's dishonest and manipulative. Eventually people learn to discount the drama. Remember the tale of the boy who cried wolf.

Also think about what you have to offer. How important are your contributions to the group? How much do they need you? It takes a lot of different ingredients to bake a good cake. Are you the one who can add the essential cup of sugar? If your departure would create an unacceptable BATNA for the others, you are more likely to get what you want.

For example, imagine a band of musicians. Stan is just a mediocre drummer, but he owns a van. They can't get their gear to gigs without him. Stan's wishes usually prevail in the group, right? Caution: if you have this kind of leverage, use it sparingly, or it will breed resentment and eventually lead to backlash.

Conflict redistributes or reaffirms power within a relationship or group. Well-managed conflict does this in a fair and equitable manner, promoting robust health. So here are some things to think about regarding power

- Do you feel unjustly powerless in the situation? How might you move to alleviate this?
- If you are the "top dog," are you truly willing to reallocate power more equitably for the good of the relationship?
- Do you want power distributed equally or proportionally? (proportional to needs or to contributions?)
- Are there situations in which inequality of power is a good thing (provided there are limits, checks and balances)? Would you, for example, give weight to experience (i.e. in a teaching relationship)?
- Might other stakeholders feel differently about the allocation of power?

Know the other

Almost always, our conflicts are with people we like and trust. Our opponents in most conflicts are not our enemies. We may just happen to disagree about the best ways to work towards common goals. We may even have different priorities or goals at this moment. But still we usually want to settle our disagreements without rupturing an

ongoing relationship or destroying the group, without sabotaging the project, without demonizing the other. Understanding helps.

It's essential to be clear about how important it is to you to maintain this relationship after this particular conflict is over.

As you anticipate a conflict, it's obviously smart – and wise – to understand the other stakeholders as well as you possibly can. All the same questions you can ask about yourself, you should also ask about them. Remember that the answers will be guesses at best, and may be projections of your own personal back story or displaced feelings. So make this assessment as calmly and clearly as you can, hold your perceptions tentatively, check out those perceptions whenever possible, and allow for some margin of error.

Here are a few more questions to ask yourself about the other:

- Are they in good faith? Can you trust them to state their case fairly? Not to fudge their facts? Not to lie or manipulate?
- Are they of good will? Do they sincerely want a win/win solution, or do they want to get their own desire without regard for the well-being of other stakeholders?
- Can you trust them to keep their agreements once agreement is reached?
- Do they seem to have hidden agendas or ulterior motives?
- Are they an ***antagonist***? This means somebody for whom conflict itself seems to fulfill some psychological need. Antagonists like to feel heroic and embattled. Perhaps they know no better way of getting attention? In the Pagan community, antagonists are often referred to as “trolls.” (Be sure to check out your own antagonistic tendencies as well, and to find better ways to satisfy the needs that drive them.)

It's *smart* to think about questions like this because the answers tell you something about your own safety within a conflict situation, and whether you'll be able to rely upon agreements reached.

It's *wise* because developing the ability to view the situation from the perspective of other stakeholders, feeling into their world view, and gaining some empathy, will help you work toward a fair and durable win/win solution, one that respects all stakeholders' feelings, meets their needs, and allows the relationship or group to continue working well. If your counterpart cannot live comfortably with whatever you decide together, the settlement – and possibly the relationship -- will not hold.

Empathy: exploring others' perspectives

Empathy means feeling into the ways others perceive the situation. Through empathy, we understand and honor the feelings of others, as well as their ideas. This may sound

naive or soft-headed, but it is a practical necessity in conflict management. A durable settlement must engage the hearts and the wills of all stakeholders as well as their minds.

We develop empathy through the conscious practice of *active listening*.

Active listening is nothing less than a meditative practice in which we listen to other people in the same depth with which we listen to the Sacred voices during spiritual meditation. We do not divert our focus into planning our response. We just simply listen, fully, deeply, and openly, to what they are saying: to its manifest content and also to all the emotional overtones. We attend to them.

People do not normally listen to one another this fully and deeply in today's busy, noisy society. If anything, it's even harder to do so when we are enmeshed in a stressful conflict situation and the person speaking is perceived as an opponent, even an enemy. But active listening offers the single best path through conflict to a fair and stable outcome.

It's almost as important to let the other person know that you are listening by briefly paraphrasing their statements before you respond to them. Always do this tentatively, and be open to correction. "So, if I understand you correctly, you're saying _____. Is that right?" They will either confirm or correct you, and either way the process is advanced. This builds a feeling of mutual respect and inclusion. Through active listening, all stakeholders gain an understanding of what the others want and need from the situation.

Two cautions here:

- First: active listening can be used manipulatively as well, by those who neither like nor respect their dialogue partners and could care less about a win/win solution or an ongoing relationship. Consider salespeople, working on commission, trying to get people to spend too much for things they don't really need. They have the ultimate ulterior motive for active listening. By learning the objections and concerns potential customers raise, they can more effectively counter them. Most good things are corruptible, after all.
- Second: frankly, some people are evil, and the things they want are just plain wrong, just not remotely acceptable. Yes, this is always a result of wounds and scars from their past. On that ultimate level, judgment should rest with the Gods. But we also need to make day-to-day judgments about who to trust and with whom we can engage ourselves, and about the compromises we can or cannot make while keeping our own self-respect.

On those thankfully rare occasions when we find ourselves up against adversaries like that, a decent person may not want to explore the vile cesspool that is the inner realm, and the perceptual world, of a person they consider to be truly evil. But consider this: even during the Holocaust, the Allied forces tried to understand Hitler's way of thinking in order to predict and counter his tactics. It

was the smart thing to do. Here's a way to think of it: in the world of form, garbage collectors perform an absolutely essential function. When they get home from a day's work, they take a shower.

Be careful to whom you give your trust. But having given trust, do whatever you can to nurture and maintain it. It is the basis for all healthy human relationships.

Helping others work through conflict

Sometimes we are not ourselves stakeholders in a conflict, but are asked to help as facilitators or mediators – or even as arbitrators. To begin with, let's define those three helping roles

- **Arbitrators** settle the issues involved in a conflict. They impose a (hopefully fair) settlement when the stakeholders are unable to reach one on their own. You'll hear of "binding" arbitration. Can a role this authoritarian exist within the Pagan community? Yes, sometimes the leadership of a group or organization is called upon to settle an internal dispute. Disputants can abide by the leader's decision, or leave the group.
- **Facilitators** work in a variety of group and interpersonal settings, not just in conflict situations. Their role it is to work with group processes to encourage full participation, promote mutual understanding, foster inclusive solutions, and teach new thinking and communication skills. Mediation is one aspect of what they do.
- **Mediators** work specifically with disputes, taking a middle or neutral position and using appropriate techniques and/or skills to open and/or improve communication between disputants, working to help them reach a workable and mutually satisfactory agreement. A mediator can be a facilitator with a specialty in conflict management, or just one who is helping with a conflict at this moment.

In mediation, the stakeholders themselves determine whether a solution will be reached and, if so, what that solution will be. Solutions are not imposed by the helper. It's critical that all stakeholders perceive the helper as being wise, objective and completely neutral. If they sense a bias, they will not trust the process or the outcome.

The ideal helper has no opinion about the final outcome, but cares deeply about the fairness and the effectiveness of the conflict management process itself. Although we may never perfectly achieve this ideal, we should be working toward it every time we serve as mediators.

warning: Complete neutrality is relatively easy for those who are helping total strangers and have no preconceived notion of the issues at hand. In small communities like ours, we are rarely complete strangers to each other. Even when we are, we are likely to have personal opinions about many issues.

Rhea Paniesin asked in a private email: "What happens when you facilitate, and act

impartial and objective, but really want one outcome or another? I'm not talking about the evils that come to the group if someone fails to be impartial. I'm talking about the evil that comes to the individual facilitator who succeeds in being impartial and is left without an opportunity to express his/her desires. I've been in a group and watched this happen recently. The meeting ended, the group was happy, the facilitator was miserable.”

Please think about this carefully before you agree to help others work through a conflict. If you hold even the smallest stake in the conflict at hand, try your best to help the disputants find a truly neutral facilitator who is wise, skilled, and ethical. If such a person really can't be found, it's probably better to disclose your biases than to conceal them or try to suppress them entirely. Of course, to deliberately hide your biases because you want to guide the process towards the outcome you personally prefer is manipulative and dishonorable.

If outside help is being sought, this means that some sort of formal meeting or negotiating session will be taking place, perhaps even a series of them. The issue will not be settled right there, right then, in the moment the conflict arises. It's also likely that a larger or more long-standing conflict will be involved, with more complex issues. People do not normally call in a mediator to figure out where to have lunch.

While anticipating such a meeting, all concerned will have time to think about what they really want and why they really want it, and to prepare to use the meeting well. You might want to offer them a set of preparatory questions to help them explore their positions, interests, back stories, etc. IN addition, here are some specific contributions the mediator can make:

What helpers bring:

Non-Anxious Presence: The facilitator or mediator's way of being with others will profoundly effect the quality of the total interaction. Those who remain calm, [grounded](#), and centered when emotions flare model and enable calm and open discussion of the issues. By "[being peace](#)" -- projecting serenity -- helpers profoundly influence the general atmosphere for all present. Disputants can draw comfort and courage from the helper's stability, strength, and acceptance. (for more, see Appendix B)

Safe space: The helper should also do whatever is possible, secular or spiritual, to make sure that the space feels safe to all participants. Together with non-anxious presence, this creates a “holding environment” within which deep work can proceed.

Set a definite starting time, and probably also an ending time for the meeting. People who are tired don't work as well. Scheduling further meetings gives people a chance to reflect on what's been said so far.

Find a location that is clean and comfortable. Try to provide drinking water or other small comforts. Perhaps set up a small shrine, light a candle or burn some calming

incense to help establish a calm and grounded vibe. Consider opening the session with a moment of meditation or a brief invocation.

During the session, besides eliciting the wishes, ideas and evidence being presented, and keeping the process on track, a helper serves as a sort of “vibes-watcher.” Their sensitivity to people’s comfort and energy levels, and a good sense of when to deepen or lighten the conversation, assists participants to focus on the work at hand. In some particularly intense and complicated situations, it may be helpful to have one helper chair the meeting while another monitors the emotional status of the group.

Active Listening: The single most important thing a facilitator or mediator can do is to model, guide, and, most of all, teach the practice of active listening. This basic stance of attentive receptivity is essential for a win/win solution, and so for the ongoing health of the group or relationship that is currently in conflict. In addition to helping people work through the conflict at hand, active listening skills will allow them to manage whatever conflicts arise in the future in a much easier and better way.

Here are a few simple ways a facilitator can guide participants in listening actively to one another:

- The talking stick: have some physical object, plain or elaborate, and allow only the person holding it to speak. This prevents interruption.
- Brief pauses, say 10 seconds, between each statement. By ensuring participants time to formulate their responses, we make it easier for them to relax into listening when others are speaking.
- Reflection: if participants seem to be mishearing one another, either unconsciously or deliberately, require each participant to paraphrase what the previous speaker said – to that person’s satisfaction – before going on to respond or make a statement of their own.

In addition to nurturing the practice of active listening, there are some specific things a helper can do, steps in the process, facilitative and even priestly skills that are useful in working through conflict or in helping others do so.

Ice breakers: When participants don’t know each other well, as with conflicts that are intergroup rather than interpersonal, you may want to open the meeting with some “ice-breaker.” These are activities designed to help participants relax a bit and get a sense of one another as human beings.

Groups without facilitators often find their own ways of breaking the ice. For example, George, who has no personal interest in spectator sports, reads the sports page before any major business meeting, because this is what “the guys” discuss as a warm-up and a way of sizing each other up.

When done sensitively, ice-breakers can defuse some suspicion or hostility. But be aware that, if people are really wound up, it can be frustrating not to get directly down to

business.

Groundrules: Part of holding safe space is to act as “referee” for these discussions, making sure that all participants feel respected, heard, and protected from verbal or emotional abuse. To accomplish this, the facilitator should establish some basic ground rules, such as:

- Appropriate confidentiality: conflicts within small groups, that only affect group members, should only be discussed with group members, although this includes group members who were unable to attend the meeting, but who will be affected by its outcome. Even where the outcome will affect the larger community, it may be useful to keep the process private until it reaches a conclusion, to allow for frank discussion (but watch out that this isn’t a pretext for excluding the voices of some stakeholders.) Obviously, if this is an intergroup conflict, and the discussion is taking place between representatives of affected groups, each one will and should report back to their own constituency.
- Participants should be firmly, politely assertive about their own wants and needs,[9] while avoiding blaming and name-calling. If they do need to “vent,” you can schedule separate individual sessions for this, while holding firm boundaries against verbal abuse of any kind when the participants are together.
- Interruptions are rude, but freedom from interruption carries with it a responsibility not to filibuster. After making each main point, a speaker should allow space for responses, not go on to another point, especially not one that builds on the point just made. A facilitator can break up a filibuster by cutting in and asking other stakeholders for response at any point. (Yes, it’s OK for a facilitator to interrupt for a good reason.)

Roleplaying is an effective tool for helping willing participants explore each others’ perspectives. A facilitator can guide participants through a process of imaginatively acting out a simulation of their conflict. While the players can play themselves, it’s often more useful for them to either

- take the role of their principal “adversary” or
- observe as others play out both roles

The players respond and react within an imaginative scenario that comes as close as possible to the real life situation. Since it is imaginative and is monitored by the facilitator, it is safe. They commit to nothing by taking the other’s side. Yet they get some sense of how the situation looks from the other’s viewpoint, which is a powerful way to develop basic empathy.

Purely imaginative roleplays, done just for practice, can also help people learn how to take many perspectives on a problem at times when there is no active conflict in a group.

Communication skills: Facilitators help the conversation stay on track, and keep the

group aware of time boundaries when these exist. They make sure all sides get heard, drawing out quieter participants, especially those whose body language seems troubled. They may use visual aids, such as newsprint pads or white boards to list issues, or possible solutions.

One useful model for understanding interpersonal communication is *Transactional Analysis* (TA). The core insight of TA is that each person has three main “ego states,” ways of understanding and dealing with the world: their inner Parent, Adult, and Child. Each ego state could take the lead in any given interaction. If people are working from different ego states, communication can be difficult. Also, all three ego states need to be considered in any decision-making process.

The TA model has survived its founder and grown in nuance and complexity over the course of about 60 years. Those who are drawn to mediation work may want to become familiar with the basics of TA, and to help participants in conflicts learn how to use it to work through their issues, now and in the future. (for more on TA, see Appendix C)

Binocular Vision: In a Pagan context, we can add divinatory techniques to rational, analytic approaches. Looking at anything through both eyes lets us see it in three dimensions, and so accesses our deeper wisdom. Whichever form of [divination](#) is most familiar and comfortable for you will be helpful for this.

Generating Possible Solutions: When everybody’s desires and concerns are made clear to all, and all feel fully heard, the mediator may guide the group in generating a variety of possible solutions. One good way of doing this is ***brainstorming***. In a brainstorm session, we encourage the creative and spontaneous Free Child to come out and play. A group calls out ideas for possible solutions, completely without premeditation or censorship. Later, these ideas can be winnowed, refined and often combined by people now working from their Adult ego states.

Single-Text: If the stakeholders seem unable to come to terms, there is one more technique available to a mediator: the single-text method. This is a complex and difficult process, just one step short of arbitration. The helper interviews each side in depth separately, and draws up a separate document for each side stating what that side wants. These documents are returned to the stakeholders for comment and revised until the stakeholders are fully satisfied that their needs and desires are accurately stated. Then the facilitator draws up a composite, integrating and balancing the two sides’ wishes as much as possible. She or he takes it to each side in turn, again, as many times as needed, integrating whatever revisions they desire, until all have agreed on a final text. Sadly, not every conflict reaches resolution even through this last-resort sort of method.

Testing tentative solutions: When a group has developed a tentative solution, the facilitator can guide them through some test processes to make sure it really rings true for all stakeholders on all levels, before they commit to it. Here are some possible approaches:

- Guided meditation/thought experiment. “Imagine the future -- one, five and ten years from this day. You have put this solution into practice. What does your situation look or feel like now?” (elaborate on this, of course)
- Check in with the ego states. Ask the inner Parent “can I agree to this and keep my self-respect?” Ask the inner Adult “does this make sense?” Ask the inner Child “does this feel good?”
- Consult the elemental Guardians:
 - Air: does this solution seem consistent with the facts and logic inherent in the situation, and with the customs of this group?
 - Fire: can I/we enter into this solution wholeheartedly, and with enthusiasm?
 - Water: are my/our still, small, inner voices content with this solution?
 - Earth: is this solution feasible? Do we have the resources to implement it? How will we know whether it has succeeded?

Commitment, closure, and celebration. To complete the process, have all stakeholders state their understanding of whatever agreement was reached in the presence of the others. If it’s complex, you may want to create a written document, making sure every stakeholder receives a copy. A small prayer of thanksgiving is in order next, and then perhaps a celebratory meal.

Partings: The hard lesson of the Wheel is that all that is truly alive is impermanent. Members of a group will not always find common ground. Some conflicts cannot be resolved, even between people of good faith and good will. If the participants need to move onto separate Paths, a good facilitator should try to create an opportunity for [formal leave-taking and grieving](#), during which people can appreciate all they gained from their time working together, and part with respect, and perhaps even friendships, intact.

Conclusion: settling in and moving on

When a conflict reaches a conclusion, those stakeholders who were included in the process have made some sort of decisions about the issues involved. Hopefully, through this process, they have also learned some better ways of dealing with other issues that will arise in the future. But now it’s time to put the current new decisions into practice and see how they work out.

Give it some time. It takes time to become comfortable with new ways of doing things. It takes time for change to set roots and grow. But also be prepared to fine tune or even revisit decisions that don’t seem to be working out. You may want to set up an evaluation meeting for when you think enough time will have elapsed.

If you could not come to terms, may you go your separate ways in peace and without ill-wishes. If you could, and most of the time you will, may you go on together with

renewed joy. Either way, may the Gods bless your path!

[Bibliography](#)

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Appendix A: Family Conflict Style

(NOTE: although our personal conflict styles are largely formed on our families, they manifest in other conflicts throughout our lives unless we become conscious of them and choose to change them. - JH)

Conflict style influences the kinds of disputes families have. It refers to specific tactics and behavioral routines individuals or families typically use when conflicts occur. Individuals have conflict styles of their own (Sternberg and Dobson 1987). These develop through repeated exposure to conflict situations in the family of origin. The combination of individual styles and the family system results in a family style of conflict. For example, one family member may dominate in all disputes and forcefully settle all conflicts. This is a *power assertive style* that is based on the power relations that are part of the family system. Another style involves endless bickering in which any kind of settlement or resolution is rare. Such an irrational style often creates a negative family climate that erodes positive family bonds. A family may avoid any kind of conflict at the first sign of trouble. Conflict may be seen as being too stressful or simply inappropriate among family members. Such an *avoidant style* often includes covert conflict in which secretive actions lead to negative consequences for opponents (Buehler et al. 1998). A *constructive conflict style* is an especially important type because it openly addresses the complaints of family members and moves toward rational changes that eliminate the problem. Several other conflict styles have been identified and research in this area continues. Furthermore, it should be noted that each family is unique and thus will have unique elements in its conflict style. But most families tend to use one of the main styles identified above.

Family conflict styles are learned in childhood. Years of exposure to the same patterns indoctrinate the child with the family's conflict style (e.g., Patterson, Reid, and Dishion 1992). The parents or primary

caregivers usually establish the style for the children. Years of participation in the conflict style allow the child to learn the intricacies of using the style to protect or extend their interests. Acquiring a conflict style defines the orientation one brings to any dispute situation. For example, a child in a family with a power assertive style will tend to see any disagreement as a zero-sum game. There must be one winner and one loser. One dominates, the other submits. One must strive to use whatever power one has to defeat the opponent, who is striving to defeat you. Learning a conflict style thus includes assumptions about how interpersonal relationships should be conducted. Conflict styles learned in the family are used by children as they interact with peers and others outside of the family context. This can create difficulties in developing relationships with peers. For example, a child who is an aggressive power-assertive bully in the family may have difficulties making friends with peers who reject that style of interaction.

The concept of conflict style has been useful because it clarifies the assessment of problematic interaction patterns in families. In addition it provides a framework for improving conflict management in families. Some family conflict styles tend to interfere with healthy functioning. Power assertive, irrational, and avoidant styles can be especially troublesome. Getting troubled families with such styles to use elements of the constructive conflict style can improve conflict management and problems related to it. Considerable success has been achieved with conflict management training as a component in individual, couple, and family therapy (Vuchinich 1999). However, conflict style is only one part of the family system. As a result, conflict patterns may be resistant to change unless other elements of the family system are also changed. It is important to acknowledge this fact during efforts to improve conflict management in troubled families.

by William Cupach et. al.

<http://family.jrank.org/pages/315/Conflict.html>

Appendix B: Elements of a Non-Anxious Presence

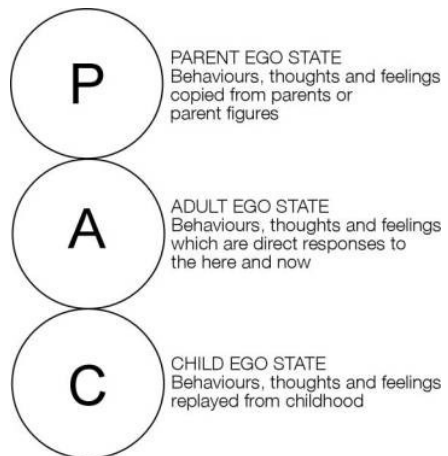
- **Friendly** - a genuine connection with parties on human terms
- **Optimistic** - assumption that potential exists for the parties to work through the problems
- **Calm** - body language and tone of voice
- **Focused** - able to redirect skillfully
- **Unafraid** - of uncomfortable emotions or statements
- **Neutral** - able to set aside personal values and beliefs
- **Flexible** - able to smoothly address new issues as they arise
- **Non-judgmental** - able to empower disputants to come up with their own solutions and not impose solutions
- **Encouraging** - enthusiastically acknowledges hard work of disputants and compliments them on their progress
- **Comfortable with Silence** - able to give people time to think without needing to fill the silence
- **Persistent** - willing to continue as long as parties are and encourage them not to give up

People in a dispute may become enmeshed in the emotion of the dispute to the extent that they cannot look at their problems rationally. The mediator with a **non-anxious presence** remains calm when emotions flare and sets the stage for open discussion of the problem.

By not reacting to the emotions of the disputants, the mediator has the appearance of strength when the disputants may be feeling helpless. This strength can encourage disputants to work through their emotions to the key issues underneath and give them the confidence to move toward agreement.

Appendix C: Transactional Analysis

Transactional Analysis is a model for understanding human interaction, introduced in the mid-20th Century by Dr. Eric Berne (1910-1970), and still a living and developing school of psychology. TA is not The Ultimate Truth, but it is an extremely helpful tool for deep and complex understanding of any human communication. Improving communication is clearly critical to better conflict management.



Dr. Berne began with the simple notion that, within our personalities, we each have three “ego states.” The “Parent” contains all the guiding ideals, abstract opinions, rules of proper conduct, etc. that we learned, mostly as children, from respected or powerful elders. The “Child” contains primal desires and unmediated emotional responses. The Adult is the truly rational part, balancing between rules and desires, choosing a course of action. You might say that the true task of the Adult is to arrange for the safety and freedom of the Child.


The words we use are the least part of our communication. Tone of voice and body language tend to bypass the Adult. How people say things is often more important than what they actually say, since it goes more directly to the emotionally reactive Child, and evokes a more primal response.

One problem with most of the standard advice on conflict management is that it assumes that all participants are working from their Adult ego state, and this is most often not the case. We are not entirely rational beings. The Adult is not even always the lead function. People in stress may be temporarily dominated by their Parent or Child states. One thing facilitators can help with is keeping the Adult function primary as much as possible. But working strictly Adult-to-Adult, as though the other ego states were irrelevant to the process, is also a bad mistake.

The function of the Adult is to honor, balance, and integrate the important influences of Parent and Child. Some compromises may seem entirely rational, satisfying participants’ inner Adults, but still troubling their Parent and/or Child ego states. Agreements of that sort will not be sustainable over time. When values, emotions and thought all reach a concerted “yes!”, people are far more likely to live wholeheartedly by the decision reached.

Communication is easiest when it is between the same ego states, for example Adult-to-Adult or Child-to-Child. It’s also easy when it is parallel, which means that, for example, a Child-to-Parent message receives a Parent-to-Child response. “Crossed” communications, those which are not balanced in these ways, can lead to misunderstanding and upset.

Becoming aware of which ego state is in the foreground at any moment allows each participant more flexibility. Facilitators can help develop this awareness.



Later followers of Berne elaborated on his model. In this more complex and nuanced picture, the adult ego state remains unitary, but both Parent and Child are divided into four parts. The parts represent a kind of polarity of function within Parent and Child, and the recognition that each side of that polarity has both a beneficial and a baneful aspect.

So, a Parent can be either nurturing or controlling. The baneful controlling Parent is an authoritarian dictator. The beneficial controlling parent is a good guide, maintaining values and setting goals and limits.

A beneficial nurturing Parent is an encourager. A baneful nurturing Parent is an overprotective smotherer.

Similarly, the Child can be either free or adapted. The beneficial aspect of the free child is playful, spontaneous, and creative. The baneful aspect is a whiny spoiled brat throwing tantrums, or a bully.

The beneficial aspect of the adapted child is cooperative, a good friend and team player. The baneful aspect of the adapted child is a repressed and fearful “sad sack,” who cannot stand up for his or her own beliefs or interests.

All good decision-making necessarily involves the beneficial aspects of both Parent and Child, as well as the rational Adult. This applies to entirely individual decisions, as well as to collective decisions that may be the occasions for conflict. A good outcome must be holistic: satisfactory to guiding values (Parent) and emotional needs (Child), and actually feasible (Adult).

Judy Harrow

For much more about Transactional Analysis, please see <http://www.businessballs.com/transactionalanalysis.htm>. The illustrations in this section come from that web site. -- JH

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